

The Harvest Song in Transylvania, a Specific Species of Occasional Lyrics

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Abstract: *The multitude of spring and summer customs unfolds in close connection with the labour tasks in rural areas. One of these is the harvest custom, practiced in our country ever since ancient times during the various agricultural activities. The practice of this custom is aimed at obtaining richer crops. The geographical area covered by this custom is rather limited to some parts of Transylvania, and more importantly, it appears in the Năsăud area, where there are a number of specific musical productions entitled Harvest Songs, interpreted by women who physically participate in the joint work of harvesting, along the various moments of the ceremony. The characteristics of the harvest song have been preserved, but there are also differences among several areas both in the subject of the literary text and in the melodic types. The harvest song is still a living custom, which besides archive materials is an invaluable resource for the interdisciplinary study of the phenomenon in all its complexity.*

Key-words: *harvest song; custom; ceremonial; Transylvania; Năsăud.*

1. Introduction

The form in which the productions and the artistic manifestations related to the works and celebrations of the year are presented is a reminiscence of ancient customs that were subject to important transformations in time. The most important factors explaining these transformations, which are reflected in the heterogeneous character of the repertoire, are:

- the evolution of the way of life and of folk mentality;
- the removal of obsolete items and the insertion of new ones;
- the loss of the initial function.

The wreath (*Crucea, Buzduganul, Peana*) is the ceremony that takes place on the occasion of the harvesting as a joint field work (*claca* is a joint work for the benefit of the host who organizes it). The geographical area of use is quite narrow: in some areas of Transylvania and most significantly it appears in the Năsăud area. The host has the obligation to cater for the others, as well as to employ fiddlers.

For the entire village community, the harvest is a culminating event in which the wide participation of the people was necessary, so that the harvest is gathered as soon as possible and placed in shelter, in order to secure the villagers' existence. The beginning of the harvest does not have a settled date, but depends on the ripening of the grain crops and on the weather.

2. Historical references concerning other regions

In the evolution of mankind, there were stages and events that profoundly marked its development. The existence of people's faith in the gods in ancient times, embodied in various forms, is attested in most peoples. For example, the goddess Demetra was named Ceres by the Romans, from the verb "to create" = to conceive and embodied the goddess of the rich crops of the earth as well as the goddess of marriage. The cult of the goddess was

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ranked among the foreign cults, being entirely Greek (the ceremonies were held in Greek). The goddess was celebrated during two distinct feasts: April 12-19 and mid-August. The festival of April 12-19 was named *Ludi Cereri* (*Cerealia*) and represented cheerful ceremonies in which all the participants were clothed in white. The goddess was offered honey and milk cakes. After the sacrifices followed the games, and subsequently a great popular procession. At the feast held in mid-August participated only women dressed in white, adorned with wheat crowns. They went and offered the first product obtained after the harvest to the goddess Ceres.

The ancient Greek and Latin sources mention other definite testimonies on agriculture and especially about the cultivation of wheat in prehistoric Dacia. Pliny the Elder notes: "There are several species of wheat (in Thrace), according to the place where they are produced (...) As a matter of weight, the third place for weight used to belong to Thracian wheat (...). In Thrace, the stem of the wheat is covered with several coats, rendered necessary by the excessive cold of those regions." (*Natural History*, 18.12).

Researchers discovered obvious resemblances between the field crops of various peoples, some of them geographically distant. According to the research carried out in Germany by the Scottish author and social anthropologist James George Frazer (1854-1941), the author of *The Golden Bough*, it appears that the harvest-related customs and rituals of the ancient Greeks and Romans were preserved, as attested by the discoveries made in the villages of Steyermark and Magdeburg. In the village of Steyermark, the peasants made into a puppet the last stalks of wheat, which they dressed in white and called it the "wheat mother." The last harvested sheaves were taken home and worshiped, unlike in other parts of Germany where the last sheaf of wheat taken home was dressed in women's clothes and thoroughly drenched with water. The "Mother of the Wheat" was made by the oldest married woman in the village, and the youngest unmarried girl in the village made a wreath out of the finest stalks. The crown was taken to the host and placed in a place of honour, and the "mother of the wheat" was laid down in the barn to keep off the mice, while in other areas it was placed on the top of a pile of wood, at the centre of the harvest supper and dance.

