Folk Culture as Symbol in Contemporary Romania

Regina Coussens

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The subject of this paper is the organization of traditional expressive activities in contemporary Romania. By "traditional expressive activities" I mean the complex of artistic and symbolic activities considered part of Romanian folk culture--folk music, folk dance, traditional customs, costumes, the folk arts, etc. Each of these genres deserves separate treatment in its own right, since each exhibits unique features, history, functions, and suitability for integration into contemporary life. I have neither the time nor the expertise to do this; suffice it to express my conviction that besides the inherent fascination of each as a symbolic and artistic system in its own right, any one can serve as a handle to most of the complex processes and issues at large in the much wider than folkloric sphere of social and political life at any given point in time. To put any one form or genre into such a perspective, however, requires some understanding of the general state of the folk arts, as well as of contemporary political and social situations. Hopefully, we can use our knowledge of micro- and macro-levels each to illuminate the other, thus neither confining ourselves to minutiae nor losing ourselves in abstractions.

My intention in this paper is to touch briefly upon why the study of symbolic action is important to us as social scientists and as students of contemporary Romania, to suggest something of the strategic potential of traditional expressive activities in Romania, and to describe some aspects of my own fieldwork that illustrate the several points I wish to make.

Symbols and Politics

The definition of symbols that I present today is taken from Abner Cohen's stimulating essay Two-Dimensional Man (1974). "Symbols are," says Cohen, "objects, acts, concepts, or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of disparate meanings, evoke sentiments and emotions, and impel men to action." He goes on, "For the individual, symbols are fundamental mechanisms for the development of selfhood and for tackling the perennial problems of human existence, like life and death, good and evil, misery and happiness, fortune and misfortune. Although they can be said to be phenomena sui generis, existing in their own right and observed for their own intrinsic values, they are nearly always manipulated, consciously or unconsciously, in the struggle for, and maintenance of, power between individuals and groups. They may be said to be 'expressive,' but they are at the same time instrumental" (1974:9-10).

There are two features of this definition that I want to emphasize. The first is that symbols, evoking sentiments and emotions and attitudes as they do, compel to action. Here we touch upon what certainly must be one
of the central tasks and broadest goals of all the social and behavioral sciences: that of explaining why people do what they do. Because symbols may present and justify normative patterns for action, they are on the one hand capable of recreating and renewing established patterns of obligation and authority. As Victor Turner has put it, symbols make people want to do what ought to be done (cf. 1967:30). In this capacity they are the very stuff of political legitimation. On the other hand, to an equal degree, symbols carry the potential for creating new normative patterns, for proposing new courses of action, alternative possibilities for perception, for organization, and for behavior. Thus we observe bursts of symbolic activity during those periods in the lives of individuals or groups that fall between relatively more stable states. This is true whether these more unstructured, experimental periods effect a smooth transition between well-established statuses, such as in initiation ceremonies, or whether they aim to overturn and replace an established pattern of relationships, as in the case of conversion, at the level of the individual, or at the societal level, of revolutions and other types of societal transformation. Usually in the former case the symbols employed are tightly controlled so as to bolster society; in the latter case, they work to disrupt it. Van Gennep (1960), Turner (1970, 1974), Wallace (1970), and Geertz (1973) each offer us important insights into all of these processes. The point is that among the many aspects of symbolizing lies its usefulness to relations of power and influence between individuals and among groups, and that all religious leaders, artists, writers, media moguls or advertising executives, are necessarily also effective symbol strategists.

Now, it is hardly necessary to point out why the leadership of contemporary Romania might want to employ each of the twin capabilities of symbols mentioned above. During thirty years of continuous power, the socialist government of Romania has well consolidated its own once revolutionary program, its own structures of authority. The political, economic, and social goals and policies it has instituted all surely would profit by the political legitimation that effective symbols could provide. These include its design for socialist transformation, its commitment to the course of heavy industrialization, its continuing ideological offensive, its relatively independent foreign policy, as well as all the myriad programs that fall under these various policies. This is doubly important, in fact necessary, in Romania because Ceausescu continues to insist on the ideological commitment of all Romanian citizens, that they should quite sincerely want to do what, in his vision, ought to be done, because it is right and just and best for everyone. Indeed, we observe the intensive courting of such wholehearted legitimation in all outlets of propaganda activism in Romania today—in mass media, in schools, in cultural activities, in factories, in institutions, in state ceremonials, and elsewhere.

