

THE ROMANIAN CĂLUȘ: SYMBOL OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

CAMELIA FIRICĂ

Spiru Haret University

No. 11, Dezrobirii Street, BL. E 14, AP. 4

Craiova, Dolj County, Romania, 200522

e-mail: cameliafirica56@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Of all Romanian dances with ritual functions the most archaic and dynamic is the *căluș*, a custom of great complexity in its functionality and manifestation, in which dance prevails. Over the course of time, the dance aroused the admiration and interest of many scholars due to the ancient ritual elements it contains, as well as for its spectacular virtuosity and the beauty of the performance and music.

The purpose of this study is to reveal the meanings and functions of the *căluș*, primarily at the social level, in its natural environment – the traditional Romanian village – and to make an analysis of the key moments, the logical order of the dance sequences, gestures and ritual acts, the importance of its props and of group composition and organisation.

KEYWORDS: *căluș* • *călușari* • *iele* • dance • ritual • Romania

As a particular, perfectly individualised, complex custom in which dancing is an important means of manifestation (Pop 1999: 111) the *căluș*, included on the UNESCO Intangible Heritage Lists (cf. The Căluș Ritual), has distinguished itself ever since the Middle Ages, and came to be acknowledged as a symbol of Romanian identity (Ghinoiu 1997: 40).

The dance used to be performed at Whitsuntide throughout Romania, in Moldavia, Wallachia, Banat, southern and central Transylvania, except for the mountainous areas and the Dobrogea region. Over the course of time, the area of this custom became restricted. At the beginning of the 20th century it was still preserved on the Danube plain, Transylvania, Banat and south Moldavia; at present the custom, which developed forms of great variability from region to region and century to century, is performed particularly in the south of the country and some localities in southern Transylvania. Despite the changes undergone over time, it is worth mentioning the particular stability of its various specific components – the ritual scenario, group organisation, props – recorded in written documents since the 16th and 17th centuries.

Familiar with the Romanians, Aromanians and Megleno-Romanians, this dance, known as *călușer* in Transylvania, *căluș* and *călușar* in Wallachia and Oltenia, and as *călucean* and *călușean* in Moldavia and Banat, is also common in northern Bulgaria, the Bulgarian dance resembling the *căluș* in the neighbouring region of Oltenia, especially Dolj County. This is due to the strong Romanian influence coming from north of the Danube, or is the result of a direct inheritance from the Romanian population living south of the Danube (Vuia 1975: 110). Known under the name of *rusalci* or *călușari* they

are led by a *vătaf*, danced the week before Whitsuntide and the number of dancers in their group is odd in number. The *rusalci* have both dances for fertility and one dance named, as in Oltenia, *floricica*, which is meant to heal the sick.

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE AND THEORIES ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF CĂLUȘ

Mentioned in documents as long ago as 1572, when the Hungarian poet Balassi gained the guests' admiration at the festivity occasioned by Emperor's Rudolf II coronation where he performed the dance (Branîște 1891), the *căluș* was minutely depicted by men of letters astounded by the artistry of the performers and the beauty of their attire, the written testimonies illustrating not only the regional differences but also the stages of evolution.

Dosza Daniil (1859, cited in Opreșan 1969: 28 and Burada 1975: 59) makes the first proper description of the *căluș* dancers and performance occasioned by the ball that Transylvania's prince Sigismund Bathory gave in 1599. A wall of one hundred dancers surrounded "twelve pillars on top of which there were plates of two square meters wide on top of which twelve dancers stood". They were holding silk strings meant to lift a cloth of very strong fabric on which the *vătaf* – a handsome peasant of impressive stature named Florea – started his dance. The onlookers' astonishment reached its climax when

[...] the dancers on top of the pillars loosened the strings to let the cloth down and then, suddenly, they pulled them again to push it up; the *vătaf* turned a somersault, hit his spurs, fell on his feet and resumed the somersaults three times. The fourth time, Florea did not jump back on the cloth, but on one plate on top of a pillar, while the dancer on that plate jumped on the cloth and performed somersaults in his turn. So did all the twelve dancers standing on pillars. In the meantime the other *călușari* skilfully performed a fantastic dance. (Ibid.)

In addition to Sulzer (1781, cited in Opreșan 1969: 32 and Burada 1975: 52), Bojinca (1832, cited in Opreșan 1969: 34 and Burada 1975: 56) was particularly impressed by the dancers' jumps and stunts and the mute's extravagant, red attire and mask with the beak of a stork, which he clatters to the rhythm of music, and he made a thorough description of the Transylvanian *călușari* of the 19th century, when the *călușari*'s enrolment would follow like this: the *vătaf* of a region formed of several neighbouring villages used to scour the fairs organised in the nearby towns looking for lads to join the *căluș*. Those who agreed to join the group had to pay earnest money worth one florin to the leader and were asked to be present at his house on Ascension Day to join the others selected. Bojinca highlighted the dancers' belief in the existence of a supernatural power who watched their dances and assisted their jumps and, moreover, the belief that one who was not able to keep pace with his dance companions fell to the ground in a state of dizziness as an indication of the fact that he was not to the divinity's liking, which entailed his immediate removal from the group. Not to draw attention, the *călușari* used to practice in the forests or on an isolated spot in a field.

