

## SPACE AND TIME WITHIN THE ROMANIAN MENTALITY

Ileana Simona Dabu\*

*Keywords:* mentality, evil place, good place, holy place, time measurement

*Cuvinte cheie:* mentalitate, loc rău, loc bun, spații sacre, măsurarea timpului

### *Introduction*

The traditional Romanian village is a model of existence in the spirit of the ideal of communion without which man risks to disappear into his own isolation. The tavern's achievements carry along generations symbolic motifs of great length. Petre Țuțea says that "the Romanian ethnics must be contemplated as a platonic idea, that is, the Romanian substance must be removed out of time as incorruptible".<sup>1</sup>

Time in Romanian society was perceived differently. Time was measured by itself, that is, there was a time for work and another for action. Time is "incomprehensible in the absence of events happening in it".<sup>2</sup> A day of work in the village began at dawn. Men woke up, dressed, washed their faces, prayed, ate something at bay, and their first concern was to nourish and feed the animals. In the summer, when they were going to the field, work was interrupted three times for food and rest: a small lunch, a hearty meal and rest, these became the landmarks of time. The length of time was indicated after the sun went down in the sky.

The peasant did not know the notion of free time or special time for rest because the rest was integrated in his work. In the Romanian mentality the ideas about the organization of the living space are not limited to the domestic microcosm, but this mentality has a much larger power, encompassing the creation of the macrocosm with the earth, the sky and the celestial bodies.

---

\* West University Timișoara, bd. Vasile Pirvan, no. 4, e-mail: ileana.dabu@e-uvt.ro

<sup>1</sup> Petre Țuțea, *Omul- Tratat de antropologie creștină* (Iași: Timpul, 1992), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Ion Ghinioiu, *Vârstele timpului* (București: Meridiane, 1988), 6.

### *The notion of place*

For the Romanian peasant, the place is represented in a special way, the place is a concrete given, of a great variation, with its own attributes, impossible to define abstractly. The place is defined by its specific quality, in its material data and its spiritual potential.

Ernest Bernea classifies places in two categories, a good place and evil place. The first one is fruitful, bringer of good, always positive; the second is unfruitful, bringer of evil, always negative. This way of classifying the place is very widespread in all the ethnographic areas of our country. It is a given that we obtain not only through manifestations of the traditional village, but also in the most evolved settlements.<sup>3</sup>

The good place and the evil place are defined by permanent or accidental elements and have distinct natures: "The good place is a holy place, everything becomes beautiful and powerful and the fruits are ripened. The evil place is a place of weakness that causes man to fall into sin, the evil place comes out of the spirit".<sup>4</sup> A good or bad place can mean two distinct things, as it relates to its material or spiritual nature. However, the shape of the place (hill, valley, shore, elbow) does not remain completely detached from some specific qualities, although it is about the material nature, the form is a kind of indication of the value and meaning that a place may have: "The place is always twisted, it's not always the same. Behold, there's the valley and there's the hill, our house is right at the foot of the hill".<sup>5</sup>

Ernest Bernea also speaks about the protected place as a good place, that can't become bad, as it often happens with the other places when they produce scenarios that transform their quality, regardless if it happens naturally or artificially. Protected places are primarily the church, the garden or the grave.

The bad consequences of the evil place would be, according to popular belief, many and varied. If man walks in these places he can start feeling pain within his body, he could lose his voice or even become paralyzed. These consequences are manifested both in the physical, of health and the physical world, and psychic, of the soul. Unpredictable and inexplicable inner states are often blamed on wandering into an evil place: "Today I was in a bad place, otherwise, I wouldn't be behaving like this".<sup>6</sup>

In connection with the evil place, there is a whole system of beliefs in our archaic village, with significant events for the study of the general mentality of

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Bernea, *Spațiu, timp și cauzalitate la poporul român* (București: Humanitas, 1997), 21.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 27.

this village, the owner of some ways of life and manifestations coming from the depths of our people's past.

Evil places are determined by geography: shores, swamps, forests, and others are naturally bad, fairies or bindweed, and besides them there are those artificially created by man (curses, charms, crimes).

### *The notion of direction*

The direction is for human consciousness a condition of movement in space. If space is varied in quality, implicitly the directions in this space are valued. The concept of direction implies a meaning and value according to two coordinates; one is related to the qualitative determinants of space, and the other to the goals, the objectives pursued.

