

FOLKLORE OF THE CHILDREN. ABOUT PLAY, PLAYFULLNESS AND CHILDREN'S GAMES

Ionela Carmen BANȚA*

Abstract: The children's folklore represents all artistic creations specific to children and the age of childhood, they form an important and full of significance branch of folk culture. The game is a cultural code, a means of communication, composed of playful signs and strict rules. The presence of a play code is mandatory in any game involving at least two partners.

The traditional children's games maintain the features of the public game, a traditional manifestation in all the world's cultures, adapting its rules and its way of life to the specificity of the age.

Keywords: children's folklore, play, playfulness, children's games.

The totality of the playful manifestations specific to the age of childhood carries in the ethnology the generic name of *children's folklore*. This folk genre includes games and related texts, as a rule, versed, which are recited or played in different phases of the play action.

The first references to the Romanian children's repertoire are found in the 18th century at Anton Maria del Chiaro (secretary of Constantin Brâncoveanu) who remarked the similarities between the children's games in our country and in his country. Proper collections of childrens' folklore were made only in the 19th century by T. Pamfile, P. Ispirescu, G. Dem. Teodorescu, I. Mușlea, I. C. Chițimia. These are basic materials in studying these categories of creations. These collections include those of Constantin Brăiloiu and his collaborators, as well as the studies of G. Breazul and the students of the Bucharest Conservatory who, under his leadership, studied and collected tools – toys used by children. Remarkable studies were also made by E. Cernea, G. Sulițeanu and Emila Comișel, Ivan Evseev and Andrei Oișteanu.

Types of children's folklore include children's creations for themselves (the most important and most interesting); Secondly, from adults' folklore, children take degraded forms, abandoned by the mature ones, imitating them without understanding them (further degrading and demolishing them); finally, third is the folklore created by mature for children's use (for mnemotechnical, educational, didactic, moralizing purposes, etc.)¹.

* Assoc. prof, PhD., Faculty of Letters, University of Craiova; E-mail: carmenbanta74@yahoo.com

¹ Andrei Oișteanu, *Motive și semnificații mito-simbolice în cultura tradițională românească*, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing, 1988, p. 51.

Interestingly, the children's folklore is framed within the perimeter of the ritual genre, and Andrei Oișteanu brings some pertinent arguments which determines us to meditate on what he claims. Thus, both the existence of formulas (recitative, chanting, counts) with a magical nature, the inclination of the child to fantastic and miraculous, the empathic, spontaneous solidarity with nature, but also the type of childhood creativity confirm the principle that both in the cultural and biological plane, the development of the individual repeats and summarizes the evolution of the species so that the childhood of man as an individual (when this occurs in "natural conditions") repeats briefly and essentially the childhood of humanity².

Andrei Oișteanu, emphasizing a certain intuition of archetypes in children's folklore (especially in games and chanting), strengthens the archetypal dimension on which Ivan Evseev typifies the great diversity of children's games (the most important and most interesting part of infant folklore: counts, apotropaic games and exorcism, games to stimulate the forces of nature, dialectics of polarities in children's games), ritual sacrifices in children's games, cult of ancestors in children's games. To these categories of infant folklore Ivan Evseev adds an entire chapter about the symbolic meanings of the toys³.

Infant folklore manifestations have a pronounced syncretic character. I. Chițimia, studying the existing material, found that "almost all the literary part of children's folklore is closely connected with their games. What's more, their folklore productions, accompanied by songs, subordinate and adapt to the game, which remains the essential element in the young ages"⁴. Children's play involves dance, singing, dramatic representation, dialogue in prose with the chanted lyrics, making toys with their manipulation through movements and gestures conceived by an infant tradition that is lost in the darkness of the times.

Children's folklore is characterized as a universal, well-defined genre that was born at an age when play is the focus of children's activity. Through song, play, mimics and gestures, the child comes into contact with the environment, striving to know him, to approach him or to dominate him. Wishes, joys, annoyances, impressions, all of them are expressed through this multiple-function folklore. In modern psycho-pedagogy, play is assimilated as a record in the process of forming and developing human personality. Compared at one time to the oneiric activity, to the infinity of symbolic elements with which it operates, but also to the benefits deriving from the hedonistic function that traces one of the connecting points between the two activities of the human psyche, the game, like the dream, creates universes describing, shaping, stating trends and values, expressing and satisfying needs and necessities. The major difference between the play and the oneiric activity would be the conscious aspect of the game, compared to the unconscious aspect of the dream.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 51–53.

³ Ivan Essev, *Jocuri tradiționale de copii*, Timișoara, Excelsior Publishing, p. 112.

⁴ I. C. Chițimia, *Problema jocurilor și cântecelor de copii*, in "Folclorul românesc în perspectivă comparată", Bucharest, Minerva Publishing, 1971, p. 287.