The Moldavian *căluș* was first mentioned in 1654 by Kemeny Ianos (cited in Opreșan 1969: 30 and Burada 1975: 68–70) who attended the wedding ceremony of the Moldavian

Prince Vasile Lupu's daughter: "They had carnival parties, with dancers, *călușeri*", but Prince Dimitrie Cantemir (1986: 141) left the first detailed written testimony about the 18th century Moldavian *călușari* "believed to have the power to drive sickness away". The group was formed of an uneven number of people, ranging from seven to eleven, who used to gather once a year under the leadership of a *stareț* followed in command by a *primicer* whose charge was "to ask the *stareț* what dance he orders the *călușari* to perform and tell them in secret, so people cannot hear before they see". What impresses the viewer is the beauty and extreme richness of the dance, with more than one hundred movements and gestures and the artistry of performers who seemed to float in the air. The Moldavian *călușari* would wear "female attire", and "wreaths of wormwood and flowers", speak "with female voice" and, hide their faces "under pieces of white linen", to conceal their identity. Strict rules had to be obeyed for as long as the dancers were under oath: not to sleep anywhere but under the church eaves, because of the belief that they might have been crippled by ghosts if they rested in other places; those who joined the group were bound to stay with it for at least nine years – and if anyone absconded, they were regarded as tormented by evil spirits and wicked fairies; no living creature was allowed to reveal a dancers' identities, so, anyone who ventured to uncover their faces, might have been killed under a right granted to the *călușari* by an old rule; when two groups of dancers met they fought and the defeated were to be subjects to the winners for nine years.

In the Banat region in the 19th century the dance was performed by eight *călușeni*, a *ceiuș*, two pipers and a jestful *bloj*, who, led by a *voivod*, would begin rehearsals ten days before Whitsuntide. On the eve of the holiday, they went to an isolated spot near a mound separating several estates where they became blood brothers and said the Our Father prayer (Liuba 1898, cited in Opreșan 1969: 46) after the *voivod* had reminded them of what a great sin it was to disobey the custom's commandments.

One of the main issues largely debated in most studies dedicated to the topic is the origin and ancient character of the custom, upon which many judgements were made, although some of the scientific arguments were hardly convincing. The different opinions expressed in the literature were grouped (Vulcănescu 1985: 377) according to three theoretical positions according to attitude to the origin of the *căluș*: Latin, Greek or Thracian.

In the framework of the theoretical position that points to a Latin origin for the custom, which is the most popular, four hypotheses were stated according to which the custom was inherited by Romanians from their ancestors, the Dacian-Romans, who, in their turn, had inherited it from Roman settlers.

Some of the advocates of a first Latin hypothesis (Sulzer 1781: 405–412; Bojinca 1832; Chardon 1863; Marsillac 1877; Ollănescu 1897: 13; Odobescu 1908: 350; Burada 1975: 52) consider the *căluș* as an ethnographic relic and a folkloric reminiscence of the old ceremonial performance of the twelve *Salii* – the leaping priests of Mars in Ancient Rome. The composition of the *călușari* group, its hierarchy, structure and ritual dance, the costumes and whole outfit hark back to the ritual dance and athletic jumps that the Roman priests performed under the supervision of their leader, the *vates*.

The second hypothesis, stated by Ion Heliade Rădulescu (1843: 167–168) and supported, among others, by Alecsandri (1850), Teodorescu (1874) and Léon de Rosny (1884) takes into consideration the Sabine origin of the *căluș* as a consequence of its

resemblance with the allegorical dance representing the abduction of Sabine women by the Romans.

The origin of this dance is obvious: it is the Roman dance that the Romanians' ancestors performed during the festival that culminated in the rape of the Sabine women. The *călușari*, until this day, like our ancestors in former times, lure women with all kinds of objects considered to have magic powers, they do not cease to shout out the kidnapping signal: Get her! (to wit the girl) and complete their dance by stealing the flag and running away with it (Rădulescu 1843: 167–168).

Romulus Vuia (1975) and Teodor Pamfile (1997) regarded the origin of the *căluș* as being in direct relation to the Latin holiday Rosalia (the Romanian *rusalii* – celebrated fifty days after the Orthodox Easter) considering it as part of the solar cult, which is proved not only by the fact that the dancers carry different weapons and mind the sunset and sunrise in their performance, but also by the relationship existing between the horse and the cult of fertility and fecundity. In the framework of this hypothesis, the *călușari* are considered as unquestionable representatives of the *iele*.

The double Latin form *collusium*, *collusii*, defining both a group dance and secret society – whose members share a secret and a state of complicity (Kligman 2000: 70) – served as the foundation of the fourth hypothesis that supports the Latin origin of the custom and of the word *căluș* (Buçsan 1976: 3).

The theories about the Latin origin were confuted by either the supporters of the Greek origin of the custom in the ritual dance of the Cretan priests, *curetes* and *korybantes* (Giurchescu 1974, cited in Kligman 2000: 70), the advocates of the custom's Thracian origin in the dances dedicated to the goddess Pyrrha, or in the solar solstice Thracian dance of *kolabrismos* (Iorga 1936: 86; Vulcănescu 1985: 377).

Taking into account one of the meanings of the noun *căluș* (gag), the state of silence of the mute and the fact that most of the *vătaf*'s indications are uttered *sotto voce*. Elefterescu (1922: 296–304) asserted: “as there is a mute in the *călușari* group and as Romanians say about one who keeps silent that he was gagged the name *călușari* would originate in the word gag”.

On the other hand, after having collected all the written testimony about the custom, Pamfile (1997: 57) concluded his research by declaring that, despite all attempts, the origin of this custom cannot be established. Sharing Vuia's opinion (1975: 129) in what concerns the name of the dance as derived from the Romanian term for horse *cal* (Latin *caballus*), Eliade (1992: 222) admits that the origin of the custom still remains obscure.

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE CĂLUȘ CUSTOM

As part of a cycle of traditions devoted to the solstitial and equinoctial holidays, whose central theme were the solar horses (Vulcănescu 1985: 376), the *căluș* opens and closes the holidays devoted to Whitsunday, a day that Dacian-Romans used to dedicate to the cult of the dead, when burial feasts were provided near graves. In the course of time, the holiday turned into a cycle of nine (*ibid.*) or three (Pamfile 1997: 33) days, called by Romanians *rusalii*, which acquired further connotations – people worshipped the sun in order to grow rich crops and receive nature's protection; although this was also the period of mythical magic medicine used in psychosomatic diseases treatment.

