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Main topics of research: material culture and the intangible heritage – dynamic of customs, traditional ecological knowledge, local legends

NARRATIVES OF SPACE: “TRADITIONS” BETWEEN ORAL AND WRITTEN MEMORY

Abstract

Contemporary local cultures, generically referred to as “traditional,” have their own dynamics, and an important part in this is played by the relation between oral and written culture, a relation that must be considered as early as the pre-fieldwork stage of each ethnological research. Drawing on a case-study from Buzău region, namely the narratives of the places situated in the vicinity of villages, the paper illustrates the flexibility and the dynamic nature of a local oral culture, its dialogue and complementarity with the literate culture, as well as its adaptative nature. It does so, by presenting the characteristics of three types of orality (see Zumthor 1990) encountered in the field: mixed orality, second orality (stressing the role of the intellectuals), and mediatised orality.

Keywords: orality, literate culture, narratives of space, tradition, dynamics of culture, Buzău

Preamble

From peasant cultures and “tradition” to the relation between oral and written culture

Content to have found the right key for unlocking the current transformations of the village world, in my field research, over the years, I was most interested in studying the dynamics of culture, focusing on how the concept of “tradition”¹ offers the key to interpreting it. Since looking into “traditions” is one of the paths taken by the social researchers, particularly ethnologists,² a discussion of the methodology that uses this concept and its embedding in the theoretical approaches is in order.

First, the study of “traditions” focuses on the investigation of archaic layers of peasant cultures, to find the foundation of contemporary culture. “Tradition” is deemed defining for the type of society that folklorists

and ethnologists document, the “traditional society,” characterized, as Mihăilescu (2004) notes, by a cosmos-centric view of the world, a retrospective rationality legitimated by the community’s past, which is transmitted through customs. This is a world where “there cannot be anything new, where the unforeseen can exist, but not the unpredictable” (Mihăilescu 2004: 188). Sought for in “traditional societies” and endowed with the power to legitimate, “tradition” becomes the topic of study *par excellence* of “national” ethnology (Mihăilescu 2007). This was a direction that folklore and ethnology studies embarked on as early as the end of the nineteenth century (see Stahl 1983³), in the context of the efforts to legitimate the creation of the Romanian nation-state, followed later, in the interwar period, by rural sociology studies (Cotoi 2009). Next came the foundation of ethnographic museums (see Iosif 2009) and ethnological archives (Iosif 2015; Jiga Iliescu 2020) that followed the same logic of legitimation and strengthening of the nation-state, building this time the image of an institutionalized “tradition,” practice that was continued during the communist period (Iosif 2015). According to this view, “tradition” is perceived mostly in its hegemonic aspect, as “tradition as value,” although “the only valid object of study is the old and all that is well enough preserved—and by this it becomes the object of safeguarding awe” (Mihăilescu 2004: 203).

Another noteworthy aspect is that of “tradition” used as power discourse (Mihăilescu 2007), as illustrated by contemporary cultural policies. This direction was generated by the coining and adopting of the concept of “ethnological heritage” in the 1980s, leading to the institutionalization of this heritage by the state bureaucratic apparatus (see Tornatore 2004). In the 2000s, the 1980s term was replaced with that of “intangible heritage,” as famously illustrated by the UNESCO’s 2003 “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.” The introduction of this new range of cultural goods in the world heritage was accompanied by the policies that aimed to emphasize local and, implicitly, national identities (see Iosif 2015). The discussions about the safeguarding of heritage had an immediate effect in post-communist Romania, with the task to manage the problems that the new heritage category gave rise to falling on folklore studies. For this discipline, it was “a new and modernized political opportunity, namely heritage-making and, implicitly, [managing] the ‘market of traditions’” (Iosif 2015: 104). In the context of heritage-making, “tradition”—which for communities means continuing and, at the same time, interpreting the past—acquires

various institutional and political meanings, as now the past is approached selectively by heritage specialists, using value judgments typical of the present (Mihăilescu 2007).

Having acquired all these theoretical and political nuances, “tradition” came to be a saturated concept, while remaining useful for understanding the dynamics of the contemporary village world and its complexities. Therefore, although an appealing perspective, with tangible results in my research, the analysis of village cultures through the lens of the dynamics of tradition has proven lacking and to some extent methodologically inoperative, as it does not answer a particular methodological question: the mutual influence of oral culture and written culture. This is an issue insufficiently discussed, at least among Romanian ethnologists, as it is often the case that, even today, rural communities are approached and researched as essentially oral societies, where “tradition” is reproduced exclusively through oral transmission. Or this is not entirely true.

The argument of the field

Retrospectively, I realize that the question of the mutual influence of oral and literate cultures arose early on in my research, an aspect that I ignored for quite a long time. What happened was that the most interesting and reliable interlocutors for the interviews I conducted, on how local “traditions” were lived and experienced, were educated people, even with university education: village teachers, students, intellectuals. Although the role of the intellectuals in redefining and safeguarding local culture⁴ is a known fact (see Goody 1977), I was oblivious of it for a long time. During my field research in Maramureş region, the share of intellectuals was not particularly large among my interviewees,⁵ so I did not think much about it. But as I started doing research in other regions and furthering my training, I encountered increasingly often intellectuals belonging to the communities that I studied and I became increasingly aware of the role they played in ensuring the continuity, valorisation, and sometimes revival of the researched cultural phenomena. This prompted me to reflect on the possible relation today between the cultural facts I researched, their dynamics, and literate culture.

From the interviews I conducted, I could see that it wasn't only the intellectuals that would use both their personal, direct experience and their book knowledge to speak about “traditional” culture from a different perspective, namely heritage-making. Even less educated persons⁶

complemented their lived experiences with print references, at least in some domains. Technically speaking, the methodology of interwar social research already included a compulsory rubric (“Does he/she read or write?”) in the “Informant Card”, which recorded the level of literacy of the interviewees (Stahl 1999: 237). This was particularly relevant in the interwar period when the level of illiteracy was still quite high—at 43% in 1930 (Mihăilescu 2018: 187). Similarly, subsequent ethnological field research, also included this information in the “Informant Card.” However, since the literacy rate had gone up in the meantime, the information was adapted and rephrased as “Literacy (level of schooling)” (Pop 1967: 89).