On the other hand, Romania by its own declaration is a society in transformation—from traditional agricultural to modern industrial, from rural to urban, from socialism to communism. Furthermore, the success of this transition on the societal level is considered to depend upon a moral
transformation at the level of the individual, referred to as development of the "new socialist man." Thus we find, expectably, transition-type symbolic activity—for example, depictions in literature and the arts and mass media of the ideal new socialist man, intensely patriotic, ethically stalwart, politically involved, toiling sincerely for industrial and agricultural modernity, for development of the mature communist society, and hence realizing his or her own personal fulfillment. Indeed, Ceausescu's encouragement of the "cult of personality" surrounding himself and his wife might be interpreted as a well-played self-portrayal of this symbolic role. We find, too, carefully orchestrated mass rallies on important ceremonial occasions, displaying exuberant enthusiasm for still unachieved goals and energizing mass efforts for their successful realization. We find folkloristic performances exhibiting the harmonious coexistence and vitality of various distinct ethnic and regional traditions. And we find the rhetoric of exhortation, of new and exciting possibilities, of perfectability.

Recall, however, that transition-type symbolizing can skip down two not always easily controlled paths: one, roughly speaking, system-supportive, and the other system-subversive. A sticky problem for the symbol-makers in charge is to tap old or create new symbols to change undesirable entrenched behavior into the desirable new patterns without also symbolically airing yet other possibilities, alternatives, and proposals not in keeping with where they themselves want the society to go.

It is in this connection that I want to emphasize a second characteristic of symbols, that is their ambiguity, or, stated in a more positive way, their multi-valence. This means that any symbol can mean several or many different things to one or many different people. This flexibility of symbols allows them to acquire new meanings or to lose old meanings either partially or entirely over time. It presents the happy advantage of allowing the symbol strategist to tap into powerful, already proven symbols with good, solid accretions of sentiment and appeal instead of having to come up with new, untested symbols to fit each new situation. It also, however, may present strategic difficulties in controlling the symbolic process, either in sloughing off old connotations no longer desired, or in solidly attaching new meanings while retaining those old ones still intended. Another problem lies in determining to what degree consensus exists among any group of people as to what the symbol means, what emotions it evokes, and therefore what behavior or attitude it recommends.

The Symbolic Potential of Traditional Expressive Activities in Romania

Much of the symbolic load of folk culture in Romania was honed and sharpened to good use by Romanian intellectuals of the last and early part of this century, particularly in Transylvania. In pre-socialist Romania proper, as Fischer-Galati points out, it also served as a common rallying point for all ethnic Romanians, masking the actually quite antithetical
goals of elite and masses with the appearance of common nationalist aspirations (1969:4-9). The socialist leadership of Romania began tapping folk culture symbols in the early 1960s as part of its new emphasis on Romanian nationalism, on national sovereignty, and independence, on mutual non-interference in domestic affairs among socialist brother nations, and on the need for "multi-lateral development" of each nation in ways suitable to its own historical circumstances. To symbol strategists in Romania, the expressive activities of traditional Romanian culture both offer weighty advantages and present potential difficulties of the kinds I mentioned earlier. As advantages, they offer a solid historical accretion of resonant associations with Romanian identity, with specifically Romanian culture; they suggest indigenous vitality and creativity, emotional mooring in place over time, thus community spirit, rural roots, social stability, spiritual continuity, and so on. Unfortunately, from the viewpoint of Romania's current leadership, folk culture also may carry old religious connotations, associated with "backward" attitudes, or provincialism and chauvinism of a now undesirable type. To use the last as an illustration, we observe throughout East European history the employment of language, music, literature, and other aspects of expressive culture as significant ammunition in ethnic and national struggles. Granting that interethnic squabbling in Romania is considered detrimental to the building of the new transformed society and to effective foreign policy, granted the often expressed ideal of interethnic harmony within Romania, of cooperation and absolute friendliness, coexistence and co-commitment to the building of a strong socialist nation; but given also the inherent multi-valent ambiguity of symbols, how can a folkloristic display of such harmony be prevented from serving in the minds of some or all participants or observers as the latest skirmishing ground of old and stubborn hostilities? That is, how can symbols of separation and boundary be transformed into symbols of integration and coexistence?

