

## IDENTITY LANDMARKS OF FOLK CULTURE IN THE VILLAGE OF DUMBRĂVIȚA DE HOLOD, BIHOR COUNTY

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### Abstract

Folk creation is increasingly requested by contemporary culture and knowledge as the source of a value system of striking originality and authenticity meant to create a more comprehensive opening to mankind and the world. Moreover, by virtue of its traditions, folk culture constitutes a permanent source for high culture or other cultural value systems. Faced with currents of thought such as existentialism, psychoanalysis etc., which put to debate concepts and notions dissolving the powers of the ego, destroying them, based on a principle according to which the world in general and the individual world are fatally condemned, through its traditions, folk culture constitutes a permanent life source, with wide, programmatic openings towards mankind and the world. Our work seeks to approach folk culture from the perspective of the triad of the "age of human being," birth, marriage and death.

**Keywords:** traditional village, folk culture, birth, marriage, death, folk creation.

Within current research on folk culture, a special contribution comes from fields such as sociology, especially rural sociology, cultural anthropology and, naturally, ethnography and ethnology, thus showing a clear concern for the integration of folk culture within a theoretical moment and perspective analysis. This is revealed, on one hand, by its multiple conceptual substance, which is still in place, and on the other hand by surprising ways of understanding the world and the evolution of human life in the rural world.

Overlapping or borderline complementary social disciplines give more and more importance to the variables of folk culture, meant to give a generalizing, substantial explanation of the way in which "His Highness the Peasant" pictured his life and surrounding world. These variables have to do with the symbols and rituals of the folk culture, with the village inhabitants' lifestyle, mentalities, traditions and customs, the rituals which compose them, together with wisdom treasured in proverbs, legends and stories, anecdotes and parables. The results of

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these investigations seek to establish the place and role of folk culture within the system of cultural values, since it represents a people's first culture, be it material or spiritual creations.

From another perspective, folk creation is increasingly requested by contemporary culture and knowledge, as the source of a value system of striking originality and authenticity meant to create a more comprehensive opening to mankind and the world. Moreover, by virtue of its traditions, folk culture constitutes a permanent source for high culture or other cultural value systems. Faced with currents of thought such as existentialism, psychoanalysis etc., which put to debate concepts and notions dissolving the powers of the ego, destroying them, based on a principle according to which the world in general and the individual world are fatally condemned, through its traditions, *folk culture* constitutes a permanent life source, with wide, programmatic openings towards mankind, society and nature. From this point of view, the state of crisis that contemporary society is going through may also be the result of insufficient knowledge and use of traditions in order to familiarize the young generation with such creations. We believe that we are rather witnessing, as Vasile Vetîşanu has stated, a crisis of wisdom materialized by the deviation of current research from the knowledge of the role of the original factors, such as they appear structured in the material and spiritual universe of folk culture, created by the people, and the sporadic isolation of their creation from the major concerns of contemporary culture.<sup>1</sup>

The reasoning goes further, as there are voices which consider that folk creation comprises no system of thought, only "rudiments of thought" or "beginnings of thinking." As such, folk culture was considered but a step, and not yet the decisive one, towards a systemic thinking, guided by appropriate concepts and syllogisms. We believe that this line of thought was also followed by philosopher Lucian Blaga, who engaged in a discourse in terms of the relationship *between minor culture–major culture*. For Blaga, the major culture is a typical product of the city, it rises on the basis of the minor culture and seems to be a distillation, a decantation of it. The two cultures have a parallel existence, in terms of value they are on the same level, therefore one did not determine the other.<sup>2</sup> In reality, we believe that the aim is only to evaluate the foundation of folk culture in strict connection with the values of individual creation, which would contribute to the elaboration of a world and life vision. As such, in this approach, folk culture would hold only a historical priority, constituting a necessary premise for any synthesis elaboration. It must be said that the invaluable folk culture, as opposed to individual culture, was based on a steady life experience of the community verified by the series of generations, and therefore not subject to fluctuations and passing states.

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<sup>1</sup> Vasile Vetîşanu, *Deschideri filosofice în cultura tradițională* (Bucureşti: Editura Eminescu, 1989), 7–8.

<sup>2</sup> Lucian Blaga, *Opere*, vol. 9 *Trilogia culturii*, ed. Dorli Blaga (Bucureşti: Editura Minerva, 1985), 335–349.

The preservation of the organicity and originality of folk culture was due to a complex of factors, including the human factor, strongly marked by a relationship with the world of nature, which ensured “a propensity towards the primary elements of the universe.”<sup>3</sup> In this universe of folk culture there are no ruptures between man and the cosmic world, nor distances, here we witness “a hora of communions joined by cosmic nature, society, the animal and plant world, the transcendent and of course the individual, by interrupting or ironing out contradictions, deceptions, claims.”<sup>4</sup> Here things have their order, not a casual one but a causal one, because of necessity, a fact due, according to Vasile Băncilă, “to the spiritual fullness of reality, the presence of providential sense in things, therefore the world we live in is not a chaos, but a purposeful house.”<sup>5</sup> The spontaneous dialectic in which the cosmic order of things is conceived in folk culture implies the existence of a continuous determination, a determination that sanctions a conservative image, in the sense that existence is unaware of disintegration, nothingness, and knows only its own laws of development. This note of originality and universality of folk conception and creation is given by the fact that it does not start from a consecrated model from which to draw inspiration, be it spiritual or material creations. In its evolution, it has consolidated the original elements, broadening the system of reference to the world in general, establishing complementary relations with the other fields, from ethnography and ethnology, to sociology and anthropology, to philosophy and metaphysics.

