

ASPECTS OF TRADITIONAL FISHING IN SOUTH-DOBRUDJAN VILLAGES

Abstract: Practicarea pescuitului în satele aflate pe malul Dunării a reprezentat pentru locuitorii Dobrogei o ancestrală îndeletnicire, dar și o importantă sursă de venituri. Prezența numeroaselor bălți de-a lungul Dunării, bogăția speciilor de pești, dar și existența unui inventar de unelte și tehnici, conferă pescuitului o importanță majoră în zonele de baltă ale Dunării. Locuitorii acestor așezări au fost de-a lungul veacurilor furnizori de pește și pentru ținuturile lipsite de acest aliment ieftin, care era prețuit atât de săteni, cât și de orașeni. Primele dovezi arheologice care atestă practicarea acestei ocupații pe teritoriul Dobrogei datează încă din epoca mezolitică, iar în epoca neolitică se înregistrează un progres considerabil în practicarea acestei îndeletniciri, prin folosirea plasei de pescuit, cu ajutorul căreia se putea pescui o cantitate mai mare de pește. Pentru această perioadă istorică sunt relevante descoperirile arheologice care s-au făcut la Histria, pe malul Dunării: harpoane și undițe din os, precum și greutăți de plasă modelate din lut. În scrierile lăsate de numeroși autori antici, între care îi amintim pe Arrian, Strabon și Polibiu, pescuitul este prezentat ca o ocupație însemnată a locuitorilor acestor ținuturi. Pescuitul a continuat să fie o ocupație importantă, aducătoare de hrană sau de venituri, în toate epocile care au urmat, indiferent de stăpânirea sub care s-au aflat cei care îl practicau. Potrivit documentelor, pescuitul se desfășura intens mai ales pe Dunăre și în bălțile vecine din care se pescuiau diverse specii: crap, știucă, șalău, caras, somn, sturion, scrumbie. În timp ce în majoritatea regiunilor țării pescuitul a reprezentat o ocupație secundară prin care populația și-a completat resursele alimentare, în unele sate din sudul Dobrogei (Oltina, Satu Nou, Aliman, Dunăreni, Rasova, Cochirleni, Topalu, Capidava Ghindărești), situate pe malul Dunării sau în apropierea bălților sau lacurilor, pescuitul a fost o ocupație de bază, care asigura atât necesarul de hrană, cât și venituri însemnate pentru familiile pescarilor. Tehnicile de pescuit sunt variate, de la metoda clasică a pescuitului cu mâna până la utilizarea undițelor sau a uneltelor confecționate din împletituri sau plasă, printre care amintim: „vârșă”, „cârlionțul”, „setca”, „prostovolul”, „ava”, „năvodul”, „tifanul”. Folosită în toate satele mai sus menționate, undița a rămas una dintre cele mai cunoscute unelte folosite în ape adânci, la pescuitul pe Dunăre sau în bălțile acesteia. Mijlocul de transport tradițional folosit pentru această activitate este barca lucrată de meșterii specializați din sate precum Rasova, Ostrov, Topalu sau de lipovenii din Ghindărești.

Keywords: fishing, techniques, food.

For the inhabitants of Dobrudja the practicing of fishing in the villages located on the Danube banks represented an ancestral activity but also an important source of profit.

The presence of various meadowlands found along the Danube river, the abundance of highly qualitative fish species and the existence of a specific

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inventory of tools and techniques which, due to their diversity are used in no other activity on the territory of our country, offer a major importance to this activity practiced in the meadows of the Danube river. For many years the inhabitants of these villages were major suppliers of fish especially for the areas deprived of this type of cheap food, which was valued both by villagers and by citizens.

Considering the age of this occupation on these lands, archaeological evidence show that during the Mesolithic period fishing instruments such as harpoons with “ears” made of stag horn or even of bone were used to catch large fish such as sturgeons or catfish.

