THE IMPORTANCE OF ROMAN ELEMENT IN ROMANIAN TRADITIONAL CUSTOMS: RUSALII[1] HOLIDAY AND CĂLUŞ DANCE IN OLTENIA

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Abstract: *The Roman influence can be traced in many popular customs and traditions in Oltenia de sub Munte[2]. The passing of time has often changed their pattern, adapted their historical present, but it has never changed their essence, and here we refer to that Latin DAN that has always complemented our origin, creating the base of our formation as a people, as natio. Preserved over the centuries, wearing Christian attire, several popular holidays, marked both in the religious and the popular calendars, maintain their importance in the collective consciousness of the Romanians, both in rural and urban areas. For instance, Rusaliile, an important Christian feast, most observed in its popular version unrelated to the Descent of the Holy Spirit, was declared "public holiday" two years ago. The first two days of Rusalii are non-working days. Definitely, it was the importance of the Christian event that mattered for this decision, but the Romanians, especially those in rural areas, actually do not work these nine sacred days in the popular calendar, for fear of vindictive deities of the sky. Closely related to Rusalii, as the sole method of exorcism and cure of the evil caused by Zâne, Mânioase, Iele, Frumoase[3], in Oltenia de sub Munte one can find the magical dance of Căluşarii, simply known as Căluş. It is interesting to note that while Căluş dance has been preserved especially by the artistic representation and its original purpose of cure and comfort has almost disappeared, the Rusalii, and here we refer strictly to the popular version of the feast, have maintained almost intact their functions: the restrictions imposed by them must be observed religiously, otherwise the unfaithful will be afflicted by great trouble. These unpredictable and evil deities "hit" and "cripple" the luckless ones who dare to come out their way the summer nights. The hearts of the Romanians are ingrained with this ancestral fear.*

Key words*: Rusalii, Căluşari, popular holiday.*

The Roman influence can be traced in many popular customs and traditions in *Oltenia de sub Munte*[4]. The passing of time has often changed their pattern, adapted their historical present, but it has never changed their essence, and here we refer to that Latin DAN that has always complemented our origin, creating the base of our formation as a people, as *natio.*

Preserved over the centuries, wearing Christian attire, several popular holidays, marked both in the religious and the popular calendars, maintain their importance in the collective consciousness of the Romanians, both in rural and urban areas. For instance, *Rusaliile*, an important Christian feast, most observed in its popular version unrelated to the Descent of the Holy Spirit, was declared "public holiday" two years ago. The first

[1] Pentecost
[2] The region "Oltenia beneath the mountain" is the northern Oltenia.
[3] Fairies, imaginary creatures in the Romanian popular mythology, conceived of as beautiful girls with evil powers.
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two days of *Rusalii* are non-working days. Definitely, it was the importance of the Christian event that mattered for this decision, but the Romanians, especially those in rural areas, actually do not work these nine sacred days in the popular calendar, for fear of vindictive deities of the sky. Closely related to *Rusalii*, as the sole method of exorcism and cure of the evil caused by *Zâne*, *Mânioase*, *Iele*, *Frumoase*[1], in *Oltenia de sub Munte* one can find the magical dance of *Căluşarii*, simply known as *Căluş*. It is interesting to note that while *Căluş* dance has been preserved especially by the artistic representation and its original purpose of cure and comfort has almost disappeared, the *Rusalii,* and here we refer strictly to the popular version of the feast, have maintained almost intact their functions: the restrictions imposed by them must be observed religiously, otherwise the unfaithful will be afflicted by great trouble. These unpredictable and evil deities "hit" and "cripple" the luckless ones who dare to come out their way the summer nights. The hearts of the Romanians are ingrained with this ancestral fear.

