

## Rezumat

### **Narațiuni contemporane: folclorul pe Internet**

Studiul de mai jos sugerează o „radiografie” antropologică a mesajelor ce pot fi numite *folclor pe Internet*, deoarece au un număr teoretic infinit de destinatari, nu conțin un mesaj personal pentru un unic receptor, ci dimpotrivă, presupun o mare generalitate și, în final, pot sugera ca mesajul să fie trimis cât mai multor destinatari. Mesajele de acest tip îndeplinesc o parte dintre trăsăturile definitorii ale folclorului, menționate în studiile clasice: caracterul anonim (transmițătorul inițial al mesajului este adesea necunoscut), caracterul sincretic (utilizează concomitent text, imagine și sunet, fiind în format *multimedia*), caracterul tradițional (multe dintre ele sunt construite pe structuri epice tipice pentru narațiunile orale). În același timp, astfel de mesaje impun redefinirea folclorului, deoarece nu sunt transmise pe cale orală și ne-mediată (de la persoană la persoană și de la gură la ureche), ci sunt scrise, mediate de un canal netradițional (Internetul) care, la rândul lui, implică o serie de modificări contextuale.

Mi-am bazat analiza pe un grup de mesaje colectate de-a lungul a doi ani (2007-2008), majoritatea narațiuni. Din punct de vedere tipologic, acestea se încadrează în patru categorii mari: glume, legende urbane, zvonuri și mesaje în lanț. Destinatarii și emițătorii mesajelor sunt adolescenți și adulți, în principal fete și femei (fiind toate mesaje primite de autoarea studiului). Majoritatea textelor sunt scrise în română, dar sunt și unele în limbile engleză, franceză sau maghiară.

Exemplele alese arată vitalitatea folclorului, contrazicând opiniile privitoare la dispariția acestuia, din moment ce demonstrează că și societățile contemporane sunt creatoare și purtătoare de folclor, ca și cele tradiționale. Destinatarii mesajelor compun un public care nu a încetat niciodată să povestească și să se

încredă în puterea narațiunilor de a lua în stăpânire și a semnifica realitatea. Compară narațiunilor folclorice tradiționale cu acelea trimise pe Internet reliefează doar deosebiri superficiale: atmosfera rustică sau medievală, personajele mitice și conflictele care motivau acțiunile eroice au dispărut, iar textele nu sunt la fel de complexe sau ample ca basmele de odinioară. Totuși, în esență, sunt construite pe baza aceleiași logici simbolice și recurg la aceleași elemente narrative: acțiuni, personaje și sisteme de semnificare tipice și registrului cultural împărtășit atât de destinatarii mesajelor, cât și de narațiunile tradiționale.

### Abstract

The present study suggests an anthropological "radiography" of messages that can be named *Internet Folklore* since they have a theoretically infinite number of addressees, do not convey a personal content for a unique recipient; on the contrary, they imply a largely general character and in the end can contain the indication to be sent to as many recipients as possible. Messages of this type verify a series of folklore defining features, mentioned by the classical textbooks: the anonymous character (the message's initial transmitter is often unknown), the syncretic character (they use text, images and sound at the same time, being *multimedia messages*), the traditional character (many of them are built on familiar epic structures, typical for the oral narrations). At the same time, they require a redefinition of the folklore because the conveying way is not oral, non-mediated (man to man and mouth to ear) but written, mediated, through a non-traditional channel (Internet) that in its turn involves a series of contextual modifications.

The group of messages on which I base my analysis was gathered during two years (2007 – 2008) and contains mostly narrations. From a typological point of view, they can be integrated in four great categories: jokes, urban legends, rumors and chain messages. The addressees and addressers were teenagers and adults, mainly girls and women (it's about messages received by this study's author). Most of the texts are written in Romanian but there are some in other languages, too: English, French, Hungarian.

The chosen examples show the vitality of the folklore, contradicting the opinions which supported its disappearance, since the contemporary societies, like the traditional ones are creators and carriers of folklore. The addressee of these messages is a public that has never ceased to tell stories and to trust the power of story to take possession and signify the reality. The comparison of folklore-traditional narrations with those sent through Internet shows only superficial differences: the

medieval or rustic settings, the mythical characters and the conflicts that motivated the heroes' actions have disappeared; the texts have neither the complexity nor the amplitude of the old fairy tales. In essence though, they are built on the same logic of symbolic nature and resort to the same narrative elements – action schemes, characters, significance systems – that exist within the cultural register shared with both the recipient public and the old narrations.

The present study suggests an anthropological “radiography” of messages that can be named *Internet Folklore* since they have a theoretically infinite number of addressees, do not convey a personal content for a unique recipient; on the contrary, they imply a largely general character, and in the end can contain the indication to be sent to as many recipients as possible. Messages of this type verify a series of folklore defining features, mentioned by the classical textbooks: the anonymous character (the message's initial transmitter is often unknown), syncretism (they use text, images and sound at the same time, being *multimedia messages*), the traditional character (many of them are built on familiar epic structures, typical for the oral narrations). At the same time, they require a redefinition of the folklore because the conveying way is not oral, non-mediated (man-to-man and mouth-to-ear) but written, mediated, through a non-traditional channel (Internet) that in its turn involves a series of contextual modifications. These last decades have called for a re-defining of folklore phenomena, the media means consequences on the transmission process being essential.

