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Creation of a *New Archaic* through Ethnographic and Journalistic Strategies. A Case Study from the Romanian Shepherds' Tradition

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Abstract: As eclectic as they are, our times express a multilevel predisposition to re-actuate the 'archaic tradition' (unclear and vague expression, in connection with another contemporary obsession, which is 'authenticity') as a return-to-nature movement. This process comes from the urban environment and is often formalised through new rituals, which do not absorb original, genuine old rituals, perhaps already vanished, despite being based. on their descriptions and interpretations. The case study discussed in this article is from Romanian tradition and is represented by the wedding in a vegetal sanctuary (Rom. *biserica de brazi*). I analysed an article published in *Formula As*, a new-age magazine with a large audience, in order to disclose strategies of a turning a ritual in a legend, that occurs at the intersection between ethnographic and fictional texts.

Keywords: inventing tradition, fictional ethnology, journalism, Carpathian Mountains, ritual, local religiosity, shepherds

The premise of this article comes from Clifford Geertz's assertion that anthropological writings are *fictions* "in the sense that they are 'something made', 'something fashioned' – the original meaning of *fictio* – not that they are false, un-factual, or merely 'as if' thought experiments" (Geertz 1973: 15).

Texts written by scholars, by journalists, or by writers all work as meta-realities that differently describe the same referent, depending on the reason why a certain text is written, on its audience, on the conventions of the genres to which a text dominantly belongs to, and last but not least, the skilful pen the writer wields. An

interesting phenomenon occurs when the demarcations between genres become blurred and the written artefact glides from one type of literary convention to another. For example, when the fictional component of an ethnographic text is augmented, or when journalistic rhetoric leans toward ethnographic realism, then the dialectical tension between *true* and *false* takes on specific meanings and nuances. My intention is to explore the relations between distinct categories of texts – ethnographic description, journalistic fiction, and promotional literature – when they refer to the same item. I chose as a study case the so-called *fir trees church* (Rom. *biserica de brazi*), an item taken from the Romanian ethnologic literature.

In 1901, the French geographer Emanuel de Martonne participated in a shepherds' wedding that took place near a sheepfold (located in Petrimanu Mountain, Latorița Valley). Instead of using a church building, the priest, brought from the foot of the mountain for the occasion, officiated the wedding in a place delimited by four fir trees.

> Il n'est même pas rare de voir célébrer un mariage dans la montagne, et il est curieux de retrouver, dans les rites observées, des usages spéciaux à la Transylvanie, dont presque tous les bergers sont originaires. L'invitation se fait toujours de la même façon, portée par deux jeunes gens à cheval, qui vont de *stâna* en stâna, offrant à boire d'une *plosca* pendue à leur selle. Le pope, appelé du village le plus voisin, célèbre la messe entre quatre jeunes sapins plantés dans le sol, qui figurent l'église; tandis que, tout comme dans la plaine, les invités dansent à côté (devant la porte de l'église), aux sons d'un violon râclé par quelques tzigane. (...) Il est curieux de voir la soin que pend la roumain de rester ainsi, malgré son isolement, en communion avec son village. (De Martonne 1902: 112–113)

Forty years later, Ion Conea recorded a 73-year-old shepherd speaking about another mountain of the same Latorița Valley:

> On the Coasta Benghii there were some fir trees planted in a circle (...). On the East, there were an opening that served as the entrance (...). From a distance, the group of fir trees looked like a church (...). It was at the limit of the forest (...). Our elders said that these trees had been planted by shepherds from Poiana Sibiului, so they could have a church (...). Many shepherds married in the grove of trees. I have seen this church around 1921 (...). When the Carpathina Society forest exploitation arrived there, part of the fir trees were cut down. The other burned in a huge fire, around the '40s (...). There is nothing there, anymore" (Conea 1943: 25–26; apud. Ciurea-Genuneni 1981: 31–32). [1]

The mountain mentioned above and its "church" are key elements of my current article.