Today it is rare to encounter illiterate interlocutors in the field which makes the mentioning of literacy data largely irrelevant. Researchers are methodologically more interested in the actual experience of the interview, interlocutors being perceived as “modified individuals” (Golopenția 2001: 13) who are in a situation of talking to an outsider about their own lives their lived experiences (see Hedeșan 2015). But however focused on content the researcher might be, we cannot help glimpse, as the interview unfolds, the interlocutors’ training, the references they make to literate culture: they might recall things they learnt in school or the professional environments they were active in, or they might mention a published source for the information they have just provided.

The first occasion for me to reflect on this issue was in 2010 when, during an interview with A. M. (age 56, farmer, Șurdești, Maramureș), I asked him if he had any knowledge of medicinal plants, and he started listing all the plants that he regularly picked and explaining how and when they should be picked, providing details that I believed to be local knowledge passed on from one generation to another. At the end, however, he provided a bibliographical reference: “I have [this] book. But I have misplaced it now. I have a book, what’s it called... *From God’s Pharmacy*. By Maria Treben,⁷ she wrote the book.”

In addition to these miscellaneous, unarticulated observations, the research I carried out in the northern area of Buzău County, for the *GeoSus*⁸ project, was the fieldwork that made me seriously consider to what extent written culture influences local knowledge. One such good example are the stories associated with the village surroundings, the material I draw on in this paper.

Relevant for the relationship between oral culture and written culture was precisely the way the interviewees we approached would recommend other good storytellers, who, they perceived, would make good subjects

of our research. Most of the times they recommended the community's intellectuals,⁹ the majority of them active or retired teachers, or persons employed in the cultural field (librarians, employees of local cultural centres). This aspect is all the more important as these are the people who are most active in the heritage-making process and in re-inventing the local culture. Also, it is important to mention that the actions of the project research team were not limited to documenting and collecting data. In addition, we initiated a few cultural activities within the community. In other words, we, as outsiders, interfered with the community, bringing our own contribution to the process of capitalizing culture through heritage-making, an endeavour worthy of applied anthropology. Concretely, we organized a local museum exhibition¹⁰ and another one in Bucharest.¹¹

So, the interviews conducted in the villages of Buzău region and the project team's cultural interventions provided sufficient food for thought on the meanings that "traditions" still hold today and how their dynamics unfolds, this time, largely in the relation between oral culture and written, scholar culture.

On orality and literacy

The relation between orality and literacy proves difficult to integrate in the methodology of Ethnology. Firstly, this is because, at least in Romania, the history of the discipline was built on the assumption that orality was structural to peasant culture. Therefore, the issue was little discussed by Romanian ethnologists, as opposed to the West where we find a theoretical interest in the topic as early as the early twentieth century.¹² M. Pop and P. Ruxăndoiu (1978), however, pointed out a methodological shortcoming of the studies focusing on the orality of folklore strictly from the perspective of cultural transmission during performance.¹³ The two Romanian ethnologists further noted that, even if the "creation¹⁴ and performance remained strictly oral" (p. 77), one had to consider how the piece was performed and received, performance and reception being clearly influenced by the listening/reading opposition. Writing had become essential for a number of cultural facts ever since the late nineteenth century (e.g. letters sent by the soldiers); most often however, due to their materiality, these were perceived by the communities as cultural objects *per se*.¹⁵

The mutual influence of literacy and orality is identified to occur as early as the Antiquity (Crosby 1936; Goody 2010), a number of studies in the field of history focusing mainly on the way this relation unfolded in the Middle Ages (Crosby 1936; Zumthor 1987; Gurevich 1988). Anthropology studies made their contribution to this research topic, focusing on present-day cultures. In this regard, J. Goody's work (1968, 1977, 2010) is particularly important, as he proposed a methodological distinction between "literate societies" and "preliterate societies" (Goody 1968). This distinction was later refined by R. Finnegan (1974), who further distinguished between "non-literate societies" and "literate societies." Finnegan claimed that because orality and literacy "exhibit constant and positive interaction" (1974: 57), the two types of societies are neither universal, nor absolute; they are merely the extremes that make the comparison possible.

The mutual influence having been acknowledged, several proposals to classify orality based on the transmission medium were made. A first such classification came from philosopher W. J. Ong in his book *Orality and Literacy* (2002), first published in 1982. Ong made a distinction between "primary orality," typical of societies that do not know literacy, and "secondary orality," which is sustained by electronic devices and is becoming increasingly widespread with the use of the phone, TV, and radio. Primary and secondary oralities have many common features, especially in terms of fostering a sense of belonging to a community, even if "secondary orality generates a sense for groups immeasurably larger than those of primary oral culture" (p. 133). However, "it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print" (p. 133).

In 1983, P. Zumthor further refined the classification claiming that "[o]rality does not mean illiteracy" (Zumthor 1990: 17). He identified four types of orality. First, there is "primary and immediate or pure orality" (p. 25), characteristic of societies that have no contact with literate knowledge, where "strength of speech is limited only by its impermanence and inexactitude" (p. 19). Second, we speak of "mixed orality," "an orality coexisting with writing" (p. 25), when writing does not override oral tradition. Third, there is "a secondary orality, one that is (re)composed based on writing and that is central to a milieu where writing determines the values of voice" (p. 25), which is derived from a literate culture, as in the case of medieval troubadours, for example. Last, Zumthor singles out a new type of orality, visible in the mass-media, that he calls "mechanically

mediatized orality" (p. 25), manifested first and foremost in recordings. Recordings are important, he claims, because they "restored to voice an authority almost lost," (p. 18) freeing it from spatial limitations, but at a cost, namely the "exclusion of any and all variants" (p. 19).

