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Children's Part in Performing Customs

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ABSTRACT

The article presents the role played by children in the enactment of traditional customs. Present at all the customs enacted in the community, children sometimes have a dynamic role as participants since they perform rituals; at other times, they have a passive role, of mere spectators, or an intermediate role, that of beneficiaries of customs, such as the cases of the customs of prophylactic rituals. The article also approaches the role children have in the passing down of customs, thus contributing to the community's social cohesion. Therefore, the article outlines the children's functions in the enactment of customs and in the development of the dynamics of cultural phenomena.

KEYWORDS

Traditional customs, the role of children, passing down customs, dynamics of customs.

Throughout field research done in the course of several years,¹ field research regarding folk ceremonials, I have had the possibility to observe several ritualistic actions, their role in a community and the community members' part in performing and keeping them. The theoretical statements of the present article are based on direct observation done as direct witness of certain customs, as an ethnologist, bearing in mind that such information is limited by the study's main interest, as well as by the impossibility of taking everything in at one glance.² During the research, I followed the minute visual documentation of the stages of a custom, from preparations to the actions that took place after it had come to an end. Nevertheless, the information gathered was not only visual; interviews with both the performers and spectators of the rituals were taken, in order to encompass the natives' perspective, the emic view that accounts for ritualistic actions, circumscribing them between the cultural and social practices of the group.

As we returned in the following years in order to further document, in addition to the above, I had the possibility to observe the changes that had occurred and the dynamics

of the customs studied, thus completing the synchronic dimension of my research with an immediate diachronic perspective, to which one might add a longer, historical perspective provided by the interviews with senior interlocutors talking about the manifestation and significance of customs in their youth. All of this led to gathering of information about traditional ceremonials, approached as unitarily as possible, following the events of the community in its entirety.

Thus, although initially I had perceived it as secondary, I couldn't help but notice the children's role in the complex of customs and the fact that they hold a special position in the process of ceremonials. Children, present at all customs, sometimes have an active part, as performers of rituals; at other times, their role is a passive one, of simple spectators, in the care of parents, or following the suite of the ceremonial; and sometimes they even have an intermediate role, of beneficiaries of the customs in ceremonies where prophylactic rituals take place. In some cases, I was able to notice that children are active agents of the process of passing down of customs, turning - depending on the situation - from mere spectators (as it should have been in that ritual) to

1) It regards the field research done between 2005 and 2013 within the ORMA Sodalitas Anthropologica group, coordinated by Bogdan Neagota and within the CNCIS (The National Council of Higher Education Scientific Research) grants coordinated by Ileana Benga. The field research was done predominantly in the regions of Transylvania and Maramures, but also in the mountainous region of Banat, in Oltenia and Muntenia.

2) These limitations and the wish to encompass as many ritualistic, social and cultural aspects as possible are the main reasons why the research was done, to the greatest extent possible, together with other researchers.

performers, even if their role was secondary.

But why customs? What role do they generally have within a community? One must specify from the very beginning that customs govern traditional or “customary” – as Vintilă Mihăilescu called them (Mihăilescu 2004, 185) – communities or, as Sanda Golopenția named them, “memory communities”, whose members know one another and are in verbal and ritualistic contact (Golopenția 2001, 36). Customs govern man’s relationship with the sacred and ensures the cultural and social cohesion of the group, by means of ritual and the fact that customs are attended by the entire community through its representatives. In other words, customs are a “dramatic form that articulate the relationship between symbolically constructed order of meanings (‘culture’, according to some authors) and a system of interpersonal and institutional relationships (‘society’)” (Kligman 1984, 169). Popular ceremonials are important also because they are real identity markers for an entire social group: people constantly relate to their traditions when talking about the specificity of their community, that is, when they discursively approach their local identity.

One of the main characteristics of customs is that they are passed down from one genera-

tion to the other, via repetition, when norms and the experience a group accumulates in time are updated, thus contributing to the “preservation of traditional life forms” (Pop 1999, 34). At the same time, one must emphasize that customs are dynamic cultural phenomenon: they update traditions, but they are also embodiments of current needs (see Bernea 1968, 383); they adapt to new situations, new social and cultural values of a community (see Pop 1999, 34; Iuga 2011, 24-26), sometimes being on the verge of abandonment as they are no longer of current interest.

