

### (De)Constructing the *Dragobete* traditions

Regarding the dynamics of a Romanian village, Dimitrie Gusti formulated the *frames and manifestations* theory. The frames are operationalized into the potentialities which exist in any society, under different forms. The larger categories of frames **are cosmological (spatial), psychological, biological and historical**<sup>10</sup> and they are to be found under different forms and variations. The actual enactments of these potentialities are the manifestations themselves, divided into **cultural, economic, political-administrative and juridical**<sup>11</sup> manifestations. Regarding the celebration of *Dragobete*, it is a great example of a cultural manifestation which derives from more than one frame. Mainly, it has its roots in the historical frame, i.e. "the past life of the village, which of course has vanished, but which is still present through traditions". The best example for the historicity of *Dragobete* is the fact that scholars interested in this celebration still have not reached a consensus regarding its origins, which are lost in the mist of the time. Some argue that it is a more than 2000 years old celebration; some claim that it is more recent due to the fact that there is no written proof that is 2000 years old.

However, the *Dragobete* rituals survived the hardships of time due to the favorable **psychological frame** of the respective communities. The psychological frame could be defined as "the inner, unseen life of the people, the life which is extremely visible in the actual social action, as well as in their habits."<sup>12</sup>

By definition, people are different – so are the larger communities formed by individuals in a given space and time. The psychology of a certain people is not a singular characteristic; rather, one could easily recognize collective psychologies, which are not static, but vary, on the time-space axis - especially under the influence of main (geo) political and economic events. This could be an explanation for the variation of the extent to which the celebration of *Dragobete* had been preserved in different spaces in Romania. Perhaps a certain village or area has a collective spirit, a psychology which is more orientated through the preservation of traditions. For example, I noted that during the news reports on *Dragobete* day, the main focus was on villages from areas that are socially acknowledged nowadays as preserving a traditional way of life (Bukovina, the west part of Transylvania,

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<sup>10</sup> Henri H. Stahl. *Monografia unui sat. Cum se alcătuiește, spre folosul Căminului Cultural*. Fundația Culturală Regală «Principele Carol», Bucharest, 1939, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Maramureș). The psychological frame of these communities had been shaped in such a manner that traditions kept their role and importance and the cultural manifestations of the psychological frame reveal that indeed “eternity was born in a village”<sup>13</sup>.

Finally, the **cosmological frame** comes to complete the picture. The cosmological element refers to “the land, the climate, flora and fauna which can be found in the place where people live”<sup>14</sup> (do not confuse with the Eliade’s cosmic order, which mainly involves a transcendent dimension). Lucian Blaga had a similar concept – that of undulatory (mioritic) space: “the unconsciousness has its own horizon [...] and at the basis of a so-called specific sentiment of a culture resides this horizon or a perspective which is being created by the human unconsciousness as the first necessary frame of its existence.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, “the Romanian traditional culture also contains in itself a specific spatial dimension, which takes the form of a “undulatory infinite”<sup>16</sup>, known today as the *mioritic space*. A successful celebration of *Dragobete* rests to a great extent on the cosmological frame, on the spatial dimension, being a cultural manifestation that can only take place under the right circumstances.

Alexandru Surdu noted that *logodna de dragoste* had to take place in a sunny glade surrounded by forest (if possible) – anyway, an open field, bathed in direct sunlight. Also, the props depended on the type of space and flora available – both the lads and girls had to wear spring flowers, symbols of their purity and flourishing love. Also, very important is the fact that if the weather was not favorable on the *Dragobete* day, then a later, more suitable day was chosen. The setting, the props and the weather point to a high dependency of this cultural manifestation on its cosmological, spatial frame.

The combination of three out four different frames into only one manifestation points to the complexity of *Dragobete* and its meanings. However, one could also identify a certain connection to the biological frame as well, conceptualized as “the bodily, physical being of the people”<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Lucian Blaga, one of the most important Romanian poets and philosophers.

<sup>14</sup> Henri H. Stahl. *Monografia unui sat. Cum se alcătuiește, spre folosul Căminului Cultural*. Fundația Culturală Regală «Principele Carol», Bucharest, 1939, p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> Bernea, Ernest. *Spațiu timp și cauzalitate la poporul român*. Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 2005, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Blaga, Lucian. *Trilogia Culturii*. Editura pentru Literatură Universală. Bucharest, 1969, p. 43.

