

TRADITION ACROSS BORDERS

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Abstract

The recognition of things in the past that tell their story should be known and possibly enriched by successive generations. A major resource in the pursuit of this objective is the effort into making traditional customs successful and strong through the sacred dimension of celebration. Important alike is awareness of others. It is a well-known fact that knowing others you come to know yourself better (E.g. Călușul versus Kagura) or, at least, you understand more easily that the forces of uniformity threaten national cultures leading to anonymous culture. Global culture is a force that is eroding and dissolving tradition entailing loss of cultural identity (E.g. Dragobetele and Tanabata versus Valentine's Day). But if in a global cultural event we come across at least one mark specifically national, meager though it may be, it could help us recognize part of that cultural identity within the large ocean of global culture (E.g. the Japanese Giryō).

I am not going to focus upon terminology such as internationalization or globalization, but upon concrete examples of what cultural identity means and how important the conservation of traditional customs through the sacred dimension of celebration is, such as I felt it during my fieldwork trips both in Romania and in Japan.

With this aim in view I am approaching the Japanese *Hayachine-kagura* and the Romanian *Căluș* – dances that are distinctive marks of national identity.

Keywords: traditional customs, celebration, cultural identity, awareness of others, global culture

1. INTRODUCTION

Before the advent of Buddhism in the 6th century, the early Shinto consisted of a bunch of animistic beliefs according to which there was a *kami* („deity”) in everything that was animate or inanimate. Besides the deities in the Japanese pantheon, the spirit of the wind, of the storm, of rivers and mountains, etc. as well as real and imaginary ancestors could fill the Japanese soul with respect and fear and became *kami*. Towards all this, the Japanese felt love and gratitude and the urge to

soothe their souls. Hence, the genuine traditional Japan is the country of the *kami* and of the festivals dedicated to them, resulting in a unique cultural model. It is a living tradition to which each generation came to add a distinctive feature through intensely emotional participation. It belongs to eternity, re-creating the past which becomes present.

According to folk belief, all deities should be periodically given offerings and special rituals because they are considered to grow old like human beings and if they are neglected, they might extinguish. Lest this should happen, they are to be subjected to renewal rituals at certain points of time.

This is the background of all folk observances and *kagura* – the sacred dance – could not have deviated from it. *Kagura* dances are in fact a way of actively perpetuating mythical symbols and rituals. *Kagura* claims a mythological origin, all the more the myth of Japan's creation tells less of the islands' physical formation than their ritual creation. Rituals speak about important events, they tell stories Japanese tell themselves about themselves.

Kagura are considered to be either offerings of music and dance brought to the *kami* by people or music and dance performed by the *kami* who descend among the parishioners. The offering of songs and dances functions as a mediator between *kami* and man, acts as a go-between that answers both for enduring the relationship with superior spirits and for strong social bonds. The offering can be considered one of man's efforts to draw closer to the sacred. The gesture of offering is connected with two planes of existence: the festive one and that of the recollection. Through the permanence of the recollection, through this feeling of cosmic essence, Japanese go beyond terrestrial familiar solidarity and acquire that ancestral solidarity which is eminently sacred and which has taken deep roots in their spirituality.

The uniqueness of *Kagura* dances is given not only by their way of conveying old Shinto beliefs, authentically Japanese, but also by the manner in which they have absorbed Buddhist and Taoist elements, merging them all into a coherent and complex story line. In other words, the home-grown mythical structures and scenarios fused with Buddhist and Taoist elements to create a distinct and complex cultural legacy.

Japanese are connected to the sacred dimension of life through celebration. There are around three thousand *kagura* troupes all over Japan, out of which over one hundred are considered regional or national Intangible Cultural Properties. *Hayachine-kagura* was also inscribed on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2009.

Kagura performances have a rich repertoire. Each dance tells a story that delights the spectators and makes them feel, even if only for a few hours (most often than not, more than twenty), liberated from the daily grind of everyday life. During such celebratory moments, emotions spring up in the very corners of the soul,

shaping a warm and lively world reigned over by the mirth of the event. In *Kagura* dances we do not speak about a typical actor-spectator connection, but rather about a fluid exchange that wraps them up in shared emotion.

