

# WHAT IS A VILLAGE WITHOUT FENCES?

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One may imagine now a windy, rainy, dark evening in the fall of 1990, less than one year after the December 1989 popular uprising. A bunch of huddled people are waiting for the street-car, which shows no signs of coming. Among them, a short, dizzy middle-aged countryman, speaking really to himself, approaches me, striking up a conversation on the common topics of that time: shortage of food, lack of heating in the apartments, no electric lights on the streets, the tram which was not coming and so on. All these long-awaited and yet unfulfilled expectations, commented the man, were because those guilty for the heavy conditions the Romanians still had to endure – the closest collaborators of Ceaușescu, the Communist Party activists, the "Securitate" officers and agents – had escaped any conviction, were free or had fled the country. Staring at me, he suddenly asked: "*What is a village without fences?*" A little surprised by such a question, I answered: "*It is not a village!*" The man was satisfied with this answer, but I continued to think of his question: "*What is a village without fences?*"

The Romanian village, as a space-unit, is made up of a number of households (Rom. *Gospodăriile*) delimited by enclosures or fences. Depending upon the local materials, these may be built of wood – wattle (Rom. *împletituri de muiel*), laths (Rom. *uluci*), mud, builders, stones, or in modern times, of iron and concrete (See for details Butură 1978: 75–76).

In some ethnographers' opinion, the fences are as old as the houses (shelters) themselves, their function being that of protecting the area from the exterior and of reducing the interior trespassing (Butură 1989: 88). The fences seem to have appeared earlier in "the wooded area with mixed trades" (tilling and animal breeding, where they "enclosed the yards, sometimes even the villages, protected the more intensely cultivated fields around the households, and, in some areas even those (fields within the village limits" (Idem). It is also said that from these enclosures developed later the stables (Rom. *grajd*) and the barns (Rom. *șură*). For practical reasons, fences were erected in the areas with more heavily used roads, while in those areas where the natural conditions offered enough protection, the fences were used only "to indicate the limits of the property" (Idem: 89).

The early origins of the enclosures (fences) are also supported by the terminology. The Romanian *gard* (fence) has the same origin and, therefore, is as old as the other words closely related to village life, such as *cătun* (hamlet), *gărdină* or *țarc* (enclosure), *arcea* ("sous/sol pour le tissage du lin; voûte d'une cave; charpente en bois"), *vatra* (fireplace, hearth, home) ("foyer; âtre; emplacement d'un village"); *bordei* (mudhut; hovel) (Cf. Vlăduțiu 1973: 128).

As for fence (Rom. *gard*) itself – "clôture, enclos, clayonnage, haie sèche, palissade" – it exists in all Romanian dialects, both North and South of the Danube: Dr. *gard*, Ar. Mglr. *gard(u)*, Istr. *gard*, Ar (in Albania) *gardu*. The word is closely related to Lit. *gârdas*, "an enclosed area for sheep" and all these are of Indo-European origin: \**gherdh-*, "to enclose, to knit, to plait" (Cf. Brâncuș

1983: 76). It seems that in the proto-Romanian language there existed a verbal form \**îngărdi* (Mglr. *angărdes*, Ar. *ngărdescu*, *disgărdescu*), the meaning of which is "to make/build/erect a fence" (Idem: 77); in modern Romanian, the verb *a îngărdi* has been "rearranged under the Slavic influence of Old Slavonic *graditi* (Cf. Mihăilă, SCL, XXIV, 65)" (Ibidem).

Both ethnographic and the linguistic arguments thus supports the conclusion of the ancient origins of household enclosures. With time, however, the original utilitarian function was supplemented by an aesthetic one. These village enclosures illustrate the classic "utile dulci", the blending of practical and aesthetic roles, even if "less spectacular compared to, for instance, the problematic of the popular arts". "In the traditional Romanian household even the enclosure itself, in many cases, is given a decorative aspect", regardless of the materials it is built of (Vlăduțiu 1973: 144).