During the Neolithic period fishing registered a considerable progress when the fishing net was finally introduced and marked the passage from the primitive fishing technique to an economical one which brought with it larger quantities of fish which was either used for consumption or for trading. In Harsova, located on one of the Danube banks, in an establishment dating from the Neolithic period, the archaeological excavations revealed a series of ancient tools such as harpoons and bone fishing lines, as well as net weights made of clay.

The importance of this activity during the Dacian and Getic period was highlighted by the historian Arrian. According to his accounts about the military expedition of Alexander the Great in the north of the Danube river, in 335 B.C, the army led by the king of Macedonia had crossed the river by using a primitive boat, the “monoxile” (carved out of a single block of wood), belonging to the local people who “had many boats like these and used them to fish on Istru river”.

Strabo, the Greek geographer, also writes about the abundance in fish of these lands and in his paper called “Geography” he mentions the fact that in the northern lands inhabited by the Scythians, the sturgeons could be caught directly “from the ice and some were as big as a dolphin”.

During the 2nd century another historian named Polybius, reminded us of the high quality of the salty fish which the Dacian and Getic people used to sell and export to Greek colonizers along the entire Dobrudjan coast line.

In ancient times the importance of fishing was also reflected in the economical life of the Greek colony of Histria, to which the Emperor Trojan granted some rights concerning fishing. A series of Latin words dating since the Roman domination are still kept and these add a completion to the latest proofs regarding the idea of how old this occupation is: fish, milt, fisherman, fishery, fishy, catfish, bream.

During the migration period and in the Middle Ages the activity of fishing continued to progress and to bring important profits to the people engaged in it.

In the Byzantine city of *Pacuiul lui Soare*, the archaeological evidence revealed a rich inventory coming from the 11th century and which was extremely significant concerning the continuity of this occupation on Danubian-Pontic lands: fishing line hooks, net weights, large iron hooks, clay weights for the long fishing line (“pripon”), lead weights for the fishing line.

Documents from the Middle Ages speak about a vast activity of fishing developed on the Danube river. Therefore, at the end of the 16th century, referring

to a Christian military expedition against the Turks, a high Polish official of that time declared that for the transportation of troops on the Danube river many boats were available mainly because “all the cities located along the great river were inhabited by fishermen and consequently this meant a lot of boats”. During the Turkish domination in Dobrudja the people who practiced fishing had the obligation to pay great fees to the Roman Empire; by the end of this period, meaning in 1877, the total amounts of money owned to the Roman state reached the outstanding number of 400.000 golden lei. After the Independence War “fish factories were almost deserted” and the Romanian government started to exert its rights on the fish factories belonging to the Turkish state”.

If up until 1895 “Dobrudjan waters and meadowlands with the entire seacoast were put out to contract, after this specific date they began to be exploited under direct state management, a thing which brought a considerable increase in the state’s profits as well as an improvement in the fishermen’ social status who started to receive a quota out of the resulting incomes. Considering this, we give as a specific example the situation during 1895-1896 when from the entire profit of 1.699.614 golden lei, the state received 415.371 golden lei and fishermen the remaining 1.284.043 golden lei.

The Danube river and its system of river meadows and lakes have always represented an important source of Romanian fish production including: carp, “lin”, “caracuda”, pike, perch, "salau", “avat”, carp, bream, catfish, "oblete", Danubian herring, sturgeons such as “pastruga” and “nisetru”.

In 1896, due to Grigore Antipa’s suggestions concerning the necessity of preserving the country’s fish supplies, the *fishing law* was voted and according to it the following were forbidden: fishing during the reproduction period, fishing using explosive material, drugs or poison; fishing with “spears, sharp stakes, rakes, fire weapons”; “fishing during nightfall by using torches and fire”; water pollution.

