

AN UNUSUAL FOLK EVENT - *STEAGUL* OR *GEAVRELELE* (THE FLAG WITH EMBROIDERED TOWELS)

CONSTANTINA BOGHICI¹

Manuscript received: 17.07.2011. Accepted paper: 10.02.2011.

Published online: 10.06.2011.

Abstract. *If the musical styles and categories specific to the Romanian folklore have evolved in time, changing or modifying their function or significance, customs have remained relatively intact as event, significance and original function. Steagul / Geavrelele (The flag/the embroidered towels) is a century-old custom, its origin being traceable far back in the history of the Romanian people. This usage is still practiced today, the event including elements that remind of the Romanian archaic world with its levels of social, political, cultural and religious organization. The origin, the function and the significance of the Flag with embroidered towels are complex and have not been totally deciphered by the researchers. They resemble certain spring-summer customs, some events belonging to the family series and the spectacular winter events. The uniqueness and the complexity of this ceremonial, practiced only in the commune of Morteni, Dâmbovița County arose the interest of the researchers from this domain; in order to find out the significances of this ritual and the actual development of this ceremonial in its full complexity we need a thorough study concerning the moral, civic and esthetic concepts this folk event relies on.*

Keywords: *folklore, custom, ceremonial, ritual significance, function, folk home, geavrelele (a Romanian custom whose name comes from a noun of Turkish origin geavrele, meaning “the embroidered towels”).*

1. INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that, in the archaic Romanian world, the social, political, cultural and religious organization levels were not concurrential, but complementary or even organic, dictated by the necessities of life. Different researchers have underlined the fact that folk regions preserve, as part of their makeup, certain traditions and customs whose origins are archaic. In time, the Christian spirituality came over this ancestral core, and conferred it the complexity of an entity, highlighting its sacred content.

In the South-East of Dâmbovița County is situated a group of localities forming together the commune of Morteni.

In the area of this commune, major archeological discoveries have been made, which point out the ancientness of the habitat and reveal certain aspects concerning the material and

¹ Valahia University of Targoviste, Faculty of Science and Arts, 130082, Targoviste, Romania.
E-mail: constantinaboghici@gmail.com

spiritual life of the inhabitants of this area along the centuries. The existence of this settlement can be traced far back in history, as the finds of the earliest habitats in this area date from the Neolithic. A Dacian settlement of the 2nd-1st century B.C. was found here, and in 1998 the traces of the ancient precincts of a village estimated to have existed more than 6000 years ago were discovered in this area [1].

One of the customs that have been preserved in this folk village, strictly passed on from generation to generation, is *Steagul* (the Flag) or *Geavrelele* (the embroidered towels) an event that requires a longer period of organization and consequently takes place between the celebration of Saint Nicholas (December 6) and the celebration of the Epiphany (January 7). During this period of the winter holidays, the “group of lads” (*ceata de flăcăi*) is constituted, having precise ceremonial roles. At the same time, the preoccupations and the actions related to this custom take over the control of the ceremonial life of the commune.

Once the group of lads is reunited, life within it follows certain strict, self-assumed laws. The hierarchy of the group and the rules related to the behavior of the group members are established, and the group starts to work as a team, learning carols, eating and sleeping together, their behavior being in compliance with the obligations and interdictions set from the very beginning. It is forbidden to leave the group without the approval of the head (who is called *vătaful*), it is forbidden to enter with one’s head covered in the room where the activities of the group take place, it is not acceptable to drink, to have a noisy or scandalous or improper behavior, and it is not allowed for the group of lads not to dance with the girls the specific Romanian round dance (*horă*).

Any ignorance of or breach of these rules leads to harsh punishments like: the payment of a fine or the elimination from the group. It is easy to understand that these sanctions have a civic, moral and educative value, contributing and marking at the same time the beginning of the adult life. There have been situations when a group member left to see his parents or his girlfriend, without the approval of the head, and was hardly punished; tied on a sledge, he was taken around the village calling out: “*cine face ca mine, ca mine să pățească*” (“who does like me, let the same thing happen to him as it is happening to me”) [2] (according to Florea Dumitru – an inhabitant of this area).

Iordănitul (the ceremony of going around the commune singing and dancing) with the Flagpole decorated with embroidered towels takes place on the day of the Epiphany (*Bobotează*), concerning the four localities that are part of Morteni Commune (Morteni, Florica, Băjenari and Braniște). This event is preceded by the gathering of the embroidered towels by the “old group members” (“*bătrnii cetași*”), namely young married man, who, beginning with January 5, start the action of towel gathering in order to create the flag. The towels are embroidered by young lasses who make them out of homemade fabric during the period of the year in between these two feasts.

