AN OUTSIDER’S VIEW OF AN INTERETHNIC COMMUNITY IN BANAT: CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN THE VILLAGE OF SVINIȚA

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Abstract:
During Easter 2013, under the auspices of the International Council of Traditional Music study group for ethnochoreology, a group of international researchers participated in a fieldwork trip in the village of Svinia, in the Danube gorge. This visit was initiated to coincide with viewing the custom of ‘Jocul de pomană’ and included participant observation of Easter customs and the evening social dances (bals). This paper focuses on observations and interviews made during this research trip and looks at how locals portrayals of their identity shifted depending on the interviewer and the situation and consequently asks whether individuals construction of their ‘identity’ is connected, or independent to, their participation in current cultural practices? It draws on concepts of positionality (Sheppard 2002) and identities that can be situational, shifting and multiple (see Barth (1969), Wilson and Hastings, (1998:13), Pistrick, (2008:358)) depending on the situation or the identity of the interlocutors. It suggests that a local conception of identity (or an ‘identity focussed on difference’) can remain closely linked to a notion that the community’s ancestry is ‘different’ or set apart from the inhabitants of the surrounding area, even in the situation that the “culture” has, and continues to, exchange and merge with the surrounding cultural practices.

Keywords: Positionality, border-identities, culture, identity, dance

1. Introduction

The inhabitants of the village of Svinia, situated on the northern bank of the Danube Gorge in Romania ‘know’ that they are different from those living in the nearby villages. Based on fieldwork undertaken in the village of Svinia during Easter 2013, under the auspices of the International Council of Traditional Music (ICTM) study group for ethnochoreology, this paper investigates contemporary manifestations of culture and identity during music and dance events and local calendrical and life cycle customs in Svinia and explores the ways that differences may be maintained and reinforced though connections across the current political border with Serbia, whilst contemporary cultural practices in the village may be viewed as relatively homogenous with that in the surrounding Romanian villages. This fieldwork was organised by researchers from the Belgrade Institutes of Ethnology and Musicology as part of their continuing research into the culture and identity of the Serbian community in this village that is funded under the project ‘musical and dance tradition of the multiethnic and multicultural Serbia’ sponsored by the Serbian Ministry of Education. The multi-national participants on this occasion included two Serbian researchers from Belgrade, the respected Romanian dance researcher Anca Giurchescu (now over 80 years old) who had previously undertaken research in the Danube gorge villages with the Institute of Folklore in Bucharest in the

*Project: Musical and dance tradition of the multiethnic and multicultural Serbia, 9 number 177024 (2011—2015). I would thank the Belgrade organizers for making our field trip possible, and the locals from Svinia for making us so welcome and for inviting us to return in the future.
1970s, two researchers from the UK who are researching music and dance in Romanian Banat (the author and her husband), a researcher from Sweden and one from the US.

This paper focuses on observations and interviews made during this research trip and in particular looks at the locals’ construction of their “identity and culture” and whether this can be viewed as ‘interethnic’ and asks whether this is connected or independent to their participation in current cultural practices?

Theoretically this paper draws on concepts of positionality (Sheppard, 2002) and that identities can be multiple, shifting and situational (see Barth (1969), Wilson and Hastings (1998,13), Pistrick (Pistrick, 2008, 358)). Sheppard proposes ‘the term positionality to describe how different entities (in this case places) are positioned with respect to one another in space and time’ (Sheppard, 2002, 318). He suggests that in the globalised world it is not only the physical or geographical position of a place that is relevant, but also its position within the global economy, that is determined by its connections to other places. He advances ‘the idea of positionality as a way of capturing the shifting, asymmetric, and path-dependent ways in which the futures of places depend on their interdependencies with other places’ (Sheppard, 2002, 308). In other words when examining the factors that may influence what goes on in one place, both the physical location and how this is situated in the immediate locality, and also the connections made between those living in this place and other locations that may be anywhere in the world have to be considered. Examples of positionality include connections made through labour migration patterns that favour certain locations, or drawing from Kaneff the links between Bulgarian villages and the UK made through the many British people who have bought Bulgarian village houses as retirement or holiday homes in the last twenty years (Kaneff, 2013, 38).