The physical spaces in which the dances are performed are cultivated, humanised spaces – gardens, houses, villages, towns – as opposed to uninhabited, wild spaces – forest, clearings, thickets, river banks, crossroads, hills, mountains, caves – the domains of the wicked fairies named *iele*. These fairies can enter humanised space unhampered, whereas the *călușari* must protect themselves when they set foot on the territory of the fairies. According to popular belief the *iele* or *rusalii*, are female, malignant, wicked, vindictive, spirits of the dead who, on Maundy Thursday, return to this world, populating the Romanian mythical landscape only in summer time. (Ghinoiu 2003: 21) Depicted as either extremely beautiful maidens in white attire, or ugly, loathsome old women (Vuia 1975: 117) who live in the vicinity of groves, wells, lakes, in certain favoured trees – nut trees or sycamore maples – the *iele* are believed to lure young men whom they charm with their beautiful voices and songs. When they get together, in uneven number – 3, 7, 9 or 11 – the *iele*, also conversant with the magic power of the healing herbs, perform their specific dance, the *hora*, dark circles on the grass being considered as sign of their passing. The place where they dance is dangerous; he who treads on it, as well as he who sees or hears them singing and narrates this, is rendered crippled, blind, mute, deaf or insane. (Vuia 1975: 117; Pamfile 1997: 25) The fairies disfigure those who sleep near springs, forests, under nut trees, in cold and wet places, or who drink water from wells at night. Their power is at its acme on Whitsunday when they castigate those who do not comply with the rules of this holiday. The person punished by the *iele* is referred to with the phrase “taken by the *iele*”, “taken by the *rusalii*”: materialised in a state of insanity, paralysis, rheumatism. (Șăineanu 1896: 93–108; Vuia 1975: 113; Pamfile 1997: 27) Not a single soul dares to do menial or farm work, or any other household drudge, not even climb trees, especially fruit trees (Kligman 2000: 22), on Whitsuntide fearing the retribution of the *iele*. According to popular belief they are dangerous to such an extent that it is bad omen even to say their name as this would cause their apparition. Therefore, people refer to them with either the third person plural form of the personal pronoun, *ele*, *iele*, the popular form, or its polite form *dânsele*, or metaphoric names expressed by flattering epithets, *frumoasele*, *măiastrele*, *sfintele*, *puternicele*, *domnițele*, *zânele*, *albele*, or using impartial epithets like *rusaliile*, *drăgaice*, *impărătesele*, *vâlve*, *vântoasele*, *șoimanele* (fairies of the wind), *știme* (fairies of the waters) (Șăineanu 1896: 93–108; Vuia 1975: 113; Pamfile 1997: 27).

The *căluș* performance coincides with the time when the *iele* are most dangerous to humans, when they arm themselves with all sorts of cutting weapons to punish those who do not observe the holiday; in order to overcome their human condition and gain power over the *iele*, power to heal the sickness caused by them, the *călușari* must venture beyond their normal human space. They must face the liminal space by going to the boundaries that separate human habitation from non-human, a trip that differentiates the dancers from other members of the village community, defining them as an esoteric group. The dancers’ attitude towards uninhabited places such as mounds, which they surround three times firing a gun and running away, or waters, near which they suddenly turn around to see if the wicked ones chase them (Liuba 1898: 128, cited in Pamfile 1997: 46) indicates that these are the places where the *iele* are believed to dwell.

The custom fulfils several functions (Ghinoiu 2002b: 339) which very seldom coexisted in the course of time and can be inferred from the component elements:

- the magical transfer of fertility that the *călușari* achieve by casting a spell upon large

lumps of salt, which the country people then give to cattle to lick, or upon seeds meant to be sown in the fields, garlic and wormwood for healing purposes, a pot with water and coins inside, a horse halter, raw wool, all meant to bring prosperity to the householder (Ghinoiu 2003: 21);

- expediting the marriage of young girls and the symbolic fertilisation of wives performed by their joining in the dance and touching the wooden phallus carried by the Mute, one of the group members;
- healing people, particularly those 'taken' by the *iele*, achieved through the magical transfer to the sick person of, a) the sound soul of a clay pot broken with a stick by the leader of the group, b) a chicken violently killed, or, c) a *călușar* that undergoes a ritual death. Healing is accomplished by virtue of the ground rule that, in order to function properly, the community has to recover the ill-favoured;
- preventing children, held in arms by the *călușari* during the performance, from being taken ill, a ritual believed to drive away diseases, specially fever; there is also a general belief that these children will be vigorous and protected against evil spirits;
- banishing the aggressive *iele* through the instrumentality of clubs, wooden swords, bows and arrows and apotropaic plants, as well as the noises produced by bells and spurs, and the shouts of the *călușari* during the performance.

Given certain common elements, Vuia (1975: 113) states the point of view that the *călușari* are the very personification of the *iele*, the following arguments being brought in substantiation of the assertion:

- the very appearance of the dancers who, according to Cantemir (1986: 129), used to wear female clothes and cover their faces with white veils, reminiscent of the fairies' white appearance;
- the structure of the group – odd number in both cases;
- the *călușari*'s performance coincides with the period when the power of the fairies reaches paroxysm; their frenetic dance, when they seem not to touch the ground, imitates the fairies' dance;
- the belief that one who steps on the spot where the *iele* danced falls sick, *călușari* themselves being very watchful not to follow in one another's footsteps or to keep the outsiders away from the flag or from themselves during the performance so as not to go insane;
- both the *călușari* and the *iele* hold the secret of the healing plants.