This law as well as the decision concerning the exploitation of fish factories under direct state management meant an increase in the productivity of this activity in Dobrudja. A series of old testimonies support this idea and confirm that this activity was practiced in all the Dobrudjan villages located near Danube’s waters. Therefore, while in Rasova, a village located along one of Danube’ banks near the city of Cernavoda, in 1922 one million kilograms of fish were caught, in the same year in Seimeni, from the four ponds neighboring the village (Turcaret, Ramadan, Domneasca Mare, Domneasca Mica), and “stretched on an area of 1300 hectares”, 4000 kilograms of fish were caught each year. Some years later, Gheorghe Stefanescu, the tenant of the four swamps above mentioned “developed a rich commerce”. In 1923 for the inhabitants of Topalu and Capidava fishing was an important and widely spread occupation. Other major fish suppliers were Ostrov and Oltina villages; in 1924 Ostrov had “important meadowlands and devices used to catch fish”, and in Oltina a “cherdana” (a small factory in which fish was processed) was opened and it was famous in the entire region of Dobrudja.

While in most of the areas of the country fishing represented a secondary occupation which supplied the population with the necessary food resources, in

some Dobrudjan villages situated on the Danube banks or near the lakes or river meadows this activity represented a main occupation which provided not only the daily food but also a considerable source of profit for fishermen families.

In the lines to follow some aspects of traditional fishing in south-Dobrudjan villages are presented and these mainly refer to specific tools and techniques used for fishing along the Danube river.

One of the most primitive methods used up until present times was hand fishing or tickling. This ancient technique was used mainly during summers when pools and lakes dried out and the fish could be spotted hiding between the river stones and could easily be caught even by women and children.

In all the villages under investigation, nowadays people still catch fish by using bait and *fishing lines* made of reed sticks or long rods measuring 3-4 m in length, to which a 4-5 m string was attached with a baited hook (ground worms, bits of maize porridge or even fish) at its end.

In order to float above the water surface the string of the fishing line was attached to a piece of floating material such as reed or cork and for a better movement through the water small lead balls were connected to the fishing line.

For catching catfish a special fishing line called "*visila*" was used; this had a kind of a "*tongue*" in its top part which was bent on one side; with the help of a thick string the fishing line was tied up to a stick firmly fixed in the mud; the bait used for this purpose consisted mainly in a living fish ("oblete", "lin"). The catfish was attracted by the fish which moved in the fishing line, it reached to grab it being therefore caught in the "*visila*".

On the Danube river, in the meadows or lakes along the seacoast the so-called *hook fishing* was practiced by using for this purpose different hooks for each kind of fish species: "catfish hooks", "sterlet hooks", "sturgeon hooks".

These hooks connected a series of fishing lines each having a small string measuring about 40 cm in length, all being attached to a thicker string which had a stone at one end so that it could be thrown far into the open waters and a rod called "pripon" at the other end which was fixed into the mud. The hooks were mainly of two types: "with food" (*pripoane*), which used bait and caught the fish by its mouth and "without food" (*carmace*), used for catching fish with no scales (sturgeons).

"*Pripoanele*" (long lines with baited hooks) used by fishermen in Ostrov village were made of "a thicker string measuring 50-60 m in length which had larger hooks attached at a distance of a meter from each other in which the bait was placed: maize porridge, small living carp used for predators, white ground worms, fan cricket. "Priponul" "was set in the evening across the Danube river and it was pulled out in the morning" and the fish they caught (catfish, zander, carp) was taken out from the hooks with an instrument called "*minciog*" or purse net; this was made of a "ring of thick wire to which a net bag and a handle was connected".

"*Carmacele*" or the trail lines were stretched across the waters and they were provided with straight hooks which were lined up on a string along with corks which pulled them up and kept them above the water surface with their spikes

oriented upwards in order to sting the fish that passed by (morun, nisetr, cega, pastruga).

For catching catfish the “*clonc*” method is still used nowadays. The “*clonc*” is an instrument made of a rod provided at one end with a kind of a funnel used by fishermen to hit the water surface generating vibrations and producing loud sounds which attracted the catfish. The bait was placed in a hook attached to a thick string which was fixed on the boat’s edge; the moment the fish grabbed the bait it was pulled out to the surface with “*bura*” and directly thrown into the boat. “*Bura*” was an instrument used to grab large fish; it consisted of a metallic hook tied at one end to a long stick. For the Lyppovan fishermen in Ghindaresti village “*bura*” was also known as “*bagor*” and it was always present in a fishing boat.

