



HyperCultura

Biannual Journal of the Department of Letters and Foreign Languages, Hyperion University, Romania

Print ISSN: 2285-2115

Electronic ISSN: 2559 - 2025, ISSN-L 2285 - 2115

Vol 2, no 1/2013

Multiculturalism and/or Transculturalism (Part II)

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Recommended Citation:

Georgescu, Sorina. “Book Review: ‘United We Stand, Divided We Fall’: Romania and Japan, Two Branches of the Same Tree”. *HyperCultura*. Vol 2.1 (2013).

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Book Review: "United We Stand, Divided We Fall"¹: Romania and Japan, Two Branches of the Same Tree

Reviewed Work:

Sandra-Lucia Istrate, *Folclor românesc și japonez. Proverbe*². București: Editura Victor, 2013. [241 pg]. Print.

In an era when every subject of research means a connection to the world around us, from slavery and nationalism to Multiculturalism and Globalization as such, Sandra-Lucia Istrate's book makes a unique and valuable contribution to the study of Romanian folklore and to the study of folklore in general, through an illuminating comparison with Japan. Through this, she also hopes to 'infect' her readers with her deep love for the Japanese wisdom, education and mentality.

As with any comparative study, our author explores both the common and the opposite characteristics of the two folklores under analysis, referring to the Romanian and Japanese exterior physical life as well as to the two countries' psychology.

In order to achieve her purpose, Sandra-Lucia Istrate organizes the book in eight parts: Forward, three main chapters, a Conclusion, one list of Japanese proverbs which have or may have a Romanian equivalent, one list of those who do not have one, and the Bibliography. The examples she chooses are from the years 1955-2005 and are approached both linguistically and culturally.

As she argues from the start, proverbs are very difficult to analyze, even the most famous ones:

If we analyzed the proverb "Cine fură azi un ou, mâine va fura un bou" (He that will steal an egg will steal an ox) [...] The historian might tell us when robbery was so striking that they started to write about it in the history annals, the psychologist may explain us what robbery once meant and what caused it, the philosopher might find unsuspected meanings beyond the words, the literary critic and the linguist can give us valuable information regarding the structure of this proverb and how it ended up in this form, the priest may tell us how this crime was punished when the Bible meant every person's essential reading, and the old man's experience may clarify to what extent the theoretical or the written elements correspond to reality and when he actually applied this proverb (my translation) (Istrate 7-8).

In her attempts to define the proverb, Sandra-Lucia Istrate starts with a survey of Romanian and Japanese folkloristic research from the last fifty years, continues with explanations regarding the contextual nature of the proverb, and ends with the comparative perspective as such, choosing the relationship between the man and his physical environment on the one side, and his social environment on the other, all three chapters being powdered with important theoretical concepts.

Thus, the first chapter informs us about the origins and the evolution of the proverb, from Hesiod (9th century BC) to Homer in Greece and to 19th century Romania and the building of its national

¹ <John Dickinson: The Liberty Song – 1768 - "Then join hand in hand, brave Americans all! By uniting we stand, by dividing we fall!"; Patrick Henry: public speech – 1799 - "Let us trust God, and our better judgment to set us right hereafter. United we stand, divided we fall. Let us not split into factions which must destroy that union upon which our existence hangs".

² *Romanian and Japanese Folklore. Proverbs*

identity. Major concept here is the Greek 'paroemiology', that is, 'the science of proverbs', followed by several definitions of the proverb as such, Constantin Negreanu's one among them, plus an attempt to distinguish the proverb from the 'saying'. An important point here is the division of the Romanian proverb in several categories according to style and structure: sayings, imperative proverbs, proverbs as such, proverbs expressed in dialogue, metaphor proverbs with emphasis on their constitutive elements (general-particular, symbolic/multiple connotation, simple terms, syntactic stereotypy, nucleus, intonation, rhythm, archaic grammar, the use of the present tense and of the imperative). Our author's major contribution here is the introduction of the Japanese "kotowaza", which may be divided in "short saying", "idiom" and "four-characters idiom" as well as Kunio Yamagita's "Center vs Periphery" theory:

New words are created in the cultural centres, often synonymous, which are taken, step by step, by the periphery and the non-cultural centres, in wave-like structures, which function as the capillary vessels, crossing an interface (here, the geographical area), among fluids (here, language users), the dynamics (here, the result) being dominated by the effects of the surface pressure (here, the distance, the level of culture et cetera) (my translation) (Istrate 45).