The analysis of the five classic terms of communication (*who* tells, *what*, *to whom*, through what *channel* and with what *result*) reveals the fact that, in the case of the Internet folklore, the *channel* is the most important, influencing directly all the other elements. Thus, both the sender as well as the receiver has to have certain technical knowledge and equipment: to be able to work on computer (to be literate and e-literate), to have personal computer and/or access to Internet, e-mail address etc. Restrictive on one hand (since it reduces the number of those involved in the communication process), this channel is extremely permissive on the other hand: it dissolves the spatial distances (messages travel on all meridians), the temporal ones (they are quickly transmitted, although the Internet is one of the ways of asynchronous transmission), the social ones (they travel among people of different social groups and classes)<sup>1</sup>, and the cultural ones (the borders between local narrations or traditions, between “high culture” and “popular culture” disappear). The incredible huge domain of the Internet has generated notions like “global village” or “planetary folklore”. At the same time, it has restructured the *collective* character of the folklore: although it

comprises infinitely more individuals, these represent an addition of individualities, not a *community*, since both the sender as well as the receiver sits *alone* in front of the personal computers – position specific to the post-industrial society individual. In the case of the chain letters, the sender is not necessarily the creator of the message, he can take the content of a prior e-mail and send it either in its original form or in a changed one (variant), while the addressee is not unique; this is a situation in which we can also take into consideration the communication formula's term *to whom* in the sense of *how many*. The number of the addressees grows exponentially according to the number of the senders, virtually infinite. A study could take into account how big the different groups to which a message arrives are, as well as the sociological implications of this type of communication in the extended networks. The redefinition of the folklore's collective character involves also the interactive dimension of the Internet communication: from all the modern communication means, this one allows the most vivid direct participation of the users, as opposed to radio, television or journalism, which, at a first stage, were predominantly passive. In time, these too became interactive (after the remote control, live calls, broadcasts with public etc. appeared), but at a lower scale than the Internet.

Within the Internet messages, the narrative is by far the most productive, but the context of the story telling changes inevitably and radically: the communication is not direct anymore, but mediated by the computer, and the consequences are many. The oral culture, a large part of it a "culture of the ear", harmonized with the sound landscapes, is replaced by an "eye culture", in which what you see weighs heavier than what you hear and man does not communicate directly anymore in a physical space with another being, but with a machine in a cybernetic space. More and more used, the term *interface* defines the relationship between people and computers, but also the communication between computers and other computers, and nowadays, between different persons or human groups.<sup>2</sup> The question that naturally appears is whether the Internet destroys the communities or creates new types of communities in which the spatial closeness is not important anymore? In the context of oral narrating, the spatial closeness was alive and profoundly humane, contributing to the configuration of the narrator's identity, while in the case of the Internet story, the narrator's identity is dissolved behind e-mail addresses, names, nicknames, senders' lists. Sending through e-mail implies a transition from the organic communication to the electronic one, a change that involves a series of social and psychological consequences.<sup>3</sup>

The group of messages on which I based my analysis was gathered during two years (2007 – 2008) and contained mostly narrations. From a typological point of

view, they can be integrated in four big categories: jokes, urban legends, rumors and chain messages. The addressees and addressers were teenagers and adults, mainly girls and women (it's about messages received by this study's author from persons with whom she is in correspondence on the Internet). Most of the texts are written in Romanian but there are some in other languages, too: English, French, Hungarian.

### I. Jokes

Most of the messages received and stored during the above mentioned period are the jokes which seem to be the most productive species of all cultural texts sent through Internet. "Typically urban folklore products, newer from historical point of view and little studied here in comparison to the traditional oral species of literature, the jokes are short humoristic narrations. Very often they have a simple structure, reduced to only one episode that describes the structure of a situation and a conclusion".<sup>4</sup> In spite of the apparent simplicity, the species is difficult to define. Along the years, folklorists, anthropologists or psychiatrists have suggested different definitions for it.<sup>5</sup> There are jokes about human groups (ethnic, regional, of gender, socio-professional), about relationships between parents and children, about drunks, dwarfs, historical personalities, about work, sex, about Radio Erewan etc. As it has already been noticed, there is no aspect of life or human category that hasn't been the object of jokes.<sup>6</sup> Besides the species' theme richness, its profound sense of reality is obvious because these texts represent an excellent psycho-social barometer of the historical moment. If, before 1989, the most frequent and appreciated jokes in Romania were the political ones, relatively few of such kind are afloat nowadays. There is no political joke among the samples I have studied, there is only one of the type of "proving the supremacy" with a slight political shade since in the end it refers to the minister of finances, but it could belong to the jokes about ethnic groups or to the ones about professional categories (doctors) as well: *The American doctor says: "In America, the medical studies are so advanced that we take out a kidney from someone, we transplant it to another and 6 weeks later, the latter looks for a job!" The German doctor says: "That's nothing, in Germany, we take out a lung from someone, we transplant it to another, and 4 weeks later, the latter looks for a job!" The Russian doctor says: That's no big deal either, in Russia, we take out half a heart from someone, we transplant it to another and 2 weeks later, both look for jobs!" The Romanian doctor answers: "We cannot compare anything, you are all out-of-date compared to us: in Romania, we took someone without brains and heart, appointed him minister of finances and now all look for jobs!"*

The oldest jokes are the ones with *Bulă*, a representative character for the Romanian cultural memory.