Based on these premises, I begin by analyzing the way in which the passing down of values and the continuity with the old traditions and the inherent dynamics take place, what changes occur, depending on recent innovations. The article focuses mainly on the children’s role in the passing down process, presenting the functions they have in the actual performance of customs, both in customs they are an active part of as performers and customs they have a passive role in, as spectators and beneficiaries.

As definitive marks in approaching the local identity, customs offer natives of a community the feeling of temporal continuity and permanence, even if they are adapted to con-



Photo 1: Children wearing masks at the Bondroși ritual. Șurdești (Maramureș County), 2006.
Photo: Anamaria Iuga



Photo 2: Children wearing masks at the Fârşang ritual. Moldova Nouă (Caraş-Severin County), 2011. Photo: Anamaria Iuga

temporary needs.³ In addition to the actual performance of customs, people reminisce and talk about customs of previous years; stories told by the natives of a community, whether performers or spectators of customs, are frequent, when their own experiences are transferred in “post-experience narratives” (Benga 2009, 50; see to that effect the entire article, p. 49-65, which analyses the narration of oral transmission and the manner in which the traditional ceremonial is passed down, synchronously and diachronically). But what does actually happen during the enactment of a custom? How can the actual transmission be done? The most obvious example I can offer is that of the custom of *Păpălugăra*, on Pentecost (Soimeni, Cluj County): in 2009, while *Păpălugăra* was getting dressed in green leaves from the forest near the village, because that year, for the first time, *Păpălugăra* was a young villager, I noticed the advice and explanations of the elderly kept on flowing, thus initiating him in the enactment of the custom. Via the events in previous years, narrated by former performers, the transmission of a “dramatic package containing all the stage directions” (Benga 2009, 63) occurred in this case, which

the receiver, the new *Păpălugăra*, would set to motion.

Children, the subjects of the current article, also have an important function in this passing down process; the first means - rather frequent - is that of imitating the gestures of the main performers of customs, especially at ceremonials which involve masks, when, at the end, the performers leave their props behind, and the children put them on, partially imitating the principal gestures of the custom. For instance, during the spring rituals, at *Sângiorz* or *Băbăluda*,⁴ after the young people dressed in green leaves and tree bark have shed their costumes, the children, who imitated the performers, lingering and awaiting in the place where the latter were shed - at a village end (Muncel, Cluj County, 2007), or in the yard of the house where the participants for the final stage of the ritual, the final score, got together (Buru, Cluj County, 2007) - dress in the bark helmet or in the green-branch dress and run on the village roads. Other examples regard the winter rituals. Thus, after having performed the *Viflaim*⁵ in the church yard on the first and second Christmas days, in Dragomireşti (Maramureş County, 2008), in

3) The narrations of the natives of a community also speak volumes about the dynamics of customs, especially in the case of older people who had an active role in the development of the ritual many years ago and who compare the present staging to the past one, when they were the performers.

4) *Sângiorz* and *Băbăluda* are customs that take place on Saint George's Day (23rd April), celebrating the beginning of Spring.

5) A folk theatre play presenting the birth of Jesus Christ. It is performed at Christmas.

the house where the members of the Viflaim group (around 15-18 youngsters and teenagers) got together, after having shed their costumes, the children of the respective house or the neighbors' children put on the bell-belt of the masked and run on the village roads. Similarly, in the New Year morning, after the young people and adults alike wearing sheep-

when the ritual is held; afterwards, the young villagers will dress as *ghiduși*. The little and big *ghiduși* share the same responsibility: at a crossroads or on the road, in front of the house of the host where the ritual starts, they stop the cars and jump around them, so the bells can ring vigorously. After this, they get rewarded with money (Tăure, Bistrița-Năsăud County,

Photo 3: Children dressed at the Profeți ritual on 15th August – The Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Dragomirești (Maramureș County), 2012. Photo: Anamaria Iuga



6) A custom performed before New Year's Eve when young masked men go from house to house to drive away evil spirits.