THE GROUP COMPOSITION

The hierarchy is very strict within the group, which is absolutely, unconditionally, obedient to their leader. The most skilled of the dancers, who maintains the cohesion of the group, chooses the dancers who form the group, decides upon the type, duration and location of the dances, states who will be cured and leads the dance, for it is he who first shows how the figures should be performed. As master of the sacred ceremony, the *vătaf* performs the ritual acts and magical practices related to the binding and breaking of the flag, oath taking and healing of the sick. He must be a man of moral virtues and

qualities, an outstanding character, familiar with all the secrets of the *căluș*, a connoisseur of incantation, charms and spells that must not be disclosed to anyone, except for his successor, who he chooses when he retires. This position, highly esteemed and honoured by village society, is held for several years and transmitted from one generation to another. Once invested, the *vătaf* becomes a sacred, respected and feared character considered to have magical power over the dancers, which he shares with the Mute, to whom he is faithful.

An equally interesting, important, highly respected person in the group, and a substitute for the protective god of horses (Ghinoiu 2002b: 339), defender of the secrets of the initiated ones, is the Dirty One, the Masked (Eliade 1973: 116) or the Mute. His name comes from the prohibition against speaking for the whole period of Whitsuntide, from dawn to sunset, and from his outfit. With his very uncommon appearance, dressed in patched clothes, the Mute strikes a discordant note: he wears a leather mask, a goat beard, or, in some cases, he just smirches his face and carries a primitive weapon such as a painted wooden broadsword, bow and arrows, hatchet, or a whip, which he ceaselessly lashes to chase away evil spirits. The mask and his state of dumbness help him conceal his identity, while the weapons he carries make him invulnerable to the *iele*. A pouch full of healing plants and a red wooden phallus – the classic symbol of both natural and personal fertility – tied to his front, with which, it is believed, he can make girls marry or women get pregnant by a mere touch, are elements that complete his costume. Except for the prohibition against speaking, the Mute can do whatever he pleases: freely join or leave the performance, disobey the group leader, make dancers err and then beat or lash them with his sword or whip, kiss girls and married women. He ensures that the dancers should not be approached by any bystander who might go insane or fall sick. The Mute must be a very good dancer, an athlete, and a consummate actor as his responsibilities are not easy: he performs particularly difficult stunts, climbs tall trees, dances on his hands.

The flag bearer, called *arătătorul* (Ghinoiu 2003: 37) in some villages in Dolj County, is entrusted the special care of the flag. Dressed in ordinary clothes, he does not, as a rule, dance but is ready to replace any of the performers in case of ailment or weariness. During the performance, the flag bearer must hold the flag in upright position in the middle of the group, which is why he has to be a sturdy person. If the flag falls down, which is bad omen, repairing can only be made by disassembling the group, making a new flag and repeating the covenant of faith.

As to the dancers, any person, irrespective of age or marital status, who commits himself for a period ranging from at least one year – a precaution that prevents the violation of the commitment (Giurchescu 1992: 53) – to three, seven or nine years can be a *călușar*. Such a position is considered a privileged, particular one: in the eyes of the country people, they are not mere dancers, but human beings endowed with a suite of powers and characteristics that other mortals do not possess. As a matter of fact, their very virtuosity is considered to be presented to them by supernatural forces that guide and protect them. According to some popular beliefs, the fact that the *călușari* must take an oath of allegiance the moment they join the group, represents proof that their dance is devilish, the dancers are related to dark forces and have nothing in common with the institution of the church or other holy things; moreover, in fact they must keep away from such things. The enthusiasm and elation of the dance seem to be the work of

pagan forces that inspire the dancers and give them strength to overcome themselves. In the past, as long as they were under oath, the *călușari* lived detached from the rest of the world; it was imperative for them to be pure and they would gladly comply with this rule and cohabit under the *vătaf*'s supervision for protection. After taking the oath, the dancers were considered sacred and adhered to norms and regulations similar to those of war confraternities, some of which are still valid even today: they are not allowed to betray the secrets of the group, have relations with women, and so as not to maculate the sacred, they never walk alone but in groups of two or more; in addition they would sleep and eat together to avoid being under the influence of evil spirits. The state of purity obtained by sexual abstinence was the best and safest way to avoid exposure to the supernatural and its related hazards. Purity and power are in close interrelation when it comes to *călușari* (Semuc 2002: 56). They all mind the sunrise and sunset in their performances, the time of the living (Kligman 2000: 98) as opposed to night and dark, the time of the *iele*; they would never dance before or after these times of day. Violation of the oath entails the so-called disease of the *călușari*, defined by the phrase, "taken from the *căluș*" (Larionescu 2002: 18).

On the other hand, if, in Dolj County, the *călușari* used to ask for the help and protection of a witch (Wolfram 1934, cited in Kligman 2000: 30), in Moldavia they preferred divine and church protection (Cantemir 1986: 114). The oath the dancers take on the Saturday that precedes Whitsunday endows them with particular powers and seals a condition: it binds the *călușari* to one another and, simultaneously, to their leader and from that moment on they are above the mass of ordinary people and act only as a group. Only by acting as a group equal in number to that of the *iele* could the *călușari* resist their attack and dominate them.

Every family would welcome the dancers, who could chase away the wicked fairies and spirits; the households and villages in which the *călușari* danced are blessed and fortunate, protected from evil forces and will supposedly become prosperous.

THE RITUAL SCENARIO OF THE CĂLUȘ

In former times, the *căluș* dances used to begin on Whitsunday and continued for three days as well as the following Sunday and Tuesday, when the ritual of Breaking the *Căluș*, or Breaking the Flag, was performed; there were villages where the *călușari* would dance for the whole week after Whitsunday for healing purposes.