The people who gather the *geavrele* from the girls of the villages are lads whose ages range from 16 to 20 and who have not done their military service. From each small village about 1000-1500 multicolored embroidered towels are gathered, destined by each girl to her boy friend or future husband.

2. PREPARATIONS FOR THE DECORATION OF THE FLAG

The flag that must be decorated is made up of a long flagpole of 10-11m, made of ash wood, obtained of a more than 50 year-old tree. Each of the four localities will decorate its

own flag with the towels folded in four. The one appointed to tie the towels, the “binder” (“*legătorul*”) is not chosen randomly, as this function goes to the one who kept the pole throughout the year.

3. BINDING THE EMBROIDERED TOWELS

He is the one that will decorate the flag! Binding the embroidered towels is no easy job; only a skillful person who inherited this ability from generation to generation can do it. After the towel gathering operation, the group residence is agreed on, and there is the place where the whole ceremony will take place. As soon as the house has been hired (with money, products gathered by the group members from the four villages or by performing certain activities), the room acquires sacred properties; there will be discussions in order to choose the people who have certain functions in the group (priest, cantor) and to set the strategy for the following activities.

4. HOISTING THE FLAG

This is also the room where the earnings are gathered and distributed. In the yard, the flags are decorated, and on top of each of them, a cross and a bunch of basil are tied.

If the towels were not properly tied and during the ceremony one of them should fall, this lack of ability will trigger the mockery of the whole village for the respective “binder”. The nicely decorated flagpole will acquire from this moment on magical significances. Each member of the group will try to avoid any mistake that could trigger any mishaps. For instance, going over the flagpole during the decoration could cause big trouble for the one who made the mistake (“*Unul daruieste, Unul pedepsește, Unul o pățește*” – “One gives, One punishes, One gets into trouble”).

5. FINISHING UP THE FLAG

When the decoration ritual is completed, three flags will be tied near the eaves of the house, and the fourth is taken to the local church; they stay there until January 6, when they are taken by the groups of *iordănitari* (singers and dancers), who are going to go with them to the center of the commune, so that they may be seen and admired by its inhabitants. “The whole richness and beauty of the colors of the embroidered towels tied on the sticks is revealed to the onlookers: emerald green, ochre, beige, snuff-colored, mauve, black, violet, yellow, orange dyed cotton threads, naïve drawings embroidered patiently, leaves with ribs, flowers of an incredible beauty”. During this time, the lads *iordănesc* (sing to and dance with) the lasses that were imprudent enough to go on the street at this moment. The lads lift them up

and throw them in the air three times, accompanying their gestures by calls like “*hăp, hăp, hăp*”. At the same time the groups of *iordănitari* try a fall with one another, and this helps them get warm constituting at the same time a very amusing show for the onlookers.

In the center of the commune, the local people come with barrels or other vases full of water and this water is going to be sanctified by the priest, who will baptize both the flags and the water. From this sanctified water, the people of the village drink on fasting days or they feed the sick animals or people, until the next Epiphany.

While the priest is baptizing the crowd, the men hoist the flags endeavoring to be the first to place them vertically, in order to benefit of the primacy of the baptism (the first flag up is the first flag to be baptized) and to win the admiration of the villagers. This is the climax of the ritual, which seems to be filled with magic; the lad group hoist the flag while the villagers from each village acclaim and encourage the team from their village.

The groups of lads go around the village visiting the people called *Ion* or *Ioana* (the Romanian equivalent of John and Johanna; they are celebrated on this day of remembrance of Jesus Christ's baptism by Saint John the Baptist). On January 7, only the flag from Băjenari will travel around the villages, whose “priest” and “cantor” borrowed the priest's small bucket of water and silver cross. The “priest” and “cantor” sing the well-known religious song “*În Jordan botezându-Te, Tu Doamne...*” (“When you were baptized in the river Jordan, o Lord...”). At the end of the day they return at the rented house with food, meat, drinks, money, and feed the members of the group of lads.

The second day they start undoing the Flags, a part of the embroidered towels being returned to the girls that made them, and the other part being kept by the lads who “like” the girl whose towel they received. At the same time, the flagpole is returned to its owner, who keeps it until the following year when the ceremony takes place again.

According to the villagers' belief, this ritual must not be interrupted, because this fact would cause serious troubles that can only be avoided by interrupting the ceremony for a period of seven years. “If on the Epiphany day the Flag breaks, it means that one of the lads is going to die, or something is going to happen. Fifteen years ago, Leana's son, Cătălin, died in Găiești, run over by a car and for 7 years they no longer decorated the flag” (according to a declaration of a local villager, Florea Dumitru - “*Dacă în ziua de Bobotează, Steagul se rupe, unul din băieții aceia moare, sau se întâmplă ceva*”. *Acu' vreo cinspe ani a murit Cătălin a lu' Leana la Găești, călcat de o mașina și șapte ani n-au mai putut să-l facă*”) [3].

