

THE FUNERARY SONG *THREE SISTERS GATHERING FLOWERS**

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Abstract: Since ancient times, in all the civilisations, the antagonistic duality fear versus fascination, which refers to the aspect of the Other-Side World, has induced and maintained numerous funerary rites and rituals in the collective mentality. The fear of death was defeated by the belief in the continuation of life beyond death. In the funerary song *Three sisters gathering flowers* that accompanies the funerary rites, the passing towards the Other World is presented as a wandering (or falling asleep) while gathering flowers. By analysing the significations of the symbols that are found in this song, we intended to bring back to life the image of the cosmic sacredness, characteristic to the Romanian peasant.

Keywords: three sisters, sleeping, gathering flowers, This World, the Other-Side world.

In the Romanian folklore, the narrative nucleus of the three sisters gathering flowers is developed in several folkloric creations, such is, for example, the ballad¹, the funerary ritual song and, very important as well, the carols about the death of

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¹ The variants of the ballad with the three sisters who left to pick flowers, in the typology of Al. I. Amzulescu, are also met in Ilfov, Teleorman, Ialomița, Dâmbovița, Argeș, Olt, Dolj, Sibiu, Gorj, Caraș Severin and Timiș. Here is the summary of this ballad made by Al. I. Amzulescu, based on other several versions: "Leaving at daybreak to pick flowers to make wraths, three sisters get lost one from another in the misty morning and the thick forest. Hearing the cuckoo singing, the little girl asks it to show her the good way, promising it that she will become its: sister, cousin, wife. Only after the third promise, the cuckoo helps her to return home. The cuckoo was Prince Charming, transformed into a bird, who became the husband of the girl. In some variants, the girl does not keep her promise, or her mother does not agree, and the cuckoo leaves making a curse that comes true" (Al. I. Amzulescu, *Balada familială. Tipologie și corpus de texte poetice*, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing House, 1983, pp. 13-14).

the reaping girl². The similarities have been noticed by acad. Sabina Ispas, who believes that the reason is represented by “the ancient wide range of significations of these narrative nuclei, preserved from the background of old religions, or magical practices, well-known to the autochthonous population, which have kept, owing to his reason, an image full of mystery that generates both fear and respect”³. The researcher observes especially how interesting there are the possible connections between the primary forms of manifestation of the old epic-heroic epos and the ancient funerary songs⁴. Due to this reason, one of the examples is the fact that the wandering of the girls is met as an initial episode in some variants of the songs depicting the fight of Iorgovan with the snake⁵. Consequently, this narrative nucleus is rather well-represented, especially in those texts that originate from all the regions of the country, which demonstrates its antiquity at the Romanian people.

The text from the funerary ritual *Three sisters gathering flowers* narrates the following string of events: three sisters leave for picking flowers at a specific moment of the day, they get lost (or fall asleep) and find themselves on the realm of the Other-side World, a space of the total silence and stillness, where they can hear only the voice of a cuckoo, which they ask to help them return to the world they came from. Let's follow the text carefully (approximate translation) of a version from Oltenia, the village of Runcu, commune of Șovarna (Mehedinți County), published by Vasile Șișu in 2001: “When the rooster was crowing/ When the day was dawning/ There were gone/ Three sisters to gather flowers/ Through the dewy grass/ Through the misty morning/ And they picked/ And they gathered/ Randomly the blooms/ Lots and lots of flowers/ The flower of lonesome/ The flower of peony/ The flowers were willing/ And they made mistake/ And they fell asleep/ Then they woke up/ When it was midnight/ Feeling chills of death/ Vainly they listened/ If they still could hear/ The crow of the roosters/ The sound of the otter/ A door opening/ The call of a wooden church board/ And they didn't hear/

² The text of the carol about the reaping girl is spread in the central area of Transylvania, encompassing the entire space between the Mountains of Maramureș and the area of Târnave, Western Mountains and the range Gurghiu-Călimani, being inserted by Monica Brătulescu in the typology of carols, at number 34². “The heroine, who tells the story at the 1st person singular – as Vasile V. Filip notes – leaves to reaping, where she finds a mysterious “heavenly flower”, which she hides in her bosom. But the flower seems to be magical effects, because it releases the eroticism, which will prove to be evil, of a shepherd. He, who either sees the girl picking flowers, or hearing the trumpet sounds that-surprisingly – the flower makes, comes to hug and kiss the girl. She fights back, showing a fear that cannot be generated only by the fact that the harvest will remain unreaped, but by an obscure intuition of the danger, and by the look of the shepherd-Flyer, who the girl calls “a dog with a human face” (Vasile V. Filip, *Universul colindei românești. În perspectiva unor structuri de mentalitate arhaică*, Bucharest, Saeculum I.O. Publishing House, 1999, p. 190).

