Eastern European Countryside
DOI: 10.2478/v10130-012-0003-x
18' 2012

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On the Ethnographic Categorization of Biodiversity in the Danube Delta "Biosphere Reserve"[1]

Abstract

This paper is an interpretative approach of a conflicting state of affairs in the Danube Delta, Romania, where local communities of Russian and Ukrainian fishermen claim their "rights" of wetland management in the context of (and sometimes against) the government policies of "conserving biodiversity". My general assumption is that divergences acting between fishermen and the authorities in the Danube Delta are essentially rooted in a kind of "generalized (but not insurmountable) incongruity" of two such occupational and institutional "worlds" and, moreover "worldviews".

Keywords: Danube Delta, fishing, the emic – etic distinction.

Literature and Theorization

My research takes into account several recent anthropological investigations of the Danube Delta and its fishing communities. Sandra Bell (Bell et al. 2004) provides important ethnographic information concerning the "local perceptions on environment" and the "conflicting interests of the fishing communities and animal predators" in the Danube Delta (in comparison with Lake Kerkini in Greece, the Nemunas Delta in Lithuania and Lake Pihlajavesi in Finland); of particular relevance for my text are Bell's references to the post-socialist "institutional dynamics" in the Romanian deltaic area and to the administrative role that DDBRA plays in restructuring the traditional

[1] This paper is supported by the Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number SOP HRD/89/1.5/S/59758.

framework of local fishing. Similar data have been published on the fishing restrictions imposed by DDBRA, in the case of the Danube Delta ethnic minorities (Balaban et al. 2009). Some initiatives of cultural "revitalization" have been reported among local groups of "Lipovan" Russians (Capoți et al. 2009) and "Haholi" (Ukrainians) (Iancu 2009). The "craft" dimension of fishing among the Lipovan communities of Jurilovca and Sarichioi, and also the joint enterprise of Lipovan and Romanian fishing "brigades", have been described by Constantin (2003).

To different degrees, all the above-mentioned works are concerned with the conflicting implications that the establishment of DDBRA (with its politics of "biodiversity conservation" and restriction of the local fishermen's rights) now have over the social, institutional and interethnic relationships in the Danube Delta. My argument is that while the existing literature on the topic is particularly useful thanks to the case study contributions, it does also need a deeper ethnographic contextualization and a larger anthropological conceptualization of what the fishermen and authorities claim about, and act upon, the micro-deltaic region – as a "subsistence niche" and a "biosphere reserve".

Concerning the very definition of the "Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve", we can ask to what extent it reflects (partially, at least) the ethnographic and political realities of the "administered communities" (Kushner 1988). Indeed, dwelling on the model of the Amerindian reservations, the Israeli new-immigrants' villages (moshvei olim), and the Japanese-American relocation centres, G. Kushner discerns a "cross-cultural type" of "changing relations between administrators and the administered", "factionalism", "artificiality", "imposed internal organization", "dependence for economic support", "juxtaposition of an authoritarian […] bureaucracy and its pattern of formal co-option", and "directed socio-cultural change".

Local customary rules of ownership and inheritance are generally seen as *mechanisms which mediate between the pressures emanating from the larger society and the exigencies of the local ecosystem* [for instance, the differences between partible and impartible inheritance in Western and Eastern Switzerland, respectively] (Wolf 1972). However, recent anthropological reports indicate the worldwide implementation of state restrictive politics in the management of environment resources, with dramatic consequences to the native customary usages of ancestrally-inherited lands. Thus, in Kenya, given the value of wildlife tourism to the central government, the traditional communities – such as the Maasai, Kamba and Orma – have been excluded from

