

The Dynamics of the Traditional Musical Repertoire of the Armenians of Constanța

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Abstract: *Dobrogea is the oldest province of all Romanian lands, being an area capable of offering some advantages to those who went out into the wider world to make a living. The Dobrogea territory, located between the mouths of the Danube and the Black Sea, was the first mentioned in history, being considered a true linguistic and cultural mosaic that offered equal opportunities for affirmation to all ethnic groups established here².*

Since the 13th century, the Genoese have been establishing commercial settlements in Constanța and Mangalia, thus contributing to the development of Dobrogea's maritime trade³. Among the groups of colonists, temporary or permanent residents, were not only Genoese, but also Italians or Westerners of other origins, to which are added the autochthonous ethnic groups: Armenians, Greeks, Georgians, established in all ports and at the crossroads of trade routes, which constituted the nucleus of a class of merchants that existed before the arrival of the Genoese⁴.

The present study aims to highlight the dynamics of the traditional musical repertoire representative of the Armenian community in the city of Constanța, while also taking into account the transformations produced in urban society and the effects of the globalization phenomenon.

Keywords: *Armenians; musical repertoire; traditional organology; globalization;*

Introduction

The Armenian people represent a rare example of survival in the conditions of the loss of state independence and the occupation of the territory by powerful expansionist empires. Armenians settled in the Romanian Lands since the first half of the 14th century⁵.

In the 14th century, the port cities of Dobrogea were inhabited by Romanians, Italians, Greeks, Armenians, Tatars, Turks, Alans, etc⁶. Dobrogea was one of the most populous regions on the Black Sea coast. The inhabitants of Dobrogea were of various ethnic origins, the region being a true melting pot of peoples. It is worth noting, however, that the oldest population that had continuity of residence on Dobrogean land, the most numerous, was clearly the Romanian one. In this area with a mixed population, there was also a religious mosaic. Obviously, the

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² Ion Gr., Ionescu. 2008. „Dobrogea, mojar al popoarelor și al religiilor în secolul al XIV-lea”. In *Dobrogea - model de conviețuire multietică și multiculturală*, coordonator Virgil Coman. Constanța: Editura Muntenia, pp. 86-87.

³ https://biblioteca-digitala.ro/reviste/analele-dobrogei/ANALELE-DOBROGEI-istorie-dobrogeana-Seria-II-an-II-nr-1_1996_092.pdf p. 90.

⁴ Atanasiu-Găvan Andreea. 2008. „Mozaic etnic în porturile bazinului pontic (secolele XIII-XIV)”. In *Dobrogea - model de conviețuire multietică și multiculturală*, coordonator Virgil Coman. Constanța: Editura Muntenia, p. 63.

⁵ Lăcrămioara Manca. 1999. „Armeni, Evrei și Țigani în Dobrogea (sec. XVII-XVIII)”. *Steaua Dobrogei Revistă de cultură* (1): p. 18.

⁶ Vergatti Radu, Ștefan. 2008. „Dobrogea, mojar al popoarelor și al religiilor în secolul al XIV-lea”. In *Dobrogea - model de conviețuire multietică și multiculturală*, coordonator Virgil Coman. Constanța: Editura Muntenia, p. 71.

strongest was the Christian Orthodox denomination. The situation was due to the Romanians' belonging to this denomination. The other confessions and religions: Catholic and Armenian, the Muslim religion were permanently attested in Dobrogea, but for a minority population⁷.

From all times, Armenia has played a bridging role between Europe and Asia, passing through here the caravan and strategic roads, for whose control the neighboring empires have fought, throughout history, bloody battles. The history of the Armenian people dates back thousands of years, research demonstrating that the space has been inhabited continuously. The origin of the Armenian people is lost in the mists of antiquity, and the Kingdom of Armenia was born on the ruins of the ancient slave state of Urartu, considered one of the oldest civilizations in the world⁸.

At the beginning of the 20th century, unfavorable historical events will lead to the rise of modern diasporas in Western countries. It should be noted that living in the diaspora was not a novelty for the Armenians of the 20th century. Certain waves of emigration can be distinguished in history, and the oldest of them date back to the ancient period and the Middle Ages. However, the largest emigration that affected the modern Armenian self-consciousness took place at the beginning of the 20th century⁹.

