

The Romanian Căluș tradition & its changing symbolism as it travels from the village to the global platform.

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Picture 1 - Young Căluș flag bearer from Muntenia, Romania.

Romanian *Căluș* originated as a healing and fertility ritual performed by groups of an odd number of men, bound together by an oath. By the beginning of the 20th century its ritual form survived mainly in southern Romania and among Romanian minorities in northern Bulgaria (Figure A), although remnants of this custom and associated customs could be found in much of the rest of Romania, and throughout the Balkans. This custom formed part of the agrarian custom cycle, which has its basis in prehistory, although its exact origins have never been established.

In this paper I initially examine the symbolisms of the Romanian *Căluș* tradition in its village setting, then I look at the changes that took place in these symbolisms during its transformation from a village ritual to a national icon. Finally I investigate the position that the *Căluș* tradition holds today among Romanians within Romania and in the diaspora.

Victor Turner theorises that symbols are ‘multivocal’, hence one symbol can have many different meanings, and can be interpreted differently by different people (Turner 1974, p.55). He holds that these meanings form a continuum with polarisation at each end, physiological meanings at one end and meanings connected with social relations at the other. The use of symbols is an essential part of ritual, and ritual symbols have played a key role in rural life from prehistory to modern times. Symbols are also vitally important to nationalism and identity forming, especially in the post-modern world where claims to national, local or ethnic roots and heritage play a multifaceted role in the very being of existence.

Traditional Căluș Ritual in the Romanian village

Turner considers that rituals are social dramas (Turner 1974, p.35) performed at a determined time and place, with a fixed form. The determined time, for the *Căluș* ritual is the period of *Rusalii* (Pentecost) which occurs forty days after Orthodox Easter, and lasted for seven to nine days. This transitional period from spring to summer is when, according to Romanian and Slav folklore, malevolent fairies, known as *Iele* were at their most active. The period of *Rusalii* was a liminal period in villagers’ lives (Rapport & Overing 2000, p. 229) as during this time



Picture 2 – Căluș dancer from Muntenia, Romania wearing modern costume.

normal relationships within the village were suspended and certain work interdictions applied. The villagers must not clean their houses, work in the fields, or with animals. If they broke these interdictions they could become possessed by the *Iele* which resulted in a mysterious form of nervous illness which could only be cured by being ‘danced’ by the *Călușari* (dancers), the main ritual actors of the *Căluș* tradition.

The *Căluș* ritual had three distinct stages which equate to those in Turner’s extension of Van Gennep’s Rites of Passage (1960) (Eriksen 1995, p.137). The oath taking formed the pre-liminal stage, the period of *Rusalii* itself being the liminal period, and the unbinding of *Căluș* at the end of *Rusalii*, the post liminal stage.

The secret oath (*jurământ*) was taken on the eve of *Rusalii*, at sunset (a liminal time between day and night), at a liminal place; a crossroads or mound, on the edge of the village. