

AN ATTEMPT FOR UNDERSTANDING WHY THE IRONSMITH SOMETIME STRIKES ONLY THE ANVIL AND NOT THE IRON PIECE, TOO. FOLKLORISTIC AND COGNITIVE ANTHROPOLOGY PERSPECTIVES*

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Abstract: The ironsmiths' gesture of striking only the anvil without striking the iron piece, too, is integrated in a ritual whose function is to reinforce the devil's chains, on the one hand, and in the mental text of the worker, on the other hands. Two very different reasons ascribe to one and the same gesture. The first part of the study analyzes the narrative motif of the object who binds in relation with the ironsmith, Jesus Christ, King Solomon and the devil, as appears in the Romanian and Caucasian culture. The second part purposes, at least as an experiment, to approach the ironsmith's work, in order to produce a specific object, as an oral performance, expressed through body gestures which put in act the mental knowledge of iron processing.

Keywords: ironsmith, King Solomon, Jesus Christ, oral narratives, cognitive anthropology.

I.

“The devil chained in the sea is constantly gnawing the chains and he would set himself free unless the blacksmiths prevented this to happen. They were taught by their ancestors: on Sunday, when the sun is setting or even in the afternoon, they are to hit the anvil once with the hammer, and the chains of the devil will be reinforced”¹. “The devil is gnawing the chains throughout the year and he would escape on Easter Day if the blacksmiths didn't hammer the anvil once with no purpose at all”².

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¹ Elena Niculiță-Voronca, *Datinele și credințele poporului român adunate și așezate în ordine mitologică*, Iași, Polirom, I, 1998, p. 115.

² *Ibid.*

... Christ came on Earth; then He descended into hell and took out Adam's book and all the souls in hell. And Scaraschi had prepared a chair for Him to sit on and never to stand up again. When He was invited to sit down, our Lord said: You sit first, as I don't know how to do it. And the devil sat down to show Him. Then Christ, our Lord, blessed him to be chained and said: Whenever the blacksmith will hit the anvil with his hammer with no purpose at all, the chain will be reinforced³.

The blacksmith's act done in certain time and space conditions (in the environment of the smithy on holidays and at a certain moment of the day) belongs to the series of ritual gestures and aims at preserving the divine order of the world by keeping the disturber away (there are other actions which are meant to reinforce the devil's chains such as painting the Easter eggs, poking the ashes in the hearth with children's *colindețe*⁴, rinsing the buckets before filling them with water).

The importance given to a gesture which may seem banal and useless (he hammers for no apparent reason) but with a major purpose opens the floor for discussions. Firstly, it could mean – in secular terms – a ritual prescription with a non-ritual aim meant to state the indispensable quality of the blacksmith's work. Yet, one has to go into deeper analysis especially because we refer to a European pre-industrial society whose rituals do not only have social values but also mirror a religious system.

We should mention that at the moment of writing the present study, the ritual hammering of the anvil, without an apparent reason, is no longer attested. Not even in the passive fund of the performers' memory. Nowadays, the blacksmiths do strike the anvil with the hammer with no working reason but having other purposes than reinforcing the chains of the devil, as we are going to show in the latter part of the present study. The very few data we have on this ritual date back from the 19th century. Unfortunately, this information can no longer be checked or directly analysed in field campaigns. The ritual purpose of this gesture is frozen in some narrative excerpts which we will further discuss.

Therefore, we will focus on religious structures expressed in texts and which convey the profound meaning to the text message. As any text and any message is created and transmitted at a certain moment within a historical context which is shaped and which itself shapes the religious and knowledge horizon of the teller and listener(s), the meaning of a tale is unstable in time and space. It is about a process of continuous redefining, a variable process at the message and decoding level. The

³ *Ibid*, 47.

⁴ Wooden sticks decorated by the children who perform Christmas rituals.

topics proposed by this study are drawn up after a 100-year dive back in time without the possibility of synchronization between the artist, the author of the study, and the meaning given to the texts and rituals by those who performed them at least at the time the texts were recorded. What about earlier in time? Therefore the interpretations that follow will be cautiously presented, the main precaution being the concern of keeping them accurately related with traditional Romanian culture in general.