Beside the usual instruments used to grab and to sting the fish, others were made of twigs or net. Among these, the most popular is “*varsa*” which the fishermen from Ostrov, Oltina, Satu Nou, Dunareni, Topalu, Capidava and Rasova villages describe as “a false basket made of twigs and net”. “*Varsa*” consists of five rings “which are made of ten knitted twigs, each having a different length to which the proper net is attached”. The rings form a series of connected rooms: such instrument has as many rooms as its number of rings, the last room being the smallest of them all. “*Varsa*” is dipped in water “as much as to cover the rings and it is left there for a day or a night”; the fisherman “must leave a sign, a stick near it in order to find it”.

In order to be caught, the fish (catfish, zander, carp) needs to get inside the “*varsa*”, to cross all the rooms until these straiten in size and finally remain trapped inside. “*Varsa*” resembles “a funnel in which the fish gets in, but from where they can’t get out”.

The twigs which support the net of this instrument were made of green hazel wood (Ostrov), willow (Oltina, Satu Nou), dogberry tree (Rasova, Cochileni, Dunareni) or “*singer*” (Capidava, Topalu, Ghindaresti). During the latest years these materials were replaced by steel rings which were far more resistant to water corrosion.

Another fishing tool found in all these villages was the so-called “*blind basket*”, also known as “*hodorog*” (Cochirleni, Rasova, Topalu, Seimeni), or “*hodorob*” or “*odorob*” (Ostrov, Buceag). This instrument was made of knitted twigs and it resembled a basket with no bottom which had a piece of sack attached to its narrowest ends, and a wider mouth which was dipped into water. For luring the fish into the basket bits of maize porridge and ground worms were placed inside it. In shallow waters the “*hodorob*” or “*odorob*” made of metallic net (“*rapit*”) or iron frame were very efficient and had the aspect of “a basket completely dressed in net which you submerged in water and walked with it with its mouth turned upside down until the fish got in; the fish got scared, ran, hit the net and remained trapped in it.

A particular instrument frequently used (even by women and children!) was the so-called “*carliont*” or “*chipcel*”, consisting in a long pole measuring 2-2,5 m in length, two bent cross-shaped sticks with its points oriented upwards, and an

exterior net. “*Carliontul*” had the shape of a large spoon which was used to agitate the water, and depending on the length of its handle a fisherman could submerge it deep into the Danube river, pulling it then to the surface together with the fish trapped inside it. An informer woman from Rasova village describes “*carliontul*” as follows: “it is a big spoon which you use to search the water with and you can catch all sorts of fish: “*oblete*”, “*ochelnita*”, “*rosioara*”-redeye, pike, “*salau*”, carp.

Other fishing instruments used in the areas under investigation were those made from net. Fishermen made the nets in any season of the year but the skilled masters were the Lyppovans from Ghindaresti. Nevertheless, during the latest years more and more fishermen started to buy the so-called “*net dolls*” (in large quantities and already manufactured) which they afterwards cut to the dimensions they needed.

Two of the instruments that fishermen used to knit a net were: “*calusul*” and “*iglita*”. “*Calusul*” was in fact a small board which actually determined the size of the of the net’ loops; if you wanted a smaller loop, then “*calusul*” was thinner, if you wanted a loose loop then you used a larger “*calus*”. “*Iglita*” was made of metal and through its V shaped ends a thread was passed. The thickness of the thread could vary depending on the size of the loops of the net: for smaller loops a thinner thread was used while for the larger ones, a thicker one was required.

The fishing instruments which were made of net were used to fish in deep waters, on the Danube river and in its neighboring meadows. From this category we mention the following tools: “*setca*”, “*prostovolul*”, “*navodul*” (trail net), “*tifanul*”, “*ava*”, “*oria*”. According to the description of an informer from Rasova village, “*setca*” is “a 45 m long net which has two “*camene*”. The one with lead is submerged in water and the other one with cork floats above the water surface; the net forms a kind of a wall in the water and the fish that pass by get entangled in it and remain suspended without being able to get away. The net used for a “*setca*” is of two types: the one in the middle is thicker and the other two that frame the first one are thinner. Depending on the size of the net’s loops, *setca* can be of several types. The smaller loops measure 12 mm and this kind of net is ideal to catch smaller fish (especially “*obleti*”), while the larger loops reach to 100 mm and they are used for bigger fish (carp).