7) Is a custom in which an ox, decorated with a crown of flowers, crosses the village, driven by young lads. Water is poured on the flowers and the head of the ox, in order to have a prosperous year.

8) Little pranksters. Children wearing masks.

9) A group of men who dance traditional and ritual dances, meant to cure and to protect the villagers. During the ritual they dance around some prophylactic plants, such as garlic and absinth. The area of the custom overtakes the village boundaries the men come from, as it is performed also in the villages and the cities close by.

skin masks and big bells walked all night for the custom of *Bondroși*,⁶ it was the children's turn to wear the big masks and get on the road, jumping mightily, in order for the sound of bells to be heard afar (Șurdești, Maramureș County, 2006, 2010, photo 1).

The second category is that of ceremonials in which children have a secondary role, though they also have the same attributions and gesture repertoire as that of the main performers, the adults. In this case, the children seem to be passing an apprenticeship period, composed of several stages, before becoming the main performers themselves, as they age. For example, on Pentecost, on the occasion of *Împănatul bouului*⁷ in Transylvania, children wear masks and bells as they "turn" into *ghiduși*,⁸ but only in the first part of the day

2005, 2006). Also on Pentecost, in Oltenia, the group of *călușari*⁹ can also be comprised of children, such as the one in the village of Olari (Olt County, 2010): the *călușari* group that danced in Craiova included two children; when they came to dance in the village, only one child danced together with the group, while the second one took care of the absynth. By entering the group of the *călușari* and taking the vow which requires that a *călușar* stays for 7 years in a row in the group, the children ensure the continuity of the ritual over several years, during which they also pass the apprenticeship stage.

As seen above, in the case of the two Pentecost rituals from Transylvania and Oltenia, the children were integrated in the custom, having a distinct role in its development, even

though, at times, it was secondary. Therefore, the continuity and passing down of values of the respective community is ensured by the growing awareness among children regarding the rituals. Thus, the researchers' concern regarding the future of some traditional rituals is understandable, especially in barely populated villages where the birth rate has sorely decreased because of the season migration or the migration to the city. In this case, the ethnologist becomes "the isolated witness of a dying world and the sole confirmation of a tradition that does not narrate itself anymore" (Benga 2005, 119), since its passing down has ceased. This would be the case of the village of Buru (Cluj County) where, as Bogdan Neagota has noticed, the ritual of *Băbăluđa* is going to be performed only for a short time, „because children are no longer born in the village and the racing depopulation is obvious" (Neagota 2008, 28).

In addition to the fact that they participate at the transmission of tradition, children have an active role in the performance of rituals as they are one of the main participants in the ritualistic complex of a community, having their own repertoire of rituals.

There is an entire series of rituals that can



be performed only by children. Most of them are around Christmas when caroling starts on Christmas Eve. They are the first to announce the birth of Jesus, going from house to house with *Steaua*¹⁰ (Ticuș, Brașov County, 2007; Dragomirești, Maramureș County, 2008; Ungureni, Maramureș County, 2009; Boz, Hunedoara County, 2012). If they are older, they go in groups of 3-4, but, usually, as this is a ritual performed by younger children, they go caroling with one of the parents. Children go caroling with *Steaua* early in the evening, until around 10:00 p.m., when they go back home. Only after the children have performed this ritual can the other groups of carolers start off, generally following a succession given by the group members' age. Children perform *Capra*¹¹ at Christmas (Ungureni, Maramureș County, 2009) or on New Year's Eve (Șurdești, Maramureș County, 2006), they do "The Herods" (*Irozii*) or "The Magi" (*Craii*) at Christmas (Cuciulata, Brașov County, 2007; Ungureni, Maramureș County, 2009), staging a short theatre play of 3-4 characters narrating the moment King Herod meets the three wise men announcing the birth of Jesus. In Boz (Hunedoara County, 2012) there are even two groups of *Irozi*: one formed of older children, the villagers call „the little Herods”, while the second one is formed of youngsters called „the big Herods”, and who go caroling after the children's group, staying behind them by one-two houses. In the neighboring village, in Târnăvița (Hunedoara), where the Christmas rituals have been partially abandoned, 2012 was the first year when - after a long time - the children's group of *Irozi* was resumed. In the case of the groups of *Irozi*, they go from house to house till they have finished caroling the entire village, with a couple of hours' break during the night, sometimes finishing caroling the next day (as in the village of Boz).