access to their grazing lands; the restriction of means of livelihood was probably a major reason that some Maasai began killing rhinoceros and elephants in protest. Similarly, in Indonesia the state forest management agency, the State Forestry Corporation, maintains control over the management of production forests as "sustained yield management" (with the collection of deadwood for fuel and the collection of some naturally occurring non-timber forest products as the only legal access of local villagers to production forests). In both Kenya and Indonesia, the maintenance of state control has led to the militarization of the resource conservation process (Lee Peluso 1993). In Honduras Cayos Cochinos Marine Protected Area, the local livelihood transition from fishing to ecotourism took place with violation of Afroindigenous Garifuna rights in the use and extraction of terrestrial and marine products within the reserve; as "resource management" was locally promoted as a "developmental" strategy, with all activity within the area as overseen by the Honduran Coral Reef Fund (HCRF, a non-profit organization formed by Honduran business investors) the lack of recognition of Garifuna rights increases tension between community members, HCRF and the government (Vacanti Brondo and Woods 2007). In Southern Africa, the local San hunting and gathering group was affected by the relocation of the Kalahari Central Game Reserve, in conditions of a large population and few resources area; the state conservation policy (in favour of natural resources management and ecotourism) actually led to the denial of the right to hunt and gather, which appeared to be a restriction on subsistence rights among the San (Hitchcock 2001).

My approach to the environment management in Romania is meant as an anthropological interpretative contribution, relying upon Kenneth Pike's classical distinction (1954) between the "emic" vs. "etic" behaviour", as applied here to the "native" vs. "governmental" administration of the Danube Delta area. Pike speaks (1990) of an emic unit in terms of a *physical or mental item or system treated by insiders as relevant to their system of behaviour and as the same emic unit in spite of etic variability*. It has also been argued that the methodological *juxtaposition of emic and etic versions of social life* is as necessary as *people tend to have alternative emic prescriptions* (Harris, 1990). Emics and etics are broadly described as ethnographic facts (i.e., "accounts", "constructs", "experience", "knowledge", "orientation", "meaning", "viewpoint", etc.), as well as methodological tools ("approach", "analysis", "criteria", "description", "interpretation", etc.) (Headland et al. 1990). Internal (vernacular) relevance within one culture vs. cross-cultural (analytical) validation is generally seen as crucial in distinguishing emics from etics (Berry 1969).

Working Hypotheses

My text will account first for a few working hypotheses dealing with those factors – the environment, economy, law and ethnicity – that now shape the Danube Delta landscape. Thus, "ancestry" could presumably uphold a genealogical-grounded legitimacy among fishermen, with their empirical competency (in areas like fish spawning, fish eating birds, reed harvesting, etc.) as an "aboriginal conscientiousness" of belonging to the local wetland[2]. On the other hand, "biosphere" would be associated with a "green" form of "responsibility" (and bureaucratic authority) that the Romanian government exerts over its country's ecology; scientific data (regarding, for example, the Delta's "1839 vegetal species" and the "3590 animal species") would endorse here "the national interest" that the Romanian Ministry of the Environment promotes in the area[3].

The "traditional fishing" is probably related to times of small-scale trading of fish resources by deltaic inhabitants, who (particularly during socialism) seem to have built their micro-regional "autarky" together with agricultural villages from the Danube Delta hinterland[4].

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[2] In an article dealing with the "representations and practices of space" among Ukrainian deltaic villagers of Sfântu Gheorghe, D. Alexandrescu, I. Daia, and G. Leonida speak (2009: 31–32) of "unwritten [customary] laws" that regulate local gardening and fishing areas. Community and kinship rules (including usufruct and mutual arrangements between native people) are reported as having traditionally regulated social and economic relationships among Sfântu Gheorghe villagers (unlike some "dissolving of community esprit", nowadays). National legislation associated with the establishing of DDBRA (1993) has recognized (although ambiguously) the right of preemption for the local community of Sfântu Gheorghe, with the new regime of state property over the fishing rights in the Danube Delta "reserve" (Balaban, Birta, Stoica 2009: 17–18).

