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## In search of authenticity: Doing fieldwork on the islands of the Lower Danube

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This paper starts from one anthropological field research carried out within an interdisciplinary team project, together with social scientists, historians, geographers and biologists, on the topic of the islands on the Lower Danube, which lie at the state borders between Romania and Bulgaria, as well as between Romania and Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> The basic assumption is that, in a multitude of ways, these islands exercise agency over the human and institutional actors in the mentioned regions. The project, which concluded in 2023, was conducted over the period of three years. First, we carried out research on both sides of the Bulgarian-Romanian sector of the Danube. In 2023 we tried to move the field research to the Danube border between Romania and Ukraine as well, but due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine we were compelled to limit the scope of the project to the Romanian part of the Danube Delta. For this reason, in this chapter I will refer only to the Danube cross-border area common to Bulgaria and Romania.

Fieldwork conducted on and about the Danube islands at the Romanian-Bulgarian border elicits an odd feeling. As partially new territories created by the dynamics of a still mighty river (whose power was, however, thwarted by the regulation projects relentlessly carried out in the interwar years and especially under communist rule), the islands seem to be unwanted gifts, at least for the authorities on both banks, responsible for the administration of the Danube waters. Thus, some of them are not attributed to either of the two countries, for instance

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<sup>1</sup> To find out more about the project see <https://danislandsproject.wordpress.com/about/>. A shorter version of this chapter was presented at the online conference “La preuve imaginaire: Asseoir l’authentique dans les sciences sociales/Imaginary evidence: Establishing the authenticity in the social sciences”, convened by Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales/National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO), Paris, November 17–18, 2022.

Elena Island, located 20 km down-stream from Giurgiu in Romania, a kind of no man's land. Others are divided, with the river border becoming a terrestrial one, as is the case with Georgescu and Bezimen Islands near Tutrakan in Bulgaria (Fig.1). Others still are located so close to one bank or another that one can see the people of the neighbouring country going about their daily tasks.



Fig. 1. Walking on the bedload of the former channel that separated Georgescu and Bezimen Islands, June 2022. Photo by Stelu Şerban.

The anthropologist who takes up such a topic must first understand what kind of ethnographic reality he/she needs to discover and describe in the field research reports. Apart from the human interlocutors, who are the main source in the classical methodologies of social anthropology, there are also non-human “interlocutors” to consider: plant species, animals, geo- and hydro-morphological phenomena. The field researcher is thus obliged to resort to a multispecies methodology. We had anticipated this fact in our project, yet the full impact of it did not become clear to us until we stayed on the islands and asked people about them (Fig. 2). Secondly, research into the multispecies which the islands host to the fullest involved the dislocation of the research site. While, in classical anthropological methodology, human interlocutors are related to a community, which is the focal point of field research, for multispecies it is difficult to pinpoint this place. The wild boar, for example, moves relatively quickly from the terrace fields in the north of the Danube to the south, with stops on the islands on the Danube, being able to reach the main chain of the Bulgarian mountains, Stara Planina. Moreover, invasive plant species such as wild vines (*Vitis riparia*), wild cucumber (*Cucumis anguria*) or false indigo-bush (*Amorpha fruticosa*), now present on almost all the

islands on the Danube, appear rapidly as a result of the spread of seeds by the river waters. Even projects aimed at supporting biodiversity and strengthening the natural environment carry a risk of getting out of control in the Danube environment, especially on the islands. The beaver rewilding projects, for instance, carried out in the mid-2000s in the upper valleys of several rivers that spring from the Romanian Carpathians, had unexpected consequences, such as the multiplication and spread of beavers over an area that includes the entire Lower Danube valley. Moreover, using the river islands as stations, beavers crossed into Bulgaria and neighbouring Ukraine. Thus, a whole “animal geography” has emerged (Lorimer, Srinivasan 2013), which intrigues both the locals and researchers. However, such methodological complications are worth braving, not least because social research of the natural environment, in particular the environmental anthropology fieldwork, seems to show much promise with respect to authenticity. Thus,

place authenticity represents a powerful source of inspiration for conventional environmental discourses [...]. Authentic places are pure, wild, untouched by man [...] and are characterised by permanent harmonious relations between people and space (Certoma 2009).



Fig. 2. Interdependence of sediments, invasive plants and birds' life on a new sand bank near Popina, 30 km downstream from Tutrakan, May 2022. Photo by Stelu Șerban.

Nature seems to be a place of authenticity par excellence, unlike the socio-human world, where facts can be distorted, manipulated or simply falsified. Moreover, there is an

environmental nostalgia that warrants further study, especially among restorative practices and policies for “lost” natures, ecosystems, and environments. In this moment of environmental change, the therapeutic dimensions of nostalgia, for people and place, are consequential (Howell *et al.* 2019).

The islands, on the Lower Danube at least, represent spaces of authenticity that generate detailed and colourful narratives in the local culture; narratives between which, however, some confrontations with reality seem very unreliable. The following section presents one such story, one that revolves around the attempt to acclimate Mediterranean cypresses (*Cupressus sempervirens*) to one of the islands in the Tutrakan city area, of which the locals convincingly spoke at the very beginning of the project.