The Coasta Benghii Mountain is closely located to the former political border area along the South Carpathian crest, which until 1918 separated Austro-Hungary from Romania. The mountain is also very close to one of the passageways that cross the mountains and link the two Romanian historical regions of Oltenia (south flank) and Transylvania (north flank). Administratively, it is included in Oltenia. The area was – and still is – used for grazing by shepherds from both North and South faces of the mountains.

On the military map of Oltenia drawn between 1790–1791 under the guidance of the Austrian General Specht, on Coasta Benghii is a placed marked as *monastir* (monastery). The edifice identified on the Austrian map no longer exists.

In my book "The church 'outside'. Ethnological study about Carpathian shepherds' religiosity" (Jiga Iliescu 2020) I dedicated an entire chapter to this church and the body of legends around it, along with the wedding ritual among the fir trees (the emic terms would be 'behind the fir trees'). In writing it, I conducted consistent fieldworks during 2011 and 2019 up to the mountain and the villages at its base, and had the chance to find and to deeply observe the very place and topography where the church from Coasta Benghii was settled. Nowadays, the spot is marked by *two* stones with engraved crosses, one of them with the inscription: 'I, Ion Lazăr, put this stone as an offering, in remembrance of this halidom. 1868'. The text on the other stone is illegible, but the year 1888 is still visible.

Fig. 1: The stones that mark the place where the church was settled. Credit photo: Laura Jiga Iliescu. 21 of July 2012

I examined the landscape and noticed how many paths connect this place with a wide net of stables, also connecting seven peaks where mountain fairs (Romanian terms are *târg de plai, târg de două țări, nedee*) took place until the end of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth century. These fairs, where shepherds and their families gathered from both flanks of the mountains, played an important role in the regulation of grazing lands and in the control of the matrimonial alliances system. In the past, some weddings took place up on the mountain, on the very day of the fair.

> According to the village elders from the Oltenia mountains (...), a few decades ago [the recording was conducted in the 1940s] in this church from Coasta Benghii wedded shepherds and shepherdesses who decided to marry at the fair. Those days, fairs took place all over the mountains, starting with St. John's day (June 24) when the flocks climbed on to the mountain and ending with Little Mary's day (September 9), when they came down again (...). The shepherds even had a church in Coasta Benghi. They were wedded here by priests who came from Poiana, Răşinari [Mărginimea Sibiului, Southern Transylvania], from Novaci, Bengeşti [villages in Northern Oltenia, on the other flank of the Parâng Mountain]; aside**,** they married on the mountain, without any church: they stuck few small fir trees [in the ground] *as if* they were the chancel table and encircled them while ritually dance (Conea 1943: 25–26).

This intriguing paragraph, written in 1943 by Ion Conea, indicates *two* spaces, both dedicated to wedding ceremonies: a constructed edifice and a vegetal sanctuary.

Searching the narrative file of the area and particularly of the Coasta Benghii, I was not so much interested in finding out exactly what (in historical terms) was actually there, but how local people perceived the high level of the mountain in relation to a church that is outside of any village and out of the control of the parish community. I identified two groups of legends. One tells of a forbidden marital union: against their parents' will, a couple decides to flee and to marry in the very church at Coasta Benghii. In another, a maiden is kidnapped by a dragoon, the *stranger* par excellence*,* from the very dance at the fair. The second group has nothing to do with marriage, but with some supernatural events that cast a strange shadow over the place and its church(es). Here is an example, told by a non-shepherd:

> There was a man in Polovragi whose wife was pregnant. At Easter, according to their tradition, they had to bring food and drinks to church. Because the woman was late, (...) the man became angry [and] destined the child to the devil (...). Seventeen years later, the boyar Bengescu, who owned Coasta Benghii Mountain, sent a group of hunters to chase chamois. They met there the cursed boy, who, in the meantime, had become the devil's serf and grazed

> its wild goats**.** The boy took the hunters to the devil's palace, where they ate and drunk (...); the devil wasn't at home. Then the boy asked them: 'Go to my father and tell him to pay the priest to read the Holly Book in my behalf for six weeks, and after six weeks, to come here, together with the priest, to break this curse'. The father did so, and finally the priest baptized the boy and freed him from the devil's chains. (...) In that moment, the devil's hotel turned into a stone and fell down. Then the boy went home with his father and the other people (Mocanu 2003: 256).