According to many contemporary researchers in the field, the modern discovery of the traditions of folk culture does not mean at all the return to the past, or a simple romantic or pastist escape, but an effort of synthesis, of inscribing the values created in the past into a new way of thinking about the world. For this reason, the real meaning of the connection with tradition is not reduced to the inventory of its elements, but requires finding an identity in the way of thinking and interpreting the world.<sup>6</sup>

In our view, one of the many issues concerning the scientific research of the social reality in general, of the ethnological one in particular, represents the Gordian knot – *the quality of the researcher and the objectivity of his investigation*. According to certain specialists in methodological issues, deciphering the ethnological reality should be exclusively the prerogative of the specialized researcher.<sup>7</sup> We agree with such a healthy direction, but with the amendment that it should not turn into an “axiological elitism,” which no longer takes into account the specificity of the subject of socio – human knowledge, given that the subject of knowledge can be constituted not only by professional researchers but also by the

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<sup>3</sup> Blaga, *Opere*, 9:10.

<sup>4</sup> Vasile Băncilă, *Duhul sărbătorii* (București: Editura Anastasia, 1996), 67.

<sup>5</sup> Băncilă, *Duhul sărbătorii*, 69.

<sup>6</sup> Vetișanu, *Deschideri filosofice*, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Henri H. Stahl, *Eseuri critice* (București: Editura Minerva, 1983), 104–105.

“human factor” (often its leaders) involved in the existential action. Also, the specialized literature points out several epistemological positions regarding the researcher’s situation. Thus, we find researchers in the position of integral participant, participant as observer, observer as participant.<sup>8</sup>

When it comes to the research of folk culture, there cannot be an external object that the researcher avoids or reflects indifferently. In H. H. Stahl’s opinion, the knowledge of this type of culture cannot be attained only by the city – dwellers who, alone, possess the “methodology of scientific research” and, wandering through the villages, are the only ones who can provide reliable data about it.<sup>9</sup> The deliberate exclusion of the others from investigating folk culture seems to us a eulogy to “vulgar sociology.” A certain similarity can definitely be established between his position and K. Mannheim’s point of view, according to which “only intellectuals freed from any group interests can and are able to provide authentic knowledge about socio – human life.” However, from here to the point of smearing Lucian Blaga, Mircea Eliade, Constantin Noica, Romulus Vulcănescu etc. by subjecting them to a nihilistic criticism,<sup>10</sup> is a true offense to Romanian culture which, through these literati, philosophers, breathed an air of freshness, of metaphysics, and registered a true “hygiene” in all its members.

Without considering this discussion concluded, we do not wish to reach situations that give the feeling of familiarity with the phenomena and facts of folk culture without providing their systemic knowledge as well, or, as Hegel put it very plastically, “not everything that is familiar is also known.”

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An ethnological and/or ethnographic approach to the wonderful world of the village, to its perennial values, takes into consideration first of all the huge depository, the *silence witnesses* of history which have remained *captives of orality*, those living fossils mentioned by Mircea Eliade who continue to stand, par excellence, for a live reality. Our ethnographic research seeks to recreate that discreet and silent world, starting from the realities recorded by the documents of the time, as well as from those lasting in the memory of the contemporary villagers. We wish to render, through careful examination, the most precious features of this rural world, its simplicity, wisdom and spirit, i.e. that hidden palmistry behind which one hears the doina, the opener of a very particular horizon, the “plai,” in other words that high, rhythmic and indefinite horizon made of hills and valleys.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Achim Mihu, *Meandrele adevărului* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia, 1983), 208.

<sup>9</sup> Stahl, *Eseuri critice*, 106.

<sup>10</sup> Claude Karnoouh, *România. Tipologie și mentalități* (București: Editura Humanitas, 1990), 150–200; Stahl, *Eseuri critice*, 100, 202–203, 273, 133.

<sup>11</sup> Blaga, *Opere*, 9:191.

We often forget the connection between music and a certain landscape, i.e. between a spatial horizon and the spiritual accents that “the horizon acquires from human destiny, a destiny made up of a certain spirit and a certain blood, of certain roads, of certain sufferings,”<sup>12</sup> in favour of an anthropological approach, of a historical documentation which seeks to identify methods by which to approach the discreet masses in writing. The relationship between the spatial horizon and the spiritual accents it acquires from human destiny is revealing for these *captives of orality*<sup>13</sup> who keep seeking to unravel both the land and the spirit, turning them into fields of the spiritual horizon of the Romanian village.

Although the world in which ethnography forged its concepts and was established as a science is about to be dismantled and to disappear, ethnographic research is more active than ever, judging by the field investigations undertaken and the list of publications and journals dedicated to it. Reaching its final stretch, the rural reality of the traditional village seems to be even more subjected to research, as in its golden days, ethnography, among others, seeking to grasp its last “remains” which bear the mark of tradition.

