# *THE SYMBOLIC IMAGINARY OF THE ROMANIAN CROSSES (TROIȚE)*

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***Abstract:*** *Romanian Crosses (Troiţe) impress through colours and archaic significances. They are the elements of an old mentality, but they still alive in the symbolic imaginary of the Romanian people. The study presents the results of a research project "Contemporary evaluation of Romanian Crosses (troiţe) in Oltenia and in a multiethnic context in Timoc and Voivodina" financed by AFCN (National Administration of the Cultural Fond). The study highlights the way of religious communication supposed by the presence of Crosses in Romanian rituals. Here will be analysed certain symbolical representations specific to Romanian identity. There will be also presented several fragments of interviews with painters of crosses from Oltenia with the goal to highlight the symbolic imaginary of the painters.*

***Keywords****: Romanian crosses, identity, collective memory.*

The importance of rationality had brought forward certitudes that later proved to be doubtful, and disarmingly imperfect. A human-like aspect, too much human, which both estranged us in our own world and accustomed – sometimes comfortably damaging – with its own rules and inventions. Initially, we used to consider possible the approaching of the customs of the road side crucifixes and crosses, only in the Romanian identity areas from Oltenia, Timoc and Voivodina, and only as a practice with implications rather social than religious. On the way, the differentiation has been proved to be limitative, on addressing both the used concepts and their applicability. The phenomenon can still be studied *in vivo*, and the field experience has gained the signification of an interior journey as well. The approach, or the research, was one of identification of the cultural landmarks that defeated the time on a pre-established path, meaning that the challenge is still present –that to continue and extend the journey-research in other fields too, including the symbolic imaginary one that accompanies these traditional artefacts. The similarity to the sacred, funerary horizon from nowadays is accomplished through the meaning of the premise-question: "what is the awake world dreaming?"

The social sciences – ethnology, anthropology, sociology etc. – have conferred an ample space for debating the practices of memory, cultural identity, collective memory. In all these equations there is a space for decanting, for noticing the metamorphoses or the functional mutations. How and what do we forget and, especially, how do we remember? If these questions can be generously approached in the broad area of the social concepts, particularised in the theme of our research, they can trigger a dialogue on different levels, in the context of fragmentising our recent present. On one side, the analysed phenomenon belongs to the horizon of the traditional culture, nowadays incorporated mostly into the identifications of the immaterial patrimony, which imply efforts to research, preserve and revaluate; on the other side, the erecting of roadside crucifixes, as a living cultural phenomenon, encompasses remembering, reaffirmation of the religious identity in the wider and exterior space of the village –

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open for the unknown and for the journeys towards everywhere, sacralisation of the space, commemoration/'non-oblivion'.

We can see the crosses "at graves, at wells, crossroads or deserted places, for purifying the place (…); places where assumed wonders took place, the halting places where one can have a rest, next to the main roads etc." or where there is marked the honoring "of a *civilizing, salvation* or *eponym hero*'s memory, [fixing] in the collective memory a *remarkable event* of this hero's life (a donation, a fight etc.)" (Vulcănescu, 1972: 144-145). Adela Toplean, analysing representations of death in the antique Greece, said that "through the heroes' cult, *death becomes naturalised*. It enters for the first time into the *polis*, it subjects to, and even generates rules (symbolic living rules). Some exceptional dead, whose remaining has magical-religious powers, would not have probably enjoyed the same glorious existence, outside the city. These dead people are now being called to talk not only about a spiritual continuity, but about political and cultural one too. Briefly, they seem to be the «pretext» for inventing the social memory" (Toplean, 2006: 192-193).

