

Soldiering Stories as Individual and Social Narratives in the Aranyosszék Region

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Keywords: military stories, narratology, oral history, world wars, rites of passage

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Summary of the dissertation thesis

In my dissertation I study the soldiering stories collected in the small ethnographic region of Aranyosszék (Romanian: Scaunul Arieşului), located in Transylvania, Romania. The paper focuses on the narratives of the local Hungarian ethnic minority. It analyses the narratives from different perspectives, both paradigmatically and syntagmatically, both within a narrower ethnographic-anthropological and a wider interdisciplinary social-scientific framework. The research focuses on comprehending the narratives as an integral part of the local society, as a tool of communication, which not only reflect, but also construe the social reality of the present, the shared understanding of the past, and the social position and narrative identity of the teller.

In the introduction I briefly describe the topic of the dissertation, offer a general theoretical understanding of storytelling and position the current study within the scientific discourse. The most important problem I introduce in this section is grasped in terms of the subject-object dichotomy. In terms of this dichotomy I primarily analyse the narratives from the perspective of the teller (subject) and treat the described events as the secondary context (object). For this reason, the stories are understood as tools of individual narrative strategies, as texts of actual speech events and also as products of more general factors, of the local society and culture. However, the social and the cultural are not understood as unchanging elements and they are not treated as mere causes. Rather, following the reasoning of Tim Ingold,

storytelling is described as a communication that creates social links and commonly shared knowledges. Therefore, the social and the cultural are not treated as factors that define the position of the individual and pre-define the speech events, but rather, something that is created and recreated, defined and redefined in actual social events and during the communication of stories.

The following part of the dissertation explores in three chapters the different research contexts that influenced the collected corpus, and the underlying research questions of the dissertation. As the first context, I introduce the fieldsite, Aranyosszék. The chapter balances between two aims: one is to examine the research-history of the site, an overview of its representations as an ethnographic region, and the second is to describe some of the general social and economic characteristics of the region. My intention was to describe these two aspects of the field in parallel and to offer an understanding on how these seemingly separate features are deeply interconnected. Through the literature review I arrived to the very recent studies, which re-discovered and re-canonized the region. Building on the results of these researches and some of my own field experiences, I sketched a general social and economic portrait of the region in the present. The second chapter reflects on the fieldwork, on those factors that affected the research and might have had implications for the corpus that was collected. This methodological review lists and examines such trivial factors as my gender, my Hungarian ethnicity or the physical reachability of the villages, while it also reflects on some abstract theoretical questions. At certain points these factors are interpreted in an interconnected manner. For instance in the case of the field site I study how the ethnographic canon of the region and the practical necessity of travel interplayed in the actual outcomes of the fieldwork. All of these questions are examined through a methodological lens with the intention to answer what kind of intended or unintended preferences and qualities predefined the research, which indirectly manifest themselves in the results, namely the corpus of data and the analysis. The last chapter is a review of the previous studies of Hungarian ethnographic literature regarding soldiering, with a focus on the three traditional fields of folkloristics, material culture and society. In accordance with the primary focus of the research, the results of folkloristics is more thoroughly examined. The other fields of research are reviewed in order to grasp the mediatory function that compulsory military service as an institution played in the life rural culture.

The next part of the dissertation comprises a study of the social dimensions of the stories, while it also consists of an analysis of the corpus within a paradigmatic framework. Besides the horizontal interpretation it offers a vertical, structural reading of the narratives. The chapters here chapters apply and reconsider, narrow the application and widen the scope of structuralism

as a theory and symbolic anthropology as a particular theoretical framework. All the chapters are in dialogue with some of the questions and findings of these schools of thought, while they also reflect on some of the criticism that these theories have received. On more general terms, this part applies primarily their methodology, while it is often critical of their theoretical positions and views of society and culture. From this perspective, the chapters interpret the different local, horizontal social relations through the lens of the narratives of soldiering. The first chapter considers ethnicity and investigates the narrative representation of the different groups. The foremost aim of the chapter is to draw a line of connection between the norm of ethnic endogamy and the narratives, to see how the stories create, echo, and rationalize this norm through their depiction of other ethnic groups, in the ways the stories mark and define the lines between the ethnic groups. The secondary aim of the chapter is to demonstrate how the stories – through the norms they establish – operate as tools to build a moral universe, in which the different ethnic groups are associated with morally evaluated values or absolute moral categories. The absolute, fundamentally different and opposing moral categories are interpreted as the base of the absolute rules of endogamy and the categorization of the ethnic groups as fundamentally different entities. To reach this conclusion the narratives of soldiering are read in the context of the different stories, which are analysed in a Lévi-Straussian paradigmatic manner. The micro and macro level, the historical and life historical events are interpreted as stories that tell of different events but apply a common, above-mentioned structural logic whenever ethnic categories play a larger part in the narratives. Through this paradigmatic analysis I offer an understanding of how the stories of the local Hungarian minority structurally problematize the question of under- and overvaluing of horizontal social relations and ties. Regarding the question of the social embeddedness of the narratives I sketch the portrait of two men living in the village Cheia. The two men present two different life and economic strategies, one which follows the norm of ethnic endogamy and separation while the other could be labelled as one taking the route of exogamy and cooperation. Through the introduction of the two life paths and the differing repertoire of stories of soldiering my intention is to demonstrate how the narration of past is deeply connected to the present of the teller. In narratives, the events of the past are connected to the different ethnic groups and translated as the clash of antagonistic moral categories. The structure of the narratives is so axiomatic that there is no space, language to narrate the events of the past for those who follow a more cooperating life strategy with other ethnicities. While some cannot narrate the past, others re-use these dominant structures to narrate the present, to interpret their personal life history and especially their shortcomings as something that is beyond their power and as a result of the above-mentioned, antagonistic,

