

Ethnological investigation of villages

WHILE MANY ETHNOLOGISTS INTERESTED in the culture of African, Amerindian, Asiatic, and Oceanic peoples concluded many studies of society as a whole, whether in the form of a tribe, a clan, or yet a simple community, the trend in Europe was mainly towards the study of parcelled-out aspects of culture, whether in the field of folklore or of ergology.

The study of a huge mass of single aspects of culture, by analysing its morphology, by establishing types, by comparing them, and by trying to follow their diffusion, has made an extraordinary contribution to the understanding of the formation and evolution of cultural elements and complexes of the various peoples of Europe. Methods have improved; there is a better comprehension of details which had at first been disregarded, and the need for an exact localization of the facts led to Ethnological Cartography. To-day, a large number of countries have their Ethnological Atlases; in those cases where the Atlas is not yet ready, it is in an advanced phase or lagging not far behind. To certain Ethnologists, the importance of Ethnological Cartography is such that it has led to the creation of an International Committee in order to effect an Ethnological Atlas of Europe, covering countries from both East and West.

The first attempt, which is making headway, is a most meritorious effort on the part of European Ethnologists for solving problems which, if not jointly studied, would become insoluble. One of the main supporters of the idea has been the Yugoslavian Ethnologist, Bratanić¹.

It is a fact that these studies of cultural elements and complexes, when taken individually as autonomous units, are a consequence of the old and complex History of Europe. This History is formed by many ethnical layers which, as time went on, exerted their cultural influence on other peoples who had settled down before. They mixed with each other, they established contacts with neighbours and they contributed in many different ways to the diffusion of various forms of culture, either by supplanting more ancient ones or by combining with the latter in variable proportions.

As a consequence of these movements of peoples and of the individualization of some of them, which ended up as independent nations — having in the process agglutinated less powerful neighbours — the study of their social heritage took on a strong nationalistic or even a regionalistic hue.

Generally speaking, the first to study the traditions of their own people were the linguists and philologists who, obviously, were mainly interested in gathering oral literature. However, even when these scholarly men broadened their interests to cover many other aspects of material culture, like the German Volkskundler did, their formation as Germanists conditioned the frontiers of study to those of the German language.

For a long time, European ethnological studies were confined to national frontiers and it was only little by little that the first steps in comparative study were taken, although these were inadequate due to lack of contact and of an appropriate organisation. The creation of CIAP was the first attempt to establish contact between the

1. Branimir Bratanić, Internationale Arbeitskonferenz über die ethnologische Kartographie Zagreb 8-10. Februar 1966. *Ethnologia Europaea*, vol. 1 (1967), pp. 75-77.

various peoples and the results were undeniably important². Yet, the markedly folkloristic trend which it maintained for a long time shows that the Europeans working on the subject did not possess an ethnological grounding. International congresses and meetings show up this fact well³, although, little by little, a reaction could be observed on the part of European elements, who were desirous to establish a European Ethnology on truly scientific bases, thus doing away with the amateurism of many of them. It is a matter of curiosity that there was held in 1955 the "Congrès International de Folklore", at Arnhem, whose record of proceedings was published as the "Actes du Congrès International d'Ethnologie Régionale"⁴. This was the consequence of a symposium held at Amsterdam, which took place by invitation from the "Académie Royale des Sciences", where a group of 13 specialists, chosen among the representatives of the countries assembled at the Arnhem Congress, signed a series of recommendations which they submitted to CIAP⁵.

The conciliation between Ethnology and Folklore represents all a problem of European academic tradition. For a long time, our Universities prepared Ethnologists who were only devoted to studying so-called primitive peoples of other continents, while study of the social heritage of their own countries was limited, in certain of them, to oral traditions, under the name of folklore; or yet, more recently, to the study of certain elements of material culture, as, for instance, the German *Volkskundler*⁶. What is more regrettable still is that these studies were completely ignored by the Universities of many countries, as they still are in some of them.

The real problem does not rest on the fact that some devote themselves to studying oral traditions while others to material culture, for both of them are equally valid. What is important is that one should be university trained and not an amateur, in spite of the fact that among self-taught men there have been investigators of great merit, because of their exceptional personal capabilities. But, generally speaking, it is not a question of terminology; it is one of scientific training instead.

