

The role of popular customs in the social sphere

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Résumé: *Pour ceux qui aiment leur patrie et leur nation, les coutumes folkloriques représentent un trésor inestimable. Dans le contexte européen, le village roumain avec ses traditions, affirme son originalité à travers des documents ethnographiques et architecturaux distingués. Notre objectif reflète la richesse étonnante des traditions et coutumes du point de vue du folklore, la dynamique de ses formes culturelles en obtenant une vue d'ensemble de l'ethnographie roumaine. Les coutumes roumaines ancestrales, après un long effort de connaissance, représentent un véritable trésor de sagesse dont les ressources et les valeurs ne seront jamais effacées. Dans le domaine social, les coutumes populaires représentent un point de grande attraction à commencer par celles qui ravissent l'œil comme: la sculpture en bois et le costume folklorique, jusqu'à la joie de l'âme à travers des jeux, des chansons, des rituels et des manifestations roumaines spécifiques. Le folklore préserve les valeurs populaires les plus proches de l'âme de la communauté rurale. Grâce à la variété du folklore, nous connaissons, comprenons et apprécions davantage le passé glorieux de notre peuple, les coutumes, l'occupation, les sentiments et les aspirations des générations passées.*

Les mots clés: *folklore, coutumes, valeurs, valeurs éducatives, évolution*

Traditions reflect a way of life in which the mentality, social units and forms of artistic expression constitute a unitary whole, an indestructible assembly approaching the traditional values through an interdisciplinary study of popular customs and an overview on their nature and role in the social plan. Our objective reflects the amazing richness of traditions and customs from the perspective of folklore, the dynamics of its cultural forms by getting an overview on the Romanian ethnography. From an etymological point of view, the term "folklore" refers to the wisdom of the people expressed in artistic, behavioral and spiritual forms. As a specific, the folklore is characterized in terms of transmission methods, evolution, appearance and practice.

„Folklore means all the artistic works created or existing in the masses of villages and cities, creations which, as a rule, circulate orally, in a large area and for a long time, without the consciousness of their author”. [Pop, 1957:15]

The tradition is a treasury of folk productions that have been gathered along the history and is characterized by the ability to preserve true archetypal structures under the influence of external factors. The Romanian village attests its originality at a global level firstly through distinguished ethnographic and architectural documents, while point of great attraction is given by the customs

and popular holidays. For the villagers, the material wealth is not superior, but a temporary good, as in their view the real wealth is in the soul, in the feelings. Proving admiration and respect for the elements defining our Romanian spirit, we keep alive the light of our historical past, ancestral customs and traditions.

"I wanted to get to know the Romanian as he is, in all of his ways, as he has been shaped by a gradual development of eighty centuries, as he has been slipping through thousands and thousands of ethnic, topical and cultural situations".

[Petriceicu-Hașdeu, 1972:11] Our folk art, expressed in all its aspects, is the mirror reflecting the beauty of the Romanian village and the human soul; supported by the art, we develop and cultivate respect for customs and traditions, as art represents an invaluable treasury for those who love their country and nation. In rural areas, the elements of Romanian culture are a legacy of our people, these cultural values are preserved with sanctity and passed on to future generations. On the social plan, the popular customs represent a point of great attraction starting with those that delight the eye such as: wooden sculpture or folk costume, to the delight of the soul by games, songs, rituals and specific Romanian expressions. „Traditions, customs, rituals have long been the only means by which the social relations between people are regulated, because there is a trust in the justice of the order established by them, which was based on their existence and age”. [Capcelea, 1998:9]

The village population has a series of occupations: household tools, pottery, weaving, wood carving, handicrafts, icon painting on wood and glass, making pork rinds, straw braids, glazed clay pots, creating traditional costumes.

A characteristic and at the same time attraction of the Romanian villages is the wooden sculpture, which is said not to exist as a concern in itself, but as a means of decorating all objects made of this material, starting with the simplest in the household (from spoon and fork, for indoor and outdoor furniture), and up to large-scale folk engineering installations (mills). The carpet of Gorj, the jute rugs, the war-woven rugs, the valuable artistic achievements, distinguished by its composition and ornamental richness are still preserved in a small number.

One of the basic elements of a people's culture is the folk costume. Echoing some customary stages, the folk costume was preserved in some places and this invaluable treasure was promoted responsibly.

The peasant costume reflects a way of life in which the mentality, the social units and the forms of artistic expression, constitute a unitary whole, an indestructible unit.

The basic piece of the traditional Gorj costume is the shirt worn by women. The whole suit consists of a shirt, a type of apron and “catrința”, which is also known as “vâlnic”, “fotă” or “opreg”. The traditional feminine dress is completed by a knot or scarf, which are worn on the head.

For shirts and skirts, white is used as a background, and the ornaments are colored in black, green, red, cherry red, blue, brown.

