

The Uncarolling, a Ritual Act Performed by Carolling Groups

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Abstract: *Among the Romanian folk traditions, the customs related to the winter holidays occupy an important place. Carolling is, without a doubt, one of the most representative practices of the winter period, whereas very little is known about another parallel practice called uncarolling.*

The uncarolling is an archaic Romanian custom with powerful magical-ritual facets, which belongs to the practices related to Christmas carolling. The uncarolling is a form of ritual and social reaction to the hosts' refusal to accept the carollers or their inappropriate treatment of the carolling guests. Although less known in the present, this custom had a particularly important ethnographic value in the Romanian folklore.

Keywords: *carol; carolling; uncarolling; tradition; custom;*

Introduction

Carolling is one of the most representative traditions of the Romanian people, which takes place during the winter holidays, especially on Christmas Eve. This custom combines elements of Christian spirituality with various reminiscences of pre-Christian practices, having multiple functions: ritual, social, educative, and artistic².

The act of carolling is not merely an artistic expression, it is also a process of social integration and education. Thus, young people learn the carols, year after year, from parents and grandparents, while taking part in the carolling becomes a way to pass on the traditional artistic heritage, as well as the norms of behaviour and the religious faith. The carollers are rewarded by the hosts with various symbolic gifts (pastry, apples, nuts, money), which reflects the mutuality of this custom³.

1. Carolling in the Romanian Communities: Tradition, Rite, and Cultural Parallelisms

In the rural environment, the organization of the carolling custom starts as early as the beginning of the Nativity Fast, when groups of children, lads, and even adults gather at a host's house to learn the carols. On Christmas Eve, they start walking through the village and carolling at all homes with diverse literary themes depending on the hosts' wishes. The groups are often organized according to criteria of age and gender, and choosing a leader (called *vătaf* or *staroste*) is essential for the good progression of the custom⁴.

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² Otilia Hedeșan. 2010. *Rites of passage and carols [Rituri de trecere și colinde]*. Timișoara: Editura Universității de Vest, p. 37.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 112.

⁴ Ion Ghinoiu. 2003. *Romanian holidays and customs [Sărbători și obiceiuri românești]*. București: Editura Elion, p. 82.

Carolling is also an occasion to strengthen the social connections among the villagers. The hosts welcome the carollers with joy, offering them various gifts: pastry, apples, nuts, wine, symbolic gifts that reflect not only the hospitality, but also the social status of each host.

Beside the religious message that the carols communicate, certain ritual gestures are associated: walking in groups of carollers, hitting the ground with clubs, scanning and well-wishing, all of which contribute to the invocation of fertility and the protection of the household. These aspects lead to an archaic mythical fund which precedes Christianity.

The carolling custom can be encountered in all areas of the country, with local variations regarding the verse, the melodic line, and the manner of singing. Carolling starts on Christmas Eve, and in some areas, people still carol on Christmas Day and even until the eve of Epiphany. This custom can be found in the traditions of other peoples as well, and has significant resemblances to the Romanian one. In Poland, the custom called *kolędownie* consists in carolling with a bright star carried by children while they are singing various religious texts. In the Ukraine, *koliadka* contains texts on the Birth of the Lord, and in some areas pre-Christian themes similar to the Romanian ones are preserved. In Germany and Austria, the *Sternsinger* tradition involves groups of masked children who walk around blessing the homes.

All these practices highlight the universality of the desire for ritual around Christmas time. The Romanians have preserved carolling by means of oral transmission, from generation to generation, and nowadays it is practiced not only in rural, but also in urban environments.

1.1. The Origin of the Carols

Carols have religious or lay themes specific to Christmas. Their origin is closely connected to the syncretism between the old pagan rites and the Christian tradition, a phenomenon that appears mostly with the Romanians. In the pre-Christian period, the village communities celebrated the winter solstice through various fertility rituals accompanied by songs and dances, which were meant to chase away evil spirits and attract good luck for the new agricultural year⁵.

After the Christianization of the European people, the carols were adapted to convey the message of the birth of Jesus, however maintaining many elements of the anterior rituals, such as the form of collective well-wishing, the performance of the ritual by groups and the presence of ritual gestures, such as: visiting peoples' homes, the use of symbolic objects such as bells or drums⁶.

The carols have a ritual function of well-wishing for the hosts' health, for the richness of the harvests and for fertility. Monica Brătulescu asserted the following aspect related to the function of the carols: "The function expresses the relationship between the meaning involved in a text and the text as a manifest act in the system of folk culture"⁷.

⁵ Mircea Eliade. 1995. *From Zalmoxis to Genghis-Khan [De la Zalmoxis la Genghis-Han]*. București: Editura Humanitas, p. 102.

