

CULTURAL CONFLUENCES IN THE TRANS- BORDERING DANUBIAN SPACE. THE CAROLLING

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Abstract: Although border between Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia, the Danube area currently appears as a specific area of socio-cultural interference. Migration of population from one bank to another has contributed not only to trade development but also to intense cultural exchange as it testified by the language, lifestyle, habits or traditions. In this regard, we focused on the carolling tradition in an attempt to identify their characteristics in the border region of the Danube.

Keywords: Low Danubian space, cultural interferences, carolling tradition, present influences.

The Danube, the river that unites the European society's economic life, on its inferior side particularly known as The Low Danube, was limes and boundary for the economic relations of the human communities from the both banks of the river. Along the time, the river divided human communities, peoples and states but also united them in the development of their relations.

Although it is a border between Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia, the Danube appears nowadays as zone of socio-cultural interference¹. The migrations of the populations from one bank to another favoured not only human but also intense cultural exchanges: language, way of living, customs, traditions etc.

Speaking about the aculturation phenomenon in the Clisura Dunării, Carmen Bulzan and Florina Bulzan indentified, from a sociologic perspective, some elements of an identity configuration in this area of interference. These elements are regarded in a merging relation, the authors distinguishing several zones: the nucleus – with elements common to the both cultures, a zone of

¹ Carmen Bulzan, Florina Bulzan, *Interacțiune socială și comunicare interculturală în Clisura Dunării. Contribuții la o sociologie a frontierei*, Craiova, Editura MJM, 2007, p. 29.

interference, with two different layers – the similitude and the creator combination, after taking some elements of material culture, and a zone of specificity (that differentiate them) characterized through elements of identity that didn't transform after the social interaction from the trans-bordering Danubian space².

The traditions and the customs, along the other elements, and the popular clothes or popular and cult artistic creation constituted themselves in reciprocal borrowings of the ethnic communities from the both banks of the Danube.

The Christmas and New Years' Eve carolling is a ritual met not only in the trans-bordering space, but also all over Europe and the places where the first European colonists settled becoming, as Petru Caraman says, “one of the rituals that doesn't have a country, a universal ritual”³. As any ritual, this is also a traditional reality, a phenomenon that influences the order of the human community. Ernest Bernea, in his study published in 1968, mentions that the ritual is a conservative phenomenon, inherited from generation to generation: “in a society, the ritual represents what is crystallized, deposited in time, it represents the forms that the collective spirit takes, being the concrete expression of a system through which the world and its internal connections are perceived”⁴. The author underlines the idea that the ritual is different from the custom, difference that comes from their double relation and direction and also from their way of functioning. Thus, while the custom is a social *act* that actualizes the rituals and brings them to life, the ritual is a social *form*, a face of the collective being⁵.

Stopping on the same problems, Mihai Pop sustains that the ritual is synonym with the custom (there are two words that name the same thing), mentioning that “the custom encompasses all the folkloric manifestations connected with a certain event or date” and “the ritual seems to be the general popular term for everything that uses old rules”⁶.

The carolling ritual is a part of the customs related with the winter holidays, being present, as we have mentioned, at the Romanian people but at other peoples also.

Therefore, we will try to identify all the specific features of this ritual in the trans-bordering Danubian space.

In the calendar of the old people, the time was measured through the important stages of the work, of which necessity determined empirical

² *Ibid.*

³ Petru Caraman, *Colindatul la români, slavi și la alte popoare*, București, Editura Minerva, 1983, p. 3.

⁴ Ernest Bernea, *Introducere teoretică la studiul obiceiurilor*, in *Revista de etnografie și folclor*, volume 13, no. 5, 1968, p. 381.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Mihai Pop, *Obiceiuri tradiționale românești*, București, Editura Univers, 1999, p. 33.

knowledge related with the cyclic evolution of time, according to the stars, the vegetation periods and the stages of the productive activity⁷. Thus, was born the modern myth about the death and the resurrection of nature that, in the imaginary plan, means the death and the resurrection of the mythical hero, of the god⁸.

