

*METHOD AND CRITICISM**I Musical folklore*

The coupling of the two terms 'folk' and 'lore' is fairly recent. Ever since the latter was coined (and immediately adopted with enthusiasm) a century or so ago, its precise meaning is still disputed. The 'people's learning' it seems; but already some confusion enters, because in current usage it implies at one and the same time this learning and its object. One says 'folklore researches' as easily as: 'the folklore of France' or 'of Spain'. The object is not yet well defined either. For some it embraces everything that makes up the spiritual and material life of a people, and in that case it approaches sociology, from which its preference for 'tradition' hardly distinguishes it. Others limit the term to a few aspects, even, like some contemporary Finnish or Russian scholars, to a single one – that of literature. On the other hand, the majority only want to concern themselves with 'traditional' facts. But on the borders of the traditional and its contrary, they grope about endlessly and apparently without hope of ever tracing a precise demarcation line. So much so that a Belgian, throwing the handle after the hatchet, has declared: 'It's no good worrying about where folklore begins and ends since we don't know what characterizes it.'

So much for 'lore'; we will return to that. As for 'folk', what exactly does it mean? The nation as delimited by its political frontiers? Or the demographic units enclosed within those frontiers, considered separately, to the extent to which the tangible differences (often fallacious, like language) allow them to be dissociated, as happens in Belgium or Switzerland? Or does it imply the race, revealed by striking common traits, stretching beyond the national territories and outlining, over and above the state frontiers, vast domains where side by side live French or Spanish Basques and Catalans; French, Walloons, and French or German Swiss; or Germans, French and Belgian Flemings, and Dutch? Finally, within these families, real or supposed, with whom is our science concerned? With the whole mass that comprises them? Or only with one or other of its compartments, of its 'social layers' – and if so, which? Or merely with a limited fraction of these layers, a sub-group whose material conditions of existence (occupation, habitat) supposedly isolate it from its surroundings?

According to their temper, their time and – particularly – their workplace, scholars have answered these questions in a thousand contradictory ways. In the West, the closer one approaches the present time, the more one sees them encumbered by the difficulties of objective discrimination, and consequently the more they incline to think of the 'people' as a purely

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administrative entity, a human complex kneaded by the same historical, economic and spiritual forces. One of them warns us that ‘in using this word, townspeople as well as country people must be understood’ (literate as well as illiterate, we might say). Carried to its rigorous extreme, that is the present viewpoint of German science. It is also, though generally more modified, the view of all those observers who do not manage in all sincerity to circumscribe opposing zones of psychic life within their own country. In France, England, Italy – we are told – the phenomenon of an uncultured class entirely shut away from the élite does not exist. If it ever existed (and many doubt it) the uneducated class has slowly become dissolved into the national community.

On the other hand, others would obstinately reply that a ‘primitive’ material and moral condition, more ancient than we realize, survives in our present day. According to Cecil Sharp, the absence of education separates the ‘common people’ (who preserve this condition) and consequently the ‘intuitive exercise of qualities developed without methodical training’ from the so-called cultivated people. Similarly, the laws governing their moral behaviour are not codified but transmitted by heritage, known by all and accepted without a murmur. And these laws bear no resemblance to those followed by the world of educated people.

Obviously, this point of departure is of paramount interest to musicological research and explains the countless uncertainties of the researchers. Like ‘musical folklore’, a recent term, its elders – ‘Volkslied’, ‘chanson populaire’, ‘folk song’ – and its Italian younger brother ‘etnofonia’ all bear upon those people whose artistic practices are being studied. And the more elusive they become, the vaguer the notion of folklore becomes, the wider the frame of the problem becomes, the more sociology comes to bear upon criticism. Those who believe in a coherent human category essentially unlike any other, grant it the privilege of a civilization of its own, embodying original works. These works belong only to it and of necessity they wilt and decay from the moment the society that gave rise to them declines and abandons the ways of living, thinking and feeling that defined it. Others, naturally, maintain that the nation, one and indivisible, only possesses the fruits of the culture of its ‘upper’ classes. That is why the concept of folklore still varies to such a degree from one country to another and from author to author: the need is felt to present the incessant fluctuations in works of synthesis, real repertoires of conjectures and perplexities. Certainly it would be fruitless to start enumerating them here.

