



Research Article

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Received: 17 January 2024 / Accepted: 29 May 2024 / Published: 02 July 2024

The Instrumentalization of Cultural Heritage in Ceaușescu's Romania

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2024-0095>

Abstract

This article analyzes the heritagisation policies and the instrumentalization of cultural heritage by Ceaușescu's regime for political purposes. I argue that Ceaușescu's political regime was neopatrimonial, a system where rules took place within the framework of legal bureaucracy of a modern state in which formal structures and rules did exist, although in practice, the separation of the private and public sphere was not always observed. This system was characterized by insecurity about the behavior and role of state institutions, but primarily the actions of the supreme leader that were erratic and unpredictable. In this regime, the rural cultural heritage was used for political-ideological purposes, in close connection with the cult of the personality of the supreme leader. In this context, the heritagisation of folk creations such as folk plays did not mean the preservation of these rural cultural forms under threat in a society undergoing major economic and social transformations that imperiled traditional community life. Instead, it was a form of symbolic political manipulation used to acquire political legitimacy.

Keywords: Ceaușescu's neopatrimonial Romania, rural intangible cultural heritage, heritagisation, instrumentalization of cultural heritage, folklore festivals, folk plays

1. Introduction

The use of heritage for political gains is a practice with deep roots in history (Dow 1991). Already, the leaders of the first Mesopotamian states understood the value of folk creation and the gains of its manipulation to achieve political goals (Wengrow 2001). In times of political and moral crisis, the appeal to heritage proved to be a useful tool to create legitimacy for political leaders; Cesar Augustus's revival of certain old deities cults and some gone sodalities like Fratres Arvales and Sali can be understood from this perspective (Rus and Neagota 2016). The usurpation of folklore, in the forms of myths and folktales in Greek and Roman antiquity, falls into the same category of manipulation of heritage for political gains (Ruebel 1991). Modern states have particularly distinguished themselves by appropriating some heritage forms that they have used for ideological purposes (Oinas 1978a). The formation of national states in the 19th century was closely intertwined with the emergence of folkloristics as a science (Abrahams 1993) and its use for political-ideological purposes (Wilson 1978; Petre 2003). In the 20th century, not infrequently, totalitarian states used cultural heritage, symbols, and folk production in their propaganda to impose their visions on the

people they lead (Oinas 1978b; Lixfeld 1994; Roth 1998; Eminov 1978; Abazi and Doja 2016). On the other side, Romantic nationalism and its nostalgia for old forms of culture (Lowenthal 1985) present in some modern state's heritagisation policies were often intertwined with grandiose projects of forced industrialization that many times resulted in the dislocation and proletarianization of folks who were the promoters and practitioners of cultural heritage (Mungiu 2010; Kligman and Verdery 2011).

It is not surprising that the authors who examined these processes used harsh terms to characterize the process by which cultural heritage and the science of folklore were transformed into the hands of autocracies: "manipulating the national consciousness" (Silverman 1983), "total perversion of a scientific discipline" (Roth 1998), "manipulation of a discipline for political purposes (Dow 1991)."

The current article focuses on Romania's nationalist-communist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu (Soulet 1998:168) that heavily used folk creations to impose its political agenda. The case is not new in Eastern Europe, where Communist regimes used heritage to build political legitimacy (Silverman 1983; Kligman 1988; Feinberg 2018). In the modern history of Romania, quite often, the heritagisation policies (Bendix 2009) were intertwined with some dictatorships' goals and political interests. Gusti's Sociological School, the most impressive heritagization effort in 20th century Romania (Mihăilescu 2003), was fully funded by the Royal Cultural Foundation Prince Carol mostly because it was used by the Romanian King Carol II, in the interwar period, in his political fights with the rival extremist organization the Iron Guard (Momoc 2012). The communist dictatorship of Gheorghiu-Dej, the first Romanian communist president, also leaned on folklore creation, which became an instrument of the class struggle in the style of Soviet-Marxist propaganda (Vasile 2013).

Coming from the perspective of cultural politics, a field that analyses, besides other things, how cultural heritage is used as a resource in the state political ideology (Dorson 1966; Silverman 1983; Roth 1998; Cash 2011), the present article examines the processes through which the Ceaușescu's regime appropriated rural cultural heritage in three distinctive stages. Promoting a cult of personality unusual for post-World War II Europe, this dictatorship instrumentalized and manipulated cultural heritage to build its own legitimacy and impose its political goals on the Romanian people, at the same time aiming to create a favourable image on the outside (Romania Journal 1965-1977). Therefore, the novelty of this article consists in deploying the term neopatrimonial to characterize Ceaușescu's dictatorship relationship with rural cultural heritage and to describe the mechanisms through which the heritagisation process was intertwined with the dictator's political goals in a regime characterized by a continuous personalized interference in the state's bureaucratic institutions.

In Ceaușescu's regime, the rules took place within the framework of the legal bureaucracy of a modern state in which formal structures and rules did exist, although in practice, the separation of the private and public spheres was not always observed. This system was characterized by insecurity about the behavior and role of state institutions, but primarily the actions of the supreme leader that were erratic and unpredictable. In this regime, the cultural heritage of the rural communities was used for political-ideological purposes, in close connection with the cult of the personality of the supreme leader.

