Traditional “roots” as a remedy for living abroad. A perspective on Romanian immigrants’ behaviour

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ABSTRACT

The article makes use of data collected throughout a scientific project on migration to argue that cultural heritage plays an important role in the effort to cope with new environments. The analysis is focused on traditional memory and folk customs that are completely different from cultural practices specific to host countries. Romanian immigrants tend to become more aware of their legacy after they experience migration challenges. Mental instability and anxiety finds solutions in Orthodox religion and traditional behaviour.

KEYWORDS:

Migration psychology, calendar customs, family traditions, taboo, cultural heritage

INTRODUCTION

Migration has become a complex and defintory theme for societal studies as early as the end of 80’s. However, the “debates are now more divisive than ever” (Levitt 2019, 213). Economic dates, statistics, law infringements, remittances seem to be on the front screen while socio-anthpologic issues always escape attention, or at best they are viewed as less relevant. The fact that in 2017 as much as 3.400 patients from The Psychiatric Institute Socola from Iaşi were diagnosed as suffering from a severe disorder, called “Italy Syndrome”, shows that

migration should be treated as a phenomenon that puts pressure on more than economy. Synthetically defined as „continuous sorrow associated with chronic physical pain” (Niţu 2014, 72), this mental affliction is considered a new disease caused by socio-political circumstances that force people to accep difficult work opportunities, such as living 24/7 with old, disabled Italian people. Despite being a recent challenge for Romanian psychiatrists, in 2005 The Pan-American Division of the Royal College of Psychiatrists organised a symposium on “Migration and Mental Illness Around the World”.

Individuals make groups and nations are moving with them through the world. The necessity to prevent illness and treat this continuously changing environment with specific instruments has been stated just as early as migration studies appeared: “a complementary perspective is taken in migration psychology, where the conceptual focus is at the microlevel. Migration psychology is the study of individual behaviour with respect to movement across space. Studies in this field often deal with the subjective correlates of migration behaviour such as underlying attitudes, values, perceptions, and migration intentions” (Fawcett 1985, 5).

The following lines address to such reactions and practices that reveal an acutization of traditional behaviour after immigration. The data has been collected from 2004 and 2019. The 53 interviewed subjects come from various settlements in Romania and The Republic of Moldova. Their immigration destinations are Italy (45 informants), Spain (7) and Greece (1). Seventeen persons chose to return home after they spent seven to twenty years in these countries. I talked with eleven men, while the rest of the subjects are women. The age varies from 23 to 69, with only two informants in their twenties. A 60-inquiries questionnaire is used as a starting point for the discussion, with the intention to obtain semi-directive interviews. Cultural heritage as a key aspect was the pillar of discussions that often provoked intense states of mind to the subjects.

Speaking about the concept of *home*, since migration somehow multiplies homes while leaving the person with the feeling that there can be *a home* no more, informants revealed their profound identity, and also a vulnerable one. „To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the

human soul. It is one of the hardest to define” (Weil 2003, 43). What are traditional roots in a society ruled by consumerism, political correctness and pragmatic relationships? The answer may be found in C.T.’s words who lives in Morlupo, near Rome. This is how she responded in August 2019, when asked if she maintains traditional customs: “if you give up your customs, then what do you have left?!”

A QUESTION OF (DOUBLE) IDENTITY

A dichotomy created by Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick-Schiller (2004: 1010) can be used to understand the challenge faced by immigrants each day, and in our case, their reactions to traditional holidays (E.G. Orthodox Easter, Christmas) or rites of passage (baptisms, weddings, funerals). The authors speak about a demeanour that indicates the immigrants’ “ways of being” in opposition to their “ways of belonging”. Technical amenities may change daily social interactions (on-line tickets for buses, team lunch at McDonald’s), but identity (*id est* belonging) is expressed by spending winter holidays with the family in Romania or eating Romanian food for special family meals. Nevertheless, this constant shift between the two social personalities is stressful, especially for the first generation immigrants who had the opportunity to come in contact with folk knowledge.