Besides the themes that already belong to the history of the species, there are also many modern jokes, which mock at certain categories, persons or phenomena recently appeared in social life: jokes about blondes, about grannies who work on computers, about globalization, about coincidences or new enriched people.

**Jokes about coincidences:** *In the waiting room of a maternity hospital, three men are waiting. Here comes the midwife and congratulates the first: -Congratulations, you have twins! –God, what a coincidence, I actually work at Minnesota Twins... After an hour, the same midwife comes and says to the second father: - Incredible, you have triplets!!! – I can't believe, what a coincidence, I actually work at 3M Company. The third faints. – What happen to him? Asks the midwife – He works at 7UP...*

Jokes about globalization: *Question: What is the best definition of globalization? Answer: Princess Diana's death! Question: How so? Answer: An English princess with an Egyptian lover has an accident in a French tunnel, with a German car with a Dutch engine, driven by a drunken Belgian, intoxicated with Scottish whiskey, closely followed by Italian paparazzi on Japanese motorcycles. The princess was attended by an American doctor with Brazilian medicines. And this joke is sent to you by a Romanian, and you are reading it on a Korean monitor, assembled by workers from Bangladesh, in a factory in Singapore, transported on ships by Indians and unloaded by Sicilians, transported again in trucks driven by Mexicans and finally, sold to you by Jews.*

Jokes about the new enriched: *Now, a Gipsy goes fishing by car, a Mertz 600 SEL. He comes out of the car, takes the last model of golden reel with silky thread and diamond needle and starts fishing. Suddenly, a wonder: he catches the golden Fish. Phiiiiiii... The Fish says: "You know, I am the golden fish with those 3 wishes..." And the Gipsy: "WHAT DO YOU WISH FOR?"*

The transparency of the e-mails on the Internet makes visible a part of the addressees, revealing a segment of the delivery network, proving that jokes have an international circulation. This can be also observed from the theme domain, from their language (some of them in English or French), from the senders' addresses (people living in Romania, Israel, Canada etc.).

Jokes do not represent a new species or a modern category of the popular culture; short humoristic narrations have existed since Antiquity, both in written and oral literature.<sup>7</sup> At present, there are specialized sites with collections of jokes, some interactive, accessible on the Internet.<sup>8</sup> Their on-line publishing has major implications on

orality, a defining characteristic of the species (and of the folklore in general). Yet, they don't circulate exclusively in written form but, in parallel, are orally transmitted, the latter form allowing the existence of variants and of jokes *sessions*, told within a group where all present persons participate, and the parts (Transmitter-Receiver) alternate.<sup>9</sup> An example: I heard the joke about the new enriched ones, given above, first orally, and few months later I got it from someone else via Internet. In the oral version, the main character was an extremely rich political figure, well-known through his stupidity and lack of knowledge. In its written version, he is replaced by the Gipsy, the written text moving the emphasis from the area of recently enriched politicians to the one of the ethnic groups. The oral narration was by far richer in significant details, much more juicy and vivid (the Fish asked 3 times without the Fisher paying any attention, being much too busy with his golden fishing instruments; only after the three attempts, the human character would answer, bored: *Say what you want!*) being accompanied by non-verbal and para-verbal marks: gestures, mimicry, intonation. Moreover, it respected a certain *usage* specific to the species, the actual joke telling being preceded by a checking formula, more precisely, by the question whether the interlocutor is familiar or not with the joke to be told: «Do you know the one with ... ?», «Have you heard the one with...?» This was necessary, because a well-known joke would not be interesting anymore.<sup>10</sup> Compared to this, the written form is shorter (condensed, stripped by details), it doesn't usually allow variants and it does not require a *usage*. However, if the jokes travel through Internet between two or more friends, the receiver can become transmitter at a certain moment, and answer with another joke (or group of jokes) to the one from whom he received such texts, the process of diffusion being comparable to the one of oral variants, in which each becomes transmitter of the jokes heard in a different context, in the presence of other individuals. The major differences within the Internet transmission are given by the dimensions of the involved human groups (a lot bigger than in the case of oral communication) and by the disappearance of the spatial distances, which contribute to the globalization of jokes.

## II. The Urban Legends<sup>11</sup>

„It seems that the «modern urban legends» are not actually legends. Moreover, they are neither modern, nor urban. Several researchers have demonstrated that many contemporary legends represent actually the last version of some much older stories, hidden under the appearance of a recent event [...]. The stories wouldn't be recently invented but only recently collected. These stories contain nothing exclusively urban.