Nevertheless, the individual commemoration or memory gains particular attributes in the Romanian cultural space, "the personal success or failure, regardless their nature, would become edifying pretexts. The burying of a family member, the last will on the deathbed about the commemoration, the taking of an oath for a certain diet, the so-called prophetic dreams, the occasional predictions, the reading of the old laws, the forgiveness in front of the community etc., represented an inalienable side within the endless individual reasons that triggered edification. Once *the pretext of edification* crystallised in the reader's conscience, it would become an impetus of artistic creation" (Vulcănescu, *op. cit.*: 145-146). The roadside crucifixes, the crosses and the entire religious-symbolic arsenal that accompanies them, cannot be reduced to a linear process, finalised through an *artistic creation*, although the aesthetic significance of it is implicit, but only secondary, and more as an ulterior perception.

Grigorescu I. Nicolae, from the village of Polovragi, Gorj County, told us that "the last will of a person, by word of mouth is: «I want a wooden cross when I'll pass away», if anyone listens to the wish…, if not, they will have a marble cross on the other side world"[1]. It is impressive that the expression "by word of mouth" is still being used in the quotidian language of the place and the actual context for respecting this type of wish – in the traditional culture, being said that the wooden cross is lighter, but the contemporary alternative of the marble cross is more widely spread used – a practice that is borrowed from the urban area. In Bulgaria, at Pocraina, a Romanian village, Lozana Ivanova Djangolvska told us about the tradition of installing the cross at the dead person's tomb: "They have to install one, otherwise it is a sin to not have one, the dead have no shade, no shelter from the rain, and they face cold and wind on the other side"[2].

[1] Grigorescu I. Nicolae, field informer, 46 years old, village of Polovragi, Gorj County, interview realised by Associate Prof. Gabriela Rusu-Păsărin, PhD, University from Craiova, in 2009, during the project *Revalorizarea contemporana a troiţelor*....(The contemporary revaluation of the crosses…)

[2] Lozana Ivanova Djangolvska, 67 years old, the village of Pocraina, Bulgaria, interview realised by Associate Prof. Gabriela Rusu-Păsărin, PhD, University from Craiova, in 2009, during the project *Revalorizarea contemporana a troiţelor*....(The contemporary revaluation of the crosses…)



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The administration of the collective memory and, implicitly of the cultural identity, is organised as a spiral, involving cultural and particular institutional structures, on independent levels: family, community, society.

We underline that "the identity" is understood, in the present thesis, as a "relational manifestation", surpassing in this way the objectivism/subjectivism alternatives. The identity is not an immutable ""given fact", but it "is constantly built and rebuilt inside the social changes" ( Cuche, 2003: 127). Therefore, it is awarded a highly important share to the relational situation and the actor who confers signification, the identification being, consequently, at the same level with the differentiation. The correlation with the collective memory and its practices of re-actualisation is, nevertheless, implicit. Ethnology and anthropology come across new requests in the identification and revaluation of the cultural patrimony, the area of the social application has been extended, involving a continuous reflexive approach and realising an open dialogue with the representatives of the investigated culture. A special attention has to be granted to the configuration of the ethnological field and the problems emerging from its input. The investigation of the roadside crucifixes in Bulgaria and Serbia involved a visual component of the research, doubled by the instant observations, along with those that appeared on the way. The traveller passes especially through an interior space when he steps inside a cemetery; the invasive camera creates a subtly tensioned interception: he deals with the feeling of respect for a sacred space, with the deciphering of a code, with the desire to notice the coherence of a ritual.

The cemetery is as an *imago templi* in which «the eyes of the sky» are open, and caress visually each presence-absence that lies in anonymity, the cross becomes an icon, each detail gains unexpressed valences, which you can feel coming from a sacred horizon: from the mourning cloth that fastens the cross (called "*gulerele*-collar" in the area of Ponoare), tamed by the rain and the wind, to the blackened marks left by the burning candles for commemoration, to the photographs on the crosses, which describe the everyday life, to the traces of the burial ritual – basil, woollen thread, red thread…

The representation of the field research combines the images and the text; the visual discourse that it is added is meant to create closeness to the investigated traditional artefacts, the sensation of presence and of their intrinsic verticality. There are established instant visual correspondences between the stoned crosses from the cemeteries of the Romanians from Bulgaria – the village of Florentin, and the old cemetery from Isverna, where the crosses are covered by the ground, but which can still be discovered if one passes patiently from one side of the village to the other, accompanied by a wise guide, as in our case Mr.Cornel Boteanu, the author of numerous ethnographic and folkloric works, among which we mention *Cântecul zorilor din Plaiul Cloşani – epos funerar mehedinţean*(The song of the dawn from Cloşani field – a funerary epos from Mehedinți) (Boteanu, 2008:45).

