

## FUNERARY REMNANTS OF THE GETO-DACIANS IN THE ROMANIAN POPULAR CULTURE\*

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**Abstract:** The funerary ceremony arouses a special interest for the researcher, preserving itself until today in obvious and expressive traditional forms, as an example being, on this respect, the multitude of ritual-magical practices and the archaic elements that they encompass. This ceremony attests the crisis moment from each human's life, constituting a warranty and, in the same time, the remaining of the individual inside the group of belonging, which is the same and, yet, different.

The keeping almost unchanged of the funeral rites and rituals, from ancient times until nowadays, is explained though the belief that any deviation from the norm could trigger the loss of the efficiency of "passing", a belief that imposed itself over all the traditions, with different coercive power. There can be therefore found, exquisitely coherent, archaic gestures, ceremonial acts, beliefs and funeral ritual songs that have continually been performed until today, in most of the folkloric areas from our country.

**Keywords:** cult of the dead, immortality of the soul, Romanian popular culture, funerary practices, soul.

In the Romanian ethnographic space, the funerary practices used to aim, and they still do nowadays, the post-existence, the initiation of *the pure-white traveller* into the mysteries of the Other Side World, the assuring of the further existence, on another ontological level, along with the defence of the living against the aggressive actions of the passed away. In a traditional type society, there is a tendency to uphold the funerary ritual-magical practices, which determined their preservation, even after they lost or changed their significance, because most of them encompass elements characteristic for the primitive way of thinking.

The rich ethnographic and folkloric Romanian material allows a quite precise diagnosis of the different cultural-religious "layers" and "roots", starting from the living people towards the missing ones<sup>1</sup>, as T. Herseni was noticing.

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\* The article is part of research project *Christian beliefs and ritual practices in Oltenian spirituality* included in the research program of the "C. S. Nicolăescu-Plopșor" Institute for Research in Social Studies and Humanities of the Romanian Academy, Craiova: *Church and society in southwestern Romania (XIV<sup>th</sup> – XX<sup>th</sup> centuries)*.

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<sup>1</sup> T. Herseni, *Forme străvechi de cultură populară românească*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia Publishing, 1977, p. 100.

Further on, we are trying to demonstrate, with the help of a couple of examples, that the numerous funerary rites and rituals, obviously anterior to the Christian period, can still be found in the Romanian traditional background. It is a rather difficult task, because, if for certain archaeological documents, the ethnological correspondences are missing, in the same way, a part of the funerary traditions are not confirmed by the archaeological material as well. Therefore, as referring to the perpetuation of the obituary practices, according to which the soul survives after the death of the body, being rooted in the Geto-Dacian world, we are going to discuss: *the fir-tree spear*; *the wake masks*; *the ritual cracking of a pot* and *the funerary feast*; *the custom to close up with clay the skull's orifices* and *the rite of the soul window*.

One of the examples that sustain the affirmations above, is the *fir-tree spear*, which is placed at the graves of those who passed into the Other Side, before the fulfilment of the earthy destiny, such are the unmarried, and, in extension, at the graves of all the deceased. Taking into account the sequencing of the ritual successions that constitute the funerary ceremony, we are truly inclined to believe that the fir-tree spear is related to the Zamolxian cult<sup>2</sup>. The fir-tree spear represents “the symbol of the sky column and, through it, the cosmic tree”<sup>3</sup>, as Romulus Vulcănescu said.

*The wake masks*<sup>4</sup> are elements with ancient magic valences, certainly pre-Christian. The presence of the mask implies the performing of a role; the role is an intentional act that presents the passing from an anterior condition to a superior one. “The roles are based on an ancient system of values, with a concrete pattern, in a relation of determination between the performer – possible and creator – and the present collectivity that receives, along with the precedent one, which contributed to the creation of the pattern. Therefore, the role play, as an element of the cultural pattern, is the result over generations”, as Nicoleta Coatu mentioned.