All these above-mentioned elements give the specifics of the Romanian village as we see it today.



Valeriu Capcelea, *Tradițiile naționale: continuitate în dezvoltarea generațiilor*, Chișinău, Editura Evrica, 1998, p.9.

Traditional costumes

There are undeniable elements of village sacrifice in the folk art including the popular artistic creation, weaving, traditional costumes, birth, wedding, death.

The concepts of popular creation are related to birth, marriage and death. The classification started from the importance of customs, emphasizing the idea that each tradition has a special role in the social life. The objective of our reflection focuses on understanding the amazing richness of traditions and customs from the perspective of folklore, the dynamics of its cultural expressions in order to obtain an overview on the Romanian ethnography. The holidays and rites that are part of the "cycle of human life", starting with the Birth, Baptism, Wedding and Funeral, know a great interference with the pagan myths and rites.

„In culture, nothing should be lost, everything must be transmitted and renewed”. [Noica, 1978:177]

The birth is considered the beginning of life and is a ritual of the family cycle. The customs related to birth extend over a long period of time, starting with the fertility within the wedding, continuing with those preceding the birth of the child, and until the ceremony of baptism. Among the traditional customs, the birth is of particular importance and ensures the continuity of life, giving rise to a series of habits that express many desires and fears related to the birth of a child, for whom everyone wants to be blessed with all qualities: to be healthy, obedient, hard-working, intelligent, beautiful. The traditions of birth, seen as a total fulfillment of the purpose of women in the world, preserved in the consciousness of the Romanian peasant, are still practiced, and the ceremonial moments are well expressed.

"The Ritual deeds and magical practices that take place at the moment of birth guarantee the passage of the child from pre-existence to existence". [Suiogan, 2006:103]

In the popular tradition, after birth, each child receives his/her destiny from the fate (Romanian “ursitoare”). These fates are mythical characters, and their job is to determine the fate of the man/woman from birth to death. On the third day after birth, before sunset, the midwife places three plates, three spoons and three forks on a table. She puts a cake smeared with honey, three coins and three sprigs of basil wrapped in cotton wool on each plate. Different objects are placed next to them: a pencil, a notebook, a book, a needle, keys, money. After finishing the meal, the godmother says the prayer „Dear Lord”. All offerings are given to three children the following day.



The table fates of baptize

The fundamental stages of the holidays over the year are as important as the traditions regarding birth and death. The customs and traditions are rooted in the religious morality and in the well-being of each person. The habits have a special importance in the crystallization and development of the individual moral consciousness, in the development of the family spirit and aesthetic taste, which are characteristic for the human beings until late in their lives, as they regulate etiquette and mutual respect in the family. The social norms or the norms of the social group can be transformed into norms of the personality, into intrinsic structures, inalienable to the human being, which will determine his/her social position and behavior. Even if the modernity has some influences, we notice a multitude of customs that have been preserved in the traditions of our people and that give the specifics of the Romanian village as it is today: folklore, folk dance, sitters and clacks, *paparuda* dance, „*Mucenici*” celebration (a Christian feast of the 40 martyrs of Sebaste), baptism, wedding, caroling, the fates of baptize (*in Romanian „ursitoare”*), funeral rituals, are some elements that have not yet lost their identity in the rural areas, are maintained and are carried on by the young people who have as the guides the older inhabitants of the villages that knew how to preserve, create and carry on these legacies.

The popular customs represent the living mirror of the Romanian people existence, a telling proof of the ancient cultural unity.

The immense folklore treasure of our people is a valuable component of this heritage. The traditions represent us and constitute a true value of our country, appreciated in the world, which determines the desire to know the beauty and depth of the customs in which the folk costume, the authentic folklore and the local speech are reflected. Being related to the most important events in human life, the traditions and customs have survived to this day with all the

transformations that contemporary civilization has brought to the life of Romanian villages.

An important objective of the traditions is represented by the re-evaluation and reinvention of the way in which the Romanian folklore can be viewed, which keeps the popular values closest to the soul of the rural community. We can talk about the popular habits within a year that manage to deeply shape the general atmosphere of their role in the society. Without traditions, there is no culture, they mark different stages in the development of the village life. Folk customs and traditions create a true national heritage, we can find all the artistic creations of popular spiritual culture in the folklore.

The folklore defines the spirituality of a people, being an integral part of the national culture. Cultural knowledge must be perceived as an important part of general development and must be seen as one of the essential aspects of young people's education. These customs and traditions develop the moral, artistic and spiritual values, the authentic tastes specific for each area.

The folklore is a method of cultural education, of full knowledge of specific traditions and reliving the past which reflects the way of thinking and perceiving the world because popular traditions mirror the spirituality of a people.