The concept of neo-patrimonialism doesn't need to be confused with the concept of patrimonialization extant in heritage studies (Adams 2005). Neopatrimonialism is a concept that derives from Max Weber's distinction: *patrimonialism* and *legal-rational bureaucracy* (Weber 1978:217-231). Weber developed a sociological perspective on historical forms of domination based on different models of ruling, exemplified through concrete cases from ancient, medieval, and modern history. He draws an analytical distinction among three forms of political domination: *patriarchal domination* (patriarchalism), *patrimonial domination* (patrimonialism), and *bureaucratic domination* (rational-legal) (Idem 1978). I will use the term neopatrimonialism from the perspective of political scientists Gero Erdmann and Ulf Engel, who described it as a realm in which formal structures and rules do exist. However, in practice, the separation of the private and public spheres is not always

observed, as the patrimonial penetrates the legal-rational system and perverts its functions and effects (Erdmann and Engel 2006). The neopatrimonialism concept was used especially in African Studies to describe some African political regimes that were characterized by an infusion of personal relationships in the sphere of state institutions and political administration (Idem 2006). The term was not used in heritage studies but only in political science; nevertheless, I think it works perfectly to illustrate the case study of Ceaușescu's regime that instrumentalized folk cultural heritage for political ends.

2. Methodology

This study is part of a larger research that I carried out in Eastern and Central Romania, the counties of Iași (Pașcani-Târgu Frumos area) and Hunedoara (Hațeg area), between 2009-2019. Throughout this decade, I conducted over fifty unstructured interviews and had hundreds of discussions with rural intangible cultural heritage practitioners, local politicians interested in promoting cultural heritage, directors of local and county cultural centres, inhabitants of the rural area who were involved in the practice of cultural heritage in the past at local and national folklore festivals, according to the directives of the Communist Party. The main criterion for selecting the study participants was their relationship with cultural heritage, either as practitioners or officials with administrative functions in state institutions responsible for safeguarding and promoting cultural heritage. In the reconstruction of this picture, my memories from the communist period, when I participated as a school pupil and high school student in the local Song to Romanian festival editions, played an important role. Another method deployed for collecting the data for this study was participant observation and the recording through visual means (photo and video) during the local and national folklore festivals held in the research area between 2009 and 2019. The fieldwork was doubled by research on press archives, particularly on *Revista Romania/Romania Journal*, published by *Agenția Română de Presă/Romanian Press Agency* in five international languages (English, French, German, Russian, and Spanish), expressing the official vision of the Romanian Communist Party (*Romania Journal, Agerpress 1965-1977*). Other local magazines published immediately after the Revolution of 1989, on the occasion of folklore festivals in the area of Moldova, such as *Strunga (1993)*, were also consulted.

3. The First Phase of Ceaușescu's Neopatrimonial Regime's Relation with Peasant Cultural Heritage (March 1965 – July 1971)

Initially, Ceaușescu's contribution to instrumentalizing Romanian folklore was similar to that of the previous communist leader, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej. Basically, he inherited the *Amateur Artist Movement* – a politically controlled national folklore movement, from his predecessor, to which he added a more nationalistic component. This was not a surprise as Gheorghiu-Dej had been distancing himself from Moscow's domination by emphasizing autochthonous national values during his last year of leadership. From 1965 to 1971, Ceaușescu added to this movement only by increasingly emphasizing its national character and expanding it throughout the country (Vasile 2015).

Ceaușescu introduced his vision for artistic production just two months after reaching the top of the Communist Party. Emulating Stalin, one of his role models, Ceaușescu organized a meeting with the "men of culture and art" on May 19, 1965 (*Romania Journal*, May 25, 1965:3). This recalled the meeting of Joseph Stalin with writers at Gorky's house on October 26, 1932, where the supreme leader of Soviet Union had expressed his preference for Socialism realism and proletcult (Proletarian Cultural and Educational Organizations), a kind of art depicting the realities of the socialist society (Oinas 1978). In Stalin's view, writers, painters, and other artists should be "engineers of the human soul," helping to create "the new man" of socialist society. Thus, writers and other artists were expected to surrender their elite role and bend their efforts to the socialist cause like other workers, the only difference being that they would produce "literary goods" rather than material products

(Rappaport 1999:81). Ceaușescu proposed a similar view on the role of art in the Romanian socialist society on which he added a nationalist perspective (Soulet 1998). During Ceaușescu's leadership, a new tradition was inaugurated. As top Party leaders visited cities and villages throughout the country, the *Amateur Artist Movement's* teams would perform for "honorable guests (Romania Journal 1966)."

