

SOME THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL INSIGHTS INTO THE JIGSAW PUZZLE OF ETHNOCARTOGRAPHY

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Abstract: The immediate impulse for this paper came from the author's empirical involvement with the topics concerning "social culture" while dealing with ethnocartography used in a historically oriented ethnology. This auxiliary heuristic technique is being observed as the jigsaw puzzle of the "old" and the "new" theoretical commitments in Croatian ethnology in the 1970s and 1980s. Although ethnological cartography (not having the methodological power to holistically depict culture, but to particulate/atomize it) represents only one of the possible ways of gaining knowledge in ethnological research, on the basis of two main thematic wholes – the concept of history and the object of research – the author's aim is to defend those principal characteristics of ethnocartography deemed indispensable, the ones that sustain and defend its relevance and existence.

Keywords: ethnocartography, ethnological atlases, Croatian ethnology, social culture, theory, methodology, concept of history, object of research

The immediate impulse for this presentation came from my many years of empirical involvement specifically with topics concerning "social culture" while dealing with questionnaires from the *Ethnological Atlas* of former Yugoslavia (as part of the bigger European project) at the *Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology – Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zagreb*. This paper is empirically and theoretically based on some problems connected with ethnocartography – the possibility of comparative analysis and drawing conclusions on the basis of geographical distribution of given phenomena – as an auxiliary heuristic research tool, an instrument used in a historically oriented ethnology. It is placed, methodologically and theoretically, in the context of Croatian ethnology of the 1970s and 1980s, a time of a kind of crisis of ethnology, as we used to call it at the time. The Greek word *crisis* (debate, controversy, dispute, estimation, critique etc.) is exactly what was occurring in Croatian ethnology through those years with, roughly speaking, two different ethnological approaches, the "old" and the "new". Therefore, this auxiliary heuristic technique is observed as the jigsaw puzzle of the "old" and the "new" theoretical

commitments in Croatian ethnology of a time when it has been looked down as an old-fashioned, inappropriate, unimportant, inexact field of work not based on historical premises. T. Schippers, one of the two organizers of our Conference in Szeged, stressed the similar point¹ in his introductory note to the Conference. Before I try to develop my argument, let me state that it was good to be at the 2009 SIEF conference and reunite in the International Ethnocartography Network, ethno cartographic European re/Union or, let's call it – the professional and specific *Ethnological European Union*. For, let us not forget that in this “Union” 32 countries collaborated on an international project with atlases.

The main goal of this contribution is to present my explanation of what I think the reason for such a neglecting attitude towards ethnocartography in Croatian ethnology was. I will try to illustrate it by two thematic wholes: 1) the concept of history; 2) the object of research.

The concept of history

The first cause of the misunderstanding between the two streams in Croatian ethnology is based, in my mind, on the different view of the notion of history, thus further compounding the problem. Therefore, this approach, which I will provisionally call the “new approach”, challenges the historicity of this method. This critique, as I see it, misses the point since both sides deal with the same word, history, but understand it as two different notions – two concepts of history. For, how else can we explain the ascribing of nonhistoricity to the results of this technique? To illustrate this I will cite the words of my colleague Olga Supek who in 1983 stated that “[...] if the treated cultural »elements« are not dated as precisely as possible... we get a picture of one »traditional culture« which doesn't represent a specific historical period, but a reified, fixed »former state«. Since the historical dynamics has vanished from the »picture«, this former state is in fact ahistorical.”²

In my opinion, this view forgets that an ethnological map is not supposed to give a journalistically documented history that should be precisely dated since this is not its goal at all and since for the “distant history” this technique has its very own, unique and intrinsic possibilities. On the contrary, the ethnological map attempts to reach the contacts, connections, influences, migrations and other cultural changes in the distant past for which we are deprived of any historical data, but which can be considered as historical dynamics in its own right. The ethnological map, as a specific ethnological instrument, reveals the past before written history by the distribution of cultural phenomena in space by *the conversion of space relations into time relations of relative sequence*, as A. L. Kroeber pointed out already in 1963.³ If we refuse to call such a history a history, and if it is the cause for misunderstanding, I would suggest we might call it, for instance, *archeohistory* or *paleohistory*, similarly to the historically oriented ethnology that in Italy is called *archeoetnologia* or *paletnologia*. Such a history is history and the denial of the ones criticizing it is unwarranted. What we may acknowledge is that it is not a precisely dated and documented history or, we may say, an “absolute history”. Rather, let me roughly call it a “relative history” (like

¹ Of course, not with regard to the situation in Croatia.

² SUPEK-ZUPAN 1983: 62. Translated by J.V.P., like all other translations in the article.

