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THRACO-DACICA

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SULTANA AVRAM, *Incursiune în antropologie*,
Sibiu, 2007, 101 pages

ALEXANDRA COMȘA

The author of this book (English title: *Excursion into Anthropology*) seems to have two essential objectives. First, the book may be designed as an introduction to the field of cultural anthropology for university undergraduates, as this text provides a comprehensive overview of the discipline. And second, this text aims to demonstrate the dynamic, changing and challenging nature of anthropology today. The author emphasizes what Marvin Harris said: “*The study of anthropology is valuable for anyone contemplating a career in a field affected by the cultural dimension of human existence*”¹. Anthropology is still a young science in Romania as *many of its most basic questions are as yet without firm answers and the answers we have are subject to revision because research is producing new knowledge*².

The **first chapter** (*Domeniul antropologiei / Field of anthropology*, pp. 9-19) provides an introduction and an orientation to the field. It shows how the various subfields of anthropology, including biological anthropology, archaeology, linguistics, ethnology and many others are tied together by their interest in the human species.

The author introduces us into the field of anthropology, referring into a brief history to the emergence of the term “*anthropology*”, that initially had another meaning than the one we use today. It was insisted upon the data that archaeologists exploit, in order to reconstruct aspects of life in the past human communities (examining of the trash pits, of the animal bones, of the way of acquiring the raw materials, pottery analysis, local and regional studies by aerial views, or other techniques, the study of building functionality).

The physical or biological anthropology is focused upon the study of the human being as a biological system and its connections to

the environment. These data are being used by the archaeologists and comprise the criteria for assessing sex, age and possibly the cause of death for the skeletons uncovered during the archaeological diggings. There are also included studies of primatology, taking into account the closest relatives of man, these being also important for archaeologists, especially for those who are dealing with the Palaeolithic time.

The linguistic anthropology studies either the present languages and makes deductions regarding the past ones, or decode “*dead languages*”, discovered by archaeologists on clay tablets... etc. Cultural anthropology provides a definition of culture and sets forth certain general features of cultures, as well as describes and explains cultural differences and similarities.

The culture (**Chapter II: *Defining culture / Definierea culturii***, pp. 21-25) had been defined towards the end of the 19th century, subsequently emerging over 100 other interpretations in about half of a century. The author explains and defines what enculturation, cultural relativism, limitations of enculturation concept and diffusion are, stressing upon the fact that some cultures are the result of reactions to similar conditions, or situations.

In the **Chapter III**, entitled *Theoretical Anthropology / Antropologie teoretică* (pp. 27-36) the author presents some of the most important anthropological theories: evolutionism, diffusionism, American historicism, functionalism, structural-functionalism, psychological anthropology, neo-evolutionism, French structuralism, ethno-science, cultural materialism, interpretative anthropology, and neo-functionalism.

Referring to the **Chapter IV**, *Unity in diversity: means of communication between us and the others / Unitate în diversitate: mijloace de comunicare între noi și ceilalți* (pp. 37-43), the author presents aspects of nonverbal communication, the evolution of languages and considers that intolerance and

¹ Marvin 1987, 18.

² Daniel 1992.

conflict are partly the result of misunderstanding the ethno-cultural differences. The importance of *body language* and of different objects used by various communities in nonverbal communication are taken into account. All languages, like other aspects of culture, are constantly being changed as a result of both internal and external processes, are complex, and are adapted to the needs of the respective populations.

The following **Chapter (no. V)** deals with *Ways of obtaining food / Căi de obținere a hranei* (pp. 45-48). There is a close connection between the environment, food production and technology, all of them exerting an influence upon the evolution of social organization and culture of the societies. Together with the social evolution it emerged and developed the social hierarchy. Because people themselves can define the same behaviour in different ways, it is necessary to distinguish between the native definition of, for example, cannibalism and the observer's definition of the custom.

An important part of cultural anthropology study analyzed in the book is **Chapter VI**, *The Evolution of Elementary Forms of Religious Life / Evoluția formelor religioase și sentimentului religios* (pp. 49-61). Spirituality and religion play an important role in every society. Not all religions have a supreme being, a formal organization, or a set of prescriptions.

If the cult of the dead existed even in Palaeolithic, in time, it would manifest a differentiation of the religious concepts, passing through the cult of the ancestors to the one of the nature, the deities being personified much later. The human-god would be a symbol of the deity, who has both attributes and obligations that, being unfulfilled, could lead from replacement up to his physical expelling.

The following **Chapter (no. VII)** deals with *Sexual relations, marriage and family / Relații sexuale, căsătorie, familie* (pp. 63-73). There are tackled the sexual relationships, including homosexuality and incest, the necessary conditions for a marriage at different populations (endogamous or exogamous ones), social influences that appear in such cases, like the levirate (the marriage with the brother of the deceased) or surorate (the marriage with the sister of the deceased wife), the social rules that impose polygamy, simple or serial monogamy. In many societies, the marriage is not a religious problem, but plainly an economic one. That is why, divorce has various degrees of difficulty. The widowhood is also marked by different rituals. It is interesting to take into account the role or importance that genders had played in various

societies. The aspects regarding the behaviour of a man or a woman are aspects of extended controversy in the anthropological literature.

An interesting **Chapter (no. VIII)** is that of *Rituals and Power Symbols / Ritualuri și simboluri ale puterii* (pp. 75-82). Initially, political anthropology had emerged as a subfield of the social anthropology, it was outlined as a subfield until the 1930-40's and it truly defined itself after the World War II.