The person who will wear the mask will not just play the role of the character that is imagined, but he will identify with this. Only in this way, there can be assured the communion with the sacred being, whose gestures he brings forward, and the form of equilibrium can be re-established. The bearer of the mask “is given its power, he is taken out from the profane time and space, does not feel the touch of the individual and ever changing «self». Maybe this is the reason for which the name of the mask, *persona*, will also include that of the individual, unrepeatable through what he owns more steadfastly, less occasionally and transiently, in relation with the others”<sup>5</sup>. We must permanently consider the fact that “the mask

<sup>2</sup> See Loredana-Maria Ilin-Grozoiu, *Concepte, credințe și tradiții privind nemurirea sufletului și cultul morților*, Craiova, Universitaria Publishing, Bucharest, Pro Universitaria Publishing, 2014, *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> Romulus Vulcănescu, *Coloana cerului*, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing House, 1972, p. 116.

<sup>4</sup> See Constantin Eretescu, *Măștile de priveghi – origine, funcționalitate*, in “Revista de Etnografie și Folclor”, tom 13, no. 1, Bucharest, 1968, pp. 37-43.

<sup>5</sup> Ivan Evseev, *Enciclopedia simbolurilor religioase și arhetipurilor culturale*, Timișoara, Învierea Publishing, 2007, p. 351.

and the mask bearer are successively inverted, and the vital force condensed in the mask can take into possession the person who wished to be protected by it”<sup>6</sup>.

In case of the wake to which there are used masks and ritual dancing, a special signification is held by the characters that the mask impersonate: old men, old women, the priest, the devil, the stork, the goat or the bride. At the funerary ceremony, from Moldova, the masked couple, *the old woman and the old man*, who mime the act of procreation and the symbolic birth, bear important significance. If Lucia Berdan associates the masked couple with the fore-fathers of the dead and of the kin<sup>7</sup>, C. Eretescu brings forward the apotropaic function of the masked performance<sup>8</sup>, and I. H. Ciobotaru associates this game with the erotic crisis of the young people who interpret it<sup>9</sup>.

Another performance that we can also meet at the funerary wake from Moldova, related to the Geto-Dacian fore-fathers, takes place as following: “two masked boys carry a third one on two pieces of wood, who also wears a mask and holds a bludgeon. The two, wearing a pot on their heads, enter in the room with the passed away and improvise a horse selling, for which they ask a *leu* and a farthing”<sup>10</sup>. The refuse to sell the horse, in exchange for this price is also accompanied by the breaking of the pot in the middle of the room.

Most of the wake performances include, in the same time, the children, the young people, the old people, man and women, the neighbours, the friends, the dwellers of the same village, because “the interdictions about age, gender and social position are abolished here”<sup>11</sup>. Even if the wake for the dead, with masks and ritual dancing is organised for the all people to join in (in the regions where this ritual is still carried on: in villages from Transylvania – Lunca Platform, Apuseni Mountains, the region of Pădureni and Moldova), there are evidenced differentiations for the people who are quite old and those who filled a special social position in that community. At the wake, “the people laugh in such a way that the house is trembling. Everybody laughs, the relatives of the dead, the children, all the other people too”<sup>12</sup>.

In the villages from Vrancea, the wake performances represent an important sequence of the ritual-magical scenario included in the myth of *the great journey*. In the ancient communities, the watching of the passed away in the light of the

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<sup>6</sup> Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dicționar de simboluri*, vol. II, Bucharest, Artemis Publishing, 1994, p. 275.

<sup>7</sup> Lucia Berdan, *Fețele destinului*, Iași, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University Publishing, 1999, p. 185.

<sup>8</sup> Constantin Eretescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-43.

<sup>9</sup> I. H. Ciobotaru, *Folclorul obiceiurilor familiale din Moldova*, in “Caietele arhivei de folclor”, VII, 1986, p. XXV.

<sup>10</sup> Lucia Berdan, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

<sup>11</sup> Tiberiu Graur, *Jocuri de priveghi în Munții Apuseni*, in “Anuarul Muzeului Etnografic al Transilvaniei pe anii 1971-1973”, Cluj, 1973, p. 593.

<sup>12</sup> I. Conea, *Clopotiva: un sat din Hațeg*, vol. II, Bucharest, Institutul de Științe Sociale al României, 1940, p. 294.

burning fire, was also accompanied by the mask performances. The fire is joining the group of the other symbolic elements, such are water, air, cross, green twig, apple, wine, wheat, sounds, rooster etc., which are conferred with a rich and varied semantics, recorded as magical and religious codes. As Romulus Vulcănescu remarked, “the fire is the permanent element, eternal and always present, in everything that is encompassed in the cosmic and terrestrial life”<sup>13</sup>.