She applies this theory to one Romanian and one Japanese proverb, while the rest of the chapter is dedicated to parallel situations regarding the types of style and structure mentioned above, a first compelling and convincing instance of how similar two completely different cultures/folklores can be:

For 'Pielea rea și răpănoasă ori o bate, ori o lasă' (Same thing whether you beat or ignore the evil and scabby skin), we have an additional element, the 'răpănoasă', a Moldavian regionalism. If the proverb had been born in Banat, 'răpănoasă' would have been replaced by 'buboasă' [...] For instance, the proverb 'Katatsumuri no tsuno arasoī' (Snails lock their horns), which means an insignificant quarrel for an insignificant matter, is mostly used with the word 'katatsumuri' (snail) regardless of the area. Still, we can also find the proverb 'Mamai no tsuno arasoī' ('mamai', melc) (translation mine) (Istrate 48)³.

The second chapter characterizes the proverb, in general, in terms of three main contexts: genetic (decoding), generic (how we use it) and locutionary (its form). That is, when analyzing a proverb, we need to know the moment and reason of its birth and its possible source, i.e. how it was influenced by spirituality, traditions, religion, a scholarly, oral or professional environment (cultural-genetic context), when it can best fulfil its role, i.e. as advice, guide, general truths, social consensus (situational-generic context) and when we should best say it in order to send the right message (functional locutionary context): life-matters guide, methods of consolation, practical advice, rules for behavior, call to action, teachings.

Sandra-Lucia Istrate also decomposes the proverb in its structural elements and sees their collective nature, their orality, anonymity and the tradition-innovation relationship as well as their

³Romania: Buturuga mică răstoarnă carul mare (A small leak will sink a great ship)/ Japan: Iwanu ga hana (Silence is flower) (metaphor); Romania: Găina care cânta nu ouă (You cackle often, but never lay an egg)/ Japan: Ōma mo tsumasugu (Even a stallion can shake) (simple terms); Romania: Cine muncește hrană agonisește (He who works earns food/ No cross, crown)/ Japan: Hataraku hito taberu hito (He who works, eats) (no connotation); Romania: Cine împarte azi, parte-și face mâine (He who shares today, will produce his own share tomorrow)/Japan: Yoru neru hito asa sakana nai (He who sleeps in the evening will not have fish in the morning) (connotation); Romania: Unde nu-i cap, vai de picioare (Woe to the mule that sees not her master/ Woe to the feet that have no had)/ Japan: Nō nai atama mo itakunai (Where there is no brain, there is no headache) (syntactic stereotypy); Romania: În copacul fără poame, nimeni nu aruncă cu piatra (Nobody throws stones at the tree without fruit)/ Japan: Rikuchi ni yaki mo inai (Not even a goat on the barren land) (central nucleus – flora/ fauna)

function of expressing indisputable truths. She sees concise and suggestive, stereotypical wording, expositive terms and various types of conclusions: direct, indirect, preference-like and advice-imperative conclusions. She also sees figures of speech, verse, folkloric syntax, key terms from life, history, nature, divinity or concrete/tangible elements, irony, satire, humor, grotesque, ridicule, paradox. Various relationships such as 'big-small', 'love-beauty', 'cause-effect', 'action-response', 'man-woman', 'artisan-craft', 'parents-children' plus the 'ethno-fields' theory derived from Constantin Negreanu make another important element in the composition of the proverbs.

