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Specifics of the Calendar Rituals of Ethnic Romanians of Bessarabia

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Abstract: The article examines the calendar rituals of ethnic Romanians of Bessarabia, since it is folk festivals, customs and rituals, as components of traditional culture, that reflect the national characteristics of the Romanian community, characterizing it as an ethnically distinctive organization. The purpose of the study is to reconstruct the complex of calendar rituals of ethnic Romanians of southern Bessarabia, to identify its internal structure and content in the system of traditional culture, and to clarify its local specifics. To achieve this aim, it is necessary to solve the following tasks: to outline the place and role of calendar rituals in the traditional ethnic culture of the inhabitants of Bessarabia and to characterize folk holidays, customs, and rituals of the calendar cycle. The use of the field research method (survey, questionnaire, individual interview, direct observation) allowed us to determine the specifics of the traditional culture of ethnic Romanians of Bessarabia, to identify common features of Romanian calendar rituals in the context of the ethno-cultural landscape of the Bessarabian region. The study of the ritual poetry of the Romanian ethnic group of the Ukrainian Danube region has shown that the entire annual cycle of folk rituals and holidays is consistent with the seasons of the folk calendar. A detailed study of rituals, customs, and folk holidays as an important component of traditional Romanian culture made it possible to consider the calendar ritualism in a complex and to trace the connection between the Slavic and Romanic layers of folk ritualism of the calendar cycle in both historical and functional aspects.

Keywords: calendar ritualism; ethnic Romanians; culture; rituals; customs; holidays

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1. Introduction

Traditional culture is an integral part of every ethnic group and ethnicity, regardless of the history of its origin and conditions of existence. Folk festivals, customs and rituals, as components of traditional culture, reflect the national characteristics of the people, characterizing them as an ethnically distinctive organization. Preserving this identity is one of the most urgent problems of our time. In the process of rethinking history, people are increasingly turning to their origins. At a new level, national culture with its traditional customs is being protected.

A review of the historiography of special researches devoted to the study of the calendar rituals of ethnic Romanians of Bessarabia has shown that in the works of D. Kantemir, P. Chubynsky, Y. Popovych, V. Zelenchuk, M. Mocanu, G. Botezatu, G. Spatar, N. Beyeshu, N. Petrova and L. Antohi only considered certain issues of the material and spiritual life of the Romanians of Southern Bessarabia, and therefore confirms the relevance of our study.

A detailed study of rituals, ceremonies, customs, and folk festivals as an important component of traditional Romanian culture made it possible to consider the calendar rituals in a complex and to trace the connection between the Slavic and Romanic layers of folk rituals of the calendar cycle in both historical and functional aspects. Today, this is quite important in terms of interethnic communications and the preservation of ethno-cultural traditions, both in individual communities and in the region as a whole.

The purpose of the research is to reconstruct the complex of calendar rituals of ethnic Romanians of southern Bessarabia, to identify its internal structure and content in the system of traditional culture, and to clarify its local specifics.

To achieve this aim, it is necessary to solve the following tasks: to outline the place and role of calendar rituals in the traditional ethnic culture of the inhabitants of Bessarabia and to characterize folk holidays, customs, and rituals of the calendar cycle.

The object of the study is texts and acts of the calendar and ritual arsenal of ethnic Romanians of Bessarabia.

The subject of the study is traditional calendar rituals as one of the important components of the culture of the Romanian ethnic group.

When considering the issue of calendar rituals from the point of view of their place and role in the traditional life and culture of a particular society, it is necessary to address the very topic of traditional culture and its functional orientation.

Traditional culture, as the most important component of the spiritual and cultural space of any nation, is the basis for the formation of national self-awareness. This broad concept includes folk traditions, national peculiarities of the spiritual structure of a particular ethnic group, rituals, holidays, folklore, and much more.

The importance and role of traditional culture in the life of a nation is invaluable. It is a form of transmitting folk experience, a source of shaping national character, and one of the methods of educating the younger generation.

2. A Study of the Calendar Rituals of the Ethnic Romanians of Bessarabia

Increased attention to traditional culture, including the calendar holidays and rituals of ethnic Romanians of Bessarabia, is currently due to the increasing interest in the historical and ethno-cultural heritage of this ethnic community.