On the other hand, it is important to state at the outset that current theories, including the newest, all concern themselves with the same criteria, whether to adopt them or to demonstrate their absurdity. They turn up over and over again from the most contradictory pens, including those of ‘cultivated men’ who, following Davenson’s example, reject any scientific standard and cut the discussion short by declaring as ‘folk’ anything that seems so to

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them, anything that produces a ‘certain impression of being displaced and of characteristic exoticism’, and which gives us that ‘nervous thrill that we get from any encounter with the unexpected’. So we are put into a situation of believing that somehow these criteria fix the discussion and entirely frame the problem of folklore. Let us observe, by the way – we shall shortly see why – that most often it is a matter not of ‘folk music’ but of ‘folk song’ (‘Lied’, ‘chanson’).

Now, this song, depending on whether the theoretician who is dealing with it is ‘romantic’ (according to his contradictors) or ‘scientific’ (according to his own view):

- 1 emanates (or on the contrary *does not emanate*) from a ‘lower’ social class, homogeneous and organized, living to some extent apart from, if not in opposition to the class above it (unless on its own it comprises the whole nation);
- 2 is (or *is not*) generally evolved amid special norms of life and in ignorance ‘of all writing’, or to risk that detested word, amid ‘analphabetism’;
- 3 such conditions only existing – in Europe at least – among the agricultural or pastoral peasantry, it can be (or *may not be*) called ‘peasant song’;
- 4 being transmitted entirely by oral means, it does not merely circulate in set form but ‘multiplies’, that is, in its travels it undergoes many transformations, the signs of its ‘folk’ character (there is general agreement on this point);
- 5 thus, it is ‘collective’, because it serves as spiritual nourishment for a more or less numerous mass of people into which individualities merge and disappear if only by virtue of the uniformity of their preferences (here again, little argument);
- 6 it is (or *is not necessarily*) anonymous: the author is unknown and any hope of tracing him is vain (or *has a good chance of success*);
- 7 it has been (or *has certainly not been*) created by the folk themselves, comprising a single and multiple personality; its source is (or *cannot materially be*) in the ‘melodious soul of the people’ from which it spontaneously sprang;
- 8 thus, it presents (or *does not always present*), in relation to art music, essential and definable ‘technical differences’ (Sharp).

The polemics make use of arguments as numerous as they are varied. So this illiterate social class to which some people attribute a specific civilization is, in the minds of others, merely a theoretical postulate, an abstraction that violates reality, given that in no European country (Western European particularly) does any such gulf cut the nation in two. Nowadays, school education, for instance, is diffused more or less throughout the entire social organism; everyone participates in it willy-nilly, even if by chance they do not know the alphabet. Writing and print are present everywhere or, at least, their effect is generally felt. Between the city, the seat of ‘high culture’, and the countryside, considered primitive and backward, active and uninterrupted exchanges have always been taking place, and, for France, Davenson names for us the agents: social classes such as the rural

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11744-9 - Problems of Ethnomusicology: Constantin Brailoiu

Edited by A. L. Lloyd

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bourgeoisie or the petty nobility; domestic service (servants ‘would receive a veneer of culture in the manor or in the city . . . and would carry it back so proudly to the village’); the clergy, secular intermediaries; the representatives of a ‘minor art that contrives the transition between great art . . . and the taste of humble people’, and that passes from the city to the fairs and markets of the provincial towns; songbooks, whose genealogy goes back to the seventeenth century (Pont Neuf, fit-up theatre of the Pont Saint-Jacques, fairground theatre of Saint Germain, street theatres in general; also the ‘cabarets’, traceable back to the time of Villon and Rabelais: all places producing ‘second rank’ authors); without forgetting all the literates and semi-literates of the countryside, whether of high or low extraction, to whom we owe such a lot of Christmas carols and dialect pieces.

And the movement is just as intense in the opposite direction: imitation of popular forms by the *trouvères*; paraphrases of street-cries by Charles d’Orléans; the use of street song by the sixteenth-century polyphonists (and their forerunners); evidence of the interest of great writers in the ‘villanelles of Gascony’ and pieces like them; rustic ingenuities of the *opéra comique*; *Trianon pastorales*; and finally, in the nineteenth century, a positive infatuation, innumerable pastiches, collections, treatises. In all this, everything is perfectly true.

