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BOOK REVIEW

Almăj Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow or the Much Desired Valley of Miracles, coordinator Păun Ion Otiman, Romanian Academy Publishing House and Artpress Publishing House, Bucharest, 2017, 939 p.

Issued in the year 2017, the book “*Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine sau Mult dorita vale a miracolelor*” [*Almăj Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow or the Much Desired Valley of Miracles*] has as main topic the fascinating world of an isolated rural area from Banat, meeting place of several cultural patterns. It is a book written over several overlapping, intertwining, polyphonic plans, in which the different sources/testimonies intermingle with the authors’ opinions, in a special effort to recover the past and to decipher a possible continuity in the future.

The scientific approach to identify the results of cultural collisions and social mechanisms specific to Almăj area is based on a complex argumentation:

– “*The research conducted throughout time, in the past or recently, highlighted that the main feature of **Almăj Valley** or of Almăj country is the very character of the **uniqueness of living, of the unity of the country**, which can be rarely found on Romania’s territory (maybe in Hațeg Area or Maramureșului Area)*”¹

– the multitude of research works “...*systematic field research, archival and bibliographic approaches...in which the authors mainly focused on the close relationship between the historical-geographic, economic-social and cultural-spiritual characteristics of **Almăj Area** and the life and activity of the people living in this area.*”²

– “...*the tumultuous history of people from Almăj area.*”³

¹ Păun Ion Otiman, Argumente pentru apariția cărții *Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine*, Gârbovăț, 1 decembrie 2016, in *Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine* (coordinator Păun Ion Otiman), Editura Academiei Române și Editura Artpress, București 2017:19.

² Păun Ion Otiman, Argumente pentru apariția cărții *Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine*, Gârbovăț, 1 decembrie, 2016, in *Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine* (coordinator Păun Ion Otiman), Editura Academiei Române și Editura Artpress, București, 2017:20.

³ Păun Ion Otiman, Argumente pentru apariția cărții *Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine*, Gârbovăț, 1 decembrie, 2016, in *Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine* (coordinator Păun Ion Otiman), Editura Academiei Române și Editura Artpress, București, 2017p: 23.

– “...*admirable assimilation, integration and total identification and merging with the atmosphere, soul and consciousness of people coming from everywhere who settled in Almăj, the case of teacher Vasile Nemiș, of other teachers coming from Oltenia or Ardeal or even from Bucovina, the case of my teacher, Iosif Plievschi, from Gârbovăț.*”⁴

The rural area from Almăj Valley is investigated in an exhaustive manner, the structural dimensions and the socio-economic processes being subject to temporal contextualization: past, present and future. In this perspective, the territorial image is decomposed into its fundamental dimensions:

– Population, living and language in Almăj (Location of Almăj on Romania’s map – author: dr. Ana-Neli Ianăș; Almăj throughout time – authors: Prof. Dan Oberșterescu, dr. Dacian Rancu; Population and living in Almăj – author: dr. Ana-Neli Ianăș; Language of the people from Almăj – author: dr. Florina-Maria Băcilă), dedicated to the natural, demographic and cultural heritage of this territorial entity. The multiple and complex analyses, conducted under an academic paradigm, overlap the scientific perspectives of the rural area with those specific to the *perceived pace* and of the *lived space*. Under this rationale of investigating how the demographic and cultural structures were developed in a physically delimited space, the following conclusion can be drawn:

“*Almăj, as a well-established geographical, historical and administrative entity, has a rich history. Throughout time, Almăj Valley was a melting pot in which different populations, ethnicities and confessions were mixed together. Almăj has permanently had something of its own, something specific: picturesque place, architecture of houses and dwellings, people’s traditional clothes, traditions and mentalities.*”⁵

– The economy in Almăj area (Business Sector in Almăj. Structure of Rural Economy in Almăj Area – authors: acad. Păun Ion Otiman, prof.dr. Vasile Goșa, dr. Caius Goșa-; Agriculture in Almăj Area – authors: acad. Păun Ion Otiman, dr. Caius Goșa; Forestry and Forestry Economy – author: acad. Păun Ion Otiman; Tourism in Almăj area – author: prof. Dr. Gheorghe Popovici) is investigated in a historical perspective (the economic activity –mining, wood exploitation, wood processing, agro-processing – are temporally located in terms of emergence and development) completed by the in-depth analysis of the main agro-pastoral activity. The occupations and occupational skills were the social, economic core of life “...*patriarchal way of rural social life and predominantly agro-pastoral economic activity with strong traditional elements as well as the quasi-total absence of agriculture modernization elements (mechanization, electrification, use*

