

After The Folkloric Movement: Traditional Life In Post-Socialist Moldova

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Moldova's folkloric movement in the 1980s involved many professional ethnographers and folklorists who are now associated with children's folkloric groups. These professionals see their work as part of a national project of recovering and transmitting traditional values. This paper explores the notion of "traditional life" as ethnographers and folklorists in Moldova use it. At a minimum, this notion is positively evaluated as pre- and (possibly) anti-Soviet, and pro-rural. From this perspective, it is clear that the folkloric movement, which had as a goal the "authentication" of folklore already being performed, embodied anti-Soviet sentiments similar to those of the national movement. I therefore also consider alternative views of the relationship between ethnography and nationalism, including the "invention of tradition" literature, and multiple propositions for how anthropologists might ethnographically study nationalism and large-scale collective identities. This will allow us to discuss further how ethnography informs understandings of socialism, post-socialism, and the "transition."

In the 1975 *Handbook of Major Nationalities*, Stephen Fischer-Galati assessed cultural progress in the Soviet Republic of Moldova. He found that few writers or artists had attained distinction but that there had been other successes within the confines and under the tutelage of the state:

The aspects of culture encouraged by the Kremlin are limited to those involving raising [the] educational level of the population, disseminating propaganda through printed word, theater, and other media of communication, and preserving and developing folk culture, particularly in the spheres of music and dancing. In these terms much has been achieved. [Fischer-Galati 1975: 420]

Although Fischer-Galati counts 247 ensembles of folk music (presumably ensembles for adult amateurs), during my field research on children's folkloric groups in the Republic of Moldova in 2001, I was told by officials at

Moldova's Ministry of Culture that the majority of nearly 1,500 children's ensembles used folkloric material in their repertoires. Field research brought me in contact with a number of professional ethnographers and folklorists, including the adults who directed children's ensembles, who perceived their work as being the recovery and transmission of traditional values. This paper explores the vision and social meaning of "traditional life" created when folkloric ensembles perform on stage. At a minimum, this representation of "traditional life" is positively evaluated by its creators as pre- and anti-Soviet, as well as pro-rural.

Specialists in Moldova distinguish folkloric ensembles according to the authenticity of repertoires, costumes, and performance. There are three basic, but unofficial, designations – *folcloric*, *etno-folcloric*, and *popular*. *Folcloric* and *etno-folcloric* ensembles are recognized (by specialists) for their commitment to presenting an authentic vision of traditional life on stage. (Ensembles of this type were the focus of my field research.) Attempts to distinguish the levels of authenticity represented by folkloric ensembles in Moldova can be traced to a "folkloric movement" in the 1980s. This was a movement within the state-supported systems of culture and education that pushed for changes in how "Moldovan" music and dance were learned and performed by both amateurs and professionals.

The folkloric movement in which my informants began their professional careers coincided with the emerging pro-Romanian national movement at the end of Soviet rule. Thus in this paper I ask what, if any, relation exists between folkloric activity and the general public's sense of national identity. Several recent theorists of nationalism have cited two types of connections between folklore and 19th-century nationalisms in Europe (e.g., Gellner 1983, Herzfeld 1987, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Smith 1991). First, folklore is seen as one of the academic disciplines that helps identify the "ethnic core" (Smith 1991) of newly forming

nation-states. Second, public demonstrations of folklore represent and transmit selected and stylized visions of ethnically and culturally defined communities. Although folklore is usually described as promoting state-defined national identities, it can be linked to regional or sub-state national identities as well, as in the case of Catalonia (Brandes 1990).

Folkloric activity has a third appeal to scholars of nationalism because it is seen as a practice that counteracts the socially disruptive effects of modernization and industrialization. Folklore thus has the potential to provide a sense of shared history for a population where the traditional ways of life studied by and represented in folklore no longer exist. To what extent is Moldova's recent folkloric movement analogous to previous movements? Or, does the Soviet – or more broadly, the socialist – experience require an enlarged discussion of the “invention of traditions” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and the development of collective identities that is not accommodated by theoretical literature based on 19th-century history?