⁶ Ion Ghinoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

⁷ Brătulescu Monica. 1976. „Several explanations about the use of the notion of function in folklore” [„Câteva precizări în legătură cu utilizarea noțiunii de funcție în folclor”], *Journal of Ethnography and Folklore*, Tom 21, no. 1, București p. 46.

The main way to sing carols is in groups, in unison, facilitated by the fact that, in terms of rhythm, almost all carols are measured⁸. A particularity often encountered in some areas of Transylvania is that the carollers also sing antiphonically or *părechește* (in two groups).

The Romanian carols have been preserved and passed down orally from generation to generation, and starting with the 19th century, folklorists started collecting, researching, and publishing them. The most important literary themes of the Romanian carols are connected to the birth of Jesus, the hospitality of the host, the prosperity of the household, as well as elements of a cosmogonic nature.

2. The Uncarolling – a Romanian Ritual Practice

The uncarolling is an action of symbolic reversal of the carolling and is resorted to solely when the host refuses to welcome the carollers, not offering the appropriate hospitality or, worse, when they reject them completely. In these situations, the carollers retort by a revenge ritual (*ritual de rezbunare*), expressing their resent towards the refusal of the host, using an inappropriate conduct that involves symbolic acts and formulas of punishment. Even though the carolling is an act of benevolence, the uncarolling reverses these intentions, standing in a relationship of opposition, being endowed with a normative, educative, and moralizing value. Among the traditional community, Petru Caraman identifies in his study⁹ several functions of the uncarolling, among which:

- The normative function, in which the uncarolling involves a sanction for the hosts who do not abide by the norms of the community, especially by those connected to the carolling custom. The hosts who do not allow the carollers into their homes to sing their carols are considered inhospitable and stingy, a behaviour that is symbolically punished through uncarolling.

- The educative function that intends to educate the community members on the importance of mutual respect and collaboration, highlighting the fact that not abiding by these principles leads to uncarolling and social humiliation.

- The cathartic function, as the uncarolling offers a form of releasing the tensions and frustrations accumulated by the carollers, who express their dissatisfaction with the host who refuses them.

- The social cohesion function where the uncarolling practiced in groups of carollers is a way to preserve social cohesion and solidarity, strengthening the connections among the community members by means of the ritualistic behaviour.

3. Uncarolling Methods

The uncarolling is not a mere reaction of dissatisfaction of the carollers towards the host, but also a clear system of practices containing symbolic, social, and magical-ritual implications. The Romanian people, regardless of their native area, have used various uncarolling methods, which have been preserved and passed down from one generation to the next. In the following I

⁸ Ioan Bocșa. 2022. *Carols in the area of the middle Mureș river, Case study on a musical typological group [Colinda în zona Mureșului Mijlociu, Studiu asupra unui grup tipologic muzical]*. Cluj-Napoca: Editura MediaMusica, Editura Curs, p. 10.

⁹ Petru Caraman. 1997. *Uncarolling in the Orient and South-East of Europe [Descolindatul în Orientul și sud-estul Europei]*, Studii de folclor comparat. Iași: Editura Universității Al. I. Cuza.

shall describe some of these methods, which were also mentioned by ethnologist Petru Caraman¹⁰ in his research:

3.1. Verbal Uncarolling (Caroller's Curse)

One of the most frequent methods of uncarolling, encountered almost all over the country, is the verbal method, through which the carollers express their disapproval by means of various satirical verse or even curses. These were composed on the spot and their role was to disrupt the blessing of the carolling:

Dare-ar brânca-n porci/May your pigs get diamond skin,
Și holera-n găini/And your hens cholera,
Dare-ar ciuma-n boi//May your oxen get the plague,
Și gălbeaza-n oi/And your sheep the fluke,
Dare-ar turba-n câni/ May your dogs get rabies,
Lovi-i-ar inima pe stăpâni/ And their masters heart disease!¹¹

By using this formula, the carollers symbolically cancel the beneficial effect of the carolling and impose a type of symbolic punishment upon the host. Such texts can include invocations of drought, famine or ill-luck in the household, expressing a ritualized aggressiveness.

3.2. Symbolic Gestures Which Punish

Another frequent method consists of symbolic gestures performed in the neighbourhood of the host's household. The carollers placed straw or ashes before the door, as a sign of contempt, they threw mud or dirty water on the threshold of the host's door, they chased the poultry and the cattle out of the yard, or turned various objects upside down (water jugs, cart wheels), signalling an inversion of the natural order of the household. These gestures are regarded as a form of reversed magic, where the carollers transform the positive energy of the well-wishing into a negative one, symbolizing the *undoing* of the carol¹².