2. Sviniţa: History, Positionality and Border Identity

The inhabitants of the villages situated along the northern bank of the Danube along the Danube Gorge in Romania identify themselves as ethnically either Romanian or Serbian with Svinița being the most eastern village whose inhabitants identify themselves as Serbians. The village’s web site describes Svinița as ‘a Serbian centre isolated in a network of Romanian villages on the banks of the Danube, not integrated into a certain ethnographic zone of populations of that origin’ (2013) thus reflecting that Svinița has through history been geographically and historically separated from others villages along the Danube Gorge with Serbian population.

A book on the history of Sviniţa written by Nicolaie Curaci, the mayor of Sviniţa, and Ilie Sâlcianu (Facultatea de Istorie -Filozofie, Cluj) highlights questions that have been in the minds of the people of Sviniţa about their culture and identity ‘for hundreds of years’, these being, ‘who are we, what are we, where do we come from, and what language do we speak?’ (in local Svinița dialect: Koj smo mi? Što smo mi? Otkude smo došli? Kaki izik vrevimo?, or in Romanian ‘Cine suntem noi? Ce suntem noi? De unde am venit? Ce limbă vorbim?’, (Sâlcianu and Curaci, 2012, 1, Sâlcianu, 2013). This history of Sviniţa introduces several pointers that may provide some answers to these questions, by tracing the history of the people of Sviniţa, and their
language through time. This area has been inhabited continuously since the Neolithic period (Sălceanu and Curaci, 2012, 300-1, Sălceanu, 2013). In medieval times Svinuța village became a refuge for the religious sect of Bogomils who were considered as heretics in Bulgaria. Bogomil refugees arrived in Svinuța in two waves of immigration in the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. This influx of people from further south in the Balkans is considered to explain the archaic linguistic features of the Slavic dialect spoken in Svinuța that are closer to western Bulgarian and Macedonian than to present day Serbian. For example many of the oldest families names in Svinuța end in -ski which is more typical of Macedonia. The Serbian identity of the village was reinforced over time by the local practice of endogamy that was practiced in Svinuța until around late 1960s. Over the last fifty years mixed marriages have increased, initially with Serbians from the nearby villages and more recently with Romanians from the Banat Mountains and Oltenia (Rakočević, 2012, 250).

This paper applies the concept of positionality to the village Svinuța. From the perspective of the locals in Svinuța, the concept of positionality applies in several ways. Firstly the geographical location of the village has been, and still is, relatively inaccessible by road as the road that passes along the northern bank of the Danube, although asphalted is in a poor condition. In addition to this the village held through history a geographical and political position as a fluvial border town. Military bases have existed on the right bank of the Danube since Daco-Roman and Roman times. The existence of a citadel in Svinuța was first mentioned in documents dated 1430, and in the eighteenth century Svinuța formed the centre of the fluvial border of the Austrian administration that was responsible for supervising the river traffic (Svinuța web site, 2013). During this period it is likely that Serbians from the Wallachian-Illlyrian border regiment, who provided guards for the fluvial border of the Austrian administration moved into Svinuța. Although as political borders changed Svinuța lost this role, those living in the village retain their memory of their border identity. Finally in the network sense, Svinuța can be considered to have had closer links to Serbia than other villages that are geographically closer to Serbian border because of the majority Serbian population, and in addition to this a close economic and cultural connection has always been maintained with Vlach populations in villages on other side of Danube.

From a theoretical viewpoint, Svinuța can be classed as a border town, and the locals as borderlanders. There has been much anthropological interest in borders in recent decades. Wilson and Hastings, who draw on Barth (1969), observed that borderlanders tend to have shifting and multiple identities because of the liminal and frequently contested nature of borders (Wilson and Hastings, 1998, 13-21). They comment that although citizenship and state nationalism draw people towards the power centre of the state, in the case of borderlanders there is a counter pull across borders due to similar ties of ethnic and national unity. According to Wilson and Hastings there are three main types of border populations: those who share ethnic ties across the border as well as with those residing in their own state, those whose ties are strongest with those across border and those who are members of the national majority with no ethnic ties across border. The people of Svinuța can be taken as belonging to both of the first two of these groups as although they have strong cross-border connections, they also have connections with the surrounding villages in the Danube gorge zone. Wilson and Hastings observe that borders have to be ‘negotiated’ (Wilson and Hastings, 1998, 21) and locals may be involved in cross border pursuits that include flows of goods and services either legally (shopping if there is a price
differentiation across the border) or illegally (cross-border smuggling). Discussions on such activities form part of locals narratives (Radu, 2013) however I would also comment that the positionality of Sviniţa and its situation as a border town may have influenced contemporary cultural practises and local concepts of culture and identity.

