

# On the Dynamics of Mytho-Folkloric Vocabulary: Linguistic and Spiritual Implications

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**Abstract:** *To the best of our knowledge, the mytho-folkloric terms originating in the names of folk holydays have not represented the object of an overview research thus far. The present paper aims to study the abovementioned section of the folk vocabulary from an ethno-linguistic perspective that includes both formal and ethnographic aspects (such as beliefs, superstitions, etc.). The analysis of the terms belonging to the abovementioned category shall help researchers acquire better insight into the lexical relations established between folk terms and the dynamics displayed by the Romanian folk vocabulary. Ultimately, the dynamics of the folk vocabulary is closely connected to the evolution of folk mentality, which it mirrors.*

**Keywords:** *dynamics, ethno-linguistic perspective, holyday, mentality*

To the best of our knowledge, the mytho-folkloric terms originating in the names of folk holydays have not represented the object of an overview research thus far. Among the researchers who have studied only specific aspects of the matter under discussion, we mention I.A. Candrea, Gr. Brâncuș, P. Popescu, St. Dumistrăcel, O. Văduva etc. The present paper aims to study the abovementioned section of the folk vocabulary, from an ethno-linguistic perspective that includes both formal and ethnographic aspects (such as beliefs, superstitions, etc.).

A holyday represents a sacred time rupture and it is characterized by specific ritual, alimentary, behavioural, clothing, etc. aspects manifested on such days. According to folk beliefs, evil spiritual activities intensify during such periods, which entails the performance of specific magical practices, as well as a more rigorous observance of several interdictions. Likewise, during such days, witchcraft activities are performed more than on regular days. It is precisely because the aspects mentioned before are obviously linked to a certain time frame (a holyday) that there usually is an easily noticeable connection between the name of a particular holyday and the terms denoting the

elements of the said categories (mytho-folkloric beings, magical practices, magical actants, etc.). There is a specific marking of the latter terms.

Based on an analysis of the Romanian vocabulary, the following categories of mytho-folkloric terms originating in the name of folk holydays have been established:

- terms that denote food items;
- terms that denote elements of magical terminology;
- terms that denote vegetal elements;
- terms that denote elements belonging to the field of magical medicine;
- terms that denote imaginary beings.

The following section of the present paper shall present, in detail, the terminological categories abovementioned:

➤ **terms that denote food items:** *moși, moșoaie, moșori, mucenici, florii, paști, crăciun*.

Let us analyse the meanings of such terms in the field of ritual food items:

*moși* “objects or food items that are given away as alms on Soul Saturday” [1];

*moșoaie* “earthen mugs that are filled with wheat boiled in milk and given away on the Saturday before Pentecost (one of the Soul Saturdays celebrated by the Eastern Orthodox liturgical Calendar)” [2];

*moșori* “moșoaie” (used in Vâlcea County) [3];

*mucenic* (formally identical with the Romanian word for *martyr*) “a type of bagel made of baked or boiled dough, with nuts and sugar, or honey, eaten on the 9<sup>th</sup> of March” [4];

*florii* (formally identical with the Romanian name for *Palm Sunday*) “small wheat bread rolls plaited in the form of spiral clock fingers, that are given away to the poor boys of the neighbourhood, in honour of the dead, on Palm Sunday” [5];

*paști* (formally identical with the Romanian name for *Easter*) “cake made of sourdough and filled with sweet cottage cheese, sugar and raisins [...] that is eaten on Easter” [6];

*crăciun* (formally identical with the Romanian name for *Christmas*) “ring biscuit made by women on Christmas Day, kept till spring – until after the censing of the oxen and the yoking of the oxen to the plough, right before the beginning of ploughing – and then eaten by ploughmen when they are out in the field” [7].