"*Ielele* are feminine mythical representations that come out at night, before cock-crow, between Easter and *Rusalii*. There is a zonal sinonimy in their names: *Cele Sfinte*[2]*, Dânsele*[3]*, Fetele Câmpului*[4]*, Frumoasele*[5]*, Măiestrele*[6]*, Rusaliile, Şoimanele*[7]*, Ursoaicele*[8]*, Zânele*[9] and others. They are rebel spirits of the dead who, after having spent Easter together with the living, refuse to return to their underground places. Unlike the ghosts that appear and cause trouble to people during the cold season of the year, *Ielele* populate the Romanian mythical landscape in summertime only. They have an anthropomorphic look: virgins dressed in white, in odd numbers, only rarely in even numbers." In *Oltenia de sub Munte*, in the consciousness of people, they are known as *Rusalii*, nine days from the eve of the feast itself, while the rest of the summer, in June, July and part of August, they are called *Iele.* In June[10] *Sânzienele* are celebrated as well (June 24). However, they are beneficent agrarian deities "protectresses of wheat fields and married women". (GHINOIU, 2005: 138-139). *Sânziana* or *Drăgaica* identified with *Diana* and *Juno* in Roman Pantheon or *Hera* and *Artemis* in Greek Pantheon, is also the protectress of girls who have reached the marriage age, and it is said that the night she is celebrated (June 23/24) the skies open and love spells are prepared.

Wicked, unpredictable and vengeful, according to the popular belief, *Rusaliile* must be mellowed with rich alms, on the occasion of *Moşii de vară*[11], on the Saturday dedicated to the dead, on the eve of the feast that bears their name. Romulus Vulcanescu in *Romanian Mythology* defines *Ielele* as "fairies of sylvan and pastoral space that personify the atmospheric states in continuous motion and change". Regarding the origin of these deities four hypotheses have been outlined: 1. Souls of bewitched

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[1] Fairies, imaginary creatures in the Romanian popular mythology, conceived of as beautiful girls with evil powers.
[2] The Saint Ones
[3] They
[4] The Girls of the Field
[5] The Beautiful Ones
[6] The Charming Ones
[7] *Şoim* meaning "falcon" and *Şoiman* meaning "fearless, proud person"
[8] *Ursoaică* meaning she-bear
[9] Fairies
[10] In Romanian, the old name of the month of June is *Cireşar, cireş* meaning "cherry".
[11] Traditional summer feast

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women; 2. Daughters of *Rusalin* Emperor; 3. Three daughters of Alexander Makedon who have been flying around dizzily, looking for the wonder horse of their father, ever since they drank form a bottle the "water of life"[1]; 4. *Ielele* are beautiful girls transformed into ugly girls or vice-versa, punished by *Nefârtat*[2] for their ugly deeds.

"According to the tradition, the name *Iele* is only a ritual appellation, a polite euphemism, a taboo, because those who discover their true meaning and pronounce their name, regardless of conditions, are left voiceless and they can hardly gain back their speech. The nominal taboo goes so far with precautions that even when the appellations are known by everybody, they must be forgotten and replaced by others, not to attract punishment from *Iele.* (…) *Ielele* in their entirety as well as in their functional groups are assigned several mythical meanings. Generally they are fairies sometimes good, sometimes bad, according to their mood, with immediate interests and other reasons unknown to people" (VULCĂNESCU, 1985: 428-429). When the mortal wants to mellow them, he will use the names that flatter their elation, when he wants to chase them away, he will use the insults and menaces.

At the same time, *Rusaliile* "is the popular name of the ecclesiastical feast celebrated on the fifth day after Easter, dedicated to the Holy Trinity (the Descent of the Holy Ghost, Trinity)" (EVSEEV, 1998: 403). As already emphasized above, the restrictions imposed by this event (forbiddance of labour no matter its nature, of haste, dance, forbiddance of sleeping outside, of taking water from the well at night, etc.) evoke a conduct modeled according to the supposed commands of the pagan deity, rather than to the norms imposed by the church for these holidays. "The ethnologists and the historians almost unanimously admit the pagan layer of this feast devoted to ancestor worship, hence its name *Moşii de Rusalii* or *Moşii de vară*[3]. Etymologically speaking, its Daco-Romanian name, existing almost in the entire Balkan and East-Slavic area, has Latin origin, where *Rosalia*<rosa "rose", was a feast dedicated to worshiping the ancestors who died untimely; people used to bring showers and bunches of spring roses to the graves and memorial feasts were organized" (Ibidem). *Rosalia* was an important feast dedicated to roses and to worshiping the dead. On May 13, according to Ferias, or on May 23 according to Constantine's calendar, the Romans used to decorate their homes with flowers. This custom is still preserved; not only houses are adorned with flowers, but churches as well. *Rosalia* was taken over by Christianity and assimilated with the Descent of the Holy Ghost. On our lands, according to Mircea Vulcanecu, *Rosalia* became a cycle of nine days called *Rusalii,* and acquired additional meanings in the mythical popular calendar, being a feast devoted not only to worshiping the dead (*Moşii de Rusalii* is a day of charity and funeral feast) but also dedicated to worshiping the sun in order to obtain rich harvest, protect the waters, the vegetation, and cure neurological diseases. That is why A. Candrea called them *Pathogenic Fairies*. "According to the magical pathogenesis, *Rusaliile* carried psychoneurotic diseases, morpheic epilepsy which, in popular belief, were cured by *Căluşarii.* They danced *hora căluşului*[4]around a boulder on the ground, and jumped over it exorcising the fairies of the disease" (VULCĂNESCU, 1985: 320).

