

SPIRITUAL ITINERARIES: MYTHS, TRADITIONS REINTERPRETED AND MEMORY

WINTER HOLIDAYS AND CUSTOMS IN THE TRADITIONAL VILLAGE FROM OLTENIA*

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Abstract: Celebrated yearly on the 6th of January, the Epiphany Day, or the Baptism of Christ, is one of the most important Christian holidays.

In Oltenia, the holiday of the Epiphany gathers numerous magical customs and practices for the cleaning of the body from the evil spirits, practices of prophylaxis, divination and, moreover, ritual acts meant to attract wealth for the newly started year. Even if some of the customs and traditions of these places have disappeared, many of the Epiphany related customs have been preserved along the time, in a form closed to the traditional one. So is, for example, walking through the village priest baptism, the Christian rite of holiness the water, the baptism of believers, throwing the cross in the Danube.

Keywords: the Epiphany Day, Oltenia, Christian holiday, traditions, customs.

In the traditional folk culture, the customs are a distinct important topic that include, into a unitary system, the entire folk manifestations and folk art, perceived as means of communication, which mark a multitude of events related to the biocosmic cycle, the calendar dates, or the cycle of life.

The calendar customs belong to an extremely rich and varied list of folk phenomena, having their origin in the conception of the pre-Christian traditional societies that would refer to space and time, the latter one perceived as inhomogeneous and discontinuous, the sacred periods alternating with the profane ones. Among them, the customs related to the winter holidays occupy a special place, through their amplexness and richness. They represent a central point in the cosmic calendar, encompassing diverse ritual scenarios, numerous magical-religious customs and practices, which mark the symbolic death and rebirth of the Year.

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Winter holidays are carried out on several days (25 Dec. – 7 Jan.), and they have as major celebrations the great Christian holidays: Christmas, New Year, Epiphany Day and Saint John the Baptist Day. According to the New Year's Eve, their cycle is divided into two symmetrical periods: the first one, between the slaughtering of the pig, on St. Ignatius Day, and the midnight of the New year, when the fear, the disorder, the chaos rule, determined by the regression and the death of the Old Year, and the second part, between the New Year midnight and the Epiphany, a period when, once with the emerging of the New Year, is dominated by order and optimism¹.

In the present study, our attention is drawn towards the Epiphany Day, a holiday that closes the cycle of the winter holidays, in the areas of Oltenia, gathering a wide variety of customs, rites and ceremonies, dedicated to the purification of the households and nature, from the forces of evil.

Celebrated yearly on the 6th of January, the Epiphany Day, or the Baptism of Christ, is one of the most important Christian holidays. It is also known as the Theophany, the Showing of our Lord, the Feast of the Holly Name of Jesus, because, on this day, Jesus manifested his divinity for the first time, to the world.

We can find proofs of this holiday starting with the 2nd century, being mentioned by Saint Clement Alexandrine, for a long time being celebrated along with Christmas, on the same date, the 6th of January. Two centuries later, the two events parted, the Birth of God being celebrated on the 25th of December, and the Baptism on the 6th of January: "The merging of the two great Christian events on one day, logical from the point of view of the new belief, had become, in time, a source of misunderstanding and confusion for the believers. In this situation, the theologians found a compromise solution: they kept the data of 6th January for the Baptism of Jesus Day, and established the date for the birth two weeks before, on the 25th of December, when it used to be celebrated, back then, the death and birth of the Iranian god Mithra, and that from the Carpathian-Danubian space, Crăciun (Christmas)"².

Each year, the Orthodox Church officiates, on this day, the service of waters blessing, as a recollection of what happened in the water of Jordan, of the moment when Jesus Christ entered the waters of the river, in order to be baptised by John the Baptist. The entering of the Redeemer into the waters of Jordan was, nonetheless, His ascending into the heart of the sinful Creation, in order to remove the sins, to give blessing. subsequent to His immersion into the river, its waters did not have what to purify, being purified themselves: "The entering of Christ into the water of Jordan is truly a descent within the bosom of the decayed creation... receiving the baptising in the Jordan, it is not Him the purified, «because God does not need to become clean»... but the entire creation, from the water, is cleaned

¹ Ion Ghinoiu, *Comoara satelor. Calendar popular*, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing House, 2005, p. 265.

² *Ibidem*, p. 17.

from their sins”³. Thus, through the baptism of the Redeemer, the water from the created world becomes “spring of redemption”.