⁴ Păun Ion Otiman, Argumente pentru apariția cărții Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine, Gârbovăț, 1 decembrie 2016, in Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine (coordonator Păun Ion Otiman), Editura Academiei Române și Editura Artpress, București, 2017: 27.

⁵ Dan Oberșterescu, Almăjul de-alungul timpului, chapter 2, in Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine (coordonator Păun Ion Otiman), Editura Academiei Române și Editura Artpress, București, 2017:259 .

of chemical inputs, etc.) and of road and communication infrastructure (paved roads, passenger and freight vehicles, railway, telephone networks, radio, post office, TV, etc.).”⁶ The analyses are a seductive blend in which objective information (referring to crops, fruit tree growing, sheep raising) are completed and continued with subjective accounts (about the traditions related to sheep raising and transhumance – the Annunciation tradition, Saint George). The historical dimension imposed to deepen the analysis of agriculture evolution throughout time and of the response modalities to different social challenges: cooperativization, reorganization/restructuring in the '1990s. The use of objective (statistical) data as well as of subjective data (memories, testimonials) enables a particular type of understanding, i.e. exhaustive, cognitive decryption, of the significant events in the investigated area: “A most often used method was the elimination from courses and exmatriculation of student and pupils. I lived this period as a student. Here’s an episode: a gentleman, a fellow from human resources...took me out of the amphitheater, on March 12, 1962, coming during the course of my illustrious professor C.V. Oprea, and said to me: “You won’t come back to the faculty, you, son of a traitor (my father had candidated for the mayor position from the side of the National Liberal Party during the elections of 1946, although he was not a party member) until your father joins the collective farm. I left home in Almăj Valley, at Gârbovăț, where my father – a middle peasant – had 6.63 hectares agricultural and forestland. I met my father, peasant over 50, aged before his time, tired, pressed, thoughtful. I didn’t need to tell anything, he understood with tears in his eyes, he, who had not cried even at his mother’s death, why I had come home. The next day, after years and months of psychological torture, he signed the request.”⁷ The chronological statistical series, by each rural community (Bănia, Bozovici, Dalboșeț, Eftimie Murgu, Lăpușnicu Mare, Prigor, Șopotu Nou) complete the objective picture of agriculture transformation, sometimes modernization phenomena and processes: average crop and animal yields, agricultural holdings, subsidies, farms.

Forestry and forest exploitation, the main pillars of the rural economy, are subject to multidimensional analysis, i.e. in historical, economic and social terms. The organizational analysis of the Wealth Community (1871–1948) is worth noting, as a polarizing institution for the forestry interests of rural communities, social support for the inter- and intra-rural solidarity and economic cohesion. Tourism can be an asset for the modernization and development of Almăj area; the possible tourism forms are: mountain, balneary, week-end, rural tourism and agro-tourism, speo-tourism, eco-tourism, hunting and sport, fishing tourism, adventure tourism, spiritual tourism.

⁶ Păun Ion Otiman, *Agricultura în Almăj*, chapter 6, in *Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine* (coordinator Păun Ion Otiman), Editura Academiei Române și Editura Artpress, București, 2017:398.

⁷ Păun Ion Otiman, *Agricultura în Almăj*, chapter 6, in *Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine* (coordinator Păun Ion Otiman), Editura Academia Română și Editura Artpress, București, 2017: 449.