The study of the system of forming the daily lifestyle of the inhabitants of southern Bessarabia shows that it depended on special natural and living conditions. The entire annual cycle of holidays requires their consideration from the perspective of folk beliefs about their magical influence on the harvest and well-being.

The scientific study of the calendar and ritual folklore of ethnic Romanians of Bessarabia shows that the ritual culture of the population is directly related to the labor activity of the peasants, and consequently has an agrarian origin.

The monograph “Moldovans” (Moldovans, 1977) is very important for studying the ethnic picture of the region in the late XIX – early XX centuries, during the period of socio-economic, political, and cultural transformations, which provides an ethnological description of Moldovans as one of the Eastern Romance peoples of the European continent, and also explores the history of centuries of intercultural interaction between Moldovans with Russians and Ukrainians as representatives of the Slavic world.

Clarifying the role of the East Slavic peoples in the formation of Moldovan ethnic culture has attracted the attention of many specialists. At the beginning of the XX century, interest in the issues of interethnic and intercultural interaction between

peoples increased. It is worth noting here the work of scholars in identifying Moldovan-Eastern Slavic ties and historical contacts, as well as common features in the customs and rituals that are characteristic of these nations.

Well-known ethnographers and folklorists T. Zlatkovska, M. Beyeshu and G. Bostan, in the process of studying Moldovan calendar rituals, discovered a significant layer of ancient Moldovan-Slavic common features and later East Slavic borrowings.

Of scientific interest is the monographic study on ethno-cultural interrelations and peculiarities of Ukrainian-Moldovan relations (Bostan, 1978), which illustrates the dynamics of transformations in the lifestyle, material and spiritual culture of the Ukrainian and Moldovan peoples of the Soviet period. V. Stepanov's work (Stepanov, 2002), which is devoted to the topic of cultural and ethnic interaction of peoples, focuses on the development of ethnic and civic identity of citizens living in a non-ethnic environment.

The works of V. Zelenchuk are of undoubted interest for the study of the traditional culture of Bessarabia. For instance, in his monograph "The Population of Bessarabia and Transnistria in the XIX Century (Ethnic and Socio-Demographic Processes)" (Zelenchuk, 1979), the author examines the theoretical problems of the development of the Moldovan ethnic community, as well as other peoples – Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians – in Bessarabia and the Left Bank Transnistria in the XIX century.

The author analyzes the correlation between the social and ethnic structure of the population, shows the historical and socio-ethnic preconditions for the patterns of settlement of peoples and the demographic processes that took place in their environment. The researcher pays special attention to the process of forming a multinational population, interethnic relations, etc.

Despite the fact that in his book "Essays on Moldovan Folk Rituals" (Zelenchuk, 1959) V. Zelenchuk studies the family Moldovan rituals that existed in Bessarabia in the second half of the XIX – early XX centuries, on the example of matchmaking and engagement, wedding and funeral customs, as well as ideas and beliefs related to death, some information is still relevant today for the study of the calendar rituals of ethnic Romanians in Bessarabia.

As we can see, the historiographical analysis shows that XX century researchers paid great attention to the study of traditional customs, rituals, and holidays of the Romanian-speaking population of Southern Bessarabia, which makes it possible to learn the peculiarities of the ethnic culture of the people, to understand their

perceptions of the world around them, of time and space. It is significant to note that in ancient times, people not only observed the change in natural cycles, but also used various magical tools to influence the course of natural phenomena, i.e. tried to ritually consolidate natural processes that they did not understand, but which were so essential for life (the revival of nature and the renewal of life). As a result, many holidays, customs, and rituals were united and grouped around the most important dates of the solar calendar – the winter and summer solstices. Being directly related to agricultural work, its beginning or end, sowing or harvesting, they mark important milestones of the year. The peculiarities of the biological development of plants and domesticated animals determined the annual cyclicity of peasant work and the rituals associated with it, which led to the emergence of a kind of folk agricultural calendar.