Moreover, the existence of variants is specific to orality, which is characterized by a "generative transmission" (Goody 1977: 27). A topic otherwise discussed in detail in the literature (see Goody 1977, 2010; Ong 2002; Stahl 1983; Baumgardt 2008), it is reinforced by the fact that "oral memorization¹⁶ is subject to variation" (Ong 2002: 65). The existence of variants poses, however, a few methodological problems. From their very first experiences with fieldwork, "all direct researchers of folklore find out, to their greatest regret, that there is no standard text or template of belief, custom, ritual or ceremony universally known and repeated *ad litteram*, only themes and expressions generally known, which each informant will perform, improvising a new version of them every time" (Stahl 1983: 237-8). In fact, the researcher's intervention in the field, namely audio recording and writing down the documented cultural fact, does only to privilege one version over another, freezing it as it were. This can lead to problems in later stages of the research, such as the analysis of the data. One drawback is not having access to the original text, the one from which all the other versions were derived. One possible solution is to go back to the first version ever published or recorded (Baumgardt 2008). This can however lead to a second problem, namely that, by recording one particular version, the researchers created a "version-modèle" (template version) (Baumgardt 2008: 82). To avoid this, it is advisable to record several versions to be then examined and published in print or mass media (see Goody 2010; Seydon and Dauphin-Tinturier 2008).

Coming back to the classification of orality based on how the information is transmitted, in addition to Zumthor's (1990) four types of orality, given the importance the Internet and the online world have acquired in recent years, a new type has emerged, namely "digital orality," which uses text, image, and sound (Lafkioui and Merolla 2005). As a result, recent studies increasingly focus on how the Internet is integrated into oral cultures and contributes to the affirmation of local identity, a fluid identity that also relies on the new technologies (see Barber 2005; Castleton 2016). The phenomenon is the more important as it constitutes the source of inspiration in reinventing culture, especially in migrant communities (Merolla 2005).

In light of the above, the importance of the indissoluble relation and the mutual influence of oral and written cultures is impossible to overlook, especially in studying contemporary rural communities. This interdependence is to be used first as a methodology choice, a methodology for both the collection and the interpretation of field data. This approach could thus provide a possible solution for analysing and assessing the epistemological discontinuity that researchers perceive between two types of inquiries. On the one hand, there are folklore studies, which acknowledge this interdependence (see Pop and Ruxăndoiu 1978) but only briefly touch on it, since rural cultures are from the start conceived of as being oral. And on the other hand, there are cultural anthropology studies, which are more open to the transformations of the contemporary world.

Narratives of Places and Orality

My field research in the north of Buzău region allowed me to investigate the relation between orality and literacy *via* a few examples of narratives about places and events that occurred in the area surrounding the villages.

I chose to focus on narratives because they are the prototypical products of orality, as their existence is bound by utterance (Goody 2010). Moreover, narrating is an activity which is essentially human (Clemente 2015), and, according to cognitive psychologists (Kékesi 2017; Damasio 2016), stories are deemed to play a significant part in the building of the self and the definition of selfhood. Stories are also vehicles for passing on knowledge through the generations: although they might seem to convey the personal experience of one individual, as they bring to “the stage events from the narrator’s life as agent or at least an indirect or direct witness” (Bîrlea 1981: 256), narratives connect the various generations. They relate to and fuse with the experiences of the ancestors, which are transmitted through narratives (see Culiănu 1996; Goody 1977) and, thus, preserved in the group’s collective memory as exemplary events (see Halbwachs 1980). Consequently, all experiences, however fantastic they might seem, become true because they are embodied in local traditions (Valk 2012); they become testimonies of the connection between personal experiences and formalized belief.¹⁷

The second reason I opted for researching narratives of places is because of the diversity of stories we encountered in the interviews

conducted in Buzău region, which to some extent reflected the natural (geographical, geological) diversity of the landscape.¹⁸ Landscape is a cultural construct (Taylor 2008), that is to say it is not neutral but “qualitative,” in phenomenological terms, actively participating in all the events that occur within its boundaries (Bernea 1985). Precisely because it is experiential—either via personal experience or that of ancestors (Basso 1996)—abstract and general “space” becomes a personalized, known and familiar “place” (Baker 2012). People thus know the qualities of each place, good or bad (see Iuga and Andreescu 2016); places are witnesses of unusual events, or they are shaped in a particular way because an exceptional event took place there, or, just as well, they have the appearance that we see today because of the actions of the ancestors (Basso 1996). As such, places are named and personalized (Clemente 2015), they are important because they are imbued with memory (see Taylor 2008; Baker 2012; Halbwachs 1941). And because “[e]very story is a travel story—a spatial practice” (de Certeau 1984: 115), narratives help transform (neutral) spaces into (personalized) places, “bedecking” them with stories and legends (Gunnell 2008: 15).

By this logic, narrative structures turn out to be genuine “spatial syntaxes” (de Certeau 1984: 115), they decode and give meaning, since they load places with symbolic references. The challenge is to observe how these syntaxes become articulated within orality’s frame of reference, and then come to engage in a dialog with the written culture. To do so, I looked at three types of narratives, each illustrating one of the types of orality described by Zumthor (1990): (a) oral narratives recorded during interviews; (b) written narratives, in their various forms, stressing the role of the intellectuals inside the community, as well as outside of it; and (c) the new media narratives to illustrate the increasingly prominent “mediatized orality”.

Narratives of places and “mixed orality”

The first sources of narratives of places were the oral narratives recorded in the interviews we carried out as part of the research. They tell the stories of the people and the places, as they have been experienced by the interlocutors or by their ancestors (see Culianu 1996; Goody 1977). Tales are told as they have been heard from parents, grand-parents, neighbours, or other kin. They were all passed on from one generation to another as stories are preserved in the collective memory, ensuring

the connection between generations¹⁹ and enabling the transformation of mere souvenirs in local tradition (see Halbwachs 1941). This type of memory draws on direct experience; it is a primary, live, instantaneous memory specific to traditional communities, or “memory collectivities” as Nora (1997) called them.

Insomuch as they describe the interlocutor’s direct experience, narratives are autobiographical, or just biographical, if the main characters are other community members, whether the interlocutor is personally acquainted with them or not. Therefore, to structure the various narratives I documented, I adopted the classification proposed by I. Benga (2005) and B. Neagotă (2005),²⁰ which they designed using the referentiality criterion. In their view, there are four types of narratives: *memorate* I—self-referential, the subject shares his or her own experiences; *memorate* II—the narrator knows the referents directly; *memorate* III—the referents are generic, unknown, and the narrator does not provide clear information to identify them; and *memorate* IV—the referents are heroic, fantastic. Below I offer one example of each type of *memorate*, to illustrate my field data.