On the other hand, the utilitarian function cannot be separated from the magic one, for the household's enclosure repeats, on a reduced scale, the delimitation of the settlement itself. Etymologically, the Romanian *sat* (village) comes from the Latin *fossatum*, "ditch, encircled; surrounded by a ditch", which meant a double protection: against the outside enemies and wild beasts, and against evil forces, too. In more recent times, the limits of a village were drawn in a more symbolic manner. There are, actually, two limits or borders – one for the whole village property, including, therefore, the households and the fields as well, which is the village border (Rom. *hotarul satului*), and one for the inhabited area alone, which is the village margin (Rom. *marginea satului*). Within these two well protected areas (the village border and the village margin), a third space unit appears, a family space unit, the household (Rom. *gospodărie*), considered as "the cell of the socio-economic organism called village" (Butură 1992: 26-). Within the limits of a household there are the houses and the shelters for animals, the gardens for vegetables, spices, medicinal plants and flowers, the little orchard and the spaces for fodder. All these had to be and were protected by magic means. Some examples of the use of magic are the spring practices against garden bugs (insects, pestes), those concerning the green branches of Saint-George (April 23<sup>rd</sup>), Pentecost (Rom. *Rusalii*), May Day (Rom. *Armindenii*), or in the Bihor area, practices meant to drive away ghosts (Rom. *strige*) (Cf. Butură 1992: 260–263).

In the true spirit, these three concentric spaces – the village border, the village margin and the household enclosure – are in harmony with each other and with cosmic order as well. For the peasant of the Romanian archaic village the word *rânduială* (order, system) has not only a thrifty meaning, in the economic sense, or a social acception. The word is much used with the meaning of ordering everything that exists, and is connected to the equilibrium and harmony" (Bernea 1985: 91).

In this respect, the household enclosure separates and protects the individual, family property and, on the other hand, links the households making up a specific subunit of a Romanian village – the neighborhood (Rom. *vecinătate*). Regardless of the shape of the yard (usually rectangular), the front side of the enclosure is towards the street, be it the main street (Rom. *ulița mare*), or a secondary line (Rom. *uliță, linie*), and the back side is towards the fields or, in compact villages, towards the back side of another household, while the two lateral sides separate (and, in a sense, unify) two adjoining households.

In many respects, especially in the case of isolated houses / households, the fences indicate the separation of a limited space, firmly taken into human occupation from a larger space which continues to remain under the control of evil, "uncontrolled" forces. It is not difficult to note that the rough dichotomy *nature / culture* operates here, as does the much debated distinction *sacred / profane*. Even those who, theoretically, dissent from Mircea Eliade's perhaps overstated point of view, have to accept the existence of the two types of space – sacred and profane – within the larger space-unit which is the Romanian village. The process started quite early. If, as stated, "for the modern mentality every fence or wall is a sign of property", in an old village community (Rom. *devălmășie*), "the walls and the fences may have had only a purely technical value, they can be just simple pastoral or agricultural tools" (Stahl 1983: 197). However, those villagers who want to assert their personal propriety of a piece of land which actually belongs to the whole community, often resort to magic practices. The fences become, in this way, "legal instruments of the cutumiar

law, bet it magic or not.“ Such magic tools include horses’ skulls put on top of the fence posts, indicating the prohibition of trespassing. ”They transform the enclosed space into a magic place, of a pagan sacrality, but very efficient“ (Idem: 199; see also Vulcănescu 1985: 516: ”The horse skulls... were put on top fence-posts... as apothropaic insignia“). It is worth mentioning that this practice provided a literary motif in fairy tales: the hero is hired by the evil old lady to fulfill, a heavy tasks; only one of the one hundred pillars of the yard fence does not have a human skull on its top and is screaming: ”a head, a head!“

The idea that a fence is a border between nature and culture is clearly expressed even in the shorts folk-literature genre, the riddle. The riddle for *fence* sounds like this: ”*In the forest I was born, / in the forest I was raised; / When taken home / The guardian of the yard I became*“ (Govorei 1972: 189; compare the riddle for *gate or door*: ”*in the forest I was born, / In the forest I was raised; / When taken home / The doorman of the hose I became*“ (Idem: 432). The two terms of the opposition here are *forest* and *home (yard, house)*. The first refers to the materials the fences are made of (wood); the second implies the idea of order, as a ‘guardian’ or a ‘doorman’ is a person who takes care of and maintains the order in a community. ‘Order’, on the other hand, is opposed to ‘chaos’; it is a result of a human (or super/human) being who works upon the inchoate, upon open space and endless time, and takes it into possession, ultimately transforming nature into culture.