The quoted legends seem to be part of ancient religious mythological structures, which used to be quite extensive and out of which we have witnessed only more or less disparaging fragments. We will not try to rebuild these structures as they have been diluted, reshaped by other religious structures – Christian ones in Europe – or have been spread in parallel with the latter ones, exchanging meanings.

“The so-called *collective* memory is not a closet full of old things but a forever active device which ceaselessly renew the material. The final product, no matter the moment it is grasped should preserve the reshaping and the filtering it has suffered. In other words, the starting topic cannot be recognised at finish. Changed, thus altered by those who handled it for centuries, it now belongs to a pattern which is not longer the original one even if the successive remaking has taken place within one and the same people. More so if the whole process is modified by the intervention of a foreign culture⁵.

Therefore, who is the blacksmith? Which other folk characters is he paradigmatically related to? Who is the captive character? What is the deep message transmitted by the narrative variants which talk about the character’s captivity?

The texts quoted at the beginning of this study contain the motif of a supernatural object which is able to capture anything and anybody – the object which *binds*. This motif opens up the possibility of associating characters which at a first glance has very little to do with each other. At this stage, our analysis funded on narrative scenarios which integrate the above mentioned motif will be more general.

Just the blacksmith

The ATU 330 type in the international catalogue of folk narratives, widespread in Europe, – “A knapsack that draws people into it” [j2071, D1413.1, D1413.5, 1412.1] – mentions a poor blacksmith who puts up

⁵ Georges Charachidzé, *Prométhée ou le Caucase* (Préface de Georges Dumézil), Paris, Flammarion, « Nouvelle Bibliothèque scientifique », 1986, Romanian edition by Barbu and Dan Slușanschi], Bucharest, Meridiane, 1988, p.262.

God and Saint Peter for three miraculous objects able to take anyone captive. In the Romanian folk repertoire this type is very often combined with ATU 332C* type – “An old soldier becomes the doorkeepers for heaven”⁶.

Elena Niculiță Voronca published the tale *The Blacksmith and the Devil* at the end of the 19th century: A poor blacksmith sells his soul to the devil for a barrel filled with money. One day, God and Saint Peter go to the smithy to shoe their horse. The blacksmith does not ask for money. For his kindness God offers him a miraculous chair. Whoever would sit on it could not stand up without the owner’s permission. When the devil comes to take the blacksmith’s soul – as agreed – sits on this chair. *Sit for a while and wait for me to finish my work*. The devil sits down (...) but he is not able to stand up when he wants to⁷. In order to be allowed to leave the devil clears the blacksmith’s duty. Yet, “having been used to lots of money, the blacksmith finds it difficult to make ends meet. Therefore he again promises his soul to the devil and gets another barrel of money.” This scenario repeats two more times, the blacksmith being given a tree (a pear tree) and a knapsack by God as “he would give away the money to everybody who needed it”. Both objects are able to keep someone captive in⁸. On his death bed the blacksmith tells his wife to put his pliers in the coffin⁹. He went to hell but seeing the pliers, the devils got scared and didn’t let him in. “God makes him the Heaven’s gatekeeper”. Here, just like Ivan Turbincă but without the supernatural object which *binds*, the blacksmith distorts God’s words preventing death from its divine purpose (eating trees instead of people) and tending to unbalance the world’s order. “God punished the blacksmith by resurrecting him and making him carrying Death on his back because she¹⁰ was so weak that she could barely walk”¹¹. As Death starts eating

⁶ The types mentioned above – and combined with other narrative types – have an almost universal character, being attested in Europe, India, Middle Orient and America.

⁷ Elena Niculiță-Voronca, *Datinele*, I, 261. The motif of the chair which binds is attested in ancient Greek myths: Hefaistos makes such a chair that whoever sits on it is not able to stand up. The God sends it to his mother, Hera.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.* We think that placing the pliers inside the coffin could be related to the legends about Catholic saints in which the blacksmith shoeing a devil clamps the devil nose with the pliers – this practice is really used when horseshoeing – thus scaring him away. Ever since then the devil has not got closer to the smithy. We are also wandering whether we cannot spot here a custom specific to the blacksmith’s burial.

¹⁰ In Romanian language Death is perceived as a female character.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

people she becomes heavier and heavier and he can no longer carry her. Then, the blacksmith uses a trick similar to Ivan Turbincă's (who locks death inside a coffin pretending he does not know how to get inside) but also to Jesus' (who makes the devil sit on the chair which does not allow him to stand up).