Memorate I:

I told you I didn't believe in that kind of thing ... From Valea Lupului, I came on foot ... And then a big wind, a blizzard started, and you couldn't—you couldn't even breath. And at one point, so I could go on walking, I put a bag over my head, I pulled it up—no, basically you couldn't see the road. And, after you cross that bridge they're working on now, before you enter the village of Colți, all of a sudden, as I minded my business, from the left-side of the road, a big toad, this big, appeared. And bang, it came towards me, I moved away, and the toad, bang, towards me, so at one point, I stopped and I said: "Good Lord, Blessed Mary, where did you come from now?" Because it was freezing, snowing, and the toad kept following me—I was afraid to look back, but there, in that area, you get to see this kind of thing (F.R., age 72, village of Colți, Oct. 2014, interview conducted with M. Andreescu).

Memorate II:

[My father-in-law], back when he was out cutting wood in the forest at night—it was around midnight, in a forest near Buda—like they worked back then, with a saw, an axe, a two-man saw, he felled, he bucked—when he heard a beautiful song. Those were the lele.²¹ If you make one peep then, you're paralyzed. Paralyzed, completely. We can't believe it. I personally, since I heard it and the things that happened to me, I still

can't believe it (M.M., aged 77, village of Sărulești, Sept. 2016, interview conducted with M. Andreescu, C. Voicilă, and R. Marinescu).

Memorate III:

By the woods, there was this place, Coman's House it was called. They say there was this man who ran an inn there and he ended up dead I don't know how ... crazy or something. And they said ghosts came up when you passed by. But [only those] who were afraid could see it. ... It happened to a woman; she told the ghost came before her oxcart. ... Something came up to the oxen. The oxen got scared but [the ghost] kept walking, only stopped when the woman crossed herself, before that it just kept walking. It happened at night. ... Nearby, towards Jâțrîligu, past the crosses (I.L., age 80, village of Cojanu, Nov. 2015).

Memorate IV:

Our elders would tell that giants used to live here, but I never saw them. ... A long time ago, I don't know where this was, ... they found one of us ploughing with two oxen. They say the giant tucked them in his shirt and took them away. "Look, mother, I found some little worms, they were digging down there, with these animals, they were digging there. ... What should we do with them?" ... This is hearsay, passed down from father to son, you know—This was a long time ago. I couldn't say what date this was. They're gone now. They knew [what would happen to them] because they said: "Let them be, let them be, take them back to where you took them from, because they'll survive us, we'll perish," she said. She predicted that ... That's what I heard from the elders. (I.B., age 92, village of Scăieni, Nov. 2014, interview conducted with G. Vlahbei).

Since all the interlocutors are literate, according to Zumthor's classification (1990), the narratives above belong to "mixed orality" and not "primary orality" typical of illiterate communities. Nonetheless, Buzău locals live in an environment in which local knowledge continues to be transmitted orally. The proof of this living transmission is the use of direct speech and imagining dialogues in the brief space of the story. Further, the speakers use persuasion to convince the audience about the factual truth of their utterances, couched in the language of orality: "but there, in that area, you get to see this kind of thing" (memorate I); "We can't believe it. I personally, since I heard it and the things that happened to me, I still can't believe it" (memorate II); "they say" (memorate III); "Our elders would tell" (memorate IV). These phrases are indicative of the intergenerational

transmission, which is done strictly orally and uninterruptedly within the communities.

It should be noted here that the narratives above, and other similar ones, were recorded in their spoken form, during the interviews. In addition to their own imagination, subjectivity, and emotions stirred by the storytelling, the interlocutors were also stimulated to perform as storytellers in relation with the researchers. They used gestures or changes of tone to make the story more dramatic, showing once more that speaking “engage[s] the body” (Ong 2002). The transcript of the recording, however, is but an “arbitrary” version (Goody 2010: 6) out of all the versions that could be found in the field, even coming from the same interlocutor, since oral performance is personalized and influenced by the context in which it takes place (see Finnegan 1974, 1977; Goody 1977). Following Ursula Baumgardt’s theory (2008), a template version was produced during the research, which was later also captured in writing, through transcribing. As a result, all of the recorded narratives exist at present in written form, as faithful a copy of the spoken version as possible. The narratives thus become “textual object[s],” which “will constitute the basis for any subsequent analysis” (Roulon-Doko 2008: 281), linking their oral, living existence to their written, frozen one, to be cited as a primary source from now on. This process of formalizing the oral texts is emphasized by their institutionalization, as they are transferred under the authority of an archive—in this case the Romanian Peasant Museum archive—with all the methodological problems associated with indexing oral records, including the ethical issues that concern the status of the researcher conducting the interviews and deciding to record them.

There are indeed several studies discussing the methodological slippages that the relationship between writing and speaking causes when the ethnological document enters the institutional collection of ethnological archives in both its audio recorded form and its written, transcribed form (see Iosif 2015; Jiga-Iliescu 2020, Mateoniu-Micu 2020). In this direction, C. Iosif (2015) writes about methodological reductionism as an effect of the archives, and ethnographic museums, because they present the “ethnological document” as the irrefutable proof of orality. “Following the logic of typologies, those institutions would depict rural societies as fundamentally ‘oral’” (p. 102), despite the village world having been for generations now at “the confluence of written culture, non-traditional spectacular practices, and the mass media” (p. 102). To further complicate things, Iosif goes on, the folklore “document” is an oral

document that is “identified,” recorded and classified following the logic of archives and typologies, i.e., of the literate culture. Therefore, in light of the methodological problems raised by the relationship between orality and literacy, Iosif claims the need for a reevaluation of the ethnological document produced by the researchers.

As an archival record, the oral document becomes therefore an instrument, source and resource for researchers, or cultural actors. The document, both oral and written, thus lives several lives via the readings that it supports, independent of the original intention of its creation as a document, since “[l]istening to a recording can also produce a variety of written outcomes” (Goody 2010: 6). It is however vital to point out that, although it appears to connect orality and literacy within the framework of mixed orality—as a “half-breed, or mixed genre,” as F. Pejoska-Bouchereau’s proposes to call it²²—transcription has a reifying effect, and in so doing it draws attention to the absence of oral transmission mechanisms; cut away from the original context of its production, and especially cut away from the community that produced it, the document is deprived of the intergenerational transmission²³ that generates the multiplicity of versions.