Speaking about structure and meaning, she sees proverbs with identical expressions (tautological proverbs), proverbs expressing a repeated experience, general attitudes, behaviors and reactions, philosophical meditations, moral/educational principles, historical and social events, particularities of a certain era and proverbs inspired by concrete happenings, scholarly, folkloric and ethnographic literature. She also sees remains of lost anecdotes, fables, traditions and legends, song refrains. As themes, she discovers 'death', 'life', 'luck', 'fear', 'perseverance', 'the order of things/events as it should be', the 'human being', 'equality', 'inequality', 'laziness', 'injustice', 'exploitation', the 'rich-poor' relationship, 'money', 'cowardness', 'rebellion', 'church', 'faith', 'friendship', 'education'.

Therefore, the chapter concludes, both countries feature proverbs that have circulated, in translation, through the whole world, Japan included, such as those taken from the Bible, the Antiquity and the Greek and Roman classics. In both countries proverbs are conditioned by the repetition of new, similar experiences and are characterized by the same linguistic contexts – idiomatic, verbal and extra-verbal (Eugen Coşeriu), locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary (J. Austin – speech acts theory)- and share the same three levels: situational, communicational, conclusive (J. Austin – speech acts theory).

Finally, one of the most fascinating moments in this book, the third and last chapter compares two important categories of proverbs from Romania and Japan: "the man and the physical environment" and "the man and the social environment".

In the first case, we have the pleasure to discover the animals that populate the proverbs, as well as their meanings.

Thus, we have mammals: the tiger (Japan: force, savagery, threat, superiority, power), the wolf (Romania: cunning, evil, hypocrite, enemy, keen hearing, greedy, negative solidarity, the fear of consequence, friendship/ Japan: lack of honesty, hypocrisy, falsehood), the lion (Romania: power and courage, superiority), the cow (Romania: abused animal, stupidity, insult towards a woman/ Japan: perseverance, slow motion-slow progress, patience), the horse (Romania: harassed, worn out person, impossible things, rapidity, diligence, intelligence, comic/ Japan: superior man, personality, energy, habitude, reliable person, flexibility), the dog (Romania: loyal friend, an animal on the watch, fear, evil man, barking, trouble, uselessness, selfishness/Japan: fear, coward, loyalty, obedience, fidelity).

We have birds: the goose (Romania stupidity/ Japan: the wilde gander – normality, a hard to obtain thing, order and hierarchy), the turkey hen (Romania: stupidity), the peacock (Romania: stupidity), the crow (Romania: stupidity/ Japan: incapable, overestimate), the hen (Romania: stupidity, much ado about nothing, diligence, life experience), the falcon (Japan: superiority, dignity, power, ability, energy, wisdom, cleverness), the swallow (Japan: small, weak), the sparrow-hawk (Japan: inferior raptor, as opposed to the falcon); the crane and the cormorant (Japan: happiness, prosperity, longevity, fidelity, peace, delicacy, gentleness, precious thing), the pheasant (beautiful but fool, stupid, dirty legs).

We have fish, water animals, insects, reptiles: the fish (Romania: bad beginning-bad end, bad education, to know exactly what to do, effort, abundance/ Japan: the bream – very appreciated, the carp – courage, power, perseverance; the sardine – something insignificant; the loach – remedy against extreme heat); the octopus (Japan: wasteful), the crayfish (what is strange for us, is natural for it); the snake (Romania: dangerous, lousy, mean/ Japan: luck, born predatory, dangerous); the frog (Romania and Japan: ordinary man, stupidity, it doesn't know its place); the bee (Romania and

Japan: diligence, sting); the ant (Romania and Japan: small, weak, insignificant – very significant in group); the fly (Romania and Japan: inferior).

Nature as landscape is made here by the tree (Romania: don't trust what others say, power and protection), the moss (Japan: change, dynamism, movement); the water, the fire, the wind and the cosmic elements.

In the second case, proverbs in both countries refer to responsibilities in the parents-children relationship, to exaggerated love, to the similarities between parents and children, to the men-woman/ husband-wife relationships, to friendship, professions, nationalities and, in the Japanese folklore, we have the very positive image of the samurai.

I will conclude this review with another quotation from Sandra-Lucia Istrate, this time, from the back cover, a quotation which also justifies my own choice for the title of this study: "I hope my book could actually bring together two seemingly diametrically opposed civilizations and cultures, which still share the same existential nucleus characteristic of the entire mankind".

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