[3] According to the Law no. 82/1993, the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve is defined as an "area of national and international ecological importance", while the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Administration is presented as that "institution of administering the natural heritage of the public domain of national interest of the Reserve"; the "main objectives" of DDBRA are as follows: "the conservation and protection of the existing natural patrimony", "the promotion of an enduring utilization of the resources generated by the natural ecosystems of the Reserve", and "the ecological reconstruction of the areas damaged with the impact of human activities" (www. ddbra.ro).

[4] Recent narratives of Lipovan elders evoke the trading importance of fish resources in the Jurilovca community's exchange relationships with other deltaic villages (including Slava Cercheză, Sfântu Gheorghe), during socialism; thus, fish was sold or exchanged for basic food

Unlike this, in times of Romania's accession to the European Union, the fishing industrial exploitation would possibly be vested into the politics of "development" (including ecotourism), as planned and implemented by the agency of government and private entrepreneurs, over the Danube Delta's social archaism and "backwardness"[5].

Customary law would expectedly be ethically resorted to, given its very vernacular elaboration and transmission, as well as its relevance for present-day social life[6]. On the contrary, Romanian and international legislation (including the 1990 UNESCO recognition and the 1991 Ramsar Convention) is likely to emphasize the crucial importance of the Danube Delta's "natural resources" (fish, birds, reed and so on), with little concern for the rural communities living there – as if they did not belong to the local "biodiversity reserve".

All the above-discussed cleavages in environmental, economic and legislative terms among fishermen and authorities in the Danube Delta, are given a further differential cultural contextualization, in the ethnic disparity from between Russian and Ukrainian minority groups and Romanian nationalistic central and local administration. Within the Romanian parliament, a law on minorities is (since 2004) still being debated, the absence of which potentially affecting (as concerns the Danube Delta as well) such ethno-linguistic communities' sense of official recognition for their cultural

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items, like sugar or edible oil, or still used within rituals of the Orthodox Church of Ancient Rite (Constantin 2004: 174, 179, 189).

[5] A relatively important issue in the contemporary policies of development in the Danube Delta is that of "responsible tourism". According to Bell (et al., 2004: 147), unlike the ecotourism (which would "not emphasize local livelihoods and traditions as much as other forms of tourism"), "In responsible tourism, both tourists and local people engage in a sensitive manner towards the environment, with respect for cultural practices and traditions". Despite the dramatic decline in deltaic tourism after 1989 (from 109,938 Romanian, and 140, 432 foreign, tourists in 1980, to 36,447 Romanian and 9,181 foreign, in 1997), the same authors remark that "Local people [in villages like Crişan, Mila 23, Sfântu Gheorghe] see tourism in the Danube Delta as virtually the sole hope for socio-economic progress". DDBRA is cited as the local provider for home-stay tourism in the area, but the development of such economic branch faces "basic infrastructural [transport facilities, freshwater systems, etc.] and educational [e.g., schools for tourism] issues" (cf. Bell et al., 2004: 164–168).

[6] Alongside the "unwritten [customary] laws" (see note 1 above), fishing tradition is said to have played an important role in the deltaic community relationships. According to Bell (et al., 2004: 41), "Fishing areas were previously established [in the Danube Delta] by tradition although certain areas were thought of as "belonging to particular families, and the notion of ownership was sufficiently flexible to allow people to move between areas when poor conditions restricted fishing in their "own water".

identities and management of local economic resources[7]. A perspective here is disempowerment among Russian and Ukrainian fishermen, with the Danube Delta "Biosphere Reserve" to be converted into a kind of "reservation" or "administered community area" by the Romanian authorities.

The Notion of "Poaching" in Its Ethnographic Usage and Intelligibility

The deltaic fishermen usually denounce the DDBRA system of granting fishing rentals to be a "disguised form of poaching"; on the other hand, when the local villagers claim their own "tradition" in fishing, they are "marked officially as "poachers, and [are] criminalized" (Bell et al. 2004: 64, 172). In my view, the notion of "poaching" (as it is currently reported in the Danube Delta) is relevant for what I have called "the generalized incongruity" that nowadays damages the relationship between the local fishing communities and the authorities, especially at the level of the "rights" of fish exploitation in the area.