3. Sviniţa: Easter Customs and Jocul De Pomană 2013

During the fieldwork trip in May 2013, the visiting researchers from the ICTM Sub-Study Group on Field Research Theory and Methods observed and participated in calendrical customs associated with Easter in Sviniţa including the custom of commemorating the dead at a local spring outside the village, the orthodox Easter service, a procession through the village to a shrine on the edge of the village, the blessing of the graves in the village cemetery by the priest and the local Easter egg breaking competition, as well as attending the evening social dances, ‘bals’, on Easter Sunday and Monday evenings. The focus of the fieldwork was to observe Joc de pomană (Serbian: namenjuvanje), the custom of giving a dance or giving alms to the dead, which is very unusual in Serbian communities, although more common in Romanian and Vlach villages. The goals set out for this fieldwork trip were to observe and document this ritual, record and participate in contemporary dance practice, and reveal and explore different ethnic perspectives both of the performers (insiders) and researchers (outsiders) considering the ritual practice and the contemporary non-ritual dance practice. The field research methods used included both verbal (interviews, discussions) and non-verbal communications (participatory observation).

After attending the overnight service in the Orthodox Church in Sviniţa, around dawn on Easter Sunday the researchers were taken by one Sviniţa resident to a spring situated in a small valley in the hills outside the village where they observed a custom that she undertook on this day in memory of her late son. After returning to the village and the traditional Easter breakfast, they walked back to the church for the Easter day service that finished late morning. In the afternoon the locals held their annual Easter egg breaking competition, and in the evening the majority of the villagers attended the Easter Sunday ‘bal’. On Monday morning the service in the church was followed by a procession through the village streets led by the priest and mayor, and two villagers carrying the crucifix and religious banners. Such religious processions frequently take place on holy and saints’ days in villages in Eastern Europe and, as described by Dubinskas ‘[t]he crucifix holds the position of honor — the front — and the villagers follow, by twos and threes, in its path (Dubinskas, 1983, 96). The procession stopped at a shrine on the edge of the village where the priest carried out a blessing, and then continued to the village graveyard, where family members were waiting by the graves of their loved ones for the traditional blessing of the graves. Each family had brought painted Easter eggs, cakes and drinks to leave by the grave and to share with all present. The jocul de pomană took place on Easter Monday before the commencement of the evening ‘bal’. On this occasion the mayor
dedicated the dance to his deceased parents. In the early 1970s, according to Giurchescu in the Atlasul Complex Portile de Fier:

‘Funeral ceremonies, in which dances appear connected to the custom of giving gifts, jocul de pomană, which is practiced on the occasion of the pomemirii mortului’ at a week or a year. Within this custom are the giving of pomană only in the dances belonging to the first suite – brâul, hora and some sârba, dances for freedom, marking the closing of the period of mourning, (six months or a year), that take place through a series of ritual actions (for example, the passing of a scarf three times within the dance that opens the suite, brâul’ (Giurchescu, 1972b, 246).

In ‘The functionality of funeral dances in popular conceptions’ Giurchescu explains that:

‘the practice of giving the dance of alms (Jocul de pomană), is still sufficiently alive in the southern zone of south and central Banat and in north-east Oltenia, this fact leads to many known variants. The presence of this custom can be followed also beyond the Danube in all the villages of Krajna in Serbia, where Romanians live (Velicova, Duboka, Klococevac, Tekija etc)’ (Giurchescu, 1972a, 124).