Movement gives birth to the idea of direction in the mind of man. Its study traces a set of elements that belong to the system of archaic beliefs on nature, revealing a way of thinking about this fundamental category that is space.<sup>7</sup>

The right and left are the most important and defining poles in the research of the notion of direction in general. The right adjective along with all its derivatives are positively connotated instead, the left adjective is associated with a number of negative meanings.

The left and right have different axiological values, this duality being the basis of the binary differentiation that organizes the mythological thinking network originating from the Paleolithic. It is associated with male-female dichotomy, the two complementary principles at the base of life.

The archaic division of the house reflects this duality, the right side is reserved for men, the left side for women, as well as the association of the right hand with the male's world and the left with the women's world.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond these two directions, left and right, the positions of the world and objects are fixed to the cardinal points. They are four in number: East, West, South and North. The Romanian peasant does not use these scientific connotations, but instead uses those abstract terms. He rather refers to them as the positions of the sun, dawn, dusk, midday and midnight.

Space is defined by the relationship between the horizontal plane of the earth and the hemisphere of the sky. The visible world of the Romanian peasant falls within these dimensions of the horizon. From the crossroads of the village, the four directions of the cardinal points are east, west, south, north. This cross of the horizon, however, has a game that belongs to the seasons. Two of the

<sup>7</sup> Mircea Vulcănescu, *Dimensiunea românească a existenței* (București: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 1992), 67.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Caillois, *Omul și sacrul* (București: Nemira, 1997), 36.

cardinal points are fixed, namely the south and the north. The other two depart or approach the perpendicular to the equinox by giving the summer and winter solstice.

Cardinal points fix the positions of the world and of things. The whole world is observed and appreciated by a continuous relationship at the four cardinal points, things are also determined by the place that occupies it in space, relative to their position on the same cardinal points.

The world exists and manifests itself on two coordinates, time and space. The space is divided into sizes and distances, the relationships of things that exist in space are determined according to the cardinal points. They have the qualities and functions and the place occupied by these points.

If the house is facing east or south, we have a positive state, and if it is set to face the west or the north we have a negative state. The same happens with placing things inside the house or in the garden, field or well. An icon, a bed, a flower, or a clam with wheat sheaves each get a spatial orientation according to the quality of the cardinal points.

Right and left in the traditional representation of space are places and qualitative directions. This identification goes to some determinations of great importance.

### *The passage to the domestic sacrament*

L. Frobenius, after studying the peoples of Africa, establishes two types of living: outdoors or in the tent, which for desert nomads means to live in the possible house whose walls are the sky.<sup>9</sup>

There is also a tradition of moral, psychological and religious significance from outside and inside, danger and safety, public and private, sacred and profane. In the Romanian thinking the three places and moments of the passage: the gate, the threshold and the door, are very well marked. This is evidenced by their participation in the rites, at the most important moments in family and community life.

The gate underlines the vulnerability of the passage to the domestic world. Mircea Eliade wrote: "The gate fulfills in the life of the Romanian people the role of a magical creature, who watches to all the capital acts of the life of the individual. The first pass on through the entrance means almost an entrance in life, in the real life outside. The gate watches marriage, and through the gate the dead man is taken, solemnly to his resting place. It is then a return to the first

---

<sup>9</sup> Leo Frobenius, *Cultura Africii: prolegomena la o teorie a configurării istorice* (București: Meridiane, 1982), 56.

world, the cycle is closed and the gate remains further away, with a lesser man, to watch other births, other weddings, other deaths”.<sup>10</sup>

The gate is a symbol of transition, transformation, stages, the isomorph of the bridge, because it separates and binds at the same time two states, two worlds, two territories. The bridge is a symbol of the connection between two sacred spaces or between two contingent worlds, but exploited differently. It's a component of the symbolic road, but also an obstacle to the hike. Bridges, decks and debris are the favoured places for evil spirits gather, expecting their victims. Hence the custom of the Romanians to place guard posts, zoomorphism, sculpted figures on both sides of the bridge. Bridge builders usually form closed professional confessional groups, being assimilated with wizards or priests. The name of the Pontifex Roman priests comes from the 1st of the “bridge maker”.<sup>11</sup>

The threshold marks the transition from one space to another, in a new phase of existence. Ivan Evseev considers the threshold a passage from a profane space into a sacred place, hence the obligation of purification or discharging to some peoples at the entrance to the temple or house.<sup>12</sup> The threshold plays one an important role in the rites of passage: at birth, the child was on the threshold with a stone placed on a plank, and the stone was buried at the bottom of the courtyard, at the marriage the bride passed the threshold of the house into the arms of the seam so as not to cross the threshold and thus offend the memory of the ancestors, the dead's coffin is stopped for a few minutes on the threshold before leaving his house.

