PAST AND PRESENT RITES OF DENIGRATION

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Abstract: *Human groups, communities and societies themselves are organized according to a set of rules which, the older they are, the less prone to negotiation; therefore, they are inherited. The adjustment is performed at the level of the forms of expression, the deeper functions remaining basically unchanged. This is the case of the rites of infamation, often doubled in the punitive rites of traditional civilizations, physical violence being gradually replaced by symbolic aggression. The important thing was - and still is - the message transmitted: no iniquity shall remain unpunished! Otherwise the world, which is still in a precarious balance, would become a disharmonic construction.*

Key words*: ritual, public disapproval, resemantization, refunctionalization.*

The deritualization of traditional manifestations (which also holds to accelerated desincretization) leads to events located mainly in the verbal region, sometimes backed iconically by pictures/cartoons. To illustrate the processual character of these cultural practices, we selected two categories of phenomena: the first one, inscribable in the typology of the Shrovetide habits - *Strigarea peste sat*, with considerable seniority, is still performed on the middle course of the Doamnei River, Arges county (the specialization and individualization of the habit are marked denominatively as well, practitioners calling it "Măroagă"); the other, transmuted into the market (the University Square "phenomenon", Bucharest, Romania), partially borrows imagery and props thereof, yet the slogans of the participants, deprived of the patronage of the immunity ritual, easily glide towards libel and personal attacks (the precise wording would be attack against personality, *atac la personalitate*).

In the first case, fire is the *magic* mediator of the custom (here it refers to a solar cult, but also enables apotropaic, propitiatory, prophylactic, omen values). In addition, a projection of the popular mind prolongs the relationship between fecundity and fertility, marriage and fruitfulness of the field (the wearer of the harvest crown is the "wheat bride"), the fire being rather frequently associated with erotic elements. So it is not by chance that the beginning of working the land, marked by the entry into Lent, is celebrated through a kind of community exorcism meant to purify the individual for the next stage; and as the female element is somewhat prone to maculation, if only by not performing marriage during câşlegi, spinsters *are drawn a refenea*, i.e. they undergo a rite of denigration (the meanings conveyed by ceremonial descended from a symbolic mentality, probably medieval, that combines one rite of denigration with one of evil exorcism in order to prepare the community for the entry into a new period).

The characters that are mainly concerned are the spinster and the lazy girl who did not finish spinning wool and hemp (interference with the practice of the Holy Thursday: fires of the dead and the punishing Joimărița); the group of lads "call" them at night, thus ensuring anonymity and the collective support of the disqualifying message (the protection of the performers), not so much to widen (its current correspondent, to *mediatize*) the non-ethical facts of the village (however known by the *in-siders*), but in order to "remind" them of their guilt and make them mend their ways. The gesture is meant to gain the benevolence of the protective deity, the state of

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physical and moral purity, as a condition for the beginning of the stage work. In addition, the woman is primarily responsible for the harvest throughout the year.

In this context, *Măroaga* represents a particular case of celebrating the beginning of the Lent that preserves the fundamental features of the *charivari* custom (once spread throughout Europe), closely connected to other customs, such as *Le feu de Fassenottes* (in France) or *Il giocco del matrimonio* (in Italy)[1]. The term that designates the ceremonial derives from the present tense form of the verb "a ruga", merged with the first-person singular pronoun which precedes it, the newly-formed structure having a nominal value. We also believe that it is the popular etymology that can explain the more "esoteric" *Alimori* (*aoleo, măre!*) which is interpreted as a remanence of an ancient spell performed with fertilizing aims, but which establishes links with the after-world: the Turano-Balkan *ali* (red snake) + *mor/mar* (beings of the world of the dead).

The custom is practised exclusively by single young people; when the church service finishes on Sunday morning, they share roles: a) the callers – those who walk in the streets of the village and urge the residents to turn from passive elements into active elements in the ceremony. The crying-invitation "*Hai la Măroagă!"* (similar to "*Hai la focul lui Sumedru!"* – October, 26th) is also meant to mark the festal moment; b) the bearers of wood and other materials for combustion – are responsible for the "power" of fire (probably the ignition of the fire symbolized a ritual, too); c) the judge – the informal leader of the group, the one who decides whose name should be called over the village. The group of callers is formed through an interesting sociological method which combines the geographical grouping (consisting of neighbours) and the biological grouping (consisting of people of the same age and sex) with the psychological one (sympathetic groups).

The ceremony itself begins after dark. The participants climb to the customary place, meet with those who have prepared the pit and the kindling and they light the fire. It is a real competition between the groups of the village; there are some years when fire is lit four to five times, the winning team being designated by the distance from which the fire was spotted, which can probably be proved by the amount of ash remaining after combustion. This may be an ancient practice to light fires at the border with an apotropaic purpose, marking the territory within which the evil forces cannot manifest (see also the plague shirt or the furrow ploughed when carolling begins). In some areas, the group is divided into two smaller groups, each climbing a high hill, continuing the dialogue at a distance, truly "over the village". In Coşeşti, the two instances of dialogical discourse are face to face, around the fire.