Each stage of the cycle organized and generated around it a multitude of calendar holidays, with fixe or mobile date, all making the *popular calendar*. The ritual scenarios specific to them remained, in the memory of the archaic collectivities, the main moments in fulfilling the agricultural activities: the beginning, the development and the finishing of these activities. Ion Ghinoiu underlines that

The popular calendar planed all the humans' activities on seasons, weeks, days and moments of the days. The optimal time for ploughing and sowing, for gathering and separating the flocks of sheep, for asking for marriage and engaging, for spells and magic charms etc., were marked by the days when there had been celebrated different mythic Christian or pre-Christian representation⁹.

This Popular Calendar was kept, mainly, at the Bulgarians too, especially in the Timoc area¹⁰.

The pagan popular calendar had been superposed, in time, with the Christian dates, an official calendar recognized by state and church, the Romanian ethnographic space and not only, bearing the mark of this syncretic correlation.

The cycle of the customs dedicated to the New Year's Eve is opened by *the carolling*. This ritual is present in two distinct forms: profane and religious. At the Romanian people there are several types of profane carolling that contain nevertheless Christian elements also: the carolling, the carolling of the children, Plugușorul, the carolling with masque (capra, turca), Vasilca, Sorcova and the religious carolling: Steaua and Vicleimul. Common elements as at the Romanians we find also at the Serbians and Bulgarians, the difference being, most of the time, the name of the carol. So, we find the carolling, the children carolling, the carolling with masque (at the Bulgarians is called *brezaia*), Sorcova (*surva* at the Serbians, *suruvakane* at the Bulgarians), *zvezdari*, especially at the Croatians, and *betlehemari* the going from one house to another

⁷ Mihai Pop, Pavel Ruxăndoiu, *Folclor litarar românesc*, București, Editura Didactică și pedagogică, 1978, p. 312.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Ion Ghinoiu, *Comoara satelor. Calendar popular*, București, Editura Academiei Române, 2005, p. 6.

¹⁰ Nicolae Panea, Cornel Bălosu, Gheorghe Obrocea, *Folclorul românilor din Timocul bulgăresc*, Craiova, Editura Omniscope, 1996, p. 50.

caring *betlehem*, singing religious carols, the last two corresponding to the Romanian carols *Steaua* and *Vicleimul*¹¹.

From all this, we have chose to talk in this material about *the Christmas carolling*.

In the New Year's Eve night, after midnight and until dawn, at the Romanians, both in the rural and urban sides of the country, groups of carollers made of three, four or more children and young men go from one house to another, *carolling* (*în colindeț, Moș Ajunul* or *bună dimineața la Moș Ajun*). In some Romanian localities the people went carolling even on Christmas, the little ones in the morning and the elder ones¹² in the evening and, in others, the carolling started in the New Year's Eve morning and until the third Christmas day, in the evening¹³. At the Bulgarians too, the 10 and 12 years old children went carolling also in the New Year's Eve, at night.

After the traditional ritual, the carolling was made, at the Romanians, to their neighbours', friends' houses, in the village. The carols were songs that announced the birth of the Redeemer, Jesus Christ, or wishes of prosperity that were especially referring to wealth and health: "*Bună dimineața la Moș Ajun (It's good the New Year's Eve morning) / Că-i mai bun a lui Crăciun (And yet, it is better the Christmas morning) / Porci unturoși, oile lănoase, vacile lăptoase (We wish you to have fat pigs, woolly sheep and milky cows) / Oameni sănătoși (Healthy people) / Pui mulți și boboci mulți (Lots of chickens and ducklings)*"¹⁴. Octavian Buhociu considers the carols that made the repertoire of the children and young men as being, all, magical-religious "because this is their reality", mentioning further more that "the oldest of all these carols, of pagan and laic inspiration, are considered inherited from the Geto-Dacians; a second group is made of the Christian inspiration and generally savant (bookish) carols and, a third category, 'varied' are the carols of Christian and non-Christian mixing"¹⁵.

The ritual text was accompanied by dances and gestures. As for example, the riparian localities, near the part of the Danube that passes through Oltenia, especially those from Dolj County, were put in the stove straws and branches gathered from the yard of each villager, on which one of the carollers sat "for the clucking hen to hatch". At the Bulgarians, the children, gathered in small groups, recited (not sang) very simple carols: "*Bună sara lui Ajun (It's good the New*

¹¹ Petru Caraman, *cited work*, pp. 9-10.

¹² Ion Ghinoiu (coordinator), *Sărbători și obiceiuri*, vol. I, *Oltenia*, București, Editura Enciclopedică, 2001, p. 245; inf. from Hinova, Mehedinți County.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 245; inf. from Runcu, Gorj County.