Having suffered many invasions throughout history and the domination of various conquerors, Armenians have always struggled to preserve their identity. The polyglot Armenians have assimilated the languages of other peoples, borrowing from the surrounding cultures but always managing to preserve their identity and uniqueness¹⁰.

1. Ethnocultural coordinates of the Armenians in Constanța

The estimated number of Armenians in Romania is 2,023, which represents 0.01% of the population. Of these, most live in Bucharest and Constanța (about 1,400), and the rest in Transylvania, being considered Catholic Armenians. Like the other ethnic groups living in the Dobrogea area, the Armenians consider this territory to be their original one.

The Jewish, Greek and Armenian communities preferred to live in the urban environment, where the population is characterized by social heterogeneity. The Armenians were involved in commercial activities, easily adapting to multiethnicity and interculturality, defining coordinates of urban life.

At the beginning of the 20th century, in 1904, there was a school of the Bulgarian community in Constanța, one Greek, one Armenian, one Mohammedan, and two Jewish.¹¹

The migration of Armenians to Dobrogea resulted in the establishment of a visible ethnocultural community, with multiple resources in the preservation of its ancestral culture. The historian N. Iorga in his work "Historical Writings about Armenians" mentions that the Armenians settled in Dobrogea immigrated from Turkey and Asia Minor, and in Constanța all

⁷ Jeromonah Andrei Marian (Calinic). 2008. „Situția demografică și religioasă din Dobrogea în secolul XIII”. In *Dobrogea - model de conviețuire multiethnică și multiculturală*, coordonator Virgil Coman. Constanța: Editura Muntenia, pp. 56-57.

⁸ Simion Tavitian. 2003. *Armenii dobrogeni în istoria și civilizația românilor*. Constanța: Editura Ex Ponto, p. 5.

⁹ Rouben Paul Adalian. 2010. *Historical Dictionary of Armenia*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, p. 271.

¹⁰ Nicoară Toader. 2005. *Istoria și tradițiile minorităților din România*. Proiectul pentru Învățământul Rural, Ministerul Educației și Cercetării, p. 34.

¹¹ Ionescu Dobrogeanu M. D. 1904. *Dobrogea în pragul secolului al XX-lea*. București: Editura Atelierele Grafice I.V. Socec, p. 440.

trade was in the hands of the Greeks, Armenians and Jews¹².

The Armenians were not only famous traders. Some were skilled craftsmen, who combined utility with creative fantasy and elegance in the processing of gold and silver, being famous jewelers in Constanța.

In Armenian cuisine, oriental culinary art is combined with Mediterranean, with different tastes and aromas, and thanks to various spices, the dishes are unique. Over time, Armenian cuisine was enriched with culinary preparations from the cuisine of the Daco-Romanian group or other ethnic groups of Constanța.

2. The traditional musical repertoire of the Armenians of Constanța

I aimed to highlight in this study the dynamics of the traditional musical repertoire considered representative and practiced by the Armenian community in Constanța, taking into account the transformations produced in urban society and the effects of the globalization phenomenon.

I used indirect research methods (bibliographic research, analysis, synthesis) and direct (semi-directive interview, conversation, observation), and the information obtained was recorded in a digital system (audio and video), later transcribed with the aim of being disseminated to all those interested.

The field research that I conducted between April 2024 and May 2025 highlighted, in addition to the diminution of the cultural specificity and the ethno-cultural uniformity of the Armenians, the maintenance of dance melodies in the musical repertoire, but also the disappearance of traditional musical genres from the wedding repertoire or lullaby. All those interviewed told me that for more than sixty years, the musical repertoire of the Armenians had included sad songs that recalled their places of origin, heroes, and their brave deeds in the fight against the Turkish oppressors. No one was able to interpret such a song for me, although they had all heard them in their childhood when members of the community met on various occasions.

The only occasion for joy for the Armenians was the wedding. Over time, marriages between Armenians and Daco-Romanians were permitted, primarily due to the Orthodox Christian religion of the two ethnic groups¹³. It is difficult to reconstruct today the musical repertoire that accompanied the stages of the nuptial ritual. The lack of instrumental and vocal performers gradually led to the disappearance of these sequences from the wedding itself.

