

PERSPECTIVES ON FESTIVALIZATION OF TRADITION IN NORTHERN DOBRUJA (ROMANIA)

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Abstract: In the contemporary period, society is going through deep, complex, and constantly dynamic transformations, in all existential frameworks. In this article, we set out to analyze how traditional elements (e.g.: holidays, food, folklore, crafts, folk costume), some of them in a state of dissolution or cultural latency, are cut out of the customary context that produced and maintained them in a certain form for a certain period, to be introduced, adapted, and re-signified in festivalized or institutional frameworks. The festivalization of tradition occurs in relation to a multitude of factors and consequences, among which we mention: tourist development and commodification; loss of vitality of a traditional element and patrimonialization; recalibration of identity strategies; desire to impress and retain the public for economic or symbolic benefits, cultural implantation of foreign traditions, migration of traditions between the village and the city. These new holidays, which publicly celebrate an element of intangible heritage (e.g.: Borscht Festival, Baklava Day, Christmas Carols Festival, Pies Day, Village Day) tend to crystallize in a festival calendar, which doubles and, in some places, competes with the festive calendar. Can festivalization impose new traditions over time, or is it a new facet of traditions that are no longer viable from a practical and ritual point of view, no longer practiced with the same intensity as in the past? Which elements of cultural heritage are predominantly subjected to festivalization? What are the examples of good practice, in the spirit of sustainable development, but also the negative examples, with an impact to the detriment of the natural environment and local culture? These are just a few questions that we will try to answer, in the current social, economic, and cultural context, marked by the uncertainty of the present (Russian-Ukrainian conflict, pandemic), globalization, migration, virtualization, artificialization, at a time when recourse to tradition is a solution that ensures the stability of society.

Keywords: Romania, Northern Dobruja, tradition, festivalization, patrimonialization, commodification.

In the contemporary period, society and at the same time culture go through rapid and complex processes of transformation, in relation to the new social, economic, political and identity conditions. Today's rural communities, which must be considered reservoirs of popular culture, are no longer relatively closed and slow-evolving systems, which in the past managed to preserve a heritage element in a stable, but not immutable, form for a longer period of time, in the context of some mental and social constructions that did not exclude the magical, the much deeper relationship with sacredness and nature (including the use of local resources according to old knowledge transmitted intergenerationally), the recourse to mythical veins that substantiated certain habits and customs. Furthermore, in traditional life, economic relations were primarily based on household work (agriculture, cottage industry, crafts and traditional occupations) and stable commercial or exchange relations, which valorised manufactured goods, but not excluding certain products bought from haberdasheries or travelling salesmen. From this equation we cannot eliminate the social prestige, towards which all the villagers tended, so that the decorative uniqueness and the craftsmanship in the creation of the folk costume, the wealth of the dowry, the complexity of the carols, the beauty of the wedding breads or the observance of behavioural rules were important elements of a *modus vivendi* regulated by true multi-layered popular institutions (the guild of elders, the brotherhood of lads, the group of maidens and women, the group of carollers, etc.), deviations being sanctioned by the judgment of the elders, the "screaming" over the village¹ and the disapproval of the community, to give just a few examples.

The political, ideological and socio-economic changes, from the communist period, assumed the dilution of work for one's own family, through the (forced) inclusion in associative economic forms, the industrialization and urbanization of the villagers, the homogenization of social strata and the ostracising

¹ The custom of blaming social and individual vices performed on some holidays by a "court of law" consisting of lads.

of the elites, the reduction of religiosity, at least in public space, and the creation of new mythologies, which put into practice the image of the new man, *homo communistus*, without completely eliminating the ethno-folkloric elements, although some of them were selected and adjusted to meet the nationalist requirements of the era. Heritage becomes the subject of cultural dirigistic policy.

In the post-revolutionary period, but especially in the last two decades, when capitalist relations work, mobility is easy, and instant communication is facilitated by technological development, communities are subject to other types of challenges: the disenchantment and attempted re-enchantment of the world, migration over relatively large distances and the rootlessness, globalization and reshaping of identity, integration into a pleiad of inter-human and inter-community networks with different purposes, the proliferation of services at the expense of industry and agriculture, the need to develop communities drained of resources and economic or symbolic capital and the tourism solution. In this complex time, in which the danger of uniformity and implicit cultural anonymization is perceived more and more acutely, the appeal to tradition constitutes a solution of stability for society. But, over time, the material and immaterial heritage elements have either diluted or completely disappeared from the reality of the community, because they no longer had ritual or practical purposes or because tools, methods and connoisseurs of practices were lost. For example, *Paparuda*, custom of invoking the rain, lost its vitality and sacredness with the technological advancement of agriculture, the towels with fine cotton and natural silk are produced less and less because the weaving looms have been thrown or have been treasured in museums and private collections, sericulture has gone out of use, and there are fewer and fewer women who warp and weave cloth.