3.3. Ritual Silence and Shunning of the Household

In some regions, the carollers did not utter any words in the neighbourhood of the respective house, being considered *inhospitable*, which represented a serious form of symbolic marginalization. This silence had a negative role equivalent with a wordless curse, while the refusal to carol was perceived as a *rupture from the world*. In the rural environment, the lack of carollers at the gate was seen as a punishment, which was heavier than the curse uttered by the carollers. This method of shunning was considered the worse form of uncarolling.

¹⁰ Petru Caraman. 1983. *Carolling with the Romanians, the Slavs, and other peoples [Colindatul la români, slavi și alte popoare]*. București: Editura Minerva.

¹¹ Iulia Gorneanu. 2011. *Carolling and uncarolling [Colindatul și descolindatul]*. Retrieved May 4, 2025, from <https://jurnalul.ro/calendar/colindatul-si-descolindatul-599004.html>.

¹² Petru Caraman. 1983, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

3.4. Parodic Songs

In some areas of Moldavia, Muntenia, and sometimes Transylvania, the uncarolling took the form of a parodic song, in which the stingy landlord became a negative character. The carollers would replace the traditional carol verses with various satirical lines addressed directly to the host:

*Mere racu a pești/The crayfish goes a-wooing,
La fetița broștiți/To the frog's daughter,
-Bună ziua, roscă, broscă/'Good day to you', says he,
Dă-mi tu, Broscă, fata mie!/'Give me your daughter to marry!'
-Ba, io, fata nu ți-oi da,/'That I shall not do,
Că n-ai clop de comânac,/'For you have no fine hat
Nici picior de nădrag/And no trousers on.'¹³*

These verses are also seen as a warning for the rest of the community about the risks of social marginalization.

3.5. Carolling Backward

A rare, yet significant type, is also the reversed or backward carolling, where the carollers sing the carol in reverse (the last verse comes first and the first verse comes last), thus annulling the symbolic act. This reversed carol is associated to various magical beliefs about turning blessings into curses¹⁴.

3.6. The Uncarolling of Other South European Peoples

The uncarolling is a phenomenon that spread not only on the territory of our country, but also on the territories of other South-European countries, bearing a significant resemblance with customs from the Ukraine, Russia, Greece, and Serbia, which proves that it is a quite common tradition. Petru Caraman extends his analysis of uncarolling and other similar customs of other South-European peoples, comparing them to those of the Romanians.

- In the Ukraine and Russia, the uncaolling appears as a reaction of revenge against a cold, inhospitable treatment. The carollers from these regions resort to various curses of the harvests or to the symbolic maltreatment of the households, in a similar manner as the Romanians.

- The Greek practice uncarolling using ironical expressions addressed to the landladies who are not hospitable to the carollers. The carollers make various jokes or funny remarks that nevertheless bear a symbolic heaviness that brings a subtle revenge against the hosts.

- In Poland and Serbia, we encounter the same ritual practices that reverse the carolling (the gates are soiled with ashes or ashes are thrown in the yard), meaning to punish the hosts for their lack of hospitality.

4. Conclusions

¹³ Ioan Boeşa. 2009. *Traditional vocal music from Sălaj [Muzică vocală tradițională din Sălaj]*. Cluj-Napoca: Editura MediaMusica, Fundația Culturală TerrArmonia, p. 373.

¹⁴ Petru Caraman. 1983. *op. cit.*, p. 250.

The uncarolling represents an essential component of the Romanian ritual of carolling, with the symbolic role of punishing the deviations from certain community norms, particularly the lack of hospitality. Even though it is less known in the present, the uncarolling has a profound value, expressing the collective reaction to certain inappropriate behaviours. In various forms – from uttering curses, symbolic gestures or ritual silence – this custom conveys clear moral messages: those who refuse the carollers are temporarily excluded from the community. Thus, the uncarolling is not merely a form of ritualistic revenge, but also an educational act, which strengthens the values of solidarity, generosity, and respect for tradition and the carollers.

Also, the presence of the uncarolling in several Southeast Europe cultures confirms its archaic and universal character, being an expression of the community's need to maintain balance and cohesion by means of symbols and rituals.

In conclusion, the uncarolling must not be regarded as a simple refusal reaction, but as an integral part of a complex ritual structure, which has been in use in the rural communities alongside the actual carolling custom.

Even though in the present this practice has almost entirely disappeared, its analysis helps us understand the importance of ritual acts in the archaic societies and the manner in which people sought to influence, symbolically and practically, the unfolding of their collective destiny.

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