In Magdeburg, the last wheat sheaf was called the "Grandmother." The boys and girls competed, and the first of the contestants who got the sheaf was thought to marry in the following year, but his or her spouse would be old. In Galicia, the grains from the wreath were sown in following spring.

In England, the last sheaf of wheat, which was a puppet, was offered by the reaper to a girl who was dear to him, keeping the bundle of stalks until the harvest the following year.

In Scotland, the last straws of the harvest were bound in a bundle by the first farmer who finished the shearing. The last sheaf was called the "old woman" and was sent to the farmer's nearest neighbour. The latter, in turn, as soon as he was ready, passed the "old woman" to the next one, and so on, until it reached the last farmer to finish the harvesting, who had to keep it for that year.

In Bulgaria, a puppet called a "Wheat queen" or "Wheat mother" was shaped from the last sheaf and was thrown into the river or burned, the ashes being strewn on the fields for a richer harvest next year.

In Poland, the last sheaf of the harvest was wrapped around a woman, who was then taken home in the last harvest-waggon and drenched with water by the whole family. The woman remained encased in the sheaf during a dance performed by family members and retained the name of "Baba" for a whole year.

In the Czech Republic, a woman with a straw hat was made of the last sheaf and was carried home with the last harvest waggon by three girls adorned with the garlands of flowers, who delivered it to the host. The women who bundled this last sheaf would have a child the following year.

In France, before the harvest was completed, a willow branch was brought to the last part of the field to be reaped, and adorned by the villagers with blue corn-flowers, poppies and daisies, at the top of which was put a live rooster. The adorned willow branch was fastened to the top of a pole in the middle of the harvested field, and from that moment on a contest started among the reapers, each trying to reach first the pole with the rooster. The reaper who was the winner became the “master of the sheaf” and could choose his queen. The pair was dressed with ribbons and followed the last waggon, adorned with sheaves; once arrived at the host, the pair together with the reapers who participated in the contest was served a cup of wine and the rooster was cooked and shared by everyone at supper. The willow branch was placed above the barn door and was left there until the flowers dried.

3. The custom of the wheat crown within the Romanian realm

In most areas where the custom of the harvest was present, the last wheat stalks, even since ancient times, were left unreaped in the field as an offering to the earth and the sun.

The first testimonies on the customs practiced in Moldova regarding the harvest are reported by Dimitrie Cantemir in his well-known *Descriptio Moldaviae*.

In 1866, the ethnologist and linguist Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954) contributed to deepening the knowledge on the agrarian customs of the Romanians in Transylvania.

In 1888 the “wheat crown” is described in the ethnographic monography of the historians Teofil Frâncu and George Candrea entitled *Românii din Munții Apuseni (Moșii), scriere etnografică cu 10 ilustrații în fotografie*. Professor Nicolae Bot in his synthesis of the custom of the harvest wreath ceremony, starting from the writings of Mircea Eliade, emphasizes on one hand its archaism and on the other the great unity of the agrarian customs along wide geographical distances: “The spirit of the wheat took refuge during the harvest, according to the archaic mentality, in the last stalks, which is why they were given special attention. As a result, the end of the harvest was marked by extensive ceremonial events impregnated by ritual beliefs and practices. Their wealth could be explained by the fact that they were understood as end rites, marking the end of a growing cycle, but at the same time as rites of beginning, because they aimed at making permanent the living crop and its transfer from one harvest to another” (Bot, 1989, 6).

Another researcher, Ion Ionică in the work *Dealul Mohului, Ceremonia agrară a cununii în Țara Oltului (Mohul Hill. The Agrarian Ceremony of the Wreath in the Olt Country)*, Bucharest, 1943, mentions that the custom is formed from a bundle of ritual acts, the same throughout the entire Transylvanian region: a ritual object, a ritual song and an ensemble of ritual acts (the procession) consisting in wearing the wreath, the drenching of the wreath, the game of the wreath, and a (hypothetically) ritual meal.