And yet, the contrary opinion is held by passionate partisans, expressed in categorical terms. ‘It is the illiterate folk,’ exclaimed Tiersot repeatedly, ‘who still preserve tradition’, and he recalls a report by the Director of Music in Tokyo that says categorically that in Japan folk music has remained for centuries among the most ignorant class of society. Similarly – I am quoting at random – in the preface to a collection of songs from the Department of Ain, Gabriel Vicaire complains that ‘nowhere is there such a radical divorce’ between the world of town and village than in France. The most recent writing on these questions, the *Chants des provinces françaises* by Joseph Canteloube, recommends ‘studying in the countryside’ the ‘precious remnants of immemorial traditions’, and he adds: ‘For it is there that true folk song resides, which it would be more exact to call “peasant song”’ (the same term is used by many others). A German maintains that a folk song, in the sense in which we understand it today, is only imaginable once the spiritual unity of a nation yields to social stratification, that is, only when an ‘upper class’ emerges. A sociologist, likewise German, Mackensen, explains to us in striking terms the mechanism of this stratification: at the outset, ‘knight and peasant,’ he says, ‘become differentiated by the inequality of their condition and the disparity of their habits, but they are alike in their equal lack of culture, and thus by an identical representation of the world.’ The sociological picture only changes when a city patriarchy, a new class of laymen, emerges who will not only shape new usages for themselves, but will equally be impelled, for personal and very worldly reasons, to take part in ‘education’, hitherto the professional privilege of the clergy alone. So an evolution begins which segregates the community: the

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‘people’, formerly to a great extent internally unified, are divided into two castes, the ‘ignorant’ and the ‘cultivated’, and this has torn them apart up to the present day.

The sceptics consider that the impossibility of defining this area of illiteracy has for an inescapable corollary the denial of a poetic and musical repertory proper only to itself. And the proofs come down like rain. ‘In Valais,’ Paul Budry amiably tells us, ‘if you think, because there are four on a bench with nothing to do but with a fancy to sing, that you have stumbled on a chance to hear one of those songs of theirs that breathe, one might say, a cosmic melancholy, we bet that they’ll offer you *Ma Normandie* or *Montagnes de Pyrénées*, or even . . . Doret’s *Allons ramasser les épis laissés* or Bovet’s *Là haut sur la montagne l’était un vieux châlet* . . . In Quimper it would be no different: at the festival of the May Queens they sing *Le coeur de ma mie* by Jacques Dalcroze, to the sound of the bagpipe.’ After having dictated some seventy-five songs, a peasant from Quercy confided to Canteloube, ‘I know another one. I’ve kept it till last because it’s the most beautiful one.’ Thereupon, with all his heart he launched into an aria from *Faust*. In Auvergne another prided himself on a dialect version of *Viens, pouppole*, a third on a variant of *O Rose Marie*.

Tiersot has been able to trace the greater part of the contents of the oldest songbooks that he has found, one of which goes back to the eighteenth century, to printed ‘artistic’ models. Doubtless, as is explained, the uneducated forget the authors’ names or pay them no heed; but the authors are none the less real and their products, though deprived of signature, remain their property. Anonymity, completely fortuitous, tells us nothing essential and authorizes no judgement on the nature of the work. Has this work reached us anonymously? That is simply because the maker’s name has got lost on the way. Supposing it were a peasant and that one day we discover his track, does the song cease, from that day on, to be a folk song?

But in the other camp, it is not heard that way. Some proven specialists, exempt from any ‘romantic’ coloration and, moreover, well versed in investigations on the spot, knowing the material by study as much as by experience, if they agree that anonymity cannot be a cause, make of it an inexorable ‘condition’ (Sharp). The Hungarian Laszlo Lajtha, one of the best informed, goes even further: he believes, in fact, that it is not so much a matter of mere anonymity itself that concerns us here, but of the ‘total absence of any author’, of the entirely ‘collective’ character of this kind of manifestation, on which everyone, and Bartók at the head, has insisted in turn. In fact, as we have seen, on this point agreement is complete, except that according to some nothing is collective except usage, unanimous adoption, while their adversaries discover collectivity in the very genesis of these songs, in the manner they arise and are perfected.