In the region of Iași, where I conducted field research from 2009 to 2019, I interviewed the director of the *County Center for the Preservation and Promotion of Traditional Culture*. He has been working in the field of folklore since he was a young man in the 1970s and had learned from his older colleagues and their articles about the early history of the folklore movement in Iași County. He explained how, soon after Ceaușescu had become Romania's political leader in 1965, annual local folklore festivals were established in his area:

The first annual folklore festivals in Iași County were set up at the end of the 60s. The first one started in 1966 in the commune of Strunga and was called The Moldavian Rose. The second one started one year later in the county's cultural centre – Iași city. This one was called Winter Traditions and Customs. Since then, they both continued except for a short period after the fall of Communism when people perceived these customs as a continuation of Ceaușescu's cult, which was not true. In the first years, the only folk creations admitted to these festivals were songs, dances, and some folk theatre. Nevertheless, not all rituals belonging to this last category were performed on stage. The teams performing during those years were The Mavericks (Hajduks), Jianu's Band, The Fall of Plevna, and other folk theatrical performances dealing with the life and deeds of mavericks (hajduks). In communist ideology, the so-called hajduks were romanticized characters, fighters for social justice and against inequities during the early history of Romanian kingdoms. They fought against boyars and against the country's mercantile leaders. Of course, things are rather nuanced there, as they were not always "brave fighters for people's justice," yet communist ideology transformed them into heroes whose main goal was establishing a more just social system. As we learned in school, in the communist narrative hajduks took money from the rich and gave it to the poor. For this reason, the first annual festivals from Iași region allowed performances of The Hajduks' theatrical plays alongside folk dances and songs (A.A., 60 years old, Iași City, July 15, 2015).

Indeed, theatrical representations of *The Hajduks* were relevant for communist ideologues because they coincided with a Marxist societal vision, and became an important theme of reference for heritage promoters in the neighbouring countries too (Silverman 1983:55-56). In Romania, these folk plays embodied the class struggle in earlier stages of human society, exemplifying it inside feudal societies throughout the national territory. That is why folk plays with mavericks/hajduks, folk dances, and songs were the first to be included in the annual folk festivals that started to spread across the country two years after Ceaușescu became the Party's supreme leader. They supported his strategy to create closer bonds with the masses and personalize his relationship with people through rural heritage, thus leading his power towards neopatrimonialism. However, structures and institutions were needed for these mass spectacles; money had to be allocated, and social networks had to be created to implement these programs. This was the perspective from above.

From the perspective below, this state structure, all this deployment of human forces and energies to perform for the country's supreme leader of the country, required qualified personnel who can mobilize and train people. Legitimate local leaders had to convince villagers to prepare for the performances; in addition to the onstage show, many rehearsals were required. Local people, who typically received no material compensation for performing, as many of them declared throughout my interviews and discussions, need to be convinced to get involved in these activities. When it came to power in November 1946, Communism had little legitimacy among ordinary people, and after WWII, the Romanian Communist Party had numerically the fewest members in Eastern Europe; the grip of the socialist ideology was small among the masses, and this situation had not changed much in the intervening two decades (Deletant 1999). Thus, local organizers needed to use moral suasion to mobilize local villagers, commonly arguing that they would promote their village heritage and make it more widely known (*Strunga* 1993).

There was also a continuous need for local cultural centres led by professionals and managers who had to be permanently involved in organizing and training amateur teams of folk singers, dancers, and theatre actors (Vasile 2015). These people had to know what kind of customs, songs, and dances could and could not be presented onstage. Because of this, they had to be connected to the communist-nationalist ideology, with its principles and rules, little known by ordinary peasants who were not particularly attracted to "the wooden language" of official ideology and propaganda (Thom 2005; Rus 2023). Although most of these professionals were volunteers, the new system needed some people to be permanently employed for such jobs. Heads of the counties' cultural centres had to have a holistic view of the spectacle and be in touch with all the teams appearing onstage. Furthermore, they had to know in advance the repertoire of each team and the orders to follow when on stage. There were also logistical aspects, such as accommodating team members in high school, college dorms or culture centres. Once again, they had to be connected to the managers of these institutions to ensure that everything went well since organizational mistakes observed by Ceaușescu or other members of its team could be followed by severe sanctions or at least complaints from the Party's upper level (Interview with A.A., 60 years old, the director of the *County Centre for the Preservation and Promotion of Traditional Culture*, Iași City, July 15, 2015).

These organizers were supposed to follow the rules imposed by the centre, and they could be held liable for any failure in organizing spectacles. Yet many had little sympathy for the ideology of the Party or communist leaders' desire to control the masses and create a new mass identity for Romanians (Interview with A.A., 60 years old, the director of the *County Centre for the Preservation and Promotion of Traditional Culture*, Iași City, July 15, 2015; discussions with elders who participated in folklore festivals held in Iași County). Instead, they developed a personal connection with rural heritage and genuine feelings for folk culture. They became attached to peasant culture and started to perceive their relationship with rural heritage as a mission to promote it, to educate people about national values, and to patrimonialize folk traditions that, they came to believe, could only come to be known to and appreciated by city dwellers, via mass spectacles. They began to organize local folklore competitions in both cities and communes. The first such annual festival in Moldova started in 1966 in Strunga locality and was called *The Moldavian Rose*. The spectacles were soon successful and were sincerely enjoyed by local inhabitants, most of them city dwellers who would otherwise have had no more direct contact with this dimension of village culture (Strunga 1993).