Moldova's folkloric movement developed in the early 1980s as a protest against composed pieces of music and dance being performed as “folklore” by *popular* ensembles. Many of the movement's participants were performers who had been double-trained as ethnographers and folklorists. As students at the Art University, they had done summer *practică* in which they were sent to villages to record and collect a variety of information about local traditions, arts, and material culture. Materials from these expeditions were not, however, put directly on stage: they were archived. Trained composers and choreographers then had access to these archived materials. Sometimes they created new music and dance compositions that incorporated portions of locally collected material, but then changed the form drastically. Participants in the folkloric movement, however, reacted to these alterations and insisted that performed folklore should be most similar to those materials they knew to have been collected from villagers.

In the past 15-20 years, the folkloric movement has succeeded in redefining the criteria used for evaluating performances in folkloric festivals and competitions and has created arenas of performance and competition exclusively for ensembles that perform materials collected in ethnographic expeditions. The National Palace for the Creativity of Children

and Adolescents alone runs three festivals: each started within the past 15 years. As I have already mentioned, the folkloric movement has also succeeded in introducing three terms to distinguish and classify groups that perform folklore: *popular*, *folcloric*, and *etnofolcloric*. The first term – which was in use for the duration of the Soviet period – is equivalent to the Russian adjective *narodnyi* and, when applied to the performing arts, carries the meanings of “national” and “folk,” as well as “amateur” (see also Mally 2000). I will use a discussion of the 2001 Folkloric Festival sponsored by the National Palace for the Creativity of Children and Adolescents to illustrate the new criteria for representing tradition on stage.

The National Palace is the former Pioneer Palace. Although the Palace's name was changed in 1991, it still assists the Ministry of Education in organizing children's artistic culture throughout the country. To this end, the Palace runs a series of festivals that are designed to identify and promote talented children, both singly and in groups, in such areas as music, dance, poetry, prose, drama, and even flower arranging. There are three folkloric competitions. Two are linked to holidays: Christmas/New Year's and Easter. The third, which has the general title of *Festivalul Folcloric* (Folkloric Festival), is held biannually.

As a country-wide competition, the Folkloric Festival occurs in three stages. The first round of competition is organized and judged by the local (*județ*) departments of culture. Each county sends three or four winning groups to compete in the regional round of competition. Moldova is conceptually organized into three regional zones: north, center, and south. Transnistria (the separatist region east of the Dneister River) is sometimes considered a fourth zone, but it is otherwise ignored or partitioned into the other three zones. This division of the country into zones is not administrative, but appears in the popular imagination as a way to discuss differences in economy, traditions, mentality, speech, ethnic-mixture, interaction and influence, and the weather; these are also the ethnographic zones recognized by ethnographers and folklorists. Winners from each of the zones proceed to a gala concert in the capital, which is filmed by the state television company for subsequent broadcast and archiving. I accompanied the jury to the northern and central competitions and the national concert.

According to the festival's rules, competing groups were to present a "mini-spectacle" that incorporated several folkloric genres and met additional criteria determined by the jury. The jury was composed of "experts" who included a musicologist (who could vouch for the authenticity of vocal and instrumental music), a choreographer/dancer (who evaluated the authenticity of dances), and an ethnographer (who commented on costuming and ritual sequence). The groups that won shared some common features: their mini-spectacles were organized around a ritual (e.g., wedding) or set of rituals (e.g., spring rituals) rather than comprising a loosely organized concert of songs and dance. Winners were also required to document that their repertoire had been collected from village informants.

The jury's decisions were relatively simple in the northern district. The jurors' biggest concern was with the number of groups they should accept for the gala performance. Did they need representatives from each *județ*, or could they choose winners based on quality alone? In all folkloric competitions, preference is given to performing groups that use repertoires collected from their host villages, or from a group of nearby villages. At the very least, the repertoire should come from the group's home "ethnographic zone." This requirement poses a particular problem for groups based in cities, particularly those in the capital city. In the central zone's competition, the jury wrestled with their criteria and ultimately eliminated three groups from Chișinău that were otherwise known to be fine folkloric ensembles.

Because in popular imagination cities are depicted as being filled with "all types," and especially with newcomers (*veniți*), Chișinău is seen as being devoid of local traditions. Instead, as an ethnographer who was not a member of the jury for the National Palace's competition in 2001 explained, groups from Chișinău had the right to include traditions from any and all zones of the country. Because they were representatives of the capital city, they could also represent the country as a whole. In this competition, however, the jury decided that Chișinău ensembles should come with repertoires drawn from the central ethnographic zone since, geographically, Chișinău is located in

the center. This requirement imposed additional difficulties, however. The center, as a whole, is known for having few traditions. Some specialists say the greater influence exerted by the city on surrounding villages has destroyed



Fig 2: Ensemble "Buciumașii" from Chișinău. Invited as "special guests" to the gala concert of the Folkloric Festival.

the center's traditions. Others qualify that even if there are few dances, there are still many ballads. Either way, when a competition specifies the inclusion of multiple genres, the center has less material to present.