The structure of the ritual includes, on one hand, acts of an esoteric character, performed in great secrecy, in a wild, liminal area, actually the territory governed by the *iele*: the setting up of the group, the raising or binding of the flag, the oath taking, the breaking of the flag that represents the group's dissolution and the reintegration of the dancers into ordinary life; on the other hand, there are the exoteric acts – the proper performance of the *căluș* dances – that take place in the living space and also involve the practices of healing, of protection and defence of the community members.

At the same time, a series of acts that precede the symbolic birth of the group and its ritual performance complete the structure of the *căluș*: the recruitment of new members, if necessary; the initiation of novices in dances; preparation of the costumes and ritual objects, for example clubs (so customary that in some regions they became part of popu-

lar costumes and, ritually, their masters' substitutes) and swords, the phallus made of the sacred wood of cherry, oak or hazelnut trees; picking plants with magic, preventative and healing valences, which must happen before dawn unless their magic virtues be taken by the *iele*, dissatisfied that such remedies exist and are used by mortals.

ACTS THAT PRECEDE THE SETTING UP OF THE GROUP

Even if today the group is constituted in most regions on the Saturday before Whitsunday, which is a sign of desacralisation, during the past centuries this event used to take place twenty-four days before Whitsunday, a day called in Romania *Stratul de Rusalii*, *Strodul de Rusalii*, *Sfredelul Rusaliilor*, or *Todorusele* and considered to be the moment when the *iele* appear on earth and their power evident; there are still places, particularly in Dolj and Mehedinți counties, where the *călușari* are convened one week before Whitsunday. If the previous year's group has been rendered incomplete by a member's death or departure, the *vătaf* has to bring it up to full strength with new members, although not before thoroughly testing their stamina and dancing skills. The applicants' ability to dance is a decisive selection criterion as each dance is composed of more than fifty gestures and motions and very high, repeated jumps. In all regions the first dance, *plimbarea*, is a sort of introduction to the *căluș* (Bârlea 1982: 58), a lively walking in circles, performed by the dancers to the rhythm of music, with the last circle, called the *hora*, believed to facilitate marriage and fecundity when spectators are allowed to join the *călușari* so as to receive their healing virtues. During the *hora*, the *călușari* carry children in their arms or jump over babies placed on the ground thereby endowing them with health and strength. This last dance distinguishes itself by the fact that all dancers neigh. Through everything they do, the *călușari* want to resemble horses (Ghinoiu 2002a: 141). They wear spurs and tie bells to their legs and belts crossed on the chest imitate the harness; they gallop and neigh, and some of their most daring choreographic and acrobatic movements are symbolically inspired by the horse. The horse had an increased apotropaic role and hence the significant presence of the cabal-line motif in almost every area of folk arts: as amulets, and as decorative carved wood motifs present in peasant household architecture adorning the interior and exterior alike, including gates and wells. Even today, the horse head is used as a symbolic image to protect the spaces associated with human life. The very technical definition of these parts is *cai* (horses) and their location is hardly accidental: they are meant to protect entrances and have a comprehensive view over the household. In the framework of the custom, the horse is regarded as an apotropaic symbol, protective genius of vegetation that can influence crops, animals and people, whom it can shield against illness and the *iele*.

The configuration of the pieces that make up the dancers' costumes, along with the countless ornaments and accessories, confer, by their artistry and unusual combination, a note of extreme originality and uniqueness to the *călușari* attire. Symbolically grouped in vital areas of the body – the head, torso, waist and legs – the ritual signs are composed of several categories of items chosen in accordance with the type of message to be expressed. Situated at the boundary between natural and supernatural, between profane and sacred, the *călușari* have to change their identity, adopting the ritual insig-

nia as means of protection of their physical and mental integrity (Işfănoni 2002: 35). Two colours prevail in the dancers' costumes: white, signifying purity and chastity, and red, which on one hand materialises confidence in the protective power of the chromatic symbol able to remove evil spirits and evil eye and, on the other hand, is the symbol of maximum vitality that characterises the *căluşari*.

In 18th century Transylvania the *căluşari* had black round hats decorated with feathers, coloured ribbons and other metal adornments; the white shirts, were girdled with wide leather belts adorned with brass buttons. Straps intersected on the chest over the shoulders down their backs to the belt (Sulzer 1781, cited in Oprişan 1969: 32; Burada 1975: 52). During the 19th century the hats were wide-brimmed, adorned with coloured beads, the cotton peasant trousers braided with black or dark blue cords and selvedged with red, the peasant sandals tied around the ankles with thin, beautifully plaited straps on which bells were fastened. Moldavian dancers used to put on female clothes (Cantemir 1986: 141).

In Oltenia and Wallachia the dancers used to wear a small, round, black hat adorned with coloured ribbons and flowers, white shirts, white homespun peasant trousers, socks and peasant sandals with bells. They had belts adorned with coloured beads and tassels, given to them by girls and women who believed that the belts worn by the *căluşari* during the dance bring or preserve good health and keep evil spirits away. In Giurgiu County, towards the end of the 19th century, the *vătaf* wore an embroidered Turkish fez while the *căluşari* had round, black, hats completely adorned with long silk ribbons. Five pairs of girdles embroidered with beads representing butterflies surrounded their waists; large embroidered handkerchiefs, also provided by countrywomen, folded in the form of a triangle were fastened to the girdles. The heels of the footwear were provided with bells and spurs. Fezzes were customary in Dolj County, although they fell into disuse and were replaced by adorned straw hats. Characteristic of the costume was an embroidered pinafore girdled with a belt on which different children's caps were fastened.

With some alterations or differences from one century to another, or from one region to another, this costume was preserved into the modern day. Unitary in structure throughout Romania, it combines the basic pieces of the Romanian folk costume characteristic to each area, plus some specific accessories: belts crossed on the chest and woollen or leather girdles, embroidered handkerchiefs or pinafores, all usually manufactured by countrywomen, as well as spurs and bells, as effective weapons against evil, made of metal considered of divine, mysterious origin (Eliade 1991: 55). The main purpose of the costume and insignia is to narrate, in the secret language of plastic signs, the myths that cause people to invest each element of the costume with symbolic virtues.