This is how the communist national ideology and Ceaușescu's predilection for mass spectacles, together with his view of having a personal relation with the masses, generated, during his early rule, a movement whose outcome was not necessarily attachment to the country's supreme leader, but rather the creation of a patrimonial consciousness, to many of the participants and local organizers (Rus and Neagota 2016). Besides creating the superordinate structures required for mass parades, this movement was responsible for the emergence of a genuine attachment to rural culture for many people who got closer to rural traditions due to these activities and performances. This rural culture, however, was passed through the thick filter of the Communist Party's ideology, allowing the passage of elements considered suitable for its purposes and interests, a trend extant in some other European communist countries like Albania or Bulgaria (Silverman 1983; Abazi, Doja 2016). Ordinary people, however, such as workers in the cities who had grown up in the countryside, typically sought the elements and representations with minimal ideological content, enjoying those parts of the spectacles that reminded them of the authentic heritage they had known during childhood in the countryside. The folklore festivals, besides their political-ideological purpose of controlling the masses, generated a patrimonial consciousness that was strongly related to the new realities of Communism, such as industrialization, cooperativization of agriculture, urbanization, the massive migration from villages to cities – all of which were eroding the social fabric of the rural culture and its norms, customs, and values.

From a holistic perspective, the cultural outcome resulting from implementing this mass culture, like the god Janus, had two faces. The most obvious face of the festivalisation of peasant culture was a form of symbolic violence against the values of rural communities (Bourdieu 2008:191).

These rural communities were like belts for the social transmission of some living cultural forms created as a result of peasants' interaction with their environment and economy through the centuries. For this reason, the effect of symbolic violence on them was a process of reshaping the living rural cultural forms so that they corresponded to the requirements of the state – whose ultimate purpose was to control the masses rather than to safeguard certain cultural forms threatened by the massive changes and challenges of modernization.

The second face, less visible though, was the creation for many Romanian peasants uprooted by the industrialization of the country, of an understanding of rural culture's transformations and challenges in relation to modernization. People who were in contact with these spectacles became aware that living cultural heritage was gradually, yet inevitably vanishing, and parts of it would only survive within these festivalized forms created by the Communist Party. However, many also understood that these festivals were created for purposes and objectives that had nothing to do with the culture from which these rural customs and living traditions had been forcefully extracted and exported to the cities as folklore festivals.

4. The Second Phase of the Relation between Ceaușescu's Neopatrimonial Power and Peasant Cultural Heritage (July 1971 - October 1976)

After July 1971, Ceaușescu's neopatrimonial power intensified its use of rural heritage as an ingredient in the symbolic-ideological mode of population control. This moment is important in Romanian communism because it marks a significant and visible change in the Party's politics and its relation to culture production and cultural activities in the country. This new phase was officially introduced by Ceaușescu himself on July 6 in a discourse delivered in front of the Executive Committee of the Romanian Communist Party. The official name of this speech was *Proposal of Measures for Improving the Political-Ideological Activities of Marxist-Leninist Education of Party Members and of all Workers*, but it is better known as the *July Theses*. The 6-page document contained 17 points and was written in the usual "wooden language" of Communist Party ideology (Tismăneanu 2003:206; Thom 2005).

The document was full of repetitions, redundant expressions, and empty words, but it introduced a new party agenda concerning culture as a general phenomenon disseminated through creations such as movies, literature, musical creations, religion, school education, and party meetings. In essence, the main idea was quite simple. The Communist Party needed to become more visible in the cultural and artistic life of Romanians. Schools needed to educate youth in the spirit of the Party's values. Censorship of religious life and promoting atheism had to become a priority, and censorship of capitalist movies and literature that promoted a bourgeois lifestyle had to be strengthened. This last measure fitted with the recommendation to impose autochthonous creations in the spirit of national and socialist values in all these areas of life.

The document was extremely disheartening to writers, poets, singers, and other artists (Breban 2005), signaling the end of a short period of relative liberalization and a return to a coercive period of widespread Stalinist censorship of individual professional creativity (Cătănuș 2005a). Vladimir Tismăneanu underscored the fact that Ceaușescu's Stalinist inclinations had been accentuated by his visit to China and North Korea in June 1971, where the personality cult of the leaders was expressed in huge mass spectacles (Tismăneanu 2003:206). Nevertheless, the exact reasons for the Romanian Communist Party's leader to launch this new system of tough measures and severe control of cultural life remains a subject of debate to the present day (Cătănuș 2005b). Regardless, after July 1971, Ceaușescu gathered more authority and firmly imposed his neopatrimonial power as a form of governing. To do this, he used peasant heritage to benefit communist-nationalist ideology.

During this period, the activities of researchers in the fields of Ethnography and Folklore were redesigned. The Institute of Ethnography and Folklore, established by Decree no. 136 of April 5/6, 1949, as a result of the merger of the Phonogram Archive of the Ministry of Cults and Arts (G. Breazul) and the Folklore Archive of the Society of Romanian Composers (C. Brăiloiu), was meant not only to preserve the archive materials collected from peasant communities, but also to promote the