The door is a natural symbol of imminent penetration. Behind every closed and locked door there is a mystery. Being the entrance and exit point, the door receives magical virtues of closing and opening. No matter how paradoxical, the door is more of a means of protecting the quality of space, whose harmony would be disturbed by the presence of unwelcomed guests from the earthly and spiritual world.<sup>13</sup>

If any traditional house is a cosmic micromodel, the chimney performs the role the axis of the world, is the way of communicating with the world above. The Horn connects the hearth, which is the seat of the spirits of the ancestors, with the sky through the fire and the smoke rising from the hearth. It is also the gate the main penetration of the house spirits and all heavenly influences. It is

<sup>10</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Sacrul și profanul* (București: Humanitas, 1993), 72.

<sup>11</sup> Ivan Evseev, *Dicționar de simboluri și arhetipuri culturale* (Timișoara: Amarcord, 2001), 157.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>13</sup> Delia Suiogan, *Simbolistica riturilor de trecere* (București: Paideea, 2006), 27.

also the symbol of social ties, as the chimney and the hearth are places where familiar ceremonies are held.

Evseev said about the window that it is the eye of the house.<sup>14</sup> It mediates oppositions inside and outside, closed-open, danger-safety, linking the privacy of the home to the outside world. It is the place of the entrances and exits, “unregulated”, so it was supposed that the evil spirits could enter the window, hence and the habit of putting different objects on the windows that come out into the street: plants or curtains apotropaic properties. Through an entrance or an exit through the window, death and illness could be deceived. The dead man, not knowing where to return, sometimes went out the window, and during the moves from one house to another, the children were introduced to the window. In stories and in love poetry, the window symbolizing the face is the last line separating two lovers.

### *Conclusions*

The house has always been perceived as a construction destined for durability, so it was impossible to build a house, anywhere or anyway, the main concern of man was to turn the place for construction into a real space, the house as a microcosm can only be placed in the center of the world.

At the inauguration of a living space, religious ceremonies are held for this purpose. The cleansing practices of the living space have been honestly observed and transmitted from generation to generation, so when moved to a new house, you must take a new broom, the old one need to be left in the old house, and when building or repairing the roof of a house, a cross, a wicker and a basil branch are placed on the top of the roof, to guard the space and those who will live there.

So, the door, the threshold, the gate, the window mark the border between the inside and outside. They put the house under the sign of initiation. Repeated enterings and exits send us to the idea of the *initiator travel* and have an important role in all the proper rites of the transition from non-existence to being and then to death.

## SPAȚIUL ȘI TIMPUL ÎN MENTALITATEA ROMÂNEASCĂ

### *Rezumat*

În satul tradițional tot ce are omul mai vechi atinge veșnicia și este nou în fiecare zi. Fiecare lucru dintr-o gospodărie avea sensul și locul lui. Țăranul are grijă în fiecare zi să

<sup>14</sup> Ivan Evseev, *Dicționar de simboluri și arhetipuri culturale* (Timișoara: Amarcord, 2001), 151.

respecte tot ce-l înconjoară în gospodărie: ochiul magic al casei, locurile bune și rele, timpul după care se ghidează zi de zi în desfășurarea activităților sale. Ochiul magic al casei, adică ochiul de sticlă din acoperiș, veghează cu privirea ageră tot ceea ce se întâmplă în gospodărie. Timpul pentru omul de la sat era împărțit în timp de toate zilele, fiind dedicat muncii și timp pentru sărbători, adică timpul sacru.

Casa țaranului a fost percepută ca o construcție sortită durabilității, aceasta nu putea să fie contruită oriunde și oricum. Omul respecta toate ritualurile de ridicare a unei case, de la îngroparea în temelia acesteia a unor obiecte cu rol ocrotitor până la înalțarea pe acoperiș a unui copac sau cruce atunci când era construcția terminată. Cele trei locuri de trecere (poarta, pragul și ușa) dintr-o gospodărie au fost foarte bine marcate. Ca simbol al trecerii, poarta separă și leagă două lumi, pragul marchează trecerea dintr-un spațiu profan într-un spațiu sacru, iar ușa este considerată un mijloc de protejare a spațiului, datorită închiderii și deschiderii ei. Așadar, orice lucru care se înfăptuiește în viața de zi cu zi a țaranului, are ceva magic care trebuie să se supună rânduielilor din vechime.