³ Sabina Ispas, *Cântecul epic-eroic românesc în context sud-est european. Cântecele peșirii*, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, 1995, p. 73.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

Either the rooster crowing/ Or the otter barking/ Or a door opening/ Or the priest calling/ But they still could hear/ On the top of the mountain/ The sound of a cuckoo/ And they started calling:/ -You, dearest cuckoo of the sea/ Turn your tail into a ladder/ Get us out of here/ -I cannot, I say/ I wish, but I can't/ I am only a traveller/ Only twice a year/ And you shouldn't take/ The way of the waters/ They just take you away/ But don't bring you back/ In the summer, all the flowers/ They are all my good sisters"⁶. This is the classical form of the songs that accompany the funerary rites, but we should consider the fact that the text presents, according to its variants, other motifs too, which we shall take into account further on, at the right moment. It is also worth mentioned that a thorough analysis of these motifs is to be later approached, first of all because the space for writing an article cannot allow such an extended study. Therefore, although the subject remains the same, the changes that refer to the foundation concern the details: for example, in the version from Prejna (published by Pavel Ciobanu)⁷, and that from Rudina (published by Mihail Gregorian⁸), the little sister asks the cuckoo to help them passing from the Other-Side World to This world; in the version from Prejna, the sisters left for gathering flowers on a certain day, on a Thursday morning. Although in the past it used to be more often heard, this funerary text is quite seldom attested. There should also be added that, the variant from Runcu is performed by the women who mourn, in the evening and at night, during the wake, in the house, next to the dead person's coffin, the variant from Rudina is sang next to the grave, and the one from Prejna is performed on the way to the cemetery.

As it can be observed, the quoted funerary ritual song introduces us, nonetheless, in the area of the myth that refers to *the great road* or *the road of the passing*. The myth and the rite are tightly connected to the symbolic way of thinking, because the myths are the elements that can offer us a concrete perspective on the manner in which the individuals give meanings to their existence and experiences⁹. Here are some of the notes of A. Codoban, made for this reason: "(...) If the essence of the religious experience is symbolic, its adequate expression is the myth, then its celebration is the ritual. The myth explains the symbols, making a connection between them and dramatizing them. Through the myth-symbol "we are told" and "we are brought motivations". (...) As keeper of the fundamental sacred gestures and deposit of the exquisite patters for acting, the myth justifies and assures the communion around the same beliefs and behaviours. In the original archaic cultures, "the myth and the ritual did not represent only

⁶ Vasile Şişu, *Odiseea sufletului. Epos funerar românesc*, Drobeta Turnu-Severin, The County Centre for Folk Creation from Mehedinţi, 2001, pp. 32-33.

⁷ Pavel Ciobanu, *Plaiul Cloşani*, vol. III, Drobeta Turnu-Severin, Edited by the County Centre for Popular Creation from Mehedinţi, 1981, pp. 151-153, 156-158.

⁸ Mihail Gregorian, *Folclor din Oltenia și Banatul Răsăritean*, in "Folclor din Oltenia și Muntenia", I, 1967, Bucharest, Editura pentru Literatură Publishing House, pp. 262-264.