pragmatic political agenda of the Communist Party (Vlăduțiu 1971). The ethnographer Ion Vlăduțiu clarifies that, henceforth, folklore had to be used in service to the Party while heritagisation activities, such as creating folk material archives and editing systematic folklore volumes, had to "take a back seat." In the same line, an anonymous article from *Romania Journal*, called *The Offensive Against Folk Art Pollution*, asserted that in Romania, folk creation and industrial activities peacefully coexist: "[t]he Romanian spiritual scenery evidences a feature of international notoriety the existence of a vivid folk creativeness side by side with a modern industry and an industrializing agriculture" (*Romania Journal*, February 28, 1974:16). This article goes on to explain the role of folklore in educating young people who "grew up with TV sets and tape-recorders" and could (probably) easily fall into the trap of a bourgeois lifestyle. In this respect, the role of folklore was pragmatic, in accordance with the *July Theses'* first-stated goal of educating the masses. The article describes the rich collection of the Folklore Institute that "accounts for a direct source of inspiration and guidance for the *Amateur Artist Movement*, encompassing thousands of groups in villages and towns, for the centers of folk art guidance and the specialized instructors throughout Romania's 39 counties" (Idem 1974). This passage establishes the subordinate role of Folklore institutions and their archives to the *Amateur Artist Movement*, a movement that embodied the official vision of what heritage should be and how it needed to serve the Party's interests. In the second part of the article, readers can learn about "big popular festivals" organized across the country. The mass media was also to play an important role in this organization, acting as the Party's watchdog; the press needed to uncover the low-level artistic performances "that, mimicking folklore, turn it into operetta or revue-like shows" (*Romania Journal*, February 28, 1974:17). The main concern was that folklore could fail to fulfill its primary role of properly educating the masses, or even worse, it could mislead the people towards values that were not approved by the Party – such as the bourgeois ones (Idem 1974:17).

Thus, the official position on rural cultural heritage was concerned with the relationship between popular masses and folklore and how tourists perceived and consumed folklore. In this respect, the tourists, either Romanian or foreign, had to receive folklore education according to principles formulated by the Communist Party. As we learn in another issue of the *Romania Journal*, foreign tourists were encouraged to attend the *National Folklore Festivals*, like the one held on the *Black Sea* coast, where folk's teams, for example, *Călușarii*, performed *Căluș*, the oldest Romanian dance, of "Thracian origin" (*Romania Journal*, August 15, 1971). Groups like *Călușul* from Scornicești, the village where Ceaușescu had been born, were urged and supported to participate in international folklore festivals where they often got prizes. This was the case in 1975 when the band of *Căluș* from Scornicești got the *Europa Folk Art* prize in Hamburg (*Romania Journal*, October 31, 1975:14).

Paradoxically, despite the continuous political interference of the Communist Party in the field of folklore, where the conditions of heritagisation had been established by political decisions, the period following the *July Theses* opened the gate for a broader range of folk creations to be included in local and national folklore festivals. The folklore festivals of Iași County enriched substantially as more folk play teams were allowed onstage:

After 1971, some other forms of folk plays were introduced in folklore festivals for the first time, besides the plays with mavericks. Teams from villages like Cucuteni and Strunga presented The Play of the Deer, a very interesting and one of the oldest forms of folk theater. There were also teams like The Bear, The Goat, and The Rams. For spectators, this was beneficial because, in previous years, people in the cities could not have the chance to watch these performances unless they went to a village during New Year's Eve. Folk plays started to have success and to be highly appreciated by spectators. As a result, they continued to be performed from that moment on in all the editions of folk festivals held throughout Iași County (Interview with A.A., 60 years old, the director of the County Center for the Preservation and Promotion of Traditional Culture, Iași City, July 15, 2015).

More than ever before, the danger of the folklorization of the entire culture seemed unavoidable. Dumitru Popescu, one of Ceaușescu's closest collaborators and a propaganda leader of his cabinet, remembered: "N.C. strongly believed that folk production was an inexhaustible

phenomenon, a strong stream that would spring in all epochs and all social environments especially if it was stimulated and directed" (Popescu 2006:10). As a result, Ceaușescu ended up instrumentalizing peasants' intangible cultural heritage – the rural folklore, as a symbolic-ideological mode of controlling the population to impose its political agenda. He relied on this folklore-laden ideology that was well understood by the masses because it had a long tradition in Romanian history and culture (Verdery 1991:85-86).

While some other fields of human cultural creation had been censored, the doors were opened for getting more diverse folklore representations and customs into the public arena. Professional folklorists saw this as an incredible opportunity, enabling them to present folk creations that had not previously been allowed under communism (*Strunga* 1993). While this was one of the few positive aspects stemming from the Communist Party's new cultural direction, there were also negative consequences. The interference of folklore in all fields of culture caused problems for professional singers, cinematographers, poets, and artists who had to include folkloric themes in their creations if they were to be performed. Rock star and composer Nicu Covaci, the head of *Phoenix* rock band, discussed in an interview the censorship imposed on professional artists after July 1971, and how Ceaușescu's *July Theses* affected his musical creativity and style:

The Western influence lasted until Ceaușescu came back from North Korea in 1971, and issued those theses through which he ordered the promotion of national folklore in music, and in arts in general. We were blocked for a while. Our entire musical repertoire had been influenced by great Western rock bands. Although we had played at the seaside every summer for at least a couple of months, after July 1971, we stopped being invited. So I and my friend Ioji Kappl locked ourselves inside the house for about three months to find a solution to this problem. Luckily, we found among the discs produced by Electrecord some with pre-Christian music, traditions, and rituals from Romania and the Balkans. Inspired by them, we started to sing. This is how we produced the album "Those who gave us a name" and managed to find a new musical path. We created a new genre: ethno-rock. In this context, the authorities could no longer censor us, and they started to let us give concerts again. A year later, we produced another new album, "Flute's Bud," a more mature and elaborate piece. Finally, we produced one more album, "Musical Fables". What else should I say? We went nuts! (Gorgonaru 2014).