One of the Ethnologists who has contributed most in the last decades for broadening the frontiers of ethnological studies in Europe is Sigurd Erixon, whose influence has long transposed the limits of Sweden to cover most of Europe. We all owe him a great debt for what he gave of his learning and enthusiasm for the progress of European Ethnology⁷.

Yet, notwithstanding the evident progress carried out in recent times, there are a few sectors of Ethnology which have hardly been explored in Europe. One of these is the ethnological investigation of villages.

2. CIAP came to life out of the "Congrès International des Arts Populaires", held in Prague in 1928.

3. A "Congrès International de Folklore" was held in Paris in 1937.

4. *Actes du Congrès International d'Ethnologie Régionale, Arnhem 1955*. Arnhem, 1956.

5. *Ibidem*, pp. 137-139.

6. The word "Volkskunde" had already appeared in 1787, 59 years before that of "Folklore". About its history and concept, see: Arthur Haberlandt, *Die deutsche Volkskunde*. Halle-Saale, 1935. pp. 58-60; Helmut Möller, *Volkskunde, Statistik, Völkerkunde 1787*. *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* (Stuttgart), 60 (1964), p. 220.

7. An important series of international meetings, whose results are very positive, are due to Sigurd Erixon.

A VILLAGE IS A FUNCTIONAL WHOLE, integrated by individuals who participate in numerous common behavioural patterns, who live more or less animated by common ideals, who share a certain number of common values. In various regions of Europe one can still find a typical, traditional village, as described by us. Such a village could, for instance, have originated in a remote, historic age, where generation after generation created a typical cultural configuration, in accordance with its ecological environment. Its study has been highly neglected and if one does not start right now, it will soon be too late.

Interest in the historical reconstitution of the past, which absorbs many scholars, is certainly very important. But the study of social groups, who react as a whole, with their own aspirations, their own original ways of coming face to face with the world and with life, who are the bearers of systems of traditional values, which do not in the least resemble those which are gradually forced on them by modern technical and economic conceptions, is a well-spring of human wealth which is extremely important and has hardly been explored by European Ethnologists. This does not happen in America, where the study of Western-type or acculturated communities has been very much to the fore.

I do not say that pioneering attempts have not been made in Europe, such as those of Frederic Seebohm⁸ or Harold Peake⁹. In Spain an attempt was also made to study the Terra de Melide (Galicia), carried out in 1933 by a number of Galician scientists¹⁰. Although it was the study of a circumscribed area, covering several villages, the team was a heterogenous one in which each of the components was only interested in a certain field. Thus, they did not arrive at the notion that the villages were total, integrated groups. Therefore, it is not even possible to try to establish the basic personality of the group.

However, these are not the studies that I have in mind. I rather aim at the study of one single village, which may be embraced as a whole, by one Ethnologist alone, who should be a participating observer. For this purpose, the village should correspond to the characteristics attributed by Redfield to "the little community", that is, "distinctiveness, smallness, homogeneity and all-providing self-sufficiency"¹¹. This may not be possible to-day in many regions of Europe, but it will always be possible to find a village which answers to a concept of community, as defined by a group of American Ethnologists: "The maximal group of persons who normally reside together in face-to-face association"¹².

A community which can be perceived by one single observer, who is himself integrated in it and who knows how to take part in and share everybody else's life, is a true microcosm. In one of these communities such problems as those of personality and culture, problems of social interaction, family organisation and kinship

8. Frederic Seebohm, *The English Village*. London, 1883.

9. Harold Peake, *The English Village. The Origin and Decay of its Community. An Anthropological Interpretation*. London, 1922.

10. *Galicia, Terra de Melide*. Seminario de Estudos Galegos. Santiago de Compostela, 1933.

11. Robert Redfield, *The Little Community*. Chicago, 1955. p. 4.

12. G. P. Murdock, C. S. Ford, A. E. Hudson, R. Kennedy, L. W. Simmons and J. W. M. Whiting, *Outline of Cultural Materials. Yale Anthropological Studies* (New Haven, Conn.), vol. 2 (1945), p. 29.

systems, relationship between economy and social organisation, inter-group relationship and, sometimes, budding forms of political organisation can be concurrently studied ¹³.