The Baptism of the Lord represents a great holiday, owing to the fact that this day, near Jordan, immediately after the heavens were open and the Holy Trinity shown (The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit): “As soon as Jesus was baptized, He went up out of the water. Suddenly the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and resting on Him. And a voice from heaven said, «This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased»”⁴. On addressing this moment, Saint John Chrysostom was saying that: “Christ did not become known for everyone when He was born, but when He was baptised”⁵.

Although Jesus did not need the baptism for washing the sins away, because He did not have any sins, He came to Jordan to receive the baptism from John. Entering the water of Jordan, Jesus was symbolically buried, or man He used to be, in a decaying condition, and started, in that manner, the erection of a new, sinless, man. He was baptised for the redemption of all people, to show each of us that we need penance, we need to change ourselves from the sinful humans we are, in order to step towards a new type of existence. The fact that Jesus did not come to John to receive forgiveness for his sins is also understood from the fact that, as it is known, the baptism of St. John in the water of Jordan was not a secret, but helped the people to become aware of their sinful living, yet, not granting forgiveness: “And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins...” (Marcu 1:4)⁶.

The Baptism of our Lord in Jordan “is the prediction of our own baptism, the instituting and its historic fundament. By baptising Himself into the Jordan, then receiving the Holy Spirit when coming out of the water, Christ cleaned and blessed the entire human nature that He was holding within Himself, and that was done through the instituting of the Church and its Sacraments. The Holy Spirit gave the people the opportunity to experience it themselves, through the grace poured forth in the Sacrament of Baptism, at the Church. Every person is baptised because Christ Himself was baptised; any baptism is the reproduction and the repetition of the unique baptism of Christ, renewed through the grace of the Holy Spirit, ...”⁷. Through Baptism, the

³ Hierodeacon Gabriel, *Simbolismul apei în Teofanie*, available at <http://www.crestinortodox.ro/sfintirea-casei/simbolismul-apei-teofanie-70092.html> (accessed on November 24th 2016).

⁴ Teodor Danalache, *Jordanul – apa în care a fost botezat Hristos*, available at <http://www.crestinortodox.ro/religie/iordanul-in-care-fost-botezat-hristos-69744.html> (accessed on November 24th 2016).

⁵ *Boboteaza – Jordanul arătării Sfintei Treimi*, available at <http://www.crestinortodox.ro/sarbatori-botezul-domnului-boboteaza/boboteaza-iordanul-aratarei-sfintei-treimi-154020.html> (accessed on March 20th 2017).

⁶ *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură*, Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române Publishing House, Bucharest, 2001, p. 1497.

⁷ Hierodeacon Gabriel, *op. cit.*, available at <http://www.crestinortodox.ro/sfintirea-casei-simbolismul-apei-teofanie-70092.html> (accessed on November 24th 2016).

man, after the three-folded immersion into the water blessed by the priest, in the name of the Holy Trinity, is reborn spiritually, obtains forgiveness for his original sin, and all the other sins so far: "... there takes place indeed a sacred thing, a wonder: God, through His grace, wipes the original sin; the one baptised in the name of the Trinity is born again, from water and Spirit (John 3,5) giving them new powers and making them participators to the divine life. At their clerical maturity, with these powers, they can overpass the condition of the common life, can attain the stage of the angelic one, near God, and similar to Him (Efes. 2, 19-20)"⁸.

In Oltenia, the holiday of the Epiphany gathers numerous magical customs and practices for the cleaning of the body from the evil spirits, practices of prophylaxis, divination and, moreover, ritual acts meant to attract wealth for the newly started year.

All these start on the *Eve* when, for all the Christians, it is the moment when they clean their souls and purify themselves. The priests bless the houses of the people by sprinkling them with holy water in the morning of the day, after the Liturgy: "On the Epiphany Eve, the priest goes round the village to baptise everything. Nowadays, he starts his procession two or three days before, to have time to visit everybody. He enters all the houses. You need to kiss the cross, and the priest sprinkles you with water from a soaked bunch of basil. He enters every room and sprinkles everything with the blessed water"⁹. Before the priest enters the house, the unmarried girls used to lay beans on the threshold, for the priest to step over, and to faster bring, in this way, the moment of their marriage. Now it is the moment when people keep a total fast. It is believed that the people who are fasting will be blessed by God, and will have a healthy and prosperous life that year.

But the Eve of the Epiphany is, to an equal extent, the appropriate time for different magical practices, charms and disenchantments. A series of measures aim the security of the crops in the following period. Thus, in the morning, the housewives used to gather the waste from the household, along with the ash from the fireplace, before lighting the fire, and, in spring, they would spread it through the vegetable garden, in order to increase the fertility.