And now we are at the heart of the great quarrel that, more than anything else, divides the folklorists and will continue to divide them for a good while

Cambridge University Press

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to come: the problem of creation remains the theme of their liveliest, and sometimes most confused, argument. The uncertainty is double. Firstly, are we to imagine a non-localized creative act, a universal collaboration, to some extent tacit, in one and the same work, a plural brain working as a single organ? Surely not, one answers from this side of the barricade: only a mystic could imagine such a mechanism or believe in it blindly, but sane reason rejects it. It is not the entire mass that creates but only some well-gifted individuals who are poets ('natural poets who are poets without realizing it'), acting, as it were, in the quality of mandatories of the group to which they belong: this group receives their discoveries and spreads them. To which Bartók, that eminent expert, would reply: 'There is absolutely no sign that individual peasants (*Bauerindividuen*) have ever invented melodies, which in fact would be hard to explain from the psychological point of view.'¹

The second question, already touched on because everything depends on it: whatever the manner in which they express themselves, do the folk possess creative gifts, yes or no? For the romantic forerunners and their followers, no doubt at all: ever since Jakob Grimm's memorable sentence: 'Like all good things in nature, folk songs emanate in silence from the tranquil strength of the whole,' they have been repeating that the folk are indeed the 'elusive composer' of the music they sing, 'created by themselves and for themselves'. Folk song, declares Tiersot firmly, is the 'art of the illiterates'. 'The folk make their songs – the folk are the sole initiator' (Canteloube).

Not at all, replies the school that believes itself realist. All art has its dwelling in the peaks of the social edifice, from whence it slowly filters down towards the depths, to prolong an obscure life there, reduced to its rudiments. There, it is no more than the 'improvised echo of a fashionable art', a clumsy imitation, a fallen cultural chattel ('gesunkenes Kulturgut'). Rustic costumes, ornaments, furniture, music are but servile copies of urban masters. The folk can only receive, accept, appropriate, and if some people have thought otherwise, it is because their information was faulty, hence the incalculable number of blunders that an impartial learning is nowadays obliged to correct one by one. Everyone knows by now that *Ich hatt' einen Kameraden* is by Uhland, *Ich weiss nicht was soll es bedeuten* by Heine; *Au clair de la lune* and *Le bon roi Dagobert* are merely commonplaces of the end of the eighteenth century; *Cadet-Rousselle* is sung to a Parisian contredanse tune of the same period. Coussemaker took as 'authentically Thioian' a composition signed and dated 1712 which is a dance; the Vicomte de Puymaigre let himself be deceived by a romance by Loïsa Puget; Maurice

¹ What Bartók actually wrote was: 'Whether peasants are individually capable of inventing quite new tunes is open to doubt. We have no data to go by. And the way in which the peasant's musical instinct asserts itself encourages no such view.' (Béla Bartók, *Hungarian Folk Song* (repr. Albany, N. Y., 1981). (Ed.)

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Emmanuel did not recognize an opéra comique aria; Van Gennep noted, without raising his eyebrows, a song by Maurice Bouchor.

It is true that from such facts most French specialists only intend to draw a corrective to an enthusiasm that confides too much in the miracles of folk genius. But in Germany they have gone much further. There, John Meier has identified the bookish originals of several thousands of pieces, and from that to the conclusion that there is a total inexistence of a specifically rural fund and a complete lack of creative faculty among country people was only a step, or a false step: the *Rezeptionstheorie* boldly took it. Since then, where have the folk found their (spiritual) property? Wherever they can find it, our positivists think, and – once again – they can only find it among the intellectuals and the towns they live in or are dependent on. From there, it flows to the peasants by channels immediately enumerated, for France, and its fellows may be found elsewhere (in Germany, Liliencron sees the equivalent in the educated travelling singers and instrumentalists). A French folklorist has the idea that the creators of folk song were ‘the minstrels, troubadours and trouvères’, a feeling shared by one of his rivals: ‘One may conjecture’, says the folklorist, ‘that the anonymous authors were inspired, for their music, by the plain-chant of the Church, *the only music that was within their reach*, and for the words by common jongleurs.’ We nearly forgot the Church! But Vincent d’Indy certainly remembered it when he reproduced (or rediscovered) the preceding judgement almost word for word. It is from Gregorian cantillation, he declares, that the ‘then religious’ folk borrowed *Pernette*, since in those remote times, ‘*they knew no other music*’ than that of the liturgy.