The rhythm is not of a lower rank than that of any modern dance. The latter changes according to the current preference and influences and therefore does not have time to crystallize in a fixed pattern, not even for a brief instance. Modern dances are like flaring flames that go out having used up their fuel. It is not the fate of *Kagura* dances, since they have been for many ages an important source of entertainment for traditional communities. It is exactly this function that has dictated the guidelines for celebration events.

In group dances the performers conjoin and seem to share a single heartbeat. In solo dances the rhythm allows each performer to unveil his own spirituality, eager to bring forth the message of his dance. Gentle torso twists, knee bends, and the more important hand movements which sign different layers of gracefulness – all talk about the Japanese unique way of interpreting beauty. If we add to this the diversity of exquisite costumes, we will come to envision the Japanese aesthetic values surviving over generations.

Besides, we should not leave out the humorous remarks and situations found in most *Kagura* performances, which make the audience burst into laughter. The product of the ancient effort into making Japanese traditional culture successful and strong, is a mixture of joking and dancing which proves that, when intertwined, the two attitudes result in true, simple, and refined art.

To give only one example of *Kagura* spectacle that came to be known in France (1983 and 2013) and in the United States (1976 and 1994), *Hayachine-kagura* in Iwate Prefecture was highly appreciated not only as a ritual performance dedicated to *Gongen* (the guardian deity of the Hayachine Mountain) but as refined art as well, being imbued with *yamabushi*'s ("people who lie in the mountains") energy and strong sense of humor. Originally, such ascetics would go round villages between November and January or February, carrying a *lion head* in order to practice a purification ritual. In the evenings they would stop at a house, enclose the place with sacred rope (*shimenawa*), improvise a stage and dance *kagura* all through the night. Nowadays the spectacle consists of forty dances performed on July 31st and August 1st. Beside the first six ritualistic dances (the first always being *The Dance of the Birds*, a re-enactment of an auspicious portion of the myth according to which the primordial couple – Izanagi and Izanami – gave birth to the Japanese islands), there are humorous dances as well as dances looked upon as an artistic response to the prevailing feuds and battles between powerful clans along the centuries, or sensitive "women's dances".

Gongen-mai (Gongen-dance) is always closing such types of *kagura*. Like other dances that characterize *Hayachine-kagura*, *Gongen-mai* has two parts. The first half features a solemn dance, in fact a prayer piece, while the second half represents a symbolic possession of the dancer by the deity. The dance begins slowly and reaches intense movements in order to indicate the possessing presence of the deity. The possession takes place while the dancer manipulates the *lion head* mask. The second part is performed by two dancers. The first manipulates the *lion head* with both hands and performs a series of turns that are interrupted by a snapping movement of the lion's jaw. This snapping motion symbolizes the removal of evil from the community. The second dancer assists by holding the *lion's body* – a long cloth attached to the head. The dance reaches its climax when the dancer manipulating the *lion head* enacts having taken over the attributes of the deity. In becoming *Gongen*, the performer raises the *lion head* above his own and lets the attached cloth body fall around him. The performance ends with a mighty clapping of the jaws and quick movements of the head to show the deity's joy at having been entertained by all of the dances that were brought as offerings. If we are to judge the *lion head* in Mircea Eliade's words, we can consider it a clear example of theophany, namely a visible manifestation of the deity through the mask of an imaginary animal.

Not only *Hayachine-kagura* but all *Kagura* dances make one feel that rituals are endless realities; they look like eternal occurrences which belong not only to the past, but to the present and the future as well. Thanks to the items in the program, they cast performers and participants onto a plane which goes beyond history, enabling them to assume a reality hardly to be attained on the individual profane plane. It is a plane beyond temporality – that of Japanese traditional communities which apparently live according to perennial co-ordinates, but in which the present is nevertheless intensely felt through people's creativity ready to meet their up-to-date spiritual needs.

The same holds good for the Romanian traditional dance *Căluș*, which crossed the borders of Romania for the first time in 1935, when the troupe from Pădureți, Argeș County, performed it at the International Folk Festival in Albert Hall in London. The Romanian dance *Căluș* impressed Spanish spectators in 2003, and the French ones in 2005 and 2008. Mention should be made of the presence of *Căluș* in Japan, at Aichi EXPO 2005, where Romania participated with the message "Heritage for the Future". The *Căluș* dance attracted Japanese and foreign spectators, being one of the most looked for events of the exhibition. Diana Tihan, Secretary II in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, at that time translator for the Expo, said the Japanese would wait in a line for hours in order to be able to watch the *Căluș*. I was not astonished at the news because during my field work trips I had met quite a lot

of Japanese researchers and photographers trying to understand Romanian spirituality through this dance.