This points up the difficulties encountered by the symbol strategist in detaching unwanted connotations from the content of those pre-established symbols he employs. A further problem is that of grafting on new connotations, for instance, of building an affective link between the Romanian communist party and its programs and Romanian peasant traditions—a less than obvious connection, historically, economically or politically. The incorporation of folk elements (costumes, performances) into party and state celebrations, or the setting of lyrics with party references to folk tunes, to give a few examples, can be interpreted as attempts to bolster this symbolic association.

Research in Buciumi-Salaj

The research that I carried out in Romania was done for the most part in Buciumi-Salaj, just 60 miles northwest of Cluj. I planned to develop a sort of traditional cultural profile of this village, including the histories of various types of traditional expressive activities, that would allow me to characterize the changing role of traditional expressions in a
modernizing setting. On a rough scale of Romanian villages from relatively untouched by agricultural modernization or industrial development to nearly urban, Buciumi is about midpoint. Although collectivization of agriculture was completed in 1961, bringing many important changes in its wake, the most radical transformation of this village has occurred since the administrative reorganization of Romania in 1968. At this time the industrial development of Zalău, 26 kilometers from Buciumi and the new administrative center of Județul Salaj began in earnest. By the early 1970s, factory jobs and transportation to the city were available for anybody in Buciumi willing to commute. Today most households have at least one member employed in Zalău. In fact, Buciumi itself is officially slotted to become a city by 1980 (now perhaps 1985), a subject of some humor among Buciumani. Buciumi has never had the wherewithall for success as an agricultural village, whether private or cooperative, being afflicted with poor soils and adverse topographic and climate conditions. In contrast, the new influx of cash from industrial wage labor has brought a clear sense of local progress and familial prosperity.

Although not located in one of the famous Romanian folk strongholds like Oaș or Maramureș, Buciumi traditions were active and locally renowned. By active I mean that people invested quite a lot of time, energy, and resources in them and they were an important, regular part of most people's lives. As elsewhere in Romania, recent decades have brought a modification of these folk ways. Buciumani no longer wear their most elaborate and beautiful costume for the Sunday promenade, but instead display the latest fashions from the local clothing store. There are no more Sunday afternoon dances in the village square. Spontaneous țesători—work bees—and evening social gatherings for singing, dancing, storytelling, and discussing the issues of the day give way to television viewing and other less social pursuits. Today's woven goods, still far from urban tastes, are even farther from traditional models, exhibiting bright, cacophonous colors and bold new designs. Icons on glass have been replaced by Italian religious prints or pictures from magazines. Household furnishings and decorations are purchased with an eye to urban styles. Weddings, too, show the influx of urban and other regional influences. Modern young couples dispense with many local traditions, sport long polyester gowns and suits, and hire a town-bred guitar and drum band.

The glaring exception to these tendencies toward modification and urbanization, the lone island of folk art conservatism, includes that cluster of expressive forms preserved and elaborated under Romanian cultural policy. Recent years in Buciumi have seen a striking intensification of organized cultural "events"—festivals, folklore programs, chorus performances, and multi-comune or multi-județ programs in Zalău or outside of Salaj. Some of the performing ensembles have considerable histories. For example, the village chorus, under the able direction of the village priest, has been active since 1940 with one short interruption. Others are newly formed and sporadically rehearsed. All participants wear new standardized versions of the traditional costume and/or parts of old costumes.
Buciumi's present degree of involvement in these events is due both to national efforts to step up folkloric activities and to Buciumi's location in Salaj and its good relations with the Committee of Culture in Zalău. Salaj is often tapped for national radio and television programs which focus on the various județe; filming and recording crews coming from Radio-Television Bucharest to Salaj for this purpose are often sent to Buciumi, which can mobilize a good folkloric performance on as little as a day's notice. When these programs are aired, everyone in Buciumi with access to a television set tries to watch. An ensemble of some sort from Buciumi participated in every județ-wide folklore program organized in Zalău during the nine months of my residence there, as well as serving as the Salaj contingent to several multi-județe festivals. Buciumi also boasts its own serbare held every August at the archeological site of an old Roman garrison overlooking the village. In 1978, this serbare was attended by nearly all villagers, by officials of the Cultural Committee at Zalău, and by representatives from several other județe--this "tradition" was founded in 1975. Also in 1975, a traditional wedding performance group was organized in Buciumi, including a master of ceremonies and the best local experts in strigătură; the "wedding" was thoroughly rehearsed and polished up for staging at the Village Museum in Bucharest. This was the first time several of the performers had ever visited Bucharest.