Petac differentiates between the custom of jocul de pomană and that of hora de pomană that involves a posthumous wedding, that is also termed as the ‘wedding of the dead’. He explains that ‘[t]he roles and objects alluding to the posthumous wedding, present […] in the hora de pomană, are missing from this ritual of jocul de pomană (it has the same ritualistic use, being a dance offered as ‘pomană’, alms for the dead.)’ He recounts that jocul de pomană takes place during dance events at specific times of the year and gives a description of the jocul de pomană in Cărbunari, Caraş-Severin county. He explains that this ‘includes, during the dance, the act of stepping over a towel with food alms and a candle. The one conducting the performance of the musicians (a relative of the deceased) is obliged to lead the line of those caught in the dance (să joace înainte) and to step over this towel. The dance is done when the mourning period is over, one year after the death, dedicated by the musicians to the deceased with the expression: ‘This dance is charity for him’ (Petac, 2012,11).

Petac’s description of the jocul de pomană in Cărbunari is very similar to that seen by the researchers in Svița on Easter Monday 2013. On this occasion the dance was led by the mayor, who held a candle wrapped in a towel and a bottle of brandy, followed by his wife, who carried a plate of cakes, as did a couple in the middle of the line of dancers and the last woman and man. The sequence of jocul de pomană was Brâul (making three circuits of the dance space), the dancers then stood still while the singer sung a doină and an announcement was made in respect of the deceased, then Brâul and doina are repeated, followed by Hora, Četvorka, Ardeleana, De doi and finally Învârtita.

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2 Quotes translated from Romanian by the author of this paper. The original Romanian text is included as footnotes.

3 Ceremonialul funebri, în care dansurile apar legate de obiceiul dării Jocului de pomană, ce se practică cu prilejul pomemiririi mortului la 6 săptămâni sau la un an. În cadrul acestui obicei sunt date de pomană exclusiv dansurile aparținând primei suite — Brâul, Hora și uneori Sârba. Slobozirea jocului, marcând finalul perioadei de doliu (6 săptămâni sau un an), se realizează printr-o serie de acțiuni rituale (de exemplu, trecerea de trei ori peste: o naframă în cadrul jocului ce deschide suita, brâul.

4 Practica dării jocului de pomană este încă destul de vie în zona sudică și centrală a Banatului, ca și în nord-estul Olteniei, fapt care poate motiva multitudinea variantelor pe care le cunoaște. Prezența obiceiului poata fi urmată și dincolo de Dunăre în toate satele din Krajna (RSF) locuite de români (Velicova, Duboka, Klococevac, Tekija etc).
4. Music and Dance Events in Sviniţa

Research undertaken in the early 1970s by academics from the Institute of Folklore in Bucharest and documented in the *Atlasul Complex Portile de Fier* (Milcu St. et al., 1972) examined the music, folklore literature and dances in the villages in the Danube Gorge (including Sviniţa) prior to the building of the dam and flooding of the Gorge. This work places the ethnography of Sviniţa within the context of that of the surrounding villages in Romania, at a specific point in time. Comişel’s contribution to this publication covered the musical folklore of this ethnographic zone. She refers to its position as an interference zone between Banat and Oltenia ‘where the living together of different ethnic groups enriches the repertoire with new musical elements, belonging to them’ (Comişel, 1972, 244-5). The dance research for this publication was undertaken by Anca Giurchescu who also took part in the 2013 fieldwork in Sviniţa, this being the first time that she had returned to the region since the 1970s and the flooding of the Gorge. Her presence brought both a diachronic perspective to the 2013 fieldwork based on her previous work in the area in the 1970s, and a comparative view based on her fieldwork in many other locations in Romania and in particular with the Vlach population on the southern banks of the Danube in northeast Serbia.

In 1972 Anca Giurchescu recorded that:

‘the existing repertoire of dances in the Iron Gates Zone, especially in its old substrata, shows a series of characteristics which are within the framework of the choreography specific for the Danube zone. Over time, a strong influence has been exercised on the structure of this repertoire, as well as on the local dances, from the zone of Caransebeş’ (Giurchescu, 1972b, 246-7). She continued:

‘In the (Danube gorge) localities with population of Serbian origin (Sviniţa and Liubcova), a number of Serbian dances that are done with some stylistic variation co-exist beside the repertoire of Romanian dances. Among these, the dances belonging to the older local fund are in the course of disappearing. They were replaced by Serbian dances with a wider circulation, practiced especially by the younger generation’ (Giurchescu, 1972b, 246-7).