The belief that on this night, the same that on the eve of all great holidays, the heavens open and people can ask for the fulfilment of certain wishes, still persists in the memory of the dwellers from Oltenia. This is considered a favourable moment to find the future, when the young girls ask the celestial characters for answers as regarding their predestined husband and the fortune in marriage. According to tradition, the unmarried girls put, in the evening, under their pillows, blessed basil¹⁰, "stolen" from the bunch that the priest used to bless the house. It is

⁸ Arhim. Ioachim Pârvulescu, *Sfânta taină a spovedaniei pe înțelesul tuturor*, Mănăstirea Lainici – Gorj, 2005, p. 16.

⁹ Informer Peța Maria, 78 years old, Cetate, Dolj County, 2014.

¹⁰ Basil is a plant whose leaves are used for preparing the healing red water, which is believed to have magical powers. In some geographic regions, such is, for example, the central area of Congo,

believed that, on this night, they will see their future husband in their dream: “When the priest comes to baptise the house, you ask for a stalk or two of basil. The young girls lay it under their pillow, and the boy that they dream on that night, will be their future husband”¹¹. The basil is also placed at the eaves of the house. If, the second day, it was covered in white frost, it was believed that the girl would be lucky¹², at the gate, or in the fence: “The basil threaded on the fence was placed there on the Eve of the Epiphany and the New Year’s Eve. The second day, the board fence was checked, to see the way the predestined husband would look”¹³.

As well, for the marriage, in the villages from Oltenia, we meet other divinatory practices done by the girls, such is *the kicking of the beasts*: “At new Year, Epiphany or Saint John, the girls would go to the stable and would kick a beast, and the numbers of kicks after which the beast would get up, represented the number of years the girl would be married in”¹⁴, or *the counting of the poles*: “At Epiphany, the girls used to count the poles with their eyes closed, staring from ten, back, and would tie a thread around the last one. The second day, the pole was checked, and if the tie was slanting, it was believed that the husband was the same, but if the tie remained straight and nice, the husband was like that”¹⁵. Furthermore, if they wanted to know the name of their future husband, the girls “would get outside in the evening with a broom, in front of the house, to do magic. The first name of boy that they would hear, would be the name of their predestined spouse”¹⁶.

A special importance is given, on the Epiphany Day, to the Christian rite of blessing the water. The Orthodox Church commits this religious act not only to recollect the baptism in the Jordan, but also to “effectively bless the entire nature, pouring forth on it the entirety of the Christ’s grace « through the holy water »”¹⁷. Usually, the service takes place in a wider space, in the church yard or outside it, next to a well from the village, a river or a spring. For this event, there are brought large vessels made of wood that are filled with water, the priest carrying out the religious ceremony, which the entire community attend.

After the finishing of the service, the believers are blessed by the priest, through their sprinkling with holy water, and they are invited to drink it. People take the consecrated water at home, in special containers, and sprinkle their households with it.

the basil leaves are used for the purification of the space and the removing of spells. (Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dicționar de simboluri*, vol. I (A-D), Bucharest, Artemis Publishing, 1993, p. 218).

¹¹ Informer Tonciu Maria, 87 years old, Maglavit, Dolj County, 2014.

¹² *Sărbători și obiceiuri. Răspunsuri la chestionarele Atlasului Etnografic Român* (coordinator Ion Ghinoiu), vol. I, Oltenia, edition supervised by Ofelia Văduva and Ofelia Pleșca, Bucharest, Encyclopedic Publishing House, 2001, p. 261.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 260.

¹⁶ Charles Laugier, *Sănătatea în Dolj*, Craiova, 1910, p. 104.

¹⁷ Hierodeacon Gabriel, *op. cit.*, available at <http://www.crestinortodox.ro/sfintirea-casei/-simbolismul-apei-teofanie-70092.html> (accessed on November 24th 2016).

Therefore, at Epiphany, the water becomes the central element of the holiday. Bearing symbolic significance, it has an essential place for each threshold from our existence, being also present within many of the calendar customs we celebrate. The symbolic significations of water are encompassed in three great themes: element of the genesis, means of purification, centre of regeneration¹⁸. The immersion into the water always implies a regeneration, a rebirth. In water, any form is dissolved, disintegrated and annulled. When addressing the humans, the immersion in water represents a symbolic “death” and a rebirth or the purified, renewed man. Therefore, the immersed into water “dies” and generates a new being, without sins and history, facing a new beginning: “The immersion in water symbolises the regression to the pre-form, the total regeneration, the new birth, due to the fact that an immersion is equivalent to a dissolution of forms, an integration in the undifferentiated form of our pre-existence, and the coming out of the water repeats the cosmological gesture of the formal manifestation. The contact with the water always implies regeneration; on one side because the dissolution is followed by a new «birth», on the other side, the immersion fertilises and increases the life and creation potential”¹⁹. Therefore, the water annuls what has previously existed, and recreates it under other circumstances. Nonetheless, unlike the fire, which is known to purify the soul, the water, through its features, purifies, equally the soul and the substance.