⁹ Delia Suiogan, *Simbolica riturilor de trecere*, Bucharest, Paideia Publishing House, 2006, p. 45.

cultural images, as they are nowadays, but they encompassed everything, each thought and activity. The myth and the ritual were the culture itself, not only simple forms or manifestations of it”¹⁰. Since immemorial times, in all the civilisations, the discovery of the man’s eternal youth secret, or the continuation of existence on another ontological stage, were permanent preoccupations of the humans and constituted the motivation for the emerging of numerous beliefs and myths that promised to shed light on the origin and the meaning of death, but, on what it was entirely fascinating, what was beyond the threshold of the existence. Accepted as a natural law, death is regarded as a long and mysterious voyage towards another world, whose success depends, first of all, on the fulfilment of certain funerary practices that assure the safe depart from This World and the emersion into that of the ancestors. As a passing rite towards another ontological level, death becomes the image of the supreme initiation, “the beginning of a new spiritual existence”¹¹. In the funerary ritual text *Three sisters gathering flowers*, the passing from This-Side World into the Other-Side World is presented as a wandering, a lingering while picking flowers. Displaying a wide potential, the flower is the symbol of the paradise, an ephemeral and passing world¹². A formulation of a text from Ilovăț, Mehedinți County, seems edifying in this respect: “Flower of a rose,/ You have not bloomed/ This morning again/ As you did yesterday morning/ Because I lingered more/ And I fell asleep/ While picking flowers/ You flower of a water hyssop/ Being the loveliest/ And remembering of my house (...) Flower of sweet basil/ Spreading longing and passion/ Passion and great sadness/ From my dearest sisters (...)/ Flower of a cranesbills/ Great yearning you spread”¹³.

In the title, and also in the text of the funerary ritual song, we can meet an archaic symbol, the number three, related to the characters. Three are also the goddesses invoked in the funerary song, to grant the soul respite, in order to prepare for the voyage towards the Other-Side World. In the Romanian collective imaginary, the *Dawn Fairies* are three sisters who decide, by their appearance before the Sun rise, the departure of the soul from existence, and the entering into post-existence. These goddesses become the correspondent of the Faith Fairies, who are goddesses of the soul that enters into This-Side World. Rolf W. Brednich in his work *Volkserzählungen und Volkslaube von den Schicksalsfrauen*, published in Helsinki in 1964, mentions that in the mentality of the Indo-European traditional societies, the Faith Fairies exercise their powers on three ontological levels: pre-existence (they decide whether the moment of birth is favourable or not), life (they

¹⁰ A. Codoban, *Sacru și ontofanie*, Iași, Polirom Publishing House, 1998, p. 99.

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, *Eseuri*, Bucharest, Scientific Publishing House, 1991, p. 307.

¹² Ivan Evseev, *Enciclopedia simbolurilor religioase și arhetipurilor culturale*, Timișoara, “Învierea” Publishing House, 2007, p. 209.

¹³ Sabina Ispas, *Trei surori la flori (Trei fete surori)*, in “Anuarul Institutului de Etnografie și Folclor «Constantin Brăiloiu»”, new series, volume 4, 1993, p. 125.

decide when and who a person will marry), and death (they decide when and how an individual will die)¹⁴. The Faith Fairies are also three sisters, maidens, dressed in white, who predestinate when the children are born; “The Faith Fairies spin the thread of a man’s life, according to their disposition, in the day they predestinate. The little one, who has the scissors, limps and, similar to other Romanian mythical representations that have this flaw (Limping Filip, *Sântoaderul cel Șchiop-Saint Theodore the Limping*), they decide the age when somebody dies, by the sudden cutting of the life thread!”¹⁵. Really fascinating are the investigations of Mircea Eliade, who gives to these feminine mythical representations of the destiny, the role of “spinners” in several Indo-European mythologies¹⁶. For the Romanians, these mythical representations appear in the area of the popular beliefs, and the ceremonial manifestations, of the superstitions, of the artistic creation. The hypostasis known in the context of the funerary ceremony is a complex one, that of “Faith Fairies-Fays-Sisters-Sisters of the Sun-Death. The manners in which this formula is accomplished are different, according to the inner conditions that they relate with. Thus, the Faith-Fairies can be directly connected with the Sun, can be displayed as siblings, can appear as Faith-Fairies-Fays, or equal with the Death”¹⁷. The presence of number three in some variants of the *Song from the Dawn*, is closely connected with the presence of the customs. In the popular mentality, the passing towards the Other-Side World implies the paying of the heavenly customs¹⁸, which is done with money and other ritual objects: “You should go to the fair/ And buy from there/ Three black scarves/ Three mourning veils/ Three wraths”¹⁹. As referring to the number three, Adrian Fochi in the work *Estetica oralității* published in 1980, noted that it closes a cycle (in the ballad *The girl and the cuckoo*, three represents a progressive succession that brings the idea to a closure), or opens a cycle (in the ballad *Manole*, after three obstacles, the catastrophe unleashes)²⁰.