They have equivalents in the rural areas where they also circulate.[...] The majority of the analyses carried out on the circulation of these «urban legends» emphasize symptomatic features of rumors, discovered long time ago. For example, the English folklorists notice that the narration source is, in most of the cases, a friend of a friend (FOAF). And exactly this is one of the general features of rumors. At the same time, the folklorists insist on the realism intention which contributes to the truthfulness of the affirmations, another element specific to rumor.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, the French sociologist Jean-Noël Kapferer includes the urban legends in the category of rumors of the type „exemplary stories”.<sup>13</sup>

Being placed immediately after jokes from the point of view of the transmission number and frequency, they constitute a folkloric species, extremely productive in contemporary society. “The urban legends are stories often made up of only one episode: an event, an incident whose hero is a common individual. This is different from the traditional stories whose hero, endowed with extraordinary qualities, takes part in many complex actions which require the presence of certain supernatural elements, being triumphant in the end and getting married to “live happily ever after”. The texts’ shortness is not necessarily an element of modernity. The Biblical parables – short, too – are ancient narrative forms”<sup>14</sup>

### **Example A...story**

*It is said that a few years ago, a man punished his 5-year-old daughter because she had wasted a very expensive golden wrap paper. The man was short of money and became even angrier when he saw his daughter had used the paper to decorate a box under the Christmas tree. However, the next morning, the little girl brought the present to her father saying: “This is for you, daddy.” The father was ashamed of his reaction from the day before, but he became angry again when he saw the box was empty. He said to her in a severe voice: “Don’t you know, young lady, that when you offer a present to someone, you have to put something in it?” The little girl looked at her father and said with tears in her eyes: “Daddy, the box is not empty. I blew so many kisses until it was full”. Her father remained astonished. He kneeled down, embraced his daughter and asked her to forgive him for his useless anger. Shortly after that, the little girl died in an accident and her father kept that golden box by his bedside for the rest of his life. And every time he felt discouraged or had to overcome difficult situations, he would open the box and take an imaginary kiss, remembering the love his daughter had put in there. In a true sense, every one of us, as humans, receives a golden box with the unconditioned love and kisses from our children, family, and friends.*

*We cannot have anything more precious than that. Now, there are two options: 1. Send this message farther 2. Delete it and pretend it didn't touch your soul. As you can see, we have chosen option 1. The children, family and friends are like the angels who help you get on your feet when you are in trouble, to remember how to fly...*

I received this message through Internet in two versions, from two different senders, both adults, women, around Christmas (December 2007). The first version contained only the story in itself, the second had also the "two final options" with the urge to carry on disseminating. The text didn't mention the author's name, had neither musical background nor images, arriving as simple attachment (Word doc.). I won't discuss the grammar mistakes (lack of sequence of tenses, annoying repetitions, clichés, word-by-word translations) generated by the awkward translation of the text from a foreign language (probably English) into Romanian, as well as by the low cultural level of the person who drew it up. Features specific to folklore narrations are still visible: the opening expression („the story says that...”), generic characters (a man, the little girl). Like in all urban legends, the actors are anonymous but well defined from the social point of view (a man in need of money, a 5-year-old girl) to serve as surfaces of projection (the man can be any parent). As in the old folkloric narrations, the text contains a moral lesson in the end. The above-mentioned story requires 6 stages, like most of the exemplary stories:<sup>15</sup>

- Introduction („The story says that...”)
- Delimitation in time/space („a number of years ago”)
- A usual, every day life scene („a man punished his little girl”)
- An unusual event (the girl gives the father an empty box and at short time she dies)
- Consequence (father understands the meaning of the gift)
- Explanation/moral: the girl's box symbolizes the unconditioned love every one of us receives from the close ones.

The content of the text resorts mostly to a symbolic vocabulary: filial love, parent-child relationship, money problems (the poor man), the gift and the gesture of giving, the angelic purity, the fragility of the human being – ancient motives of circulation carried by the text which places them in a contemporary (Christmas tree, the presents under the tree, the golden wrap paper) yet vague setting: no specific place or time is mentioned, the initial clue *a number of years ago* being indefinite. In the analyzed context, the urge to send on the story blends with the moral in the end, being yet different (though there aren't well-defined borders between the species) from the messages that „bring luck”, which are *chain* transmitted, within which the expression “Send on this

message" often represents the nucleus that motivates the text, frequently reinforced by a whole system of promises and punishments.<sup>16</sup>

*The urban legends* (also named *exemplary stories*, *contemporary legends*, *modern legends*, *asmut*<sup>17</sup> etc.) demonstrate all the characteristics of the popular literature, including orality, because "the story telling, the verbal communication continues to occupy an important place in the relationships between people. [...] Other new types of transmitting, inexistent in the rural societies were added to this one. The urban legends are published today in newspapers or books, appear at the poster board, circulate as comics, form the epic nucleus of certain movies, their content is discussed in different TV programs, can be found on the Internet".<sup>18</sup> But the exclusively oral circulation allowed a visible intervention of each witness, who would leave his/her stylistic mark on the text. Unlike the oral ones, the versions written and sent on the Internet contain minimum of modifications. These consist of: musical images/pieces that accompany the written text, illustrating and explaining it, making the receiver more sensitive; introducing some completions in the beginning or end of the text, never in the narration's contents.