ESOTERIC ACTS

An impressive, important ceremony, a sober act wrapped in mystery called the raising or adorning of the flag, also referred to with the phrase the binding of *căluş*, and considered the birth of *căluş*, is closely related to the esoteric act of taking the oath; these acts take place on the eve of Whitsunday in an isolated place, in the forest or on the bank of a body of water, areas attended in great secrecy and silence by the whole group, includ-

ing the musicians, lest the *iele* should hear them. The magic force of the rite could fade away if the liminal space, where it was held, was to be violated by strangers.

One can not conceive the *căluș* without its symbol, the flag, in the presence of which the oath is taken and which has divine power, governs the dancers and keeps them together. Generally the word flag is used to define the four or five meter long pole, made of sacred wood, on top of which the *vătaf* binds coloured ribbons, a handkerchief or an embroidered piece of cloth together with as many garlic bulbs, stalks of green wheat and wormwood as the number of dancers (Giurchescu 1974: 27); garlic is chosen for its apotropaic qualities, wormwood is meant to render the dancers strong and wheat is the symbol of brotherhood (Kligman 2000: 31). The *călușari* themselves provide these plants, chew them during the performance and also wear them bound to their belts or hats (Ișfănoni 2002: 40) to keep the *iele* away; they are very vigilant so that the plants should not to be stolen or else the dancers will go mad or be unable to perform. Nobody is allowed to touch, stand or pass beneath the flag; even its shadow is believed to be dangerous, in as much as anyone who treads on it, falls ill (Fochi 1976: 45). The *călușari* are equally watchful in what concerns the position of the flag: it is an omen of bad luck that brings great misfortune upon the *călușari* if the flag is tilted, dropped or put down. The flag is stuck in the ground when the *călușari* have meals or retire for the night's rest.

In Oltenia County the binding of the flag used to be done in the presence of the community's witch. She gave the dancers a kerchief belonging to a wicked woman who had been wearing it at the moment of her death. While the *călușari* were performing a dance, the witch, carrying the flag, walked around, and, to check the effect of the spell, would suddenly stop behind one of the dancers; the spell was considered efficient if the dancer fell down in a state of dizziness. In some villages in southern Oltenia the flag is substituted with a rabbit skin stretched over a stick and is called *cioc* (beak) (Giurchescu 1992: 43).

In Transylvania the *călușari* used to travel on Ascension Day over nine villages to bind the flag. "During this journey the *vătaf* had to fill a bottle with water taken from nine rivers; finally they all used to halt in a dale where the leader tied two straps with bells from under each person's knees as well as two rows of ribbons on their arms, above the elbows. Once the ceremony was completed, the young men gathered in a circle, entreating *Irodeasa* (Herodiada), the *călușari*'s protectrix, to support and help them. The *vătaf* sprayed the dancers with water and ordered them to raise their iron-knobbed clubs above their heads and strike them against one another three times, looking westwards first and then eastwards; this signified a mysterious sign indicating those who were part of the *călușari* society. With this completed, the dancers were ordered to return home and never look back, to remember that they were duty bound, and had to remain so, in good and evil, to appeal to *Irodeasa* for help before starting dances, and not to forget to sacrifice the first morsel or glass of beverage to their goddess by throwing them under the table." (Bojinca 1832, cited in Opreșan 1969: 34)

The oath taken by all *călușari*, except for the musicians, completes the ceremony of the flag binding. With all the transformations suffered by the custom, the prohibition to disclose its proper wording to outsiders is still in force. Nothing certain is known, the secret is kept religiously, under the threat of the curse. Nevertheless the literature quotes some texts of the *călușari* oath: "In the name of God we commit ourselves to

dance rightly, without feeling offended or complaining”, “I swear that I will fully obey the *vătaf*’s orders, comply with the regulations, act honestly and not keep anything secret from my companions”, “We commit ourselves to be united, to help one another, not to disunite the group, hide money and touch women as long as we dance, so help us God!” (Oprișan 1969: 57), “I swear to serve the *căluș* with faith, honesty, obedience and fear of God”, “I swear by God, by the soul of my ancestors, by my horses and cattle, to abide by the law of *căluș* until the flag is undone” (Ghinoiu 2003: 52).

By oath the *călușari* are related to each other for better and for worse, they are bound to obey their leader, to heal the sick, to share everything together, not to leave the group, not to reveal any of the secrets, not to come into contact with any woman, to stay pure in heart and body. Nobody but the *vătaf* has the power to release them from the bound or else they themselves will be taken by the *iele*. In some places in Wallachia, the *vătaf* used to measure the height of the dancers on a red thread and bind it together with the apotropaic plants on the flag, or he would make a sign on the very pole of the flag, kept in vertical position, indicating the height of each *călușar*. This was considered as a pledge of everlasting commitment to secrecy and obedience given to their protectrix. After taking the oath, the *călușari* pass under the flag, or through a gate formed by either the flag pole and the Mute’s body, or by the flag pole and the Mute’s sword held aloft to form an arch. This is the moment the profane world is left behind and the dancer enters the sacred world (Ghinoiu 2003: 52). Both the bringing of the flag and the oath taking are acts of initiation of new members, the profane being separated from the common life and prepared, step by step, for the sacred world.