The gathering of flowers begins at the end of February (the 24th of February—the Christian Holiday celebrating the Finding of the Head of St. John the Baptist, also known in the popular calendar as *Dragobete*), when there are gathered flowers that the girls put around their ears, there are jokes about the feelings of the young

¹⁴ Rolf W. Brednich, *Volkserzählungen und Volkslaube von den Schicksalsfrauen*, Helsinki, 1964, p. 220 and next.

¹⁵ Ion Ghinoiu, *Mica enciclopedie de tradiții românești*, Bucharest, Agora Publishing House, 2008, p. 319.

¹⁶ See more, Mircea Eliade, *Traité d’histoire des religions*, Paris, 1968, pp. 159-160.

¹⁷ Florica Lorinț, Cornelia Belcin-Pleşca, *Însemne despre destin (în credințe și rituri populare la români)*, in “Anuarul Institutului de Etnografie și Folclor”, New series, volume 4/1993, p. 47.

¹⁸ As regarding the heavenly customs, see: Serafim Rose, *Experiențe contemporane “de după moarte” în lumina învățaturii ortodoxe*, translated from English by Dana Cocargeanu, Bucharest, Sophia Publishing House, 2007, pp. 81-106.

¹⁹ Mihai Fifer, *Cântecul ritual funerar*, in “Arhivele Olteniei”, New series, no. 10/1995, p. 177.

²⁰ Adrian Fochi, *Estetica oralității*, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, 1980, pp. 194-195.

people, there are horas and reunions for shared working, the boys kiss the girls. Dragobete characterises “the representation of all the beings, animals, birds, along with the man”²¹, showing in the same time a reminiscent form of Eros.

Anna Ferrari tells the legend of the god from the Greek mythology, Hades (he used to rule in the infernal land of shadows, beneath the ground)²², who fell in love with the beautiful daughter of Zeus and Demeter, called Persephone. Knowing that Demeter, the goddess of harvest, grains and fertility was against the marriage between Hades and Persephone, he asked her from his brother, Zeus, who agreed, on the condition that Hades managed to take her into his kingdom. While picking flowers, Persephone was taken by Hades into the Inferno. Finding the news, Demeter wandered through the world in nine days, looking for her daughter, and leaving draught behind her. Under these circumstances, Zeus sent Hermes, his messenger, into the Inferno, to ask Hades to leave Persephone return to her parents. Although released from the Inferno, Persephone remained connected to the world of the shadows, due to the fact that Hades had lured her with the fruit of a pomegranate tree. Each winter, she had to return into the Inferno, and for the rest of the year she would live on the earth, along with her mother. This is the reason for which, in the winter, the vegetation dies²³.

An interesting symbolist interpretation can be invoked in the moment of the ritual time. According to the variants, the three sisters left for picking flowers in the dawn of a day (when the rooster was crowing=around the daybreak moment). In this context, it should be brought forward for discussion the moment when the *Dawn is breaking*. The moment the red-orange light of the sun appears, before the sunrise, is called “the daybreak” or “dawn”. The sacredness of this moment is marked by the birth of the Sun²⁴. It is the symbol of the victory of light over the darkness, of purity and sincerity, of awakening, met in the cultures from the civilisations around the world²⁵. Some of the most poetic embodiments of the dawn is the Hindu goddess Usas, the wife and lover of the Sun. In *Rig-Veda*, there are 20 hymns dedicated to her. She is a young woman, of an exquisite beauty, dressed in shining gowns, who shows herself to the world dancing in a shining chariot, pulled by reddish horses. The mythical personification of this moment are the *Dawn-Sisters*, invoked in the funerary ritual songs, the *Pure-White-Dawn* from the Romanian carols, the lyrical and wedding songs. The observations of Ernest Bernea depict the vision of the Romanian peasant, on the moment when the *Dawn*

²¹ Romulus Vulcănescu, *Mitologie română*, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing House, 1985, p. 338.