The verbal component of the custom is simple, reduced to two to three replies of each group[2]. We identify five discursive sequences: 1) the initiation of the dialogue is sudden, interjectional - *aoleu*! (phatic function plus semantic value); 2) interrogative form I - requires some additional information that will unravel the state of the first sequence, with the focus on the relative-interrogative pronoun *what* - *ce*; 3) the nuclear sequence - puts the generic performer in the position to perform a task/request; hence the name of the custom – *Măroagă*; 4) interrogative form II - aims to identify the beneficiary of the request in the previous sequence; focus on the relative-interrogative pronoun *who- cine*; 5) the finality (purpose) of the request - revealing the matrimonial

[1] For further information, please see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charivari

[2] *Aoleu, aoleu! (Aoleu, măre!)* (1)/*Ce ţi-e, băăă?* (2)/*Mă roagă şi mă roagă, măăă!* (3)/*Cine, băăă?* (4)/*Fata lu' X* (or the girl's name) *s-o iau pe lopată şi s-o arunc/s-o duc la Y* (the boy's name) *în vatră, măăă!* (5)

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plot; the girl is taken/thrown to the boy as a substitution of the uncontracted marriage, as anticipation of a marriage or as a simple game – impossible, paradoxical pairs. (We do not insist here on the textual symbols – the shovel, the fireplace – or on other peculiarities of the message[1]).

At a first glance, the group seems to act as a matrimonial instance, establishing the pairs. Until the '60s and '70s of the last century, they say that the girls were waiting on the porch to hear "to whom they would be taken". The maidens' woefulness materialized on the first night of the Lent through lamentation songs and cursing addressed to the lads[2] invoking this time the pyrrhic element as well: *arde-te-ar focul!*, *bată-te focul să te bată*! We believe that at its origins *Măroaga* was an instrument of denigration, of mocking at the spinsters, resembling *tragerea plugului* sau *a butucului, cu spargerea oalei cu cenuşă* in the case of the girl "who had sinned" or to *datul în petec*.

The last paremiological expression above also gives us the (pre)text of the transition to the second subject under discussion. Functionally, the proverb can be interpreted as a verbal concentrated gesture of denigration of those who deviate from the community rules. But its diachronic resemantization almost opacifies its primary purpose, *a-şi da în petec* entering today in a synonymous relationship with *a-şi da arama pe faţă*; or, between „a-și înșela bărbatul" and „a falsifica monedă" the common traits are of a completely different nature (indeed, the deception still remains in both cases!) Specifically, a few hundred years ago, the woman that was proved to have cheated on her partner was forced to wear publicly "marked" clothes - a stridently coloured patch, so that everyone in the community should know whom they deal with (see also "The Scarlet Letter"). This is also a pillory!

A similar form of public disapproval is claimed by the Romanians as well - or at least by the inhabitants of Bucharest – in the University Square (we are certainly not an agoraphobic nation!). As the subject goes far beyond a simple contrastive approach, we retain here only the events of the beginning of 2012, namely, the textualized productions displayed/chanted by protesters dissatisfied with everything/everyone (we should note that the Square becomes a "phenomenon" not so much by the magnitude of the demonstrations, but by their repeated, iterative character). The anonymity of the sources is no longer a feature of popular culture, but of the policies of the appliances/advocacy organizations. Opinion vectors, stereotypical elements of the posts, performative agents, jamming factors and information accelerators (in this case the contribution of the media is very important) can be traced. Reducing the function of these messages to a form of collective manipulation through language is limited, and it is less important from an ethnological and narratological point of view.

We propose as an interpretive technique the placing of posts under the incidence of denigration practices. But the genetic context generated other discursive *species* from the pseudoproverb to jokes and the urban legend. We inventoried ten

[1] We approached this subject at length in *Les feux rituels de printemps en Muscel-Argeş*, part of the volume „Fuochi e rami. Feste e ceremoniali folklorici italiani e romeni" (A cura di Ignazio Buttitta e Bogdan Neagota).
[2] Mihai Pop, 1999, page 100.

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sites/blogs dedicated to events, bringing together nearly 200 posts with semantic autonomy (we have not taken into account the variants derived from the same matrix).[1]

In an article published in "România Liberă" in January 21, 2012, Andreea Pocotilă proposes a typology of the market slogans: a) simple, classic slogans – "Demisia" and "Jos Băsescu"; b) ironic slogans - „Băse, suntem 50.000, ne-a numărat Anastase", „Am venit singur, nu m-a adus autocarul", „Pierdut preşedinte şi guvern. Se declară nuli", „Băse, nici nu ştii cât de Boc începi să fii"; c) auto-ironical slogans - „Cinste lor, cinste ciumpalacilor", „Vă rugăm să ne scuzaţi, nu producem cât furaţi"; d) pro or against drug slogans – „Legalizaţi marijuana", „Stop Spice Shop! Guvernul vinde droguri"; e) pro monarchy slogans - „Regele Mihai salvează România!"; f) aggressive slogans - "Băsescu, moarte!", „Sătul de voi, angajez lunetist"; g) environmental slogans - „Roşia Montană nu e de vânzare", „Vrem cianură pentru dictatură"; h) cryptic slogans - „Până acasă", „Opriţi plăcile tectonice" or "By any means necessary, Malcolm X"; i) slogans of encouragement or exhortation - „Sunt obosită şi mi-e frig, dar tot stau şi tot strig, Jos Băsescu", „Băsescu te crede idiot. Te simţi?", „Nu pot face nimic? Ba bine că pot şi îmi vreau ţara înapoi!"; j) offensive chanting slogans such as „Am adus vaporu, ca să plece chioru", „Angajăm preşedinte. Condiţii: să fie sănătos psihic, să nu fie beţiv!"; k) the chants of „ultraşi" - „România, stat poliţienesc!", „Asta-i ţara noastră, nu hoţia voastră", „Ultima soluţie, încă o revoluţie!", "Ole, Ole, Ola", "Romania, Romania!", „Cine nu sare/ Cine nu sare/ Ori e gabor/ Ori e prost de moare!", „Cine sare vrea schimbare", „Avem gabori civili printre noi", „Cine este trist, este securest".