### III. Rumors

"The oldest way of informing in the world", according to Jean Noël-Kapferer<sup>19</sup>, rumor came to the researchers' attention quite recently, being observed especially from sociological and psycho-sociological point of view. For Allport and Postman, the first who studied this phenomenon, rumors represent statements regarding the latest events, meant to be believed, spread about from man to man, usually from mouth to mouth in the absence of concrete data that would confirm their exactness<sup>20</sup>. Taking into account their conclusions, as well as the ones of the American sociologist of Japanese origin T. Shibutani<sup>21</sup>, Septimiu Chelcea suggests a comprising formula to sum up the complex phenomenon of rumors:  $Z = f\{Sx [Ix A/P]\}$ . "The emergence of rumors in a given social context (S) depends on the importance of the event (I) and ambiguity (A), factors that intensify the rumor, and on certain personality features (P) that hinder it (the capacity of criticism, externalism etc.)."<sup>22</sup> Kapferer's research showed that rumors' circulation is based on three essential conditions: credibility, the appearance of truth and the interest for the information's content. Their circulation appears as a fear and uncertainty drainage system when facing ambiguous situations. At the same time, their circulation is correlated with the form, quantity, quality and credibility of the official or formal information. The poorer, less complete or credible the latter is, the more intense the rumors' spread. Their circulation is restricted when

there is the possibility of checking the information.

The rumor as folkloric act was “X-rayed” on Romanian ground by Constantin Eretescu.<sup>23</sup> In the case of this species, essential is the relationship between text and context, more exactly, between its content and the communication process. In this respect, the Romanian ethnologist defines rumors as statements that “transmit an invalidated piece of information, [...] are born and circulate in circumstances in which the information dissemination channels are either blocked, or discredited, when nobody is fully informed and when there are no means of confirming the truth.”<sup>24</sup> Messages of the rumor type received on Internet during the previously mentioned period refer to a second (fictitious, of course!) nuclear explosion at Cernobâl on May 23rd, 2007, to the kidnapping of children for organs traffic, to the AIDS infected syringe needles intentionally placed in movie theatres or discos, to the phantom of the girl hanged in the closet, who haunts in the middle of the night<sup>25</sup>, to the imminent inversion of geographic poles and the close ending of the world, to the lethal viruses for the personal computer etc.

The rumors regarding the children kidnapping have a recurrent character, they appear periodically and often generate outbursts of collective anger.<sup>26</sup> The theme reappears at certain periods of time, and those who spread it are not necessarily familiar with the situation, they have found it out from media. At the same time, it also exists in the Romanian and European folklore (the ogre who steals children). Here we have a very old narrative structure, in a modern atmosphere and scenery: the organ traffickers, enriched overnight, criminally kidnap children, take them by an ambulance (black!) to a cottage in the forest. A topos that reminds us of Hansel and Gretel or of Snow White and merciful hunter who took the organs of a wild animal to the Queen!

The quickest and most comprising form of communication, the Internet makes possible for a rumor launched and disseminated through this network to reach everywhere in the world. However, the written channel is not unique; it often doubles the traditional one. For example, the rumor about the second explosion at Cernobâl was spread on the same day both orally and on the Internet, noticing that the oral transmission was based on the written text, thought to be the very “proof” of the disaster. The writing was invested, like so many other occasions, with the force of the real fact, absolutely certified through a superposition – typical for the folkloric thinking – between the word and its referent.

Like jokes, rumors have an important psychosocial function; they exteriorize anxieties, worries, and very diverse problems of a society in a strictly determined moment. “They circulate not only a piece of information, true or false; at the same time, they

express the newsmongers' mood, voice their anxieties and wishes. The rumor conveys an attitude."<sup>27</sup> A folkloric-traditional one, since it transforms the real world into a story through processes of narration and fiction. "To circulate, rumors need no truth. Their logic is not the one of reason"<sup>28</sup> but the one of narration. They fill the story with the anxieties of the contemporary man: incurable diseases (AIDS), computer virus, dangers to which our children are exposed nowadays, richness gained through murder etc.

#### IV. Chain Messages

The electronic chain letters are also frequent, circulating under various forms. Usually, they contain a touching message and require their transmitting to as many addressees as possible (after certain conditions were fulfilled: a wish, a prayer etc), then they enumerate the misfortunes that would fall upon the recipient if he/she didn't send the message farther. A typology of the electronic letters could include: letters that bring good luck; pyramidal scheme (it promises profits, being made of a chain of persons recruited to participate with money and to enlist new members); charity letters; prayer letters; urban legends; anti-chain letters.