Otherwise, the complexity of mental images, real or deformed perceptions, sensitive saturation (with rhythms and temptations not subject to the laws of reality), lack of purpose, lack of censorship, and the rejection of everything that is inconsistent with some rules that the child has not assimilated, reveals that a child is a playable being, and nothing else, play being an emanation, a way of expressing a normal psychic, like a dream. For the child, almost any activity is a game that puts into practice functions, which the social environment in which it evolves, through the care of the adult who forbids him from contacts too tough with reality, would have left them unused.

The word *joc* (play), inherited from the Latin *iocus* “joke, fun, amusement”, took over in the Romanian language the meaning of the Latin noun *ludus*, which in the antiquity has designated a wide range of folk manifestations, beginning with the amusing scenes of everyday life and ending with agonal, sporting, military or religious manifestations of a city, land or empire (Ludi Apollinares, Ludi Capitolini, etc.).

Ivan Evseev says that “play is a basal activity and an essential dimension of man. The playful creativity is a constant requirement for the cultural development of the individual and society”⁵.

The fundamental idea of the game is to discuss its everyday universe, redirecting its boundaries in the desired sense: man takes part of the divine power, from the demiurgical act, and use it for its own purpose: man must remain a more beautiful, spiritualized, powerful being than he is, the rediscovery of a primordial universe.

Children’s games maintain the features of public play, a traditional manifestation in all cultures of the world, adapting its rules and its way of life to the specificity of the age. The hypothesis of the existence in the earliest times of a special repertoire of infant gambling, practiced exclusively by representatives of the young generation, cannot be excluded.

Among the features of children’s play, beyond syncretic character (text, melody, gesture, movement, mimics), the researchers noticed player’s attachment to the rule, respect for the canon, which does not exclude a typological diversity from one ethnicity to another or within the same national cultures.

The great power of assimilation of the child, his imitative spirit, spontaneous solidarity with nature, a certain intuition of archetypes explains the taking over and preservation of some archaic elements that have disappeared from the adult folklore, which the child now reproduces through a kind of repeat mechanism, without knowing or understanding the meaning. In the children’s games and songs we meet a primary world, “the child being in his essence a primitive, on the first stages of evolving, despite the modern intrusions of the world in which he lives. The primary character has its seal on the stylistic aspect as well as on the ancestral syncretism of the art”⁶.

⁵ Ivan Essev, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

⁶ Ovidiu Bîrlea, *Folclorul românesc*, vol. II, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing, 1983, p. 404.

For the child, play is work, it is good, it is duty, it is the ideal of life. By playing his psychological being can breathe and act. The game triggers in the child latent, virtual, assimilated but unconscious potencies, which he develops and combines in an activity that is structured and coordinated in consensus with the particular aspects of his personality.

Play is the most important concern and the basic form in expressing their soul life. Through songs, counts, rhythmic-melodic formulas, through songs related to certain holidays, the child discovers the world and satisfies his/her need for action and movement. These artistic productions, transmitted from one generation to the next, are learned, presented, transformed and born in the play, from the children's desire to imitate. They express their exceptional receptivity and inventiveness, being a proof of the rich imagination of children.

If through play and song the child contacts the environment and the spiritual dowry of the ancestors, then it is probably this atmosphere of an extreme archaism emanating from his productions and his playful manifestations reaching the deep layers of adult sensitivity. Adults look with delight in the development of a children's game, reviving their own childhood and the childhood of all humanity. These feelings have consciously or unconsciously urged most folklorists to give in their collections or studies to give a certain place of this popular, seemingly minor, kind of creativity.

Significantly from a motivational and psychological point of view is the following dialogue between Vasile Alecsandri and Petre Ispirescu, in which the collector confesses to the Mircești bard the intention to publish a collection of games and plays for children: "It is a proverb that says: man – if he ages – he gets to the child's mind. And once meeting V. Alecsandri, the one who writes lyrics sweet like honey, I said to him: – I think I have come to the childish mind, sir, because I started writing the games and plays since I was a child. – No, Mr. Alecsandri answered me, you do not get old; you rejuvenate by remembering childhood and playing games when you were a child. Write down how many games and plays you remember, and print them to remembrance"⁷.

Many folkmen and ethnographers have guessed that "a more in-depth study of these productions would prove unexpected"⁸, that "the games of the little ones mirror and preserve memories and survivals of customs, rites ... that sometimes only live in childhood demonstrations"⁹. For the folklorists of today's generation, concerned with the reconstruction of the mito-poetic model for the reception of the world in the traditional Romanian culture, the folklore of the children appears as a museum of ethnological vestiges worthy of being investigated with the means available to contemporary science.