The above variant was recorded in 1975, in Voineasa, Northern Oltenia; I recorded two other variants of the legend in 2012 and in 2014, in Baia de Fier, Northern Oltenia. The legend paradigmatically articulates semantic fields of marginality and wildness: at the high level of the mountain, away from human settlements, we have an ambiguous shepherd, an outsider who grazes wild animals, and an ambiguous building, as well. Through baptism and the priest's prayers, not only the boy, but also the space, at its turn polluted by the devil's presence (whatever 'devil' means here) have been cleansed and Christianised. But where exactly on the Coasta Benghii was the devil's *palace*? Or, in other words, to which kind of edifice does the legend refer to? Could they refer to the fir trees sanctuary, namely the *aside* church mentioned by Ion Conea? In this case we might speak about a (non-Christian?) space assigned to the devil, a space that was cleansed and *baptised* through the concrete presence of a Christian church built there later on.

Or, on the contrary, could the legend refer to the building Christian edifice that, even if it was a church from the very beginning, was perceived as having an ambiguous nature (such as the boy does, too)? It perhaps was a church that did not belong to a monastery, nor to a parish, but that served a fluid community of people who only seasonally gathered around it. It would then be a church contaminated by the liminal significance of the space *between* territories, thus getting a hybrid status (it is neither *here,* nor *there*, but away from ecclesiastical control).

At the end of the seventeenth century, far from the Carpathians, in Val d'Aran, the Spanish flank of the Pyrenees, descriptions of similar kinds of churches appear:

> [C]*inq églises foraines sont considérées comme des ermitages (...). Précisons encore le vocabulaire. Quand on parle d'ermitage, en Aran, on ne pense pas à un lieu reculé, habité par un ermite vivant en solitaire. Les ermitages sont d'abord des lieux de cultes pour les bergers, qui sont desservis par des prêtres portionnaires, généralement à tour de rôle. Parfois, des prêtre décident de s'y retirer.* (Brunet 2001: 326)

These churches were dedicated to the wedding ceremonies between people from different valleys or from both sides of the border between France and Spain (Br

funet 2001: 657). In the same area, forbidden weddings (against parents' wishes) celebrated in a fir tree sanctuary are also attested, as in the Carpathians. Here is a description from 1884:

> *Paul Perret nous parle d'union, désormais sans prêtre, «devant la nature», au Portillon* […]. *Le col apparaît, il n'est guère éléve que de 1300 mètres (1.308)* […]. *Voici quatre sapins (ils sont quatre). Ici on renouvelle le sacrement sommaire de Gretna Green; seulement il n'y a point de forgeron. Les amoreux qui n'ont pas la patience d'attendre que M. le Maire ait scellé et que M. le Curé ait béni, prennent à témoins ces quatre troncs rugueux qui ne disent jamais non. C'est ce qu'on appelait, en d'autres temps, épouser devant la nature.* (Brunet 2001: 659)

Similarities with the Coasta Benghi case include topography with frontiers between pasture lands on both sides of a mountain chain, the marital destination for these small non-parish (or multi-parished) churches, their ambiguous status, and last but not least, the built church is joined by an outdoor, or *aside* edifice of fir-trees. There are very likely other such places in the European mountains.

Literature, Fiction and the Fir Trees Sanctuary

In Romanian scholarly literature the most known and apparently richest description of the so-called *fir trees church* is, in fact, the most doubtful. It comes from Romulus Vulcănescu, an ethnologist who was interested in finding the pre-Christian, Dacian roots of Romania, and especially the pagan survivals during Christian times. It was Vulcănescu who actually coined the expression 'fir trees church'. In emic language, as recorded in the field, people say *wedding behind, or among the fir tree* (Rom. *nunta după brazi*, *nunta printre brazi*):

> My grandmother married like that. In the fair day, they took the priest and walked around the fir trees. And that was all. No party, only wedding behind the fir trees. (personal field recording, 20 of July 2017; Maria B., 67 years old, sheep owner, from Poiana Sibiului, Mărginimea Sibiului, Southern Transylvania)

The same informant spoke about a fair on the high pasturage plateau, at which shepherds from Oltenia, on the other side of the mountain, also took part.