The final esoteric act, which goes under different names according to the region, the breaking of the flag, the undoing of the flag or the burial of the flag, is also completed by the *vătaf* in utmost secrecy, silence and isolation. This moment, when the flag is stripped of its ornaments, marks the ‘death of the *căluș*’, the absolution from the oath, the dissolution of the group and the return to everyday life. The event takes place the second Tuesday after Whitsunday, before sunset, in the very place where the flag binding was performed. If, in some villages, it is customary to let the adorned pole float away on a river, or distribute the chops among the dancers together with the plants rendered curable, in others – Olt County for example – the flag and adornments are buried, it being a bad omen to tread on them, or the chopped pole is spread to the four winds while the *călușari* ran away and hide themselves. They leave their hiding places when the *vătaf* whistles, get together, shake hands, and greet one another as if they hadn’t ever met before, then take their own ways home in complete silence, lest the fairies chase them. This sequence of the *căluș* ceremony is an interesting rite of oblivion of what the dancers did and witnessed during the flag binding.

To be able to heal those taken from the *iele* or *căluș*, the *călușari* must identify the cause of the ailment. Therefore the healing rite, preserved mainly in Mehedinți and Dolj counties, includes two phases: the diagnosis, made by means of music, and the treatment. The former phase is performed by the *vătaf* who goes to the sick person’s home in the company of musicians. The whole repertoire is played and if, at the sound of a melody, the patient gives a start, dances, or shouts in the manner of the *călușari*, he is considered taken and curable. On the basis of the correspondence between certain songs and the activities prohibited during Whitsuntide, considered as causes of illness, the appropriate healing dance, called “Cal, Bâți, Floricică or Chiser” (Kligman 2000:

97), is chosen to be performed. The treatment takes place in one of the three days of Whitsuntide, in a liminal space, or at the patient's dwelling place, in complete silence, with the participation of the whole group of dancers. The *vătaf* or the Mute trace the circle – the barrier between the sacred and the profane, inside which the *călușari* always perform their dances and rituals – thus ensuring the necessary conditions for the treatment to have the expected effect. The patient is laid down in the middle of the circle, head eastwards – East symbolises life and the sun – and covered with a white cloth. Beside the patient's head the flag is placed as well as the necessary ritual props prepared by relatives beforehand: garlic, wormwood, vinegar, a new earthen pot, a black chicken, water taken from a well or spring (at dawn, lest anyone else take water first). The *călușari* dance anticlockwise around the patient, who is, meanwhile, rubbed all over with garlic, wormwood and vinegar, then jump over him touching him with their feet or clubs. While they perform the dance associated with the patient's disease, some acts, different from village to village, meant to achieve the transfer of health from the ritual objects, or from one of the *călușari* to the patient, are carried out: the *vătaf* either induces a state of trance to one of the dancers, who undergoes a ritual death, and then breaks the clay pot and kills the chicken, or he breaks the pot and kills the chicken and when the drops of water and pot shards touch a dancer, that dancer symbolically dies, transferring his life to the sick person. It is the sacrifice the *iele* ask for the healing of the patient (Cristea 2008: 152). There is still another method:

the *călușari* lay the sick person down, jump over him, and at the leader's order they all tread on his body from head to foot. Then the dancers whisper into the patient's ears words known only by them and command the disease to leave that body. (Cantemir 1986: 141)

THE CĂLUȘ TODAY

Such healing rituals can hardly be seen today. Social emancipation, the fact that there are fewer and fewer people who believe in the existence of the *iele* and the harm they can cause, and who are more interested in the artistic level of the performance and less in its ritual significance, and the oppression of communist ideology, exercised for almost half a century against any mystic manifestation, all determined the custom's shift from ritual to entertainment. The *căluș* is performed by virtue of tradition. The custom lost its esoteric character, the raising of the flag is no longer carried out in a liminal space but in the *vătaf's* courtyard, in most cases the flag is not buried or chopped up any more but preserved from year to year; the ritual symbols as well as the costume accessories are mere props or ornaments, the dancers perform only on Whitsunday or for three days at most. Nevertheless, beyond these new facets of the *căluș*, one can still discern its ritual structure, despite the fact that it is no longer active.

The 50 years of communism erased from memory, first and foremost, the essentials of the Romanian way of being; they truncated, invalidated and mutilated traditions; they utterly forged everything that was peasant culture; they eliminated the sacred dimension that lies in every peasant culture. As a ritual of healing and fertility, the *căluș* ceased to be operational during the socialist and communist period of Romania's industrialisation, modernisation and urbanisation when the country passed from an

essentially agrarian economy to an industrial one, from one social system to another, in which the village interfered with economy (Kligman 2000: 176) by populating the newly emerged towns with peasants who transferred their own culture when they came. In this socio-political context a new ideology superposes on, or denies, a traditional system of belief and practice pertaining to the calendar and lifecycle customs, which were qualified as backward, dysfunctional and religious. This is also the case with the *căluș*. The dance, music, costumes and ornaments taken out of the original context, became artistic products of amateur and professional groups that performed on the stages of national and international festivals and competitions. The ritual symbols, the flag, wormwood, garlic, mask, sticks, became, by losing their ritual meaning, simple things necessary for performance. The dance became a compulsory element in mass political ceremonies with thousands of *călușari* on stages or in stadia, where the aesthetic criteria prevailed.

At the same time, the new economic, social and political conditions constituted an impediment to further practice of the tradition. The ritual rules were not observed for objective reasons: engaged in professional activities – in factories, on construction sites or in agricultural production cooperatives – the dancers could no longer stop work without serious repercussions. The healing of those taken from the *căluș* or the health of the animals was now the doctors' job, as household prosperity, the fruitfulness of the soil and rich crops were provided by new agricultural machinery and the chemical industry. The *călușari* were no longer responsible for protecting the village.

Despite the regime's campaign against mysticism, the *căluș* continued to exist and be an integral part of the spiritual life of many villages in the Danube Plain, although the old magic functions of initiation, fertility and fecundity have been almost totally forgotten.