I.T., a man who came to live in Italy 22 years ago, declared that answering to the questionnaire on Romanian cultural practices made him feel relieved. He had cried several times during the interview in a manly manner, and tried to explain how he felt after talking about traditional food and his dream plan to return to Romania in his first day as a retired citizen. His wife helped him find his words and she said it was “like a confession in the church”. E.C., a woman who has spent her last seventeen years in Rome, sighed when I

turned off the recorder and gasped: “this interview was like a psychotherapy session”.

The social mask wears people out because of the initial feeling that caused migration. A recent book on contemporary art summed this phenomenon up in its title: *When home won't let you stay* (Respini, Erikson 2019). Socio-economic difficulties from Romania and political instability induced a state of insecurity, translated into the frustration that your own home land does not care for you. Moreover, it rejects you, since people less educated than you, who disobey the law and common sense are having a thriving life full of opportunities.

The vast majority of subjects declared that they left for economic purposes. At the end of the day a satisfying income is not enough though. V.B., who decided to return to Chişinău after having spent fifteen years in Italy, told me in a heart aching tone: “don't you ever think that one can sleep well on a foreign pillow! May it be filled with money!”. Hence, subjects live with a split mind: emotional bonds are causing sorrow, while as pragmatic reason keeps them trapped in an unfamiliar world. G.P., a Moldovan woman living in Iaşi since 1992, called life in a foreign country „a yoke” (Rom. *giugu' străinătăţii*). Traditional culture may sometimes have a soothing effect.

SOMETHING IS MISSING

Migration inevitably causes a feeling of displacement, despite the rational decision to leave the country of origin. Time only adds to this self-perception and subjects who experience important melancholy episodes are more likely to return to their country of origin. D.M., a highly educated man from Chişinău confessed: “I missed everything [when I lived in Italy]. I am born near the woods (Rom. *codri*), ...of course, we carried our customs with us, but still...”. When he

finally returned to The Republic of Moldova for good he experienced tachycardia and an intense desire to fall on his knees and kiss the earth beneath his feet. The exact gesture was actually performed by V.C., a Moldovan woman who stayed for nine years in Rome. When she arrived at a crossroads in her home country, she kneeled in front of a crucifix (Rom. *troiţă*) and kissed the ground.

This latent soul pain was also indicated by a younger subject, who apparently doesn't need much from Romania anymore. D.T. is 30 and a graduate from “Babeş-Bolyai University”. She decided to work in her mother's pizzeria near the Colosseum in 2011. The young lady easily declared in the beginning of the interview that the only things that still connect her with Romania now are the Easter, Christmas, sometimes her relative's birthdays and her grandmother. Soon after, she recalled the specific sensation from her childhood years and her words became less firm: “Here, I never feel the holidays [spirit], when it's Christmas, when it's Easter, I think of home continuously. I think about my grandmother; I think about *sarmale* [minced meat cabbage rolls]”. Later in the discussion she admits the whole truth: “I think I lost something of myself. Something is missing. 10 percent of me can't be expressed, because the Italians don't know what *No, bine!* [“well, fine!”] means. This is what I miss, to express myself in my language”.

David Sutton argues that “the memory of taste and smell leads to the emotional effect and the sense of emotional/emodied plenitude” (Sutton 2001, 82), an interpretation that can easily be proved by culinary preferences of the vast majority of immigrants. Moreover, the British food historian uses Fernandez' concept of “returning to the whole” (1986) to develop the idea of recreating familiar surroundings. “Eating food from home

becomes a particularly marked cultural site for the re-imagining of ‘worlds’ displaced in space and/or in time” (Sutton 2001: 84).

Migrants behave culturally in a *regressus at utterum* pattern, that assures them a relative sensation of safety. Food, loving grandparents and the special context of holidays induce a relaxing state of mind to a certain point. Speaking in your native language, however, needs a specific community in host countries. D.T. acknowledges linguistically her deepest identity – she comes from Transylvania where Romanian language is spoken slowly and musically, a thing that cannot be apprehended by Italians or Romanians from other parts of the country. This correlation between language and psychologic comfort is efficiently used in marketing strategies. A chain of Romanian stores from Italy is called *Acasă* [Home] and displays labels in Romanian language first, with an Italian approximate translation underneath.

