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ELEMENTS OF ROMANIAN MYTHICAL GEOGRAPHY. CĂLUȘUL¹

VLAD IONUȚ SEMUC

Keywords: customs, Căluș, mythology, interdisciplinary approach.

Cuvinte-cheie: obiceiuri, Căluș, mitologie, abordare interdisciplinară.

For the audience, the traditional custom called “Călușul” is a folk happening, a great performance and also a play. Beyond these, it implies profound meanings regarding the human relations with the world and with the nature, the normal way of life and the solutions that the humans had found in this millenary evolution, in order to make things right, when they were out of order. As Mihai Pop had put it, it is an expression of social life and, sometimes, a mechanism that makes our social life go on.

In order to understand the meaning of the Căluș, considering the conditions of its integration within the contemporary culture, we should also know its significance in the past. This is why, the custom needs to be known in depth. Its investigation cannot restrict to the surface, as description of the dance as known in our days, but to point out as many profoundly human facets it comprised, its reconstruction beginning from prehistoric times, starting from plain hypotheses, up to confirmed documentary data. Lastly, it should provide an explanation for an apparently simple fact: how it came to what it is. This is the condition of its critical valorification, in the true cultural sense.

The reason for choosing a theme like this comes from the necessity of putting information in order, for there are a lot of old and new data that have been interpreted so far. From this perspective, the volume “*Elements of Romanian Mythical Geography. Călușul*”, tries, apart from the investigation of certain aspects connected to how the custom takes place in the real life, to make an analysis that should lead not only to the discovery of its successive stratifications, but also to the reconstruction and knowledge regarding the evolution of the different perspectives that it is made of.

Because of its complexity, to approach this custom from the perspective of a single discipline, cannot offer conclusive explanations of all its aspects (origin, evolution, functions, meanings and so on). This is the reason why, as methodology, I considered the interdisciplinary method, that is based – at the level of synchronous analysis – on facts and data research, that is formed at the level of diachronic interpretation (in

order to determine the cultural archetypes) through the ethnological, geographic and historical (archaeological) investigation, trying in both cases, to frame the custom in its area plan.

In order to support the ideas developed in the volume, I have brought, besides the already classical bibliography of the Căluș, the recent literature dedicated to this ritual, a series of archive documents unused by now in the research, the results of the field investigations, in order to observe the today condition of the custom, but also some series of new archaeological finds.

As the title says, this work is not aimed to offer an overview of the custom, but to show certain aspects and phenomena of its sphere that are less known in general, or aspects that have stirred debates along the years in this field.

Actually, there are six detailed analyses aspects that coincide with the chapters of the book: I – *Historical evidence and the history of the researches*, II – *General Presentation (The spatial and temporal context, the players, the props and ritual symbols, the ritual script)*, III – *The Geographical environment and repartition (sharing) of the custom*, IV – *The Equine Motif. Historical considerations*, V – *Dances with weapons in the European space, origins, distribution, historical becoming*, VI – *From the traditional custom to the contemporary show*.

The first chapter is dedicated to the oldest evidences of archeological nature and others that could be connected to the custom, but also to a critical comment of the bibliography.

Along time, the custom of Căluș stirred the admiration and interest of a large number of Romanian and foreign scholars, given its very archaic elements, but also due to its spectacular appearance, the beauty of the dance and melodies. Beginning with the first information that belonged to the foreign travelers (15th century) and reaching up to the ethnological studies in the 19th-20th centuries, this socio-spiritual phenomenon was frequently analyzed. With some exceptions yet, the descriptions and even the vast studies lacked the basic aspects regarding the Căluș significance, tackling it from a single perspective, as a dance. To all these, some ethnological presentations have been added, mostly often being very limited and

¹ Doctorate thesis defended in 2008 at the Faculty of Geography of the University of Bucharest; scientific coordinator prof. dr. Ion Ghinoiu.

meant to point out some curiosities of that custom.

The documentary-scientific value of the bibliographical sources is uneven and only by their combination a clear general image of the *Căluș* could be outlined. At the same time, the critical evaluation of the existing information provides with just several basic aspects that could bring clarifications about the way this custom had been practiced in the past, about its territorial extension or about its ritual content. Mainly, there are two perspectives of the custom: the first one – the author aims to elucidate its origins, the other – that is specialized in the choreographic language study, the play – the game – being one of main parts of the ritual.

The limited extension of this Chapter did not enable us to present a critical analysis of the whole bibliography and rendering all viewpoints in a large number of historical sources, studies and articles. This is why, I was focused just upon some papers of a certain scientific value, containing novel information and surprise by their approach, or conclusions. Moreover, the oldest sources are also presented that, even if not referring explicitly to the *Căluș* custom, can still be connected with it. These are even more valuable considering that, up to this paper, they had not been used and valorified at all.

The second chapter is dedicated to a detailed description of the ritual, in order to obtain an image as expressive as possible. Without it, it would be impossible to research and order its components. Although “*Călușul*” is common to all the spaces where Romanians live, some of its sequences are different and this is why I have considered necessary to identify each element and its characteristics and purest forms.

For a better understanding of the phenomenon, I have referred to the Geographical areas that have more or less influenced the emergence and evolution of the ritual. Moreover, I have followed the geographical distribution, the different stages of evolution in each area and the structural changes it had undergone.

As first instance, out of the brief presentation of the regional characteristics of the customs, seen in their evolution, we could find that, despite all these variants it had, in a certain moment, they were part of a unitary and complex custom/ritual, defined by an organic structure in which the constituents were determined by norms, established and strengthened by tradition.