Written sources and the “second orality”

Once transcribed, living, primary memory, which is transmitted orally, turns into “secondary memory” (Cornea 1988), mediated and reified. This points to a paradigm shift that occurs with the invention of writing, since, as Jack Goody (1977) reminded us, “writing shifts language from the aural to the visual domain” (p. 78). To exist, therefore, this secondary memory needs a physical medium, i.e., the written text affixed to various materials, which become “places of memory” [*lieux de mémoire*] (Nora 1997), witnesses and marks of a shared past. The narratives about the places of Buzău region create many such *lieux de mémoire*, the first being turn-of-the-twentieth-century publications and, second, more recent publications produced by local teachers or cultural representatives.

Perhaps the best known such *lieu de mémoire* is Al. Odobescu’s *Pseudo-kynegeticos*, first published in 1874, which includes the fairy-tale of “The Emperor’s Son Who Had Luck Hunting.” The book, as the title suggests, is a mock hunting treaty, in fact a genuine travel guide around Wallachia and Moldova. Northern Buzău is one of the areas featured in the book, complete with the names of places, a brief description of them,

and a few legends explaining local exceptional natural phenomena. Some of the important sites of the future Geopark are mentioned, e.g., Dealul Balaurului (Dragon's Hill), in the area of Beciu and Arbănași villages, as a reminder of the fantastic beast killed by the emperor's son, or the mud volcanoes, located in the area of Pâclele and Beciu villages, where they said that "the Devil set up his pots of boiling tar and pitch" (Odobescu 2010: 211).

Second, there is Al. Vlahuță's *România pitorească* [Picturesque Romania], first published in 1901, a travel diary in which the author described the wonders he encountered in the places he travelled too, giving their local names, among which a few villages from northern Buzău. He recorded some of the giant stories,²⁴ creatures said to have lived a long time ago in those parts.

A third publication, written by a local teacher, D. Șerbănescu-Lopătari (1937)²⁵ recorded in elaborate detail the legendary origin of the toponymy²⁶ of the area, including the communes of Lopătari, Mânzălești, and Bisoca, crossing into Vrancea region. The legend accounts for the origin of the eternal flame natural phenomenon as nature's interfering in the final battle between Giurgiu, the protagonist, leader of the local shepherds, and the thieves who attacked him.

Although these are fictional works, the authors switch to a different register when they recount the legends, resorting, even if in passing, to a few artifices typical of orality. First, all three of them use the stylistic device of the embedded narrative, as the legends are told by a local, incidentally a gifted storyteller, who acts as the guide of the traveling writer. Odobescu does not mention the name of his guide ("a strong Bisoca villager, a sort of darker, Wallachian Apollo, who knew all the meanders of the mountains like the back of his palm," 2010:196); Vlahuță's guide is "Moș [Father] Gheorghe", presented as a wise man, who spoke "in riddles"; and Șerbănescu-Lopătari's guide is "nea [Uncle] Vasile Andrei", who, although illiterate, "was also a very good hunter and therefore a wonderful storyteller. For Uncle Vasile, each hill, valley, stone, rock, stream, and even older tree had its own story" (1937: 3). Further, direct speech is used in the text, as the guide speaks to the current audience made up of travellers and the future audience of readers. In terms of the language, local speech is used sparsely, despite its potential to lend local colour to the narratives, as the authors prefer a literary standard language, easier to read than the local speech in which the story was presumably told originally. The authors do acknowledge that; for instance, Odobescu

writes: “And then my good man of Bisoca did not waste any time and started to tell the following tale, using his soft, lyrical speech, which hard as I try, I could never recall” (2010: 199). Clearly, these literary devices are meant to recreate an appearance of orality—which the text fundamentally lacks, and with it, also variance.

In addition to the three works published before the 1950s, two of them (authored by Odobescu and Vlahuță) having become landmarks of Romanian literature, I also consulted several more recent local monographs (Gâlmeanu 2004; Costea 2012), as well as local publications.²⁷ They all record legends about places or other narratives explaining toponymies as part of a process to produce heritage, i.e., to salvage a culture that, in what is essentially a romanticized view, is deemed to be on the verge of extinction. The style of the monographs and legends does not raise any issues, as the narratives are merely transcribed and, ever so often, rewritten as they are retold, losing their orality in the process, the only remaining trace being at best the mentioning of the interlocutor.

In this type of secondary orality, the written version exists along with the still living, oral tradition, which, in the process, goes through several essential changes, such as losing its capacity to be re-created through variance or acquiring the style the transcription imposes on the spoken word, or sometimes being subject to a meddling with the language by educated authors. Nonetheless, the one version captured in writing can regain its orality, as visible during the interviews. For example, after telling us the legend of the village of Vintilă Vodă, when prompted where she had heard it, I. D. (age 71, village of Mânzălești, April 2015) admitted that she had learnt it in school.

Orality and the intellectuals

The role of the local intellectuals, according to the above, is anything but insignificant, pointing to the need to reconsider their part in promoting local culture, as well as, within the framework of this analysis of how orality and literacy interact, the way they influence, through their actions, the perception of oral cultural facts.

a) Local intellectuals

First, there are the local scholars who, in our recorded interviews, described their own experiences in a way that made apparent their active

involvement in the communities. Through their efforts to preserve and transmit the local collective memory in the form of monographs—thus “freezing” mixed orality and turning it into secondary orality—they become witnesses of traditions and orality. But their action is not limited to recording and, possibly, rewriting texts, for, as Goody (1977) put it, they are those “individuals engaged in the creative exploration of culture” (p. 20). It takes instead the form of a multiplicity of contexts in which local scholars intervene proposing creative cultural activities akin to heritage-making, sometimes with the purpose to “educate” the community. Their efforts are the more significant as they emerge within the community and actively engage the locals.