What is special about it?

The ritual dance *Căluș* can be considered first of all an offering to the souls of the dead. The renewal of the communication with ancestors is as important for Romanians as it is for Japanese or for many other peoples all over the world. People cannot live if they don't find an opening to the other world, i.e. they can't live in chaos. It is believed that if they lose the link with the world beyond, life in this world becomes impossible. In order to avoid such a situation they have been practicing ancestor worship since ancient times and Romanians are no exceptions in this respect.

According to Romanian folk belief, ancestral spirits come from the Heavens (i.e. the other world, when the "sky" opens for them to descend) and watch over the life of the descendants, being in constant contact with them (the same holds good for the Japanese). Romanians worship their ancestors on fixed dates, during the four seasons, alongside with the growth and death of vegetation – a definite mark of cultural identity. The ritual offerings given to the ancestors' souls consist of *coliva*, water, bread (usually in special shapes), and food. They are believed to make the connection between the world of the living and that of the dead, thus showing the descendants' concern for their predecessors. *Coliva* (made from wheat, nuts and honey) is the symbol of the mystery of life and eternity. The ritualistic dance performed on Pentecost, in early summer (fifty days after Easter), is considered to be another important offering to the souls of the dead. Before starting for the round of the households in order to perform the dance which carries out the functions we are to discuss below, *călușarii* (the dancers) stop at the cemetery in order to offer to the ancestors' spirits at least one dance.

However, the first important rituals to be performed are raising the flag and making the vows of obedience, which are usually done outside the village at a crossroad, on the bank of a river or at the edge of a marsh, hillock or mound, in a glade, or at one of the village boundaries. Villagers are not allowed to attend these rituals because, according to folk belief, they might attract evil spirits.

The flag is usually made out of hazel-nut tree. Its magical properties are well-known all over the world, to mention only the wizard's wand or the broom handle the witch rides. When the flag is ready, enough garlic and wormwood for each member of the group is tied with a white cloth to its top. The potential of the garlic and wormwood to ward off evil spirits at the turn of the seasons is recorded in many Romanian folk texts. They are also believed to function as effective talismans against malevolent forces. A little piece of wood wrapped in rabbit skin is also added. It is called the "beak" of the flag and is to be buried the following Tuesday. In fact, it is the "beak" that is considered to be the substitute of the deity who revives and dies

every year, at a crucial period of time, and that's why the awe with which the flag is regarded is warranted.

The *călușari* form a circle around their leader and from then on strict silence is maintained. All of them have pieces of garlic and wormwood in their mouths and ears. Each of them makes his vow by coming forward, saying something unintelligible and kissing the flag. It is believed that the dancers take over the force of the deity which resides in the "beak" and become supernatural beings; whereupon they are able to defeat the evil forces that menace the community at this time of the year. Then they cross their wooden clubs on the flag in a radiant way, looking like the rays of the sun, which reminds us of the cult of the great heavenly body.

The *călușari* are bound by ritual law to dance only between sunrise and sunset. They only dance in courtyards or at crossroads, and never enter houses. People gladly receive the dancers in their yards, because they believe that if the *călușari* dance there, they will enjoy good luck and will be spared illness. At the same time, owing to the objects used inside the circle of dancers, the fertility rite is obvious.

The hostess comes out into the courtyard and places the following objects next to the flag in the center of the circle that the *călușari* have formed: stalks of green garlic, wormwood, and salt. She may also place a bowl or a pitch with water and some grains. The garlic and wormwood are attributed healing and prophylactic powers, while salt, water and grains are considered to be fertility symbols.

The musicians who stand either inside or outside the sacred circle (it varies according to village) play the "calling of *Căluș*" as a first tune. Then there follow the other dances. We can divide them in two sequences: the spectacular dances of the *călușari* themselves and the round dance in which the villagers join.

The complex dances performed by the *călușari* who support on their clubs require great dexterity. They consist of jumps, heel clicks, stamps, leaps, cross-steps, knee bends and many other movements. The dancer's club is the symbol of power, like the ruler's scepter. It becomes both the dancer's support for the difficult jumps and leaps he has to perform and the sign of victory over the evil spirits he has to overcome on a supernatural level.