You are among your people, buy as much as you can is a message that has long been proved persuasive anywhere in the world. This lead to misappropriations of traditional heritage for commercial reasons and now UNESCO actively fights against such cultural lies/ thefts. For example, the famous song *El Condor Pasa* is in fact a traditional Andean song, and communities that still transmit this music line never received any of the deserved intellectual property funds. Ioana Repciuc wrote a review on a book that details this economic stratagem and she concludes that despite “the irresistible force of the progress myth”, advertisement uses manipulation through magic, since domestic wealth is promised in a traditional imaginary (2018, 3).

Romanian immigrants build this folk-like world for themselves, often in an artificial manner. “Immigrants assume their minority status as a unique chance to resist on an

emotional level and use fragmented reflections of their culture to preserve the feeling of general safety” in the attempt to recreate home (Hulubaş 2016, 77). In August 2019, I entered in L.N.’s house in Rome and I noticed a red towel on the table that used to be sold in communist stores called “*Artizanat*” as traditionally woven pieces of ceremonial cloth. She answered happily that it belongs to “her Romania” and showed me several more objects around, all commercial pieces of wood, clay pottery and also Romanian flags. Her traditional outfit is kept in the closet near Asian traditional dresses, since she is involved in community charity work. Such micro-worlds that are carefully built by immigrants translate into the relieving self-induced conclusion that individuals have their own place in a melting pot of nations and cultural practices.

E.C. admitted that she suffered from a serious breakdown for several years because of the compromise she accepted, to live abroad. She turned to Orthodox religion in a more dedicated manner than before migration and she is now “better”. Faith can also compensate the feeling of unfamiliarity brought by host countries.

WHAT DEFINES US

Often immigrants see themselves in two new lights: ignored customs make them resonate intensely while being far from home, and Orthodox belief becomes essential in regaining a comforting state of mind. V.G.V. left The Republic of Moldova in 2005 and is still in Rome today. She declared that “faith defines us, Romanians” and implicitly created an opposition between Catholic religion and Orthodox. This cultural difference is mostly visible during Easter time, when Romanians have to wait for one more week to be able to celebrate properly. Furthermore, East-European countries dye ritual red eggs for the

occasion. I.N., a Bulgarian woman living in Munich faced the new world in the confused eyes of her offspring when they did not understand the trouble of organizing a parallel holiday: “It was very difficult for me to explain to my children why there are no red eggs here in Germany. So I told them that we are Bulgarians, our Easter is not on that day and our eggs are red” (Krăsteva-Blagoeva 2009, 261). *We are not them, this is who we are* refers to faith and tradition.

N.B., who lives in Italy since 2008 and even graduated from a college in Rome, declared out rightly: “it is common law (Rom. *lege*), there is no Easter without red eggs”, a conviction that was expressed by other informants too. Another cultural practice that opposes Italian behaviour and is closely related to Orthodox religion was described by M.T. When I asked her if she ever does her laundry on Sundays she firmly said no. “This is how I grew up, no! (*id est* this is what my parents taught me to do). Come what may [I just won’t wash]!”.

Such taboos as working on a holy day reconfirm personal attachment to traditional values, since Christianity is deeply embedded in folk culture. Mircea Eliade created the concept of *cosmic Christianity*, “a new religious creation, specific to South-East Europe” (1980, 246). This mixture between heathen convictions and dogmatic rules allows Romanian people to harmoniously bond together contrary precepts from a historical point of view. Almost all of the interviewed subjects have in their houses from abroad Orthodox icons and ritual lamps (Rom. *candele*) that they use for worshipping. C.T. displays such an image of Jesus Christ entering Jerusalem, just above the threshold of her house in Italy. What was uncommon though was the fact that underneath this sacred object she nailed a horseshoe. Two

separate layers of religious culture are blended to secure a dangerous space: the doorway.

Deep down at the origin of Romanian beliefs related to the threshold we find the cult of Penates Gods, who were believed to lie under this transition space. Even today we are familiar with the taboo of hugging someone on the threshold or to give something away over it. Pregnant women are forbidden to linger on the doorstep for too long, while as alms for dead children are placed on the threshold, since the departed ones from the family are assimilated with Penates Gods in Romanian traditional thinking. Having a pre-Christian symbol of good luck in this point of the house shows, on a psychological level, vulnerability in front of what may enter the door, and, on a cultural level, an active transmission of archetypes.