³ Quoted in BRATANIĆ 1979: 102.

the one revealed by the strata in archaeological sondas) since it gives us a relational and not necessarily an absolute chronology. What is more, we are dealing with ethnocartography as a specific technique since there is no other methodological way to reach and trace such distant historical movements, such a remote history.

In the aforementioned article O. Supek reasonably supports the need for more precise terms – “peasant culture of the first half of the 19th century”, “the culture of worker suburbs at the beginning of the 20th century” – which would, in opposition to the term “traditional culture” help with, for instance, the setting up of artefacts in ethnographic museums.⁴ If we were to apply the same to ethnological cartography, we would face the attempt to link two parameters which do not suffer being connected. Namely, the peasantry and working class are general categories and are not the characteristics of one specific people/folk, but rather of most of humanity. Hence, the goals of ethnological cartography cannot find their place in that “socio-political sector”.

The mentioned denial of “historicity” of the scientific results of the cartographical technique with the consequence being the denial of its value (absurdly enough since its primary goal is right dealing with historical matters!) results, I believe, from a misunderstanding in ethnological theory, and that is that ethnology has two definitions of its subject. This point was brought to light by V. Belaj in 1989 in his much cited *Playdoier – The first definition, the one of Adam Franjo Kollár* (that came out in Kollár’s book published in Vienna in 1783, addition by J.V.P.), emphasizes ethnical cultural characteristics of a certain ethnic group or gens. Its criteria are cultural, its orientation historical with emphasis on ethnical history with its name derived from its subject. The second definition, that of Cesar Chavannes, focuses on understanding the causality behind the general development of humankind. The nominal topic, that of ethnos, is considered as a political and sociological category understood as a unit which has reached a certain level of development which can be detected with the help of certain indicators. Although its orientation is also historical, its goal is to reconstruct the universal cultural development of all humankind. Here ethnos becomes a synonym for a certain level of development in a hierarchy of universal history, its culture is understood as the representative of a graded category and the ethnical characteristics of that culture become in fact irrelevant. Interestingly, this “western” science of the development of general culture takes over the name “panonic” on ethnic happenings.⁵

The history that is revealed after thorough and oftentimes tiresome cartographic work and the “historicity” which we attain this way, surely would satisfy the first, Kollár’s definition of the subject of ethnology, the one oriented on the historical and ethnical aspects of culture. For such an ethnic history, the ethno cartographic technique is “*the quickest, simplest and clearest way to get an objective idea of the traditional cultures of peoples, and of their actual connections and relations [...] especially for the ethnological reconstruction of cultural history it is simply indispensable.*”⁶ Ethnological maps may shed light on the relationships between different ethnical groups, their movements, contacts and connections. Herein, we learn of their relative chronology, which is a category whose historicity we can

⁴ SUPEK-ZUPAN 1983: 63.

⁵ BELAJ 1989: 11.

⁶ BRATANIĆ 1979: 101.

challenge without a doubt. For dated history, let us repeat, ethnological cartography is not required. On the other hand, it is indispensable for histories predating written sources. This situation is mostly prevalent for rural settings, especially until recently. Hence, in the context of ethno cartographic research the necessity of introducing the aforementioned more precise categories that of peasantry and workers, is not relevant. This is clearly stressed in the words of the founder of ethnological cartography B. Bratanić “*For successful comparing of the historically originated cultural properties of different peoples, especially for research in the scope of the Ethnological Atlas of Europe, the traditional preindustrial culture, in its various forms and appearance, proved the only possibility of such a common denominator. Without such measures we would always risk the danger of involving ourselves in quite another problem, namely in the advance of urban civilization – a qualitatively and historically entirely different thing – and in the receding of traditional folk cultures, at various times and in various places, which is for ethnology of peripheral interest only, and does not require to be investigated cartographically at all. For a consideration in terms of large areas and for the investigation of far-reaching connections, only old, preindustrial folk culture comes into question if meaningful results are to be expected.*”⁷

The object of research

After quite a long involvement with ethnocartography, it has empirically come to my attention that the success of this technique greatly depends on what we are attempting to depict, and whether the object of research is material or nonmaterial. While carrying out ethno cartographic research based on two topics of social culture – introducing the second wife, besides the first live one⁸ and the phenomenon of the sworn *virgins* – I was permanently faced with the fact that the answers to the questions of social culture were mostly insufficient, both in quantity and quality. At the same time, due to their ambiguity, they should be quite the opposite! This fact of insufficiency, among others that will be shown later, proves the thesis that the elements of social organization are harder to depict and can hardly be used on a distributional basis as it is impossible to decontextualize them from the integral whole. It is far more difficult to take out elements of social culture from the social context. In George Peter Murdock’s book *Social Structure* we can find an interesting opinion of the author on his work where he states “*one of the most extraordinary conclusions of the present study is that traits of social organization show practically no tendency to yield distributions of this type.*”⁹ Similarly, even with a stronger accent, the opinion of the structuralists is that the elements of social organization can’t be presented on a distributional basis.¹⁰