He asks her how she can get inside a locked 16-room house. *I turn into a fly and get inside through the keyhole.*" Asking her to show him how she does it, the blacksmith locks Death inside a walnut. Death is *bound* again but without a supernatural help which means that his gesture does not fit into the divine coherence. Eventually, the blacksmith is hungry and cracks the walnut. Then Death gets out and says: *You wanted to eat me? Well, I will you eat you.* And she eats him¹².

Solomon the Wise, the first blacksmith

The strategic trick used to fool the opponent by pretending being ignorant and thus stimulating the other's pride brings forward another character, namely the Wise King Solomon who locks the Plague inside a rabbit's bone (*The Story of Wise Solomon and the Plague*, apud Sabina Ispas, 2006:249-254) and who tricks death pretending he does not know how to lie in a coffin (legend collected by Ovidiu Bîrlea in 1963)¹³. These legends reiterate the last episode in the tale belonging to ATU 330 type in which the hero does **not** have a miraculous *binding* object of divine origin but acts on his own.

However, the connections between Solomon the Wise and the blacksmith are more profound and lead us to the theme of chaining the devil as Solomon himself is considered to have bound the devil in chains according to type ATU 803 (*Solomon binds the devil in chains in hell*).

Solomon made a big chain, girded the mountain with it and bound the devil to the mountain. *Now, you will sit there tied up (...). And this chain no matter how long you are gnawing at it will be reinforced when the blacksmith strikes the anvil with the hammer with no working purpose.* Even nowadays the blacksmiths hammer the anvil once before starting work. Solomon's father was a blacksmith and he strengthened the devil's chain himself¹⁴.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ William F. Hansen in his book *Ariadna's thread: a guide to international tales found in classical literature* emphasises the parallel between Sisyphus' myth (Sisyphus tricks Thanatos asking him to show how to handle the chains; Thanatos is thus chained in Tartar. From that moment on, nobody on earth dies. Ares, when asked by Zeus, releases Thanatos) and the ATU 330 tale structure.

¹⁴ Sabina Ispas, *Preminte Solomon. Legenda populară românească între canonic și apocrif* [The wise Solomon. The Romanian popular legend between canonic and apocryph], Bucharest, SAECULUM I.O. 2006, p. 149.

Unlike the variant cited at the beginning, in this case the primal gesture of hammering the anvil with no working reason was done by Solomon. Thus, his action set an example, Solomon being the first blacksmith ever. On the other hand, there is a specific group of narratives which reiterate the theme of hero's temporary hidden identity, namely "The Son of the King and of the Smith (AT 920) is frequently connected with the name of the Solomon. The king decides to get rid of his son and exchanges him for the son of a smith"¹⁵.

Saint Haralambos

There is yet another character that should not be neglected. This is Saint Haralambos. The hagiographic tales (widespread between the 17th and 19th centuries) present him as keeping the Plague bound in iron chains received from God as reward for his faith and his martyrdom's sufferings. The chain has the miraculous quality of unbinding only at the Saint's command. Yet he does not overuse his power, as other characters do (the blacksmith repeatedly signs the pact with the devil and just like Ivan Turbină or King Solomon selfishly, superficially and unjustifiably arrogate control over death), thus maintaining this divine gift. Saint Haralambos is the only one who remains obedient to God till the end. This is one of the reasons why we are postponing now the analysis of his place within the gallery of the already mentioned characters. The blacksmith will release the prisoner.

The narratives we are dealing with in this part belong to the two genres: tales (*The Blacksmith and the Devil*) and legends (hagiographic legend – Saint Haralambos' – and etiological ones with eschatological meaning – the chained devil). Their spread in different spaces and cultures is not consistent. *The Blacksmith and the Devil* type attested all over Europe and Middle East¹⁶ has local specific variants due to the manner of combining the episodes, contamination with other types and to its denouement. The legends about the chained devil, also attested in a large area, are usually included in the King Solomon cycle, with local variants. Not the very presence of this kind of narrative in a certain culture gives the specific character to that culture but the way in which both the narrative structures and their heroes are integrated among the

¹⁵ Stith Thompson, *The folktale*, University of California Press, 1977, p. 159.