In 1987, Romulus Vulcănescu wrote:

> The holiness of the fir tree acquired *magico-religious* [my italics] meaning in the consciousness of the Romanian shepherds. For example, the mountain

> fir trees church. A flock of fir trees planted in a circle or a circle formed by cutting the forest around them; in this circle shepherds engaged or married with the maiden who came at the stable from the village, in order to shirk from their parents' authority. The wedding in the fir tree church was summarily officiated by an *old* [my emphasis] shepherd or *even* [my italics] by a priest. (Vulcănescu 1987: 487).

The unique reference for this paragraph is represented by a book (Ciurea Genuneni 1981: 30–34) that also alluded to Ion Conea's study from 1943 (see above). The original text, however, does not contain any information about a circular clearing of the forest, or about an old shepherd taking the role of the priest in the wedding religious ceremony.

Ten years later, in 1997, the same Romulus Vulcănescu gave more details, again without any bibliographical or field evidences:

> There were fir tree churches close to the mountains shepherds' fairs (Rom. *nedei*); some of them were not hidden within the fir tree forests, other were camouflaged within the fir trees flocks. The un-hidden churches consisted in cut fir trees re-implanted in an open circle line, near the mountain fairs. The camouflaged churches usually consisted of three concentric circles of green fir trees. They lasted as long as they were not destroyed by those who were sabotaging such churches for the reason that they were not canonically consecrated. For protection, sometimes the access to the camouflaged churches was through two Y-shaped paths, at their turn camouflaged by fir trees. (Vulcănescu 1997: 11)

In reading scholarly literature, searching archives, or conducting fieldwork for my research on this topic, I never found anything about open or concentric circles, about cut and re-implanted trees, about camouflage, or active hostility against these sanctuaries. Such information would have been of great interest if certified by documents, bibliographical references or field recordings. Romulus Vulcănescu, however, was silent about his sources. Instead, through axiomatic sentences and allusive style, he induced an aura of mystery around these shepherds who are given generic and metaphoric values, as if they represent the embodiment of a culture that comes and survives from *archaic* times, a culture with a religion more or less independent of the Christian institutions from the bottom of the mountain. He cloaks himself in an aura of mystery, too, as being the one who learned and was initiated in these sorts of secrets.

When Vulcănescu wrote about the fir tree churches (1986, 1992), he was an emeritus scholar and an influential member of the Romanian Academy (elected in

1993). His popularity, thanks to the book *Romanian Mythology,* has since spread outside the academic milieu.

Despite several voices who expressed doubts (mostly informally) regarding the accuracy of some descriptions from this book, the author's prestige encouraged other more or less professional ethnologists to simply credit him. Here is an example:

> The famous ethnologist, academician Romulus Vulcănescu, the one who peregrinated the villages around the mountains, asking the elders about the fir tree churches, how they were made, what services took place inside and for whom, concluded: 'there were fir tree churches close to the mountains shepherds' fairs (Rom. *nedei*); some of them were not hidden within the fir tree forests, other were camouflaged within the fir tree flocks'. (Moga 2010: 254)

Some Avatars of the Ethnological Fiction

Romulus Vulcănescu was a scholar whose work in the 1980s promoted the idea of autochthonous Dacian pagan survivals within Romanian culture, an idea encouraged by the nationalistic and atheistic (anti-Christian and anti-Church) communist regime of those times. A few decades later, this notion is being revisited as neopaganism, combining with ecology and new age trends; it is, in effect, its own *new* survival. In this context, Vulcănescu's comments about fir tree churches generate avatars that circulate – without quotation marks – through written and online media, popularising (and selling) *old tradition* and, passing from one site to another, entering the virtual database, becoming anonymous and 'collective' property, and hence marked by the process of variation. I will give an example taken from the virtual field.

