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Local Communities-Diachrony and Synchrony

Mermaid Rituals of Ethnic Bulgarians and Romanians of Southern Bessarabia

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Abstract: The article studies the mermaid rituals of ethnic Bulgarians and Romanians of Southern Bessarabia. The main attention is focused on the historical and genetic features of the Bessarabian folk tradition, the most common and at the same time the most typical ritual actions of the Rusalii holiday for the inhabitants of the villages of Southern Bessarabia are analysed. The analysis of the main elements of the folk rituals of the Bulgarian and Romanian population of Bessarabia allows us to state that the existence of the components of this holiday today in South Bessarabia is characterized by local variability of individual rites both in terms of structural and formal expression and in terms of polyfunctional semantics. In general, the rituals of Bulgarian and Romanian rusalii contain Slavic and Balkan components layered on a more ancient all-European base.

Keywords: ethnic Bulgarians; ethnic Romanians; Bessarabia; ritual; custom; traditions

1. Introduction

One of the central aspects of contemporary humanities is the regional study of folklore. Determining ethnogenetic depth and spiritual potential as components of the national system of cultural integrity seems appropriate and productive today.

The regional study of this area implies a comprehensive approach since the entire array of traditional and everyday culture of an ethnic group is a complex diachronic

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and multidisciplinary set of achievements of the production and spiritual activities of the people, which is expressed in specific material, ritual, artistic and verbal realities, beliefs, philosophical and ideological, legal attitudes and knowledge, traditional stereotypes of behavior, morality, ethics, family, and social life.

Obvious in this system are the regional subdivisions of traditional and everyday culture, which were formed on the basis of the historical process of formation of the ethnic group, its territory, peculiarities of the natural and geographical environment, ethnographic structure, territorial zoning, nature of economic activity, intra-regional and inter-ethnic relations.

Bessarabia is a unique region that has not only specific geography, climate and nature but also a multinational population. The processes of ethnocultural and linguistic adaptation, assimilation and consolidation are intertwined here. The ethnic communities of Bessarabia have preserved their distinctive features in language, rituals, family and marriage relations, beliefs, and oral folk art.

As Vodynchar O. notes, “Southern Bessarabia represents a specific ethnographic region with a multiethnic environment, various forms of intercultural ties and relationships, and intensive social and economic development in the XIX-XXI centuries. This feature of the region provides a unique opportunity to study various cultural processes that show the admissibility of contact and coexistence of different identities” (Vodynchar, 2005). In addition, political events, legislative changes, socio-economic innovations are the circumstances that directly or indirectly affect the identity of the local population and the ethnic groups that moved here in the historical process. The intensive settlement of the region in the late XVIII - early XIX centuries by immigrants from Bulgaria led to processes of contamination in the calendar and ritual folklore of the Bulgarian and Romanian ethnic groups in the region. They are especially evident in the spring-summer cycle of the folk calendar of Romanians and Bulgarians of Southern Bessarabia, in particular in the rites of calling for rain, ritual songs and games, making a substitute for a calendar sacrifice, divination, and wreath weaving. Semantic features are shared by the Rusal calendar myth, which attests to genetic kinship and emphasizes archaic local invariants.

Aim of the research – to analyze the main structural components and attributes of the Rusal ritual in the system of traditional ethnic culture of Bulgarians and Romanians of South Bessarabia, to determine the ethno-national peculiarities of the functioning of the Rusal ritual.

The object of the study is the ritual actions of the Rusal repertoire of Bulgarians and Romanians living on the territory of Southern Bessarabia.

The subject of the study is the Rusal ritual activity of Bulgarians and Romanians in the Ukrainian space.

The question of the genesis of mermaids has arisen for many scholars. In the early and mid- XIX century, mainly in Slavic historiography, there was a widespread opinion that the holiday got its name from mermaids, which, in turn, got their name from the words “canal”, “light brown” or names of rivers (Rusa, Ros, Ras, Rasa, etc.) (Shafarik, 1883, p. 264).

The most prominent place in these studies was occupied by the question of the origin of the name “Rusaliia”.

In Bulgarian literature, the name of the rose plant (*Dictamu salbus*), which plays a major role in the Rusaliia procedure, is sometimes invoked to explain the name of the rite. This opinion is found in Arnaudov M. but is most clearly formulated by Vakarelsky G. (Vakarelsky, 1974, p. 507), although, according to the scholar, it is impossible to definitively separate the question of the origin of the name of the rite from the Latin name.