¹⁶ On type AT 330 narratives, *The Smith and the Devil or The Smith and the Death*, Stith Thompson wrote: "The story has been told in so many forms, both literary and oral, that a clear history of it would be very difficult to trace".

other elements of the cultural system in which they appear. Our general approach of some characters that are involved in similar narrative structures (without being interchangeable) will focus further on shaping the typological profile updated for each of these characters. Then, we will consider their narrative place in order to reach the message transmitted during the hammering ritual and the customs which justify and consecrate it. However, our further analysis will not start from the blacksmith or Solomon or even from Saint Haralambos, but from the common element for all of them: the prisoner.

The Prisoner

The prisoner is the devil or death or the plague. We will not discuss death as she follows God's order, thus not being destructive. There remains the devil and the plague. The latter is similar to the devil as its hunger makes it the destroyer par excellence¹⁷.

Before going further allow us to temporarily skip another element, namely the blacksmith in the tales about the devil, as his presence is not compulsory for the plot and its meaning. Moreover, the main character in many 330 ATU type is not only a blacksmith but also a soldier or just a poor man. Yet, the main character in the legends about chaining the devil is the blacksmith. These narratives will be our next main topic.

Which of his many faces does the devil have here?

It is said that once a blacksmith went to his (the chained devil's, L.J.I.) place, underground. And he told him: *Why do you beat us? Why do you kill us, my mother and me?* They are made of iron. That blacksmith went to his place to ask him what he would do if he were set free. *I would crush the world*, he said, *for the good things I've done to the people who are now keeping me bound here!* That blacksmith came back and told the others: *Keep hammering and don't let him go 'cause that's what he said.* And they still keep hammering¹⁸.

This devil does not belong to the same tradition as the fallen angel's.

The ritual of hammering with no reason for strengthening the devil's chains is part of a tradition spread beyond the Romanian cultural area. We lack both the competence and the information for a comparative analysis between different geographic spaces and cultures.

¹⁷ That is why Saint Haralambos received the chain which keeps it captive. He releases it only at God's command – its presence in the world is a tool of divine punishment – and brings her back in controlled captivity.

¹⁸ Elena Niculiță-Voronca, *Datinele*, I, 115.

In south Germany and the Tyrol, when a blacksmith rests from his work on a Saturday evening, he strikes with his hammer three blows upon the anvil, thereby chaining up the Devil for the ensuing week. And so likewise, while hammering a horse-shoe into shape, he strikes the anvil instead of the shoe every fourth or fifth blow, and thus makes doubly secure the chain wherewith Satan is bound¹⁹.

The quoted fragment is dated back at the end of the 19th century, like in the Romanian case. These are the only mentions we have found except Caucasian epic and ritual ample structures. It might have covered a wider territory but we have not found them mentioned. It is also possible that at the end of the 19th century (a period rich in folklore collections) the above mentioned traditions to have already been diluted or maybe written down in editions or languages inaccessible to us.

Yet, they could also have appeared at a superficial level in European cultures where they might have had a short life. However we have too few documents to be able to speculate upon their area.

It is remarkable their persistence and presence in the Caucasus Mountains, a place which appears as a burning core very strong compared with the European flickering flames. More than this it is the only place thoroughly known as the first written mention of the traditions we are talking about dates back in the 9th century and the oral variants are still transmitted. Georges Charachidzé's *Prometheus or the Caucasus* offers an excellent approach of these traditions. An extended epic cycle is dedicated to Amirani (having name variants), the warrior hero. He also has the attributes of a civilising hero but ends up using his physical strength in a destructive way. He kills everyone around him until there is no one left to fight with. Then he challenges his godfather, Jesus Christ, to fight him. In the aftermath of this fight Amirani is alive but bound.

The old women say that he is chained in a cave; that two dogs are licking ceaselessly his iron chains and he is trying to escape to put an end to this world. Yet, at the noise of the blacksmiths' hammers striking the anvils, his chains, it is said, are reinforced. That is why on Sundays many blacksmiths strike the anvil with a hammer three or four times. Thus, they say Artawazd's chains are strengthened again²⁰.