In the conditions of the decline of household activities, handicrafts and the knowledge to do unique cultural products, certain rituals and activities experienced an important development in the public space,² possibly as a form of compensation, in a supervised, institutionalized and festivalized framework. Thus, the culture lived spontaneously and daily, having a natural course, turns into a playing, staged, theatricalized and directed culture, short-lived and ephemeral, even if at a given moment it has a repetitive character. Thus appears festivalization, as a process, and the festival, as the subject of this type of staging. Essentially, in tune with the challenges of the 21st century, festivals represent the expression of the dynamic tension between the opposite phenomena related to identity and cultural construction (fragmentation vs. globalization, mobility vs. community, belonging vs. anonymity).³

Not infrequently, cultural institutions, which patronize certain sectors of folk culture, orient certain parts of their program towards a few central themes and thematic events, concentrated in space and time. Festivalization thus appears both through the flourishing of the actual festivals and through the eventization of the usual cultural offers.⁴ Thus, any life event, no matter how mundane and everyday is (e.g. the preparation of pies or fish borscht), is transformed into a cultural event, endowed with new qualities, because it is in the attention of an audience that responds positively or negative to the element celebrated in that festival-event, which consolidates the cultural memory of society.⁵

On the same note, festivalization involves the reconfiguration of a cultural activity, previously marked by a certain pattern and seasonality, to form a "new" event.⁶ This reconfiguration can be a response to the social and mental transformations, to the industrialization of arts and heritage (the so-called creative industries) that have changed the canonized forms of tradition, the types of consumption and the roles within the process of producing heritage elements.⁷

From the perspective of the economy of experiences, festivalization involves processes of spectacularization (augmentation, sometimes to the point of exaggeration, of certain elements), immersion (which involves a complex of senses to captivate and engage the public in the festival) and experimentation of new forms, technologies, relationships with communities and space.⁸ Last but not

² Hann 2018, 21.

³ Guerra, Costa 2016, 40.

⁴ Négrier 2015, 19.

⁵ Hauptfleisch 2007, 39.

⁶ Négrier 2015, 18.

⁷ Jordan 2016, 45.

⁸ Jordan 2016, 45.

least, festivalization involves mixing the traditional (or re-traditionalized culture) with the experimental, the conventional with the new, so that, more and more often, various "poetic" licenses, scenographies, theatricalizations, textual exaggerations, resizing of meanings appear, resulting in a true exploitation of culture in all its forms and of the whole set of human expressions, heritages and identity affirmations.⁹

As for the spectacularization of the festivals and implicitly, of the culture from which they draw their essence, this can combine the old and the new, the aesthetic and the sensational, by creating sumptuous decorations that mark the space of the event or by overbidding some items, which places once essential elements in the background (e.g. the oversized effigy made of vegetables and natural elements from Harvest Day which symbolizes in an anthropomorphic style the riches of autumn; *Cincila-Mucila*, the straw doll present in 2018 at the Maslenitsa celebration organized by the Community of Russian Lipovans in Romania - Tulcea subsidiary, the personification of winter and cold, which was not found in the Old Believers communities of Dobruja; the over-sizing of the group of masked men during the Old Men's Feast (*Sărbătoarea Moșoilor*) from Luncavița, in the conditions where in the past there was only one mask, the infernal noise of the bells covering the carol itself). Moreover, the spectacle frequently appears in tourism festivals or that create brands of localities or communities. Pomposity and theatricality are thus key elements, these invented or (re)created traditions, supported by institutions, non-governmental organizations, ethnic groups, etc., causing the appearance of public celebrations with a wide audience. Based on a historical or folkloric event or on an element of cultural heritage, real or imagined, correctly or (therefore) falsely interpreted and manipulated, this new celebration is obstinately exhibited in the communal space, receiving increased publicity through tourism and mass media. Thus, these festivals can in turn develop tourism and shape and strengthen local identities.¹⁰ It is no coincidence that the Lipovan Fish Borscht Festival from Jurilovca, which in 2022 attracted over 100,000 participants and offered 40,000 free portions, according to the organizers' estimates, led to an occupancy rate of over 90% of the guesthouses in 2023, on the occasion of the Easter holidays. The relationship between culture and tourism is ever closer, with the tourist becoming an actor of heritage and identity constructions, on the other hand, events guaranteeing quality and contributing to the creation of a favourable image of the space/community and strengthening its influence and prestige.¹¹

At the same time, it is true that heritage, increasingly poor and vulnerable in its natural being, is often decontextualized and recontextualized from the perspective of time and space, so that within the festivals distinctions can be delimited from the perspective of necessity, role and meaning.