Many researchers objected to this explanation of the term Rusaliia, but the theory of the Slavic linguist Fr. Miklosich was recognized as the most convincing. The scientist came to the conclusion that the basis of the name “Rusaliia” is the name of the Latin holiday “rosalia, rosaria”. The Slavic, East Romanian and other Balkan peoples adopted the Greco-Byzantine name of the same Latin festival of roses, ρουσαλία, which probably appeared to them early together with Christianity. This name was adopted from the South Slavs by the whole Slavic world (Miklosich, 1876, pp. 25-26).

Fr. Miklosich’s opinion became very popular and is recognized by many researchers. However, there seems to have been some overestimation of the influence of the ancient Roman rite on the rites of various peoples bearing the name of rusaliia: the adoption of the name of the Roman rite is sometimes considered by researchers as evidence of the borrowing of the rite itself.

The merit of the Roman influence on the rusalis of modern peoples (mainly Bulgarians, but also Romanians, Serbs, etc) belongs to the Bulgarian ethnographer M. Arnaudov, who devoted a significant part of his special study “Kukeri and Rusali” to this rite. Explaining the common features in the Romanian and Bulgarian

rites of rusalii and kalusari, Arnaudov M. points to the unity of their origin from the Romanized Thracians. Stressing the presence of healing magic in the rites of the modern Balkan peoples, he expresses doubt whether these actions should be considered as manifestations of the influence of Thracian beliefs or as borrowings from the mysteries of the Greco-Roman cultural circle (Arnaudov, 1920, pp. 144, 171, 172, 180).

According to Mateevici A., a researcher of Romanian folklore, “Rusaliia” in the popular imagination of ethnic Romanians is one of the numerous incarnations of the evil power, which, according to the people’s beliefs, becomes especially rampant after the bright holiday (Mateevici, 1993, p. 167).

According to Romanian religious beliefs, the doors of paradise are opened, and sinners who have managed to enter paradise during this time receive pardon, salvation and eternal bliss together with the righteous. Satan and all the forces of hell become furious at this and send “Rusalii” to the world with the order to do all kinds of harm to the Christians and those who do not observe the celebration of Thursdays – to kidnap them, carry them through the air, and at the end destroy them with a painful death in some area inhabited by all kinds of evil (Mateevici, 1993, p. 167).

The “Rusalii” themselves are mythical creatures of the female sex. In the “Rusaliia” period, they are carried through the air and threaten the righteous Christian with all sorts of troubles. A. Mateevici remarks: “God forbid this Christian on one of these Thursdays, by forgetfulness, to do any work – in the yard or in the field! Such a person will inevitably be kidnapped by the Rusalii and will be lost to his relatives and friends” (Matejevich, 1993, p. 167).

2. Study of the Peculiarities of the Ritual Actions of the Mermaid Week

Rusal week (also called “green week”) falls on the eve of the Christian holiday of Trinity. According to the folk beliefs of Bessarabian Bulgarians and Romanians, during this period the dead are resurrected and mermaids come out of the water. The folk holiday is accompanied by various ritual actions: dressing up one of the girls as a mermaid, weaving wreaths, tying them with grass or cornflowers, dancing, and singing mermaid songs. Rusal Sunday ended with the “send-off of mermaids” - expulsion of mermaids or “Rusal games”, i.e., the end of the holiday and Rusal fun.

In Bessarabian Bulgarians, the green week is called “Rusalnitsa”, which is consonant with the Ukrainian name “Rusalii”. According to Georgieva S., “Rusali, Rusari are

personified unclean, harmful forces, represented as supernatural beings, whose gender is not defined. This gives rise to a number of prohibitions and ritual actions of cautionary nature: one cannot sleep during the day, one cannot bathe in the river, “otherwise mermaids will take away” (Georgieva, 2017).

Today, ethnic Bulgarians of southern Bessarabia observe traditional rituals both in celebrating the church holiday of the Trinity and in observing folk rules of celebration, dating back to pagan times. This is evidenced by the observations of A. Kaloyanov, who notes that “Rusal games are a pagan heritage, “shameful games”, which were first reported in the XIII century by the Ochrid bishop Demetrios Chomatenos – during the week after Pentecost, young people went round the villages in groups, collected gifts, danced, jumped, and played pantomime. In the folk calendar, the Sunday before or after Pentecost is considered Rusal Sunday, and, according to the beliefs, it is then that the Rusalians roam –invisible spirits who punish non-compliance with prohibitions by taking away hands or feet” (Kaloyanov, 2000, p. 22).