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Our ethnographic research conducted in the village of Dumbrăvița bears the imprint of classic investigations, as it has taken into account realities of the material and spiritual culture of the place present in the collective mind, that is in the memories of those interviewed. In our research of this world full of “mystery” we have, thus, focused on information received from the village elders, who have converted longing, sorrow and weariness into songs, doinas, ballads, lamentations and rhythmic shouts, such as: “Pe unde umblă doru/Nu poți ara cu plugu/Că s-agață plugu-n dor/Trag boii dă să omor./Pe unde umblă jalea/Nu poți trage cu grapa/Că s-agață grapa-n jale/Trag săraci vacile mele.”<sup>14</sup> In this hearth of Dumbrăvița village, people have always been hospitable to their visitors, to both Romanians and Hungarians alike, unsurpassed in household crafts (breadmaking, woodworking, blacksmithing, spinning, weaving, sewing, a.s.o.), in working the land, as well as in handling the words. This is the cradle of the string of spiritual values (such as legends, songs, anecdotes, riddles as well as laments) were born.

<sup>12</sup> Blaga, *Opere*, 9:191.

<sup>13</sup> Barbu Ștefănescu, “A da glas tăcerilor,” în *Satul bihorean*, ed. Aurel Chiriac, Ioan Godea and Mircea Bradu (Oradea: Editura Arca, Editura Universității din Oradea, 2010), 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Cântece din popor*, Culegere de Ion Pillat. Colecția literară *Cartea Vieții* (București: Editura Fundației culturale Principele Carol, 1929), 41. Roughly translated as: “Where the longing goes/One can’t plough with plows/As plows cling to longing/And oxen die pulling./Where the longing goes/One can’t draw harrows/As harrows cling to sorrow/So cows can’t pull the harrow.”

According to the poet, “Aici orice gând e mai încet/și inima-ți zvâcnește mai rar,/ ...Aici se vindecă setea de mântuire/și dacă ți-ai sângerat picioarele/te așezi pe un podmol de lut /.”<sup>15</sup>

Through its geographical position, the village of Dumbrăvița gives even nowadays passers-by passionate about beauty and tradition the opportunity to encounter authentic material and spiritual structures, still anchored in the past. Although Dumbrăvița is not located near a large city, urban influences are more than clear in the villagers’ environment, standard of living, behaviour etc. However, there are still a few traces of the archaic left in the village. At present, as before, defying modernity, one may still see the *small old mother* heading for the church with the holy prosphora wrapped in a towel she has once woven on a loom.

These are the identity aspects of material and spiritual life that we wish to emphasize, elements hidden or ignored by contemporaries. Places bearing names which spring from the depths of history such as: Ciutărie, Dealul Lii, Trapi, Luncă, Dealul Coșului, Dealul Onii, Valea Hodișelului, Câmpul Vidicana, Valea Holodului, Valea Popii, Râtul Curtului, Clejie etc., guard the surroundings of Dumbrăvița village, their names reminding of long – gone times, places and people who used to spend most of their time around here. Family names such as: Buză, Podilă, Popa, Pantea, Andor, Știubea, Toma, nicknames like Pațocu, Moga, Petrea Loabi, Loaba, Copilu, Puica, Cioloș, as well as first names such as Petre, Ioane, Mărie, Floare, Ană, Vasile become identity landmarks for the village of Dumbrăvița, which still draws on the sources of the past.<sup>16</sup>

### **1. The homestead and the dwelling house, the traditional family’s stronghold**

The rustic homestead, considered as an ensemble composed of the dwelling house, the stable for livestock, the shed, the barn and the outhouses (“cuptoriștea,” i.e. the summer kitchen, the pigsty and chicken shack, the corn shed, the well and sometimes the “găbănaș”—the granary), as well as the fences, represents the micro – universe that has implanted in us the taste for order and beauty, for everything that is just and uplifting, for dignity and humanity, and the love for the ancestral land. The size of the buildings, their position in space are not accidental. The shape, the plan and the size of the courtyard, as Romulus Vuia put it, are the economic expression of the region.<sup>17</sup> Through all its architectural and functional utilities, the homestead was in agreement with the specific living conditions both

<sup>15</sup> Lucian Blaga, *Poezii* (București: Editura Minerva, 1986), 68, i.e. “Any thought slows up here/just like the heart beats,/... Thirst for salvation gets quenched here/and if one’s feet are bleeding/one sits down on a mound of clay.”

<sup>16</sup> Ana Buza, 81 years old, village of Dumbrăvița.

<sup>17</sup> Romulus Vuia, *Satul românesc din Transilvania și din Banat* (București, 1937), 27.

geographically and economically, so that the residents' occupations could be best carried out in an adequate space. As for the spatial layout of the constructions within the living hearth, it can be said that the house is always facing the village street, therefore in front, with the stable behind it marking out the courtyard from the vegetable garden.

The homestead mirrored the economic state of each villager, their spirit of organization and economising, so its construction was a primary concern, perhaps often on the same level as the need for food and clothing. Over time and according to the economic power and taste of their owners, there were several types of homesteads: the open homestead in the past centuries, the homestead with a courtyard and an area and the homestead with a closed courtyard, but with an area as well.<sup>18</sup> We could say that depending on the financial situation of the people, the above-mentioned component elements of the traditional homestead are joined by others. For the inhabitants of Dumbrăvița village, the traditional construction is the one-level homestead, be it the dwelling house or the stable ("iștalău"). Today there are one-storey houses or even houses with an attic, which increase the comfort of the villagers' habitat.