On a website dedicated to bioenergy – a key concept for the new age movement – I found a new fiction whose credibility is assured by a collective and *en vogue* character, who takes the place of the scholar's authority, namely, witches:

> The fir tree churches – energetic balance of malefic places. The witches say that the fir trees churches grow only in holy places. What are they? Since very old times, the shepherds used to plant isolated clumps of fir trees, or to cut down a round section of a fir tree forest (...). When you meet such an isolated, but rich group of fir trees, the chances that there is a beneficial energetic space are high.[2]

The next example is taken from a journal that appears both off and online. There is a more elaborated text, representing an interesting case of journalistic narrative that mimics both literature and ethnography (or aims to). *Wedding in the Sky* was

written in 2009 by Bogdan Lupescu for *Formula As*, an eclectic, dominantly new age magazine, whose profile contains a certain interest in the Romanians' spirituality in connection with vernacular and ecclesiastic, much more monastic religiosity, from the perspective of the past idealisation and its present survivals, resulting in a sentimental – and stereotyped – portrait for the Romanian identity, in which both Orthodoxy and Dacian *magic* roots are shown to play an important role.

The epic frame of the article is represented by the quests for the fir trees church (we recognize Vulcănescu's appellative, so different from the emic term): one conducted by a local teacher, writer and amateur ethnographer (who failed to find any such sanctuary) and the other one by the reporter himself (who succeeded):

> What if I would be the one to find the traces of such a fir trees church? Even only the remnants of such a sanctuary would be a treasure indeed. Both for me, as a reporter, as well as for those who would like to study it. (Lupescu 2009)

The message is clear: the journalistic text may be used as an ethnological document or, much more likely, the journalist takes the role of the one who clears the way for scholarly research.

Both the reporter and the teacher from whom the reporter declares he learned about this kind of 'churches', had their own informants, whose words are not transcribed, but stylistically reworded. The result is a multi-voiced text, coagulated, under the journalist's pen, into a *story inside a story* structure.

Even if it is hard to imagine how the reporter's documentation could not have led him to the few ethnographers who wrote something about the weddings between fir trees, the name of Romulus Vulcănescu is not mentioned anywhere. However, the article communicates exactly the information that Vulcănescu had launched into circulation without any references. As an example, here is a second-hand rewording (the local teacher shared with the reporter what an old shepherdess would have told him a *long time ago*):

> The churches of love…the strange trees churches from the crests of the mountain. Green trees, under whose canopies the old times shepherds married with their brides. They dig the church shape in the ground, right there, on the fair's place and planted fir trees. (…). Consecrated by long haired, old priests, by shepherd priests, who have long buried their prayers and incantations (Lupescu 2009).

The impression of 'archaic' through terms designating *old* times, also suggests a certain syncretism between Christian religion and local paganism.

Finally, the reporter learned that there was once a *church* on the Coasta Benghii mountain. Finding this mountain, he went to a sheep fold there and a shepherd guided him to the two stones engraved with crosses. Seing them, he exclaimed: "The holy place of the fair, preserved from ancient times!" (Lupescu 2009) In fact, there was no fair on Coasta Benghii, whose slope and lack of a plateau make it unsuitable for a large gathering of people. The journalist located the place on the very crest, at the end of a difficult ascension (suggesting symbolical and spiritual meanings), but which is actually placed between the valley and the top, on a very small flat terrace.

