

Female presence in Romanian Folk Customs

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Abstract: *The analysis of the system of Romanian folk customs may result in discovering the existence of a significant female presence in the field: female characters playing secondary roles; the female procession; the female group; female characters playing main ritual roles. The present paper may represent a landmark for conducting a detailed study in the field; what is also worth remembering is that such a study is currently missing from the specialized bibliography, as male ritual presence predominantly enjoys more attention from researchers.*

Key words: *folk rituals, Romanian folk customs, female actants*

No thorough analysis of the said matter has been conducted up to the present date. Various customs and traditional practices have been studied, however, without the purpose of conducting an overall analysis of the matter at the level of the entire system of customs. The present paper aims to outline the main aspects of the theme in question, taking into consideration precisely the entirety of ritual manifestations of the abovementioned type. On the basis of the analysed materials, the existence of the following types of female presence in Romanian customs can be established:

1. Female characters playing secondary parts

A series of folk rituals are marked by the presence of female actants who perform various actions during a certain sequence of the customs; the customs worth mentioning when discussing this issue are: the dance and dramatic plays performed by the *călușari*, *colindatul cu măști* (masked carolling), *vălărit* (ceremonial baptism reiterating Saint John the Baptist's blessing ritual), funeral customs, *caloianul* (rain invoking folk custom consisting of ceremonial plays, songs and ritual practices), etc. This category also includes female characters who participate in the performance of the final sequence of several customs (the feast, the party, or, the joint meal, etc.), similar to the case of several folk rituals such as *iordanitul* (see *vălărit*), *vălăritul*, *colindatul* (Romanian carolling). Another aspect worth remembering is that the joint meals at the end of some customs have been, for a long time, considered to be “disjointed” from the said ritual, when, in fact, they represented the final sequence of the said ritual scenarios and they were completely justified in the abovementioned ritual contexts.

The most remarkable female characters belonging to this category are the *crăițele* (the brides) and the *bocitoare* (the mourners or keeners).

Crăițele are women who used to be part of the characters included in the *călușari* ritual scenario. They would wear the national costume and perform certain choreographic sequences. Also, they were not stricken down during the dance. However, they were denied access to the esoteric part of the ritual. *Crăițele*, similar to the *călușari*, would perform their activity during the *Rusalii* (Whitsunday) period and, in some areas (such as Dolj County), the dance of the *călușari* would open with the dance of the *Crăițe*, thus, named *Crăițele*, after the actants. The dance of the *călușari* did not involve any female presence among the actants, in its archaic form. However, as mentioned by D. Cantemir, at certain points during the dance, the *călușari* would dress up as women and “speak in a female voice”¹. Through such actions, the actants intended to deceive the evil forces².

Bocitoarele were true professionals of crying and they would have well-established moments for performing their action; readers should bear in mind the fact that they were forbidden to mourn at night. Their manifestations were particularly interesting in the context of the *Dawn song* (*Cântecul zorilor*) when the nine *bocitoare* would form two groups, face

east and stand on some high natural rise (such as a hill or a mound). They would act only at dawn and only with their hair unbraided, as a sign of grief. Another aspect worth mentioning is that the *bocitoare* would update their song only when an “unexpected death”³ occurred.

The category of characters analysed above displays other interesting mythical connections:

- the presence of the *babe* (the crones) (usually, forming a couple with *moșii*, their male counterparts) is connected to the ancient cult of the ancestors;
- *Crăițele* have sometimes been assimilated to the *Iele* (feminine mythical creatures in Romanian mythology, often described as virgin fairies with great seductive power over men, magic skills and attributes similar to the Ancient Greek Nymphs, Naiads and Dryads); therefore, they can be seen as human substitutes of the much-feared mytho-folkloric beings;
- *Bocitoarele* (*Cântecul zorilor*) does not address the deceased one, but the dawn, as personification of the said moment that is situated at the fine line between night and day.