Among the buildings of the homestead, the dwelling house represents its vital center, the space most marked by the human presence, the one most loaded with functionalities and meanings, some of them coming from time immemorial. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the houses in the village of Dumbrăvița were built of beech or sessile oak wood. The building of the house began with the choice of its location and continued with the plan. Depending on the wooden material, the stones were fixed – the foundation on which the thick feet (thick wooden beams) and the wall beams were to be placed, up to the girth.

The feet of the house were made of sessile oak wood, in which was carved the place for the beams, which were then attached to the end girth. The thick beams were provided with hollows for the insertion of beech or sessile oak beams. If a beam was less sturdy, it was not hollowed, but it was replaced by sticks to make room for the beams. The resulting walls were glued together with clay mixed with horse dung and *chaff*. It was finished and whitewashed with lime in which *mnerăieli* (blue pigment) was added. The attic was sheathed with planks ("mărjinari," "lătunoi"), plastered over with clay mixed with sand. It must be said that the wealthier villagers made their house of "voiață," unburnt sun-dried clay fashioned in parallelepiped shapes. The house was covered with straw, shingles or "cîripă" (tiles). The bottoms, "cioncuri," the sides in the attic, were made of braided twigs ("îngrădeli") that were glued with clay. The traditional house had a well-beaten clay hearth, "murluită" (finished) with "modrojală" (thinner clay used for finishing the hearth).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Ioan Godea, *Caracteristici ale culturii populare din Bihor* (București: Editura Sport-Turism, 1977), 123.

<sup>19</sup> Maria Podilă, 79 years old, Dumbrăvița.

The house consisted of a “târnaț,” a stoop bordered by planks, which was accessed from the outside on stone steps or planks through a small gate made of wooden planks or slats (*roșteiu*) that provided the entrance to the porch. This constituted the access space to the two rooms placed on either side of it. The stoop was often closed at the bottom, where it usually had a bed in which the householder slept for more than half a year. At the other end of the stoop there was a large wooden barn for cereals. As for the rooms, one faced the street, being the large, guest room, and the other faced the yard, the family living room. There were no mythical magical practices for the construction of the house known in the village, to drive away evil spirits from its location. In terms of proportions, the traditional house in Dumbrăvița had a gable roof and it was high enough to allow the rapid drainage of precipitations, especially snow.

The arrangement of the interior of the house differs from one room to another. The living room is the place where all the daily activities were carried out from morning to evening. Here are the beds, on both sides of the room, made of simple unadorned wood. Next to them, “lavița” (the tall bench with backrest), embellished by carving or fretwork, usually with solar symbols. Between the beds, under the window, was the heavily ornamented dowry chest made by the craftsmen from Budureasa and bought from the Beiuș (Binșului) fair. Framed by the benches besides the beds and the dowry chest, there was a table with a chest for bread storage with ornate walls and covered with a top, usually made of a single piece of wood. Behind the entrance door there was the cupboard adorned with solar motifs, the tree of life and other geometric ornaments bearing names such as: the lost path, the endless path etc. Above the cupboard there were the wall mounted plate shelves with spoon holders on display. Above, hanging from the beam there was the pole on which hung beautifully adorned “felegi” (loom – woven hand towels) with decorations, tablecloths and pillowcases.

“Tinda” was the passage room that connected the two rooms. It contained the cooking stove, “candalău,” a table, the bench and the cupboard. The large front room usually reproduces the same type of furniture and interior organization, but more strongly decorated and neat, with a strong smell of fresh mud plaster (“murluială”). Mounted on its walls there were icons and plates with beautifully ornamented loom woven towels and the lamp attached to the beam. In this room there was usually no stove (“cândălău”), and the beds were covered with pillows with loom woven cases with decorative motifs in beautiful colors. The interior of the traditional dwellings in the village of Dumbrăvița has evolved by expanding the living space, by enriching the pieces of furniture and by their artistic execution, by organizing and combining decorative elements, textiles, ceramics, glass painting, household objects etc. – keeping over time the same unity of conception specific to the traditional Romanian dwelling. This unity of interior organization denotes, as

stated by the researcher Tancred Bănățeanu, “the same conditions of historical development, a similar way of life, the same condition of life and thought, due to ethnic unity.”<sup>20</sup>

In the courtyard (“ocol”) there was the shed sheltering the bread oven which could bake 12 loaves of bread. Also here was the stable for animals (“iștalău”), the chicken coops and pigsty made of wooden boards. There was no corn crib or corn loft, as corn was stored in the attic of the house.

## 2. The folk costume – the guarantee of an identity survival

The folk costume is an important component of our national identity. The area on which we have focused our research has preserved its traditional costume unaltered until today, developed on the same Thracian–Illyrian substrate, within the patterns characteristic of the Dacian cultural background. The archaeological investigations carried out in this space have brought to light fascinating evidence of the practice of spinning, weaving, sewing for the manufacture of hemp, linen or wool clothing (whorls for the spinning wheel, clay or stone weights for the vertical weaving loom etc.).