Messages that promise to bring good luck represent the oldest type of chain letters. They circulate from a very long time and take advantage of the electronic form since the computer birth.

#### Exemplification:

*If you delete the presentation after you've read it...you'll have a year of bad luck!  
But...if you send it to (at least) two friends... you will have 3 years of good luck!!!*

*Do you know that those who seem to have a strong heart are actually weak and more susceptible?*

Do you know those who spend their time protecting others are the ones who actually need to be protected by someone?

Do you know the three most difficult sentences to say are: I love you. I am sorry. Help me

Do you know those who wear red are more self-confident?

Do you know those who wear yellow are the ones who enjoy their beauty?

Do you know those who wear black are those who want to be unnoticed and need our help and understanding?

Do you know that the help you offer doubles itself?

Do you know it's easier to declare your feelings in writing than to tell someone?

But do you know it would be more valuable if you told it to his face?

Do you know if you ask something with faith, the wish comes true?

Did you know you could make your dreams come true (like how would it be to fall in love, to be healthy, to get rich), if you asked this with faith? And if you truly knew, you would be surprised of what you could do.

But don't believe everything I tell you until you yourself try, if you know someone who needs something from what I've said and you know you can help him/her, you'll see the help will come back doubled.

Today the Friendship Ball is on your playground; send it to those who are really friends (including to me, if I am one of them). Don't feel bad if none of them sends it back to you, you will find out you have to keep the Ball for other persons who want.

#### THE FRIENDSHIP BRACELET

OK, here is what you have to do. Send this to all your friends. But you have to do this during the first hour after you read this message! Now...MAKE A WISH! Do it now! It's the last chance! I hope you made the wish! Now send the message to:

- a person ~ *your wish will be fulfilled within a year*
- 3 persons ~ 6 months
- 5 persons ~ 3 months
- 6 persons ~ 1 month
- 7 persons ~ 2 weeks
- 8 persons ~ 1 week
- 9 persons ~ 5 days
- 10 persons ~ 3 days
- 12 persons ~ 2 days
- 15 persons ~ 1 day
- 20 persons ~ 3 hours

The above written text circulates as a power-point presentation, accompanied by images animated rather clumsy, which temporize the reading. Its circulation is rather intense; I myself got it in my inbox 5 times during one and a half year. Built on two levels – one of the “teachings” of the “Do you know?” type and another one of “the arithmetic of luck spreading” – the presentation contains a number of truisms issued by persons with low cultural and educational level. It is symptomatic that between the two levels there is no visible logical connection but a “mixture that short-circuits reason, burying the mental in the «folklore» or confused «religion» of irrational hope. This, on one hand, in some contrast with everything we conceptualize as modernity

and ideal of civilizing evolution; on the other hand, according to what we label as irrational and primitive psychism, as culture or religious, magic, folkloric mentality.”<sup>29</sup>

The message is structured around the concepts of *good luck* and *bad luck*, specific to the externalist (manner of thinking that places on the outside the causes of the events or failures that take place in the individual’s life, starting with the idea that the master of life is not him, the individual, but an external authority), folkloric-traditional thinking. Between the two extremes (good and bad luck), the sent message fulfils the role of a magical object: it is capable to perform miracles through its exceptional power, to transform the recipient’s life, turning the bad luck into good luck (or the other way around!). Like an enchanted adjuvant from a fairy tale, the message can fulfill a strong wish but in a certain manner. The recipient has to comply with certain conditions, comparable with the tests in the fairy tales: to send the message to all the friends, not any time, but in a strictly determined period: no more, no less than within an hour from the message reading – because later, just like in fairy tales, its supernatural power disappears! A strict arithmetic follows– actually, without any rational logic – that ascribes the number of addressees to which the “enchanted letter” has been sent to the number of months, days and hours in which your wish comes true.

The messages of this type have been recently commentated and pertinently analyzed by Marin Marian-Băla<sup>o</sup>a.<sup>30</sup> In a series of articles dedicated to *The Letter or Chain Luck*, the ethnologist has noticed that behind these texts “all the «logic» of illogic, irrational faith, hopes, despair and absurdity of religious-magic type are hidden.”<sup>31</sup> Regarding diachronically the phenomenon, he observes how these texts’ existence and proliferation are built on the power of the written word, on the “old belief of the illiterates’ in the writing’s, letter’s, note’s, book’s power of events’ release. Writing and reading were sacred licences (practised especially by monks and priests) during Middle Age, the oath or curse on “Book” was a method that confirmed, improved, saved or, on the contrary, destroyed destinies. The spreading, especially in the rural areas, of writings and letters offering prayers of maximum efficiency, requiring penitence or religious fasting and feasts started during the first half of the 20th century. The condition: either to keep these writings and letters or to copy and spread them more or less anonymous, more or less public. I would like to emphasize, their role, efficiency or goals were rather religious. [...]. However, the .pps under discussion is just the last form a very old phenomenon has taken, that is, the traditional spam of the lucky letters. Some of them relied on the paupers’ religious faith, others, on the gullibility of superstitious, greedy people, of those dependant of the «gift’s economy» (or charity), others, on the illusion of lonely, helpless people that they could influence