In the present context, the fire fulfils the role of purifying element; the pushing of a child or an adult towards its flames must be a reminiscence of an ancient ritual offering. According to the traditional mentality, the person who touched the fire is, at least symbolically, incinerated, travelling towards the sky in a purified condition. Through performing and ritual masking, the wake acts as a protecting shield for the family of the passed away, against the action of the evil spirits<sup>14</sup>.

On the same coordinates, it can also be placed *the ritual of creaking of a pot at the funerary feast*. In the magical thinking, the shaping and the breaking of the clay pot are associated with the birth and the death of the human being. Through the ritual breaking, the pot becomes again what it used to be, clay, and returns to the place from where it emerged, the Earth. Correspondingly, the human body, separated from the soul, returns into the Earth and it is identified with it<sup>15</sup>.

The presence of the ceramic fragments of Coțofeni type – in the mantle of the tumuli or on the old stepping levels under the mounds identified at Plenița, Rast, Târnava (Alexandrov) – is regarded, by Ionuț Semuc, in relation with the practices that involved the breaking of ritual pots that had been built during the construction of the mounds; these rites were connected to the separation of the living from the dead. Moreover, this custom of breaking the pots over a special surface, near the graves or above them, can also be met “in the funerary complexes of steppe regions, and in other areas of the Balkan Peninsula (Goljama Detelina, Piskove)”<sup>16</sup>.

In the researched tombs from Ștefănești (Botoșani), which date back from the time of the early Thracians, there were found in the pit, and covered with a bowl that was serving the purpose of lid, broken dishes, probably coming from the funerary feast or from the pyre<sup>17</sup>. The custom of the funeral offerings is mentioned by Herodotus as well: “The Thracians, after they mourn the dead, they display the body for three days; then, they scarify different animals and organize a funerary feast (...). The funerary feast, with the ritual breaking, over the tomb, of the dishes they had used”<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Romulus Vulcănescu, *Mitologie română*, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing, 1985, p. 380 (next cited as: Romulus Vulcănescu, *Mitologie română...*).

<sup>14</sup> Lucia Berdan, *op. cit.*, pp. 193-194.

<sup>15</sup> See Ion Ghinoiu, *Lumea de aici, lumea de dincolo. Ipostaze românești ale nemuririi*, Bucharest, Fundația Culturală Publishing, 1999, pp. 44-47.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> C. Iconomu, C. Asăvoaie, *Contribuții privind cunoașterea ritualului de înmormântare a tracilor timpurii în lumina cercetărilor de la Ștefănești-Botoșani*, in “Pontica”, XXVII, 1994, The National History and Archaeology Museum from Constanța, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> H. Daicovicu, *Dacii*, Bucharest, Enciclopedic Publishing, 1972, p. 179.

At the Geto-Dacians, in the second Iron Age, it became generalised the rite of incineration in flat cemeteries, under tumuli, situated outside the settlements. The incineration was taking place in a specially prepared area (*ustrirum*), or exactly on the grave, the ashes and the offerings being deposited into the pit or in urn and buried under the ground, similar with the other populations from the south of Danube, as the Thracians, the Illyrians or the Germans. The numerous archaeological discoveries attest the fact that the Geto-Dacians practiced certain religious rituals that included the funerary feasts and dances, human sacrifices, along with the offerings<sup>19</sup>.

In the extra-Carpathian space, in the 8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries, fragments of dishes broken ritually near the pyre, on the occasion of a funeral feast, were found in almost each necropolis. At Balta Verde, in the researched tombs, there were deposited ceramic fragments, manually moulded or with the pottery wheel: Sultana – 6 tombs; Platonești, Izvoru, Sihleanu, Frătești, Obârșia, Păuleasca, Chiscani<sup>20</sup>. At Obârșia, from the 99 inhumation tombs, there were discovered, in the pit and in its filling, ceramic fragments from several “ritually” broken dishes<sup>21</sup>.