Currently, the islands on both sides of the Danube are most commonly used for logging. The islands, particularly on the Romanian shore, are covered by forests exploited to a greater or lesser extent by forest administrations, according to plans made at government level, which rarely take the organic life of the islands into consideration. The Tutrakan area is special, because nearly all its islands are currently included in the list of protected areas. Logging is thus greatly restricted. In the past, however, as we incidentally found out during fieldwork, an attempt to acclimate cypresses had been made on one of the nearby islands, namely Radezky Island (Bulgaria). The experiment, which ultimately ended in failure and was abandoned in the 2000s, dates back to the interwar period, when Tutrakan was under Romanian administration.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, despite the wealth of details provided by the locals during interviews, we were not able to identify the exact location of the former plantation. Our interlocutors provided contradictory information, and some of the land once separated by the waters of the Danube had since become a part of the shore, and was included in the plans of the forest administration. The authenticity of the project of cypress acclimation was not at all supported by the data in the field. We therefore took a different path, trying to secure an interview with members of the local forest administration. The first attempt, made in the summer of 2022, ended in failure. Despite the assistance of the director of the Tutrakan History Museum,<sup>3</sup> a person attached to Tutrakan and the history of these places, who was unexpectedly receptive to our project,

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2 Southern Dobruđja, the region where Tutrakan is located, belonged to the Romanian state between 1913 (when the two Balkan Wars ended) and 1940 (Hitchins 2014).

3 For more on the Tutrakan History Museum see [www.museumtutrakan.com](http://www.museumtutrakan.com), accessed November 25, 2024.

we were met with a firm refusal from the director of public relations of the forest administration. To attract his attention, we even tried a presentation of the project in Bulgarian, yet we were still rejected, on the grounds that a permission from the upper regional administrative levels was needed. The administration director present at the discussion, who knew a little Romanian and seemed receptive, finally overruled the refusal. After a quarter of an hour we left with the promise that, at some point, we would be able to do the interview. Ultimately, it took place by chance more than two months later. One Friday in early November, after a week of working in the state archives of Silistra (Bulgaria), we went on a short trip to Tutrakan. We did not have much planned, apart from looking for a ranger to interview and visiting our friends there to announce we would return in the spring. We also passed by the history museum, to the pleasant surprise of the director, who not only received us kindly, but also telephoned the forest administration for the interview promised in the summer. Things went smoothly from there. The director of public relations was much more open and found time for a discussion that eventually turned into an interview which lasted for an hour and a half. A colleague at the Tutrakan History Museum who spoke English and a local English-speaking friend were present to facilitate communication. Another person involved at one point was a forester who had much knowledge about the cypress plantation and about the overall management of the forests on the islands. Without indicating where exactly the cypress plantation was located, the employees of the Tutrakan forest administration shared with us many details not only about the attempt to acclimate the cypress trees, but also about many other projects of this kind undertaken during the communist period. Moreover, they gave us two leads to follow.

One was the public garden of a nearby village, Staro Selo (Bulgaria), where two cypress trees from the former plantation on the island would have been planted. Since other locals had told us about this, we went there in the days that followed, yet failed to find the two cypresses. Instead, we held consistent interviews with the mayor and the director of the local community centre who proudly told us about the public garden established in the 1970s, which indeed housed many trees and plants brought from other parts of Bulgaria. They also told us that this public garden had been an experiment conducted with the participation of environment experts and foresters. Moreover, the experiment had been part of a rural modernisation programme that involved the construction of public buildings and roads, central squares and other facilities that completely changed the face of Bulgarian villages.

The second lead given to us by the forest administration was the fact that, in the communist period, the project of planting cypress trees on Radetzky Island was administered by experts and researchers from the Forest Research Institute of Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in Sofia. This time organising an interview proved much more difficult; we only managed to get to Sofia a year later. As the spatial and subjective distance from our topic grew, we began to question the authenticity of the accounts of the cypress trees on the island. Most likely our interlocutors had been referring to a much more modest cypress species, such as the pond or marsh cypress (*Taxodium distichum*), which was indeed acclimated during the communist period in swampy areas across Bulgaria. In addition to the qualities of its wood, pond cypress is also preferred because it is one of the few species of trees well adapted to marshy terrains. We also found traces of the plantation on Radetzky Island (Bonev 1975, 16).

This concludes the story of our fieldwork discovery, which led us to different directions of research – having us visit state offices and research laboratories. What is authentic in this story? First of all, beyond the authenticity of a clear and easily verified fact, we have the subjective and emotional aspects, especially prevalent among the locals of Tutrakan. These issues have raised certain questions regarding the kind of authenticity that can be the subject of our research. We have, on the one hand, the hydrological, geomorphological and biological reality of the dynamics of the islands (Petts, Gurnell 2005; Gurnell *et al.* 2019); on the other hand, we must face the subjective constructs built by the people who have contact with these islands. The latter also vary, as the subjective ideas of fishermen, hunters, rangers, people who have direct contact with the reality of the islands or are even surrounded by it, will inevitably differ from the theoretical constructs of researchers and experts, who aspire to a certain degree of objectivity (Crane, Fletcher 2016; McMahon, André 2018).