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[1] In Romanian mythology, the "water of life" is the water that the heroes drink in order to come back to life
[2] The Devil
[3] Pentecost
[4] Circle dance

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The only remedy against the dreadful sufferings that befall the mortals punished by *Iele* or *Rusalii* is *Căluşarii* dance or *Căluşul* as it is called in Oltenia and Walachia. The dance has lost its magical properties and only the artistic ones have been preserved, but the story of its origin still raises the interest of specialized researchers. "(…) *căluşarii* is part of a cycle of traditions devoted to solstitial and equinoctial feasts, having the *solar horses* as theme*,* in opposition to the *infernal horses*. Ultimately, what is the mythological relationship between the solar cult and *căluşarii*? A few details: *Căluşarii* tradition opens and closes the days devoted to celebrating *Rusalii* (Latin *Rosalia*), one of the oldest and most observed archaic feasts of the Romans, taken over by Christians and assimilated with the Ascension" (VULCĂNESCU, 1985: 320). In *Romanian Mythology* three theories of *Căluş* origins are summarized: Latin, Greek and Thracian. In Latin theory there are three hypotheses: the first connects the origin of *Căluşarii* dance to the *Roman Salii* – a ritual dance show performed by 12 *Salii*, priests of the god Mars and of the hero Hercules, in April, during the Ides. The ritual dance of the *Salii* led by *Vates*, their headman (it is supposed that in Romanian, it became *vătaf*[1]) is very similar to *Căluş* dance. Some linguists consider that the word *căluşar* originate in the word *Colissali,* the surname of the *Salii*. The structure of *Căluşarii* group, its hierarchy and the ritual dance, the costumes and the auxiliary artifacts" (VULCĂNESCU, 1985: 377) rebuild, at least imagistically, this ancient Roman rite. The second hypothesis concerns the Sabine origin of the magical dance. *Căluşarii* would be a partial imitation of the allegorical dance symbolizing the abduction of Sabine women by the Romans. But, Vulcanescu argues, "the resemblances emphasized by the supporters of this theory contradict and do not explain the complex structure of the performance of the tradition inherited by the Romanians, where the abduction theme is only an insignificant episode in some versions of the dance".

The third hypothesis establishes a direct connection between *Rosalia* and *Căluş,* "considering *Căluşarii* dancing with weapons as part of the solar cult. This assumption that explains *Căluşarii* as representatives of *Ielele,* emphasizes certain belated episodes, influenced by a feudal deontology regarding the Romanian *Rusalii* feast, similar to Slavic Pentecost in some aspects". Finally, the last Latin theory assumes that *Căluşarii* originate in the name of an ancient sacred membership playing a double part, a group part: *Collosium* and *collosii.*

Greek theories are of two kinds. The first one refers to the ritual dance of the Cretan priests dedicated to the orgiastic worship of *Great Goddess Rhea.* "As members of the chtonian cult, the priests were divided into several groups, according to their semi-martial character." (VULCĂNESCU, 1985: 377) The last Greek theory refers to the magic dance of the begging priests called Agyrtai, a cult dedicated to the goddess *Demeter*. Similarly to *Căluşul*, the dancers were bound by strict vows.