Although in certain regions there is a tendency for the dispersion of the rural population, it can be said that three quarters of Mankind live in cities, villages, or in bands. In Europe, in spite of a growing trend towards the formation of great conglomerates of urban and suburban types, in consequence of industrial development, there are still vast regions where, apart from scattered farmhouses, numerous villages showing "little community" character, as defined above, still subsist. However, these regions are seriously threatened by the growing development of modern economy which is rapidly causing agricultural economy to be transformed into an industry, in which maximum production is obtained through minimum labour.

On a newsitem published by the "German Tribune", quoting an article from "Die Zeit", it is stated that because of the needs resulting from the Common Market, German agriculture must produce more and produce cheaper. With that aim, all those who are superfluous in the fields should seek work at the factories. Although there is already an exodus of between 20.000 and 30.000 farmers to the cities, this figure will be doubled. The author estimates that, in ten to twenty years, there will not be in the whole of Germany more than 300.000 farming concerns ¹⁴.

What is taking place in Germany is also taking place, more or less at the same time, in the rest of Europe and we are reaching a point of letting the wealth of the cultural lives of our villages slip from our hands, without having first studied them. In twenty years time, instead of villages, we shall have great pre-fabricated conglomerates very similar to the Kibutzes or the Kolkhozes, bearing no link whatever with the present villages, which are the product of a long historical evolution.

It is true that material culture is rapidly being lost or has already been lost in many regions, but there is a lot of material kept at museums. Folklore is also disappearing, but it has been studied by many generations and there is a most abundant collection of oral literature and musical folklore in publications, on records and tapes, and in the archives. We know very little of what was the life of rural societies, their aspirations, creeds, joys, virtues, hates, their own way of conceiving life and death, the manner in which they were collectively organised to face up to dangers, adversity, and the problems of every nature which affected or still do affect them.

IT IS ONLY IN QUITE RECENT TIMES that monographs trying, to a certain extent, to interpret the community as a whole, were published about European villages. Arensberg, in 1937, published "The Irish Countryman" ¹⁵, which is a work of great merit. Sigurd Erixon, one year later, published a study about Swedish villages ¹⁶, which contains indisputable interest. Yet, in spite of the importance of these studies,

13. Jorge Dias, Problemas de método em estudos de comunidade. In: *Ensaio Etnológicos*. Lisboa, 1961, p. 41.

14. *German Tribune* (Hamburg), vol. 3, No. 23 (August 1967). Quoted from *Die Zeit*, 30.6.1967.

15. Conrad M. Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman*. London, 1937.

16. Sigurd Erixon, *Svenskt Folkliv*. Uppsala, 1938.

there is no question in them of one given village, interpreted as one whole, in which its "modal personality" was fixed. Instead, the studies were a synthesis on the knowledge of life in many villages put together. In 1944, Julio-Caro Baroja, published, "La Vida Rural en Vera de Bidasoa" (Navarra) ¹⁷.

In 1948 I published a Study of a village in the Northern Mountains of Portugal, called Vilarinho da Furna, inhabited by rural shepherds, with a curious collective organisation ¹⁸. In 1953, I published a study of another village, Rio de Onor ¹⁹. I had visited this village for the first time in 1944. It is situated right next to the Spanish border, in the North-east of Portugal; at the time it had no roads and was 27 kms. from the next township. I tried to interpret reality as an organic and functional whole, conditioned by environmental factors and influenced by historical events which had left their mark on them. I lived for long among them, I learnt their dialect, I worked and went hunting with them. All this I did until I came to be considered as one of them.

This is a typical community, with a vigorous collective discipline. Although they have been integrated in the country (Portugal), they still show a strong individuality which gives them a semi-independent position ²⁰.

This monograph has a failing, though, that of having been made with one aim: that it should be as complete as possible. I lost too much time in describing all the aspects of community life, instead of being more synthetic and interpretative.