Mânzălești is a good example, as several creative activities were organized in the village over the years. After 1990, under the guidance of their teachers D. Cristea and V. Beșliu, the pupils were encouraged to bring to school old household items that their families no longer used, thus creating the collection of objects displayed at the “Time of Man’ Museum” exhibition.²⁸ This attests the contemporary trend of educating the young generations to embrace self-heritage-making as an identity-building practice, an approach reminiscent of the theoretical orientations of the early days of folklore studies (Mesnil 1997). In addition, creative activities for adults and teens were offered. During communism, a folklore group²⁹ made up of both adults and teens was organized to participate in local and national festivals and take to the stage local traditions, especially winter customs, re-inventing them in the process. The folklore group’s repertory included a folk theatre play, based on a legend explaining the origin of the village’s name. The sketch was written by teacher D. Cristea, who first collected the legend in 1970 and wrote it for the stage to be performed by both adults and teens in 1974-1975. Before 2001, the play, consisting of short folk music, theatre and dance pieces, was performed only locally or regionally. In 2001, it was performed for the first time outside the county, at the ASTRA Museum in Sibiu, and in 2015, it was included in the opening program for the “Time of Man’ Museum” exhibition.

The story of Mânzălești is illustrative of how active involvement by local intellectuals can change the direction of local knowledge transmission. Thus, the direct oral transmission paradigm, where memorization techniques focuses on themes and motives, allowing for each transmitter to interfere with the story and imbue it with his or her own personality or style, is altered. With the establishing of a reference text, first collected as an oral document and then transposed in a popular theatre script, the

narrative is reified in a relatively fixed form, meaning that, in this case, there is word-by-word memorization and the possibility for variance is largely lost. As a novelty, the theatre play provides new media for the message, apart from the spoken word, namely gestures, music and dance, all of them engaging the body the same way it used to happen in the case of direct oral storytelling. But, by being performed as a theatre play, the narrative re-enters the oral circuit through another “door,” as each actor (member of the folklore group) leaves his or her mark on the text and the performance.

b) Intellectuals from outside the community

Next, I discuss the cultural interventions performed by actors coming from outside the community. In this connection, I will focus on our actions as researchers to single out and display Buzău heritage, both tangible and intangible, in what can be ultimately deemed an applied anthropology endeavour that invites to self-reflection.

While, during research, we gather evidence, we record narratives, which we then file and preserve in the archives, later, our role as museum researchers implies that we give back the community what we recorded, in the form of cultural interventions. In the framework of museum work, this would require opening local exhibitions, as well as creating publications for the use of the young generations. This analysis discusses heritage-making as representation of orality via institutional action (Iosif 2009), even more so as these cultural interventions use information that was already selected as representative.

As part of the GeoSust project outcomes, two local exhibitions were opened in Buzău region. The first, the mostly ethnographic “‘Time of Man’ Museum” display (Mânzălești, 2015) used household items belonging to the 1990s local collection. Initiated by the mayor of the commune, it was the outcome of the collaborative work between Romanian Peasant Museum researchers, geologists, and a few locals. The exhibition was designed around the local natural elements, salt and clay, combining objects and excerpts of interview transcripts that told the story of the people and places. The success of the small display showed both how much the community welcomed the effort, as well as the community’s openness to it, as the locals fully appropriated the discourse on heritage offered by us. The opening of the exhibition in Mânzălești stirred the competitive spirit of other villages, so, in 2016, the “Seven fairy-tale places” exhibition

was opened in Lopătari. The display explained seven key local natural phenomena (the salt domes, the eternal flames, the mud volcanoes, the amber, the sulphur springs, the concretions, the caves dug in the rock) using both scientific data and local narratives, mostly from print sources, as well as from the interviews we conducted during the research.

Another intervention that concerned the interference of orality and literacy were the publications that resulted from the GeoSust project, namely “A User’s Manual for the Environment” and “A Guide to Cultural Legacy.” The two publications were designed as manuals for the use of the community youth to encourage them to become involved in the heritage-making process, the process that valorises a community’s cultural particularities, such as oral cultural facts that help build local identity.

*

The narratives of places—even when performed on stage or filtered through the personalities of village or outsider intellectuals—do not cease to be dynamic as, despite having been transcribed, they can always go back into the oral circuit and undergo the transformations specific to the dynamics of orality. The novelty here is that, presented this way, they are meant for a larger audience than the local one. Nonetheless, the reversion to orality, unsurprisingly, only occurs within the community. This is not however the whole picture since these cultural events target mostly the young local audience, those who need to be made aware of the significance of cultural heritage, here intangible, for defining and asserting local identity. The intellectuals’ interventions are, for that reason, all the more important as the dialog that they enable between oral culture and literate culture shapes how communities perceive their history and reactivate their oral memory.

New media and the “mediatized orality”

Because it is a dynamic phenomenon, present-day orality “no longer has the same agenda as it did for our ancestors” (Zumthor 1990: 18), which explains why its current form is radically different from mixed or secondary orality, sometimes combining the features of the two, always surprising as it resorts to all the latest media for transmission. In fact, as early as 1977, Finnegan claimed that the radio and the TV, “the oral media,” were becoming “one of the main means of distribution of oral poetry” (Finnegan 1977: 169) and orality in general, and by that “restored

to voice an authority almost lost” (Zumthor 1990: 18). Now is the time for a new type of orality, “mediatized orality” (Zumthor 1990), that uses mechanical devices. In the world of the “hypermedia,” where the Internet reaches all types of audiences and is directly involved in the perpetuation of orality in digital form (Lafkioui and Merolla 2005), the researcher must consider the new media.

I did encounter instances of mediatized orality in northern Buzău, as the narratives of places were increasingly advertised using the mass-media (TV, radio), but also in digital form (websites, social media, etc.). They all made an active contribution to asserting local identity (see Castleton 2016). So, the region’s cultural assets are now accessible through the mediation of technology (TV, radio, the Internet), illustrating the capacity for adaptation and appropriation of the new media by the local community and ultimately the latter’s resilience.

Most often, this mediatized and digital orality develops from within the community. For example, an increasingly widespread way to popularize the stories of places is to post them on social media (Facebook, Instagram). Locals from Buzău region post them on their own pages to draw attention to the local culture—but mostly it is local intellectuals or people with a higher profile, not only online but regionally due to mass-media promoting them as craftsmen. One of the most active local actors posting stories and legends about Buzău places is C. P. (age 70, Mânzălești), former teacher. Now and then, she posts the narratives she collected herself in the 1970s-1980s or later, her posts gathering a lot of likes and comments. Social media pages thus become a new way for people with shared passions and, most importantly, values to come together, as evidenced by the positive tone of the posts and comments.