According to Romulus Vulcanescu, the Thracian theories bring in the most plausible explanation. Nevertheless, this theory does not necessarily contradict the Roman one, from the perspective of an empire that molded the entire area in terms of military forces, culture and religion. The first hypothesis refers to the Thracian martial dance performed by *Cabiri* or *Dioscuri*, dedicated to the semi-deity *Pyrrha,* the fairy of the reddish land of which Zeus made the people. The second hypothesis assumes that

[1] In the Middle Ages, leader of a group of courtiers, servants or soldiers of the royal authority; *vătaf* also designates the headman of *Căluşarii.*

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Căluşarii originate in Kolabrismos, "a Thracian solar solstitial dance, with ritual ludic, medical, martial and purgatorial implications. The traditional dance was performed in circles, in round dances imitating the passing of the sun in the sky at summer solstice. It began at sunrise and ended at sunset. Only men participated in Kolabrismos. In their ritual dance, men used to carry mascoid staffs symbolizing the solar rays, which afterwards turned into ritual horse mascoids" (VULCĂNESCU, 1985: 378).

Other researchers of this fascinating ritual dance suggested other theories as well. H.B. Oprisan advanced the theory according to which *Căluşarii* is a tradition of Roman descent, but with Dacian influences. Ovidiu Birlea considers that in *Căluşarii* dance "two main representations are merging: one connected to the worship of *Iele* and the other connected to the caballine cult, to the "totemic cult of horse" respectively. At the same time, Mircea Eliade believes that *Căluşarii* dance is a Geto-Dacian ritual for initiating young men. Beyond these theories and hypotheses, the direct connection between *Rusalii,* as pre-Christian feast and *Căluşarii* is clearly highlighted. Both of them celebrate the beginning of summer and the victory of sun. In the war between *Căluşarii* and *Rusalii* the confrontation between the good and the evil can also be noted. Not only that *Căluşarii* can cure the people deformed by the evil fairies but also "they can hasten the marriage of girls at *Rusalii* and fertilize the sterile women by taking them into the circle dance and touching them with the wooden phallus carried by *Mut*[1]" (GHINOIU, 2005: 132). Ion Ghinoiu believes that *Căluş* is a caballine god of Indo-European descent, protector of horses and of the warm season of the year that dies and is born on *Rusalii.* The influence of the church pushed the pre-Christian script out of the Paschal cycle, originally the script of *Căluş* taking place during foaling and mating (GHINOIU, 2001: 40). The ritual dance where horses are considered solar, can also be found in the tradition of other people: the Germans have *Pferd-Ritters***,** the French have *Cheval Japon* and the English have the famous *Hobby Horse*.

"The part of the caballine god is played by *Mut* and the effigies are the Flag of *Căluş* and the Beak of *Căluş.* His divine entourage is a male group with strict hierarchy (foreman, foreman aid, flag bearer, *căluşari*), with handsome men who by their traditional clothing (…), name, simulation of horse trample and gallop while dancing, gestures etc. try to resemble or intermingle with the horses. Although *Mut* wears a mask representing an old man or a goat, he has a wooden phallus attached to the belt by which he fertilizes the sterile women by mere touch" (GHINOIU, 2001: 41).

According to the tradition, the flag of *Căluşarii,* the symbol of the magic power that they temporarily hold, must be carefully guarded. If the flag disappears, all the members of the group will go mad, that is they will catch the very same disease that they normally cure. The birth and the death of the god *Căluş* once in a year are indissolubly connected to this magic attire, the flag of *Căluşarii*, a thin and flexible rod of hazel wood, on top of which a headgear is attached, inside of which green garlic is hidden, three bundles for each *căluşar*. The birth of *Căluş* is ritually marked by Flag Binding, Flag Chosing, Flag Rising or the Vow. Upon the death of *Căluş* the flag is torn into pieces and buried: the Burrial of *Căluş.* This final ritual deed represents, in addition to the evanescence of the god *Căluş* for one year, the elimination for the same period, of the threat represented by *Rusalii.* Generated by popular imagination, *Rusaliile* and *Căluşul* succeeded in preserving themselves intact over the centuries; they are vechicles

[1] *Mut* meaning "mute", "silent", "reserved"

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of the signs revealing Romanian identity, giving evidence of times about which, at least so far, unfortunatelly we know very little.

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