<sup>17</sup> Henri H. Stahl. *Monografia unui sat. Cum se alcătuiește, spre folosul Căminului Cultural*. Fundația Culturală Regală «Principele Carol», Bucharest, 1939, p. 16.

Extensively, the biological status of the participants in the *Dragobete* rituals determined their roles in the enactment of *logodna de dragoste*. As noted before, sexual activity was subdued to marriage. It was considered that an unmarried lad or girl was a virgin until after the wedding. This is relevant and visible in the dynamics of the dances and other rites enacted during *Dragobete*: the social division of ritual labor depended on the marital status of the person and, therefore, on the socio-biological condition of being sexually active or not. However, it is again important to note the distinction between social norm and individual action (Kligman 1988) – it was the norm not to have sexual intercourse until marriage, but this does not necessarily mean that all youngsters acted accordingly to it. Rather, it is a social form of virginity - a fact that becomes real through people's belief that it is so. However, we should not fall into the trap of labeling such ancestral customs with modern concepts such as "sexually active". The purpose of *Dragobete* was the formation of new families, not the beginning of sexual activity for the participants.

The individual action was of no importance as long as "the voice of the village" was not informed on any violation of the norm. On the contrary, if this happened, then marginalization was the punishment: "nobody will ever take you to be his/her spouse and you will die an old girl" (*nimeni nu te mai ia și-o să mori fată bătrână*). To be an old *girl* is the literal translation from Romanian, for the correct English word, i.e. *maid*, automatically entitles virginity and social innocence, whereas an old girl is not necessarily a pure one. Old girls were considered crooked outsiders and were thought of as unfulfilled beings. They were not "real" (young) girls, they were not women because they did not perform as women, they were not necessarily old as well. Rather, an old girl was associated with the dark side of the moon and her status relied on this unpleasant fate, of growing old without fulfilling her destiny as a woman. To exemplify this, Kligman notes on a rather hilarious habit people in leud had: during New Years' Eve, they placed an ugly, mocking and insulting doll in front of the house of an old girl, while shouting some sexualized lyrics to emphasize her unusual nature and the fact that, although she steps into a new year, she will not have a fresh start. Her destiny was sealed – once an old girl, always an old girl (Kligman 1988).

Regarding the importance of this dimension of the biological (physical) frame, preserving one's purity was of public importance only in the case of girls, because they were the center of the familial universe, they were the ones responsible with raising a healthy new family, so they had to be untainted. This becomes especially evident during the

wedding rituals (Kligman 1988). The most awaited moment of the wedding focused on the bride's virginity: *The Song of the Hen (Horea Găinii)* had a strongly emphasized sexual character and the girl's purity was on display for everyone to see and acknowledge (especially her husband and his parents). "Because honor demands it, the bride's virginity must be publicly certified. This is accomplished [...] during *The Song of the Hen*, [...] which usually takes place around 4 A.M. at the bride's house. [...] The bride's symbolic mother, in this instance the woman who prepares the wedding meals, attests to her "daughter's" virginity through a versified dialogue with the symbolic mother-in-law, the groom's godmother. [...] The hen is fashioned into an icon of the bride. [...] Social norms do not permit forthright public discussion of sexual matters; hence, the discussion is carried on via metaphoric discourse."<sup>18</sup>

Given the fact that the goal of the *Dragobete* celebration is the formation of new nuclear families, it is evident why the ritual is destined only for the unmarried to perform. This way, the social dimension of a biological frame shaped the interactions between the members of the community during *logodna de dragoste* rituals.

Given the fact that the "real" life began with marriage, it should be no surprise that the celebration of *Dragobete* and all wedding rituals were held so dearly by the members of different communities. Traditionally, girls turned into women only when they were dressing the bridal gown and *logodna de dragoste* described in the previous section of this paper was the first step towards their spiritual and physical maturity.

## ***Dragobete - masculinity, femininity, and the philosophy of love and joy***

### **Male vs. Female**

It is important to bear in mind that, in the case of love, masculinity and femininity are no longer dichotomous or subjected to power relations. As Mircea Vulcănescu noted in "*Logos and Eros*", in love we do not find a subject and its object, but two subjects: "We deal with a spiritual unity, with a whole new reality under which the two terms of the equation, existentially distinct and free, are one. But what is that that occurs between them is not knowledge, but a shared feeling of love which can sometimes be emptied of any intellectual

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<sup>18</sup> Kligman, Gail, *The wedding of the dead: ritual, poetics, and popular culture in Transylvania*, Univ. of California Press, Berkeley, 1988, pp. 107 -109.

content [...] and enacted only “in via”, in synchronized action.”<sup>19</sup> A relation of unity as Vulcănescu conceptualizes love also underscores mutual dependency, because if one of the elements steps aside the cultural norms regarding love and marriage, then he or she negates the other and their unity.