²² Victor Kernbach, *Dicționar de mitologie generală*, Bucharest, Albatros Publishing House, 2004, p. 223.

²³ Anna Ferrari, *Dicționar de mitologie greacă și romană*, translated by Emanuela Stoleriu, Dragoș Cojocaru, Dana Zamosteanu, Iași, Polirom Publishing House, 2003.

²⁴ Ivan Evseev, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 57.

breaks: “When the red light appears on the sky, it seems as if you were a different man, and the entire world is different too. The light is coming from God and it brings nothing but good things. This is given by God, everything to be under change. When the dawn breaks, it feels as if the world was being recreated”²⁶. In the folkloric vision, the child born at daybreak will be lucky, and the person who dies at dawn has all his sins forgiven.

The text of carols, called *The Dawn*, registered by Monica Brătulescu in the 28 typology²⁷, present the request of the carollers for the dawn to stay longer, or the solemnly brought news of the daybreak. The image is accentuated, in the mythical area of the carol, the key moment of the dawn breaking is that of some birds or animals fighting for a small amount of food. Ovidiu Bârlea, preoccupied mainly with the folkloric text, underlined that “Transylvania and Țara Loviștei shows an even greater importance, by singing the carol *the dawn* on the lanes of the villages (*zăuritul*), or even in the church tower or on a tree. The Sun, through the red light spread beforehand, is asked not to rise, by the morning mist, because the mist did not find any moment of rest, often pretending that witnessed the fight between two eagles, over a golden feather, saying a rather imperative request: “Do not break”, and with the impetuosity in which it is seen the impossibility to change the natural course, along with the regret that the crucial moment from the year, the night of the carolling, is, nevertheless, over”²⁸.

This is also the moment when the valences of the dew are cherished, representing the purification and the merging between human and vegetation. The valences of the water, encompassed in the dew, are found in numerous rites connected to the dawn, which refer to the health of the humans (the ritual of washing with the dew gathered in St. George’s night; the rolling in the wet grass in the Midsummer Night etc.), and also the animals (the dew from the field is given to the cattle for more milk²⁹).

In the version from Prejna, the three girls-sisters left to pick flowers, “on a Thursday morning”, the day that used to be protected by the lord of the sky-the god Jupiter. The mythology of Thursday was reflected both in the ritual³⁰ and in the

²⁶ Ernest Bernea, *Cadre ale gândirii populare*, Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishing House, 1985, p. 192.

²⁷ See Monica Brătulescu, *Colinda românească*, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, 1981, pp. 182-184.

²⁸ Ovidiu Bârlea, *Folclorul românesc. Momente și sinteze*, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, p. 305.

²⁹ A. Fochi, *Datini și eresuri populare la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea. Răspunsurile la chestionarele lui N. Densușianu*, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, 1976, p. 295.

³⁰ Among all the important Thursdays, referred to the popular calendar, we mention: *the Forbidden Thursdays* (*the Thursday of the Ants*, from the week before the Lent, also called *the Thursday of all the Animals*, *the Thursday of the Mares*, from the first week of the Lent, *the Thursday of the Pots*, *the Black Thursday*, *the Thursday of the Rain Idol*, *the Thursday of the Rain-Makers*), *the Maundy Thursday* from the last week of the Lent (also called *the Thursday of the Passions* or *the Black Thursday*).

texts of the ballads and the funerary songs. “Thursday is the day of the passed away, the day in which the worlds, the seen and the unseen ones, get in touch. The moment from the day, when the hero wanders, is precisely the moment known as favourable for unleashing the inhuman forces, the moment when magic is practised and spells are made, when hidden rituals are unfolded. During this period of time, the hero “wanders”, “roams” as the souls of the dead that the poem of the funerary ceremony calls “the pure-while travellers”³¹. The morning, considered the time of the divine privileges, symbol of purification, a moment when nothing is tainted, corrupted or compromised³², the girls leave to gather flowers. Everywhere, in all the variants of the funerary text, the sisters were living in This-Side World during the daybreak, but at midnight or “in the middle” of the night, they pass into the other world. According to the popular beliefs, the midnight represents the apogee when the demons and the evil demi-gods unleash (the Spooks, the Wicked-Fairies, the Ghosts, the Wraiths, the Evil Spirits, the Flyer, Muma-Pădurii – the Evil Spirit of the Forest etc.), along with the witches, the spectres and the infernal animals”³³.