While researching the costume in the village of Dumbrăvița we have found that it is the witness of certain forms of life, of a culture and civilization, absorbing the gestures and thoughts of the people who used it. In the same vein, the costume appears as a component of communication, as a language extended in space and time, thus offering individuality to the members of the rural community. Not infrequently in the Beiuș fair, people knew each other’s place of origin according to the individual elements of their costume, so there was no need to start a conversation with someone to ask where they were from as clothes revealed everything. Thus, we could say that “clothing symbolism unites the human beings on the one hand with the cosmos and on the other with the community they belong to.”<sup>21</sup> The costume of the inhabitants of Dumbrăvița reveals not only the preservation of the practical, utilitarian and aesthetic functions of the costume pieces, but also the functions related to the social, economic, age, occupation and ritual condition. As such, the costume has constantly responded to human being’s needs of the time and function in various poses of its life: at work, on holidays, at funerals or weddings, always according to tradition. Wearing the traditional costume meant observing the elders’ order, the place, the community, respect for tradition, for the ancestors. No one was above tradition!

The folk costume of the villagers of Dumbrăvița takes into account on the one hand the composition of the *men’s costume* and on the other hand the *women’s*

<sup>20</sup> Tancred Bănățeanu, *Arta populară bucovineană* (Suceava: Centrul de îndrumare a creației populare și a mișcării artistice de masă al județului Suceava, 1975), 86.

<sup>21</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Traité d’histoire des religions* (Paris: Éditions Payot, 1970), 378.

*costume*. The traditional pieces of the men's costume from Dumbrăvița were: in winter – on their feet they wore “opinci” (traditional peasant moccasins) with wool stockings and later boots with a stiff shaft, “gaci” – wide and long canvas trousers. On their head they wore a black lambskin cap (“cujmă”) in winter and a straw hat in summer. They wore simple white shirts made of loom woven hemp cloth and later of “misir” (cotton). Over their shirts they wore a “laibăr,” a sheepskin vest, on summer days, and on cool and frosty days the suman (knee – length peasant coat made of beautifully adorned thick cloth. Within the folk costume, a special and prestigious piece was the “cojoc” (sheepskin coat), which used to be bought from the Beiuș fair or made to order by those with good financial condition.<sup>22</sup>

Women's costume, the other component of the folk costume, consisted of a shirt made of hemp cloth or cotton (“spătoi”), embroidered with seams on the chest, collar and sleeves, long pleated skirts with strings on the top and over them an apron of different colors and pleated as well. On their heads they wore cloths, flowered scarves on a white or yellow, red, pink – green or black background, depending on their age. On their feet they wore “opinci” with woolen stockings and later shoes and even boots, those who could afford them. The raw material used to make the folk costume was loom woven hemp cloth and wool, alongside sheep/lamb skin is added.<sup>23</sup> Both women's and men's costumes stand out through the same elegance due to the contrast between the two background colors: black and white.

### **3. The spiritual universe of Dumbrăvița village, a laboratory of identity continuity**

In all rural communities, as well as in the village we have researched, it is attested that people have sought on their own answers and practical solutions in their relationships with nature and the cosmos. The rural human beings found, each time, means of fighting against the vicissitudes of holy nature, claiming their right to a balance with its forces, at least formally, seeking that vital tone that humans need, whenever and wherever they may be. The spiritual universe that emerges as a result of our research in the village of Dumbrăvița refers to the calendar customs (those over the year, linked or not to fixed dates), to the customs of the family cycle (birth, marriage, death) and to some elements of magic and folk medicine, all of them taking place in a special order as only the peasants liked to do them. There are two terms used by specialists—*ceremony* and *rite*—terms that will occur several times throughout our work. Mihai Pop differentiates between these terms, noting that: “...the *ceremony* is a part of the custom, constituted in an organized sequence of solemn, ingrained acts, with primordial conditions of good manners,”

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<sup>22</sup> Maria Podilă, 79 years old, Dumbrăvița.

<sup>23</sup> Maria Podilă, 79 years old, Dumbrăvița.

and “*the rite* is that element of the custom in which mythological representations step in, therefore placing it at the level of the sacred by virtue of the ancient beliefs of the folkloric environments.”<sup>24</sup>

One may say that in the village of Dumbrăvița the local cultural – artistic heritage specific to the Romanian population has been preserved, as well as the archaic character of the folk language that preserves old phoneticisms and words of Latin and Slavic origin, disappeared in other regions and frequent here in their usual use, as in almost all of Bihor county. Traian Mîrza’s remark cannot be ignored: “...if an indication of the very ancient nature of certain spoken languages is their rich musical intonation, it is appropriate to note that in the folk language of Bihor this intonation is so obvious that the people of Bihor are said to sing when they speak.”<sup>25</sup>

Folklore has grouped the calendar customs into four cycles which correspond to the four seasons: spring, summer, autumn and winter customs. The village, states ethnologist Mihai Pop, “is the keeper of ancient forms of culture and civilization, among which the ingrained customs, that encode deep meanings on human being’s relations with the surrounding world, on interhuman relationships, on the normal course of social life and on the solutions that, in an evolution that is often multimillennia, it has found to make them return to normal when the order of the world was, for one reason or another, corrupted.”<sup>26</sup>

The village of Dumbrăvița, with all its profound socio – economic mutations that took place over time, did not compromise on these customs and habits. Thus, with all the influence of the city, whichever it may be, it can be said that the village of Dumbrăvița relates to traditions through the local people, through the string of traditions, still alive, stored in the collective mind. The crucial moments in people’s life dominated by the need to integrate into this world (the birth), to integrate the newlyweds into a new household (the wedding) and the passing into the afterlife of eternity, are still rendered today with accuracy and depth by those interviewed by us. In the same vein, we reiterated the feasts and calendar customs with fixed and movable dates, then those related to the sacred time of the Birth of Our Savior Jesus Christ marked by carols and wishes and, of course, the transition from the old year to the New Year, a framework of renewal of hopes and fulfillments on all levels.