Subsequently, Covaci's ethno-rock melodies were used as the soundtrack for Romanian movies that enjoyed substantial success in the early 1970s. One of the most notorious examples is that of the well-known film director Sergiu Nicolaescu's 1974 film *The Immortals*. Made according to the directives of the *July Theses*, the movie glorified the great deeds of Romanian ancestors fighting next to Mihai Viteazul, the Wallachian king who had been able to achieve, in 1600, the first unification of three provinces (Walachia, Moldova, and Transylvania) included in modern-day Romania. In the movie, peasants were presented as a progressive force fighting against foreign occupation and dispossession of Romanian territories and wealth, while Mihai Viteazul's ex-soldiers were portrayed as heroes of the country's immemorial past, ready to die for unification.

Folk motifs and romanticized historical themes started to appear in most patriotic movies produced immediately after the *July Theses*. A classic example is the 1976 movie, directed by Mircea Moldovan, *Pintea*. *Pintea* was a Romanian maverick (hajduk) who fought against social inequalities and injustices and organized one of the biggest revolts against the Austrian occupation. The movie, based on the life of a real character who lived at the end of the 17th century, used folk themes heavily, as well as songs and ballads meant to reconstruct *Pintea's* figure and life. Authentic folk songs orally transmitted and collected from peasants in the region where *Pintea* lived and died, were used in the movie and became the most important part of its soundtrack. Besides this, a band of folk play – *the goat team*, appears in a movie scene going from house to house, playing their sketches in the yards of the householders. *Pintea* himself takes advantage of a New Year's Eve custom – *the mummies' house visit* (Halpert and Story 1969), wearing a mask to escape the vigilance of the imperial guards, who sought to arrest him but caught another mummer instead. Such scenes were used to demonstrate the ancient character of some rituals like mummies' plays. Folk motifs were often used as testimonials of

the Romanian continuity and autochthony on the current territory of contemporary Romania.

These are just a few examples of what the folklorization of culture meant after the *July Theses*. Through these kinds of cultural creations, Romania's Communist leadership aimed to create deep patriotic feelings among Romanians and adherence to the Party's agenda. Although the people did come to feel patriotic love for the country, the Party's second purpose was not fully achieved in that people did not become strongly attached to the values of communism. At this point, I align my views with Verdery's (1991) that, out of the twofold communist-nationalist doctrine, only the second component – the nationalistic one – was successful with the masses, while the first – the communist one – achieved much less traction with ordinary people.

Moreover, in spite of a hegemonic process of cultural folklorization, certain cultural productions did not become the dull, dry creations that one might expect. Despite the rigid and severe directives imposed by the *July Theses*, genuine human creativity has not been completely crushed. There were artists who were able to produce works of beauty, as exemplified by the Phoenix rock band and the movies just discussed. Similarly, inside the *Amateur Artist Movement*, especially at the local level, besides ideological demands imposed by the Party's agenda, folklore lovers were able to embed feelings of attachment and respect for peasant culture in people (discussions with elders who participated in folklore festivals held in Iași and Hunedoara County).

All in all, this blend of competing tendencies and trends resulted in a heavily folklorized culture gravitating around the festivalisation of folk creations and instrumentalization of rural cultural heritage. This cultural mélange following *July Theses* set the direction of evolution for the heritagisation of folk creations even long after Ceaușescu's regime collapsed (Rus 2023).

5. The Third Phase of the Relation between Ceaușescu's Neopatrimonial Regime and Peasant Cultural Heritage (October 1976 – December 1989)

In July 1971, power had already been completely monopolized by Nicolae Ceaușescu. His clan and close friends controlled important sectors such as politics, finance, culture, and mass media. Ceaușescu was able to establish a type of domination that has been called "dynastic socialism" (Georgescu 1987), a clientelist system of power (Fischer 1983), which could only be accessed through a personal relationship with the leader who offered favors in exchange of personal loyalty and faith in him as a supreme leader (Marin 2014:46). This political system was characterized through an erratic and unpredictable behaviour of Ceaușescu who enjoyed imposing his vision, especially in questions of culture and national history (Vasile 2015:50). The only missing element was a much closer relationship between the supreme leader and the masses. In Ceaușescu's view, not only did the masses need to be subordinate to the leader, but they also needed to express admiration for him. It seems that Ceaușescu felt the need for this missing element. After the Stalinization of culture following the *July Theses*, the invention of a mass festival in the spirit of the Chinese Cultural Revolution as an expression of piety toward the supreme leader was somehow predictable.

Ceaușescu's speech at the eleventh congress of the Romanian Communist Party, held on November 24-27, 1974, has come to be seen as the direct source of the *Song to Romania* festival, a mass celebration that "outpaced every other artistic structure created previously by the regime" (Oancea 2007:43). Apparently due to Ceaușescu's unpredictability in exercising power, the mass media, now totally subordinate to him, introduced this mass event only shortly before it started; the first mention of the *Song to Romania* festival of which historians became aware of, being in *Scântea*, the official daily newspaper of the Romanian Communist Party, on October 23, 1976 (Idem 2007:43). Although the festival was advertised as cooperation between professional and amateur artists, *Song to Romania* was, in fact, designed as an assault against professional creations that still remained independent (Petrescu 1998:241).