unjust interethnic relations. While the chapter on ethnicity raises many questions, the second one on generations examines only one problem: according to my field experience everyone agreed that compulsory military service did good to youngsters and it was a mistake to end it. While this statement is straightforward, and its truth is commonly shared it is puzzling in the local context of untrust towards the institutions of the Romanian state. This chapter intends to answer this riddle, to understand why adults of both sexes support the military institution, why local youngsters strive to serve in the army and why all the local people still hold the view that it is the army that turns a boy into a man. The answer to these questions is offered through an analysis of the narratives of soldiering, through a detailed description of how and in what sense compulsory military service functioned as a rite of passage. In the first part of the chapter I conclude that Turner's understanding of the term could be applied to comprehend what the army meant to many and it also enables us to realize that it is exactly this universal structure of the rites of passage that explains the popularity of this invented tradition. While the first part of the chapter mostly considers the past and the memory of the socialist area, the second part analyses the present and the lived experience of the post-socialist period. I interpret the past nostalgia and present longing towards the military institution through Bauman's description of the solid and liquid phases of modernity and Szakolczai's concept of liminality and permanent liminality. I interpret the local narratives that contrast the past and the present through the dichotomies these terms imply. In the solid phase of modernity the institution functioned as a liminal institution that socialized the locals to accept and adopt the logic, time management skills and body techniques of the factory, while today, in the permanent liminality of the present, the previously liminal institution of the army promises a stable life strategy for young adults. The last chapter investigates the gendered aspects of the narratives. My primary intention here is to revise the common understanding of military stories as a male genre and to refine the image that Hungarian folklore literature generally portrays between the style and mood of the storytelling of men and women. I offer a detailed description and a longer analysis of a few speech situations in which military stories were told while both men and women were present. Following the explanation I introduce the short life history of three women, who themselves narrated many stories of soldiering and I strive to understand what adopting and retelling the narratives of their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons meant to them. Adopting the terms of particular and general meanings of gender and through a review of the literature in folkloristics of the artistic creation and imitation, and the adaption of stories, I interpret these situations and narratives as a sign and tool in redefining one's social role and what it means to be a woman.

The last part of the dissertation investigates the written and the oral texts of a marginalized local man. The first of the three chapters investigates stories of soldiering in the context of his life story and life situation, while the second two analyse two sets of documents, written during military service. The first belonged to one of his relatives and was written just after the turn of the century and during the First World War, while the second was written by himself in the years of the socialist period. The chapter on oral narratives investigates how the marginalized position presents itself in the military stories, in what sense these stories differ from the mainstream local narratives, what kind of stylistic and conceptual variations can be traced in the otherwise common themes. Apart from these differences I also analyse the peculiarity of the stories of radical ethnic conflicts that are omnipresent in his narratives. Finally, I investigate, the moral aspects of these stories, namely the moral narrative play, the categorization and the positioning of the self in the act of storytelling. The next two chapters introduce and investigate the written documents. Besides the description of the style and the content of these two sources, I also examine them from a functional perspective. In the case of the first document my focus is on how the war changed the language of self-expression, in what sense the pre-war and wartime documents differ from each other. I trace how the metaphor of the war is recreated in the personal documents of field diaries and letters, how the images and texts of the war propaganda reappear in these writings. In my reading these pages testify how self-representation and one's understanding of his role as an enlisted soldier radically changed during the Great War and became a tool for disciplining and a platform for the internalisation of the image of the self-sacrificing soldier. The focus of the chapter on the second source is primarily on the peculiar language of soldier diaries, and the range of styles they comprise: the romantic, old-fashioned lyrical and funny, sexual prose. The stylistically different texts are interpreted as the result of the same social factor, namely the lack of women's presence. Male gender is understood as a connecting link between the soldiers who are from different regions and social backgrounds, and romantic longing and sexual objectification serve as a common theme for these collectively created, memory-diaries.

The dissertation demonstrates that stories of soldiering are a popular, life-historical genre, which are not only part of the local repertoire of oral stories but of social life as well. In a sense narratives link people, time periods and places through telling, listening, commenting and retelling, and as a result they reinforce synchronic and diachronic social ties. They integrate the different experiences and actors in a narrative universe that is both an image and an element of the social universe. The thesis argued that the narrative and the social is also a moral universe, that the stories create and the morally evaluated categories and morally favourable social and

individual positions for the tellers. The stories of soldiering which tell of the events of a rite of passage or that of major historical events are especially capable of forming, reinforcing and validating the social norms and values.