

# DYNAMICS OF CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS IN BANAT. CASE STUDY CONDUCTED IN AN URBAN CENTER – TIMIȘOARA

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## *Methodological aspects of the study*

The case study was conducted based on applied interviews (2018–2019) in the urban center-Timișoara, the residence and largest city of Timiș County. The interviewees (aged between 20 and 60) were open and interested in the topics covered in the interviews.

The objective pursued in the case study was: to identify the evolution of Christmas customs in the period 1970–2019 in the Banat region, more precisely in the urban center – Timișoara.

### *1. Specific habits*

The celebration is made of: core of holiness, a clean place, the good time, the received soul, the word, the gesture and the right thing.<sup>1</sup>

The feast has three essential functions: it maintains the relationship with the sacred; puts society in harmony with the Cosmos; restores the community group.<sup>2</sup>

Within the city, the majority of the population being settled here from various areas of the country and from the surroundings, there are a multitude of customs, both within the family, but especially throughout the city. Timișoara, being in a continuous development and constantly being in contact with other

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<sup>1</sup> Vasile Băncilă, *Duhul sărbătorii* (București: Anastasia, 1996), 81.

<sup>2</sup> Irina Nicolau, *Ghidul Sărbătorilor românești* (București: Humanitas, 1998), 13.

cultures, the Romanian customs and traditions end up being touched by all of this, by the course that the Romanian society follows. We will be able to see many habits that have emerged from one year to another or habits that are not considered traditional.

At present, people and especially those from the urban environment are still able to create and enhance the holiday.<sup>3</sup>

The customs such as caroling, the Christmas tree and Santa Claus that are practiced within the family sound approximately the same in every family in the urban environment, they are also complemented by small rituals specific to each family. Traditions can also be influenced by the ethnographic area from which the family migrated to Timisoara.

“In the family it is customary to make some gifts on the occasion of Christmas, these are placed under the decorated Christmas tree.” (Male, 28 years old)

People do not perceive celebration as people used to do. For them, the holiday induces fear, because it takes them out of their reality.<sup>4</sup>

The habits that take place within the family are maintained almost the same for a fairly long period of time. For example, the family habits that were practiced 10 years ago are still practiced in contrast to the habits of the whole society that have undergone changes, which are complemented by new habits brought from other peoples or invented more recently by people or which, before the 1990s, were banned because of the political regime.

“Before 1989, I don’t remember the festive atmosphere in the city as it is now, but more in the family, there was a festive atmosphere. There were no loudspeakers in the center of the city, and no biblical scenes were made.” (female 50 years)

The non-family habits, the collective ones, from the whole city level, present a rather complex area. One of the main customs that appeared in the city, in addition to the carol of children’s groups, is the street carol with masks that represent the embodiment of various animals such as the goat or the bear. The whole scene that the carolers play refers to some moments in the human life cycle: birth (when the costume is made), life (the goat’s game) and death (when the character throws himself to the ground). These moments refer to the passage of time, to the year that dies and is reborn with the appearance of the new year.

During the Christmas holidays in the churches, after the liturgy carols are

<sup>3</sup> Ion Ghinoiu, *Obiceiuri populare de peste an* (București: Ed. Fundației Culturale Române, 1997), 92

<sup>4</sup> Sorin Lavric, *Cartea de Crăciun* (București: Humanitas, 1997), 155.

sung, and in some churches after the service, scenes are organized regarding the Birth of Jesus Christ.

“On December 25 at noon, after the Holy Mass, this piece is made by the Army of the Lord and then he goes to several churches. Here in the city, right after the Revolution, I saw in the Cross Square this piece made by those from the Lord’s Army.” (woman, 67 years)

Lately, the image of Santa Claus is used throughout December. In this sense, the symbols of Christmas stand out in the most diverse places and contexts and are used mainly for commercial purposes, where their religious significance is often neglected.