Secondly, the authenticity of a fact, such as the experiment of planting cypresses, also depends on certain random situations or happy coincidences that suddenly bring the researcher very close to a quasi-sensory distance from what he/she is looking for. What is meant here is a phenomenon known as serendipity (Andel 1994; Merton 2004; Hazan, Herzog 2011). In our case, the happy story was the impromptu interview conducted in the fall of 2022 with the local forest administration. This kind of authentic serendipity has the gift of opening new lines of research both as a methodology and as a field of research. Moreover, in this sense, environmental anthropology has the advantage of dealing with much more dynamic facts, which circulate much faster, and which can be more easily identified compared to the cultural facts found in classical social anthropology. After being

identified, the “trails” of the pond cypress trees once planted on Radetzky Island could be easily traced both in their area of origin (i.e. North America) and in their acclimation area in the Lower Danube, and even more so in different regions of South-Eastern Europe (Stoiculescu 1980; Šijačić-Nikolić *et al.* 2010). Also, even though we have not been able to find them in the field, the search for them has opened up directions of research on topics such as the spread of invasive species. For example, interviews with biologists and environmental activists have revealed that the presence of another North American plant known as false indigo bush (*Amorpha fruticosa*), whom most locals believed to have appeared in the area accidentally (as seeds carried by the river), has, at least in part, resulted from the acclimation experiments of the communist period.<sup>4</sup>

On a somewhat theoretic level and as a conclusion, two consequences can be extracted at the end of this short essay. Firstly, the idea of authenticity in a strictly descriptive sense, as something immediately verifiable, separating truth from falsehood (Copeman, da Col 2018; Aradau, Perret 2022), is a poor fit for the way I approached this concept in my paper. In this regard, I follow the arguments of such scholars as Chiara Certoma (2009) cited at the beginning, who sees authenticity in a geographic and spatial sense. Thus, it is more about the places of authenticity rather than authenticity as such. Moreover, the places are not conceptualised through simple descriptions and separated categories, but as spaces of porosity, in which things are related to each other – biology to geography and culture. All these belong to a “more-than-human-geography” that reveals and interrogates the political and ideological premises of the human/non-human separation (Lorimer 2012). In this framework it is no longer a social/human identity, but the identity of places, and one of the major concerns of the anthropologist in general, or at least of the environment anthropologist, is the analysis of how this kind of identity of the place (or places) constitutes the embedded human relations and practices.

The second consequence of such a model of authenticity leads to a methodological and theoretical turning point not only in environmental anthropology, but in the entire social anthropology/ethnology and in ethnography (Escobar 1998; Boyer, Marcus 2020). In search of this kind of authenticity, the anthropologist becomes a “neo-nomad”, an artist of a “nomadic anthropology” in the sense outlined in the excellent volume edited by Haim Hazan and Esther Hertzog (2012). Without

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4 An interview with Teodora Trichkova and Luchezar Pehlivanov, researchers from the Institute for Biodiversity, Sofia, October 2022; an interview with Silviu Covaliov, the researcher from the Institute for Research and Development of the Danube Delta, Tulcea, July 2023.

downplaying the subversive and manipulative effects of this nomadic condition in relation to the classical methodologies of social anthropology, such authors as James Faubion shape an alternative field methodology, one which foregoes the idealism of the classical terrain that involves long-term accommodation in favour of problematising the research subject in the everyday terms of the native culture and on the basis of an “authentic serendipity” (Rivoal, Salazar 2013, 186; Faubion, Marcus 1995; 2002). Reflexivity and a critical anthropology coupled with this authentic serendipity constitute the lines of force for a pluri-local ethnographic methodology alternative to classical ground methodology of Malinowskian origin (Marcus 1995; Marcus 2002). George E. Marcus, who has propagated such ideas since the 1980s (Clifford, Marcus 1986), starts from the fact that today the concept of culture, even in traditional societies, is no longer the one based solely on orality and autarchy, but one influenced by connectivity, social mobility, writing and globalisation. In the field, the ethnographer/anthropologist is confronted with this type of culture, research on which must be much more critical and (self) reflective, and also include looking at the data through the lens of linguistic pragmatics. Correlatively, the terrain in the most concrete way becomes ethnographically multisite and can be multiplied depending on the complexity and degree of interconnection of the researched culture.

By way of conclusion, let us return to the case of the cypress trees planted on Radetzky Island. Even though we have not identified the cypress in the researched places, there remains the excitement and the degree of embeddedness of this species of trees in the local culture, feelings that we have felt from the very beginning. It is, on the one hand, about the semantic imprecision in the definition of what cypress means in the local culture; the imprecision mentioned by scholars like Certoma (2009) or Marcus (1995). On the other hand, there is also the attachment the locals of Tutrakan feel towards the identity of the places, including the Danube with its islands. We were thus pushed to seek an authenticity of the places in the Tutrakan area (which includes local life and history), but without separating them even from a conceptual point of view.

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