The crosses, and moreover the groups of crosses, because the wooden crosses are often accompanied by the new ones – made of marble or metal, allow the unravelling of a coherence for the pious, ritual and creational gesture from the moment it was created. The physical space – the vegetal space, the chaos of forgiveness is counteracted by the function played by the orientation of the icon on the cross – the contour icon, the scratched icon, the painted icon… Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary, Saint Parascheva, Saint George or the Last Supper and the Cherubs met in the iconography of the crosses from Salcia.

The cross is a bridge between the sacredness of the space in different stages: from the indistinct space outside the village to the community space – the church, the



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cemetery; therefore, we can meet the roadside crucifix at a crossroads or in a «marked place», we met well-crucifix, the chapel-crucifix, the church yard crucifix. The erection of the church itself is supported by "an element of *stability*, a steadfast fundament: it is the square stone, marked through a *cross* (our note), settled on the place of the future altar; it symbolises the Christian stone endowed with the power to sustain a new world, the restored world of ecclesia" (Manolescu, 2002: 90-91).Moreover, Anca Monolescu noticed in her work *Locul călătorului*(The place of the traveller):

> Symbolically, the foundation stone assures the function of the principle that "supports", but also "destines", confers the last purpose of what will be built on that spot. «The stability» represented by it signifies the certitude of accomplishing a unifying project. The stone – unapparent, but essential – from the basis and the Pantocrator from the vault represent two hypostases of the Logos that symbolically include the sanctuary in the metabolism of the Christed corpus (*Ibidem*: 92).

Therefore, we come to understand why the space of the cemetery can be perceived as *imago templi.*

The profession of crosses-making, specific for the area Pietriş-Olt unravels gradually throughout the investigation carried out in the cemetery of the village, the deterioration of the crosses 'telling' stories about the construction details. The vegetal ornaments specific for the crosses from this area, is doubled by the real vegetation that already frames organically the funerary monuments of commemoration. The documentary details mention: "as regarding the art of phytomorphic ornamentation, the artists from Pietrişu, or those from Salcia excel in it, being more skilful in representing the faces of the saints: «we are better than them at painting saints, and they are better than us at painting flowers » (field information from Ion Mustaţă, Salcia)" (Iordache, Popilian *et alli*, 1970: 164)

The iconography of the roadside crucifixes is surprising even nowadays; it is known that "in Pietrişu, a *man's crucifix* has usually imprinted on it the figure of a male-saint: either Jesus Christ or Saint George. On a *woman's crucifix* there is the face of a female-saint, usually Pious Paraschiva or The Mother of God. On such a crucifix, it can also appear the crucified Jesus Christ. On a man's crucifix we can preponderantly meet the crucified Jesus Christ and the ridding Saint George."Other times, Saint George is replaced by Saint Demeter. On the woman's crucifix can also be painted two female saints: on the upper side of the crucifix, there is Virgin Mary, and on the lower side, Pious Paraschiva. Saint Mary holding the Baby, appears as an exception on the men's crucifixes, but the image is accompanied by that of Saint George, in order to show the gender of the deceased (*Ibidem:* 162). Under the circular or four-sided roofs, made of wood or tin, there are hidden fragments of this iconography, the elements contributing to the final image that we can meet *today*, to such extent that the grave preserves only the marks saved by the cross maker: a man or a woman's crucifix, on the places where the paint is still visible. Thus, the anonymity allows *only* the simple recognition of a Human being. These cases of anonymity – specific for the villages – can be understood as gestures of the serene departure into the belief of resurrection.