¹⁴ Ștefan Enache, Theodor Pleșa, *Zona etnografică Dolj*, București, Editura Sport-Turism, 1982, p. 110.

¹⁵ Octavian Buhociu, *Folclorul de iarnă, ziorile și poezia păstorească*, București, Editura Minerva, 1979, p. 89.

Year's Eve evening), / *Și mai bună lui Crăciun!* (*And yet, it is better the Christmas evening!*)”, followed by wishes of fertility and wealth¹⁶. In Serbia, unlike the Romania and Bulgaria, the children were asked to come to the people who had a prosper year, believing that this happened because a certain child had carolled them last year¹⁷.

Also, the Romanian carollers used with this opportunity, the carolling, different magical instruments, as *colindele* (in Romanian they have the same name as the carols) – thin sticks with which they stirred the fire in fireplace in the house they entered; they were especially used by the carollers in the villages from Mehedinți County. These were made of hazel nut tree that, according to the popular believe, had the property of re-establishing the order in moments of tension and incertitude¹⁸. Through this stirring, the carollers maintained the fire burning, helping, in fact, the Sun to regain its force for the new year¹⁹. The role of the *colinde* wasn't just an augural one but also apothropaic, of favouring the fertility of the land and of sending away the malefic spirits²⁰. By touching an object or a human being with those sticks, were transferred to them growth, health and stretching qualities²¹. The same “magical sticks” were used by the carollers from the Timoc villages in Bulgaria: “When the Christmas Eve came ... my old man cut two rods and blackened them with smoke... saying that this is also a carol”²².

The carollers were expected with ritual gifts: round shaped bread made especially for this event called *colindeți* (also a name derived from the Romanian name *colindă* = carol), apples, nuts, bagels, pork, blood pudding, rarely money, each having its own meaning that remembers of the Sun cult, of

¹⁶ Nicolae Panea, Cornel Bălosu, Gheorghe Obrocea, *cited work*, p. 137; inf. from the locality Bregovo.

¹⁷ Carmen Bulzan, Florina Bulzan, *cited work*, p. 240.

¹⁸ Georgeta Nițu, “Valențe etnologice ale alunului”, in *Oltenia. Studii și comunicări. Etnografie*, vol. VIII, Craiova, 1997, pp. 76-77.

¹⁹ Anca Ceaușescu, Gabriela Boangiu, “Darul ritualic – semnificații simbolice și acte magice specifice zonei Mehedinți”, in *Mehedinți. Istorie, cultură și spiritualitate*, Dr. Tr. Severin, Editura Didahia Severin, 2008, p. 471.

²⁰ Georgeta Nițu, “Simbolurile vegetale și derularea timpului calendaristic (I)”, in *Arhivele Olteniei*, New Series, București, Editura Academiei Române, 2002, p. 237. The sticks were prepared beforehand. After they had previously been peeled, the hazel nut tree sticks were wrapped with strings of wet lime-tree, laid in spiral, upwards and then backwards, forming some kind of eight shapes. They were then turned black using the “smoke from the fire kept with larch tree, cherry tree and birch wood”. The ornaments that resulted after the removing of the lime-tree strips, consisted of an alternation of black and white spirals and rhombuses, suggested the battle between light and dark. (*Ibid*; see also Ion Ghinoiu (coordinator), *Sărbători și obiceiuri...*, pp. 247-248, inf. from Cireșu, Mehedinți County, Olteanu, Glogova commune, Gorj County).

²¹ Octavian Buhociu, *cited work*, p. 88.

²² Nicolae Panea, Cornel Bălosu, Gheorghe Obrocea, *cited work*, p. 50.

the nature's regeneration. The round shaped bread, "with a whole in the middle and embellished with doe flowers"²³, called "the God's bread" and the smaller round shaped breads received by the carollers who stirred the fire, can be interpreted as a reward for the Sun that ritually helped people in those moments of crisis from the end of the year, would assure prosperity and wealth in the new year. Like the Romanian ones, the Bulgarian carollers received as a reward, among other things, a *kravai* – a small round shaped bread, with a whole in the middle.

The proper carolling of the young men and older people, both at the Romanians and Bulgarians, takes place in the Christmas night, until dawn. This ritual presents at two different peoples common features both regarding the organization of the young men, the moments of the ritual and the characteristic phases of the carolling.