For the region of Dobrogea, broken dishes, probably ritually, during the funerary feast, were discovered at: Cernavodă, Sarichioi, Chilia Veche, Mihai Bravu<sup>22</sup>, Luncavița “Drumul Vacilor”, Luncavița “Mocuța”, Independența (Murighiol), Babadag, Garvăn-Mlăjitul Florilor, Satu Nou, Celic Dere, Niculițel-Cornet<sup>23</sup>.

In the nowadays communities, after the deceased is taken out of the house, it is broken a pot that could be empty or filled with water or ashes, by a closed relative of the passed away, on the place of death, on the threshold of the house or at the grave: “A woman remains inside the house, closes all the doors and breaks a pot with ash, to prevent the death of another person from the family”<sup>24</sup>, at Prunișor, Mehedinți County; “It is broken a cup, from which it had been poured water to wash the dead”<sup>25</sup>, at Racovița, Gorj County; “The pot used for the incensing of the passed away is broken in the middle of the house, where the dead remained”<sup>26</sup>, at Cetate, Dolj County; “After the funeral procession leaves, it is broken a cup/glass

<sup>19</sup> M. Petrescu-Dâmbovița, Hadrian Daicoviciu, Ligia Bârză, *Istoria României de la începuturi până în secolul al VIII-lea*, Bucharest, Didactical and Pedagogical Publishing, 1995, p. 214.

<sup>20</sup> C. Luca, D. Măndescu, *Rituri și ritualuri funerare în spațiul extracarpatic în secolele VIII-X*, Brăila, Istros Publishing, 2001, p. 67.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.

<sup>22</sup> At Mihai Bravu, there were identified, among the tombs, few open fireplaces, on which there had been ritually broken Dridu type vessels (*X<sup>th</sup> cen.*) (Gh. Mănucu-Adameșteanu, *Aspecte ale ritului și ritualului funerar din perioada feudalismului timpuriu în lumina descoperirilor din Dobrogea*, in “Symposia Thracologica”, no. 7, Tulcea, 1989, p. 429).

<sup>23</sup> Ionuț Semuc, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>24</sup> Ion Ghinoiu (coordinator), *Sărbători și obiceiuri. Răspunsuri la chestionarele Atlasului Etnografic Român*, vol. I, *Oltenia*, edition supervised by Ofelia Văduva and Ofelia Pleșca, Bucharest, Enciclopedic Publishing, 2001, p. 187.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 188.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 187.

on the threshold of the house, over which the dead passed. A girl superficially sweeps the house; the people who live there throw coins on the floor, which the girl gathers with the broom”<sup>27</sup>, at Melinești, Dolj County.

The signification for the breaking of the pot, at the funeral, is related to the belief according to which, “after the soul has come out through the ascendant mouth, it flies away from the house, through the window, open widely by the family members. After it visits the beloved place, from while he it was alive, it returns inside the house and wishes to reenter into the abandoned shelter, triggering the transformation of the dead into a wraith, a wondering soul that refuses to leave this world”<sup>28</sup>.

In some areas of the country, along with the breaking of the pot against the threshold, the door is slammed, gestures made for the assuring that not only the body, but the soul, left the house<sup>29</sup>.

Moreover, we have to mention another practice, archaeologically attested, *the custom to close up with clay the skull's orifices*. This “is related to the multitude of ritual interdictions that belong to the belief that the skull is a recipient of the soul, which at the tribes belonging to the Catacomb Culture (the Bronze Age) has different manifestations (the dislocating or the severing of the head, its trepanation or deformation, the colouring in ochre, the masks)”<sup>30</sup>. In order to remove this danger, nowadays, at the communities from Argeș County, the dead is turned into stone, meaning that all the orifices are filled with pounded stones and glass, incense etc., for impeding the soul to enter the deserted body<sup>31</sup>.

The belief into a post-mortem existence is also sustained by *the rite of the soul window*. This is actually a perforation made in the lid of the funerary recipient, in which the ashes and the calcined bones, resulting after the incineration, were deposited. The archaeological discoveries confirm the existence of this practice, starting with the Bronze Age. For example, some of the urns, from the necropolises that belong to Monteoru culture from Căndești (phases IIa and IIb), had a small orifice on the bottom part, in order to ease the spiritual access of the spirit of the incinerated<sup>32</sup>.