The tomb crosses, specific for the area of Pietriş, can also be met nowadays in other villages from Dolj (for example Motoci), Olt County. At Călui-Olt, we meet them painted in anti-corrosion paint (minimum of lead) – except for the space of the specific iconography, which is accompanied by wooden crosses, carved by the local artists. The spreading area is certainly wider, being known the fact that "the spreading area of the



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wooden crosses encompasses especially the field regions and only a part of the hill region, from the south of Turnu-Severin, Strehaia, Filiaşi, Bălceşti, Drăgăşani. Towards the north side, from the mentioned region, in pre-mountain and mountain areas, there can be met especially the stone crosses" (*Ibidem:* 165).

Going upwards to the Counties of Mehedinţi and Gorj, one can notice the roadside crucifixes, the commemoration crosses or those from the wells – mixture of spaces and sacred offerings for the use of a *traveller*. And the only thing that we should do is to recollect the *Pure White Traveller* from The song of the Dawn, specific for the area of Mehedinţi and Gorj, in order to try to understand the symbolic horizon of the old-times customs. The signs of verticality accompany the graves from Ponoare (the smoke-darkened symbol that still keeps the rhombus representations), or Polovragi, where we can meet the spear – incised or smoke-darkened fir-tree bearing the same marks of the sacred geometry.

The real traveller is permanently greeted by the reaffirmations of the sacred, by simple village constructions, many times anonymous or accompanied by a diptych. The foreign travellers in the Romanian Principalities often mentioned the meeting with such village monuments (Vulcanescu, *op.cit.:* 118-130). Other times, the Romanian village employed photographers or engravers to preserve the memory of such artefacts. Among these, we mention Anton Kaindl, a well-known painter of engravings with subjects from Oltenia (110 engravings signed Anton Kaindl, made in the aqua fortis technique, with subjects almost exclusively from Oltenia). These engravings were purchased in 1970 by the Museum of Art from Craiova, and have a special documentary and patrimonial value. Anton Kaindl was, starting with 1921, the official engraver of the princely court of Ferdinand I and his wife, Queen Mary. Travelling in Romania for almost 30 years, he realised an impressive documentary material through his works, which often represented Romanian crucifixes. His itinerary was especially along Oltenia, and it can be reconstituted through the created images.

Kurt Hielscher takes 5 000 photographs after his journeys in Romania, between 1931 and 1932, among which he publishes only 304 in his album, being impressed with "the love and the natural sense of art [that] the Romanian peasants use to embellish their houses and the last resting place: the crosses from the tombs, wells and roads", considering them "signs of a deep interiorisation of their naive feelings" (Hielscher, 1997: 32). Hielscher was aware of the documentary value of his work: "for me, it is as if I would preserve my book over the further times, when everything will be ceased to a lent and continuous disappearance" (*Ibidem:* 33).

An aesthetic revalorisation inside the Romanian culture is also proposed by the plastic artist Vasile Buz, a member of the Plastic Artists Union from Romania, the branch from Craiova, preoccupied for over 30 years by the theme of the Romanian crucifixes, which he has exploited in numerous works. Another type of visual discourse is unravelled, mediated by the plastic art, but also accompanied by a rigorous and passionate ethnographic documentation, another bridge towards the collective memory, towards new segments of a public interested in the reserves of the popular culture,revalued by the contemporary art. One of his works caught our attention thorough novelty – a gate-crucifix, by the wooden belfry of a church, the meanings of a Christian horizon, a colourful presence of symbols, reintegrated in the cultural circuit of a world.

The reflexive-subjective component of the research integrated the exploratory mark of this experience: the researcher has become temporary a traveller, who has found support in the Christian sign of the cross, who has discovered the passing through



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this world of the Man along with the mark of the wooden cross – his shelter cross, who has wondered with serenity in front of the zigzag-shaped crucifix, carved by the artisan from Călui, and who looks over this artist's shoulder towards the village, the same way the anonymous forefathers before that protected silently the community.

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