Mediatized orality remains, however, mostly the domain of actors outside the community. The most eloquent example in the Buzău case study are the three documentary films³⁰ produced by Digi World, the *GeoSust* project’s media partner. The films tell the story of the region following several narrative threads and focusing on three themes derived from the natural landscape: fire, wood, and stone. The directors opted to present the places of Buzău Land via the stories told by the people—several key interlocutors recommended by the researchers who did fieldwork there. The three films were screened during the exhibition about Buzău at the Romanian Peasant Museum (2017); they were also present at the “Culese din Balkani” documentary film festival (Nov. 2017, Bucharest); and another special screening was organized at the Romanian Peasant Museum

(Jan. 2018, Bucharest). In addition, they were repeatedly broadcasted on the Digi World TV channel, which brought them to a considerably larger audience. Excerpts from the interviews were published on the Facebook page of Asociația Ținutul Buzăului [Association of Buzău Land],³¹ an NGO created, as our research project ended, to enable the establishing of the Geopark and communication with the local communities. The interviewees' stories thus reached an audience that exceeded by far the boundaries of the region.³²

In the case of both mediatized and digital oralities, although the audience is expected to engage with the oral cultural phenomena during their reception (Seydon and Dauphin-Tinturier 2008), in our experience, the interaction did not actually occur during the storytelling. There was a time lag between the shooting of the films and their screening and even between the writing and the publishing of Facebook posts, so the reaction of the audience came a good while after the fact. Despite the appearance of a dialog in the hypermedia environment, the oral narratives are in fact transmitted rather in the form of a monologue.

Beyond this shortcoming, the new channels for expressing orality confirm the "return in force of orality" (Zumthor 1990: 227), all the more so as they generate a strong feeling of belonging to a group, albeit online. Further, these communication channels contribute to the assertion of local identity as they "can bring proximity to cultural practices" (Castleton 2016: 209) and give the locals (and others) access to a set of informational resources otherwise kept strictly in the private sphere: old photographs of locals, photographs and video recordings of customs, or lesser-known legends.

Conclusions

As presented above, all three types of orality (mixed, secondary, and mediatized) coexist in Buzău region, illustrating the flexibility and dynamic nature of local oral culture, despite it having been influenced by literate culture for several generations. The dynamic aspect is further emphasized by the way oral memory was integrated in the written culture through transcribing, as secondary memory, an endeavour similarly motivated as the Enlightenment scientific approach, meant to "save" the local culture (see Mesnil 1997; Pop and Ruxăndoiu 1978). Adapting to the new era, orality transcends the traditional media, making its way in the digital

environment and integrating among its forms of expression, in addition to writing, recorded speech and gestures.

The Buzău case-study is significant for illustrating a reality that we, researchers, understand sometimes only after finishing our fieldwork: the relation between oral culture and literate culture, that we succeed or fail to integrate it in our research. In this sense, researchers should set out to the field equipped with a methodology that takes into consideration the complementarity and coexistence of orality and literacy, acknowledging the fact that the people whom we meet and whose stories we record are more or less educated and have access to publications and media (TV, radio, Internet, social media) that continuously educate the local community in the spirit of orality. After we record the narratives of places, for instance, asking our interlocutors the question “How did you learn that?” could be very relevant. Often people speak from their experience or that of other community members, which they know because it was orally transmitted in their social group. But sometimes their stories come from print sources, most often narratives transcribed in local monographs or received through other media channels only to fall back into orality and be passed on through the usual channels of oral transmission. In this sense, the interaction with the intellectuals from the local communities is relevant—whether we look for them ourselves or they are recommended to us by the villagers as key members of the community. They offer us a more elaborate and reflexive view of local cultures, which is why they are often overlooked as interlocutors in our final research papers, only their works are cited as bibliography. Other times, when they speak from their own experiences, they are assimilated with the other speakers, without any mention of how their narratives are distinct, because of their capacity to synthesize the local beliefs and knowledge.

As a result, once the discussion of the relation between orality and literacy is reopened and the complementarity and coexistence of the two is built into the methodology, ethnological research will acquire a new dimension to help it unpack the current meaning of traditions and their dynamic marked by both continuity and discontinuity. We find therefore that, today, oral, living, primary, empirical memory communicates with and is integrated in secondary, passive, mediatized memory without however disappearing altogether. Seemingly, oral memory leaves no material traces, as opposed to secondary memory that can be traced in written documents, audio and video recordings, or the digital environment. The traces of oral memory are nonetheless there, they are intangible, visible

in the style of the writing, the gestures recorded on video, the intonation of the audio recording. Contemporary researchers of intangible cultural facts must therefore acknowledge both types of memory, make room for them in their studies, and acknowledge the dialog that unfolds between the two.

Finally, Mesnil's claim that the relation between oral culture and literate culture should be approached critically couldn't be more topical, given that "any reflection on European ethnology must begin, we believe, with a critique and rethinking of its object of inquiry: the phenomenon of orality within a 'historical' society" (Mesnil 1997: 23). The Belgian scholar thus emphasized the need to redefine the methodology of ethnological research, which is lacking at present, precisely because it does not adequately integrate the complementarity of oral and literate cultures, a shortcoming that can only be overcome by considering this interconnectivity as early as the pre-fieldwork stage.