The study of folklore materials, recorded by us in the places of compact Bulgarian and Romanian habitation in Southern Bessarabia, shows the following stages of the Rusalnitsa holiday.

On the Saturday before the feast, they clean the rooms and wash the floors, and in the evening they scatter leaves of grass, walnut, and sagebrush. The branches of walnut and sagebrush are used to decorate the most important places in the yard and house: gates, front doors and wells, under the roof, as well as in pockets and under pillows, and also to decorate livestock.

It is worth noting that on Trinity Day, walnut leaves and sagebrush are also used to decorate church buildings, which testifies to the dualism of the Christian and folk worldviews.

The oldest informants note that: “*На Троица **русалите** взимали със себе си един човек*» («*On the Trinity the **mermaids** took one person with them*”) (Recorded in the village Horodne, Bolgrad district, Odesa region, from Khineva I. D., born in 1935, incomplete secondary education). It is believed that those who encounter “mermaids” may fall ill and never recover.

Bessarabian Bulgarians and Romanians do not have a more specific idea of these demonic beings and say only that they wear white clothes. For a whole week, one cannot wash, bathe, or work at all. People try not to go out into the fields or gardens, and if they do, they carry sagebrush in their pockets. It is not allowed to sleep under

the open sky, children are not left alone, and “*ако спите сами, слагате пелин, ножници или метла под главата си*” (“*if you sleep alone, put sagebrush, scissors or a broom under your head*”) (Recorded in the village Vasylivka, Bolgrad district, Odesa region, from Ivanova O. I., born in 1939, secondary education).

Bulgarians still believe that Rusal week is the most dangerous time in the whole calendar year, that it is an “unclean, terrible week”. Every day of Rusal week is dangerous, and Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday are declared “crazy” days. There is a popular belief that mermaids walking around at night chase working women to drive them crazy.

On Saturday of this week, housewives collect the scattered grass, but they get rid of the “mermaids” (as grasses and leaves are sometimes called) only on Monday before sunrise, throwing them into the water and saying: “*Къкто върви водата – тъй да вървят и русалите!*” (“*As the water goes, so let the mermaids go!*”) (Recorded in the village Ostrivne, Artsyz district, Odesa region, from Kesar O. D., born in 1945, higher education).

On the same Monday evening, women gather in villages to “drive away” mermaids by bringing wine and cooking Lenten dishes. For instance, as Vodinchar E. tells us, in the village of Chiyshi (Gorodne, Bolgrad region), on the day of seeing off mermaids, they drink vodka and eat summer pickled garlic to cleanse the body and soul from the presence of mermaids (Vodinchar, 2019, p. 174).

After the meal, they slowly perform the national Bulgarian choro, in which, holding hands, the women slowly move towards the sun, walk a few meters, turn around, and walk the same distance again. They do this three times. The dancers’ movements are explained by the fact that when the mermaids leave the village, they come back three times. The purpose of such rituals is to facilitate the unhindered disappearance of the mermaids.

According to the residents of the Romanian-speaking village of Erdec-Burnu (Utkonosovka, Izmail district), the celebration of the “Rusal” week embodies the tragic collision of popular piety with the residual phenomena of the pagan worldview, which are very firmly rooted in the popular consciousness: “*Potrivit credințelor populare, sirenele îi pot pedepsi pe cei care încearcă să lucreze la sărbătoare trimițând o secetă. De asemenea, Săptămâna Sirenelor este considerată deosebit de periculoasă pentru înot*” (“*According to folk beliefs, those who try to work on the holiday, mermaids can punish them by bringing drought. Also Rusal week is considered especially dangerous for bathing*”) (Recorded in Utkonosivka

village, Utkonosivka, Izmail district, Odesa region, from Olena Arzhynth, born in 1963, with secondary education).

3. Conclusions

The analysis of the Bessarabian Bulgarians and Romanians' Mermaid rituals gives grounds to assert that their contemporary existence on the territory of Southern Bessarabia is characterized by local variation of some of them both in structural and formal expression and in multifunctional semantics.

In general, the rituals of Bulgarian and Romanian rusalii contain Slavic and Balkan components layered on an older pan-European basis.

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