⁷ Petre Ispirescu, *Jocuri și jucării de copii (1889)*, in "Opere", vol. II, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing, 1971, p. 463.

⁸ G. Dem. Teodorescu, *Poezii populare române*, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing, 1982, p. 215.

⁹ Ion Mușlea, *Problema jocurilor noastre copilărești*, in "Cercetări de etnografie și folclor", vol. II, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing, p. 409.

Children's games and songs have been analyzed musically, linguistically, poetically, psychologically, comparatively and historically throughout the history of Romanian folklore, that today we have a rich bibliography of the problem we owe to Gh. I. Neagu, published in the anthology *Children's Songs and Games*¹⁰. Although many aspects have been elucidated, especially about the typology of games, the rhythmic structure and the linguistic specificities of the texts, there remain numerous "white spots" related to the semantics of the games, their mythico-symbolic substrate and their magico-ritual role, which they have had in the distant past, and they sometimes keep it until nowadays.

Although many aspects have been elucidated, especially about the typology of games, the rhythmic structure and the linguistic peculiarities of the texts, there remain numerous "white spots" related to the semantics of the games, their mythico-symbolic substrate and their magico-ritual, which they have had in the distant past, and they sometimes keep it until nowadays.

The weights of the reconstruction of meanings derive not only from the gradual "opacity" of ludic imagery and gestures, alterations and structural distortions, but also from a kind of initial hermetism of play language, which can be explained by its magico-ritual functions.

The gestures, the manipulated objects, as well as the words from which the texts of the children's games were composed, once had an initiatory character; they were spaced as far as possible from ordinary communication codes, and were part of a sacred valence language. The deciphering of the signs of this code is a true cultural archeology operation, requiring the contribution of some disciplines such as symbolic hermeneutics, semiotics, etymology, cultural anthropology, etc.

The main operational mode we will use in decoding the meaning of games and play elements will be their integration into more general languages and codes of popular culture and the establishment of semantic-functional equivalents between the semiotic units of symbolic languages comprised of the units of the zoomorf, astral, geometric, chromatic code, etc.

In the theoretical preliminaries to our analyzes, we will not propose another definition of the game than that we owe to J. Huizinga. "The play – writes the Dutch scholar – is an action or activity done voluntarily, within certain established limits of time and space, and by rules that are willingly accepted but absolutely mandatory, having the purpose in itself and being accompanied by a certain sense of tension and joy and the idea that "it is different than in ordinary life"¹¹.

It follows from this definition that play is a specific activity, opposed to practical actions. He will always seek to overcome the dichotomies: voluntary engagement / participation, obedience to rule / freedom, utility / gratuitousness, canon / euphoria, sense / lack of meaning, seriousness / amusement. The statement

¹⁰ G. Dem. Teodorescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 145–152.

¹¹ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens. Încercare de a determina elementul ludic al culturii*, Bucharest, Univers Publishing, 1977, p. 70.

that “play has purpose in itself” must be understood in the Kantian sense of “goalless purpose” only in opposition to utilitarian acts. The statement does not exclude a particular *telos*, resulting from a system of values that do not fall within the specific coordinates of the validity of utilitarian acts. One of these points is the system of poetic values through which children's games and songs approach art or become authentic artistic products, although poetic intentionality is neither and would not be the main goal of these manifestations of collective creativity.

Another referential parameter can be the projection *into* and *through* the play of states and pulses coming from the depth of the being, from the unconscious of the individual or the collectivity, which gives the play a cathartic function, of deflation and psychological self-projection.

One cannot neglect the communicative side of collective play. Through replicas, gestures and mimics, through the entire plasticity of the body, the partners make an explicit informational exchange, when the signs of the game are transparent in a semantic or related type, when the playful symbols become significantly opaque. Often, in the game, not only the word or the gesture itself, but the way in which they are articulated; tone, look, voice modulation, gesture plastic can say a lot about the player's psychological state and his relationships with his partners. In games with punishments, such as *arming*, in which those who have lost are beaten with braided headkerchief, classified into three categories (“sweet”, “salted” and “dirty”), it can be met the spirit of leniency, impartiality, or intolerance from the “emperor” who fixes the blows or from the “weapon man” that leads them to fulfill.

One of the aspects of the game, perhaps the most important thing for our research, is the fact that, at its origin, traditional play was a form of communication with *the invisible*, mysterious forces beyond appearances, with active principles which, in the archaic mentality of animistic type or in an empathetic vision, specific to the child, guides the things and happenings of the surrounding world. Empathy or anthropomorphic projection on objects and macro-cosmic phenomena creates a kind of mystical solidarity of man with nature, gives rise to a sense of active co-participation in the course of the world. “At the impression of the novelty, – C. Rădulescu-Motru notes – consciousness of the primitive human responded with mysticism. The new and the extraordinary were shrouded in the vaporous atmosphere of the emotive ego. The Primitive thinks he understands as soon as he regains the emotions of his own self in the surrounding world. The external environment thus loses its threatening character through anthropomorphism”¹².