or help others' destinies".<sup>32</sup>

There are also "nude" texts on the Internet, i.e. "chain letter" type messages that are not accompanied by images and music, these being the closest writings to the "classic, traditional, typical «lucky letter» which filled the Romanians' mail boxes during the second half of the 20th century. It's about a laic letter, typical for the second half of the 20th century, which took the idea of spreading – circulation of a written text that, during the first half of the 20th century had a religious character [...]: Saint Anthony's Letter, a text [...] meant to bring luck by its anonymous and continuous multiplication and distribution. This text was thrown on the cities' and villages' streets, sidewalks and lanes or even in the people's yards. The fashion of discreet spreading and distribution in the mail boxes was generalized later, in the 60's."<sup>33</sup> After 1990, their handwriting started to be replaced by typing, later on by Xerox. "Back then, the title of all was equally different from and similar to the present pps, *With Love Everything Is Possible*"<sup>34</sup> **Conclusion**

The difficulty of drawing firm lines between these neo-folkloric species was signaled out many times, researchers noticing the possibility of a text to migrate from one species to another or to be placed in one category or another. Some typologies include the urban legends in rumors<sup>35</sup>, others in chain messages.<sup>36</sup> Thus, narrations like *The Ghost of the Girl Hanged in the Closet*, the *Black Ambulance* can be considered both as urban legend and as rumor, and a text like the one about the quick enriching by message sending can be considered a rumor or a chain message. It seems that jokes are the most stable among the folkloric species from this point of view, although some texts appear to be slid from rumors and/or chain messages to jokes. Older and newer species can be found on the common ground of narrations: "both rumor and legend apparently transmit a fact and require the auditorium to accept it as truth. It is possible that a series of stories about historical characters to have circulated initially as rumors, becoming legends only after the generation that could have borne witness about the false information, disappeared. Included in the popular culture's patterns, standardized, rumors gradually become stories – historical legends. The Hero loses its individual features for the general features of the popular hero: the robot-portrait takes the place of photography. That things happened like that is proved by those ballads whose heroes are well-known outlaws, sometimes bandits and robbers. A few generations later, in the epic songs that narrate their adventures, they invariably appear as fighters against social, foreign oppression etc. The transformation into the «Robin Hood» type was total and quick."<sup>37</sup>

The chosen examples show the vitality of the folklore, contradicting the opinions

which supported its disappearance, since the contemporary societies, like the traditional ones are creators and carriers of folklore.<sup>38</sup> The addressee of these messages is the “popular public, a public that has never ceased to tell stories and to trust the power of story to take possession and signify the reality”.<sup>39</sup> The comparison of folklore-traditional narrations with those sent through Internet shows only superficial differences: the medieval or rustic settings, the mythical characters and the conflicts that motivated the heroes’ actions have disappeared; the texts have neither the complexity nor the amplitude of the old fairy tales.<sup>40</sup> In essence though, they are built on the same logic of symbolic nature and resort to the same narrative elements – action schemes, characters, significance systems – that exist within the cultural register shared with both the recipient public and the old narrations.

The texts sent through Internet on which I focused belong to narrative understood in its broad sense, not as literary genre but as “category of thinking”.<sup>41</sup> Their analysis revealed a *narrative consensus*, existent in every society. Like myths, the exemplary narrations, jokes, rumors and chain messages offer a “pattern of intelligibility and a coherent articulator way of the world around us”.<sup>42</sup> In their way, they give sense to the happenings of the world.

More and more present in e-mails, such texts are received, read, sent farther and eventually belonging to our every-day life. Though many of them are unwanted messages (spam), they suggest possible reading grids of the world we live in.

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> It has been spoken a lot, for example, about the Internet potential as agent of democratization. See Briggs –Burke 2005, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> See Briggs – Burke 2005, p. 288.

<sup>3</sup> In *The World on Paper* (1994), the Canadian psychologist David Olson analyzes some of these, launching the concept of *literate mind* „through which the use of writing and reading changed the way we think about language, mind and world, from the apparition of subjectivity until the imagining of the world as a book” (apud Briggs – Burke 2005, p. 22). Another Canadian researcher, Walter Ong, known for his *Orality and Literacy* (1982), „emphasized the mentality differences between oral cultures and those written or chirographic, differentiating between the thinking based on orality and the one based on chirography, on printing and on electronics, noticing for example the role of writing in the decontextualization of ideas; in other words, its role in extracting the ideas from the situations of the type face-to-face in which they were initially expressed, to be applied somewhere else” (apud Briggs – Burke 2005, p. 288).

<sup>4</sup> Eretescu 2004, p. 284.

