

Romanian Folk Feasts: Linguistic and Spiritual Interferences

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Abstract: Our paper focuses on a series of spiritual interferences that are present in Romanian folk feasts, namely, the intermingling of Christian and pagan elements. In order to research such elements, we shall have in view an ethnolinguistic analysis consisting of both formal and ethnological aspects (beliefs, superstitions, traditional practices, etc.).

Keywords: Romanian folk feasts, beliefs, superstitions, traditional practices

The current study on folk feasts is characterized by a general tendency to emphasize their Christian side, whereas the pre-Christian basis of such feasts is either not mentioned or reduced to a single most important piece of information; thus, numerous mythical echoes are omitted, which limits considerably the possibility to grasp, at least partially, the mechanisms of folk mentality. Our paper aims to present the mythico-magical echoes preserved in folk feasts in order to ensure a better knowledge of the archaic mentality. We shall demonstrate our argument by focusing on one of the most important Romanian folk feasts: *Rusaliile* (Whitsunday or Pentecost).

The term *Rusalii*, first mentioned officially in the Romanian language as far back as the 16th century, has raised a series of etymological issues; this word is used on Romanian territory in several variants: *Rusalii*, *Rusale*, *Rusare* (SCL. 1-4/ 1997, p. 50). In Latin, this noun is derived from *rosa*, “rose”; at its origin, it represented the name of a pre-Christian feast dedicated to the dead; this term was further used as the name of a fundamental Christian feast. Researchers have reached the conclusion that the Romanian literary variant, *Rusalii*, is of Latin origin, but via Slavic languages, whereas the variants *Rusale*, *Rusare* are inherited directly from Latin (*Idem*). The word in question also refers to three evil imaginary beings, *ielele*, but under a different form.

As Christian feast, *Rusaliile* overlaps with major pagan manifestations related to the cult of the dead, which is usually emphasized by most researchers; commonly, no other information related to the pagan basis of the feast is mentioned. Nevertheless, there are numerous pagan echoes that have generated an entire series of Romanian traditional practices:

- the activity of the *călușari*; the group of *călușari* consisted of an odd number of members bound together by means of an oath of secrecy regarding any of their activities; the oath would remain in effect for 3, 7, or 9 years. During *Rusalii*, the *călușari* would serve various functions, such as: protecting people from the attack of the *iele*, treating the villagers against epilepsy, stimulating fertility and fecundity by means of their dance (R. Vulcănescu, *Măștile populare*, p. 169). The specific marking element is the *flag of the călușari*, decorated with a black fabric meant to suggest that “their power comes from their ancestors” (L. Berdan, *Totemism românesc*, Polirom, Iași, 2001, p. 90). The character ensuring the protection of the group was the *Mute* (the fool), who was subjected to a total prohibition of speech during the period when the group would act. The manifestations of the *călușari* originate in Thracio-Dacian rituals, namely, „in the male initiation rites” (Tr. Herseni, *Forme străvechi de cultură populară românească*, Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1977, p. 271);
- decorating the house with vegetal elements; on the day of *Rusalii*, lime-tree, willow, etc. boughs decorate the front door of the house, the animal cots, the vegetable garden, etc.; in some areas, green boughs would decorate the front door of the houses inhabited by young girls of marriageable age. The vegetal element served an apotropaic function and it was considered to be a substitute for the god of vegetation; this traditional practice was performed during other feasts, as well: *Saint George's Day*, *Palm Sunday*, *Easter*, etc. (see M. Budiș, *Microcosmosul gospodăresc*, Ed. Paideia, București, 1998, p. 88) and it was rooted in Indo-European mythology;
- wearing waist-girdles made of vegetal elements, placing such elements on the bed; to the effect of the above mentioned, garlic and sage brush were used in traditional apotropaic practices. They acquire a special significance in the context of several folk feasts (*Saint George's Day*, *May Day*, etc.) and, of course, on *Rusalii*. Let us remember that such

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elements are also present among the elements attached to the flag of the *călușari*. The recurrence of garlic and sage brush (which were also placed on the bed during *Rusalii*) used to serve an apotropaic function in many other cultures, as well, may suggest that such phenomenon is of Indo-European origin;

- the blessing of lime-tree boughs; in some areas, the feast of *Rusalii* is also referred to as the *Lime-tree Festival*, which is, in fact, the original name of the feast. This hints at the fact that such feast overlapped with an ancient pagan manifestation derived from an arboreal cult (see I. Evseev, *Dicționar de magie, de demonologie și de mitologie românească*, Ed. Amarcord, Timișoara, 1997, p. 458). Lime-tree boughs that have been subjected to the Christian blessing procedure would fulfil an apotropaic function;

- twisting head wreaths; the wreath bears special symbolic significances: it may point to the divine nature of its wearer; it is one of the solar symbols; it denotes victory (the laurel wreath); it is symbolically associated with time; it also bears feminine symbolism, etc. On the day of *Rusalii* head wreaths were made of wheat ears and flowers and worn by newly weds. (see I. Ghinoiu, *Obiceiuri de peste an*, Ed. Fundației Culturale Române, București, 1997, p. 166); such traditional practice is deemed to have originated in Indo-European mythology;

- performing rituals of sworn brotherhood; the said rituals were performed around a fruit tree or a fir tree, in a cemetery, etc. by children that would maintain the kinship status they have acquired by means of such rituals for the rest of their lives. According to various beliefs, the rituals of sworn brotherhood were spiritually patronized by ancestors. I. Ghinoiu mentions the fact that sworn brothers would usually meet on *Rusalii*. On the basis of the information gathered, researchers have reached the conclusion that the rituals of sworn brotherhood originate in Thracian mythology.

There are other traditional *Rusalii* beliefs and practices that we shall not analyse in the present paper; however, we wish to draw attention to the fact that one of the ritualistic activities mentioned by I. Ghinoiu, i.e. collecting healing plants (see I. Ghinoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 166), is not characteristic of the *Rusalii*; the researcher in question provides himself arguments to that effect, among others: “the plants collected on or around the time of the *Rusalii* were considered to be inefficacious” (*Ibidem*, p. 33).

The manifestations that are truly characteristic of the *Rusalii* and help us understand the mythical basis of the said feast are the ones related to the cult of the ancestors; let us not forget that the Saturday preceding the *Rusalii* is marked in the folk calendar as another important feast dedicated to the ancestors- the *Saturday of Souls*. Nevertheless, in order to properly understand the pre-Christian spiritual basis of the *Rusalii* we should also consider the other types of ritualistic activities, most of which originate, as we have seen, either in Indo-European or Thracian-Dacian archaic mentality.

Although at present the Christian content of Romanian folk feasts is generally emphasized, it is not possible to accurately grasp the traditional significances of such feasts without closely studying their pagan components, as well. From this point of view, many of the Romanian folk feasts (*Saint George's Day*, *Saint Basil's Day*, *Saint Elijah's Day*, etc.) can provide precious pieces of information related to the intermingling of various types of mentalities.

Selective references

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