From the interlocutors we learned that in the past, finding a partner was the responsibility of the boy's family, who first sent a man to the girl's house to propose (propose marriage). If the boy was accepted by both the girl and the girl's parents, the engagement was fixed, the date for the wedding was set, the godparents, the best man and the maid of honor were chosen. It was the moment when the two young people saw each other and the girl received a gift, usually a gold ring. The wedding dress, considered the most important and most precious, was a special dress, according to tradition, red, made of velvet, silk and fine embroidery made with gold or silver thread, carefully kept in the family to be passed on to the next generation. A beautifully

¹² Nicolae Iorga. 1999. *Scrieri istorice despre armeni*. Ediție îngrijită, traduceri și note de Emanuel Actarian. Prefață de Andrei Pippidi. București: Editura Ararat, pp. 346- 347.

¹³ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Armenian-Apostolic-Church> biserica Armeană se definește ca fiind atât ortodoxă, cât și catolică, în măsura în care se consideră o expresie a adevăratei credințe creștine și a universalității Bisericii.

decorated green crown was worn on the head, these two colors, which symbolized luck and happiness, were also found in the colors of the suit worn by the son-in-law. The bride wore a silk veil on her head, gold coin necklaces around her neck, and jewelry on her hands, a filigree silver belt around her waist, and silk cords embroidered with gold or silver thread on her feet. The wedding continued at the church, where the bride and groom received the priest's blessing. After the religious wedding, the procession was invited to the party full of pomp and joy.

Today, the wedding ceremony has adapted to the taste of society, everything that was gradually considered anachronistic being replaced by new ceremonial sequences, borrowed from other cultures, especially from the West. For more than fifty years, young people have been choosing their partners without the help of their parents, and European wedding traditions have found their place among Armenian ones, some of which are now naturally merging. For example, the bride and groom choose to give up their parental home and prefer to go to the church from the hotel, this being a ritual sequence of more recent date. Even though the location of the ritual sequence has changed, the bride's cooking is still done by the bride's relatives, the godmother and bridesmaids, and in the case of the son-in-law, by the godfather or the best men.

Armenians also have wedding ritual sequences similar to the Dacian-Romanian ones. Among these, I would mention the white wedding dress instead of the red one, the payment that the groom must make to be able to enter the bride's house, the greeting after the religious wedding of the newlyweds by the mother-in-law, who places a towel (lavash) on their shoulders and offers them honey so that their life as a couple will be as sweet, the custom of offering the young couple monetary gifts, the throwing of the bride's bouquet, etc.

If the Armenian race is generally one of the most beautiful, this is due to the Thracians, from the same tribe as the Dacians, so that the two peoples, Romanian and Armenian, are related through Thracian blood, also inheriting some common characteristics: a penchant for poetry, a love of music, etc.

From those interviewed, I learned that in their places of origin, music resounded during religious rituals and festivities, being present in all community activities, accompanying them in moments of joy and sorrow, helping them overcome the trials of history. In the dialogues with those interviewed, I learned that the Armenians of Dobrogea did not have instrumental ensembles, as the Daco-Romanians had. There were no itinerant musicians who orally conveyed a community or cosmopolitan repertoire.

The traditional musical instruments used in the past by the community either belong to them and were created with a well-defined purpose, or were assimilated from the majority cultures and adapted to their own spiritual and aesthetic experiences. My interlocutors confessed to me that they knew from their grandparents about the musical instruments considered representative of this ethnic group. Even if the interviewees did not see or listen to these instruments during their childhood, they mentioned the duduk (a woodwind instrument made of apricot wood with a double reed), the zurna-ua (another woodwind instrument, also with a double reed) and the dhol (a percussion instrument with two membranes, struck only on one of the membranes, using a stick that has a thicker end, wrapped in felt or leather).¹⁴

¹⁴ Valeriu Bărbuceanu. 1999. *Dicționar de instrumente muzicale*. București: Editura Teora, p. 385.

The sound of the Duduk is similar to the human voice; it is in the low register, warm, sweet and velvety. This particularity is due to the character of its double reed¹⁵.

The Armenian zurna has its own particularities. Depending on the region, it can be made of apricot, walnut, cypress or pine wood. The instrument has 7 or 8 holes on the front, and a single hole on the back, which does not exist in some regions. A disc helps to block the pressure of the lips and allows for better dosing of the air flow¹⁶.

From Mrs. Anaid Tavitian, a renowned theater scholar of Armenian origin, I learned that Armenian families in Constanța wanted to take their children to music school or to a teacher to learn a musical instrument. She told me that at the beginning of the 20th century, there was an Armenian instrumentalist in Constanța who played the Kemenche and who gave lessons to those who wanted to learn this instrument. The Armenian Kemenche is an instrument with strings and a bow, which differs in shape and sound from the Persian Kemancheh considered the prototype.