Just days before *Song to Romania's* first performance, daily newspapers and other journals throughout the country started to publish multiple articles describing its rules and regulations. The media blitz revealed that the festival would follow five stages. The mass stage (from October 1976

through February 1977, the county stage (in March and April), the inter-county (in May 1977), and the national stage (starting in late May), with awards ceremonies for professional and amateur artists at the beginning of June 1977 (Idem 1988:244).

I have discussed the danger represented by the folklorization of culture occurring immediately after the 1971 *July Theses*. With the release of the *Song to Romania* festival, this "danger" disappeared. Folklore became absorbed into this cultural soup called *Song to Romania*, becoming just one piece of a behemoth cultural form that swallowed everything around it like a giant amoeba. Of course, the *Amateur Artist Movement* played an important role in the logistics and organization of this festival. Nevertheless, even this movement had already lost its rural folkloric sense, having become a platform for a rich diversity of bands from both rural and urban areas that were required to perform for the *Song to Romania* festival. Political scientist Dragoș Petrescu called this event "a pitiful national artistic hotchpotch" (Ibidem 1988:250) because artistic bands that had nothing to do with each other played and competed on the same stage. Thousands of teams from villages, factories, local and national culture houses, and professional theaters competed. The first elimination round was at the local level, then larger county festivals; finally, some teams competed nationally. The first national festival competition was said to have involved over two million participants and encompassed a huge diversity of teams: professional ballerinas from the National Opera; *Călușari* teams from Olt, Argeș, and Teleorman counties; folk dancers from Flămânzi village; professional, established singers; schoolchildren; soldiers; students from military schools; poetry reciters; and opera singers (Betea, Mihai, and Țiu 2015:60).

A key feature of the festival was the relation between the masses and the leader; Ceaușescu couple carefully watched the festival developing. As the final winner's parade ended, Ceaușescu and his wife stepped onstage to dance a traditional folk dance – the *hora* – together with artists from the Southern part of the country where both of them had been born and raised (Oancea 2007:54). Besides creating this personal relation with the masses, the festival *Song to Romania* included many poems and songs that glorified the person, work, and accomplishments of the country's supreme leader. The festival aimed at fulfilling two main purposes: creating political legitimacy for the supreme leader and exerting rigorous mass control (Idem 2007:9). However, ordinary people grew sick of these parades (discussions and interviews with people who participated in folklore festivals held in Iași and Hunedoara County; my memories as a participant in the early stages of *Song to Romania* as a high school student). As I can remember from my childhood, most people typically did not watch the broadcasts of the festival on National Television. As some anthropologists observed, "the central apparatus was more interested in arousing public awe than in building public legitimacy" (Verdery 1991:85). The National Festival *Song to Romania* "provides one of the best examples of symbolic political manipulation in the cultural arena..." where "symbols are used by the regime to support an institutionalized 'lie' and gloss over the deep contradictions in society," stated Anca Giurchescu in what may be the only scientific article published by an insider on this subject during the Ceaușescu dictatorship (1987:164).

Song to Romania festival provides strong evidence that the Ceaușescu regime became a form of neopatrimonial domination, similar to regimes in some African countries whose political realities and leadership have been described as *neopatrimonialist* (Erdmann and Engel 2007). In Ceaușescu's regime, folklore was used until the end as an instrument of propaganda and a bulwark of the communist-nationalist ideology that mediated relations between the leader and the masses. "Indeed, of all the symbols of political legitimization the national symbols, especially folklore, have achieved a large degree of acceptance among the population" (Giurchescu 1987:168).

From this perspective, the instrumentalization of intangible cultural heritage meant a continuous exercise of creation and recreation of a hegemonic cultural form that seized big chunks of the public space and transformed it into a field where Communist Party ideology and the supreme leader's ideas about culture unfolded. However, *Song to Romania* neither created real legitimacy for the Party's leader nor made him popular among ordinary people, including participants. In light of my main argument, one possible explanation is that as this festival was conceived and designed, it

required changes in the form of many rural customs. Rural traditions often had to be redesigned to be presented onstage. In my interviews with peasants who participated in this festival, I learned how the Party's directives heavily challenged their creativity and relationship to local customs and rituals, including the folk plays.

B.D., a 48-year-old man from Sarmizegetuza, Hunedoara County, recounted how his village school was ordered by the county's authorities to create a team to participate in the *Song to Romania* festival drawing on the folk drama called *The Play of the Deer*. He and his team passed the early levels of this competition and qualified for the national competition in Bucharest. Reaching this level, they had to completely change the structure of their local custom to fit the rules of the last stage of the competition and be appreciated by the Communist Party's top leaders, including Ceaușescu. First, the elders who were traditionally the team's flute players had to be removed, as theirs was a schoolchildren's team in the vision of the festival organizers. Since the masked deer character needed music to dance to, they recruited some high-school students from a music school in a northern city of the county. Unfortunately, although they knew how to play more sophisticated instruments, these students had not studied the flute. So, some were asked to play their *tárogatós* to accompany the deer; my interviewee – the deer dancer – Mr. B.D. had just one day to learn to dance to the rhythms of *tárogatós*. And this is how their new team performed in front of Ceaușescu and his wife (Interview with B.D., 48 years old, Sarmizegetuza village, January 13, 2015). But the most interesting aspect of this event was its influence on village traditions. Since then, *the deer team* traveling through that village and the neighbouring areas of Sarmizegetuza village at Christmastime is accompanied by *tárogatós* – a new tradition dating back to the 1980s that remains in place today.