– Education, culture, traditions, spirituality in Almăj area (Education in Almăj – author: prof. Pavel Panduru; Culture and folk art in Almăj author: prof. Florina Nica; Tradition in Almăj area – authors: dr. Maria Vâtcă, prof. Diana Otiman; Spirituality in Almăj – authors: prof. Gheorghe Rancu-Bodrog, prof.dr. Daniel Alic) offer the possibility to discover the institutional modalities specific to Almăj Country, on which the modernization of rural spirituality was based: “*We, the authors of this book on the beautiful Almăj area, from Banat area, and its people, are trying to show that the Romanian school from these places has a past, hidden only by the hostilities of the times.*”⁸ The educational process begins: “*...in the priest’s house or in the church, as where there was a place of worship, the education took place in the church, under the supervision of the priest....one can speak about the existence of a state-funded school only beginning with the year 1768, when the Aulic Court from Vienna took steps to operate a national school in each border commune, and a trivial school at the company’ headquarters⁹ with German and Romanian as teaching languages, with four years of studies, divided into 8 semesters...In the year 1786, national schools were established in all the communes from Almăj, in which German was no longer compulsory, and the school leadership was held by officers*”¹⁰. In the next century the same parameters were applied, “*The organization principles of trivial schools, of national schools and gymnasiums,....the educational process, the material basis of schools, the assignment of teaching staff, etc. were established by imperial ordinances...*”¹¹. Furthermore, the idea of normative development and institutional consolidation of the entire educational process, essential for the education consistency and durability, is based on pertinent historical analyses. The rural communities from Almăj area are cultural enclaves, depository for material and spiritual connectivity and for the social significance of an economic history rich in homogenous ethnic overlaps. The singularity of phenomena and processes from this area is illustrated by highlighting the characteristics of architecture, folk techniques and domestic industry. The traditions from this area offer an amazing diversity of the mix of profane, mythical and magical practices, from the traditional ones to those from the great cycles of life:

– the procession of masks from the world of horns – “*...is organized seven weeks before Easter..., only the men (also the women in certain localities) wear*

⁸ Pavel Panduru, *Învățământul în Almăj*, chapter 9, in *Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine* (coordinator Păun Ion Otiman), Editura Academiei Române și Editura Artpress, București, 2017:619.

⁹ Trivial school: *name borrowed from the schools in Middle Ages, in which the study of grammar, dialectics and rhetoric formed the so-called “trivium”*. (Pavel Panduru, *Învățământul în Almăj*, chapter 9, in *Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine* (coordinator Păun Ion Otiman), Editura Academiei Române și Editura Artpress, București, 2017: 630).

¹⁰ Pavel Panduru, *Învățământul în Almăj*, chapter 9, in *Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine* (coordinator Păun Ion Otiman), Editura Academiei Române și Editura Artpress, București, 2017: 620–621.

¹¹ Pavel Panduru, *Învățământul în Almăj*, chapter 9, in *Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine* (coordinator Păun Ion Otiman), Editura Academiei Române și Editura Artpress, București, 2017:630.

masks (wolf, fox, forest ranger, old man, old woman, bride groom) masks....the people wearing masks gather in front of the Community Center or in the center of the locality where from they will walk in the streets, with music on... The attendants –godfather, the bride (“a very big one”), the members of the wedding – go round the locality, perfectly mimicking a wedding procession.”¹²

– the Saturday of Souls in spring, for the commemoration of the dead: “On the Saturday when the Great Lent begins...food is given as charity...in wooden plates....; the Saturday of Souls – the day when cheese begins to be abstained from,...moment when cheese pie, bread rolls or koliva are offered as alms...the Saturday of Souls on “Mucenici” day, on March 9.....in Almăj it is customary to prepare a typical dessert, a cake with flowers, made of corn flour..., in which 40 holes are made and in the middle there is a coin (who finds it has luck all year)...; the Sângeorz Feast ...bread rolls, curd, bowls with milk are offered, and on Palm Sunday there is also a commemoration of the dead, when women go with willow twigs to the graveyard. On Thursday before Easter ...new mugs were offered, adorned with greenery and wild flowers, on which a candle and a bread roll are attached, bearing a specific name. On the Easter of the Kind-Hearted (Memorial Easter), bread rolls, painted eggs, a piece of curd, water or wine are offered for the dead relatives.”¹³

– Saint Basil’s Day, “On New Year’s Eve, in most localities there were certain magical practices, to predict the future. Thus, raising plates was a practice used for the unmarried girls...girls used to put a bunch of basil and a mirror under their pillows to dream of their future husband.....Also on Saint Basil’s Evening, the elderly people used to predict the weather in the year to come (also in practice nowadays), called the onion calendar...”¹⁴