On Easter Day, in various communities such as those of Maramureș, the custom is for children to go to the houses of immediate relatives, greeting everyone with „Christ is Risen!” so as to receive a red egg from the hosts (Sălișteea de Sus, 2005, 2007), custom called *în*

10) A Christmas carol sung generally only by children who go from house to house and announce the birth of Jesus Christ.

11) A traditional goat dance and a complex folk play with many characters (masks). The goat dance is a frantic dance, which is performed in every house that is carolled.

Photo 4: Children throwing water after each other, participating at the custom of milk measuring. Cămărașu (Cluj County), 2009. Photo: Ioan Moldovan

ptiez. Most times, because this happens during the day, children go unaccompanied, but, if they are very young, they are accompanied by their parents; this event bears also a social significance, as it is a good opportunity for close relatives to meet one another.



Photo 5: Călușar jumping over a child for a prophylactic purpose. Olari (Olt County), 2010. Photo: Anamaria Iuga

Some customs, performed until recently exclusively by young people and adults, or in which children had a secondary role, have lately been taken over by children, and are thus simultaneously performed by various age categories. For instance, at the beginning of Lent, in the mountainous region of Banat, the custom of Carnival, called locally *Fărșang* is performed for three days, chasing away winter and evil spirits, where youngsters and adults from a village put on masks. Nevertheless, as I could observe in Moldova Nouă (Caraș-Severin County, 2011, photo 2), the custom was taken over by children, who dress in costumes in order to participate at the ritual. Similarly, at the beginning of summer, on the Summer solstice, for the night before the feast of St. John

(23rd of June), the custom of *Sânziene*, in the villages on Vișeu Valley (Maramureș County) torches are lit on hills and, lately, next to a water source to avoid fires. Generally, only youngsters and adults used to perform in this custom, but the custom has been taken over more and more by the children who gather around Vișeu River together with their parents or grandparents to light *fetere* (torches), to swirl them above their heads (Vișeu de Jos, Maramureș County, 2006). In this case, children have become performers of a custom that has lost most of its importance and has thus fallen into decline.

Another category is that of the customs performed by adults, but in which children have an active, well-outlined role and are part of the main performers. For example, at Christmas, for the custom of *Vișlaim* (Maramureș County), a more complex folk theatre play narrating the birth of Jesus, using several characters, played by both youngsters and teenagers, the golden rule is for the two angels to be played only by children dressed in white, wearing crowns with little icons, symbolizing purity (Dragomirești, 2008). Still in Maramureș, on the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (15th of August), children, dressed in white, and wearing white or flower crowns, are part of the procession train of *profeți*, pilgrims going to the nearest monastery in the village or even to far away monasteries singing Marian songs on their way (Dragomirești, Sălișteea de Sus, Maramureș County, 2008, 2011, photo 3). Present at the head of the train of *profeți*, children are accompanied by women usually dressed in traditional clothes. Another example would be *măsurîșul laptelui* (the measurement of the milk of the sheep), performed at the beginning of May, when, in Cămărașu (Cluj County, 2006, 2009), a young man, dressed as *păpălugără*, with green leaves all over his body, walks ahead the sheep, when they get in the village, to get to the milking place; at the end of the procession, when the *păpălugăra* sheds its dress of leaves, the children start a water fight for the sheep to give milk. Following the interdiction of animal access on national and European

roads, there was no *păpălugăra* in 2009; its role is to involve the entire community in the custom, crossing the village ahead of the sheep and getting wet. However, children still have water fights in the place where the sheep yard is made and the sheep milk is measured (photo 4).

In addition to these rituals performed by children, or the rituals the children have a secondary role in, usually children are rather spectators of community ceremonies, whether it be calendar customs or family customs. As spectators, children watch the development of customs, passively participating, together with the adults in the family, or the other children, but never alone. With each passing year, they familiarize themselves with the ritualistic moments of the community and, as they age, they leave behind the role of simple spectator to turn into an active performer. Therefore, one could say that customs, through the complex of ritualistic actions it implies, represents itself an initiation journey into a community's social and cultural values.

