

Villages on Stage: Folklore and Nationalism in the Republic of Moldova. By Jennifer R. Cash. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2011. 288pp. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. 29,90 Euro. Paper.

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In the post-Soviet era, Moldova has been caught in the crossfire between the European Union and Russia. This crisis has not reached the military proportions that its neighbor, Ukraine, has suffered recently. Nevertheless, day-to-day life in Moldova is marked by this battle, often through arguments over which language to speak and which allegiance to make—Moldovan or Russian. As a cultural anthropologist doing fieldwork there in 2004, I witnessed countless contestations over language and identity—from a Moldovan minibus driver refusing to pull over for a Russian speaker, to late night toasts in Russian to “our president” Putin in Gagauz Yeri, an autonomous region in southern Moldova. In fact, for some, whether “Moldovan” exists separately from “Romanian” is also up for debate. Such disputes over language reveal controversies and uncertainties over the nature of the Moldovan national identity and the legitimacy of the Moldovan nation-state. In this context, performing “Moldovan” folklore is inevitably a political act. Jennifer Cash captures this well in her careful ethnography of folklorists who stage children’s dance ensembles in Moldova.

Based upon extensive dissertation fieldwork in 2001 with folklorists in Moldova, Cash shows how Moldovans skirt ethnic nationalism and eschew the politics of “multiculturalism.” As Cash explains their reason for doing so is that they see both as dangerously similar to the Soviet nationality policy that enforced divisions between ethnic groups, while uniting these groups under the common banner of Soviet socialism. In fact, folklorists envision Moldova as a “nation of villages.” Villages, they assert, are the locus of morality and authenticity in the face of historical transformation in the region. And it is to these villages that contemporary Moldovan folklorists argue you *must* go—in a novel form of ethnographically-informed folklore—to collect and then represent village identity to Moldovan audiences. The insistence on the de-ethnicization and de-politicization of folklore on the part of these “culture workers,” is a fascinating finding, reminiscent of the rejection of feminist identity politics by women in post-Socialist states.

In the last and strongest chapter of the book, “Inclusion and Exclusion in a Nation of Villages,” Cash elaborates upon how this ideology affects the recognition of cultural diversity in Moldova. To do this, she analyzes folklorists’ claims regarding a particular folkloric dance, the Hora, which is performed by a variety of peoples in Moldova. Here, Cash recounts discussions with folklorists about Moldovan Jewish traditions in urban settings as well as Gagauz traditions. In these conversations, folklorists question the presence of such traditions, and if present, they argue that they are weak. They claim that the Hora danced by non-Moldovans is derivative of an original Moldovan or even

Romanian dance. Thus, Cash reveals deep-seated prejudices that form the basis of structural discrimination in Moldova. She also argues that conceptualizing the nation as a collection of authentic villages comes at the cost of accepting that villages—and “authentic” cultural traditions—can be mixed. Cash argues that these ideas deny Gagauz and Jewish claims to identity and autonomy. Yet, she stops short of a full critique of her interlocutors’ insistence on the pureness of identity and does not unpack the benefits of this discourse of authenticity for folklorists and the Moldovan majority.

Cash outlines her interest in four theoretical concepts in the opening chapters: the double boundary of ethnic groups, salience, cultural intimacy, and structural power. (2011:17) The former two are effectively deployed throughout the book, but the latter two concepts are not developed to their full potential. The book concludes with an intriguing exploration of ethnographic authority through a comparison between the reflexive turn in American anthropology and Soviet-era folkloric representation.

With precious little written on Moldova in American and Western-European based social science literature, undergraduate or graduate scholars interested in folklore, ethnicity, and nation in a post-Soviet context would benefit from reading this sensitive and well written portrayal of folklorists in Moldova.