In the following we will focus on the attitudinal framework of Dumbrăvița villagers towards the triad *of the age of man*: birth, marriage and death.

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<sup>24</sup> Mihai Pop, *Obiceiuri tradiționale românești* (București: Institutul de Cercetări Etnografice și Dialectologice, 1976), 25.

<sup>25</sup> Traian Mîrza, *Folclor muzical din Bihor* (București: Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor, 1974), 10.

<sup>26</sup> Pop, *Obiceiuri tradiționale românești*, 36.

#### 4. Rules of life and death in the world of Dumbrăvița village

In the following, we aim to address the issue of the beliefs, customs and magical practices related to the great events of *the human lifespan*, namely birth, marriage and death. The three moments form an “existential cycle” which concerns every event of the human saga,<sup>27</sup> and which, through a reflection on the “existence of common man,” comes down to the opposition between life and death, in other words, to the biological thresholds of birth at the coming into existence, and death at entering the post – existence.<sup>28</sup>

Ethnologist Ion Ghinoiu drew attention to the fact that this reasoning lacks the “conception” – the biological stage for coming into pre – existence. As such, the three dimensions, pre – existence, existence, and post – existence, marked by as many phenomena of biological nature, conception, birth and death, form the “whole” which concerns any event in human life.<sup>29</sup>

Ethnographers and folklorists who researched the mythical – magical rites and practices of passage, present in the rural universe, as well as sociologists, economists and, last but not least, geographers and historians, have focused on the research of the triptych of human life, with remarkable results. Such inter – and multidisciplinary investigations created bridges between third – party socio – human disciplines, often leading to laborious research, which revealed facts and events hidden under the dust of history, furthermore, to the emergence of frontier disciplines. Many questions were also definitely raised and specialists were puzzled by a series of existential sequences of the rural man, sequences that remain “openings” for younger researchers.

In recent years, the traditional Romanian society in general, and the one in the village of Dumbrăvița, in particular, have undergone an increasingly visible desacralization process, by passing from the sacred to the profane, a process generated mainly by a void of meanings felt at the level of dogma and faith, but especially at the level of ritual. A similar process of degradation impacted the institutions that naturally constituted the resistance structure of the community, regulating intra – community tensions through certain levers of tradition.

According to folk beliefs, the cycle of man’s life is inscribed in a cosmic coordinate marked at the birth of the child by the appearance of a star which shines on the celestial vault, accompanying him throughout his life, and falls at his death announcing the interruption of the thread of life woven at birth by the Fates.

*Birth* represents the passage of the individual from the *intrauterine world* to the *extrauterine* one, from the *geomorphic* world to the *anthropomorphic* one. The mediator of this transition was *the midwife*, a decisive character in the life cycle

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<sup>27</sup> Ion Ghinoiu, *Lumea de aici, lumea de dincolo* (București: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 1999), 5–6.

<sup>28</sup> Ghinoiu, *Lumea de aici*, 5–6.

<sup>29</sup> Ghinoiu, *Lumea de aici*, 5–6.

customs. She was believed to be the representative of the spirits of the paternal line ancestors, and together with her husband, “the old man,” performs ceremonial and ritual functions at decisive moments of human existence: the coming of the soul from pre – existence (the birth) and its departure into post – existence (death).<sup>30</sup>

The birth habits expressed the parents’ desire to have healthy, diligent, beautiful, talented offspring, as well as the fear of the birth of abnormal children, with different signs or with disabilities, as we would say today.

The child’s birth is an auspicious sign, both for the family and for the community, provided that it is not a child out of wedlock. The birth of illegitimate children profoundly disturbed human relationships, having a negative influence on the newborn, even at older ages. These births break the traditional pattern, generating a chain of negative consequences: they artificially increase the number of unfulfilled families on the one hand and replace the patrilineal system, with everything pertaining to it (inheritance, anthroponomastics etc.), with the matrilineal one.<sup>31</sup>

Once the family was founded, it wanted descendants to inherit its wealth, its possessions and, especially, to carry on the family name, lest it should vanish, “say that the barren wife is like the prongless rake.”<sup>32</sup> “If you have no offspring, there is no one to help you at an old age, and your kin dies. It’s a really good thing for the wife to have a child (especially a son) because he carries on the family name, but if you have a daughter, when the fortune ends, you are bound for hell.”<sup>33</sup> Those who were late in “having children” often caused problems, not only within their family, but also within the community, they were considered “barren women,” and men were to “leave them alone.” “Those who did not have children were rare and their in – laws glared at them, especially because they wanted progenies. There were cases when they broke up because of this.”<sup>34</sup>

That is why the pregnant women were surrounded with a lot of love and care, both by their families and by the other villagers. Numerous superstitions circulated in the life of the community in connection with the pregnancy period. Thus, it was said that pregnant women were not to hide their pregnancy as it was thought that if they did so, their children would be born mute and deaf. They were considered *unclean*, and as a result a series of prohibitions were imposed on them: they were not allowed to knead bread, to make pickles, to kneel in church, because their babies wouldn’t be born normal; they were not allowed to carry fruit in their pockets because their children’s faces would bear signs in the shape of those fruits; they were forbidden to look at people with certain defects forgetting that they were pregnant (as the newborns would have the same defects); if they desired

<sup>30</sup> Ghinoiu, *Lumea de aici*, 152.