Thus, this earlier research work suggested that the dance repertoire in Sviniţa was to some extent different from that in the surrounding Romanian villages. In the period from the early 1970s until 2010, the paucity of ethnographic research into this area of the Danube Gorge by Romanian or Serbian ethnographers did not cover music and dance practices until Serbian researchers began to work in the area in 2010 when they observed that ‘a mixture of Serbian, Romanian and Vlachs (…) customs can be recognized within local traditional culture’ (Rakočević, 2012, 250).

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5 Convietuirea grupelor entice diferite (sârbi, cehi) a determinat îmbogăţirea repertoriului cu elemente muzicale noi, proprii acestora.  
6 Repertoriul de dansuri existent în zona Porţilor de Fier prezintă, în special în substratul său vechi, o serie de caracteristici care îl încadrează în specificul coregrafic dunărean. Asupra structurii acestui repertoriu, ca și asupra dansurilor locale s-a exercitat de-a lungul timpului o puternică influență provinând din zona Caransebeșului.  
7 În localitățile cu populație de origine sârbescă (Svinița și Liubcovo), alături de repertoriul de dansuri românești, preluat cu unele variante stilistice, coexistă o serie de dansuri sârbești. Dintre acestea, dansurile aparținând fondului vechi, local, sunt pe cale de dispariție. Ele au fost înlocuite de jocuri sârbești de largă circulație, practice în special de tânără generație.
In August 2011 the Belgrade researchers were present at the annual figs festival, *Festivalul smochilor* (Rakočević, 2012, 251). Fig trees are thought to have been planted in Svințița during Ottoman times (Sălceanu and Curaci, 2012, 302), since when Svințița has become known for the superior quality of the figs produced there. *Festivalul smochilor* is a newly established festival that first took place in 1999 and has since taken place annually on the last weekend in August. Groups are invited to participate from Serbian and nearby Romanian villages and towns. The programme includes a costume parade, a market of produce made from figs, a concert with performances by the visiting groups, in 2011 this was five groups from other locations in Romania and two from Serbia (Copcea, 2011), followed by an evening ball during which both locals and the members of the visiting ensembles joined in with the dancing.

As Rakočević commented ‘[t]he ball started immediately after the last concert performance,[...] The musicians who played during the whole evening were local musicians, [...] The Romanian violinist from the village of Stei joined them later on and the local singer also joined occasionally, depending of the repertoire. [...] Dance practices were of different geographical and historical origins’ including ‘traditional Serbian and Romanian dances from Banat, traditional and contemporary dances from central and north eastern Serbia, but also couple and solo dancing typical for contemporary Romanian society’(Rakočević, 2012, 252). The dances were ‘in the following order: *kolo*, Četvorka, the chain dance, *brâu*, *sârba*, Četvorka, *šota*, ardeleana, maneа, and, as a closing number, the *kolo* again.’ With the exception of ‘the maneа-dance which was performed in solo or couple formation of dancers, all other dances were performed in the half-circle’. This mix of dance repertoire seen at the 2011 *Festivalul smochilor*, and also within other social events attended by the Belgrade researchers during their previous research trips reflected Giurchescu’s observation in 1970s. Also on these occasions the musicians were mainly those from the local Serbian community.

At Easter 2013 the two evening *bals* in Svințița took place in the school playground. On both evenings the band was led by a local Serbian musician and on these occasions the other musicians and the singer were from the nearby town of Orșova and from adjacent Romanian villages. The music and song repertoire was typical for Romanian Banat events and included currently popular songs from the repertoire of the major Timișoara singers. Each cycle of dances followed the sequence most commonly played in the majority of Banat mountain villages *Brâul, Hora, Ardeleana and De doi*. The exception to this was the inclusion of Četvorka (*Hora în pătru*) which is common in Vlach villages and by special request the Serbian *Zikino* was danced once. The dance repertoire during these balls differs from that recorded by the Belgrade researchers during their previous fieldwork. When the researchers inquired from locals about the different dance repertoire they were told that the Serbian bias at the figs festival was due to the presence of the other dance groups, especially those from Serbia, who were participating in the festival.