In the case of some customs, especially the ones requiring masks, the children (particularly the young ones) get into contact with the performers, being scared by the masked people and hiding in their parents' arms (for example, caroling with *turca*¹² in Cuculata, Venetia de Jos, Braşov County, 2007; performers masked as devils for the Viflain custom on Christmas Day in Dragomireşti or in Sighetul Marmăţiei, Maramureş County, 2008, 2010; performers masked for Fărşang – Carnival - in Dognecea, and in Moldova Nouă, Caraş-Severin County, 2009, 2011). The scare is not just for amusement, but also has the function of preserving the mystery to the mask and masked, contaminated by the sacred.

Simultaneously, drawing attention from the development of customs to the objects used at such events, especially in the regions



Photo 6: Children receiving aims on the ritual of Moşi de toamnă (also known as "Luminajii"). Rozavlea (Maramureş County), 2010.
Photo: Anamaria Iuga

of Maramureş and Chioar, where the traditional costume still has an important function, children are frequently dressed in celebration clothing, traditional costumes, in order to stand out. In the last years some customs where the children are usually only spectators, have integrated them in the ritual and they have been given specific, distinct functions. For instance, at *Udătoriu*¹³ (Şurdeşti, Maramureş County), when, on the second day of Easter, in front of the church and the whole community it is declared who the most hard-working villager is and are named and consecrated the younger and adult men organizing and taking part in the custom, all of them being consecrated by being elevated, it could be noticed that, since 2011, children have also been included in this elevation-ritual and bestowed distinct functions upon. The significance of this gesture is that of growing awareness among the young generation participating in this custom and of ensuring the continuity of the ritual. This is all the more important as the custom was prohibited in the Communist period and was not resumed until after 1989; since 2000, it has become a small local festival where, after the ritual of wetting the celebrated householder, everyone (performers and spectators) go to the stage. Here, since 2010, children, especially from the community – after having been trained and taught by the village youngsters to dance – perform traditional dances. This is the contemporary

12) A costume-mask impersonating a mysterious animal that has deer horns, decorated with flowers, and a pout covered by a rabbit skin, a mask that accompanies the carollers.

13) Agrarian custom celebrating the first man who started ploughing the land. He is taken by the river, where he is wettened in order to have a prosperous crop that year.

means of perpetuation of tradition, through its reinvention and adaptation to the new social and cultural requirements. The resumed tradition is reinvented and invested with new meanings; at this stage, children are the most valued because they are perceived by the community as those who will carry on the custom year by year.

A special place is held by the customs that allow the analysis of the transfer of symbolic functions onto children who, somehow, turn from simple spectators into the beneficiaries of rituals: on Pentecost, for the custom of *Căluș*, after the usual ritualistic dances are over, comes a moment when all the spectators, especially children held in the arms of *călușari* to bring them health, are invited to the *horă*¹⁴ (Pietroaia, Dolj County, 2010). Sometimes, *călușarii* jump over them in a prophylactic goal (Olari, Olt County, 2010, photo 5), emphasizing the importance of the therapeutic function the custom has within the community. Another example is that of the customs of *pomenirea morților* (commemoration of the dead) or *Luminații*¹⁵, as they are called in the region of Maramureș, which take place around *Moșii de Toamnă* (Saint Demetrius, 26th October). The villagers tend to the tombs of the defunct and give alms, especially to children, who, in order to receive the sweets, go from one tomb to the other (Budești, 2005; Șurdești, 2006, 2007; Rozavlea, 2010 – photo 6).

Following this brief analysis, one can observe that the role children have in the continuation and enactment of traditional customs is complex and diverse; examples can be added with customs from other ethnographic regions. It must be emphasized, however, that, regardless of their role (passive or active performers, spectators or beneficiaries) children fully contribute to the social cohesion of a community and to the passing down of values incorporated in traditions.

Translated by Alina-Olimpia Miron

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14) A type of traditional circle dance found in several Balkan countries.

15) An equivalent of Soul Saturday