As noticeable, the food items abovementioned were used during the time frame of some well-known holydays: *Soul Saturday*, *Palm Sunday*, *Christmas*, *Easter*, and they echo the ancient ancestors' cult. A specific ritual action performed during such a time frame consisted in offering food items as alms for the dead, as some phrases indicate: *a împărți moși* (to give out *moși*), *a aduce moși* (to bring *moși*), *a căpăta moși* (to receive *moși*), *a da moși* (to give away *moși*) [8]. Let us not forget that *moși* "is the generic name given to mythical ancestors" [9]. It is also worth remarking that there are food items (*moși*) that are given on specific days, for the purpose of obtaining the protection of a specific sacred person: *Moșii de Sumedru* (alms given on Demetrius Saturday, the Saturday before the feast of Saint Demetrius of Thessaloniki, one of the Soul Saturdays celebrated by the Eastern Orthodox liturgical Calendar), *Moșii de Arhangheli* (alms given on the Saturday before the feast of Saint Michael the Archangel, another Soul Saturday celebrated by the Eastern Orthodox liturgical Calendar), *Moșii de Craciun* (alms given on Christmas Eve or even on Christmas Day, in honour of the dead), etc. Ultimately, the food items given on such days (on Demetrius Saturday, on the Saturday before the feast of Saint Michael the Archangel, on Christmas) have the character of a sacrifice made in order to obtain the protection of the sacred person. In some researchers' opinion, this sacrifice replaces a potential human sacrifice [10] originally made.

- *elements of magical terminology:*

*barbura* "charms, spells, witchcraft" [11]

*a bărbura* "to draw the sign of the cross on someone's (children, in particular) forehead, chin, and cheeks with sheepberry juice on Saint Barbara's Day, in order to prevent the child from contracting smallpox"[12]

*a îmbărbura* "a bărbura" [13]

*mânecatoare* "witchcraft" [14]

*a sânvăsia* "to perform witchcraft on New Year's Eve"; "to predict, on New Year's night, whether a young couple is going to get married or not next year, by using two alum stones placed on a hot stove lid"[15].

In order to reach an accurate understanding of the said aspects, we shall mention the meanings of the names of folk holydays that helped to create the words abovementioned, as well:

*barbura* "Saint Barbara's or Varvara's Day" [16]

*mâneatoare* “folk holyday celebrated on the Eve of Saint George’s Day” [17]

*sânvăsii* “the name of a Christian holyday celebrated on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, on New Year’s Day” (Saint Basil’s Day)” [18]

It is not an accident that the holydays abovementioned helped to create terms that denote magical practices; the time frames in question bear a powerful magical significance, as many ritual scenarios take place during such holydays.

- *terms that denote vegetal elements:*

*sânjor* “green bough cut from the forest, and acting as a substitute for a seasonal god of vegetation, [...] that is placed at door hinges on Saint George’s night or morning, for protection” [19].

*arminden* “maypole (green bough) placed at door hinges on May Day” [20].

It is easily noticeable that the two terms denote ritual instruments that are used during holydays: *Saint George’s Day*, *May Day*, “folk holyday celebrated on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, Prophet Jeremy’s Day” [21]. Let us add another fact: the two terms that denote the holydays mentioned above have numerous variants, and one of the variants for Saint George’s Day (*sânjor*) is extremely useful for an accurate understanding of the matter [22].

The vegetal elements listed in the present paper used to play an essential part in the ritual scenario of the holydays abovementioned, which basically explains the terminological transfer that has occurred.

- *terms that denote elements belonging to the field of magical medicine:*

*mărină* “rib discomfort”; “abdominal cramps” [23]

*a se mărini* “to contract the disease called *mărină*” [24].

The verb *a bărbura*, a verb that we have presented in a different section of the present paper, could be added to the list, as well. The root of the terms *mărină* and *a se mărini* is the word *Mărina*, the name of a holyday: “a folk holyday that originates in the holyday of Saint Marina (July 17<sup>th</sup>)” [25]. The Christian holyday has apparently replaced a pagan holyday with medical implications that was celebrated during a period when “a series of contagious diseases, namely, skin diseases, reached their pinnacle” [26]. Let us add that the term *mărină* also refers to a healing herb used to treat the disease bearing the same name [27] and that it is part of a terminological category of folk medicine that proved extremely useful in the analysis of the mechanisms of folk mentality [28].

- terms that denote mytho-folkloric beings:

*Ciurica*, “mytho-folkloric being who gave women the right to beat their husbands, without consequences, on its celebration day, July 15<sup>th</sup>” [29].