Another very interesting symbol that caught our attention, is the rooster: “And they didn’t hear/ Either the rooster crowing/ Or the otter barking/ Or a door opening/ Or the priest calling”. In the universal mythological systems, the rooster is a solar symbol. It “embodies the light, with all its cosmic and spiritual valences”³⁴. In the antique Cartagena, at the old Slavic people, or at the Pueblo Indians from America, the white rooster is a bird of light, which announced through its song, the creation of the morning Aurora³⁵. The ancient tradition attributes to the rooster psihopomp virtues, being sacrificed for the god Asclepios, who, through his cures, he succeeded to resurrect people. This bird becomes also the symbol of Attis, the oriental solar god, dead and later resurrected³⁶. In the funerary rituals of the old German people, there were sacrificed roosters, and at certain populations from Altai, “the dead is depicted as a roosted tied on the funerary bed”³⁷.

In the Christian symbolist, “the rooster signifies the supreme light and intelligence that come from God; it is also depicted as a symbol of Jesus Christ”³⁸. The beliefs recommend it as being “given as a present to God”, being implied in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ: “The rooster is blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ. If it had not been for the rooster, Jesus would not have resurrected”. It also

³¹ Sabina Ispas, *O nouă interpretare a unui cântec povestitor: Toma Alimoș*, in “Revista de etnografie și folclor”, v. XXXI, no. 2/1986, pp. 113-118.

³² Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dicționar de simboluri*, vol. 1, Bucharest, Artemis Publishing House, 1993, p. 373.

³³ Ivan Evseev, *op. cit.*, p. 399.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 133.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ Marcela Bratiloveanu Popilian, *Obiceiuri de primăvară din Oltenia*, Bucharest, “Constantin Matasă” Publishing House, 2001, p. 164.

³⁷ Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 345.

³⁸ Ivan Evseev, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

announces the Resurrection of our Lord: “At Easter, when you hear the rooster crowing, if there is a companion with you in the house, you should say: “Christ has resurrected!” “Created as a miraculous being”, it can resurrect: it flies next to the icons crying: “Cock-a-doodle-doo! Look at me, they ate me, but I have resurrected!”³⁹. In the folkloric vision, the crowing of the rooster drives away the evil spirits, announces the daybreak, announces the death of a person, watches the way towards the other world. In laments, the inferno is a place where “the rooster does not crow”. The rooster does not come at the door of the dying person, but it calls them, from the gate of heaven, through a song that only the receiver understands: “Nobody in this wide world hears it/Only Lina, who answers it”⁴⁰. It is believed that it is a good thing to give alms a rooster, to somebody the same age as you, to have it when dying. This rooster will crow at the gate of heaven day and night, and in the Other-Side World, it will meet you singing its song⁴¹. In Oltenia, it is very interesting a confession from Drăgănești-Olt, Olt County, according to which, “on the Good Friday, at the service for the dead, those who have among their beloved people who died without holding a candle, take to the church a small parcel, money, something sweet, a match, wine and a white rooster. When they come out with the holly gifts, the roosters start to crow so loudly, that you cannot hear anything else in the church. On Friday afternoon, people go to the cemetery, they take the rooster, and give it, over the grave, to a person, or a child, of the same sex as the one who died without holding a candle”⁴². The same custom is noticed by I. H. Ciubotaru in Bacău and Vrancea and by Elena Niculiță-Voronca, in the villages from the northern parts of Moldova⁴³.