This is an excerpt from a text written in the 9th century. Mentioning the old women as legendmongers could suggest not only that the author

¹⁹ Robert Means Lawrence, *The Magic of the Horseshoe with Other Folk Lore Notes*, Boston and New York Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 2008, p. 33.

²⁰ Georges Charachidzé, *Prométhée*, pp. 99-100.

of the manuscript is distancing himself from the legends' truth but also that only the older generations can remember the legend. Here is a fragment recorded in Western Georgia in 1964: "On Maundy Thursday, the blacksmith goes silently inside the smithy and strikes the anvil with his hammer three times. Thus, Amirani's chains become stronger and he remains chained"

Notwithstanding the long distance but considering commercial and transhumance routes which connected the Caucasus and the Romanian area there are striking similarities between these two territories. We will next mention another one directly linked with the characters we are dealing with here: "Amirani was Solomon's son. And according to Georgians of Mingrelian origin, Saint Solomon was considered the funder of blacksmithing. He had a smithy where he was working only with his bare hands, without using a hammer. (...) So a blacksmith is the one who fathered Amirani"²¹.

Coming back to Romanian legends we remember the iron-related nature of the devil which means that his creation had something to do with handling the blacksmiths' techniques, including striking the anvil with the hammer. In other words, the devil was made by a blacksmith²². Probably it is him who created his chains and who repeatedly reinforces them. Therefore, the connection between the prisoner and blacksmithing is puzzling. The creator becomes the enemy of the created being. The changing of the sign is mirrored by changing the roles around the chair or the chain which binds: the one who sits down on it is not the one that this chair was meant for and who was supposed to be bound (the devil had created the chair for Jesus Christ) but the one who had intended to bound the sitter.

The entire narrative fragment discussed here emphasises the opposition between *the one who binds* and *the one who is bound*. Each of them defines himself as the very opposite of the other one. The former is witty, the latter witless; the former periodically takes on the role of preserving the world balance, while the latter, the role of destroyer; the former is active (strikes the anvil), the latter, because of the chain, passive (but not motionless, as he is gnawing the chains), pending; the former's action annihilates the latter's action. Moreover, one's presence means the other's absence, or better his retreat.

The presence and absence principle draws us nearer to the core of

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

²² There are a few topics in the study *The Metamorphoses of Iron* which meet the one raised here. See supra.

our study, namely the cyclic feature. The profound and common pattern of all the narratives mentioned so far is as follows: retaining a supernatural being with precise functions for the world balance then releasing this being, then, retaining again. Considering that these legends have an eschatological character we are not talking about seasons' cycles but about mankind cycles. At a certain moment the balance ensuring the current version of the world should fall apart, meaning the end of *this* world, because this is how mankind can move further to new a hypostasis. It will thus suffer a metamorphosis. This destruction will be done by the one who, for now, is kept prisoner, in agreement with the one who has bound him. Saint Haralambos would never do this as he is forever compliant with God. The blacksmith is the one who will eventually do it. He will stop striking the anvil for no working reason as he has already had doubts since he went to the devil to ask him what he would do if he is released. And the chains will be broken.

If we acknowledge the archaic character of the above analysed legends, which might date back in time before Christ, one should not forget that for more than 1000 years they were transmitted within a culture shaped by Christianity. The influence of Christianity is not limited only to a possible change of the character's name (the civilizing character turns into a Christian devil) but moreover to a change in the very meaning of the text.

In the Romanian legend Jesus Christ is the one who started the ritual performed by the blacksmith. Furthermore He is the One who broke the iron gates of hell and freed the captive souls. Yet, the final redemption comes after the release of the devil when the world, as we know it now, is spiritually recreated into divine, heavenly and timeless New Jerusalem. The presence and absence cycle will be broken. As the Holy Spirit will be everywhere changing the essence and not the form of this world and mankind. In this divine plan the blacksmith will have his part to play.

II.

The 2009-2011 interviews with the blacksmiths whom we watched working have led us towards a totally different level of analysing the gesture which we are going to call generically to strike the anvil with the hammer *with no reason*.

L.J.I: Do you happen to strike only the anvil, without having a piece of iron on it?

C.B.: *Well, how shall I put it? [...]. That is the thinking time from hand to thought* (informant Cornel Bălăceanu, 2010).

LJ.I: When you are working why do you sometimes strike the anvil and not the iron piece? Why don't you always strike the iron piece?