*Ignat*, “character that belongs to Romanian folklore [...], the patron saint of pigs” [30].

*Înătoarea* (more recent variant of *Ignătoarea*), “greedy ugly woman who eats people” [31];

*Ispas*, a mythical character “who is said to have been a witness of the Ascension and the rise of the dead men’s souls to heaven” [32];

*Joimarița*, “mythical being who looks like a hag” [33];

*Moși*, “imaginary beings that are believed to possess the power to banish winter” [34];

*Rusalii*, “imaginary being similar to the *iele*, depicted as an evil fairy who unleashes storms and cripples people or makes them mad” [35];

*Sântoaderi*, “mythical beings belonging to Romanian folklore, shaped as wonder horses or who display only some horse-like features, that appear on Sântoader (Saint Theodore’s) evening and that are dangerous, especially for women and girls” [36];

*Sânziene*, “iele” [37].

The terms that denote such imaginary beings are derived from the names of some famous folk holydays: *Ignatul* (Saint Ignat’s day, celebration held in midwinter, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December), *Ispasul* (the Ascension), *Holy Thursday*, *Pentecost*, *Saint Theodore’s Day*, *Midsummer Day*, *Soul Saturday*. The term of *Ciurica* may be linked to the name of a holyday (*Ciurica*) that is not very well-known today: “It is Saint Chiriac’s Day, a holyday that is celebrated on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July, especially by women” [38]. We could add two more terms to the ones already mentioned: *Father Christmas* and *Father Eve* (a personification of *Christmas Eve*; Father Christmas’s brother).

Essentially, the abovementioned imaginary characters were named after a certain holyday, as their time frame was considered. We should also remark the powerful spiritual interference (between pagan and Christian elements) displayed by such characters.

In addition to the mythico-magical terms of the categories abovementioned, we have also found in the Romanian vocabulary a series of folk terms that originate in the names of holydays, but have no significance in the field of magic: *Îndrea* (< Saint Andrew),

*decembrie* (December), *sântiliesc* (< Saint Elijah) “de la Sf. Ilie” (related to Saint Elijah’s Day), *a crăciuni*, “to murder someone by spilling his blood, to cut someone as if he were a pig” [39], *ciurica* “beating” [40], *a probăjeni* (< Probajen, “holyday celebrated on a specific calendar date – August 6<sup>th</sup> – the same day as the Transfiguration, by the Orthodox calendar [41]); the latter term has the following meaning: “to turn yellow, to wither when fall comes”, with reference to leaves [42]. However, mention should be made of the fact that the mythical relations between the words listed above and their etymological roots are still noticeable, in some cases (*a crăciuni*, *ciurica*, etc.). In the case of the verb *a probăjeni*, the existence of the idea of “transfiguration”, that may be linked to the main significance of its counterpart holyday (the Transfiguration), is obvious. In some cases, establishing the original mythical significances of such terms has led to phenomena of semantic degradation: *ciurica*, “beating”, *a îmbărbura*, “to soil” [43], *a proora*, “to soak, to splash with water” [44]. In the case of the latter verb, we need to remember the fact that the action that this term refers to is a magical action, an action performed by the *proor* “on the Eve of Saint George’s Day” [45] – thus, during a sacred time frame, as the eve of a holyday is considered to be a sacred time, as well.

The analysis of the mytho-folkloric terms that originate in the names of folk holydays helps researchers acquire better insight into the lexical relations established between folk terms and the dynamics displayed by the Romanian folk vocabulary. The connections between folk holydays and other areas of mytho-folkloric terminology (the vocabulary of magic, the vocabulary of traditional food items; the vocabulary of imaginary beings, etc.) are easily noticeable.

In addition to mytho-magical terms, other folklore terms that originate in the names of folk holydays were recorded, such as: *a crăciuni*, *a probăjeni*, *sântiliesc*, etc. The fading away or even the loss of the initial meanings of some of these terms is of interest for the study of some mechanisms of traditional mentality. Ultimately, the phenomena of semantic degradation recorded in the case of some terms are an indicator of the significant changes that have occurred at the level of folk mentality, which have eventually led to an actual reassessment of the meanings of some elements of folk vocabulary.