“In recent years in the big stores, (for example at the mall)” there is also a Santa Claus who listens to children’s poems, takes pictures with them and gives gifts to children.” (man, 34 years)

## *2. The Christmas carol*

With the carol, they generally walk on the eve of Eve, on December 24. There are groups of street carolers, those with mats to get through as much of the city as possible, start walking a few days before Christmas, but we also meet them a few days after Christmas. Other street groups such as choirs with marching bands from different churches or theology students go with the carol on the eve night, usually after 00:00. These groups appeared after the revolution, so they are 30 years old, before ’89 they did not exist or at least their existence in the city was not known.

“Those who walk the streets of the city with the goat or the bear, they usually come from the villages and are groups of Roma or various groups that are part of choirs or church fanfares but they carol their friends or relatives, not carol on the streets of the city. Even the priests from some parishes go with children to carol in front of the blocks of flats.” (man; 60 years old)

In general, the most famous carolers we meet both in the city and in the village are the children. We can meet them alone or in a group of 2–3 friends, neighbors, relatives. There were mixed groups as well as groups only of boys or only girls of different ages, but not older than 16–17 years, because they were ashamed to participate. In the period before the ’90s, I also met younger children who, if they knew any carols, would go to relatives for Christmas.

“The carol is walked after sunset, in the evenings, on Christmas Eve. In general, carolers are children up to 15 years old and walk in groups of 2–3.” (man, 29 years)

“On Christmas Eve, December 24; then he walks with the carol, you have a lot of children going. Before, children from kindergarten also walked, learned

collides in kindergarten and went caroling with the Gentiles. They received showers, salons (tree candies), oranges, money.” (woman, 60 years old)

### 3. *Fog, groups of carolers*

In Timișoara there are several groups of carolers. First of all are the large groups of carolers and the small groups of carolers made up of children.

Among large groups of adult carol singers, the interviewees identified:

- “groups that go with the bear or the goat and I suspect that they are one in 2–3 neighborhoods”;

- “groups of church members, parishioners in the choir or marching bands, or theology students”;

- “groups of folk ensembles or folk art schools” (male, 25 years old)

These groups consist of at least seven people, but can reach up to 25–30 people. They are made up of young people, adults but also elderly people. In general, these groups have a leader, a more resourceful person who coordinates them and makes sure that each member fulfills his duties. It becomes responsible for the entire activity and for the route it will follow. In general, they carol on Christmas Eve, with the exception of groups of masked people who carol a few days before Christmas and after Christmas to go through as many neighborhoods and make as much money as possible. These groups participate more to improve their financial situation in a short period of time, unlike the groups of carolers formed in a church without receiving any reward in return. They have the pleasure of announcing the great news of the Nativity of the Savior, unlike the masked carolers whose carol has a secular character.

“Yes, they have a leader when they start singing, they are guided. They also have young people and older people who lead them. There are also small groups of 7–8, but even 15 or even 20 are enough and most of them are older. Even older people over the age of 50 participate.” (woman, 48 years)

“There are other such groups in the city, sometimes it happens that more groups meet. Last year, two groups met in front of the block, joined together and put on a very beautiful show together, then each resumed their route. They also have a leader, usually the one who makes the route, he saves the money received.” (woman, 60 years old)

### 4. *The place where they carol*

The places where they carol differ depending on the size and type of the group of carolers. If the carolers are children, then they go caroling in the neighborhood, to neighbors, relatives, acquaintances. They don’t go to strangers unless there are several carolers in a group. If the carolers are groups organized

by the church, then they go to the families of the group members, to other members of their denomination, and if we refer to the folk ensembles, they go with the carol to the local institutions.