I.O.: *Not to hurt it too much* [He laughs]. *I do this in order not to skip the rhythm. 'Cause I move the iron piece and I'm thinking: I have to do this and that* (informant Ilie Olaru, 2011).

The explanations offered by the blacksmiths remain hidden for the outsiders who also notice that he strikes the anvil and not the iron piece but do not have access to the reason of this action. “ 'Cause he is blind like all the blind. If you take a good look at him you'll see that he cannot see the iron when working – when he strikes, he misses it twice, and only eventually he manages to strike the iron piece”²³.

A gesture is the kinetic expression of a segment of knowledge characteristic to iron processing. Making an object entails three necessary phases: (1) activating knowledge, (2) transposing knowledge into gestures which aim at (3) making the object. We are dealing with the cognitive realm. What does knowledge consist in? How is it mentally organised? How is it exteriorised? How and how much is the blacksmith aware of it? How does he express this awareness? How is it conveyed? These are questions which aim at an area difficult to investigate by an outsider. The access to the domain to be analysed is mediated by words although it is a domain where words are replaced by gestures and sensory stimuli (colours, hardness, malleability, sounds); a domain whose main verb is *to make* and not *to say*; *to show* and not *to explain*.

Considering that the blacksmith's discourse is conveyed by gestures – *to show* – and it implies face-to-face interactive communication, a *sine qua non* condition of orality, we propose the hypothesis of approaching iron processing from a double perspective: folkloristic and cognitive anthropology. Our proposal deals with a theoretical and methodological extrapolation from folkloric performance, when the immaterial artefact is created and transmitted, to the very process of creating the material object. This extrapolation is based on the element common to all mechanisms of creating and orally transmitting the formalized expressions, no matter the language they use (words, melodies, rhythms, gestures), namely variability, *acting* a cognitive structure at a certain moment and, starting from this, creating the unique variant, characteristic for that particular moment. We are talking about the story teller or the epic song singer (we have chosen these two examples because the fairy tales and the epic songs are the most formalized folkloric genres), on the one hand, and the blacksmith, on the

²³ *The Girl, the Ironsmith and the Boots maker*, 1909, p. 201.

other hand²⁴. The fairy tale is a final, unique and distinct product (as it can not be told again in a similar manner) and so is the object produced (we are not considering here the mass market products) although it is tangible. Yet, the whole range of gestures and body movements structurally displayed which aims at producing an iron object is not tangible or material in any way, thus being irreversible and unrepeatable. In other words, the blacksmith's movements while making an object, the sequencing, could be comparable with a folkloric performance process. Lauri Honko's question – "What precedes a performance?" – as well as his considerations upon the process of creating an epic song are also relevant for our topic:

To be able to understand the production of text in actual performance, it seems necessary to postulate a kind of "pre-narrative," a pre-textual frame, that is, an organized collection of relevant conscious and unconscious material present in the singer's mind. This material consists of (1) textual elements and (2) generic rules for reproduction; we may call it a "mental text." It is not as fixed as its documented manifestations may suggest, but it is only through its fixed manifestations that we can try to construct components of a particular mental text²⁵.

It is obvious that a blacksmith does not use words and his *mental text* is not a verbal one but made up of figurative representations. However, this fact does not fundamentally change the things. The textualization mechanism (in Lauri Honko's terms), namely the multiple phases in assembling the meaning units in order to create a message is similar.

During the process of oral, verbal or musical creation, the creator-performers relate to a mental pattern which represents the variant previously produced and which is adjusted to the concrete current performing context.

Unlike the result of a performing situation whose final product is immaterial and irreversible thus not being able to be readjusted afterwards, a material artefact can be felt, smelt, seen when it is completed; it is not irreversible. This is one major difference between the two performing types of creation: the mental model of the blacksmith can be doubled by an exterior, concrete one which is handled as it had been

²⁴ This approach could also be used when talking about any of the specialized performers of a certain trade.

²⁵ Lauri Honko, *Epics along the Silk Roads: Mental Text, Performance, and Written Codification* in "Oral Tradition", volume 11, issue 1 (March), 1996, Center for Studies in Oral Tradition, Columbia University, http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/11i/honko_intro

produced at a previous moment by himself or by another blacksmith. The concrete presence of the object which is to be re-produced leads to the identity hypothesis opposed to the variability.