The significance of the round dance in which the villagers join, lies primarily in its prophylactic powers. During this sequence, the villagers are permitted physical contact with the *călușari*, i.e. they can touch the dancers, which means they will be protected from illness, harm, and misfortune. Through the process of contagious magic, unmarried girls believe they will marry soon if they brush against the dancers' shoulders, while mothers will give their young children to the *călușari* to hold in their arms while dancing the round dance. It is believed that if the children are

danced by the *călușari*, and especially if they are placed their hats upon their heads, they will remain healthy and become as strong as the dancers.

The *călușari* then move to the next household and continue like this until sunset. If the village is small, they can go on with their performance to another village or even to big cities, where their dance is no longer ritual, but pure spectacle. Nevertheless, folklorists agree that the space can become easily ritualized by drawing the magic circle inside which the *călușari* perform their dances.

Wherever the *călușari* might dance, they return to their village for the last sequence of the folk observance which is called either the burial of the beak or of the flag.

Though only *călușari* take part in this practice, it looks like being a dynamic counterpart of the binding of the flag. According to Kligman, “this last phase of the *Căluș* constitutes the rite of passage by which the *călușari* are transformed from their ritual supra-normal state back to their normal position within the community. Just as the raising of the flag is the means by which supernatural status is conferred upon the *călușari*, so the unbinding serves to strip them of it and return them to everyday life.” [1999:70]

The burial of the flag or of the beak takes place on the first Tuesday or on the second Tuesday after Pentecost. It can be performed in the same place where the flag was bound or raised, without any eye witness, or in any other “secret” place. The reason why it must remain unknown to non-initiates is attributed to the power associated with the flag and / or with the beak. It is the leader who usually unties the cloth from the top of the flag. He then gives each dancer a piece of the cloth, garlic, and wormwood, which they put in their belts. Pieces of each will also be kept and made into a packet to be buried in the ground, along with a piece of the flagpole and the rabbit skin. The leader himself buries them, while the others join him to stamp on top of the “grave”. Through the burial of the “beak”, the dancers return to their normal state because they lost the direct contact with the deity which died to be reborn the following year. The *călușari* hold their clubs against the vertical flagpole which has been stripped of its “flag” and at a given moment, they drop their clubs and run away without looking back. Their gesture belongs to the ritual of forgetting the vows they had made in the beginning, i.e. of not revealing the secrets of the dance. After a couple of moments they meet again and they greet as if they hadn’t seen one another for a long time.

The dance in itself is really beautiful and it is no wonder it was chosen among the World’s Cultural Properties of UNESCO, in November 2005.

Unlike the dance of *Căluș*, acknowledged as national treasure, *Dragobetele* – the folk observance dedicated to love – didn’t enjoy appreciation during the communist era, though it is strongly connected to nature. As the first signs of spring

show, nature and man restart the cycle of life and love. Olinescu asserts that “February 24th is the best day to find the beloved of one’s heart because *Dragobetele* is the spring-head and spring comes in for love”. [2001: 268-9] Irrespective of the controversial origin of *Dragobete* (Ghinoiu and others identify him with the Roman Cupidon or the Greek Eros), young people should be as joyous and eager to celebrate the day like the birds which, around this time, begin to build their nests and mate. “They should do it so that they might be in love throughout the year”, mentions Marian. [1995: 237]

Although eclipsed by *St. Valentine’s Day*, *Dragobete* is still practiced in southern parts of Romania and among the customs still alive, we should mention: melting snow (called “fairy’s snow”) to get water for the ritual washing of the hands, face and hair; gathering vernal flowers in the woods; performing folk songs and dances in the centre of the village. When back from the woods, the maidens run to the village, followed by the young men who try to catch the one each had fallen for, and kiss her in front of everybody present. The kiss seals the two lovers’ open engagement. Young people in towns sniff at such customs saying they are obsolete and no longer practiced, ignoring that they speak for the very nature of Romanians’ attitude towards love.