The antique writers (Plato, Aristoteles) considered that the government and policy resulted from civilization, while the preceding stages represented the anarchy, this conception being changed in 1861 by Sir Henry Maine, in his paper entitled "*Antique Law*". He considered that society was patriarchal and had a structure based upon kinship, as sacred prescriptions. By accumulation of new and various data in other corners of the world, there were also outlined other conceptions regarding the political anthropology. Max Gluckman established the well known School from Manchester, based upon "*process and conflict*". Another author, Elman Service, published "*The Order of the State and Civilisation*".

These papers established the basis of an efficient communication between the American and European specialists, especially the British anthropologists that used the analysis of the policy of the tribal groups, but also of the modern, industrial states. The power has been always represented by symbols, rendered by plants, animals, or objects. Another universal symbol is the throne, which is to be found both in the world of the humans and in the one of the deities. The king, or the leader, elected, or assigned by hereditary right, had no power up to consecration, after undergoing a certain ritual.

The ritual "*is a symbolic behavior, repeated and socially standardized, as participation to the ritual involves physiological and emotional stimuli... By symbolism it is acknowledged who is strong and who weak, while by the symbols manipulation the strong ones strengthened their authority*"³.

A significant role is being played by the initiation ritual, kept and differently used since very old times, in order to induce and enhance emotional state, both to the novice and to the assistance. The ceremony is more important in establishing the relations between states, being imposed as such by international protocols. Extremely valuable for maintaining the power of a political regime is the

³ Avram 2007, 78.

emotional involvement of the population in political ceremonies and rituals, even when they induce fear. Some series of public manifestations, such as the carnivals, peace marches, religious processions usually resulted in detensioning the population, but could also manipulate masses of people.

The author dedicated a whole Chapter (no. IX) to *Notions on Art Anthropology / Noțiuni de antropologia artei* (pp. 83-89). Concerning the up mentioned field, the anthropologists are preoccupied, not only by the art definition and the attitude towards it, but also by its relation with the culture. The art is a communication means. Even if some artistic manifestations are intensely studied and upon large time sequences, others remained practically outside the concerns of the critics and art historians, such as: sand drawings of the Navajo Indians, painting and tattoo of the body. Each society developed its own standards regarding the differentiation between the real and fake art. The nomadic populations used the body decoration, or the one of their personal items, but also the song, dance, or story telling to transmit messages. In time, in each society emerged individuals specialized in various artistic fields and this is how the standards were raised.

Regarding the art in the ancient times (prehistoric), this was parted into two categories: the mural art, representing the art upon stable background (rocks, stone sledges, caves) and the miniatural one, being performed upon mobile backgrounds. The myths, dance and music represented ways of experience and information communication.

A series of myths have contributed to the formation of the symbolic thinking and afterwards to the initiation of analytical and synthetical communication, strengthened in time by “*the magic-religious valorization of the language*”⁴. Art is a symbolic, or metaphorical representation of a message that has to be transmitted to those who can perceive it. The anthropologists also consider the craftsman as being artists. Also, Sultana Avram rightfully considers that “*the art and technology influenced each other, like in the case of the musical instruments, ceramics or fabrics, by looking for new forms, colors and materials*”⁵. The notion of beauty has varied from one culture to another and is sometimes interpreted as *mana*, while other times, like a gift from gods etc.

The kitsch, or non-art, is the expression of

the “*values deterioration*”⁶ and became manifest into all fields. This non-art could not exist, unless the kitch humans did not exist also, who like the kitch, create it, or buy it. Even if the accent is placed upon the creative aspects, in most of the cultures it could be observed a continuation of the styles that were created in time. In modern culture, genuinity is more important than the intelligibility and art is being interpreted and explained to the wide public by experts.

The final Chapter (no. X) tries to predict *The future of anthropology / Viitorul antropologiei* (p. 93). At present, some authors consider that, given the emphasized communication and remarkable cultural diffusion, the differences between cultures tend to diminish so that, in the future, the cultural anthropology would disappear, being deprived of its own object of study. Yet, the author of this volume is optimistic, considering that the “*study of the complex societies, of the factors that initiate changes, of the archaic elements that are still preserved*”⁷ represent important directions of study for the future, because the cultural diversity would maintain itself.

The Romanian culture has also undergone significant transformation, determined by the “*cultural interchanges, of the economic development and the mentality changes*”⁸. New festive days have been adopted and millenary ones have been ignored. It was lost the interest for wearing the traditional costume and the “*folk*” music has been submitted to important contaminations, both the melodic line and the lyrics. Sometimes, as regards changes, are induced by force, affecting both the culture in certain regions of the world, but also their population. The anthropologists have tried to solve such situations together with international organizations that would mediate with the officialities of those countries. The studies of urban anthropology offer support in solving some social cases. The anthropological knowledge could be useful to the authorities, politicians, diplomats, missionaries, businessmen, but also to the people who travel to a cultural milieu which is less familiar to them.

The volume *Incursiune în antropologie / Excursion into anthropology* by Sultana Avram has provided us with a real travel in time and space, during which, there were pointed out the most relevant aspects of the analyzed discipline, with special focus upon cultural anthropology, which is her primary concern. The book is worth being read,

⁴ Avram 2007, 86 f.

⁵ Avram 2007, 87.

⁶ Avram 2007, 88.

⁷ Avram 2007, 91.

⁸ Avram 2007, 91.

by students, specialists, but also by people who want to get more familiar with the angle of approach used in the field of anthropology.

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