On the first evening in the village the researchers attended a performance by the dancers from the Svințița ansamblul folcloric Dunav (KUD Dunav) who performed a selection of choreographies from Serbia. They proudly discussed their participation in festivals in Romania and in Serbia with the researchers. They explained that their repertoire included Romanian dances but they preferred dancing the Serbian choreographies. I would suggest that it may be that ‘difference’ can be beneficial, particularly for the folk group which can attend festivals on a wider circuit by their
identification as “Serbian”. However during the evening ‘bals’ the members of this dance group took part in the social dancing with many others from Svinija and adjacent villages.

5. Fieldwork Observations on Svinijan Identity and Customs

When considering culture and identity, it is important to understand how this can be interpreted depending on the situation, or the identity and cultural background of the fieldworkers. The mission of the researchers from Belgrade is to make comparisons between what is taking place in Svinija with other Serbian villages in Romanian Banat, villages in Serbian Banat and elsewhere in Serbia, and observe and record the differences that sets Svinija apart from the practices observed in these other locations. Research in this village is thus deemed as coming under the cover of research into Serbian ethnicities that live outside the borders of present Serbian state. The villagers of Svinija have retained stronger links to Serbia through the years, but also because of its position Svinija is seen by Serbian researchers as having been isolated. For the Serbian researchers Svinija is interesting because of its positionality, and the local’s identity as a borderlanders.

Research in Svinija prior to the May 2013 trip had been undertaken from the viewpoint of semi-insiders, either Romanian researchers from Bucharest or Serbian academics from Belgrade. During the recent fieldwork the presence of researchers from further afield brought different perspectives and interpretations onto the fieldwork data. On arrival in the village the locals initially assumed that as outside researchers all the participants had a Serbian ‘identity’ and thus addressed us in Serbian. Once Anca Giurchescu had introduced herself, for the majority the language switched to Romanian and it soon became clear that many of the inhabitants are equally fluent or have a preference to Romanian language. During this fieldwork it was observed that the ways that locals portrayed their identity had several facets depending on the interviewer and the situation, and in some cases the content of the answers to the researcher’s questions depended on the language used. This suggest that, as Cooley who studied the music of the Gorale people in the Polish Tatra mountains similarly found, that ‘ethnicity is situational’ with locals switching the identity that they ascribe to in order to ‘accommodate present need’ (Cooley, 2005, 64). Thus, I would suggest that the locals in Svinija are active agents in the construction of their culture and identity (Manos, 2002, 3), and that individuals’ ascription of situational identities in this region is similar to that described by Pistrick, in his work on singing practices on the Greek-Albanian border where he sees that music (and dance) performances can ‘allow communities to position themselves in relation to distinct but flexible use categories of geographical, cultural, social and political belonging’ (Pistrick, 2008, 358), that are similar to those expressed by other borderlanders or locals in places with multiple ethnicities.
6. Conclusion

This paper looked at how locals in Sviniţa portray their identity with reference to fieldwork carried out in May 2013. In conclusion it can be seen that the answers to the questions raised by the locals about who they are can be found on two levels. On the first level, in their narratives regarding their history and identity, in other words, based on what they say and who they say it to. On a second level based on what they do, in particular, during their participation in current cultural practices, that in the case of Sviniţa today are closely linked to cultural practices in the surrounding area. The identity portrayed by the Sviniţa villagers is based on ‘difference’ (compared to the villagers in other villages on the Danube Gorge), the difference being their Serbian ancestry, and to the Belgrade researchers, Sviniţa culture is interesting because it is different as the villagers maintain cultural practices that are not found in other communities with Serbian identity. Based on the above I would suggest that a local conception of identity (or an ‘identity focussed on difference’) can remain closely linked to a notion that the community’s ancestry is ‘different’ or set apart from the inhabitants of the surrounding area, even in the situation that the “culture” has, and continues to, exchange and merge with the surrounding cultural practices. And finally from point of view of the researchers who took part in this fieldwork trip, as in every case, different interpretations can be placed on the same fieldwork data depending on the researchers’ nationality, funding, research background, and view of history. These different perspectives are to be explored through contributions to a forthcoming publication based on this fieldwork.

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