During research conducted in the Lipovan villages of Jurilovca and Sarichioi, in April 2003, I first noticed the recurrence and acuteness of the "poaching" issue in the life of local communities with their specialization in lake and sea fishing (Lake Razim, Lake Sinoe and the Black Sea western shoreline). In the words of a Lipovan fisherman from Sarichioi,

> *It is not [the local fishing], but the fish resources that won't disappear! It hasn't time enough to reproduce, as it is dramatically exploited. Fishing takes place continuously, in autumn, in spring… And it isn't the trawl, but the gill net that the poachers handle when destroying the fish offspring. Poaching occurs everywhere, not only here, but also in forests…*

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[7] A Decision (no. 589/2001, completed by Decision no. 1175/2001) of the Romanian government is the legislative basis of a "Council of National Minorities" in Romania, set up as a "consulting organism" between the Romanian state and its minorities (with the coordination of the minorities' civic organizations and advising public funds distribution, as the main prerogatives). As to the 2004 "law project" dealing with "the statute of national minorities in Romania", it defines Romania's minorities in terms of "population [inferior] size", with its own "ethnic identity" as expressed by "culture, language and religion"; education, culture, mass-media information, religious liberty, maternal language use, civic organization and representativeness, and cultural autonomy are the 2004 law project's thematic chapters (www.dri.gov.ro).

The reality of such ethnographic facts is also shared by members of other ethnic groups in the Danube Delta. A Ukrainian fisherman told me the following:

> *All the lakes where the fish used to reproduce were dammed. Fish nurseries aren't profitable… […] It is all different when the fish is free, and it can find all sorts of food, as well as sand, mud and grass. On the contrary, it cannot reproduce there* [in the fish nursery] … […] *Recently, for a few years, since the* [1989] *revolution, poaching has proliferated – all sorts of narrow-loop gills have been launched, so the small and the big fish have been caught: now it's over!*

When asked about the perspectives of traditional fishing, a Romanian fisherman (who lives in Jurilovca, too) believes that:

> *Had the poaching stopped,* [the traditional fishing] *would maybe go on… However, my impression is that our society is now tourism-orientated… […] Because of poverty, that's it… The truth is that some* [of the villagers] *have needed to launch* [illegally] *their nets to the lake, while others have got rich from fishing…*

With respect to the same "theme", according to recent ethnographic reports about fishing in the Sfântu Gheorghe village, *Among local people*" […] *a poacher isn't someone who makes a daily living by fishing, but someone else, who gets rich from it*. "The true poachers" are (for instance) those who fish by using electricity generating devices. Then, the same villagers speak of the complicity among the authorities, as regards illegal fishing: *A guarding agent with a small salary would be stupid not to get interested in the poaching of costly fish. That's why the poachers go hand in hand with the guards, and, had a control operation happened, they are announced by phone and keep quiet in their homes.* Some local fishermen come to define themselves as "poaching fishermen", with fishing licenses. According to some of them, there's a lot of poaching.

> *What [kind of] poaching do I do when catching 5–6 kilos fish? To whom could I sell or give it? They say the poaching is going to be stopped, while in fact it takes off just now on! Let them forbid the sea fishing: I will continue to go [poaching]! […] Had I caught such a sturgeon, of about 20–30 kilos spawn, I made it, didn't I?! A kilo [of sturgeon spawn] is 1200–1300 Euros, so had I caught one, I couldn't let it go, you see? And I'll do this despite any control.*

Another fisherman from Sfântu Gheorghe claims that *Laws [in Romania] are badly made just to be transgressed!"* (Balaban et al. 2009: 21–2).