Through the Romanian identity, the peasant villages illustrate the ancestral customs preserved in the Romanian cultural space. The elements from the targeted ritual-ceremonial structures mark the emblem of the whole area, of the inhabitants, and of those of the future generations.

The customs and traditions have always kept the community united by the soul ties of the people, by the admiration for the popular creation of the traditional Romanian village, passing them on from generation to generation. They are a precious heritage that individualizes us as a nation in the universal cultural landscape, being part of Romanian spirituality.

Preserving the customs and habits inherited from our ancestors, makes us understand the way of life, civilization, culture and social characteristics of the society in which we lived and traditionally transmitted our customs, habits and habits related to social status and certain moments, of everything that is part of life.

The traditional popular culture is found in any act of culture, the entire collection of customs and traditions outlines a treasury of everything that involves wedding, birth, traditional carols, death. The rites of passage are also important subject matters in the folklore, considering their universality and their frequent appearance in the moments of the social and cultural life of the community.

The traditional Romanian calendar includes a series of customs and ceremonies that celebrate the most important moments of nature and human life, of existence and work.

The folk expressions, the Romanian ancestral customs and traditions, enrich the world of the Romanian peasant and create links between individuals and communities, being respected and valued by the villagers, who scrupulously keep them and pass on to future generations a wealth of spiritual values.

The holidays are the capitalization of popular customs and traditions, as these defining elements of the Romanian people identity have lived on our lands since the times of our ancestors and have been planted in the souls of the villagers. The biggest folk celebration remains the marriage that determines the development of some customs that still keep the scent of antiquity. It is a moment in the life cycle full of joy that marks the transition from one social category to another. The marriage is important for the fulfillment of destiny, and the whole traditional custom is encrusted with pragmatic faith in God. The family is a communion, which, according to the traditional model, consists in the natural union between a woman and a man.

From the point of view of ritual-ceremonial structures and folk acts, in the life of the peasant community, the wedding has a special character, and the diversity of the wedding in all its aspects is spectacular and, in any form of presentation, in its essence, is a spectacle, either traditional or contemporary.

The wedding customs, with deep springs in the mentality of the people, are highlighted by the sequences of the wedding ceremony, the prayers and the customs practiced during the party. These ceremonies in the unfolding of the wedding are complex expressions that include ancient traditional habits, and in its unfolding, the wedding requires a balanced action, performed by certain people.

The pine tree is a sacred symbol of life and an important element in the ethical conduct of the wedding ceremony. Through its habits, the wedding turns into a real show where a succession of traditional moments take place: the wedding, the decoration of the tree, the covering of the bride, the bride walking to the water. At the wedding, the attention is generally focused on the bride, her presence dominating all the plans through the white dress, the braiding of the hair, putting on the veil. At all traditional weddings, at the bride's covering, we hear the famous folk song from the folklore "Say good bye, bride". The bride's song, this folk creation with a ritual character, which has been preserved and conveyed by the oral tradition, explains the internal meaning of its structure and development and never appears outside the custom it represents.

Even if the modernity has brought some changes, there are changes occurring in the collective consciousness and, as a consequence, there are changes in the traditional repertoire.

The folk dance knows a variety of categories corresponding to these life circumstances, there are a large number of folk dances specific to the villages that people practice at weddings, baptisms, holiday “hora” dances (*specific circle dance*): Serbian, hand dance, Hungarian - choreographic expression, corresponding to a great musical diversity.



The bride walking to the water

The place of folklore is justified by its status of thematic model of any established culture, and the love for the customs and traditions of our people are part of everyone's personality.

When we speak about popular traditions, we speak about the combination between the soul, the beauty and the art. The soul is reflected in the ancestral Romanian customs, that invaluable treasure with values and resources that will never be erased, as it is the fruit of a long effort of gathering knowledge.

The Christian Easter is the feast of the Lord's Resurrection, a holiday fixed in the spring equinox according to the phases of the moon and means for each of us a moment of return to traditions, origins and customs hundreds of years old; it is one of the most expressive and long-lasting customs, and the fast of Easter is the period of purification, of well-being.

The villagers participate to the service of the Lord's Resurrection, and, after taking the traditional light and the Easter bread, they clash their eggs saying the traditional words: "Christ is risen!", "Indeed He is risen!", The meaning of this ritual being that family members will see each other in the other world.

On Easter Sunday, it is customary for people to wear new clothes, and those who could not go to church will take Easter bread at home, before sunrise, on the green grass, after washing their faces and before eating something.

"The lamb signifies the Lord Jesus Christ and the red egg is said to represent the creator of the world, and its breaking, like the cutting of the lamb, is the symbol of the sacrifice but also of the divinity that dies and is reborn." [Șerban, 2000:76]

The great folklorist and ethnologist, Simion Florea Marian, stated: "When people stop painting Easter eggs, the world will flood". [Simion, 2012:126]



Easter eggs

Through the variety of folklore, we know, understand and appreciate more the glorious past of our people, the customs, occupations, feelings and aspirations of past generations, the Romanian identity remains alive by the preservation of the cultural heritage.