Nicknames, denominations, labels provide themselves support for a sociological analysis (most of them fall in the series of pejorative slogans): *chioru, chelu, beţivu, blonda, piticu.* These generic names suddenly turn into characters in jokes. The protesters often resort to puns (paronomasia and chiasm), they use rhyme or assonance: Bă, Se Scurge damigeana!; Bă, Se Scumpesc toate!; Să trăiţi bine sau bine că mai trăiţi!; Să trăiţi bine! Noi ca voi, voi ca noi!; De ce trăim, ca să luptăm, de ce luptăm, ca să trăim!; "Ia-ţi cocoşul şi puicuţa, / şi dă la popor punguţa!"; Investiţi în Educaţie, nu irosiţi altă generaţie!; Jos prostia şi mitocănia!; Vrem cianură pentru Dictatură!; S-a umplut paharul! Pleacă marinarul! (here, the phrase „A se umple paharul" / "fill the cup" is a double connotation) etc.

A proverbial formula from the series "better ... than ..." with traditional achievements such as "Mai bine cap de pisică decât coadă de leu"/ "better the head of a cat than the tail of a lion" or „Mai bine în satul tău fruntaş decât codaş la oraş" becomes in Piaţă „Mai bine vierme protestatar, decât cadavru politic!". Likewise, the "prophetic messages in temporal key are "traditional" too: „Timpul a expirat pentru voi!", "2012, noi suntem sfârşitul lumii voastre!", "Băsescu, în cazul tău, mayaşii au avut dreptate!" (alluding to the end of the world predicted by the Mayan calendar); "GAME OVER, Băse!". Alte efecte sunt obţinute prin formulări ironice, sarcastice, uneori cinice, cu accentuată orientare spre poantă şi banc: *Eşti guvernant? Sună la 112!; EBA, tatăl tău nu vrea să vorbeşte cu noi!; Există… speriaţi-vă!; Te comporţi ca arogantul, mergi şi*

[1] Romaniavideo.blogspot.com; www. Gonews.ro, Poezia e in starda; Facebook (Pagina Piaţa Universităţii), Twitter, bebesmenblogspot.com, hristea.wordpress.com; 9gag; http://libercugetatorul.info/2012/01/28/topul-lozincilor-anti-basescu; http://liviumihaiu.ro/2012/01/19/ Colectia nationala de lozinci, slogane, pancarte si scandari; http://spunesitu.adevarul.ro/Politic/Dezbateri/Lozinci-slogane-pancarte-scandari-o-extraordinara-radiografie-a-societatii-romanesti

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termină Levantul!; Explode *the Romanian Garden!; Români, nu rataţi megapromoţia din Piaţa Universităţii: bastoane pe spinare, gratis, pentru toată lumea!* sau *De ce protestez în stradă?! Pentru că în casă, la muncă, la telefon, sunt deja ascultat. E vremea să mă asculte şi din stradă* sau *Cum se salută protestatarii cu jandarmii? Pe mâine seară!* sau *De ce nu mai vorbeşte Băsescu? A devenit Smurdo-mut!* Other effects are achieved by ironic, sarcastic, sometimes cynical formulations, with pronounced orientation to jokes: *Eşti guvernant? Sună la 112!; EBA, tatăl tău nu vrea să vorbeşte cu noi!; Existăm… speriaţi-vă!; Te comporţi ca arogantul, mergi şi termină Levantul!;* Explode *the Romanian Garden!; Români, nu rataţi megapromoţia din Piaţa Universităţii: bastoane pe spinare, gratis, pentru toată lumea!* sau *De ce protestez în stradă?! Pentru că în casă, la muncă, la telefon, sunt deja ascultat. E vremea să mă asculte şi din stradă* sau *Cum se salută protestatarii cu jandarmii? Pe mâine seară!* sau *De ce nu mai vorbeşte Băsescu? A devenit Smurdo-mut!*

Denigration - exclusively verbal and iconic in the agora of the third millennium - preserves some features of the old practices of public social correction, but moves the centre of gravity from ritual to spectacular. The propagation "with great fanfare" („cu surle şi trâmbiţe") is replaced by the spontaneous diffusion of television broadcasts.

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