Legislation applicable in pursuit of facts associated with fish poaching is represented by the Law 192/2001 (articles 1 and 2), then modified by the Law 298/2004 and the Emergency Ordinance no. 69/2004, by the Romanian government. Among illegalities thus defined it is the lack of a fishing license, as well as fishing during prohibition periods, unauthorized electric fishing, the illegal trade of fish or fish food products, etc. Statistics of "the 2005–2007 actions against fish poaching" include a number of 855 cases by "the six institutions empowered in the Danube Delta" (namely, the Gendarmerie of Tulcea, the Police of Delta, the Frontier Police, the Administration of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, the Environment Guard of DDBRA, and the National Agency for Fishing and Aquaculture). According to the conclusions of the non-governmental organization Association "Save the Danube and the Delta", as drawn from its 2005–2007 report: Of the 855 cases by the authorities after the approximately 7500 control actions in the Danube Delta, the Tulcea Court only pursued 25 cases, resulting in an efficiency percentage of 3.7%. The remaining juridical solutions were administrative fines (applicable to 933 persons, in accordance with the Art 18 [1] of the Penal Code) and No Penal Pursuit (applicable to 650 persons).

In an interview given to the newspaper *Jurnalul Național* (19 February, 2009), the Romanian governor of the Danube Delta considered the following:

> *The administration of the [Danube Delta] Reserve does not explicitly aim at fighting poaching, nor can we mobilize all forces in view of this. Even if we were to send 100 of our employees in the field, in order to monitor this phenomenon, it would be by far insufficient. I think the solution for fighting poaching is to identify the causes, as it is the lack of discipline and application of legal acts, as they are foreseen, not the lack of guards or facilities, that produces this phenomenon.*

Towards an Anthropological Conceptualization of Understanding Biodiversity

In fact, describing the poaching – in accordance with the Danube Delta inhabitants and with legal ascriptions – is to make clear the gravity of problems associated with the current management of biodiversity in this Romanian "biosphere reserve".

From the indigenous point of view, the deltaic poaching is against all protection of fish reproduction during a year, damages foremost the fish offspring, and is generally the same as "the forest-located" poaching; further aspects of local poaching include the usage of forbidden fishing tools, poverty among some people but also enrichment of others, corruption of guarding and controlling bodies, as well as the premeditated confusion in some stipulations of the official legislation.

From the authorities' perspective, poaching is approached within a precise legal framework, as it concerns the lack of any fishing license or empowerment (as a state-regulated practice), and also the usage of tools agreed by state representatives; the prohibitive policies (in issues like the season of fish reproduction, and the trading of fish resources) are, theoretically, a reaction against "the poachers of the biosphere reserve".

The two "voices" – belonging to the local villagers and to state clerks, respectively – appear to echo with each other as regards the dramatic consequences of poaching over the Delta biodiversity (particularly, at the level of fishing prohibition, along with the continuous need for protecting some fish species). However, the traditional fishermen disagree with the claim of efficiency in the state control of fish reproduction (within fish nurseries), due to low profitability and they argue for the superiority of a natural environment in that matter. On the other hand, the legal specifications are also targeted against some facts like "the closing, narrowing and damming with whatever fishing fences or tools, of the channels and those fishponds communicating with the lakes or flooded fields, by unauthorized persons" (Law 198/2001, Article 56, paragraph 1 [e]),

The most important divergences occur in identifying the causes and socio-economic contextualization of poaching in the Danube Delta. Lipovan, Ukrainian and Romanian fishermen evoke the impoverishment of local communities as an effect of post-socialist transformation, which would turn poaching into a kind of adaptive survival strategy. Many villagers refuse to admit the illicit character of such a form of fishing, which (they claim) would not exceed the limits of a subsistence-assuring practice. Rather, the Delta people do denounce as "poaching" the industrial exploitation of fish, as it took place after 1989 just under the ecological label of the "biosphere reserve".

In my view, the emic-etic anthropological distinction could enlighten some of the controversies currently associated with the "rights" that the inhabitants and authorities of the Danube Delta claim for themselves with respect to the possession or usage of local fish resources. According to the

upper accounts, "poaching" would not only represent sensu stricto a "legal" category, nor a purely "folkloric" one, but would be given some variable meanings depending on particular usages and interests, culturally expressed; thus, "poaching" would mostly appear as an emic notion, as interpreted or reinterpreted from an etic standpoint.