Table 1. Differences between traditional and institutionalized heritage.¹²

Coordinates	Traditional heritage	Institutionalized heritage
Temporal and spatial contexts	inherently linked to calendar or life cycle traditions, seasonal activities, and canonic spaces (synchronous; local)	mainly related to festivals and other cultural, educational, social or political events organized in communities or not (sometimes synchronous, often diachronic)
Character, depending on organization	high spontaneity	organized, directed, managed
Character, according to the significance of practices	ritualized	spectacular
Character, according to the transmitted value	authentic, with local variants	standardized, processed, generalizing
Direction of addressing	to community	to public
The understanding way of phenomena	complex, interpretable	simplified, for a general understanding of public
Necessity of presenting the practice	sufficient by itself	sufficient, but with emphatic trends, exaggeration or replacement of items meant to impress the public

⁹ Laville 2014, 14.

¹⁰ Barna 2012, 72.

¹¹ St-Piere 2018, 75.

¹² Chiselev 2017, 90, modified.

Thus, the two types of heritage operate with different sets of values, according to the "target" of them. Traditional heritage is created and centred on individuals and communities, and the institutionalized one is transformed, adapted, (re)created by institutions and centred on the public, even if their intention is for preservation or awareness.¹³

But what elements of cultural heritage are frequently subjected to festivalization and in what ways? First of all, this process that translates forms of traditional culture into staged cultural forms, sometimes also resorting to artifices, selections or (re)mythologising, can include a wide category of heritage components, but in Dobruja the most used are the following: food (after all, there are festivals that are based on agriculture and the traditional occupations that regulate the procurement of food: Blue Mackerel Feast – Sulina; Mackerel Celebrations – Maliuc; Lipovan (Fish) Borscht Festival – Jurilovca, Danube Delta Fisherman's Borscht Feast – Crișan; Ukrainian Fish Borscht Festival – Sulina; "Ukrainian Bee" Honey Festival – Telița; Vine and Wine Festival – Cerna; different harvest celebrations); crafts (cultural events such as fairs, where handicraft products are exhibited and sold, some of which are adapted to modern society); the folk costume, already existing or in the making, original or reconstituted (parades of the often uniformed costumes, which highlight the pride of a group rather than personal pride; urban evening sittings; the Universal Day of the Romanian Blouse); ritual and non-ritual folklore, customs (festivals of folk songs and dances; festivals related to winter holidays – Christmas and New Year: Festival of carols and winter customs "At White Fortress / La dalbă cetate" – Tulcea, County Festival of carols and Christmas traditions – Măcin; the cultural manifestation "Maslenitsa at the Russian Lipovans", organized by Community of Russian Lipovans in Romania - Tulcea subsidiary); immovable heritage and its histories (Old Center Days – Tulcea, demonstration events dedicated to vernacular architecture and construction techniques); sport and know-how (Ivan Patzaichin – Rowmania Festival, which includes races with *canotca*, hybrid between *canoe* and *lotca*/ fishing boat); beliefs, legends, local oral histories, newer or older mythologies (Feast of the Kneeling Oak at Caraorman; Marine Corps Day at Sulina, when the arrival of the god Neptune is set in motion); perceptions about nature, communities and affective spaces (Linden Feast – Luncavița; Peony Festival – Fântâna Mare; Village Days, City Days, Village Sons Day). We mention that most of the time, a festival is polysystemic, bringing to attention several types of heritage at the same time, for example, the International Festival of Shepherding from Sarighiol de Deal standing out for its food, folk wear, ethno-choreology and musical folklore, but also through the existence of a scientific symposium related to shepherding, Aromanians and the Balkan space.¹⁴ On the other hand, appear events/festivals that capitalize on the concepts of multiculturalism, interculturality, and interethnic tolerance (Diversity Festival – Mahmudia, Interethnic Week Festival – Tulcea; Delta Celebrations – National Minorities Festival – Sulina) or are based on the mix between folk and modern culture (Interethnic Film Week – Tulcea; Unity at the Fortress – Enisala).