NOTES

- ¹ V. Mihăilescu (2007) makes a conceptual distinction between two understandings of “tradition.” First, “tradition as value,” with a very broad, naturalistic, organic and absolutist meaning, connected with the concept of “tradition” as “cultural message” (Lenclud 1987). Second, “tradition as process,” seen from a constructivist perspective, following Handler and Linnekin (1984) who posited that “tradition refers to an interpretative process that embodies both continuity and discontinuity” (p. 273). In this latter view, “tradition is a model of the past and is inseparable from the interpretation of tradition in the present” (p. 276).
- ² See Lenclud (1987).
- ³ As early as the interwar period, the sociologist Henri H. Stahl (1983) provided a detailed critical account of how folklorists and other people of culture had used the concept of “traditions” starting with the eighteenth century (the Transylvanian Enlightenment) up until the first decades of the twentieth century (when Folklore Studies are established due to the interest of the Romanian Academy in the topic).
- ⁴ In this regard, it is very telling that, for the indirect ethnological surveys conducted in late nineteenth-century Romania, the village intellectuals were the ones to fill out the questionnaires sent to them by B. P. Hașdeu—in 1887 he prepared the first indirect ethnological survey questionnaire dedicated to legal customs, and in 1884 he circulated a second questionnaire, which he used to draft the *Etymologicum Magnum Romaniae* dictionary.
- ⁵ For instance, during my PhD field research, of the fifty-nine interlocutors, only nine (15%) held a university degree.
- ⁶ Looking back, all of the persons I interviewed had at least graduated primary school. Primary education has been free and compulsory in Romania since 1864, under Law no. 1150/1864, promulgated by Al. I. Cuza.
- ⁷ M. Treben, *Sănătate din farmacia Domnului. Practica mea în legătură cu plantele medicinale și sfaturi pentru utilizarea lor [Health Through God's Pharmacy: Advice and Experiences with Medicinal Herbs]*, Hunga-Print, Budapest, 1994.
- ⁸ The field research was conducted from 2014 to 2017 as part of the project Applied Research for Sustainable Development and Economic Growth Following the Principles of Geo-conservation: Supporting the Buzău Land UNESCO Geopark Initiative (*GeoSust*), coordinated by the Romanian Academy Institute of Geodynamics, funded by EEA and Norwegian grants and the Ministry of Education, contract no. 22 SEE/06/30/2014, with the Romanian Peasant Museum assigning nine ethnologists to be part of the research team. The project researched both the geo-heritage and the intangible heritage, within a bounded territory, for the purpose of establishing a geopark.

- ⁹ Of a total eighty-two semi-structured interviews that I conducted in Buzău, sometimes on my own, other times alongside my colleagues, 38 percent of the interlocutors were community intellectuals, the highest share out of all the fieldwork studies I had participated in until then.
- ¹⁰ The “Muzeul Timpului Omului” [Time of Man Museum] exhibition in Mânzălești, opened in 2015.
- ¹¹ The exhibition “Ținutul Buzăului. Priveliști, rosturi, povești” [Buzău Land. Sights, Meanings, Stories], held at the Romanian Peasant Museum from April 26 to June 25, 2017, at the end of the GeoSust project.
- ¹² R. Crosby’s 1936 study on the Middle Ages, with references to the oral culture of the Antiquity, represented a breakthrough for the study of the relation between orality and literacy. In it she started from the premise that, in medieval times, the majority of people “read by means of the ear rather than the eye, by hearing others read or recite rather than by reading to themselves” (p. 88).
- ¹³ Performance is perceived as a creative process (see Goody 1977, 2010), influenced by subjectivity, the imagination and immediate emotions of both the performer—who, equipped with specific skills, is a necessary mediator, although he or she performs within the limits (a framework of motives, topics) imposed by the community (see Baumgardt 2008)—and the receiver who, in turn, gives a subjective meaning to the text (see Seydon and Dauphin-Tinturier 2008).
- ¹⁴ When it comes to the creation of oral cultural facts, the context is often blurred, since it is ruled by the spoken word, which is both dynamic and perishable (Ong 2002: 31), the resulting cultural fact being therefore necessarily “ephemeral” (see Jiga-Iliescu 2020).
- ¹⁵ A reflection that came out during a discussion with C. Iosif, February 2020.
- ¹⁶ As opposed to “verbatim memorization,” typical of literate societies, which relies on a written text (Ong 2002: 56).
- ¹⁷ The observation belongs to L. Jiga-Iliescu in a comment she made during the international conference “Călători și călătorii. A privi, a descoperi,” University of Bucharest, Faculty of Letters, October 24, 2015.
- ¹⁸ Buzău region includes indeed many highly valuable geological heritage sites: the mud volcanoes, the eternal flames, the amber, the salt domes, the caves, the concretions and the mineral springs.
- ¹⁹ Maurice Halbwachs claims that “social memory,” as external memory of the social group, is associated with traditional communities where “all persons think and remember in common” (1980: 78). Ricoeur refers to this type of memory as “transgenerational memory” (2001: 480).
- ²⁰ The two researchers use the referentiality criterion to classify narratives in order to substantiate the process of cultural transmission in relation to fictionalization. In my study, however, this classification is not used to measure the degree of truth or fictionalization because this is not the purpose.

Therefore, I use a simplified version of the classification to distinguish between the subjects the narrative is centred on.

21 *Iele* are female mythical creatures in Romanian beliefs, often described as fairies.

22 Personal conversation with Professor F. Pejoska-Bouchereau, February 27, 2020, Paris.

23 *Idem*.

24 The legend of the child giant who finds the man ploughing his field, picks him up in his palm, and takes him to his parents. We did record the legend during our research in the GeoSust project, see the *memorate* IV example.

25 Let me note here that I owe the access to the text, in its typed version and not the 1937 published one, to Ioan Zota, a teacher in the village of Lopătari.

26 The legend covers many toponyms still used today, explaining how the protagonists of the legends (mostly people, but also animals) turned into various elements of the natural landscape: mountains, hills, rocks, rivers, etc.

27 This refers to *Întrezăriri. Revistă sătească de știință și cultură [Glimpses. A village science and culture magazine]*, first published in 2013, in Pârscov (Buzău County), under the coordination of Gheorghe Postelnicul. You can access the magazine online: <https://intrezaririrevista.wordpress.com/>.

28 The museum opened in the cultural center of Mânzălești in 2015, as a local outcome of the GeoSust project; it was preceded by a small local exhibition designed by the local teacher in the 1990s.

29 “Slănicul from Mânzălești.”

30 “Focul – Ținutul Buzăului” [Fire – Buzău Land] (2017, director A. Oprea, 35’), “Lemnul – Ținutul Buzăului” [Wood – Buzău Land] (2017, directors: A. Dobrescu, A. Oprea, 38’); and “Piatra – Ținutul Buzăului” [Stone – Buzău Land] (2017, directors: A. Oprea, A. Grădinaru, and I. Pană, 42’).

31 www.tinutulbuzaului.org; <https://www.facebook.com/pg/tinutulbuzaului>

32 The documentary film excerpts posted on this Facebook page have between 2,100 and 82,200 views.

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