Being verbally transmitted from generation to generation, it was carefully preserved by the old-timers, supplemented, improved, and adapted to the conditions of farming, which have historically changed.

The fact that such calendars existed even in the times of the Trypil culture, which left its mark on the Bessarabian land as well, is told by clay figurines of women depicting fertility divinities and made during spellbinding agricultural rituals.

According to the archaeological findings of anthropologists, we can assume that such a calendar was often depicted by craftsmen on rocks, trees, ceramic dishes, etc. Comparing such findings allowed scientists to conclude that they had a “calendar” purpose: they reflected natural processes necessary for the harvest and marked the exact days of pagan holidays. Furthermore, these calendars provide much new information for the study of paganism in general. In particular, they indicate a direct connection between ancient holidays and periods of agricultural work that coincide with certain seasons.

It is noteworthy that in the process of the migration of Slavs to the lands of the studied region, more advanced forms of developed agriculture were introduced, and the processes of ethnogenesis of the East Romanic peoples with the participation of Slavs intensified, which was reflected in the chronological system.

Comparison of ancient Moldovan and Slavic names of months (March – martisor, April – prier, May – florar, June – ciresar, July – cuptor, August – secerar, September – repciune, October – brumarel, November – brumar, December – indrea, January – gerar, February – feurar) with similar Slavic terms (florar – blossom, ciresar – cherries, cuptor – stove, secerar – August, brumarel – hoarfrost, brumar – frost,

indrea – St. Andrew's Day, gerar – frosty) suggests that the oldest Moldovan and Slavic names have a pronounced internal similarity and are associated with natural phenomena or agricultural work.

The ceremonial structure of the so-called folk calendar in most Slavic peoples represents a cycle that is conditionally divided into the following complexes: 1) a festive (Christmas) complex; 2) period of Maslenitsa (characteristic of the Eastern Slavs); 3) early spring complex (the week of Great Lent, the day of the Forty Martyrs, the Feast of the Annunciation, etc); 4) mid-spring complex (Easter, Spring St. Nicholas, Ascension Day, etc); 5) late spring complex (Trinity and Kupala period); 6) summer complex (harvest, St. Elijah's Day, the Dormition of the Mother of God, etc); 7) the autumn period, which is the weakest in terms of rituals (the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Intercession of the Theotokos, Dmitriy's Day, Michael's Day, etc); 8) the winter complex (St. Andrew's Day, St. Barbara's Day, Winter St. Nicholas, etc).

The basis for their allocation is the natural and farming sequence of annual periods, on which the division of the Christian year is superimposed. Various types of farming and household activities were tied to the major Christian holidays, in this way bringing them into the calendar order. Rituals of regional origin were grouped around them. Preventive rituals of meteorological magic (the ritual of evoking rain, protection from hail and thunderstorms), rituals of protection from evil spirits, and medical practices could be dedicated to various holidays and dates. Each complex has its own set of traditions of major dates and holidays, its own characteristic ritual content.

At the same time, calendar rituals implement a single set of ritual forms (go-arounds, rituals with greens, ritual meals and treats, lighting of fires, mummers, making and destroying ritual objects, amulets, singing, etc), of which only some appear in each complex and in each specific rite, depending on its content. For example, these are the generating and initial rituals, which are mainly related to the Christmas and spring complexes, cleansing rituals – to the spring complexes, banishing and protective rituals – to the Trinity and Kupala complexes. Cardinal to calendar mythology are the ideas of the need for careful "reinforcement" and magical stimulation of the natural order (the onset of spring warmth, the beginning of the growing season, the protection of the fertility of the land after harvest, and, ultimately, the movement of time itself) and the maintenance of the necessary balance in relations with the otherworld, on which earthly well-being depends. This explains the exceptional importance of productive magic in the calendar rituals,

which is designed to ensure the fertility of the land, livestock and people, and memorial rituals aimed at admiring the ancestors, as well as the special mythological role of those periods when, according to popular belief, the souls of ancestors walk the earth (Christmas holidays, Easter and Mermaid week). The third most important semantic component of calendar beliefs is demonological, which determines the annual schedule of appearance, activation, and disappearance of mythological characters and the role of protective rituals.