The bird of death that appears in this funerary song, and in other funerary ceremonial-ritual songs too, is the *cuckoo* (*Cuculus canorus*). A legend tells how the cuckoo “used to be the son of an emperor, who ruled in a further country, towards the west. And the emperor had another son too. Along much wealth, he had even more land. When the emperor grew very old, lying on his death bed, he tried to advise his sons how to divide the land. But they didn’t listen, and started to fight. Their father cursed them, saying: “You shall be birds that shall never meet again. And one of you shall remain here, and the other shall go in the east. And you shall call each other until the end of your time on earth, and your eggs shall be hatched by other birds, and you shall be cursed forever!”⁴⁴. The song of the cuckoo

³⁹ Elena Niculiță Voronca, *Datinile poporului român adunate și așezate în ordine mitologică*, vol. I, Iași, Polirom, 1998, p. 363.

⁴⁰ Mariana Kahane, Lucilia Georgescu-Stănculeanu, *Cântecul Zorilor și Bradului (Tipologie muzicală)*, Bucharest, Editura Muzicală Publishing House, 1988, p. 170.

⁴¹ Gh. F. Ciușeanu, *Superstițiile poporului român. În asemănare cu ale altor popoare vechi și noi*, critique edition, preface and theme index by I. Oprișan, Bucharest, Saeculum I.O. Publishing House, p. 261.

⁴² Marcela Bratiloveanu Popilian, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

⁴³ Elena Niculiță-Voronca, *op. cit.*, p. 420.

⁴⁴ Lucian Costin, *Legende*, Timișoara, 1927, p. 12.

can be heard from the Annunciation (The Day of the Cuckoo) until the Midsummer Day, when, according to the tradition, this bird would choke with a grain of barley. A lone bird, it does not build a nest, laying the eggs in the nests of other birds. According to the popular beliefs, if you kill a cuckoo, your parents⁴⁵ or the children die⁴⁶.

In the tradition of the Vedas, the soul of the man before, and after the reincarnation is imagined as a cuckoo, finding shelter in a foreign nest (body)⁴⁷. At the populations from Siberia, the cuckoo helped the shaman to resurrect the dead, while in Japan it used to accompany, at dawn, the disappearance of the shadows⁴⁸. At Lithuanians, when it is said that the sister of Laima will make a prediction through the voice of a cuckoo, it means that she will announce the person “who is going to die”⁴⁹. At the Romanians, it is a bad omen if the cuckoo sings on a lifeless branch, or if somebody sees it standing on dote, it is believed that the person will die that year⁵⁰.

In a variant from Oltenia of the ballad *Doicin the sick*, the psihopomp cuckoo, through an ascending move, flies away from the ground, together with the soul that departed the body: “The cuckoo is singing on a wall/ They put boots on Doicin’s feet;/ The cuckoo is singing on the mill,/ Doicin is about to die,/ The cuckoo is singing on a cross,/ Doicin is taken to the grave,/ The cuckoo is singing on the tall hut,/ Over Doicin there is thrown the dust”⁵¹. In another version on the same motif, gathered from Moldova, the cuckoo remains in the mourning house: “The cuckoo is singing on the beam,/ My beloved is taken out in the hall,/ The cuckoo is singing on the line,/ My beloved is taken out,/ The cuckoo is singing on the house,/ My beloved is lying dead in the house”⁵².

In the realm of silence, the lost girl hears the voice of the cuckoo, on the top of the mountain. Although the only creature from the other world is the cuckoo, its singing is the proof that the sisters are dead. According to the popular beliefs, the song of the cuckoo is an omen announcing death if: it flies over the house, it sings above the hose, you hear it singing in the morning, before having the meal, when the saying goes that *the cuckoo profaned you*. According to the entirely quoted version, at the beginning of this study, the cuckoo to whom the characters talk is not common, but one **from the seaside**: “You, dearest cuckoo of the sea/Turn your tail into a ladder/Get us out of here”.

⁴⁵ Artur Gorovei, *Credințe și superstiții ale poporului român*, Bucharest, Grai și Suflet Publishing House, 1995, p. 86.

⁴⁶ Ion H. Ciubotaru, *Obiceiurile funerare din Moldova în context național*, Iași, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University Publishing House, 2014, p. 366.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 365.

⁴⁸ Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 407.

⁴⁹ Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Despre zei și despre oameni. Studii de mitologie lituaniană*, translated by Rodica Paliga, Bucharest, Meridiane Publishing House, 1997, p. 231.