At the central zone competition, all three groups from Chișinău were disqualified on the grounds that each had failed to represent the center. Yet two of the groups were later privately invited to attend the gala performance – not as laureates, but as "special guests" – because the jury had, in fact, wanted to disqualify only the third group (see figures 1 and 2). The group that the jury had wanted to disqualify performed a mini-spectacle of a wedding that included multiple genres: two traditions (the dressing of the bride and the forgiveness of the bride and groom by her parents), oratory, song, and dance. This performance, like the group's general repertoire, was built almost exclusively on elements the director collected in or near his native village in the south of the country.

According to the common definition of an ethno-folkloric group, this ensemble is almost ideal. The one "catch," however, was that the children were from Chișinău, while the repertoire was from the south.

The zonal requirement was prominent in the jury's backstage discussion, but the jurors deemphasized it when publicly explaining the group's disqualification. Instead, the jury noted faulty interpretations of tradition. First, the dance expert declared that one of the dances was "scenic" (i.e., it was composed for stage performance and never performed as a real village dance), and that a second, despite the fact that it shared the same name as an authentic dance, was not, in fact, that dance. Consequently, the jurors decided that the group had failed to present authentic folkloric dances. The ethnographer also contested the group's rendition of the pre-wedding rituals: specifically, the jury noted that when they dressed the bride, the group sang a song that was associated in other parts of the country with the unveiling of the bride at the very end of a wedding.

Although he did not contest the jury's decision that day, the director of the ensemble brought up the subject repeatedly over the following months. He contended that not only had he done the bride's dressing as it was done in his village, but that another ethnographer



Fig. 1: Ensemble "Moștenitorii" from Chișinău. The song during the veiling of the bride was one of the contested elements in their performance at the regional level of the Folkloric Festival.

researching a neighboring village had

documented, and even published, the same ritual-song combination. The director never brought up the issue of zonal representation.

At the northern zone's competition, the local organizers held a private dinner for the jury. One of the ensemble directors who also attended the dinner seized the occasion to argue against the jury's verdict on a song. Members of the jury, however, maintained that the version sung by the director's group was corrupted from the incorporation of two songs. The director protested that she had collected it as it had been sung in the village and that it was therefore authentic. This argument was broken only when one of the jury members noted that if one asked a village teenager for a traditional costume today, the youth would bring a pair of jeans. The juror's message was clear: even though the village was expected to be the repository of traditions, only a trained professional could discern authenticity.

While there are many long-standing personal relations and disputes involved in jury decisions, the underlying reliance on ethnographic expertise is striking. The jury's dismissal of some traditions collected in villages and from villagers may seem to contradict the principles of the competition. Nevertheless, the jury is selected, at least in part, according to members' ethnographic experiences. Each member of the jury is considered an expert because he or she has participated in multiple ethnographic expeditions throughout the country. Dance and music judges, in particular, base their judgments on repertoires they have personally collected and learned. Personal knowledge, however, also limits the authority of jury members. Their authority can be, and is, questioned when they speak for villages or areas where they have not participated in expeditions.

The folkloric movement changed the standards for judging folklore in Moldova. While technique and presentation are still important, the demonstration of artistry now depends on intimate knowledge of village life, including its aesthetic and moral codes. These codes are studied and discussed by specialists, but how is the public involved in this specialized discourse of tradition and authenticity?

In general, I have found that individuals who are not involved in directing or judging folkloric ensembles do not hold the same strict divisions between more and less authentic versions of folklore as do participants in the folkloric movement. In addition, since non-specialists have not participated in ethnographic expeditions, they also have difficulty gauging ethnographic accuracy. Ordinary Moldovans still openly enjoy the many *popular* groups and individuals who are still performing composed pieces. In fact, Moldovans probably have more exposure to concerts of this type than to those of more self-consciously authentic groups.