Therefore, the rituals and holidays of the annual cycle are a kind of connected nodal points on which a complex construction is held, which is a spatio-temporal model of the world.

The components of the calendar: rituals and customs, rational knowledge and elements of cults, games, fasts, and worship have different origins, different rates of evolution, and special functional significance.

The key to understanding the early stages of folk culture and the folk calendar was a constant and highly intense dialog between humans and the forces of nature, observation of natural processes, and comprehension of patterns. All these observations were recorded in folk memory in the form of omens and predictions. For example, short-term weather forecasts (usually for the next day and the following 24 hours) were based mainly on observations of the peculiarities of the movement of celestial bodies; such features as the appearance of the sun and moon, their color, and their combination with other atmospheric phenomena were taken into account, for instance: *“Daca cerul e rosu la apusul soarelui, v-a fi furtuna si seceta”* (“If the sky is red at sunset, there will be a hurricane and drought”); *“Daca iarna in jurul lunii e cer noros v-a fi mare ger”* (“A ring around the moon – to severe frost”) (Recorded in Dmytrivka village, Kiliya district, Odesa region, from Ionel Mykola Dmytrovych, born in 1949, with secondary education).

There is a group of omens related to observations of unusual phenomena for this time of year: *“Daca iarna scapara sau tuna v-or avea loc mari nenorociri”* (“Lightning or thunder in winter – to bad weather”) (Recorded in Utkonosivka village, Izmail district, Odesa region, from Hitsa Ivan Ivanovych, born in 1937, with secondary education).

There is a similarity between the culture of Eastern Slavs and the culture of ethnic Romanians in the territory of Bessarabian settlements. In particular, many omens are directly related to observations of the behavior of livestock and birds: *“Pisica drapana podeaua – v-a fi mare ger”* (“The cat scratches the floor – it will be

frosty”); “*Gaina se scalda in tarina are sa ploaie*” (“The chicken bathes in dust – it will rain”); “*Daca rindunelele zboara pe jos-spre ploaie*” (“Swallows fly low over the ground – it will rain”) (Recorded in Utkonosivka village, Utkonosivka, Izmail district, Odesa region, from Olena Arzhynth, born in 1963, with secondary education).

Other principles underlie long-term omens. They contain far fewer “references” to the realities of the world around us, but more worldview constructions based not so much on experience as on the desire to reduce the degree of uncertainty in the future. For example, “*Daca in ziua de Boboteaza e ger vara v-a fi calda*” (“Frost on the christening – summer will be warm”) (Recorded in Utkonosivka village, Izmail district, Odesa region, from Olena Arzhynth, born in 1963, with secondary education).

If we consider the functional orientation of the rituals of the annual cycle, then among the functions of the New Year's holiday as the leading date of the calendar, we can first of all distinguish the preparatory function, as well as the desire to predict the fate of the harvest and the weather in the coming year and to ensure the well-being of the economy and the health of all family members.

The idea of fertility of the land becomes the leading idea. It is no coincidence that the Earth was called mother by all agricultural peoples. According to the oldest agricultural myths, man comes from the earth and therefore, when a person dies, he must be returned to the earth.

The idea of fertility is expressed through a variety of symbols. The most common symbol is the grain. It contains the mysterious power that, when it is united with the earth, gives new life and provides people with food. That is why sprinkling with grain is widely practiced in the New Year's cycle of rituals and in the wedding ritual.

The idea of the well-being and happiness of all relatives in the New Year and throughout their lives, the desire to have numerous offspring, permeate many customs and rituals of the New Year cycle (“*Uratura*”, “*Semanatul*”). Like other peoples, they are realized in numerous rites dedicated to the spirits and deities of happiness and wealth. The idea of success and well-being is also expressed through the symbolism of home decorations, through amulets on clothes, and through ritual food. This function can probably be defined as a function of family prosperity.

Initial magic, or “first day” magic, is known to many peoples of the world. The most archaic are the rituals and customs that actually occur on the first day of the New Year. These are: the custom of the first guest (the year will be successful if a man or

a boy is the first to enter the house during caroling), the ritual of scooping up “young water” in the morning, which was attributed with magical significance. These traditions are still alive today. Even in everyday life, if you meet a man first when you leave the house, the day will be successful, and if you meet a woman, you may have all sorts of troubles.