Fig. 2: Larger view over Coasta Benghii. The church was settled on the slope, not on the top of the mountain. Credit photo: Laura Jiga Iliescu. 21 of July 2012

The quoted article published in *Formula As* magazine does not mention anything about a built edifice (which is still present in the local memory of the shepherds, as I had the occasion to learn from the field), as if the term *church* (in the sense consecrated by Romulus Vulcănescu) automatically refers to the fir trees sanctuary and as if there was nothing else in Coasta Benghii. Consequently, the topographic configuration of the place is interpreted in this regard: beside the hole with the two stones, there are two other holes (approximately 1.5m wide) covered with grass, which seemed to me to be former military trenches (the view from there covers

the entire valley, and the road that crosses the mountain is very close). But in the reporter's eyes they

> (…) look indeed like the pits left after the grubbing-up of trees, grandiose trees which at one time have been removed from their roots. As if the shepherds have pulled them out from the ground and taken them to another place.

In the subtext, we recognize the issue of the sabotage against these sanctuaries, which had to be moved (not destroyed), hidden, or, speaking like Vulcănescu, camouflaged.

The reporter observed that, "around the stone there grow many little, purple, thin flowers. They are a strange specie of violas, which bloom only here, in this very space". The suggestion is that we are in an unique place, marked by a special beneficial energy, energy that is manifested through an abundance of vegetation, a detail that reminds the new age witches' already quoted words: 'When you meet such an isolated, but rich group of fir trees, the chances that there is a beneficial energetic space are high.' At a second level, the idea of the still active holiness of the place (incorporated by the flowers), perpetuated even after the concrete churches disappeared from the landscape, sustains the message of ethnic continuity from Dacians to today's Romania, an idea encouraged by the new Dacophil trends of nationalism. As there can be read in the article, the teacher interviewed by the reporter asserts:

> Here, the essence of the old Dacians spirituality was purely preserved. The fir trees churches [were] erected exactly on the same places of the old pagan sanctuaries, in continuity with the old temples of the Dacian hermits (...) these mountains are inhabited un-interrupted at least from Neolithic times. (Lupescu 2009)

Information delivered by *Formula As* magazine entered and have been acknowledged by local oral milieus:

> Author: Did you say that there is a deserted church on the mountain?
>
> Informant: *There is a deserted church, yes, as I learned at my turn. It was built long time ago and they abandoned it and now they found it. And I heard that some priests served it and put a cross there.*
>
> Author: Where exactly, in which mountain?
>
> Informant: *From Ștefanu, down to Coasta Benghi (...). And they found some stuff there, but I don't know. This one, Costică Popa (...), he said he was there.*
>
> Author: Who is Costică Popa?

Informant: *Well, he's a forest ranger. And he said that he heard about, or was there when a group of priests consecrated the place; books and whatever they found, because there had been a church there.*

Author: When did this event take place?

Informant: *It was not long time ago. Last year or so.... We didn't know until he told us.* (personal field recording, I.P., not shepherds, 77 years old, Baia de Fier, Gorj County, Oltenia Region; July 2012)[3].

After further inquiries, I found out that the forest ranger had in fact read the article published by Bogdan Lupescu in *Formula As*.

Conclusion

It was not my intention to cast doubt on Romulus Vulcănescu or the *Formula As* reporter's honesty, but only to question their assertions. The aim was to explore a small part of the mechanism of fabrication, at an imaginary level, a mysterious and exotic picture of the local 'archaic' embodied here by the so-called fir trees church invented tradition, and not by the real wedding among the fir trees as described by Emanuel de Martonne, or by the wedding in the shepherds' built church as that from Coasta Benghii. In this regard, both journalistic and fictional ethnographic texts promote a 'second life' of the ritual that, thus reshaped, re-enters in the collective oral and written public domain and memory.

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Notes

[1] The 1943 study of Ion Conea was republished in a volume edited by Lucian Badea and Nicolae Stoicescu in 1984 (Badea; Stoicescu, 1984: 15–31). The paragraph which mentions the church in Coasta Benghi is missing from the second edition.

[2] http://mannix-father.blogspot.fr/2012/01/magie-14-bisericile-de-brazi.html (accessed in 13 of January 2012; no longer accessible in 6 of July 2018).

[3] As I had the occasion to learn during my fieldwork, the persistence (even if distorted) of the church in the local memory is more or less alive especially among shepherds. The informer I. P. had a different profession.

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