<sup>31</sup> Ghinoiu, *Lumea de aici*, 150.

<sup>32</sup> Maria Podilă, 79 years old, Dumbrăvița.

<sup>33</sup> Petru Nicorici, 92 years old, Dumbrăvița.

<sup>34</sup> Ana Buza, 81 years old, Dumbrăvița.

something, they had to receive it, otherwise they would miscarry; they were forbidden to take anything from anyone (to steal) lest their children should get marks on their heads; they weren't to wonder at any oddity, for the children would resemble them; they were forbidden to kick the dog or the cat as hair would grow on their children's feet, as well as eat the chicken skin. Pregnant women were forbidden to eat fish, lest their children should be mute, to look at the fire in the stove or oven, lest their children should be mute or with yellow spots on their faces, to consume alcoholic beverages, lest their offspring should become drunkards. They were to always carry incense and wheat to be protected from the spells, and wheat so that their children may be as healthy as the grain of wheat<sup>35</sup>

*Marriage* follows this triptych of life and marks the detachment of two young people, a young man and a young woman, from two families to found a new family. This detachment, passage, occurs through a specific ceremony called *the wedding ceremony*. "The rites that compose it, the individual and group actions, the behaviors, are meant, according to ancient beliefs and practices, to protect the young couple from any evil, ensuring their fertility, luck, manna in the fields and in animals, but, at the same time, to strengthen, to solidify the community in its entirety."<sup>36</sup>

In the past, young people met on different occasions: at sewing bees, at weddings, at corvées, while working the land, at the "hid'ed'i" (violin events), while visiting relatives, during fairs in Beiuş. Nowadays they meet at school, at work, at parties, on visits to relatives and friends, in clubs and, more recently, through social media or dating ads in various magazines. Traditionally, the age at which girls got married used to be between 15 and 16, and for boys between 19 and 22, but especially "after the youth served in the army." "Match" was sought in a marriage, that is, the couples were chosen taking into account their wealth: "It is rare for a poor girl to get married to a rich young man or the other way around."<sup>37</sup>

Seen from one folkloric area to another, throughout the Romanian territory, the wedding ceremony in the world of the traditional village presents quite surprising similarities. Regardless of the area, the wedding has a double character. On the one hand, in terms of overall structure, function and meanings, it blends into the general Romanian ceremony, and on the other hand, the wedding highlights particularities that give it a specific profile in the context of this ceremony.

The above can be illustrated with the wedding customs in the village of Dumbrăviţa, where the three stages specific to the rites of passage are covered, namely *the separation*, *the actual passage* and *the integration into the new state*. The most important sequences of the preparatory stage of *separation* are: the young

<sup>35</sup> Maria Podilă, 79 years old, Dumbrăviţa.

<sup>36</sup> Ion Cuceu *et al.*, *Ritualurile de nuntă în Transilvania* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Fundaţiei pentru Studii Europene, 2005), III.

<sup>37</sup> Petru Nicorici, 92 years old, Dumbrăviţa.

people's meeting, the courting, "the hand giving," the invitation to the wedding, the farewell party, the decoration of the flag.

The second stage, *the wedding*, as a crucial moment in a person's life, is a complex ritual manifestation. "The wedding is the birth certificate of a social cell. It is the act through which the young men and women pass into a new social status, into the state of homemakers, and it lays the foundations of a new family."<sup>38</sup>

Through the richness of folkloric moments and ethnographic elements, the wedding is the occasion of the most important folk event known in the Romanian village, an event attended by the entire community, as well as by relatives and friends from other localities. With all its ceremonial, *the wedding* is a show which brings on stage different characters with a whole range of states and feelings. "These artistic manifestations include a musical repertoire (vocal and instrumental melodies), a literary repertoire (congratulations, wishes, shouts) and a choreographic one (flag dance, bridal dance, disguise dance)."<sup>39</sup>

As the "eternity of the sacred in profane corporeality," as Mircea Eliade called it, *death*, as the "first mystery," acutely poses a series of philosophical, sociological, ethnological, psychological, metaphysical questions related to transcendence and the meaning of the finality of the human struggle. Hence, and for this reason, philosophers, as well as sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, but especially ethnologists, have focused on this moment in the triptych of life.