About the great holiday of Christmas, we can say that it is measured with the soul and the feeling, it is a testimony of our soul unity.

Very rich in ancient traditions and customs, the Celebration of the Lord's Birth is highly popular, being long awaited even after the harsh fast practiced by the believers, because, from a spiritual point of view, fasting requires a lot of strictness.

The richest holiday cycle in folk events is the winter customs that take place between Christmas and Epiphany. The folklore preserves the popular values that were closest to the soul of the rural community. We can also talk about Christmas Eve and Christmas customs.

Caroling is the most important folk event practiced in some areas of Gorj, which is a folk area of great beauty and richness of ancestral customs and traditions.

*On the morning of Christmas Eve, the children and the elders of the village go caroling. With a bag in their hands, they go from door to door to receive the caroling goods. The villagers, after burning the incense and making the sign of cross, go out to the gate with a basket in which they have rolls, apples, nuts and give to all who come. [Al. Doru Șerban, Valentina Șerban, *Calendarul credinței, datinilor, obiceiurilor și tradițiilor din Gorj*, București, Editura Ager, 2000, p.76. Marian Florea Simion, *Sărbătorile la români*, București, Editura Saeculum I.O., 2012, p.126.]*

Through the snowdrifts, with red cheeks, the flocks of children can be seen and they can be heard shouting in a voice: "Who doesn't have a carol good / Let his pig die in the hut".

A special show is displayed in the folklore of winter customs, through the caroling of children, on Christmas Eve. The role of caroling is health and abundance, long life and happiness. The carols rock the soul of the Romanian people, they remain at the foundation of our nation, being a treasure of specific virtues. When the young people go caroling, they create real festive processions that animate the whole community, perpetuating its most beautiful traditions, to the joy of the « sorcova » carol. In the evening, groups of four children go caroling with a star and the young people sing a special carol for the birth. The star is made of a sieve adorned with tinsel, glitter and colored paper. It has 12 cones, which symbolizes the 12 months of the year and the painting on the face of the star symbolizes the Birth and the « Ignat ». The star revolves around an axis, moved by the child in the front row, while singing. In front of the door, in the

spirit of tradition, carolers sing a carol announcing the holiday: "Tonight is a big night / Last night, the Son was born / Son without a mother, a clean father... "and the star songs end with " prophesied "or" commandment " : " Listen, you honest and blessed people / To this star, the prophet who was commanded / Before Râmnicul Bălan (...) Here when they arrived they said: " Let us worship! / To whom should we worship? / To our Lord Jesus Christ / Great and beautiful / Happy New Year and Happy Birthday! "

"The Christmas tree is a decorated pine tree, synonymous with the Christmas log, reminiscent of the god who dies and is reborn during the winter solstice." [Șerban, 2000:93]

On the morning of New Year's Eve, in Ploșoru-Gorj, every villager starts the day with a tradition inherited from father to son. All family members, as they wake up, must "hatch". They sit cross-legged in a corner of the room, usually by the stove, and imitate all the animals and birds they want to have in the yard that year. Some of them make the first visitor to hatch. If they have a yard full of animals and birds, it means that the person was a good juju, if not, it means that he/she was a bad juju. On this day you are not allowed to give anything from home, tradition says that this way you will give all year round. The props of the winter holidays also include the custom of the Christmas tree, not absent from the villagers' houses, especially in those where there are children, decorated and enchantingly lit. In the traditional Romanian village, winter customs end after St. John, when the feast of the Baptism (Epiphany) is celebrated.



Carol singers

Death, known as the culmination of our existence and life, is surrounded by a multitude of rituals.

The funeral rituals are a set of practices designed to restore the social balance broken by the death of a member of the community. *The gestures made during the funeral customs and the practices of commemorating the deceased persons are closely related to the topography of the afterlife, because in the mentality of the Romanian peasant, the soul continues its existence beyond the boundaries of earthly life, in another life.*

One of the local customs is the one related to the oath crosses, for the forgiveness of the sins of the dead. They are placed at a crossroads, at a bridge

or near a spring. Where there is no room, people put crosses in trees. We find in several Gorj villages the only places where crosses and icons are found outside churches and cemeteries - on the streets of villages, at the gates of houses, by the fountains. [Al. Doru Șerban, Valentina Șerban, *op.cit.* : 93.]



The oath crosses in trees

We can say about folklore that it is represented by the totality of spiritual expressions within the popular culture (customs, artistic creations, ethical norms and customs, forms of behavior), all this knowledge and values being accumulated through practice over the years

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