There are several points I wish to make about these organized folklore events. First, in terms of the national symbolic strategy with respect to folk culture, their contents are symbolically "correct." Particularly, they are secularized. At a festival of traditional winter customs held in Zalău in which the Buciumi chorus participated, only secular carols were performed. This editing was remarked upon by chorus members, who lustily sang their favorite religious Christmas carols on the bus to and from the performance hall. Similarly, at some chorus performances the director-priest was asked to please refrain from wearing his clerical collar, or, if televised, he was shown only from the back, so it would not be apparent that he is a priest. His name, if acknowledged, was always given without clerical title. Patriotic songs referring to Romania and the Romanian Communist Party or Ceaușescu appear interspersed in every performance, usually including a rousing chorus at the end. These songs are characterized by marching rhythms, simple, clean chord progressions, and full-voiced, open-throated singing. They seem genuinely popular since they are also belted out with gusto on many spontaneous occasions.

Secondly, despite the fact that those local melodies, lyrics, costumes, dance motifs, etc. employed in organized folkloric events were created in the context of Buciumi's long agricultural and relatively more isolated past, and that they are therefore highly specific to this particular village, reflecting rural lifestyles, peasant concerns, and peasant social organization, that is, despite the preeminently rural, local connotations of their contents and forms, they are now associated with modernizing, urbanizing ways and with Buciumi's integration into the much larger society. This is due primarily to the structure of opportunity and obligation set up precisely by their incorporation into the party-
sponsored, centrally directed Romanian cultural policy. For instance, organized folkloric ensembles offer participants many opportunities to travel at the expense of public coffers. On special occasions members are also released from their work obligations. Besides the fairly frequent activities in Zalău or other locations in Salaj, ensembles travel to Cluj, to Maramureș, to Suceava, even to Bucharest, or wherever any of the several multi-județe competitions and extravaganzas are held. The comună Dobresti in Județul Argeș recently instigated regular choral exchanges with three other comune in Romania, one of which is Buciumi. Each year chorus members of one comună pile into buses, drive ten hours or so to be received by their host comună, are assigned to host families and dined and dined to the utmost of local hospitality, after which everybody celebrates and sings till the very last moment before the buses leave again for the long trek back (most often the next day, since this usually occurs during a weekend). The next year the other comună plays host. Not a few Buciumani owe most or all of their travel experiences outside Salaj and in urban centers to participation in these cultural events.

Furthermore, exceptional achievement in the folk arts can lead to national-level careers and even foreign travel. The shining example of this possibility for Buciumani is Sava Negrean. Sava Negrean grew up in Buciumi, went on to complete university studies, and then returned to the village as the teacher of French. In 1975 she entered and won first prize as a vocalist in a national game show-type television program called 'Floarea din Grădini.' On three separate programs, contestants perform folk songs or instrumental solos and are rated by a panel of judges. Relatively few succeed in winning the necessary point total. Sava's success won her a new career as a recording artist. She has recorded, among other folk songs, many specific to Buciumi, she wears the local costume in performing, and she has travelled to several foreign countries in her capacity as a Romanian folk singer. When Sava comes to visit her family or with the Bucharest radio and television crews to film a television program, she is much admired. With her experience of foreign countries, her Brașov home, her stylish clothes, her make-up and elegant coiffure, she is the very paragon of urban sophistication.