In Japan, *Tanabata*, the festival dedicated to love, goes hand in hand with *Valentine’s Day*. Origuchi submits that *Tanabata* is an abbreviation of *Tanabata-tsume*, meaning “the weaving maiden”. According to folk belief, the custom originates in a chaste maiden’s weaving attire for the God of Water. A temporary hut would be made near a river or another water flow. The hut was simple, made of elements of nature barely worked upon so that the flavor of the natural world could be exhibited. The maiden was supposed to have pure heart and noble mind, and to weave at the loom in order to meet the God with new garments. She used to be considered the God’s wife for only one night – the night before the celebratory event. The wedding was a “must”, so that the God’s power might remain in human’s world.

The Chinese legend of the two loving stars was taken over against this background. The date is not mentioned by ethnographic studies, but in *Man’yōshū* (759) there are lots of poems speaking about the love of Orihime (Vega) and Kengyū (Altair). Orihime would weave attire for his father, without having time to think of love. The God of Heaven felt sorry for her and arranged a marriage with Kengyū, who lived across the river (the Milky Way). Their marriage was very happy from the start. Little by little the God became angry because Orihime started neglecting her weaving, and he decided to separate the couple. So he placed them back in their original places, separated by the Milky Way, allowing them to meet only one night per year – on the 7th of the 7th month. When it rained, a group of magpies was believed to fly to the Milky Way to make a bridge for Orihime to cross.

Inevitably, a legend like this spawned a festival, one of the biggest in Japan. Its principal symbol is the bamboo wish tree – a long stalk-like trunk with light, leafy branches protruding from it. Such trees are usually decorated with colorful paper streamers symbolizing the threads woven by Orihime. A popular variation of the streamers are short strips of slightly stiff paper called *tanzaku*, which are tied to trees with string or ribbons, after individuals have inscribed them with wishes. On the following day the decorated trees are floated on a river or in the ocean or, in some places, burned as an offering.

The most opulent celebration of the stars takes place in Sendai, where besides the classical dances on the portable shrines, spectators can admire street performances and all kinds of parades. In Sendai, the colorful bamboo decorations brighten up the shopping arcades to delight the thousands of visitors who come from all over Japan to see the festival.

Since anybody knows what *Valentine's Day* means, I am not going to comment on the way it imposed upon *Dragobete* and *Tanabata*, but I would like to mention the specific mark of the Japanese lovers' day not to be met with in other parts of the world. It refers to the name of the chocolate offered as a present.

Where does *giri-choko* come from?

Giri is a specifically Japanese concept meaning the loyalty a man of honor owes to his superior and to the fellows of his own class. It is identified as the virtue of the samurai. This transcendent samurai virtue of old Japan suffuses great numbers of historical folktales which are known all over Japan and are worked up into *Nō* dramas, *Kabuki* theatre and *Kagura* dances. Nevertheless the old tales of loyalty are pleasant daydreams to the Japanese today for now *giri* is no longer loyalty to one's chieftain, but is fulfilling all sorts of obligations to all sorts of people. For instance, *giri-choko*, the chocolate women give to friends or colleagues on Valentine's Day has no romance involved. It is however unique in the way it revives the old concept of *giri*, so unique that "the Japanese have not tried to expound *giri* to Westerners; their own all-Japanese dictionaries can hardly define it. One of these renders it righteous way; the road human beings should follow; something one does unwillingly to forestall apology to the world." [Benedict, 1979:133-4] I wonder which of these definitions might have brought forth the custom of women's giving *giri-choko* to men. Anyway, the meaning of the word makes us think only of Japan and everybody must admit it leaves its own mark on the globalized Valentine's Day.

Besides *giri-choko* there is *honmei-choko*, too. It is given to a boyfriend, lover, or husband. Japanese women often prepare *honmei-choko* by themselves as many of them think they cannot be "the likely winner" to the man's heart without their own effort (*honmei* literally means "the favorite to win the race").

One more unique thing to add is the *White Day* – March 14th – when Japanese men who received *giri-choko* or *honmei-choko* on Valentine's Day are expected to return the gift (traditionally, cookies, white chocolate, jewelry, etc). Again, what is specific of Japan is *sanbai-gaeshi* ("triple returning"), which means that most of times the gift is two or three times worth of Valentine's gifts. The gesture belongs to specific etiquette, and Japanese are paragons of virtue in this respect.

Romanians cannot boast about anything specific on Valentine's Day. They celebrate it by giving gifts to the beloved ones, just like in other countries all over the world. No rituals, no special words, nothing to remind of the traditional *Dragobete*.

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