“*Setca*” can be used in “deep” waters having in this case heavy lead weights which reach the bottom of the water, or it can be used in “shallow” waters, in which case it is provided with large corks and smaller lead weights which float above the water surface.

In Oltina, Dunareni, Cochirleni and Rasova villages fishing with *setca* in deep waters is also known as fishing with “*stanoaga*” and it is mainly practiced in standing waters (pools, lakes). In this particular case *setca* is tied up on two poles which are firmly fixed on the shore, creating thus a vertical network in the water; the fish which swim by and easily pass through the larger loops of the first net (80-120 mm) get entangled in the smaller ones (12-35 mm) of the second net, being unable to get away. *Setca* is set in the evening so that in the morning fishermen can pull out the fish they captured during the night.

“Ava” works on the same operating principle as setca and it is mainly used for catching carp. For a better efficacy in this aspect “ava” is composed of two rows of net, the second of which has larger loops and helps stabilize the pray.

“Prostovolul” is a large, round-shaped fishing net which has a metallic ring by means of which the net is thrown into the water. A rope is fixed all around its edges and on this rope around 250-400 lead weights are lined up, weighting up to 5-10 kg. A fisherman from Ostrov village describes “prostovolul” as follows: “prostovolul is thrown into the water and when it is spread out it forms a circle, then it is pulled out to the surface and by using some “streji” it is folded again. The “streji” are threads which fold “prostovolul” by forming a kind of a funnel, like a bag in which fish are caught. The fisherman pulls out “prostovolul” from the water and unfolds it in his boat and then he gathers the fish he caught : catfish, carp, zander”.

This fishing instrument is mainly used in the autumn when carps crowd the hollow spaces on the bottom of river pools.

“Navodul” or the trail net is also a kind of a net which has cork attached to its edges; this is thrown from the boat covering a large water surface, two or four persons being necessary for this operation; it is used to catch carp, zander, catfish or pike.

“Tifanul” is actually “a part from a trail net” manufactured from a long net with corks on its edges. With this particular instrument you could fish in shallow waters, an operation also known as “front fishing”.

During winters, when waters froze, fishing in ice holes is the most popular activity. The fish comes near the surface where the water is rich in oxygen and it is caught by hand or by using a “minciog” or a purse net. For ice fishing in the Danube meadows “brisca” was also used for this purpose; this is a metallic instrument with a shiny surface resembling the tail of a spoon which has a sharp end curved like a hook. The other end had a hole in it to which a piece of string is attached. Lured by the brightness of this instrument the fish reaches to grab it and remains caught in the hook.

Another tool which was used not only in the summers but also in the winters when ice fishing was “alaul”; this was made of two arched twigs forming a cross, put one on top of the other and firmly tied in the joints. Between the four arms a squared net measuring 1,80 m and with small loops was connected; in the middle of the arches either a two-armed thole used for orientation, or a thick string was fixed. “Alaul” was submerged in water and afterwards it was taken out in order to gather the fish. This tool is still used in Ostrov and Oltina villages but the arched twigs that supported the net were replaced with two bent iron poles.

The boat still remains the common means of transportation for fishing activities. The boats were manufactured by skilled craftsmen either in their own personal workshops (Ghindaresti, Topalu, Ostrov, Rasova) or in factories such as the ones in Harsova or Cernavoda. During the latest years, among the traditional wooden boats, new metal ones appeared and fishermen started to use them mainly because they were cheaper.

For the Dobrudjan villages found on the Danube banks fishing represented for a long time a basic occupation which provided the daily food and this was possible because fish was cheap, easy to preserve either dried or smoked, transported on long distances and cooked in each season of the year.