But supposing folk artistic production really exists, it would undoubtedly bear the marks of its origin, the signs of the singular mentality that produces it. So it would offer, compared to the other – to ‘ours’ as has been said – the distinctive peculiarities, the tangible material elements of its originality. The defenders of the rustic muse have outdone each other in trying to grasp, to describe, to make an inventory of these essential ‘technical differences’ – with what success we shall soon see. A singularly deceptive task in Germany, it is said, since a recently written work from there declares baldly that it is impossible to base any distinction of kind on the musical characteristics whatever they may be. In that case, to what do we reduce the contribution of the common people to a music called, despite everything, folk? To the sole contribution that everyone agrees to recognize it by, that is, to ‘variation’, those multiform alterations that the sovereign right (‘*Herrenrecht*’) make it undergo, that the folk abrogate to themselves. For more than a century all the musicologists have remarked on it. Already, Villoteau had been astonished by it in Egypt, and after him, Ambros remarked that contemporary researchers such as Amiot and Barrow did not hear exactly alike versions of the same Chinese melodies. Since then, without doubt, there is no publication that does not pay attention to the instability of peasant music.

Cambridge University Press

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This time there is a slight disagreement only on the significance of the phenomenon, not on its reality. Some people only see in variation fortuitous vicissitudes, inevitable ‘accidents of circulation’ of no great significance: ‘failure of memory’, arbitrary transfers or mutilations, amplifications due to chance reminiscences. The Germans call this perpetual decomposition and recomposition *Zersingen*. But the prefix *zer* implies a sense of destruction: *zerfallen* – to fall into ruin, be entirely destroyed, *zerfleischen* – to lacerate, to tear to pieces. So a Lied that is *zersungen* is a Lied made of bits and pieces, taken from dislocated prototypes: to follow the path of their decline forms the boundary of the whole task of folklore. Never mind the provenance: everything that is diffused among the folk, Mersmann decided, is folklore. And Gérold follows suit: ‘the first origin of a folk song is really of little importance, it is not necessary for it to have come from the womb of the people, it can come from a bourgeois or country milieu. For it to become “folk” it must spread through different social classes, it must be adopted by them,’ then it ‘loses its individual character and becomes common property.’ It is what Saintyves repeated in 1933: ‘For a song to be a folk song it need not be created entirely by the folk nor even entirely remade or renewed by them. Everything is folk song which, having been created by the folk, by literate or quasi-literate individuals, has been adopted by groups of uncultured peasants and artisans and transmitted from then on, from mouth to ear, over a fairly long time, fifty years for example.’

We were exactly at that stage in 1944: ‘What counts is not the provenance of a folk song but what it becomes . . . The modalities of its genesis are of little account’ (Davenson). At that rate, and provided that print does not continue to re-establish the official text, the *cantique suisse* or the *Marseillaise* would be pre-eminently ‘folk’, no less than the Nazi *Horst-Wessel Lied*, which I mention because Transrhenish musicology has already put it under the magnifying glass. For all that, it is a German, Hensel, who connects these extreme views to those of the enemy group. The expression *Zersingen* rightly displeases him, because he feels it to be at once pejorative and negative, while the common people’s transformations, far from corrupting the ‘incorruptible matter’ of which they are all models, may have the happy effects of a modification (‘*Abwandlung*’) and a renewal (‘*Neugestaltung*’).

That was how Bartók and Lajtha understood it, who even went so far as to seek in variation the key to the great mystery of folk creation. According to the former: ‘Among those whom identical conditions such as language, occupation, temperament, close daily contact, and more or less complete isolation from the outside world bring together into a compact whole, the instinct for variation (“*Variationstrieb*”) operates in an unconscious manner and, by a slow process of unification of the musical elements at their disposal, gives birth to groups of homogeneous melodies.’ And the latter tells us: ‘Folk music is, *par excellence*, an art of variation . . . Folk music produces new pieces by a process of variation . . . The inclination for variation and

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spontaneity . . . assures the strength, the capacity for evolution, the life of folk music, which shows itself to the extent to which it preserves its malleability and ductility.'