In the children's traditional games, as well as in the religious rituals and ceremonies of adults, abounds with the symbols of the nature elements and the tutelary spirits of the schisms. The almost obsessive presence and in forms of an extraordinary variety of ancestral worship is one of the greatest surprises that the in-depth analysis of the semantics of play and childhood song gives to the researcher.

¹² Constantin Rădulescu-Motru, *Persoana și natura*, in “Axiologia românească. Antologie”, Bucharest, Eminescu Publishing, 1982, p. 178.

In all these hypostases or functions (magical, poetic or socializing-psychological) game is a *means of communication*, a cultural code composed of playful signs and rules for combining them; he has a vocabulary, grammar and semantics updated in a linguistic or actantial *text*. The presence of a play code is mandatory in any game involving at least two partners. "Having been part of a gaming group, the child accepted a certain playful code as a social contract"¹³. An infant tradition that goes beyond ethnic and geographical boundaries ensures that these rules are preserved and respected coming from the depths of the ages and millennia of history.

The play vocabulary includes a wide range of categories and types of signs that include: 1. the names of the games; 2. the names of characters in the play scenario; 3. the number, age and gender of the players; 4. the playing field configuration; 5. players' formation (arrangement); 6. the time (season) of the game; 7. playgrounds; 8. the rhythm of the game; 9. the text spoken or played during the game with its components; 10. ludic actions (movements, gestures); 11. toys (play items); 12. the real or *imaginary recipient of the play action*.

Each of these categories consists of a relatively finite number of minimal, simple signs, having a certain function in the game, capable of giving a certain meaning, which we will call *ludems*. Thus, actantial *ludems* are represented by a large number of gestures and movements such as jumping, kicking in the ground, tumbling, riding of the opponent, palm or fist punching, palm clapping, pinching, tickling, spinning, kneeling, running, pulling over the line, throwing at the target, making noises and cries, laughing, grimacing, imitation of crying, etc.

Like any cultural sign, the ludem has a material (meaningful) form and a meaning (signified). The meaning of the ludem can be updated in the game or appear as a potential for informational openness for the game participant or for the playwright analyst. The sharpened stick at the end, called *turca*, for players can mean a bird caught in flight, and the hermeneutic will discover in it the meaning of an ancient solar symbol or he will conceive it as the synecdoc of the mythical ancestor.

According to their material form and mode of use in various games, ludems can be object (toys), actantial, sound, chromatic, geometric, numerical or textual. A textual ludem coincides with a semantem (word or combination of words endowed with a lexical meaning). From the functional point of view and the form of manifestation, it corresponds, to the highest degree, to those signs in the system of culture that we use to call *symbols*.

Children usually use as ludems objects, words, gestures that have something striking, novel, sometimes extravagant, capable of attracting attention and suggesting a meaning that goes beyond the simple utility value of the object. This is the reason for the preference of children for their colorful toys, with an unusual shape, their attraction for old objects, weapons such as bow, arrow, lance, sling, sarbacana, which may not have any price in the eyes of the adult.

¹³ Jean Chateau, *Copilul și jocul*, Bucharest, Didactical and Pedagogical Publishing, w.y.

In terms of its significance, the ludem also tends to the versatility of the symbol. In children's games, *the stick* may be a spear, a sword, a horse or an ox, a line of demarcation ("river of fire"), the double of the player, the representation of a fantastic being, the embodiment of the spirit of the ancestor, etc.

From a semiotic and functional point of view, the play appears as a dynamic configuration, carried out in time and space according to certain rules that constitute *the grammar of the game*. The rules define the succession of the ludems, the number of repetitions, the moments of transition from one stage of the game to the other, the hierarchy of each individual ludem, their mutual substitutions in the play scenario.

Thus, from a semiotic point of view, all the replies, songs or formulas recited during the game, as well as the whole actantiality of the play scenario, are a *text*. The corpus of these texts or scenarios is contained in the anthologies and repertoires of games published by folklorists of the last century (for example, V. Alecsandri, Al. Lambrier, P. Ispirescu, G. Dem. Teodorescu, T. Pamfile, etc.) and a number of relatively recent collections (Elena Comișel, Gh. I Neagu, V. Medan, N. Ionescu, Angela Dumitrescu-Begu and others).

We can conclude that, over time, children's folklore has multiple formative valences and children's games have been analyzed musically, linguistically, poetically, psychologically, comparatively-historically, by outstanding personalities of the Romanian folk culture, which demonstrates a special interest in playfulness.