Although we have not yet identified a strictly religious festival in Dobruja, in recent years an event has been organized in Sulina with the pretext of a memorial service: the Alms of the Forgotten Pirates (*Parastasul Piraților Nepomeniți*). The experimental festival, "crazy" some would say, started from the idea of commemorating those who no longer have descendants to carry out the rites related to the cult of the dead, the exotic element, which can attract tourists and thus speed up the opening of the tourist season, being the legendary pirates shrouded in mystery but anchored in the oral histories of Sulina. The celebration takes place in the cemetery, a unique space especially for cooking. The festival can also be linked to the older tradition of eating food at graves, on the occasion of Easter of the Dead. There is no lack of specific decor, which creates a disruption in relation to reality: characters dressed as pirates, flags, banners, etc. Moreover, festivals need fabulous stories, foundational narratives that cross the festive period and manage to ensure the greatest possible impact. As an event outside the daily routine, the festival shapes social capital by celebrating selected elements of culture¹⁵. Furthermore, festival audiences have heightened expectations and moods, seeking affective and symbolic intensity in the design and program of the event, so that the festive time-space differentiates itself from everyday life.¹⁶

¹³ Chiselev 2017, 89.

¹⁴ Titov 2015, 104-105.

¹⁵ Cudny 2014, 643

¹⁶ Jordan 2016, 46.

From the perspective of the roles of festivals in relation to the culture and society from which they draw their essence, we can place these events in a few categories, without pretending to be exhaustive: the preservation or revitalization of the cultural heritage, viable or not, in the most genuine forms, even if in some cases this process involves re-signification; ensuring the visibility of the community and strengthening the identity of a (often ethnic) group; the patrimonialization of the urban or rural space and the creation of local emblems, including for tourist and sustainable development purposes, etc.

Undoubtedly, most of the festivals have a positive impact on the local communities. They increase the prestige of the space and its inhabitants, attract an ever-increasing number of tourists willing to spend their savings locally. Thus, in addition to the social capital emanating from these events, the economic capital also enters the equation, being particularly important, because it also maintains this new formulation of cultures. A successful festival involves the occupation of accommodation places in guesthouses, private houses, full tables in restaurants, etc., in other words, significant incomes attracted to that locality. Thus, through the festival, culture is salable and offers long-term monetization possibilities, long after the ephemeral event is over. Perhaps not coincidentally, these events have flourished in spaces where tourism is part of the local or regional development strategy.

Although they are recent practices in Dobruja, festivals (also called Feast, Day, Fair, Celebration, etc.) confirm and strengthen the local identity or of a group, usually offering them direct or indirect benefits. Most of the time, they are ontogenetically linked to local tradition, to heritage elements specific to a space and territory, evoking local priorities, excellences and complementarities.¹⁷ However, festivals that are not linked to a specific space or a specific community also appeared in the researched area. It is what we can name exotic festivals or events, which are organized in different locations and refer to an allogeneic or global culture, not being linked to social or ethnic groups that share common values. For example, the Mediterranean Festival, organized in the Civic Square in Tulcea, but also in Baia Mare, Cluj-Napoca, Bârlad or Timișoara, a culinary festival, offers to the public seafood dishes, squid, shrimp, octopus, Rapanas, etc. In this case, the extraordinary experience and desire to taste the unknown is the main aspect, even if the audience is not emotionally attached to this event from a cultural perspective.¹⁸ On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that a demarcation line can be decoded between the type of festivalism and the types of spaces. If big cities are mirrors of cosmopolitanism and modernism, of experientiality and curiosity, having enough exotic festivals or presenting a wider culture (e.g. the "Golden Fish" International Folklore Festival, where global multiculturalism is the key factor, over time being invited ensembles from Colombia, Sri Lanka, Georgia, Armenia, Siberian Russia, etc.), villages or small towns are still linked to localism, cultural products and local techniques, in other words to rurality (in its new forms) and ethnicity.¹⁹