In what follows, the "emics" would comprise arguments, ideas, beliefs and attitudes – pertaining to the local fishermen and authorities, as well – on the manner in which a "management of the deltaic ecosystem" is "good" or "necessary" to be thought of and implemented. "Etics", on the other hand, would reflect those notions and facts that, while being associated with the local biodiversity and intervening irrespective of, or against, emic behaviour, remain either unknown, or denied, by the social actors of the Danube Delta, or are still formulated by some of them on behalf of the others.

Indigenous emic: deltaic fishing has a traditional customary basis and a subsistence economic character, due to which such fishing is not to be equated with poaching.

Indigenous etic: poaching is an illicit practice, associated with non-local industrial fishing and corruption of the authorities or their representatives.

Authorities' emic: fishing in the DDBRA (traditional or rented), should be protected and supervised, so that the discipline in pursuing the law prevents or fights with the degradation of such fishing into poaching.

Authorities' etic: poaching is specific to any unauthorized fishing practice, to the degree it is outside any license and transgresses the restrictions established by state institutions, as exerted or implemented by their representatives.

The above assertions, which I have formulated in accordance with local accounts, do not confer a priori any quality of "legitimacy" or "truth" to the emic and etic classifications in or through which the Delta natives and the state representatives think, believe or physically behave, in relation to their "ancestral realm" or "biosphere reserve", respectively. Instead, based on such discernment of our field references, we could conclude on the reality of some "alternative authenticities" in the Danube Delta, which (after all) reveals the "situated" nature of ethnographic information and the way in which the circumstantial parochialism is responsible for the current conflicting degeneration around that region's natural resources.

Poaching in 2010

In the summer of 2010 I returned to the village of Jurilovca to do research about the Lipovan ethno-cultural identity. This time, I attempted to refresh my personal information concerning poaching in Lake Razim. My particular interest was directed towards checking the actuality in some of my previous ethnographic data, with regard to the local fishermen.

As a result, I was to find poaching as persistent in damaging the traditional fishing and the system of social relationships in the "Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve". Jurilovca fishermen continue to condemn the negative implications of such illegal "occupation" over the fish resources in the area; they associate poaching with encroaching upon the fishing prohibition during the season of fish reproduction, and with purely commercial interests (as lacking any ethics of "biodiversity conservation"); once again, the same fishermen describe the network organization of poachers and their complicity with some (at least) of the authorities. At the same time, the poachers accept (again) poverty as an "objective" cause for many poaching facts, given the increasing number of impoverished people with the advent of the economic crisis.

New accounts I collected in 2010 also indicate another phenomenon – when compared to the ethnographic evidences of recent studies. In Jurilovca today, the fishermen uphold that the legal framing of fish exploitation (against poaching), with the expected authorization of those villagers concerned, could contribute to the regeneration of the natural resources in the region, and, on such a basis, to the improvement of the local economy. Again, they argue on the efficiency of their cooperation with the Delta authorities (such as the Frontier Police), in those situations of direct (but unequal) confrontation with the poachers. These points of view reflect the private fishermen's choice to join the "partnership" of "those in power" – the holders of administrative decision and mediators of the law action –, in the management of their own ecosystem and in the control of small investments (including fishing tools and areas) of each of them. In other words, the etic vision of the Delta villagers now appears to be convergent with the authorities' etic.

Poaching, then, contravenes not only the official legislation of regulation in deltaic fishing, but also the "lake [unwritten] law" (as one of my interlocutors put it) that defends the interests of any local licensed fisherman against trespassers of such interests once they are defined individually (private-centred), and represented within a community framework; although the

poachers may belong to the village fishing community (in its emic recognition), such belonging comes to elude the contemporary "added" values of the local customary law.

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