⁵⁰ Artur Gorovei, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

⁵¹ Ion Nijloveanu, *Balade populare românești*, Bucharest, Muzicală Publishing House, 1984, p. 157.

⁵² Petre V. Ștefănuță, *Datini și creații populare*, Chișinău, Știința Publishing House, 2008, p. 196.

The ladder is an apocryphal image, met in the funerary songs: “To build a wax ladder/ To climb to Christ on it/ Because there is a lovely place” (Negoiștei)⁵³, or, “Down, at the sunrise/ Next to the yellow sun,/ There is a high ladder/ There is an iron ladder/ That goes until the high sky;/ In the middle of it/The black Samodiva,/ Holding a book;/ On which she was writing,/ He should be written in/ Up until the last year” (Borlova-Caraș-Severin)⁵⁴. Sâma Somodiva is a hideous creature, master of the obscure forces, a specific image of the old texts of small stories-songs⁵⁵. Numerous myths and religious texts attest the existence of a ladder that connects the earth from the sky, starting with *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*⁵⁶, in which the ladder of Ra is put for the pharaoh to see the gods easily, and to the vision of Jacob, where the ladder is the instrument of theophany, passing through the African stars dedicated to Saturn, which indicate the communication between the person who makes the dedication and the divinity⁵⁷.

The ladder, as a hypostasis of the world Axis, a mark of the Centre and place to pass to different ontological levels, is also met in the texts of the carols: “There, in the lowest point/ There is a waxen ladder/ On which the sun descends/ Holding the sickle next to his armpits/ To harvest rye/ And spring wheat”⁵⁸. The pictographic motif of the ladder is found, as V. Kernbach noticed, on rushlights, on jewellery and the dishes of the Dacians and the Carpi, the number of steps indicating the degree of mystical initiation. The origin of the ladder theme, according to the opinion of the same author, must be searched in the oriental mythologies (even in the Chinese one), which our popular culture connected, using the way of the apocrypha⁵⁹.

The cuckoo advises the three sisters not to follow the dangerous waters way, because they “they only take you away/ they don’t bring you back”. The same idea is also put in a funerary song from Țara Loviștei: “Do not look towards the waters/ They only run away,/ They do not return,/ And you look towards the sun/ It goes away/ But it turns back too/ And it brings you once in a while,/ To be amongst us” (Malaia-Vâlcea)⁶⁰. A more nuanced point of view is that of Mircea Eliade: “The ancient road of the dead used to be on the route of the sun, the shiny star that takes the shadows in the empire of darkness, and returns every morning. The solar cult

⁵³ Vasile Șișu, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

⁵⁴ Sabina Ispas, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁵⁵ Idem, *Eros-polemos. Comentarii asupra unei balade*, in “Anuarul Arhivei de Folclor”, no. XII-XIV, 1993, p. 151.

⁵⁶ For details *Cartea egipteană a morților*, translation and notes by Maria Genescu, Arad, “Sophia” Publishing House, 1993.

⁵⁷ Mihai Fîfor, *art. cit.*, p. 175.

⁵⁸ Monica Brătulescu, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁵⁹ Victor Kernbach, *Universul mitic al românilor*, Bucharest, Scientific Publishing House, 1994, p. 193.

⁶⁰ C. Mohanu, *Fântâna dorului. Poezii populare din Țara Loviștei*, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, 1975, p. 208.

perceived this gleaming divinity as being a hierophant and psihopomp. The sun constitutes a model for the traveller who wishes to return from the other realm. Without knowing the death (as the moon does), it crosses the other-side world every night, to rise again at dawn⁶¹.

In the case of the funerary song about the three sisters who left to gather flowers, we are facing an ancient narrative nucleus, which has in its centre the idea according to which death represents the ultimate initiation of the human, the border towards another state of their being. The syntagm from the funerary text “and they fell asleep” suggest the cleaving between the old condition, its annulment or exceeding, the leaving of the anterior existential statute and the accession to the new state. Therefore, this is not a regular sleep, but it is the one associated with a journey towards the Other-Side World, the sleep of death.

⁶¹ Mircea Eliade, *Traité d'Histoire des Religions*, Paris, Payot, 1970, p. 120 *apud* I. H. Ciubotaru, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.