<sup>5</sup> For Cathy Linn Preston, the joke has a number of specific characteristics: «A fictional-verbal sketch, visual or kinetic - , whose goal is to produce a comic effect in the environment in which it is interpreted. » The symbolic inversions in arts and society can be defined in Barbara Babcock’s terms as «any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, annuls or presents any alternative to the generally accepted codes, norms and values, be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious or social and political.» Identical or similar techniques can be identified in jokes. For Victor Turner, they are accepted forms of clownery, and for Freud, forms of disinhibit that have either a

hostile function (aggressiveness, satire or defense), or an exposing one." Eretescu 2004, p. 284.

<sup>6</sup> See Eretescu 2004, p. 285.

<sup>7</sup> „Aesop's or Boccaccio's writings, sketches of *Commedia del'Arte* or *1001 Arabian Nights*, anecdotes, modern sketches, epigrams – all have opened the way for this genre. There has been a constant exchange of themes between these cultural forms and jokes, they have mutually supported and in parallels evolved." Eretescu 2004, p. 288.

<sup>8</sup> www. bancuri.net – Collection of Romanian Jokes; .biz – quality jokes, jokes for intelligent people; – a rich collection of jokes to everybody's taste; www. bancuri.acasa.ro – The best jokes in Romania, jokes for all genders; [www. bancuri.w5.ro](http://www.bancuri.w5.ro) - Jokes – A collection of jokes grouped on categories, among which Albanians, Alinuța, Transylvanians, Blonds and many others. You have a joke and want to make it known? ... - Jokes and many other funny stuff. [www.glumetzul.ro](http://www.glumetzul.ro) – The Newest Jokes, Poems, Fun Pictures, Animations, Texts etc.

<sup>9</sup> „The active participant, the one who tells the joke becomes a passive participant, receiver of the jokes told by someone else, to later pass again to the position of the active participant etc." Eretescu 2004, p. 298.

<sup>10</sup> Eretescu 2004, p. 298.

<sup>11</sup> „The term „urban legend" appeared in spite of its being vague and even inaccurate. Some stories circulate in the rural area or tell about events from this area, many modern narrations have their deep roots in the traditional folklore. Moreover, many story tellers do not believe what they narrate. The legends are told to be believed." Eretescu 2004, p. 310.

<sup>12</sup> Kapferer 1993, pp. 291-292.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 292.

<sup>14</sup> Eretescu 2004, p. 310-311.

<sup>15</sup> See Kapferer 1993, p. 294.

<sup>16</sup> See section IV of the present study: **Chain Messages**.

<sup>17</sup> *Asmut* is a term created by the writer John Mc Phee from the initials of: *an apocriphal story much told*, apud Eretescu 2004, p. 310.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> See Kapferer, 1993.

<sup>20</sup> See Gordon Allport, Leo Postman, *The Psychology of Rumour*, NY Russell & Russell Inc., New York, 1947.

<sup>21</sup> T. Shibutani is of the opinion that the rumor is „the product of importance and ambiguity": if the importance is 0, we definitely cannot speak about a rumor; the same goes for ambiguity: the official declarations eliminate the rumors, while their lack supports the apparition and circulation of rumors. Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improved News. A Sociological Study of Rumor*, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., New York, 1966, p. 29, apud Chelcea 1993, p. 20.

<sup>22</sup> Chelcea, 1993, p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> Eretescu 2004, pp. 300-309.

<sup>24</sup> Eretescu 2004, p. 300.

<sup>25</sup> Here is the story that can be placed in the category of urban legends or rumors, a variant my daughter received through Internet: "Exactly 13 years ago a girl was hanged in the closed by a psychopat who put her eyes out and wrote "13" on her... now that you've read this message, the girl

will come and haunt you every night at 00:13...to save yourself send this message once to everybody on your contacts list until 00:13... take care, it has been checked!)))) I won't risk.... very stupid but I don't risk."

<sup>26</sup> Chelcea 1993, pp. 14-15.

<sup>27</sup> Eretescu 2004, p. 303.

<sup>28</sup> Chelcea 1993, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Marian-Băla<sup>o</sup>a, *Scrisoarea sau lanțul norocului* (III), 24.10.2008.

<sup>30</sup> Marian-Băla<sup>o</sup>a, *Scrisoarea sau lanțul norocului* (I-V), in „Săptămâna financiară”, nr. 180-184/ 10.10.2008 - 07.11.2008, p. 44 of each issue.

<sup>31</sup> Idem, *Scrisoarea sau lanțul norocului* (I), in „Săptămâna financiară”, nr. 180, 10.10.2008, p. 44.

<sup>32</sup> Idem, *Scrisoarea sau lanțul norocului* (II), „Săptămâna financiară”, nr. 181, 17.10.2008, p. 44.

<sup>33</sup> Idem, *Scrisoarea sau lanțul norocului* (IV), „Săptămâna financiară”, nr. 183, 31.10.2008, p. 44.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>35</sup> See Kapferer 1993, pp. 291-295.

<sup>36</sup> See <http://www.avira.ro/ro>.

<sup>37</sup> Eretescu 2004, p. 309.

<sup>38</sup> Eretescu 2003, p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> Coman 2003, p. 48.

<sup>40</sup> See Eretescu 2003, p. 15.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, p. 49.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem.