

ETHNOGRAPHY OF FIVE FOLK FAIRS IN ROMANIA

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The paper deals with description of a field research over five folk fairs held in the summer of 2005 in Bucharest, Sibiu, Timișoara, and Suceava. According to the author, the folk artisanhip, as it takes place in contemporary Romania, should be understood as a process that includes two main phases namely the craftwork (or craftsmanship) and the folk trade (or artisanry). The working hypothesis of research are presented in relation to nine categories of analysis which consist of the socio-professional framework of artisanship, tradition, folk art, the socialist economy, the market economy, the folk fair, the ethnographic museum, clientele, and ethnicity.

Among many folk artisans, ethno-folklorists, museum visitors, and tourists in Romania today, there is a persistent ethos with “authenticity” and the “national character” of the peasant crafts and artefacts. In fact, while claimed to be “bearers of the national folk culture”, artisans usually behave as traders of the ethnographic traditions they account for and represent. The folk artisanship is to be interpreted nowadays not only as a village-centred industry, but also as an open process of exchange with the urban world. Such a “trademark” is the result of the artisans’ involvement with the extended network of ethnographic museums in the cities of Romania, in order to meet and keep a clientele, national and foreign as well. As will be seen, artisanship (also called *craftsmanship* and *artisanry*) is associated with complex phenomena of social, economic, and cultural variation, hybridisation, and regeneration in Romania before and after 1989, as it is equally “traditional” and “modern”, and simultaneously art-and-commerce.

On an ethnographic ground, the current research is intended to examine the market enrolment of artisanship in Romania (within the folk fairs hosted by five national and regional ethnographic museums), as well as to explore the theoretical significance of the folk fairs in the comparative context of the open-air markets in Central and Eastern Europe. In doing so, we seek to understand the extent in which the craft-and-trade artisanship, while it is consistent with the contemporary market economy, could originate in peasant economic relationships probably much older than communism, and which subverted somehow the socialist economic framework. Taken as a particular rural category, craftsmen may represent a case study relevant for general cultural and economic trends of peasantry in the 2000s Romania.

This study is built up on the assumption that “tradition” and “trade” are not – such as inferred by the nationalistic and communist ideology - antithetical areas of expertise and practice. As of the late nineteenth century, artisans and their crafts have constantly become (along with folklore) referential for the national value system in Romania irrespective of the monarchic, communist, or post-communist political contexts. Accordingly, the making of the ethnographic museums in Romanian cities has been associated with the preservation, representation, and salvation of the peasant civilisation at a national scale. However, this cultural policy seems to diminish a core “element” in understanding the craftsmen’s work and identity, which is economy. As if artisans produced only from esthetical or philosophical reasons, they are commonly portrayed in terms of “folk-art” creators and thinkers. While art and beauty should not be at all denied for the folk artisans’ “worldview”, economy needs to be reconsidered as another dimension of the peasant ways of life.