LJ.I.: Have you ever made two identical axe blades?

I.O.: *Certainly. Look! Two, three, four alike, look.*

LJ.I.: Are they alike? Are they in any way different?

I.O.: *Everything can be made identical; if I want it to I can make it identical with another one. If someone comes to me and tells me: "Look, I want an axe just like this one", I measure it (Ilie Olaru, 2011).*

Nevertheless, two hand-made objects are never identical as acting the mental text – the fixed structure of gestural sequences which are exteriorized during the process of creating the finished product – cannot be identically repeated at two different moments. Also, as we found out during our field campaigns, the concrete model of the object to be produced does not replace the mental one but creates an image which is called on while performing.

LJ.I.: When you make an axe blade, for example. Do you have a pattern in mind or do draw it on paper beforehand?

I.O.: *No. Its image remains in my mind.*

LJ.I.: While working, are you thinking about that image in your mind?

I.O.: *No need. I can see it. When I start working on it, I can see the object being made.*

[...]

LJ.I.: Coming back to the axe blade. You've said that you have its image in your mind. When you work on it, what are you thinking about: what you have in mind, an axe blade you did before or the way it should look like at the end? Are you thinking about the past or the future?

I.O.: *My mind is at the measurements. At the material. I want to make it of a certain size, I look at it, I'm cutting a little piece off this axe [he has an axe in his hand and points at it], just this little. It will be adjusted at the end, will be cleaned, as I will change a bit here, a bit there (informant Ilie Olaru, 2011).*

The body movement is a manifest text, acting the mental text. Each type of objects has its own gestures organized in characteristic structures. The performing process operates a strategy consisting of selecting the very gestures are needed out of the whole repertoire. This is done according to a dynamic relationship between a compulsory mental structure and its continuous adjustment to the specific features of each object and to the concrete performing context:

One should know the next movement. You turn the metal, you turn the iron piece..., another thing should be done. And quickly or the iron piece is getting colder and you have to put it back in the fire (informant Cornel Bălăceanu, 2010).

“Structure and performance are understood as mutually constitutive”²⁶ (Keller, Keller, 1996: 27). The blacksmith’s skills become visible when he is working and consist of the mental elements of his gestures (either autonomous or organized in sequences), of the relationships between them, of his skill to apply them, on the one hand, and on the other hand, of a rich knowledge repertoire having instrumental value: the metal consistency, knowing the temperature after the iron’s colour, knowing the cooling speed, maintaining and adjusting the heat by controlling the air flow, maintaining a certain rhythm appropriate for body movement involved, assessing the strikes, communicating with the team partner (they are two or three when working), etc.

“Tools can refer to words and other intangible as appropriately as to material objects [...]. Blacksmithing provides activity in which the tools themselves are easily identifiable and the practices incorporating them easily observed”²⁷.

There are moments when you have to think very fast and also to make a move, fast. To toss the material (informant Cornel Bălăceanu, 2010).

The rhythm and alternating movements (when an object is shaped, it is heated, forged, quenched, reheated, etc and the blacksmith is also to move from the hearth to the anvil and back, around the anvil, etc.) done against time (as unlike other types of material iron should be struck while it is still hot) require distributive attention, movement coordination, focusing skills, good memory, speed, ability to assess the previous gestures and to foresee the next ones.

Hand and memory. If you don’t know how to do it from the very beginning you will never be able to do it (informant Avram Munteanu, 2009).

The main thing is to know how to use your hands. This is the starting point for all the rest. ‘Cause if you don’t know what to do with your hands, with this hand [the left one] you work, with this one [the right one] you handle the hammer, you can’t do a thing! And your brain. You don’t have to focus on the moment you take out the iron and placed it on the

²⁶ Janet D. Keller, Charles M. Keller, *Cognition and Tool Use: The Blacksmith at Work*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20

anvil, and only then to think, well, what shall I do next? You should think ahead [...] and only then to do the rest of the work, the job. Your mind should be ahead, 'cause that what blacksmithing is about. Not when you take it out and haven't planned what to do with it. You should have done it before so that when you take it out it is finished. That's it, blacksmithing (informant Costina Ion, 2009).

(translated from Romanian by Anca Stere)