According to the tradition, those who went carolling were organized in groups. They went from house to house, only in their village, singing at the gate or in the yard. The carolling custom actually meant some wishes for the householders, implying, in this way the participation of the entire community. As Mihai Pop says, "at its basis (of the custom) stays the principle on which the good order of the living together and of the collective solidarity is established in our villages: all for one and one for all"²⁴.

The carolling was prepared starting with the Advent. That moment, the group of carollers started to prepare themselves and remained in that grouping the entire winter holidays' period. The groups of carollers were constituted according to the age, friendship or family relations. One of them was appointed *bailiff* or *judge* in Romania and *stanenik* in Bulgaria. In the large communities were organized several groups, each with its own chief; the carolling was done each on "its sector", in the yard or inside the house and only one time at a house. The groups gathered repeated times to prepare their repertoire, initially at the leader's house and then, though rotation, at every member's house.

In its traditional form, the ritual scenario of the carolling, kept today in many places, such Țara Loviștei, implied several moments: the meeting with the host, for the carollers to be welcomed; the window carols; carols sang when they entered the house, for the householder; different carols sung according with the age or profession; the carol sang when receiving the gifts and the final carol, when leaving the house²⁵. We meet the same situations at the Bulgarians, where the carols are sung like this: the carol sang at the door, the *na konsea* (at the

²³ Marcela Bratiloveanu-Popilian, "Aspecte ale obiceiurilor de Crăciun în zona Mehedinților", in *Arhivele Olteniei*, New Series, no. 7, 1992, p. 146.

²⁴ Mihai Pop, *cited work*, p. 47.

²⁵ Constantin Mohanu, "Obiceiul colindatului în Țara Loviștei", in *Revista de etnografie și folclor*, 15th volume, no. 3, 1970, p. 218.

window) carol, the *na domovladikata* (for the householder) carol, the carol sung for the persons in the house, *kravai* (wishes when receiving the gifts)²⁶.

Once they entered in the owner's house, the carollers sing for the first time carols near his window, making the ritual wakeup of the householders and announcing the holiday. At the Romanians, the carolling near the window is, most of the times, religious; through it is announced the birth of Jesus Christ and the great Christmas holiday:

Iată vin colindători (The carollers are coming), / Florile dalbe (Lily-white flowers), / Noaptea pe la cântători (At daybreak), / Florile dalbe (Lily-white flowers). / Și ei vin mereu, mereu (And they are coming and coming), / Florile dalbe (Lily-white flowers) / Și-l aduc pe Dumnezeu (And they bring God), / Florile dalbe (Lily-white flowers) / Și-l aduc pe Dumnezeu (And they bring God), / Florile dalbe (Lily-white flowers), / Să vă mântuie de rău (To redeem you), / Florile dalbe (Lily-white flowers).....". At the Bulgarians: "Scoală, scoală gospodine, colinda mea, colindă (Wake up you householder, hear my carol) / Gospodine bun de glume (Joyful householder), / Scoală-te de-ai adormit (Wake up if you're asleep) / Și deschide vechea poartă (And open the old gate), / Vechea poartă luminată (The old lighted gate), / Că-ți vin oaspeți urători (Because the carollers are coming), / Oaspeți dragi, colindători! (Dear guests, the carollers)!²⁷.

If they are asked to enter the house, they sing carols for the householder and other carols²⁸, finishing with the final wish (thanking for the received gifts) said by the leader of the carollers. Both at the Romanians and Bulgarians, there are differences as regarding the received gifts. The most important of them is *the wish of the round-shaped bread* that has similar moments to the both peoples: the ploughing and the sowing of the wheat and then the journey to the field of the owner to see the crop.

At the Romanians, the wishing is an epic oration with preponderantly agrarian character, where the head of the carollers describes the story of the round-shaped bread, starting from the sowing and until its baking. This is always addressed to the owner of the house and encompasses elements that glorify his rich crop:

²⁶ Petru Caraman, *cited work*, p. 15-16.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 28.