This brings me to my final point, that generally speaking, those villagers who participate actively in organized folklore ensembles and activities tend to be themselves among the most modern, "advanced," informed, and educated individuals and families in the village. They are more likely to come from the comună center (that is, the village Buciumi) than from outlying villages, and within Buciumi, to live near the village center or on a fairly accessible side street. Nearly all have or are building modern new homes. The most active regular adult members of the village chorus, which is itself the most active, regular village ensemble, is in fact comprised of teachers and other salaried persons who work in the village—the postmistress, the keepers of the cofetărie, the bufet, the grocery store and the clothing store, the comună bookkeeper, medical assistants, and so on—and their spouses. The overwhelming participation of village teachers is partly due to the fact that they are required as a
part of their jobs to spend a number of hours per week or month in "cultural activism" outside of the classroom. Participation in the village chorus or another ensemble counts toward fulfilling this obligation. Persons in this entire group, "salariati in sat, are the most highly trained and educated in the village and also tend to be the best off economically" (Bădina et al., 1970:193-195, 197, 202). Being thus "in the forefront," they are also precisely the least likely to maintain traditions which are not encompassed within the cultural program—for example, to wear traditional garb or items thereof for everyday, to weave the traditional subdued patterns, or to furnish and decorate their homes with old furniture, old hangings, pots, etc. None of these latter practices are at all useful in the current prestige system in Buciumi. Activity within the folklore program, however, can contribute not only to individual prestige, but also to the prestige of the entire village in the context of a progressive, modernizing, yet tradition-appreciative nation. Thus, given the Romanian cultural policy, expertise in those folk culture activities selected for preservation and "revitalization" works toward integration into an industrializing and urbanizing milieu rather than being essentially conservative or otherwise at odds with it.

Further Questions

Many questions arise from this cursory look at Romania's plans for strategically employing the symbols of folk culture and at the practical results of these plans in a single Romanian village. Among the most intriguing is whether, or to what extent, participants and audiences of organized folklore activities have internalized the officially correct view of the contribution of this aspect of Romania's past to the building of a modern socialist Romanian future. Surely these estimations will vary along age, class, ethnic, and perhaps regional lines, as well as between urban and rural areas. The creation of opportunities, rewards, and obligations that promote participation obviously encourages an outward show of enthusiasm and involvement. Does this liveliness persist solely due to such official support? Or do these symbols truly resonate so as to compel attitudes and actions of devotion and edification to the programs and goals of the current regime? The genuineness of patriotic feeling among ethnic Romanians has been apparent to many of us during our extended research periods. To what extent, then, can this genuine affection be weeded of ideological error, extended to the cohabiting minorities, and wedded to Party ambitions? The answers to these questions speak directly to the heart of what is happening in Romania today. To approach them, we need both a theoretical grasp and close observation of the symbolic process, and it is for this reason that I submit them to the attention not only of folklorists and cultural anthropologists, but of all specialists in contemporary Romanian affairs.
Notes

1. For a good description of ideological correctness and deviations in contemporary Romania, see Gilberg, 1978.

2. In this connection, it is worth considering Jung's contention that symbols are natural, spontaneous products and cannot be "invented." Any "invented" representation remains a sign, a conscious connection between known things, and lacks the unconscious resonances and associative ramifications that belong to true symbols (1964:55). It is precisely these resonances into the unconscious and unknown that Turner looks to in accounting for the power of symbols to channel behavior and desire (1967:27-30). If this be true, the only effective option open to the symbol strategist is to manipulate already existing symbols. For Jung, "invented" associations would be only signs. That is, people might very well recognize the connection, but it would "fall flat," be lifeless, devoid of emotional energy, entirely incapable of inspiring genuine enthusiasm or commitment. One might profitably speculate on the mix of signs and symbols in the Romanian ideological package and the relevance of this distinction in accounting for the persistence of ideological "problems," a subject I hope to pursue in a future paper.

3. Buciumi was the subject of a multidisciplinary study in 1968 led by Octavian Neamtu and reported in Bădina, et al., 1970.

4. I am grateful to Professor Mihai Pop for calling my attention to the importance of village prestige in the modern-day activities of village-based folk ensembles.

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