Although most visual cues for accuracy appear in costuming, these are the criteria least emphasized by juries. For example, many so-called authentic ensembles still use the “kitschy” costumes the folkloric movement has tried to eliminate. Circle skirts that fall above the knee, bright colors (especially red), and generic patterns on both shirts and skirts that “belong to no one” (these include large abstract carpet motifs, grapes, or sunflowers) are considered especially offensive (see figure 3). These patterns signify Moldovan identity vis-à-vis other Soviet republics because Moldova has long been known as a major producer of the union’s wine and sunflower oil. In contrast, authentic costumes include long, narrow wrap skirts for women, hand-woven cloth, subdued vegetable-based pigments, small geometric designs, hand-sewn shoes, and an abundance of woolen articles. Instead of representing market-oriented economic production to an inter-republic audience, the new “authentic” costumes require an intra-republic audience to recognize and appreciate local household economy and artistic design. As juries promote ensembles to national competitions, they comment on continued inadequacies in costuming, but they do not penalize ensembles that have less authentic costumes. After all, as people commented, costumes are expensive, and the economy is bad.

Nevertheless, groups that have authentic costumes are proud of them. Here, too, there is a hierarchy of authenticity: like repertoires, the most authentic costumes are those collected from village households. And there is, again, ranking among colleagues. For example, one director pointed out that another director had a southern repertoire (this was the same group that had been disqualified at the central zone competition), but used costumes from Bukovina (a region that was to the north and actually located in Ukraine). In fact, only a few of the ensemble’s costumes were

from Bukovina, although these few were collected from villagers. The majority of the ensemble’s manufactured (not collected) costumes were in a southern style. Specialists also rank costumes by their age. For costumes that have been collected from villages, the older ones are identified as more authentic; and for those that have been produced by the Artists’ Union, some years of production are considered better than others. In cases in which individual craftsmen create the costumes (or instruments), directors consider quality and price; not surprisingly, hand-loomed fabrics and hand embroidery are considered better. Directors also have ongoing relations with folk artists, and they apply their knowledge of artists’ personal histories and reputations to assessing their work.

Are Folk Ensembles Nostalgic?

When I presented this paper at the 2002 Soyuz symposium, I was surprised when it was grouped



Fig 3: A girl from a *popular* ensemble. The short skirt, naturalistic flowers, and elaborate head-piece are all elements of a “kitsch” costume. *Popular* dancing is also marked by the incorporation of ballet positions for the arms and legs.

into a panel entitled “Constructing and Consuming Nostalgia.” My surprise was due to the fact that what had been so striking to me during my fieldwork was that the Moldovan folkloric movement and its definitions of authenticity had produced major and visible changes in Moldova’s performing arts with virtually no public audience. I perceive this situation as posing a potential challenge to the application of existing theories about national identity to the case of Moldova and to post-socialist societies more generally.

The folkloric movement has succeeded in building an entire industry to promote “tradition” in Moldova. The two new categories of folkloric ensemble – *folcloric* and *etnofolcloric* – can be studied ethnographically as a nexus of social and economic relations among professional ethnographers and folklorists, performers, teachers, artisans, and villagers; and between these individuals and state-sustained institutions and activities such as ministries, culture houses, pioneer houses, and festivals. Because the recent experience of socialism shapes all of these relations, a comparison of this folkloric activity with 19th-century European folklore in terms of its role in constructing new collective identities cannot be made without first comparing the role of the state, the delineation of a public, and the definition of interest.

Nostalgia most often connotes a yearning for the past. The vision of traditional life portrayed by the most “authentic” folkloric groups in Moldova is certainly about a past. In this past, which is almost certainly mythic, village households were self-sufficient, and villages had few, if any, relations with cities. But the creators of this vision insist that their work has significance as forms of protests against the visions promoted by the repertoires, costumes, and performances of *popular* groups, all of which were seen as supporting Soviet ideologies. The folkloric movement asserts the existence of a local past outside the sphere of Soviet social life. Although nostalgia does not seem to fit this case, the Soyuz panel’s title does point to the need to examine the social significance of peoples’ subjective relations to the past. The creation and consumption of “nostalgia” extends beyond the creation and consumption of representations of the past. For example, the fact that *popular* costumes, but not repertoires, can be excused on the national stage suggests that performed folklore in Moldova should not be understood as a vehicle for defining a particular

past. Rather, the jury decisions that I have discussed above indicate that what matters most is that those folkloric ensembles that appear on the national stage are led by individuals who continuously demonstrate their commitment to asserting Moldova’s locally specific pasts.

Note: Fieldwork was conducted between February and November 2001, and was funded by a grant from the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX).

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