On the other hand, the configurations of material culture are more “cartographic” and are more favourable to cartographic a(na)tomization. They are easy to bring out from the whole, the answers to the questions are unambiguous, easily attainable and clear. Hence, the image of their distribution can be confidently depicted on a map. Let’s illustrate it by the example taken from material culture – a trident, a tool for catching fish. It is clear that if we put the question about its shape, the question is strict and the answer simple and straight-

⁷ BRATANIĆ 1979: 104.

⁸ VINCE PALLUA 1994

⁹ MURDOCK 1967: 192.

¹⁰ HULTKRANTZ 1967: 104.

forward. Thus, the answer is unambiguous with its trace on the map being far clearer and, due to that, far more credible. It has become apparent that the clearer and more specific a cultural element is (we could say the “smaller” it is) its typology is more precisely attained, and hence also its final interpretation based on ethnological cartography. It is easier to de-contextualize material culture. It is less prone (but not completely resistant) to large, total or abrupt shifts and is more precisely specified by the merits of its usability, climate and physical conditions of its creation and survival. Due to its more inert characteristics, material culture becomes more prone for “long-term” research, which is precisely what is needed for ethnological cartography. In this way, inertia, paradoxically, brings about dynamics on the map. It allows that from the spatial distribution the diachronic dimension is reached, from the horizontal the vertical, from the spread in space the “spread in time” as the relative chronology. We may now return to the previously mentioned thoughts of O. Supek about the *historical dynamics that has vanished from the “picture”*.¹¹ It has to be stressed that the seemingly static “picture”, if the movements of shapes on it are read correctly, becomes a real dynamic picture akin to a, let us call it so, hologram, and in this transition from a horizontal image into a vertical chronological picture the (historical) dynamics is gained. The (distributional) picture on the map creates the new picture of movements and relations, the dynamic one we attempt to reach.

The eloquent sworn virgins?

I would now like to show some elementary premises without which the ethno cartographic technique would neither exist nor be valuable as an instrument in the context of historically oriented ethnology. These will be depicted on the basis of some particulars of the *sworn virgin* phenomenon¹², a concrete example from social culture. The above subtitle asks the question of whether the sworn virgin may answer such questions. While dealing with the virgins I was confronted with these common but aggravating denominators of the social culture for ethnological cartography.

It became apparent that, detached from the complex social whole, the answers to the phenomenon of the virgin are ultimately imprecise and unreliable. This was shown also in the ethnological map made on the basis of overly generalised questions in the questionnaire, and the answers deriving from them. This phenomenon is so complex that oftentimes neither the investigator nor the person asked understood it, and they hence wrongly “assumed” it from those external attributes (e.g. the wearing of trousers, smoking etc.) that only reminded them of this uncommon phenomenon, the ones only tangentially relevant. The ethnological map produced on the basis of real-life examples of virgins collected from the literature serving as a kind of corrector, narrowed considerably the geographical area of this phenomenon. As such, it showed once again the unreliability and inadequacy of cartography when dealing with social culture. Its “shape” is harder to capture than the one of the aforementioned material culture.

¹¹ SUPEK-ZUPAN 1983: 62.

¹² The sworn virgin is an endemic phenomenon, unique not only in Europe, but in the world, known in the mountainous Dinaric region of the western part of the Balkan peninsula. It is a common-law institution in which a girl is pledged by a vow to remain in lifelong chastity, is dressed like a man, cuts her hair short, smokes, carries weapons, goes to war, if needed, and has all the rights of men in the strict patriarchal society.

