SOCIAL PRACTICES AND IDENTITY REPRESENTATIONS WITHIN A COMMUNITY – THE RESEARCHING METHODOLOGY

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Abstract: The study wishes to approach the importance of some social practices in maintaining the identity in a community. It will be referring to the structure of the property and to its representations in the mentality of a community. A special attention will be shown to the social practices concerning the foundation (stories describing the creation of the communities, for example) and referring to the periodical actualization of some identity guide marks (local customs, events organized at the level of the entire community).

Keywords: identity, narrativity, symbolic representations, qualitative methods.

The study wishes to bring forward the importance of some social practices in preserving the identity inside a community. A special attention is given to the social practices of creation (stories regarding the founding of some communities, for example) and referring to the periodical actualization of some identity landmarks (local customs, events organized within an entire community). The socio-cultural identity, community-communitarian spirit, collective memory – syntagmas that became usual and bearer of significations throughout their permanent addition to some researching directions, theories, different methodologies. The conceptualization – although represents an indisputable contribution as regarding the increase of the scientific communities' strictness, isn't sometimes able to evidence or to recover all the aspects that imply the used formulations, expressions and syntagmas. Besides the essentialization, there is a space of the everyday living, of the life of the alive – this is not a parallelism, but a setting into a continuous dialogue. Therefore, the space of the scientific debates is detached through generalizations by the everyday living, in order to explore it, to be able to notice the dynamic equilibrium of a living culture, the

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permanent exchanges of gestures, talks, impressions during the diverse communities.

The concept of identity raised many debates in the circle of the socio-human sciences. Because its multiple aspects that refer to the genetic heritage or assimilated features, the influence of the different social groups, the particularities given by the national affiliation, the socio-cultural identity represents a subject approached from diverse perspectives – psychological, sociological, ethnological. The concept of identity opens debates on the personality – person – social group axis, this last one being

> defined according to internal objective criteria (origin, culture, religion community, the kindred relations between the group's members) or external (the common historic route, the situation at the level of the global society, the role of the economy etc.) and according to subjective criteria that can also be internal (the feeling of affiliation, the solidarity relations between the members etc.) or external (the attention towards the group coming from the surrounding society)[1].

The identity is continuously consolidated or reaffirmed through certain events meant to create the feeling of affiliation, of attachment to the community.

Hence, the socio-cultural identity must be related to many factors – family, social environment, heredity, groups of affiliation. The existence of a stable identity nucleus allows accumulations and evolutions during the entire life, completing the spiritual life of the human being. Conceptually, there is drawn a distinction between the individual's identity and the collective socio-cultural identity, the interferences between them being obvious. Thus, the identity is moreover a process though which its stable nucleus (configured from the individual particularities, aptitudes, spiritual values, beliefs, aspirations, ideals, certain behaviors and attitudes towards certain situations) enters into a relation with other social factors that can either consolidate or reaffirm, stabilize. That's why, the ethnic or the national identity are more stable, because of the existence of certain social values which become active through the primary socialization or through the periodic reactualizations of some principles or identity symbols through rituals, festivities, cultural events. Therefore, the trinominal personality-social group-community is articulated through socio-cultural key-factors, talking today about an

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[1] Pierre Bonté, Michel Izard, *Dictionnaire d'ethnologie et anthropologie*, Romanian edition, Iaşi, Polirom, 1999, p. 217

identity culture that offers particularity/specificity to a social unity, either it is a small group – that shares the same values, ideals, or an ampler association – ethnic community or nation – in this situation, the considered values, the ideals and life principles themselves have more depth and stability.

In the old days communities and in the nowadays ones too, the story-telling enjoyed a special place in the social space, but the ways in which it is "fulfilled" is different somehow, before, the story-telling regulated or was even responsible regarded through an educational angle. The story-telling, therefore as a social practice, fulfills important functions in the consolidation of the communitarian mentality, so we will try to underline the existence of some particularities concerning the relation collective identity – symbolic imaginary of several founding stories – for example – the village Aref from Argeş county.

The binominal "the offered story" – "prestigious identity" proves to be the central axle that facilitates the reactivation of some community values. The structuring of the relations between the protagonists depends on their symbolic positioning towards the discussed phenomenon. The field research made only on one of the groups from the dialog, allows a more detailed analysis not only as regarding the reactivation of some symbolic representations about the dwellers from Aref. Their cultural memory has an imaginative, much stronger component, the story sets in order "naming" each border stone, decreasing the distance between the community and the living space, making it familiar, because its "story" it is known. The connection between memory – identity – imaginative-narrative ability it is obvious for the dwellers from a certain space that they possess or, for a change, they reactualize the legitimate possession through the story, through founding legends. This thing is easily unraveled in the case of the Aref village from Argeş too. Teacher Cezar Bădescu, one of the field informers, keeps alive the village's old days stories. Although we meet an identified memorizing, orientated towards patrimonialization, can be discovered the survivals of some archaic imaginary referring to the village's origin. The seven old people from the beginning of the time, but especially of the space in Arefu are: "Badea, Pechea, Dobrin, Drăgulea, Ionicescu (also called Toinea), Redeche and Roscescu (also called Zăblaică). We come from them"[2]. An authentic story-teller is Aurelia Jugăraru, who asked us to call her "granny Aurelia", confessing that she is also called "Ciocan's Aurica". She

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[2] Cezar Bădescu, field informer, teacher, 54 years old, April 2006, Arefu.

remakes the story of the Arefu village's boundaries, reminding us that, through the story, the space enters into the possession of the dwellers. Through the legend, the origin of the village is placed into an indefinite time, because the ancestors that named those places stayed at its origin. Here there are her confessions:

> Behind our village, towards the northern side, we have three ranges of mountains: Obârşia, Căprişoara and Măgureaua Arefului. Between Obârşia and Măgureaua Arefului it existed a more dangerous path, that went towards Valea lui Stan...it was called Poteca Mărăcinelui (…) and led to a great groove – Piatra Lalii. Why was it called Piatra Lalii? During an outside assault on the village, a foolish lofty person, very silly, ran from the village and built a tiny groove and there he built his shelter. When he returned to the village, he told about the place where he had been, and the people went there, saw the spot and its name remained Piatra Lalii[3].