Some feminist theories regarding hegemonic masculinity<sup>20</sup> identify men as the norm and claim that femininity is culturally constructed in relation to its other half, the manhood (Connell, 1969, Beth 2002). However, I feel that such a perspective is deeply reductionist and fails to take into account the other side of the coin – the way masculinity is culturally produced and dependent on femininity. In other words, the female sexuality was (is?) of great importance for the safe-keeping of a certain form of masculinity. For example, in the case of Kligman’s people of leud, men defined themselves in relation to the female population of the village and not only the other way around. In other words, *she* was a woman because she was *his* wife, but *he* also was a man because he was *her* husband. This becomes especially evident in the fact that the most important thing for a successful bargaining<sup>21</sup> (on the groom’s side) was that the girl was “pure”. The groom’s masculinity depended on his bride, on her good habits. However, the villagers of leud or the lads who participated in *Dragobete* celebration were not “sexual predators” – their actions were not sexually charged. Instead, their masculinity became even more powerful and emphasized when they were getting married – it was not enough to just have intercourse, thus they were constantly seeking for a wife, and not for a “friends-with-benefits” kind of relationship. The formation of a new family transformed girls into women and lads into men.

### Love and Joy

Finally, we should not fall into the trap of comparing these traditions with our modern social order, for we might come to the conclusion that traditions forced people into getting married during springtime. One of the most important Romanian philosophers, Ernest Bernea, wrote a wonderful piece called “*The Stages of Joy*”. When conceptualizing the *joy*, he wrote that “our very existence in this world is imbued with joy when it finally reaches a meaning and purpose in its elementary (essential) data, when the human

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<sup>19</sup> Vulcănescu, Mircea. *Logos și Eros*. Paideia, Bucharest, 1991, pp. 24-25.

<sup>20</sup> As discussed in the following work: Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, 1995.

<sup>21</sup> The wedding rituals described in Kligman’s study borrowed extensively from the semantic field of the bargaining. C. L. Strauss noted in 1967 in *Structural Anthropology* that “it is the men who exchange the women and not vice-versa. [...] In human society a man must obtain a woman from another man who gives him a daughter or a sister”.

conscience is capable of recognizing some solid realities and can finally achieve what the human soul always craves for: *fulfillment*". Therefore, the joy is somehow equal with discovering one's true self and with the fulfillment of our human destiny. In the case of the youngsters who participated in the *Dragobete* rituals described by Al. Surdu, discovering one's true self and the fulfillment of the human destiny meant one and the same thing: becoming a woman (later, mother), respectively a man (later, father). How did they become men/women? By getting married.

However, please note that the immediate outcome of *Dragobete* is called *logodna de dragoste*. Not only does this ritual bring two strangers together, but it also brings love on the table. Love is one of the most discussed topics in the history of mankind. Sometimes it can be so powerful that it literally resurrects people or, on the contrary, it can destroy entire civilizations. We, the Romanian people, are a Latin people. The stereotype says that we have fiery hearts, irrepressible blood and I could add tormented souls in the equation. With all these ingredients on the table, it is no wonder that feelings of love had been present in our collective mental since ancient times.

When the lads and girls participated in the *Dragobete* celebration, it was so they could find their love, so they would *fall* in love. "Love is the beginning of all things"<sup>22</sup> (Bernea) and, in this case, it is the beginning of life itself. Every youngster of the community was eager to actively participate in *logodna de dragoste* because it was the perfect means to meet his or her soul mate. "Meeting (conceptualized as spiritual tie) the other is one of the greatest joys in life. [...] Only the spiritual meeting opens the doors for a profound companionship because only this closeness produces our own fulfillment and the discovery of the other as intimate and indispensable existence."<sup>23</sup> This spiritual encounter of the other was embodied in the dances that were performed and into the final scene on the glade, where girls rapidly kiss their chosen one. "The spiritual ties are real, fruitful and long-lasting; they underscore a beauty and a joy that is characteristic to beings gifted with self-conscience and meanings. [...] A closeness and an extensive knowledge of the significant other cannot occur in an ordinary setting, through an exclusively exterior, material contact, but only

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<sup>22</sup> Bernea, Ernest. *Treptele Bucuriei*. Predania, Bucharest, 2011, p. 233.