In many respects, the *virgin* is a peculiar topic of ethnological research, especially in the context of ethnocartography. For instance, in the context of historically oriented ethnology, it is not possible to apply those challenges to the database in, which aim at its timelessness – its lack of “more precise temporal specification of cultural phenomena” and its separation from people – “ethnology without people”.¹³ While discussing specific, oftentimes precisely dated life stories of the virgins, this topic has given us a timeline that we have not come across in any classic works in ethnology. Very rarely do we come across a topic in classical ethnological works where a very specific human individual, with a name and surname, and even with precise biographical data, is precisely dated in time. Even when we, for instance, talk about reapers, Christmas carolers etc., we do not talk about them individually. Even if the individual is approached, for instance when discussing the first congratulant, the so called *položajnik*, we do not receive information about when he was born and under what circumstances from the ethnographical sources. In short, he is not placed into the broader context. With the virgins this information is of critical importance, as the specifics of her life circumstances bring her to this new social status when she becomes a “social male”. For instance, dated information about when the parents or brothers of the virgin died is often specifically noted. Certainly, and referring to section 1 – The concept of history, such precise temporal specifications are not of supreme importance for dealing with this phenomenon in an ethno cartographical context, as was already discussed. Furthermore, there can be no thinking about the “ethnology without people” as the virgin is a human being. However, this characteristic becomes a hindrance in the context of the methodology of ethnographic cartography as the social conditioning, complexity and diversity of this phenomenon does not conform to the agreed formal characteristics of cultural phenomena. In a different way, A. L. Kroeber stated in 1954 “*It is natural that this type of research must put emphasis on »a census of items of culture content«, on formal properties of cultural phenomena, and not on »persons and their relations«.*”¹⁴ In short, ethnological cartography does not have the methodological power to holistically depict culture. On the contrary, it comes to its conclusions by a particularization, and an isolation from its context. That is, in my opinion, the basic reason that this technique is ill-suited to the analysis of social culture and the ethnological map of the virgins made this point very clear.

Nevertheless, the most peculiar characteristic of the virgin phenomenon for the methodology of ethnocartography is its endemic nature. It is a phenomenon, as has been already stated in footnote 3 that is unique not only in European terms, but also in global ones. This endemic situation, with a limited geographic distribution as its consequence, is not really suitable for this heuristic technique since it provides comparisons only within a very small, limited area (with its nucleus on the borderlines among Northern Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo). As Bratanić states “*For ethnological comparison only macrocartography – especially a macrocartography of »microthemes« – has any real value. [...] In any case, there must be also some prerequisites fulfilled. First, the comparability of the phenomena of the culture mapped must be secured. This means that in selecting the material for map-*

¹³ ČAPO, GULIN ZRNIĆ, ŠANTEK 2006: 14, 25.

¹⁴ Quoted in BRATANIĆ 1979: 101.

ping – if possible, even in collecting it – the qualities of form of phenomena [...] must be well defined."¹⁵

It became obvious that not only are the qualities of forms of this phenomenon not well defined but also, due to the limited area of its distribution – the endemic nature of the virgins – there were no conditions for comparing and therefore comparability was out of question too. What is more, the mentioned precondition for the real value of ethnological comparison – macrocartography of “microthemes” – in the case of the virgins is turned upside down. Here we have the opposite situation – instead of dealing with macrocartography of “microthemes” we are confronted with microcartography of “macrothemes” i.e. cartography in the limited area with macrothematic complex phenomenon that can't be a(na)tomized but observed as the complex social whole.

Nevertheless, although the endemic feature was, no doubt, counterproductive for the usual purposes of ethnocartography, the set framework/picture of the sworn virgins phenomenon on the map in the limited area still enabled us to get some new, even multiple inter-relationships between this phenomenon and a specific type of patriarchy – a tribal one. This could be observed not only on the macro level of the entire map, but also on the micro level within the selected parts from the map – i.e. in Montenegro where the virgins were rare in the Old Montenegro and quite common in Brda/the so called Mountains, the region where tribal patriarchal lore was more prominent. There are more such examples, but they can't be presented here.¹⁶

The European project/European Atlas mentioned at the beginning of the article was based on the idea of comparing ethnological topics that are common, i.e. universal, the ones that provide the possibility for comparison across broader areas. Being an endemic phenomenon, absurdly enough, the European atlas would not bring anything new to the research of this topic. In the hectic world of today ethnocartography might help to clear away ethnocentrism and is desired and welcome also for that. Namely, the ones empirically involved with ethnocartography know that on the maps there are no elements restricted to just one ethnic unit and that borders between states are not cultural, ethnic or linguistic borders. This could lead us closer to one of the panels of the Conference – “Crossing and creating borders”.

Although ethnological cartography represents only one of the possible ways of gaining knowledge in ethnological research, being an auxiliary heuristic research tool, an instrument used in a historically oriented ethnology, my intention here was to endeavour to defend those principal characteristics of ethnocartography deemed indispensable, the ones that sustain and defend its relevance and existence. For, it is important to keep in mind that with this technique, methodologically and theoretically, one implicitly gives up on a holistic description of culture. On the contrary, the results are arrived to by a particularization of cultural elements and, as we have seen, those more suited for this specific technique in the context of historically oriented ethnology.

¹⁵ BRATANIĆ 1979: 103.

¹⁶ Several maps would be needed in order to illustrate this (not only ethnological ones) which is technically not possible here.

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