## Notes

- [1] DLR, new series, M-Z, Editura Academiei Române, volume VI, fasc. 12-13, p. 896, București, 1968.
- [2] Văduva, Ofelia, *Magia darului*, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1997, p. 187.
- [3] *Idem*
- [4] DLR, new series, M-Z, Editura Academiei Române, volume VI, fasc. 12-13, p. 940, București, 1968.
- [5] DA, volume II, part I, p. 142.
- [6] DLR, volume VIII, part I, p. 180.
- [7] DA, volume I, part II, pp. 866-867.
- [8] Văduva, Ofelia, *Op. cit.*, p. 187.
- [9] DMDMR, p. 286.
- [10] Văduva, Ofelia, *Op. cit.*, p. 188.
- [11] DA, volume I, part I, p. 617.
- [12] *Ibidem*, p. 496.
- [13] DULR, p. 305.
- [14] Fochi, Adrian, *Datini și eresuri populare de la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea*, Ed. Minerva, București, 1976, p. 296.
- [15] DLR, volume X, part 3, p. 1028.
- [16] Bălțeanu, Valeriu, *Dicționar de magie populară românească*, Ed. Paideia, București, 2003, p. 35.
- [17] DULR, p. 381.
- [18] Bălțeanu, Valeriu, *Dicționar de mitologie românească*, Editura Fundației Universitare „Dunărea de Jos”, Galați, 2001, p. 187.
- [19] Udrescu, Dumitru, *Glosar regional Argeș*, Editura Academiei, București, 1967, p. 186.
- [20] Fochi, Adrian, *Op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.
- [21] DMDMR, p. 36.
- [22] DLR, volume X, part 3, p. 1025.
- [23] Bălțeanu, Valeriu, *Dicționar de mitologie românească*, Editura Fundației Universitare „Dunărea de Jos”, Galați, 2001, p. 130.
- [24] *Idem*.
- [25] *Idem*.
- [26] *Ibidem*, p. 131.
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- [29] Ghinoiu, Ion, *Obiceiuri de peste an*, Editura Fundației Culturale Române, București, 1997, p. 45.
- [30] DMDMR, p. 182.
- [31] Bălțeanu, Valeriu, *Dicționar de mitologie românească*, Editura Fundației Universitare „Dunărea de Jos”, Galați, 2001, p. 101.
- [32] Ghinoiu, Ion, *Op. cit.*, p. 89.
- [33] DA, volume II, part II, fasc. 1, p. 35.
- [34] DLR, volume VI, fasc. 12-13, p. 896.
- [35] DEX, p. 939.
- [36] DMDMR, p. 416.
- [37] DLR, volume X, part 3, pp. 1028-1029.

- [38] Mușlea, Ion, Bârlea, Ovidiu, *Tipologia folclorului*, Editura Minerva, București, 1970, p. 387.
- [39] DA, volume I, part II, p. 867.
- [40] DMDMR, p. 85.
- [41] Ghinoiu, Ion, *Op. cit.*, p. 158.
- [42] DLR, volume X, part 4, p. 1318.
- [43] Bălteanu, Valeriu, *Dicționar de magie populară românească*, Editura Paideia, București, 2003, p. 151.
- [44] *Ibidem*, p. 221.
- [45] DLR, volume VIII, part IV, p. 1617.

### **Bibliographical Abbreviations:**

- DA = *Dicționarul limbii române* (The Romanian Academy's Dictionary of the Romanian Language), volumes I-II, *a-lojniță*, edited by the Romanian Academy, București, 1913-1949.
- DEX = *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române* (The Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language), Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București, 1998.
- DLR = *Dicționarul limbii române* (The Dictionary of the Romanian Language), new series, M-Z, Editura Academiei, București, 1965-2009.
- DMDMR = Evseev, Ivan, *Dicționar de magie, demonologie și mitologie românească*, Amarcord Publishing House, Timișoara, 1997.
- DULR = Șăineanu, Lazăr, *Dicționarul universal al limbii române*, sixth edition, s.a.

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