On addressing the holy water at Epiphany, called *Agheasmă Mare* into Romanian, there is believed that: “The holy water consecrated through the service, is created when the priest calls upon it the power of the Holy Spirit, for it to have the power to bless the life of the humans and the surrounding nature, for them to gain the blessing of God. Water is the symbol of the soul cleanliness, the promotion and the sanctification of life. At the Lord’s Baptism, the holy water is created; it is drunk before the anaphora; it is given to those who cannot attend the Eucharist, as support for their repentance, consolation and future reformation (Apostolic Constitutions VIII, 29)”²⁰.

The churchmen say that this water has a great blessing power, an aspect evidenced by the words from the pray spoken for its blessing: “And it is granted the grace of redemption and the blessing of Jordan. Make it spring of incorruption, but of the holiness, sin absolution, disease healing, evil estranging, removing of all the mean powers, filled with angel powers. And all who shall be sprinkled, or taste it, to have their souls and bodies cleaned, to have their sufferance healed, to have their houses blessed and to make use of it accordingly”²¹. Some of this holy water is kept

¹⁸ Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Tratat de istorie a religiilor*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 1992, pp. 183-184.

²⁰ Teodor Danalache, *Agheasma, apa sfințită*, available at <http://www.crestinortodox.ro/sarbatori/-botezul-domnului-boboteaza/aghiasma-sfintita-128165.html> (accessed on November 24th 2016).

²¹ For details, see *Slujba aghiasmei celei mari la Botezul Domnului nostru Iisus Hristos*, available at <http://molitfelnic.ro/slujba-aghiasmei-celei-mari-la-botezul-domnului-nostru-iisus-hristos>.

in the Church, usually in the Holy Altar, being used by priest for prays (when blessing the churches, at the Baptism service, along with some prays from the Prayer Book, as those for removing the evil eye, for sprinkling the icons that are to be blessed, or the people who bewitched, when there are read the removing of the magic prays)²², and, another part is taken at home by the members of the community.

The water consecrated at the Epiphany never alters, due to the presence in it of the God's spirit. It is the water that remains fresh and clean for a long time, the water that has miraculous and healing properties, the water that cleans all types of sins, the water that helps when suffering. It ought to be preserved in a clean spot, usually next to an icon. According to the custom, each Christian has to drink the holy water for eight days, starting with the Eve of the Epiphany, until the end of the feast, on the 13th of January, and after, only on the fastening days, or the great holidays. The holy water should always be drunk in the morning, before eating.

Through the blessing, the water gains magical valences, which are transmitted to the entire community, chasing the evil spirits, and protecting. Consequently, there is the custom to sprinkle with consecrated water the entire household, the lands and the orchards: "people use to sprinkle the houses, the beasts, the vineyards, the land", they use "the blessed water from the Epiphany for the entire living and non-living possessions"²³. Moreover, the elders say that it is good for undoing the spells and the evil eye.

In the villages from the side of Danube, there is the custom that, after the blessing of water, the priest to throw the cross into the river. In the village of Cetate, on the morning of the Epiphany, after the finishing of the service, the priest and some believers start a procession towards the Danube. The has been preserved since ancient times, when, due to the extremely low temperature, the cross was made of the ice formed on the surface of the river, or the lakes: "On the edge of the iced water, there are made some holes; from ice, there is built an altar, made of a table and an ice cross. The priests throw the cross into the water, if it is frozen, into the holes"²⁴. During the last years, when the frosty temperatures have decreased, the cross has been made of wood.

The priest throws the cross into the water, and many of young people swim to bring it to the shore. The one who succeeds will receive the blessing of the priest and a money reward. It is said that he will be lucky during the entire year.

On the night of the Epiphany and Saint John, it used to take place *the watching of the wells*, a custom that has been recorded till recently, practice for the purpose to send away the evil spirits, which could "defile" the water. The custom implies a whole ritual, carried out according to specific traditional rules, but it is, in the same time, a good opportunity for the young people to meet together.

²² Teodor Danalache, *op. cit.*, available at <http://www.crestinortodox.ro/sarbatori/botezul-domnului-boboteaza/aghiasma-sfintita-128165.html> (accessed on November 24th 20165).