Generally speaking, these are the present theses. Quite apart from certain exaggerations, several misunderstandings and sundry curious omissions (which we shall indicate on the way), the least one can say is that they give no objective idea of 'folk' and that in consequence they do not delimit the sphere of folklore in any way. Though they claim a general validity, objections to the criteria deemed romantic, for instance, are all drawn from the observation of a state of affairs at once local and temporary and, after all, only set against the candid professions of faith of their forerunners and their heirs, a description – excessively fluctuating, moreover, in the eyes of the observer – of a particular artistic situation at a given moment. Ceaselessly invoking science, these objections even violate at times the most conclusive assertions: thus, in order that the *Rezeptionstheorie* should stand up, it was necessary to establish an absolutely artificial distinction between old German (and only German) song – 'älteres Volkslied' – which they neglect, and more recent songs – 'neueres Volkslied' – to which they apply themselves, though on all the evidence: 1. the folk repertory of a nation may evolve or degenerate, be enriched or impoverished, but remains, in any case, a whole (unless this nation ceases to be a 'folk' and its repertory to be 'folkish'); 2. one cannot, at one and the same time, set aside the nature of the objects studied and base a scientific discrimination on it; 3. the comparatives 'älter' and 'neuer' indicate the small extent to which this discrimination is consistent even in the minds of those who established it.

In the long run, what is important for us to know is not whether in France, in Switzerland, in Belgium or any of their provinces the disputed theories are verified or not. It is better to elucidate whether, in some part of the world and in whatever epoch it may be, similar causes and similar effects can be or have been ascertained. If so, it has to be admitted that 'folklore in a pure state' really and concretely exists and its analysis would give us the reason for everything in this domain: a definition that might serve as some sort of standard, and would allow us to substitute for relative criteria, perpetually argued over because each person is drawing from a limited personal experience, norms that are the more scientific the more they take into account a greater number of controlled and comparable facts.

Subscribing to the axiom of von Greyerz (and others): 'There are various degrees of folkishness,' we might judge the musical object more or less folkloric, according to the degree in which it approaches or departs from an absolute concept, which would put us in a position to determine, with a tolerable approximation, its 'tenor' of folkloric substance.

Let us begin by the notion of 'folk' understood as an autonomous social category, stranger to all bookish culture, ignorant of written law, mechanical industry, open economy. And let us ask if such a society is to be found or if it

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is nowhere to be seen. One feels some embarrassment to be debating such puerile questions. But after all, there are texts that answer: No. It is as if the folklorists leave to the ethnographers the trouble of reading the explorers' accounts, which would provide them with a thousand examples of these archaic societies. The 'primitives' (which the Germans call 'Naturvölker' to indicate clearly that they live in that 'state of nature' that our musicologists seem not to be able to imagine) offer various types, more or less pure, and each of these societies – including the Kubus of Sumatra and the natives of Central Australia – possesses a music, if not instrumental at least vocal, which is folkloric in the prime and absolute sense of the word. *Volkskunde* (in opposition to *Völkerkunde*) objects that the primitive is only capable of inventing rudimentary musical formulas, shapeless wailing, without the slightest relationship to what we are in the habit of calling a 'melody'. (To facilitate the confrontations, many of the music examples quoted in this work have been transposed, and the values of some reduced by half. Moreover, for reasons that would be tedious to explain, certain barlines have been displaced, or replaced by dotted bars. It goes without saying that in every case the melody itself has not been touched.)



But the musicologist might answer that such 'wailings' are to be found in the mouths of European children, which we shall be referring to again:



Without going as far as Oceania, it is at least forty years since Bartók remarked on the conditions that prevailed at the time of his first researches in certain regions of Eastern Europe: as he pushed on, he thought himself suddenly transported into another world, another age. As he described them, and as we know them, the populations living there hardly knew how to read and write, very rarely moved elsewhere, built their own houses, made their own carts, sheared their own sheep and wove the cloth of their own garments on their own looms, bought hardly anything from town merchants, and in some parts did not even practice money exchange. Between them and the then 'upper' layer, relations were reduced to a minimum, and in fact, up to the recent past, this layer was either completely absent or consisted merely in an administrative nobility which often set at the foot of parchments calligraphed by its scribes the imprint of a thumb as a form of signature. And even in a milieu of this kind, old peoples' memories allow us to reconstitute a world even more patriarchal, whose main features – there as elsewhere – are invariably: closed domestic economy, illiteracy, uniformity of occupation, limited mobility, and in consequence the resemblance, if not