On the other hand, in some regions the deritualisation of the custom began long ago and was historically and politically justified. During the 19th century "as a general trend in eastern and south-eastern Europe, the cultural elites, looking for symbols of national identity, turned toward folk dance traditions" (Giurchescu 1992). The *căluș*, adapted to suit stage performance, was used as a symbol of national identity in Transylvania, where the custom was chosen to serve the purpose because it symbolised the Latin origin of the Romanians, and their historical and cultural continuity in Romania. The male and organised nature of the game symbolises the determination to fight for recognition, national unity and identity.

REFERENCES

- Alecsandri, Vasile 1850. Horele Românești. – *Zimbrul*. Iași: 16 October.
- Bârlea, Ovidiu 1982. *Eseu despre dansul popular românesc*. București: Cartea Românească.
- Bojinca, Damaschin 1832. *Anticele romanilor*. Tom 1. Buda.
- Braniște, Valeriu 1891. Călușerul jucat în secolul al XVI-lea. – *Transilvania*. Anul XXII, nr. 8: 230–231.
- Bucșan, Andrei 1976. Contribuții la studiul jocurilor Călușerești. – *Revista de etnografie și folclor*. Tom 21, nr. 1: 3–20.
- Burada, Teodor T. 1975 [1915–1922]. *Istoria teatrului în Moldova*. București: Minerva.
- Cantemir, Dimitrie 1986. *Descrierea Moldovei*. București: Minerva.
- Căluș Ritual, The. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. – <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/RL/00090> (accessed November 10, 2010).
- Chardon, Louis 1863. *La Roumanie et les Roumains*. Bucarest.
- Cristea, Stan V. 2008. *Tradiția Călușului în județul Teleorman. De la ritual la spectacol*. Craiova: Aius.
- Dosza, Daniil 1859. *Koronis Ilona*. Pest.
- Elefterescu, Emil 1922. Originea și istoricul jocului călușarilor. – *Șezătoarea*. (Folticeni) An XXX, nr. 12: 296–304.
- Eliade, Mircea 1973. Notes on the Călușari. – *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*. No. 5: 115–122.
- Eliade, Mircea 1991. *Cosmologie și alchimie babiloniană*. Iași: Moldova.
- Eliade, Mircea 1992. *Istoria credințelor și ideilor religioase*. București: Editura științifică.
- Fochi, Adrian 1976. *Datini și eresuri populare la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea. Răspunsurile la chestionarele lui Nicolae Densușianu*. București: Minerva.
- Ghinoiu, Ion 1997. *Obiceiuri populare de peste an. Dicționar*. București: Fundația culturală Română.
- Ghinoiu, Ion 2002a. Călușarii în Panteonul și calendarul popular. – *Călușul tezaur universal*. Slatina: Editura Fundației „Universitatea pentru Toți”.
- Ghinoiu, Ion 2002b. *Sărbători și obiceiuri românești*. București: Elion.
- Ghinoiu, Ion 2003. *Călușul. Istorie și documente*. Slatina: Editura Fundației „Universitatea pentru Toți”.
- Giurchescu, Anca 1974. The Căluș. – *Balkan Arts Traditions*. New York, 25–29.
- Giurchescu, Anca; Sunni Boland 1992. *Romanian Traditional Dance. A Contextual and Structural Approach*. Bucharest: Express.
- Iorga, Nicolae 1936. *Istoria românilor*. Vol. 1. București.
- Ișfănoni, Doina 2002. Statutul însemnelor rituale din costumația Călușarilor. – *Călușul tezaur universal*. Slatina: Editura Fundației „Universitatea pentru Toți”.
- Kligman, Gail 2000. *Călușul. Transformări simbolice în ritualul românesc*. București: Univers.
- Larionescu, Sanda 2002. Călușarul între ritual, ceremonial și spectacol. – *Călușul tezaur universal*. Slatina: Editura Fundației „Universitatea pentru Toți”.
- Liuba, Sofronie 1898. Material folkloristic. – *Tinerimea Română* I. București.
- Marsillac, Ulysse de 1877. *Guide de Voyageur à Bucarest*. Bucarest.
- Odobescu, Alexandru 1908. *Opere Complete*. Vol. II. București: Minerva.
- Ollănescu, Dimitrie C. 1897. Teatrul la români. – *Analele Academiei Române*. Seria II. Tom 18: 12–126.
- Oprișan, Barbu Horia 1969. *Călușarii*. București: Editura pentru Literatură.
- Pop, Mihael 1999. *Obiceiuri tradiționale românești*. București: Univers.
- Pamfile, Teodor 1997. *Sărbătorile la români*. București: Saeculum.
- Rădulescu, Ion Heliade 1843. Jocul Călușarilor. – *Curierul românesc*. Vol. XV, nr. 41: 167–168.
- Rosny, Léon de 1884. *La Patrie des Roumains d'Orient*. Paris: Maisonneuve frères et Leclerc.

- Semuc, Ionuț 2002. Ceata divină a călușului. – *Călușul tezaur universal*. Slatina: Editura Fundației „Universitatea pentru Toți”.
- Sulzer, Franz Joseph 1781. *Geschichte des transalpinischen Daciens, das ist der Walachey, Moldau und Bessarabiens*. 1. Theil, 2. Band. Wien: Rudolph Gräffer.
- Șăineanu, Lazăr 1896. *Studii folklorice*. București: Editura librăriei Socec & Comp.
- Teodorescu, Gheorghe Demetriu 1874. *Încercări critice asupra unor credințe, datine și moravuri ale poporului român*. București.
- Vuia, Romulus 1975. Originea jocului de călușari. – *Studii de etnografie și folclor*. Vol. 1. București: Minerva, 110–154.
- Vulcănescu, Romulus 1985. *Mitologie Română*. București: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România.