6. UNBINDING THE FLAG

The origin of the Flag seems to be found in the worshipping of the god Zalmoxis, a god who, in the thinking of our Geto-Dacian ancestors, was at the same time good and bad [4]. According to the custom, some archers pointed their arrows up to the sky in order to chase away the bad weather or even Zalmoxis himself. The verses reveal its ancestral meanings:

" Unul dăruiește	„One gives
Unul pedepsește	One punishes
Unul o pățește	One gets into trouble
Vine un balaur	There comes a dragon
Scuipând foc și aur	Spitting fire and gold
Vine cu furtună	It comes with a storm,
Pe noi se răzbună	Trying to get revenge on us
Noi îl așteptăm	We are waiting for it
Arcul ridicăm	We raise our bow
Steagul înălțăm	We hoist our flag
Steagul face " vuup"	Our flag goes “woop”
Mirosind a lup,	Smelling like a wolf
Și îl săgetează	And our arrow pierces
Drept în fruntea brează.	The white spot on its front
Focul de aruncă	It spits fire
La poale de stâncă,	At the foot of the rocks
Ne rămâne sporul	And we remain with the fertility
De la Călătorul.	From the Traveler
Călător cu norul,	The traveler that goes with the cloud,
Ce fuge la munte	[The Traveler] that runs to the mountains
Însemnat în frunte.	With a mark on its front
La peșteră sus	Up to the cave
Îmbrăcat în urs.	Dressed as a bear
În loc negăsit,	In a hidden place
În loc nepricit	In an ineffable place
De el locuit ".	There where it lives.”

The bow and the arrows have disappeared from among the “properties” of the spiritual life, and the Flag (with the embroidered towels) could signify in the opinion of the researchers a lance or the arrow. “*Our people invented the Flag, decorated it and turned it into a ritual, a ceremonial fight*” (according to a local villager, Florea Dumitru: „Oamenii noștrii au născocit Steagul, l-au împodobit și l-au transformat în ritual, lupta în sărbătoare”).

As far as the basil and the cross placed on top of the Flag are concerned, the old people of the village say that their role is to chase away the bad weather, to break the clouds to bring in rain during the arid periods, a concept that makes the function of the *Geavrele* similar to that of the spring-summer usages (*Paparuda, Scaloianul*). To this function can be added that of protecting the community members against natural disasters. The ritual of doing and undoing the Flag with embroidered towels has one more function that makes it similar to the custom called *Vergel*, namely that of marriage promise, of mutual commitment [5].

The significance of the Flag with embroidered towels, despite all its similarities to other rituals and customs, is complex and unique at the same time. The element that unites the ritual is the number 4, whose significance is nevertheless unknown, having been lost in the long history of the Romanian people. The fact that the villagers make up four flags can symbolize according to certain researchers of the folk phenomena, the words “*daci*”, “*geți*” – Dacians or Getians, our ancestors’ names [6]. The ritual is practiced by young people of four villages that make up Morteni Commune – Dâmbovița County.

There are still questions on the significances and the elements included in this custom. They will probably find their answer in the near or farther future. Until then, the villagers

practicing this custom will enjoy the beauty of this ceremony, passing on the moral and aesthetic concepts that lay at the basis of the existence and practice of this usage.

In the past, the custom of *Geavrele* used to be called as well *Boura* (from the verb *a bouri* meaning "to hoist", „to make right”).

REFERENCES

- [1] Stoicescu, N., Lungu, R., Oproiu, M., Micu, I., Vlad, R. et. al., *Dictionar istoric al judetului Dambovita*, Editat de Muzeul Judetean Dambovita, Targoviste, 53, 1983.
- [2] Barbu Iurascu, V., *Studii de culturat traditionala romaneasca*, Ed. Fundatiei Romania de maine, Bucuresti, 18, 2008.
- [3] Oprea, G., Agapie, L., *Folclor muzical romanesc*, Ed. Didactica si Pedagogica, Bucuresti, 1983.
- [4] Oprea, G., *Studii de muzicologie*, Ed. Almarom, Ramnicu-Valcea, 7, 2001.
- [5] Boghici, C., *Journal of Science and Arts*, 1(8), 191, 2008.
- [6] Boghici, C., *Journal of Science and Arts*, Supplement 1(12), 77, 2010.