– birth and christening, wedding, death are events with a fascinating ritual significance, like: “Nedeia – pray of the village – was the patronage of the Orthodox church and it lasted for two days. As a rule, each family received guests with whom they had a good time at the festive dinner. In the two days, in the afternoon, dancing was organized in the center of the village or at the Village Community Center, and at night a ball was organized that lasted till dawn.”¹⁵

Almăj spirituality is materialized into ancient establishments (the necropolis of Sopotu Vechi, Găurile lui Miloi, Cârșia lui Vasile, Gaura Chindiei, Monastery from Boiște and Țăcovița), into orthodox churches (on a random listing, the following are worth mentioning: church “Birth of the Holy Mother” from Bănia,

¹² Maria Vâtcă, Tradiții almăjene, chapter 11, in Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine (coordinator Păun Ion Otiman), Editura Academiei Române și Editura Artpress, București, 2017:687–688.

¹³ Maria Vâtcă, Tradiții almăjene, chapter 11, in Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine (coordinator Păun Ion Otiman), Editura Academiei Române și Editura Artpress, București, 2017: 688–689.

¹⁴ Maria Vâtcă, Tradiții almăjene, chapter 11, in Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine (coordinator Păun Ion Otiman), Editura Academiei Române și Editura Artpress, București, 2017: 685–696.

¹⁵ Maria Vâtcă, Diana Otiman Tradiții almăjene, chapter 11, in Almăjul de ieri, de azi și mâine (coordinator Păun Ion Otiman), Editura Academiei Române și Editura Artpress, București, 2017:718.

church “Birth of the Holy Mother” from Gârbovăț, church “Ascension of Jesus” from Bozovici, church “Dormition of the Mother of God” from Prilipeți, church “Birth of the Holy Mother” from Dalboșeț, church “Dormition of the Apostle and Evangelist John” from Prigor) as well as churches for other Christian confessions (catholic church from Bozovici, baptist church from Lăpușnicu Mare). Traditional settlements, the churches not only organized and guided religious life, but they were also the depository of ancient objects of worship, manuscripts and old books; for instance, icons on wood made before 1780, the ark from lime wood 1896 (the church from Bănie “Birth of the Holy Mother”); the religious books of the church “Birth of the Holy Mother” – Gârbovăț, inventoried in 1971 and transferred in 1978 to the Archpriestship Oravița: Apostle, Bucharest, 1784; Gospel, Râmnic, 1784; “Antologhion”, Bucharest 1786; “Octoih”, Blaj, 1792; “Adunarea Cazaniilor”, Vienna, 1793; “Penticostar”, Sibiu, 1805; Triodion, Blaj, 1813.

A territory that exclusively belongs to rural communities, with histories and myths, sometimes strange, with modernizing evolutions and stagnations caused by society, with orthodox churches built in Viennese Baroque style that have irradiated religious spirituality as well as norms, ethical codes for the community life and ordering of everyday life.

The Almăj Valley can have a future, within sustainability limits, through economic and social modernization or through alternative-innovative development. *“The projects that we propose for the rural development in Almăj, we have in view both sectoral development, focused on the agri-food sector, and the valorisation of local natural resources, forestry and landscape resources in the first place, as well as the human resources in the area, for a durable and sustainable development.”*¹⁶

The encounter with the places and people from Almăj country is emotional and the intellectual dedication of the authors is quite impressive : *“We tried to do our best, the sources and resources helped us to bring back to your imagination, readers’ imagination, the Almăj of the past, a world that does not exist any more, a world that is slowly disappearing, but also a world that is still alive, with its good and bad things, inhabiting the so much desired Valley of Miracles – Almăj Valley”*.¹⁷

¹⁶ Caius Goșa, Păun Ion Otiman, Dezvoltarea rurală a Almăjului, in Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine (coordinator Păun Ion Otiman), Editura Academiei Române și Editura Artpress, București, 2017:848.

¹⁷ Păun Ion Otiman, Argumente pentru apariția cărții Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine, in Almăjul de ieri, de azi și de mâine (coordinator Păun Ion Otiman), Editura Academiei Române și Editura Artpress, București, 2017:32.