2. The female procession

It is necessary to make some observations regarding two almost identical concepts (*procession* and *group*): *procession* refers to “a number of individuals accompanying a ceremony”⁴, while *group* refers to “a number of individuals usually assembled together because of some unifying purpose”⁵. As noticeable, there are semantic differences between the two concepts, to which some folkloric differences could be added, as well: therefore, the procession is characterized by the lack of a minimal structure, heterogeneity and the absence of specific parts. The procession must also be differentiated from the group of participants to folkloric manifestations; sometimes, the procession appears to participants as a structure with specific ritual parts. For example, upon the passing of the funeral convoy, participants make the sign of the cross, men take their hats off and there is general silence, etc.

In the case of the analysed theme, the procession may be an exclusively female one, or, it may include mostly female participants. The female procession is present in wedding rituals, as well, in funeral rituals, in customs such as *cununa* (or *the wreath*, a folk celebration of the completion of harvesting) or *caloianul*. One of the abovementioned customs (*cununa*) shows us, among other things, the movement of the procession from the field towards the householder’s home, accompanying the bearer of the wreath made from the last wheatears left unreaped. This procession was made of boys and girls, and harvesters. On the way towards the householder’s home, the members of the procession were splashed with water. After reaching the householder’s home, the procession would enter the largest room in the house and go around the table (which the householder had previously set, by placing various food products on it) three times.

In the case of the *caloian*, it is also worth noticing that the procession appeared in many areas as a convoy, formed of girls, little girls and, sometimes, even pregnant women. The members of the procession would take part in the so-called *pomană a caloienilor* (a pseudo funeral feast); what is interesting is that boys were also invited to attend the last sequence of the custom (the *hora* or the ring dance).

It is also worth mentioning that in the case of the abovementioned customs (*cununa*, *caloianul*), the procession was initially made exclusively of women, considering the fact that such rituals came into being during matriarchy.

3. The female group

As noticeable, from a mytho-folkloric perspective, the group represents a far more complex reality than the procession. However, it is worth mentioning that many of the

differences were eliminated, or faded away over time, so that today the two folkloric realities could be mistaken. The female group is present in customs such as *Lăzărelul* (folk ritual performed on Lazarus Saturday, the day before Palm Sunday, when a group of girls would go from house to house and sing holly songs), *Goana Rusaliilor* (ritual performed for the purpose of chasing away evil spirits), *Lăzărița* (see *Lăzărel*), or during *șezători* (gatherings) that are associated with agrarian customs.

The short customs mentioned above will be presented starting with the latter type of folkloric manifestation, the *șezătoare*: researchers consider it to be the main manifestation of the female group, a counterpart to the male group. The participants are exclusively women and the custom itself consists of initiating young girls in various fields. The hostess, an older woman, plays the main part (as group representative) in a marked educational and initiation action, which actually represents one of the essential functions of the female group.

The manifestations that are specific to the female group throughout the scenarios of the *Goana Rusaliilor* and *Lăzărița* customs are extremely interesting. In the former scenario, the female group performs an entire series of actions, some of which have a preparatory nature (on Whitsunday Friday): secretly going into the forest, making the wreaths from flowers, fasting until the next day, etc.); the members of the group had to be maidens who had not yet been taken to the ring dance. They would act at night, after taking a specific oath. Dressed in white, the girls would dance a ring dance around the funeral mounds within village limits. Preserving the secrecy was mandatory, as well as observing the speech interdiction throughout the performance of the ritual. The female group is deemed a counterpart of the group of the *iele* that they would symbolically banish from the village.

Lăzărița introduces us to other types of ritual activities of the female group; the main character is the *Lăzărița*, the group leader who sings and dances in the middle of the circle made of girls, while also telling a story regarding the tragic death of the mythical character called *Lăzărel*. The female group is also present in the related custom (*Lăzărelul*). In time, the dance performed by the female group became independent, turning into a ritual dance performed by children in the Saturday before Palm Sunday, also called *Sâmbăta lui Lazăr* (Lazarus Saturday) in the folk calendar.

Even the concise presentation of the abovementioned manifestations suggests the fact that the female group was a far more active presence in Romanian customs, in the past.