Then come the stories about Bucur's hut and his treasure, about the Pietricelii fountain, Bulzul lui Bucur and La muntişor. The dwellers from Aref reactualize a creation myth, full of symbolic motifs of the life itself.

An ampler discussion can be realized as referring to the methodology of correlations research that can be realized between the social practices and the identity landmarks of the social groups.

The problem regarding the possibility of an assumed objectivity as coming from the researcher reappears in the context of the contemporary researches. The textual representation of the field experience, the subjectivity and the possibilities of objectifying the researcher's observations needs permanent questioning. The objectivity can be configured through a process of incorporation/assuming of the subjectivity, as constant distancing, objectivity that it is born through continuous recurrences that recover the decanted meanings through permanent distancing. The researcher's instrument must include this exercise of the permanent oscillations between observation and conceptualization, the research going further through constant questionings, through an open dialogue with the field, incorporating dynamically its mobility. The objectivity of the researcher is born from the permanent reconsideration regarding his subjectivity, after the decantation of the role that he fulfills during a research from the informal aspects of the discussions, necessary for the configuration of the communication's interactive context, informal aspects that can bear many or rich information, significant for the purpose of the research.

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[3]Aurelia Jogăraru, 79 years old, April 2006, Arefu.

In the context that concern the dynamic of the socio-cultural reality, the folklorist researcher is requested a remarkable theoretic and methodological flexibility, but one that would not make indistinct the academic rigor of his studies, thus, the functionality of some folkloric products can be limited or, on the contrary, reevaluations or recontextualizations of theirs. The methodological sensibility of the researcher is challenged in front of more subtle modifications.

The phenomenon of the narrativity enjoyed a main interest from the researchers, constituting the basis of its constant conceptual theoritizations and reconfigurations.

The methodology specific to the contemporary studies of folklore takes part from a more intense incorporation of the investigations developed in the urban environment, along with the studies for the rural side, intensifying the interrelations with the complex of the socio-human discipline, the adequacy of some theoretic structures, concepts that come from the fields of sociology, philosophy of culture etc. The narration of life as a method can find similarities with the folklore tradition but also with its theoretical-methodological extensions.

The stories have a central role in the community, they facilitate the relation, the exchange of some social representations, the intercultural contacts, the emphasizing of some interpretations and re-significations of several social events or characteristic to the quotidian life, in other words "the stories offer a certain type of access to the people's identity and personality"[4]. Between narration and identity there is a clear connection, but the interpretation of this connection differs according to diverse academic currents. Numerous researchers – Bruner, Rosenthal – sustain that

> the autobiographic stories, both in form and content, are actually the people's identities. According to this approach, the stories imitate life and present to the exterior world an interior reality; in the same time, they lay the foundation and offer a shape for both the narrator's personality and to the reality in which he lives. The story is someone's identity (…). Not everyone accepts this perspective[5].

Referring to the same aspect, that of "the truth" recovered through the method of the oral history, have been created realistic, essentialist or historic perspectives that examine the story or any verbal narration as a representation (more or less exact) of the exterior and interior reality. Between the absolute relativism that considers all the oral narrations as

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[4] Ruth Atkinson, *Storytelling with Folktales*, Curriculum Corporation, 2006, p. 18.
[5] *Ibid.*

being just fiction and the nominal valorisation that takes part from the story, the exact and complete representation of the reality, the middle position seems the most correct, because it is important to recover the reference of the interviewed people to the events and not the events from their subjective accounts.

The narrations have a central role in the communication, they facilitate the relationship, the exchange of social representations, the intercultural contacts, the revelation of certain interpretations and the resignifications of some social events or characteristics of the quotidian life. The life stories are subjective, the same as the people's identities are.

The life storytelling method proves to be viable in researching the urban environment, the folkoristic investigation of the urban zone being shaped conspicuously in some recent studies that imply in the same time numerous interrelations with the area of other socio-human disciplines.

The variety of the groups or of the urban zones and of the cultural models specific to the city can be viably investigated by recurring to the method of the oral history, in such way being able the obtaining of important collections of identity cultural information (linguistic, religious, ethnic, spatial). The using of the oral history implies adaptations, improvements of it to the disciplinary identity of the forlkloristics.

Hence, the researcher is always facing a challenge to a permanent exercise of distancing from his own positioning and altogether the apprehension of the way in which it is seen by the interlocutor, he cannot seek refuge in the state of neutrality, but he must permanently juggle with the Other One' challenge and with the sublimation of any judgment that might affect the narratives.

This exercise of withdrawing, constant returning of the researcher to the way in which he is perceived, implies the necessity of these auto-reflexive regards, meant for the configuration of the dialogical context, for the orientation of the future interpretations or the bringing up, the completions, "the provocations" taken again on the field. This exercise of reflexivity must be methodologically integrated as a measure of rigor and responsibility for the future research that might use the documentary material registered in such a way.

The contemporary challenges of the research open new perspectives both as regarding the studied subject matter and the methodology, the case of the researches that develop in the urban zone being eloquent as also those referring to the refining of the methodology, the redefinition of certain concepts and theories, in the context of the interdisciplinary relationships between the social and humanist sciences.