Maria Cuceu in the ethnological study *Ritualul agrar al cununii de seceriș* „The Agrarian Ritual of the Harvesting Wreath” (Cuceu, 2003, 55-56) refers to a study on the traditions of the harvest written in 1958 by Traian Gherman, a work that represents a first ethnographic and folklore monograph as a result of the direct and indirect research of about 700 localities, a study that still remains almost unknown. In this monograph, the author identifies eight areas in which the custom is embedded in characteristic features: - The Olt Country, Sibiu area with the Sebes Valley to the Apuseni Mountains, Târnavelor Plateau Area, Arieș Area, Năsăud Area, Someș Area, Mureș Area and the Transylvania Plain area – and describes the ritual acts from choosing the one to wear the wreath, the drenching of the wreath on the field, the ritual game before leaving, the formation of the procession, the ritual journey of the reapers, partially segmented into three parts (from the crop on the outskirts of the village, on the streets of the village, in the courtyard and in the house of the owner of the

harvest, the ritual drenching with its reflection in songs and the assigned meanings, baptism and the offering in the host's house).

4. Description of the custom

The villagers were announced in advance by the farmer who was to benefit from the joint work in harvesting the crop, so that they would meet at his house or directly in the field on the appointed day. The procession was formed according to a well-established order: in some areas first came the fiddlers, the family members of the householder, and finally the villagers - the girls, the young men and the mature ones with sickles and scythes.

The harvest usually lasted a day, with a noon break for food and rest. In order to preserve their good mood, the fiddlers together with some people who knew how to sing, played some songs with shouts, and in the moments of rest the young men invited the girls to dance.

In southern Transylvania the young men reaped, and the girls bound the sheaves, while in the rest of Transylvania the reverse was done - the girls reaped, and the young men bound the sheaves and formed the piles of sheaves. The cutting of wheat spikes was done from ancient times with the sickle, which was considered in Dacian mythology as a heavenly tool.

At the end of the harvest, the most skilled women picked out the most beautiful and rich wheat spikes and formed a crown, which was the ritual object for the ceremony. In some villages where the host was wealthier and had a larger crop, two or more crowns were wreathed. In the Apuseni Mountains and in Năsăud area during the weaving, the women faced the sunrise, and the shape of the crown was similar to a ritual bundle, a simple bouquet that was sometimes tied and adorned, in time developing into more evolved forms: a *cross* (representing a multiplication and an overlapping of bundles), '*peană*' (also in the shape of a cross, but smaller in size), '*buzduganul*' ("the mace" - possibly a conglomerate of bundles) and '*cununa*' or '*coroana*' ('the wreath' or "the crown" - a round intertwined bundle, smaller and simpler at the beginning, afterwards more complex). It was made only of pure wheat spikes.

The wreath was carried from the field to the farmhouse by a pure girl, dressed in holiday clothes. At the front of the procession toward the village was the girl wearing the crown, followed by the other women who sung a ceremonial song, and in some areas followed by fiddlers. Throughout the walk, from the crop field to the house of the farmer, the group of women performs the ceremonial song of the wreath without interruption, with a strong voice, with a specific folk voice emission.

At the entrance of the village or at crossroads, the wreath and the girl wearing it were drenched with water by the lads who were waiting for the procession to arrive. The drenching of the wreath was the most important and most anticipated moment of the ceremony. At the house of the farmer, the girl wearing the crown went around the beautifully embellished table three times, pronouncing the *tarostea* (the charm) of the wreath, which is a versified monologue, similar to the wedding oration, describing the unfolding of the custom, the description of the way from the field and the house, praises for the host, and at the end the farmer was asked for gifts to reward the work of the reapers. There followed a traditional meal, accompanied by dances and good cheer, ending the party, in which participated everyone who worked in the reaping of the crop. The crown was placed on the beam of the house next to an icon and kept until the following year, when the grains will be mixed with the seeds for the field, in the belief that they would bear a rich harvest. Wheat grains were also used during the Christmas festive meal, over the round braided bread ('*colac*') offered to the carollers, in the adornment of the wedding banner and the crown worn by young couples

during the wedding ceremony. Thus, the synonyms of the wheat crown: *buzduganul*, *peana* are specific symbols of the wedding ceremony in Transylvania and Banat.