“I go to acquaintances, neighbors, relatives, because it is dangerous to go where you do not know, because you don’t, but where you know them, where you were before and in the previous year you can go with the carol” (woman, 55 years)

“The groups of folk ensembles generally go to the City Hall, to different companies, headquarters of political parties, prefecture. I met them last year in front of the Timișoara City Hall.” (Man, 35 years old)

“I have a cosmetic office, here, in the area in Calea Girocului and my carolers came there and I received them with joy” (woman, 45 years old)

Groups of carolers with masks roam the entire city, depending on the size of the group. In general, those who walk with the bear, the goat or those organized in similar ensembles roam the streets, make specific noises that accompany the shouts or carols, as appropriate, to be heard by locals and to encourage them to open their windows to reward them for their wishes and the show they undertake. Carol groups, regardless of what kind, are warmly received by the people. However, there have also been cases of refusal from people, most of which are found among single or masked carolers. Their costume is a specific one, made by them, as well as the instruments and materials that accompany them.

“In general, there are at least 4 members in the group, which are organized as follows: one plays, the goat, two or more sing the carol and “dictate” the rhythm of the goat beating the drums, and another collects money and products (the latter being a kind of group organizer). The goat is made by that group.” (woman, 67 years)

Depending on how beautiful their and the goat’s costumes are made, how skilled they are in the dance of the goat and the whole action, they attract their visitors, and with them their earnings increase as well as the continuity in the future.

### *5. Benefits*

As a reward that is offered to carolers for caroling and wishes, the hosts generally offer them money, fruit, sweets, a glass of juice if they are children. If the carolers are older people then they are also offered a glass of wine or brandy. If groups from the church come to collide, they are served with cakes.

“We offer them money, in general. If more children come, I also give them chocolate. Everyone gives them what they have, how much they have and how they can.” (woman, 68 years)

“To the big ones who came with the priest from the church I gave them money, because they left for the church and I served them with cake and I made them a packet of fruits” (woman, 58 years old)

Over time, people began to diversify their gifts according to the type of car-olers and how much each person could offer. If before, as gifts during Christmas, nuts, rolls, apples were offered, now, now in the urban environment, the money is mostly offered as a reward for carolers.

### *Conclusions*

The results of the study show that in recent years there has been a decrease in the number of carolers. One of the main causes is the low birth rate. Young people moving abroad in search of a better life, decreases the number of new-born children but also of small children, that move along with their parents.

Another cause that could lead to changes in habits is the evolution of society and with it the leisure concerns that the new generation is facing.

Another obstacle that has intervened in the communication between car-olers and hosts is the intercoms, people do not always want to answer strangers.

The interviewees are of the opinion that, in addition to the causes that already exist, others will appear and thus, if no measures are taken to promote traditions and customs, they will slowly change or even disappear.

We hope that as long as there is hope and optimism, but also people who do not accept the idea of the disappearance of habits, these habits will end up being passed down from one generation to another.

## DINAMICA OBICEIURILOR DE CRĂCIUN ÎN BANAT. STUDIU DE CAZ REALIZAT ÎNTR-UNCENTRU URBAN - TIMIȘOARA

### *Rezumat*

Sărbătoarea este atât un prilej de comemorare, prin ritualul bisericii, cât și unul de celebrare, prin obiceiul popular. Acestea două, adică sacral și profanalul, îmbinate alcătuiesc o sărbătoare încărcată de ritualuri, credințe, tradiții, care o transformă într-o ceremonie colectivă.

Sărbătoarea Crăciunului comportă semnificative schimbări în cadrul societății axate pe consumatorism. Crăciunul a dobândit în ultimii ani și statutul de obiect de consum, dezvoltându-se într-o adevărată industrie și la noi în țară. Astfel, vom putea observa comercianți care ajung să-și promoveze produsul sub imaginea Crăciunului, având drept scop îmbunătățirea situației financiare.

Mulți copii asociază sărbătoarea Crăciunului cu Moș Crăciun și nu cu Nașterea lui Iisus Hristos. Din această cauză există posibilitatea ca tinerii de azi și în special cei din mediul urban să nu cunoască obiceiurile de Crăciun pe care copiii de altă dată le practicau și nici să valorizeze sărbătoarea.