The horse is still used as a forgotten *apotropaion* in Romania, since it is believed he can ward-off evil. Numerous old and new buildings here contain a detail called *horses*: the beams coming from under the roof are carved to suggest a stylized horse head. That point of the construction is vulnerable, this is where evil spirits may penetrate through, so the symbol of an animal (who can immediately perceive danger and fight it in nature) is used to secure the entrance. In the past, horse skulls were placed in poles to protect vineyards from vermin, while in United Kingdom, Ireland, Finland, Sweden, Germany such crania used to be put under the house floor, in the wall near the hearth or in churches under the pavement. A huge literature exists on the topic¹, and the vitality of this belief seems to be remarkable.

¹ See, for example, Sonja Hukantaival, *Horse Skulls and “Alder Horse”: the Horse as a Depositional Sacrifice in Buildings*, in “Archaeologia Baltica”, vol. XI. Edited by Audronė Bliujienė, Klaipėda, Klaipėda University Press, 2009.

The horse shoe is obviously a familiar sight from childhood, and I did not expect the subject to explain the symbolic evolution of what makes her comfortable to see when exiting the house. The two sacred figures invoked in C.T.'s case are powerful and able to protect the entire family from unhappy events. The discussion was rather focused on the modern alternatives to holidays and spending time, which she denied and motivated her choice with this sentence: "No matter what, you are a Romanian!"

D.T. wears a traditional shirt as often as he can and admits that being dressed like that makes him feel "completely different", in the sense of being self-confident. "Private devotional activities may also be linked with positive self-regard via processes of religious role taking" (Ellison 1993, 1027). Such hand-sewed shirts are frequently chosen as church outfit by Romanian immigrants. Varvara Buzilă, an renowned ethnologist from Chişinău, calls this element of the old clothing a *shield*. V.G.V. referred to the pattern on such shirts as something holy that you take with you when you wander the world. Religion and tradition are in consequence similar from a psycho-cultural point of view: they state your distinct identity by keeping you protected from social harm, and they put your mind at ease.

R.I. declared that when she wears this traditional shirt for church she feels *at home*, and the fact that other Romanians in the church wear it too make the moment beautiful. A social bond is created and again, the need to find again the childhood feeling of being in your own safe house is expressed. Most of the immigrants gave this formula: "exactly as at home/ as in Romania" as a first answer to the question "what do you eat for special meals?". Such cultural practices are

meant to reassure the self that nothing major has changed, he/she is away, but safe.

ROOTEDNESS

It can hardly be called a coincidence that a famous festival organized yearly in Rome (three editions up to this point) is entitled Roots Fest. Immigrants need to know that their internal foundation is stable. The image of the tree in this life situation is also folkloric. A tree is prepared ritually for all the Romanian rites of passage: the bathing water after baptism is poured at a fruit tree (a gesture also performed by immigrants), the wedding used to be announced by decorated fir trees tied to the gate of the brides' homes and trees ornamented with sweets and ritual bread are given away as essential alms for the deceased.

Songs that used to be used for ceremonial mourning also contain the alliteration "omule/ pomule" [man-tree] and a folk riddle has the answer "the human being" to the following definition: "I have/ A tree/ With its branches going down/ And its roots up" (Niculescu 1973, 3). We become our ancestors by choosing to live a similar life, where culture sets things straight. Numerous examples of inappropriate behaviour in host countries is justified in this context. G.D. came back from thirteen years spent in Torino and she told me that she risked being fined for not respecting regulated hours, but she never took the garbage out after the night fall. "This is what I heard [it must be done], I know this is right, since my grandmother taught me that".

The taboo refers to the fact that you will get poor if you take the garbage out, since it represents a part of your material possibilities. The sun goes down in the other world at night, and your luck might stay there with the garbage you took out in the dark. Such adventurous culturally justified infringements

were also admitted by subjects living in Zaragoza, Spain, but in this particular case the figure of the grandmother stands out once more.

The authority of the elders is not negotiable in traditional communities. They are right and regulations become irrelevant, since tradition

comes with a reassuring feeling that things will turn out well. Customs eventually represent one's family, and immigrants do not want to leave it behind twice. Their parents and grandparents may be back home, but their specific values and inherited knowledge fortunately comes along.

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