One year later, Pitt-Rivers published "The people of the Sierra", Spanish village, having used the modern methods of social anthropology ²¹ with the greatest success. Also, along the same lines of community analysis, one may include Kenny's study "A Spanish Tapestry" ²², published in 1961. In 1963, Ernestine Friedl published "Vasilika, a Village in Modern Greece" ²³. These are the only analyses known to us, though there may be more in other countries whose bibliography is not accessible to me. Anyway, it is an extremely rich vein on which to work, by the application of different methods. An Ethnologist may objectively describe life as he has observed in a village where he has lived, but it is to be desired, that he should also be able to formulate an analytical theory which is a close explanation of the theories of the people which he has studied and of the social facts as perceived by him and which have served him as the basis for his study. This is possible because, during his fieldwork, he ends by being the master of an organisation of facts and culture, exactly as the latter are understood by members of the society which the Ethnologist has studied. Such an organisation or system is not enough for the scientific understanding of the facts, though: so it is necessary for the Ethnologist to conceive a new organisation, of an analytical type, which will allow him to compare the facts and the theories advanced by his informants. Both these theories are true, yet we should not mix them

17. Julio Caro Baroja, *La vida rural en Vera de Bidasoa*. Madrid, 1944.

18. Jorge Dias, *Vilarinho da Furna, uma aldeia comunitária*. Porto, 1948.

19. Jorge Dias, *Rio de Onor, comunitarismo agro-pastoril*. Porto, 1953.

20. Jorge Dias, *Community Studies in Portugal*. In: Jorge Dias, *Portuguese Contribution to Cultural Anthropology*. Johannesburg, 1961. pp. 79-94.

21. Julian A. Pitt-Rivers, *The People of the Sierra*. London, 1954.

22. M. Kenny, *A Spanish Tapestry*. London, 1961.

23. Ernestine Friedl, *Vasilika, a Village in Modern Greece*. New York, 1963.

up, because the one aims at the practical purposes of ordinary life and is satisfactory, provided it corresponds to the purposes of a society; while the other, the analytical organisation, conceived by the Ethnologist, has the scientific aim of theorising, in order to help understand a society. For the interpretation of culture it is fundamental to discover the basic ideals of the group under study, such ideals to be closely connected with a system of values ²⁴.

As I said, in spite of the studies already made and of those which may be in the process of being made in this field, there is a great urgency in activating this type of investigation.

From April 10-12, 1966, there was held in Washington a Smithsonian-Wenner-Gren Conference, called "Urgent Anthropology", partly stimulated by the activity of Robert Heine-Geldern but mainly by an address delivered in Washington by Lévi-Strauss, who stated the urgency for a great increase in ethnological field work.

I took part at this Conference and once more I had the opportunity of noticing that the great majority of our non-European colleagues could not understand the urgency of the study of some of the ethnological problems in Europe. A few of them, who considered me as an Africanist, looked a little astonished when they heard me talking on European Ethnology and later referred to it with a certain contempt, saying: "That is folklore".

Due to the little time at our disposal we had to form small working groups, and so I did not have the opportunity to impose our point of view regarding European Ethnology. This was not helped by the fact that it had never had an international organisation, on a scientific basis, with an organ of its own for its diffusion, which would have rendered it well known and respected among the Ethnologists whose field work is deployed over other continents.

However, when on the last day I showed Lévi-Strauss the urgency of equally studying European rural life, which is now heavily threatened, he fully agreed with me.

Other voices were raised to make a similar statement, that all cultures are changing, not only the primitive ones but the ones of the peasant societies in Europe as well ²⁵.

I believe that it is up to us, European Ethnologists, to speed up the ethnological study of European villages, which seems to me to be both urgent and fundamental. With that in mind it would be convenient to assemble, in the shortest possible time, a representative group of the whole of European Ethnology, perhaps the contributing editors of *Ethnologia Europaea*, in order to discuss methods and lay down a line of action.

24. Jorge Dias, A antropologia como ciência. *O Tempo e o Modo* (Lisboa), No. 43-44 (Nov.-Dec. 1966).

25. Urgent Anthropology. 1. Smithsonian-Wenner-Gren Conference. *Current Anthropology* (Chicago), vol. 8 (1967), pp. 355-361. See in the same issue: 2. Urgent Research Projects. p. 363.