Speaking about spring customs and rituals, they are mainly characterized by a preparatory “beginning” because they are directly related to the actual work that peasants did on the eve of the beginning of the agricultural year. These are rituals associated with productive magic, with fertility magic, among which we can distinguish fumigating and blessing fields, lighting fires in order to protect crops and harvests from evil forces, evil eye.

During this period, people come into contact with the land, into an alliance with it, “conclude a contract with it” For this purpose, abundant, crowded meals (with festive food and drink) were organized in the spring fields, and sitting on the ground was a must. A vivid confirmation of this is the so-called “Green Feast” (the common name for the holiday celebrated on Monday, a week after Whitsun) “*Pe iarba verde*”. On this day, there are no restrictions on work, on the contrary, it is celebrated during the lunch break or at the end of the working day.

Among the customs and rituals of the spring cycle, ceremonies and rituals related to the commemoration of ancestors occupy a large place. The special importance of spring ceremonies – ancestor worship – is manifested in the multifunctionality of these ritual actions. Undoubtedly, they are inseparable from fertility cults, from the ancient ideas of farmers that deceased ancestors, being buried in the ground, are connected with its wealth and opportunities and can influence the future harvest.

In this way, it is believed that ancestors influence not only earthly forces but also heavenly ones. These ceremonies can be of great social and communicative importance and should include the dead who have left the collective into a single social organism; the ancestors are a kind of link to those who live in the afterlife.

The productive magic of the first summer months is designed to enhance the life-giving energy of the sun. The summer period is characterized by complex ritual cycles associated with “spells” of weather, “taming” of hail and rain.

A peculiar form of protective rituals (primarily for the harvest, and, consequently, for the whole society and for each person) is the performance of various tales (the word itself had a tremendous magical influence) and theatrical performances (“*Caluian*”, “*Paparuda*”).

The process of collecting medicinal herbs and plants that supposedly had a magical effect on human health was widespread at this time. The collection of medicinal herbs and plants that had miraculous powers is associated with cleansing and protective magic, with caring for the health of family members, villagers, and the collective. Cleansing and protective functions are supposed to prepare the members of the collective for the most important stage of farming – the autumn harvest.

The functional orientation of the customs and rituals of the autumn period reflects, first of all, the idea of gratitude for the harvest. This is reflected in joint community and family feasts.

Autumn is a period of weddings, “cumatrii” (“cumetrii”). In addition, the festivals dedicated to the harvest and the end of harvesting are becoming more and more social in nature, as they are often combined with secular holidays: the village temple festival. For example, on September 21, a unique village in the Ukrainian Danube region, Utkonosivka, populated by ethnic Romanians, celebrates its church festival every year. The village is famous for its winemaking traditions, is one of the first in the Ukrainian agricultural market, and has folk song and dance ensembles: “Dor Basarabia”, “Melancolie”, “Speranza”, “Play”, “Suzirie”, “Oridea”, etc.

Therefore, calendar customs and rituals regulate the agricultural, social and family life of villagers. They occupy a special place in the temporal continuum as a transmission of a certain cultural code sanctified by time, i.e., the attitude to time as a sacred thing: “this is how it used to be, this is how our grandfathers did it, this is how we do it”.

Conclusions

The study of the ritual poetry of ethnic Romanians of the Ukrainian Danube region shows that the entire annual cycle of folk rituals and holidays is consistent with the calendar seasons of the folk calendar. Each calendar season is marked not only by a set of holidays and rituals, but also has a certain mythological significance.

The calendar and ritual folklore of ethnic Romanians of Bessarabia has regional specificity, which is due to ethnic contact processes, namely their living surrounded by other ethnic groups (Ukrainians, Bulgarians).

The folklore material we have processed demonstrates the originality and identity of the folk traditions of ethnic Romanians in Bessarabia. The study of the calendar and ceremonial folklore of this ethnic community made it possible to understand the

national specificity of customary culture and to identify the processes of its transformation.

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