The relation of the *Căluș* with its ritual time (the spring equinox and later on the *Rusalii*), has been determinant for its structure integrity for a long time. Gradually, due to some local factors, sometimes remaining unknown, that connection got weakened and further on, as a consequence, it resulted in the dilution and then losing the ritual content. The slight regional differentiation existing in the structure of the ritual became more evident and, at present time, this is strikingly visible. This is why, we could discuss about a *Căluș* practiced during the *Rusalii* festive season and (still) possessing a strong ritual character, or about the one that reached as moment of manifestation

close to the winter festive season, preserving just its spectacular character.

Out of this perspective, I have considered that we could discuss about regional forms, or differentiations of the *Căluș*, just considering the evolution stages reached in the respective areas.

Even if some researchers consider risky that, in the present stage of research, we should attempt to establish the origins of *Căluș*, we could still emphasize that is not a precise moment when this custom began its existence and it cannot be found any way that could enable us to trace it. As any human creation, the *Căluș* custom had no beginning in a certain place and time. The speculations on this topic are just subjective and arbitrary constructions, upon which we have no control. They cannot be maintained, except as hypotheses, with a more or less strong documentation. Yet, we consider that, even if we cannot reconstruct the primary, *original* form of the *Căluș* and we cannot know if initially it was just a single custom, or a complex of similar ones, coming from various sources, some elements that comprise its different strata provide some significant elements (traces of the solar cult, weapons and vegetation, the exclusively male structure of the group etc.), being specific to some Indo-European populations of the Bronze and Iron Ages.

An ancient, basic motif, that is present in ritual all the time is the equine motive. This is why in chapter four, I have tried to analyze the evolution of this perspective. In ancient times, the importance of the horse and its symbol had been studied only archaeologically. Unfortunately, because we lack written sources, the only way to find out the certain fact about this reality is by studying direct proofs as bone remains, masks, wall drawings, ceramics, stones and a few other indirect proofs (as belts...).

This volume also contains a chapter dedicated to a comparative analysis of the weapon dances within the European region, that *Căluș* custom is part of. I have considered of use to give some examples of dances that belong to the same family, given that nowhere else we could find the complete ritual, everywhere could be found fragments that can be put together, in order to reconstruct it, even in part. By their comparison, it can be established not only the mutual and original background that brings together these practices in a single stem, beyond their regional distinct features, but also the changes that occurred in time. The inherent, undergone transformations, have been caused not only by the different historical evolution of each country, but also by the spiritual atmosphere specific to those people, more or less inclined towards the practice of such a custom, in which the dance played an important role.

Even if isolated and superficially mentioned in the writings of the antique authors, this originary background has been more vastly rendered in the real life, covering a large part of the European continent. Emerging in a certain historical-geographic context, under the urge of certain necessities, it continued to get transformed, to part itself into sequences and to

acquire zonal specific features, under the influence of the antique Roman and Greek civilizations and later on, by assimilating some elements belonging to other cultures. Also, together with the fundamental changes that appeared in the human mentality, these ritual practices have been modified, achieving other functions or, in some cases, completely disappearing. The evolution of this elaborate custom has faithfully mirrored all historical processes of changes within the social structure and mentality that it crossed through. In the case when some of its sequences (dramatic elements symbolising death and revival, the fight between the forces of the life and death) are still preserved in some more conservatory regions, this happens just in the virtue of tradition.

The existing resemblances between these dances has been connected by some scholars with the historical evolution process of the society, which generated (in a different time and space, but at the level of the same stage of economic and social development) similar cultural forms. We consider that, in the given situation, we could not discuss about such a process because, in all these dances, not only elements of form analogy could be traced, but mostly phenomena of identity, regarding the social-historical structure and function.

Above all, the Romanian *Căluș* has preserved, close to our days, a complex agrarian custom, as a conglomerate of ritual practices of fertility, fecundity, prophylaxy, healing and initiation, that still reflect its ancient function as a means of knowledge, concerning the nature and divinity.

In the last chapter, I have tried to provide a perspective of the dynamics of *Căluș* in the context of modern society. The ritual, which is directly connected to the collective history, economy, social life and mentality, nowadays has uneven stages of

evolution. Generally speaking, even if in certain areas some traces of ritual are kept, they have lost their real meaning and are seen as spectacular elements and practiced as a outcome of tradition, with a lot of comic content. This is why, I have considered it was necessary to follow the survival of the ritual nowadays, with its social and economic meanings and functions, trying to integrate it into today's reality.

The permanence of this custom is determined by a mechanism of self-regulation that induced the movement of the message from the ritual level towards the entertainment and artistic one. The closer we get to our days, we could observe a change of its function from the ritual level, in which the accent has been placed upon the belief in the effectiveness of the performed acts, towards the ceremonial one, in which the determinant factor of the reconstruction is keeping with the tradition and also towards the spectacular one, which is perceived as an artistic product. The rhythm of this process, as a reflex of the historical evolution and of changes appeared in ideology, was undetectable for a long time and then, slightly, after World War II it became more and more intense, in larger proportions "*the renewing force indisputably dominating over the force of tradition maintaining*". At the same time, the *Căluș* is the most eloquent example of passage from a rite to the ceremonial and then to the show. Its actual form, according with the local or general social context of performance, brings together, in a coherent piece, all three functions that long time ago were in a distinct position.

This volume aims to be a first attempt of a certain way of approaching this archaic ritual: interdisciplinarity. I have chosen this way to treat the subject, in order to fill in a gap and to suggest a way to be followed.

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