²⁸ The carols are characterized by a great variety, determined by the existence of some wishes, specific to certain situations in which the human groups or the individuals find themselves. Thus, there are carols sung by children, boys or girls (they divided in carols sung by lads or adolescent girls and those sung by young boys and girls who will soon be married), carols sung by engaged people, carols for the young married people, for the mature, husband and wife people, for the old people, carols sung by people who have a specific occupation, the most frequent being that of farmer, shepherded and fisherman, carols for certain functions, as those of mayor or priest (Ovidiu Bârlea, *Folclor românesc*, vol. I, București, Editura Minerva, 1981, p. 307-308).

Stați frați și ascultați (My brothers, wait and listen), / Bine seamă să luați (Mind my words): / Jupân gazdă de dimineață s-a sculat (Our host woke up early in the morning), / Pe față s-a spălat (He washed his face), / Grâu roșu în saci a băgat (He put red wheat in his sacks). ... Și-ncepu a brăzda (And he started to plough) ... Brazdă neagră-a răsturnat (A black furrow he made), / Grâu roșu-a aruncat (Red wheat he sowed)... Și-a făcut acel colac minunat (Wonderful bread he baked), / Pe piatra morii măsurat (Round like the mills' wheel), / Nouă gazda ni l-a dat (And he gave it to us)!²⁹.

At the Bulgarians, when the carols stopped, the stanenik, after he had taken the round-shaped bread, he would tell the good wish in which he would mention about the short time they spent there, starting from the moment they came until they left and then, the proper wish is told. This is made of wishes addressed to the householder, regarding the future crop and the final wish would be:

Acel colac (That round-shaped bread) / Alb, dalb, sucit, răsucit (White, twisted, spun), / În fața Domnului copt (Baked before God), / Nouă merit (Especially for us), / Cât grâu se află în el (And the wheat from it), / Măcinat, răsmăcinat (Grounded again and again), / Răsucit, răsărucit (Twisted again and again), / Alb, dalb (White, lily-white), / Atâta sănătate, cinste și spor în astă casă (May him bring health, honour and plenty)! ...³⁰.

The carolling habit has, as Petru Caraman shows, a Roman substrate that comes from its very name, derived in Romanian from *calendae* (*Calendae Ianuariae*), the name of the Romans' New Year³¹. The Calends were Roman holidays dedicated to the Sun. The term "calends" designates a round-shaped object, with referring to the solar disc. That's why the carollers received gifts consisting of nuts and breads, round-shaped objects, symbolizing the perfection.

The same Petru Caraman underlines the agrarian character of the carolling: "At its origin, the carolling was an agrarian ritual *per excellentium* and only later it transformed itself, enlarging its meaning and encompassing all the aspect of the rural life"³². At a closer look, we notice that these agrarian motives are less present at the Romanian people as regarding the Christmas carols, being present more in the New Year's carols, such is *Plugușorul*.

As regarding the gifts received by the carollers, the offering of gifts isn't only a reward for the carollers but, as Petru Caraman mentions, "it has magical

²⁹ Petru Caraman, *cited work*, pp. 163-164.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 161.

³¹ Petru Caraman, *cited work*, pp. 163-164.

³² *Ibid*, p. 3. At the Roman people, the winter holiday cycle, succeeding one after another, included: *Brumalia* that was lasting 24 days (November 24th – December 17th); *Saturnalia* (December 17th – 23rd) – celebrated the god of sowing Saturn and his wife Ops that personified the fruitiness of the earth; *Kalendae Ianuarii* – celebrated on the first days of January and inaugurated the Roman year.

purposes; it has the character of a magic charm”³³. Ofelia Văduva also notices that

beyond its economic, social or cultural value, the gift has the magical valences of a ritual act that influences the way of thinking and the behaviour through its symbols, attitude and gesture, as complementary ways of expressing the feelings and, altogether, as forms of a strategy of excelling the incertitude and the doubt in the relations with the people around us³⁴.

Although apparently it is a material payment for the wishes, the gift is reciprocal. It is a symbolic exchange between the group of carollers that, gaining magical powers, they allow the transfer of a favourable energy towards the human space (wealth, health, happiness) and receive, in exchange, a reward (material gifts) that also bears magical properties.

As a conclusion, both at the Romanians and the neighbouring peoples, the carolling custom is one of the oldest but still observed customs, more or less in its traditional form. The carols recited or sung mix the New Year’s pagan traditions with the Christian holiday that celebrates the Birth of Jesus.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 371.

³⁴ Ofelia Văduva, *Pași spre sacru. Din etnologia alimentației românești*, București, Editura Enciclopedică, 1996, p. 7.