4. Female characters playing main ritual parts

There are several Romanian customs during which a female character clearly stands out, compared to the other participants, sometimes transferring her name to the entire ritual scenario: *Drăgaica*, *Paparuda*, *Joimărița* (the *Joimărița* procession), etc.

Drăgaica is the girl playing the main part in the custom bearing the same name; she is the substitute of an archaic goddess: “an agrarian deity and the protector of wheat fields and married women”. D. Cantemir’s long-standing intuition is worth mentioning here: according to the said intuition, the female actant abovementioned was seen as a substitute of the goddess Ceres⁶. Cantemir also states the criteria for selecting the *Drăgaica*, as well as her main ritual actions. It is also worth mentioning the existence of a matrimonial interdiction: the girl playing the part of the *Drăgaica* cannot get married for a period of three years.

Paparuda is also a human substitute of another mythical character, probably a Thracian deity of the rain. It is common knowledge that the “ceremonial and ritual part of the goddess is played either by a pure person (a little girl or an unmarried girl), or by a pregnant woman who always dresses near a well or on the bank of a river, in danewort or burdock leafs”⁷. Cantemir draws attention to several ritual aspects: the actant is a girl aged 10, at most, and her accompanying procession is made of little girls and boys of the same age. The

female participants would also take part in another sequence of the ritual: “it is customary for the old ladies to pour cold water on their heads”⁸.

In the case of the *Joimărița*, the circumstances are different altogether: the main character of the *Joimărița* procession may be of both female and male sex (the latter will be dressed as a woman). This time, we are dealing with a human substitute of a demonic imaginary character (the *Joimărița*). The scenario in question displays a deeply playful nature; it is also Cantemir who suggests that, in his time, the scenario in question did not display the playful nature that it will display later on: “*Joimărițele* is the name they ascribe to women who are believed to wander on Holy Thursday, before Easter, in the vicinity of fires that are lit on that day in all houses in Moldavia and, should they find a woman sleeping, they would punish her, so that she can no longer be able to work afterwards”⁹.

We believe that the female presence in folk customs does not limit to the categories of characters abovementioned; another category of female characters (which is usually ignored) should be taken into account, as well; even though these characters are usually participants (as spectators) to the ritual, they may contribute, as community representatives, to the full performance of the scenario: we may include here *bătrânele* (*the crones*, mentioned by Cantemir in the case of the *Paparudă*), *the mistress of the house* who awaits the carollers at the gate, together with the householder, etc. Modern folkloric research embraces the idea that, in fact, the community does not play a merely passive part, as simple recipient, but that it actually contributes to the accurate completion of the ritual scenario thorough counterpart specific actions that are sometimes difficult to perceive.

Researchers insisted in particular on the male presence in rituals. Therefore, the present paper could represent a landmark in the undertaking of emphasizing female presence in Romanian folk customs. Folkloric manifestations of the abovementioned type (including the female presence) are remarkable due to a series of interesting mythical echoes: speech interdictions, initiation procedures, ritual control of the labour, etc. The hallmark of archaic mentality is particularly conspicuous in the case of characters such as the *Drăgaica*, or the *Paparuda*. Even in the current evolutionary stage of folk customs, both the ritual characteristics of the female group and the mytho-folkloric differences between the group and the procession can still be retraced. Last, but not least, the study of the abovementioned phenomena is of interest at both Balkan and even Indo-European level.

Notes

- [1] Cantemir, Dimitrie, *Descriptio Moldaviae*, Ed. Academiei, București, 1973, p. 315.
- [2] Berdan, Lucia, *Totemism românesc*, Ed. Universității “Al. I. Cuza”, Iași, 2001, p. 77.
- [3] Coșbuc, George, *Elementele literaturii populare*, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1986, p. 225.
- [4] *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române*, Ed. Univers Enciclopedic, București, 1998, p. 23.
- [5] Ibidem, p. 158.
- [6] Cantemir, Dimitrie, *Op. cit.*, p. 341.
- [7] Ghinoiu, Ion, *Obiceiuri de peste an*, Ed. Fundației Culturale Române, București, 1997, p. 147.
- [8] Cantemir, Dimitrie, *Op. cit.*, p. 342.
- [9] Idem.

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