These newly invented holidays duplicate or provide an alternative to the traditional festive calendar. In many situations, they are marked during periods when religious or popular holidays are reduced or have less significance, especially on weekends or other days off (including vacation periods), so an auspicious time. Although they do not yet have canonized dates in the calendar, they being fluid from year to year, it is clear that a festival or cultural calendar is taking shape. A special case is when the festival competes with the feast, both events taking place on the same day. More and more often, the Village Day is organized on the occasion of the villages' patron saint. In this situation, the festival extends the celebration in the public space, the fun and entertainment moments being staged after the religious ceremony is over. But sometimes, because of this, the common table in the churchyard or in the cultural center disappears. Another example is that of the Universal Day of the Romanian Blouse, superimposed on the popular tradition of Midsummer and the religious celebration of the Birth of St. John the Baptist (June 24). Although the event in which the art of the traditional shirt is celebrated has been authenticated based on folk customs, on this day the garments and fabrics being exposed to the sun and aired, some ethnologists fear that its popularity and the new habits related to this day will endanger the entire system of beliefs and practices outlined around the Midsummer celebration. On the other hand, since it falls on a holiday when sewing is prohibited, Universal Day of the Romanian Blouse lacks an essential element: the demonstrative character through practical sewing workshops, exemplifying the respective techniques. It is currently a

¹⁷ Hedeșan 2014, 11.

¹⁸ Cudny 2016, 17.

¹⁹ Chiselev 2021, 140.

worldwide event, celebrated in Romanian communities in the country and in the diaspora, a form in which heritage is celebrated as an object and not as a subject, the emphasis falling on the one who creates or wears that piece of clothing and not on the cultural asset or the technique itself. Perhaps the pattern of *Vyshyvanka Day* (Ukrainian Embroidered Shirt Day), held on the third Thursday of May, a day of no major ceremonial significance, is more appropriate. A third example, in which there was a negotiation of the time of manifestation of two patrimonial elements, is related to *Tepreş/Kadırlez* and *Küreş* at the Tatars. If at one point *küreş* (Tatar wrestling) constituted a natural aspect of the *Tepreş* feast (May 5th or 6th), a celebration of spring, with a multitude of divinatory, apotropaic or propitiatory rites, when the latter developed its an important cult of the dead, by officiating memorials at the grave, *küreş*, already institutionalized, was detached from the gear of the celebration, being organized, usually throughout the month of May, but not at the same time as *Kadırlez*.

Last but not least, festivals have some limits, which can be interpreted as relatively negative aspects: the tendency towards spectacular and unnatural (sumptuous decor, use of modern technical means, stage); the tendency to mystify; shortening and smoothing performance; decontextualizing and formatting repertoires to please the audience; the trivialization of the presented element, in the conditions where sociability, related activities, souvenir shopping, etc. have equally important roles in the economy of manifestation.

In conclusion, the festival is a metaphor for the modern world, drawing attention to contemporary social and cultural changes: the transformations of the local economy, the re-signification of heritage, the development of tourism and creative industries, the increase in the share of services at the expense of industry and agriculture. On these new bases, the tradition is rewritten, reinterpreted, to meet the recent needs of the communities that choose to preserve it (without excluding updating) and of the tourists that choose to experience it. Sometimes the re-actualization involves only the form, not the original meaning, with many elements disappearing from ceremonial or practical life. They reappear in the context of festivals, temporarily and sporadically, however demonstrating that the knowledge of their making has not been completely lost. Thus, the festival can contribute to the rehabilitation of traditional knowledge, even if this is not its explicit purpose.²⁰

The festival is a social phenomenon closely related to the preservation and celebration of community values, internalized and assumed by a certain group, at a given time. In addition to the social function, it has the obvious character of a commodified product, attracting the public, promoting the community, the sale and consumption.²¹ Festivals inevitably lead to a commodification of local knowledge. In the desire to ensure success and economic profit, communities risk being caught in a vicious circle of re-ethnicization, where local actors invent and enact folkloric elements to attract audiences. Not by chance, certain events promote products that, until recently, did not exist in the cultural landscape of Northern Dobruja (e.g. *Cincila-Mucila* and *kokoshnik*²² for the Russian Lipovans). In these situations, the identity strategies currently applied by the ethnic and social groups can be discussed, the most relevant of which seems to be the rallying to the current identity of the country of origin of the ancestors.

The festival involves celebration and feasting, exhibiting, food and drink, and various elements of cultural heritage, among which we can mention local traditions, crafts, music, and traditional dance. Based, therefore, on the local cultural heritage, they incorporate elements of history, probably reinterpreted, which show the mutations of the community over time. They celebrate or revive older traditions, in the context of new ways of production and consumption.²³

²⁰ Chiselev 2021, 140.

²¹ Cleave 2016, 180.

²² Chiselev 2022, 77.

²³ Chiselev 2022, 182-183.

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