²³ Adrian Fochi, *Datini și eresuri populare de la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea*, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, 1976, p. 147.

²⁴ Charles Laugier, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

The preparations for this occasion would start in the afternoon of the Epiphany Day. The youngsters, aged between 16 and 20, would adorn the wells with fir-tree branches, leaves, corn stalks, bulrush, reed (where there were ponds), coloured paper. In some localities, there were laid two-sided carpets, handkerchiefs, bed-spreads: “On the Epiphany night, the wells used to be decorated. Each would bring food, of if they had, a quilt or two”²⁵. In the same time, the lads would fetch straws and logs, to make a fire, but also skewers for the feast during the night: “Next to the well, they would lay the tables: steaks, sausages, pickles, bacon, cookies, wine, brandy, and anything the people could bring. Some of them had also music. They would party the entire night”²⁶. The well would be guarded the entire night, and, in the same time, not a single strange person was allowed to come near, not even for taking water, because there was the danger that they would “defile” the water.

The young boys were not supposed to sleep the entire night. They were put to test by the elders of the house, who would wait for a moment in which the youngsters would fall asleep, and tried to “defile” the water, symbolically, with wheat or corn bran. If this happened, the sleeping boys were punished: they were smeared on their faces with soot, they had ash and water poured in their pockets, and live coals in their hands²⁷. Moreover, they had to clean the water by dawn, so that the villagers who would come to the well in the morning, to be able to take crystal clear water. In the county of Dolj, “the people who came to the well would wash their face and hands with the water poured from a copper cauldron, in which there was thrown a coin, but only if it had been clear”²⁸. Although the custom have been preserved until nowadays, its initial significations long disappeared, remaining, obviously, only the entertaining character.

On the morning of the day of January 7th, the youngsters who had watched the well were divided in groups, would receive small buckets with clean water and go on the lanes of the village. The custom is called *Iordănit* (similar to carolling). The lads would stop at each house where they would sing specific song (called *Iordan*) and pour, three times, water on the hands of each member of the household, which they used for washing their faces, in order to send away the evils, and to become purified. With a bunch of basil, the carollers would sprinkle each person from the family and would sing make wishes: “May you be healthy! / May you have a wealthy year! / Happy anniversary!”. The same water would be used to sprinkle the trees, to make them fruit-bearing, the animals and the poultry in the household. At the end, the youngsters would receive money and different products (cakes, cookies, sausages, eggs).

²⁵ Informer Tonciu Maria, 87 years old, Maglavit, Dolj County, 2014.

²⁶ Informer Vasile Vasilica, 57 years old, Cetate, Dolj County, 2014.

²⁷ Ștefan Enache, Teodor Pleșa, *Zona etnografică Dolj*, Bucharest, Sport-Turism Publishing House, 1982, p. 112.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

Another custom, with pre-Christian origins, is *the walking of the horses*, which took place on the 7th of January. The custom is specific to the south area of Dolj County: “On this day, all the young people would take their horses for a walk, on the lanes of the village, to prove their hard-working attitude and they way they took care of their animals during the winter. The horses were especially prepared for this day. They were adorned with ribbons, red tassels and bells. Moreover, their hair from the mane and tail was braided”²⁹. After the parade, there were organised horse races, after the horses had been sprinkled with water, blessed by the priest. It is said that, the animals “baptised” in this manner, shall be protected against diseases and shall be even more hard-working.

Furthermore, in this period, there are made previsions, on the weather and crops for the year. It is considered that, if on the Epiphany day the weather is nice, the winter is long, and if it is snowy and cold, the year is going to be rich³⁰. According to the popular saying, the trees covered with frost are a sign of future wealth. Moreover, it is believed that, on these days, the treasures begin to sparkle and burn vivaciously, and the animals talk.

The tradition also says that at Epiphany, and the following eight days, until the end of the feast, there ought not to be done the washing, because during this period the waters are blessed. Additionally, it is thought that there should not be lend anything, for not sending away the prosperity from the household. What’s more, it is believed that if you trip and fall on the Epiphany Day, you will surely marry that year.

Thus, in Oltenia, where some of the customs and traditions of these places have disappeared, many of the Epiphany related customs have been preserved along the time, in a form closed to the traditional one. Nonetheless, although the original significations have been lost, these practices can shed light on the world from which they were emerged, maintaining alive ancient elements of our popular civilisation.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 115.

³⁰ Informer Brânzan Maria, 75 years old, Cetate, Dolj County, 2014.