This symbolic meaning of the ‘fence’ is preserved even when the word is used for expressing, metaphorically, the idea of loneliness and alienation: *Surrounded I am by strangers / Like the fences by brambles; / Surrounded I am by enemies / Like the road by boulders* (”Congiuratu-s de străini / Ca gardul de mărăcini; / Congiuratu-s de dușmani / Ca drumul de bolovani“). Here again, ‘fence’ and ‘road’ are taken as parts of culture (and identified with man himself), while the ‘brambles’ and ‘boulders’ represent the non-cultural, and hence, evil.

The metaphoric process goes even further: illicit lovers who, due to their forbidden love, have been isolated by the community, feel themselves, enclosed, encircled, not by the regular materials the fences are made, of, but by the ‘mean words’ of the others: *Since we honey, fell in love? / Enemies have enclosed us; / Not by poles or with wattles, / But with their mean words* (”De când, dragă, ne-am iubit / Dușmanii ne-au îngrădit, / Nu cu pari, nici cu nuiete, / Numai cu cuvinte rele“).

One can see here a modification of the value of the terms used. If in the first stanza the fence was a symbol of culture, representing safety and the human, here the enclosure is rather a sign of oppression, of isolation and of insecurity. As has been noted, usually places and spaces like ‘village’, ‘garden’, ‘house’, ‘yard’, carry ”positive connotations“, in opposition to nature, unexplored by man, savagery and chaos, for instance ‘wild forests’, ‘rocky mountains’, ‘caves’, ‘dark valleys’ etc. But ”in the love songs the axiological valorization is, to a large extent, different“ (Evseev 1987: 60).

It is also true that in some circumstances the fences were really meant to isolate and to protect some members of the family (young girls especially) from any contact with ‘strangers’, with ‘others’; for example, in the case of the young, unmarried girls in a shepherd family, in the Marginime area. While the father and all male members of the family were up in the mountains with their flocks, the young girls were forbidden to see (or to be seen by) anyone, especially of the opposite sex. As a result, in these villages, in the wooden fences one can sometimes see little holes, through which the girls used to look out on the street without seen by passers-by (Vulcănescu 1970: 78).

Nonetheless, of course, the household fences were not as impenetrable or unbreakable as the ‘Great Wall’! It is *the gate* which opens the inner space towards the world – for every village is considered as a whole world, ‘sufficient in itself’, in Lucian Blaga’s words. Besides its practical role, the gate has a ritual function, which ethnographers and folklorists have long recognized. ”La porte est la limit entre le mode étranger et le monde domestique s’il s’agit d’une habitation ordinaire, entre le monde profane et le monde sacré s’il s’agit d’un temple“ – writes A. van Gennep (1909: 26). For Mircea Eliade (1943/1991: 326) *the gate* ”is like a magic being, like a master with unseen powers, which watches over every essential act of the individual’s life“ – birth, marriage, death. In the intimate economy of space as conceived according to the traditional mentality, the gate belongs

both to the 'inner' and to the 'out'. It separates and individualises the 'inner space' and, at the same time, integrated the household into the larger world of the village. From this point of view, the gate belongs to a system of sacred or magic places, passing through which constitutes a radical change, as the replacement of one state by another necessitated special measures of protection. "This is the case with the treshold, the gate, the bridges, the cross-roads and the village limits where, because of the discontinuity of the space, various preventing and efficient practices appear" (Bernea 1985: 115).

The stile (Rom. *pârleaz*) is a narrow passage over a fence, made up of one or two wooden planks, sometimes in steps, supported on two stakes. As can be seen, the stile breaks the lateral enclosure and helps communication between close neighbors, usually – due to the traditional way in which property was inherited – relatives, brothers, parents and sons etc. It creates a secondary route, parallel to the village street / lane, but open only to the members of the two families, between which a closer relationship is thus established.

Although they have been less studied than other community constructions, enclosures are no less important, for they make up a village. It is for this reason that the question "What is a village without fences?" can have only one answer: "In Romania a village with no fences is not a village at all!"

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*The basic idea in the essay is the importance of the fences for the village. From N. Constantinescu's point of view, the fences or the enclosures have an utilitarian function which cannot be separated from the magic one.*

*With time, the original utilitarian function was supplemented by an aesthetic function. As a conclusion, although they have been less studied, enclosures are important for they make up a village.*

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