<sup>23</sup> Idem, p. 221.

through *falling* into the intimacy of the other's self, through penetrating his or her internal structures and through a cohabitation inside the same destiny."<sup>24</sup>

The sunny glade surrounded by forest is no ordinary setting, the dancing and kissing are no ordinary contacts and the idyllic idea of love at first sight was truly believed in during those times. To back my assertion, I turn to Kligman's study one more time: in the village of leud, where the Sunday Dance was the most important scene where unmarried men and women met, divorce was not known at all. Although people were getting married without "testing the waters" first, their marriages lasted for a lifetime; they somehow managed to conquer the hardships of earthly life together, despite of not having lived together before, to see if "it works out". These youngsters who took part in the *Dragobete* celebration had a similar fate – that of starting a family without previously spending a lot of time with their spouses. Probably, they were able to gracefully manage their lives together, and I tend to believe it was due to the very special occasion on which they first met and "connected" and to the completely different way of defining one's family and community.

The intensity of these moments was so high that it was not a rarity for the girls to cry at the end of the day. It might seem a bit strange, for crying is usually associated with negative affects. Luckily, *logodna de dragoste* is not a time for sorrow – on the contrary. "When joyful, the being is rich, it is loaded to the brim; the true joys in life overflow. It is said that in these moments of intense and complete living the human sheds "tears of joy". The waves of our own feelings sometimes exceed the capacity of the human soul."<sup>25</sup> The *Dragobete* celebration was imbued with heartily plenitude. However, one should not consider that any kind of plenitude can be translated into this particular feeling, *joy*. Bernea defines joy as a feeling of "elevation and fulfilling of life, as a natural effect of finding a higher meaning of the human condition"<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, there is no room for pleasure or physical excess in joy. Just like the white snowdrops, the youngsters who participated in the *Dragobete* rituals were untainted, socially pure (note again that sexual activity was subdued to marriage) and so were their actions. *Dragobete* was a moment of joy for these young people, for "our thought and action must originate in the most untainted depths, in the

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<sup>24</sup> Idem, p. 222.

<sup>25</sup> Idem, p. 164.

<sup>26</sup> Idem, p. 163.

cleanest springs of our own humanness."<sup>27</sup> And what can be more pure than young, maybe naïve, love?

## Conclusion

At first sight, *Dragobete* might seem as a simple and unimportant celebration. At least nowadays, its meanings shifted towards red hearts and stuffed animals, resembling the transformation suffered by Valentine's Day during the capitalist and postmodern era. On the bright side of the things, there seems to be a trend towards the recuperation of a traditional form of life and *Dragobete* is a part of this effort. Tradition seems to slowly penetrate the urban space again, although not always under the most desirable forms. It is the aim of papers like this to spread the word regarding the deeper meanings of what is thought of as our own celebration of love. The mythology and philosophy related to *Dragobete* are such vast and interesting domains that it is impossible to capture and discuss everything in only one essay.

I, probably like most of you out there, have been convinced that *Dragobete* is just another day about love and that we should not need a special day for love. If we love somebody, we love them every day, no matter the weather conditions or their social and biological status. However, thanks to few amazing works cited in this paper, I hope I managed to step out of the stereotype and penetrate a bit beyond the surface of the water. What fascinated me the most was the complexity of such an apparently simple web of events and the hidden meanings of their characteristics, which still remain to be further explored.

At the end of the day, nothing is random in tradition, not even the cathartic dancing, hugging, kissing and crying; not even the chosen spaces for unfolding the rituals or the props used in the process (flowers, colorful bands, etc.). I think it is our duty to try to understand the determinisms and interactions between parts of the ritual itself and between the ritual and the larger frames – the community, society, social ties between individuals because only by getting in touch with our own history we can step out of it and not repeat the same mistakes over and over again. Unfortunately, *it is not the history which is under the human control, but the poor human at history's mercy (nu sunt vremile sub om, ci bietul om sub vremi)*.

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<sup>27</sup> Idem, p. 164.



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