Among the Romanian ethnologists, a special figure is, in our view, ethnologist Ion Ghinoiu, who, in his work *Lumea de aici, lumea de dincolo [The World Here, the World Beyond]*, engages an ontological – epistemic dialogue on the pre – existence, existence, and post – existence of humans, a dialogue that goes far beyond the frameworks of empiricism, being somewhere between explanation and metaphysics. Thus, on the one hand, an explanatory naturalistic model, characteristic of "hard sciences," is highlighted, and on the other hand, there is a comprehensive – speculative model specific only to socio – human disciplines. Certainly, we do not intend to analyze these interpretive models, but we have mentioned them as a progress in the approach made by ethnology, from description, which implies the unconditional acceptance of reality, as it appears, to Wittgensteinian description through causes and reasons, where "to describe," according to Wittgenstein, means to gather objective facts which allow the explanation of the present through the past. "Scientific knowledge is the knowledge of what precedes, it seeks to identify a cause necessarily prior to the studied phenomenon, which thus becomes an explained phenomenon."<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Stelian Vasilescu, *Nunta în Bihor* (Oradea: Casa creației populare a județului Bihor, 1970), 17.

<sup>39</sup> Ion Bradu, *Din folclorul obiceiurilor bihorene* (Oradea: Casa creației populare a județului Bihor, 1970), 57.

<sup>40</sup> François Laplantine, *Descrierea etnografică*, trans. Elisabeta Stănculescu and Gina Grosu (Iași: Editura Polirom, 2000), 125.

Beyond the ethnologists' and/or historians,' sociologists' speculative – philosophical interpretations, death remains an intensely lived and “unrevealed” reality, in front of which even the peasant has not remained passive, but asked himself explanatory problems each time. Obviously, the world of his imagination is not so rich, it does not spring from Kant's or Heidegger's philosophy, but from the “holy need,” the school which formed his spirit, humble but full of faith, creation and ingenuity. Among these great existential problems, which marked his life or, more over, generated tragedies, some even unparalleled ones, death was also on his mind. In the course of his life, he tried to provide an explanation for the tragic phenomenon of human ontogenesis.

Among the issues subject to the investigation of death in the village of Dumbrăvița there were those related to the signs of death, the preparation of the traveler for the road, the wailing in the family or with paid mourners, the vigil and the vigil games, the coffin (“copârșeu”), the grave digging, the cross, the feast and memorial meal, the mourning, the “parastas” (memorial service), the soul, the customs, etc.

From the answers received from our informants, we believe that there is a *deciphering of subjectivity through intuition and empathy*. Individual and group actions are not explained in terms of causes, but by comprehensive access to the inner subjective springs of their experiences. Far from looking kindly at it, this is the end of life, against which we are all helpless. When the peasant is asked what death is, they often avoid the answer because they experience its results, but then he answers the question about the signs of death: the fact that a hen crows like a rooster, that the plaster and lime come off the wall, the howl of dogs or the roar of animals, the loss of teeth in dreams, etc. Surely, we have also encountered thoughts that lead us to a philosophy, even an empiricist one – “that death is when your steam ends” or “when you close your eyes and yield up your spirit, not any way, but in the hands of Our Lord.” Then you can conclude that death is when the Almighty wants to take you away.”<sup>41</sup>

A first layer of beliefs in the conception of the people of Dumbrăvița about death refers to the signs by which death is foretold. These are: the owl cry, the falling star in the sky, dog howls, bad dreams. An informant told us: “One night before my dad died, I dreamed of a large and black sow that crossed a murky water and did not stop until it reached our house. That evening dad passed away.” The murky water in the dream symbolizes disease, and the black sow, death.<sup>42</sup>

The premonition of death is marked by several signs: the dying person craves for a certain dish, wants to be placed in a certain position, makes his will, keeps touching his face. The moribond's last wishes must be observed strictly by his descendants. Several practices are used to alleviate the dying person's torments: the

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<sup>41</sup> Maria Podilă, 79 years old, Dumbrăvița.

<sup>42</sup> Ana Buza, 81 years old, Dumbrăvița.

priest is called to perform the Viaticum and pray for him. When the dying man is in great pain, seven widowed women fast with a single meal, pray for him, and the priest performs the service of separating the soul from the body, and when it happens, a candle is lit.<sup>43</sup>

In ontogenesis, especially in adulthood and old age, people come to realize the drama resulting from the fact that many actions and even many consequences of social deeds can be postponed, but *individual death* cannot be suppressed. It is an indicator of the human being's frailty, and more than that. Death appears to us as the most frightening of evils, for humans it is the insurmountable physical limit, and on the psychic and spiritual level it provides us with the absolute criterion of evaluating man's frailty, the precariousness of his cosmic status.<sup>44</sup> Death is the supreme failure, the top of man's frailties, the "triumphal agony"<sup>45</sup> in Cioran's view, but which only makes sense in people who have loved life passionately.<sup>46</sup> According to Lucian Blaga, the philosopher from Lancrăm, death appears to us as "the frightening and ineluctable mystery of life."

Through our approach we sought to render the most precious features of the rural universe, its simplicity, wisdom and spirit, that is, its very particular, miraculous bearer of mystery and meditative purifier horizon.

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<sup>43</sup> Ana Buza, 81 years old, Dumbrăvița.

<sup>44</sup> Ecaterina Morar, *Fragilitatea umană și gândirea antropologică* (București: Editura ALL Educațional, 1998), 85.

<sup>45</sup> Emil Cioran, *Lacrimi și sfinți* (București: Editura Humanitas, 1992), 19.

<sup>46</sup> Cioran, *Lacrimi și sfinți*, 19.