If this is how the perspective from above shaped local cultural heritage, we should also consider the perspective from below regarding the diversity of motivations that led people to participate in these competitions. An elderly flute player from Cucuteni, Iași County, who I interviewed, told me that he participated in the deer team at the festival *Song to Romania* because he wanted to make the tradition of his village known beyond its borders. B.D., my interviewee from Sarmizegetuza village, Hunedoara county, confessed that he was too young – only fourteen – to take a decision by himself; he participated because he was asked to do so by his teachers and by the school principal. Some other villagers mentioned their love for traditions, such as folk dances and songs that had nothing to do with Ceaușescu and his cult. Anca Giurghescu, an experienced field researcher and ethnochoreologist, observed, at the scene, already in 1987, how the symbols used by party ideologues failed to fulfill their main aims and to hit their targets. This was because "people explain these particular symbols according to their personal desires and feelings. In contradiction to the official intentions, they may, for example, substitute nationalism with local patriotism, small group solidarity and identification with an ethnic group, along with esthetic pleasure, entertainment, and catharsis" (1987:169).

The historian Claudiu Oancea, conducted interviews with several participants and found similar sentiments; indeed, most former participants reduced the festival to their own experience. He also demonstrated how the new narratives following the 1989 anti-Communist Revolution shaped their vision and their understanding of the festival (Oancea 2007). Thus, looking from above at the Ceaușescu regime, and with future knowledge, at the regime's last fourteen years, we see a landscape dominated by *Song to Romania*, a behemoth national festival, an eclectic form of invented tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992) and an insidious heritagisation. We also see an authoritarian leader striving for a hegemonic national culture, a creation of his mind based on communist-nationalist ideology; and we see his seemingly insatiable desire to arouse public awe and to create mass identities in the spirit of nationalist-communist ideology (Verdery 1991:85; Soulet 1998).

On the other hand, what was the practical effect of Ceaușescu's vision of folklore on the Romanian postsocialist state patrimonialization policies? From this perspective, although the *Song to Romania* festival ended with the Ceaușescu regime in December 1989, its onstage patrimonialization of rural culture has enduring effects. Much of the symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:166) against living heritage that took such extreme forms in the last fourteen years of Communist dictatorship has been perpetuated through postsocialist state heritagisation policies even after December 1989 (Rus

2023). In this respect, Bendix's observation regarding patrimonialization fits well with the Romanian case: "Heritagisation itself has tradition. Organizations and institutions have been created to legitimize [heritagisation as a cultural practice] and to contribute to turning even more diversified notions of heritage into a self-understood, habitual aspect of culture" (Bendix 2009:254).

6. Conclusion

The present study is part of the panoply of studies that analysed the relationship between the cultural politics of state and cultural heritage, especially how the heritage was used and manipulated to achieve political goals (Dorson 1966; Oinas 1978; Dow 1991).

The article used the concept of neopatrimonialism to depict the relationship between a political regime based on personal relationships and rural cultural heritage, describing the infusion of patriarchalism in state institutions that was meant to promote cultural heritage through an institutionalized legislative and bureaucratic apparatus well anchored in dynamic realities of a modern state. It emphasized the steps through which an autocracy appropriated and manipulated cultural heritage for its political gains.

Through interviews and information gathered from fieldwork with active participants in folklore festivals during Ceaușescu's dictatorship, the article described how rural cultural heritage was used to win the sympathy of the masses inside the country. Through the analysis of the media, especially the Romania Journal, published in five languages of international circulation and intended for the public outside the country, the present study demonstrated how the neopatrimonial leadership of Romania used cultural heritage in written press to promote an idyllic image outside the country; however, in reality, it was a political regime that brutally suppressed its political opponents until its last moments (Betea, Mihai, and Țiu 2015). Also, my article aimed to present the way in which cultural heritage was transformed as a result of the intersection between the vision imposed from above, from the top of politics, and the perspective from below, coming from the people who had to practice the new folklore in the new conditions imposed by the power politics.

Among Romanian heads of state, Ceaușescu showed the highest interest in instrumentalizing rural cultural heritage. He appropriated it from peasants, who created it in their small rural communities, and transposed it onstage. Through folklore festivals and the great national festival *Song to Romania*, he turned cultural heritage into a fundamental tool for the ideological construction of the relationship between the leader and the masses. Political scientist Anneli Ute Gabanyi explained the situation as an expression of Ceaușescu and his wife's poor background, resulting in their lack of interest in culture (Gabanyi 2003:131-134). Ceaușescu's limited formal education, only elementary school, and lack of appreciation for the products of high culture may have made him permanently resentful towards intellectuals, whom he regarded with suspicion and as potential opponents to his power (Betea, Mihai, and Țiu 2015:72), spurring him to find a counterbalance to the gaps in his education. The counterbalancing element was to be found in peasant heritage.

The article could pave the way to a deeper understanding of the relationship of other neopatrimonial regimes with rural cultural heritage. Besides Ceaușescu, other dictators of the 20th century, such as Idi Amin and Pol Pot, showed a strong predilection for peasant culture (Leopold 2020; Chandler 2018). However, other studies would be necessary to examine the relationship of other neopatrimonial regimes with rural cultural heritage, in order to have an overall comparative picture.

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