5. General and morphological features of the genre

The wreath songs are performed by women in different moments of the ceremony: the beginning of the harvest, the noon break, during the harvest, during the braiding of the wreath, on the way to the house of the host, and at the final party. The songs are sung in a powerful voice, in group, by the women, the measured rhythm has a slow pace (ceremonial rhythm), which confers the song a solemn character. The features of the wreath song are preserved in some areas in southern, central and north-eastern Transylvania; the general aspects above exist in all areas, but there are also differences from area to area in both text themes and melodic types.

From a literary point of view, the wreath songs have an epic-descriptive character. They bear several local names: Dealul Mohului – the most known, *Cântecul Buzduganului*, *Pana Mohului*, *Gogea*, *Cântecul Grâului*. In southern Transylvania, the *Dealul Mohului* song features various ancient mythological elements: the dispute between the Sun's Sister whose powerful heat fatigued the reapers and the Wind's Sister, who chilled and refreshed their strength. The theme of the wreath songs in north-eastern and central Transylvania describe the harvest and the road full of adventures when bringing the wreath from the field to the house of the host.

In the ceremony of the wreath, there are also some elements common with the wedding: the drenching with water, going around the table, the traditional dishes, the charm, and the common name of the ritual song: *gogea miresei* – *gogea cununii*. The soak in water is also encountered in all agrarian customs as a symbolic act of fecundity. In the charm of the crown we find thematic motifs similar with the New Year's wishes ('*plugușor*') (grinding the wheat at the mill and baking the bread). In some areas, even the melodic shape has common traits between the harvest, wedding and funeral songs.

The melodies in southern Transylvania (Făgăraș) belong to one type, which is a melodic reminder of the Gregorian chant; the melodic stanza has three melodic lines (A B C). The verse belongs to the typical Făgăraș pyrrhic trimeter, the main caesura appears after the first melodic line, the final cadence being on the first degree, and the rhythm appears in a quasi-measured motion. These structural features taken as a whole, as well as the solemn character of the interpretation, embed the songs in one of the most archaic melodic types of the Romanian folklore.

Also in southern Transylvania (Hunedoara area) is found a melodic type almost identical to the bride song in the same area. The verse belongs to the pyrrhic tetrameter, the sound material is richer, the form reaches four melodic lines (A B C B), and the rhythm is ceremonial.

In Northwest Transylvania, the wreath songs have a simple architectural form formed of one (A) or two different melodic lines (A B), and the verse belongs to the pyrrhic tetrameter. The melodic types can be differentiated from the place of the caesuras, scales, melodic formulas.

In the eastern part of Năsăud area, the most frequent sound structure is the trichord (G-A-B), around which the melody is concentrated; some versions use a wider sound material. Compared to the other types, the melody contains large ornamentations spread over several beats, recalling the style of church singing.

In southwestern Năsăud there are predominantly minor scales derived from tetratones; the final cadence and inner caesuras are placed on E, and the note D receives the sub-final cadence function.

In other areas of Transylvania, where the wreath song is present, also appear various other types of songs, some of which have structural features that are specific to the vocal dance song or the song proper in that area.

6. Conclusions

To conclude, we may say that the harvest songs have the following features: they are performed in groups, they have a solemn character, a narrow ambitus, limited sound material, pre-pentatonic, pentatonic or pentachordic scales, melismatic type of melody, rarely syllabic, while the musical form is strophic with hexasyllabic or octosyllabic verses.

Drawing from the various aspects present in this ceremony, one can see the authenticity of the harvest songs in the spring and summer customs. Due to the fact that this custom is one with a pronounced syncretism, it reveals a strong archaic character and the ancestral nature of the agrarian occupations.

In Romanian and world folk music, the more archaic a genre is, the lesser are the typological differences. Taking into account the entire area of Transylvania, where this ceremony is still present, all harvest songs can be considered as an indication of artistic wealth.

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