In the Second Iron Age (La Tène), it was discovered at Sighișoara, a funerary dish with a cavity through which the soul of the deceased entered and got out, freely, after the inhumation. After the Roman conquering, this rite was further kept by the autochthonous population, a theory supported by the discoveries from the

<sup>27</sup> Inf. Elisabeta Cimpoieru, village of Melinești, Dolj County, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Ion Ghinoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 246.

<sup>30</sup> Ionuț Semuc, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>31</sup> Ion Ghinoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

<sup>32</sup> Marilena Florescu, *Câteva informații referitoare la ritul și ritualurile practicate de purtătorii culturii Monteoru în lumina săpăturilor de la Căndești (jud. Vrancea)*, in “Carpatica”, X, 1978, p. 106.

Dacian cemetery, of Roman period, from Soporul de Câmpie. Here, there were found longish dishes, with a small inclined orifice, realised before burning, near the supporting ring from the bottom side<sup>33</sup>.

In Bucovina, an opening is made in the eastern side, where there are positioned the legs, called *door*<sup>34</sup>. It is thought that, through these windows, the passed away is able to see “the people who gathered to accompany it on the way to the grave, and to say good-bye”, there being also the channel through which the passed away can talk to the living, during the funeral<sup>35</sup>.

Romulus Vulcănescu mentions, for Muntenia, the custom to make “a small window near the head, through which the dead can see and hear the advice (...) and through which a frog can enter to pinch the dead’s nose, for (...) it to start rotting”<sup>36</sup>.

It is well known the belief of the Geto-Dacians in immortality, and more than that, they also discovered a way to continue their existence after death. Even if there it is not of great importance the way in which they reached immortality (initiation in the Cult of Zamolxis, attendance to the ritual feasts and ceremonies, bravery etc.), this belief contributed decisively to the consolidation of the Dacian state. Quite a lot of the Geto-Dacian funerary traditions can still be found, in different ways, more or less “improved”. For the mythology of the death, the funerary practices presented above encompass great importance: through genesis, forms, number and function, but particularly through the ancient signification that they promote.

In the traditional mentality, death is perceived as a painful, frightening occurrence, which appears unexpectedly. Far from representing an end, but only from the lack of physical absence point of view, the *Great Passing* is regarded by the members of a collectivity as a threshold, as a boundary, beyond which *The True Life* is displayed. Any passing implies, on one side, a breach in the old state, an annulment or an exceeding and, on the other side, the initiation or the preparation of one individual for his accessing towards a new identity. This passing proves to be, most of the times, laborious, because the individual has to overcome an intermediary situation, between two existential conditions. The ceremonial acts and manifestations that accompany the Great Passing are mainly performed for the reestablishment of the equilibrium that was lost along with the ceasing of the anterior existential condition.

Although there are signs of death and other premonitions or incurable diseases, most of the times the close people of the passing away are spiritually unprepared and the sadness, the “emptiness” from their souls, sometimes

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<sup>33</sup> D. Protase, *Un cimitir dacic din epoca romană la Soporul de Câmpie. Contribuție la problema continuității romane în Dacia*, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing, 1976, p. 73.

<sup>34</sup> Ion Ghinoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>35</sup> Ionuț Semuc, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>36</sup> Romulus Vulcănescu, *Mitologie română...*, p. 189.

disappointment, cannot be surpassed or annulled but through their attempt to establish a connection between This World and The Other Side World, transforming the “space”, whose “transparency” is to be substituted by their own mental instruments, into an accessible one. Therefore, the funerary behaviour contains performances that regard the chasing away of the horror and pain, the overcoming of fright and death fear, while the passed away has his access to the Other Side World facilitated.

Without false modesty and not at all subjective, we can assert that in Oltenia there are also pertinent perceptions about the funerary ceremonies, gained from the pure Orthodox tradition, appeared through our fore-fathers, those who knew to understand and interpret the symbol and the reality from different things and elements, perpetuating the idea of good, beautiful, living with God.

This study determines us to reflect upon the old and primary rituals and traditions, from long time ago, of our fore-fathers that referred to the belief in the after life, but, in the same time, they oblige us, the present ones, to preserve and perpetuate the rich ethnographic evidences and Christian feasts traditions. All these Christian customs, precious inheritances, related to immortality of soul and the cult of the dead must be cultivated and transmitted, depending mostly on the keeping of respect and solemnity for the Romanian spiritual values.