From those interviewed, I learned that grandmothers sang very beautifully lullabies or sad songs in which they remembered the heroes and the terrible events that this people, so tried, went through in its millennial existence.

Armenians have preserved the custom of caroling in community practice. At Christmas, at the end of the religious service, the carol "Avedis" is sung with great joy. Currently, Armenian children sing carols during the winter holidays alongside the Daco-Romanians.

The proximity to the Daco-Romanian majority group gradually led to the moderate assimilation of the Armenians, an aspect favored by the common elements found in the mentality and sensitivity of the two communities but also by the evolution of society that determined irreversible changes in terms of the patriarchal lifestyle of the community under research.

Economic globalization, marriages outside the group, the gradual disappearance of vocal and instrumental performers, etc., are some of the factors that favored the passage into the passive memory of the community of some genres from the traditional musical repertoire. In addition to the restriction or disappearance of some genres from the musical repertoire, the dialect, interpersonal relations within the group, the choreographic repertoire, organology, customs, and traditional clothing also suffered.

The same factors have produced changes in the perception of belonging to the community, and currently the Armenian community in Constanța believes that the preservation of ethnic identity depends primarily on the maintenance of the Armenian language.

Regarding the traditional musical repertoire, we noted that the most resistant musical genre remained dance music. Dances are an integral part of the community life of Armenians, and their practice determines the affirmation of cultural identity in the alien cultural space of Constanța.

Acculturation also threatens this ethnic heritage, and the Armenian Union of Constanta makes sustained efforts to transmit the dances to younger generations. The "Nairi" traditional dance ensemble of the Armenian Union of Romania, the Constanta branch, with an exclusively female composition, performs almost entirely for concerts, cultural programs and tourist shows.

The traditional costumes worn by the dancers ensure the "cultural survival" of the community, being true resources of ethnographic representativeness. They were recreated from photographs in the personal archives of the community members or from memories. A

¹⁵ Gerard Madilian. 2017. *Traditional Armenian instrumental music*. Publisher: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, p. 168.

¹⁶ Gerard Madilian, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.

standardized model was accepted, unanimously accepted by the community members, even though it is known that in the places of origin different types of costumes coexisted, both for women and for men.

Through dance, the participants connect with the community they belong to, as well as affirm their cultural identity in the amalgamated Dobrogea space. Currently considered cultural-media products with real emotional advantages, traditional dances performed on stage create a sense of pride in belonging to an ethnic group, integration into the community, and social interaction.

3. Conclusions

Traditions and music are closely intertwined, with music serving as an important means of expressing and preserving ethno-cultural heritage throughout generations. This paper aims to highlight the dynamics of the traditional musical repertoire of the Armenians of Constanța, by providing a perspective on the identity and collective memory threatened by acculturation and globalization, phenomena that have led to the uniformity of cultural diversity. Following the research I conducted, I found that for the Armenian community of Constanța, tradition involves the transmission of customs, knowledge and practices from one generation to another, in order to ensure the preservation of community cultural values.

Traditional dance music and caroling constitute a vital heritage for Armenians, reflecting the history, values and identity of the community. Passed down from generation to generation, this treasure unites people, promoting a sense of belonging and a common experience. Unique melodies, rhythms and instruments represent for this ethnic group a diverse way of human expression, with roots in different regions and eras. This heritage allows younger generations to connect with their origins, embracing their collective past. Beyond art, traditional dance music and caroling connect the past and the present, ensuring cultural reconstruction for future generations.

In Dobrogea, each ethno-culture boasts unique musical traditions, which are often used in ceremonies, festivals and in everyday life to convey the history, values, mentality, attitudes and behaviors of the group.

Among the elements that currently maintain the ethno-cultural belonging of Armenians to the community, we mention the use of the Armenian language, religious ethnonymy, ethno-history, traditional clothing, musical dance repertoire and ethno-choreography. These will continue to ensure the identity imprint that is so important in an alien environment and in a period when globalization threatens with denationalization and uniformity.

We hope that this contribution will be useful for future efforts regarding the research and valorization of the Armenian musical repertoire, and will also constitute an incentive for the preservation and transmission of tradition.

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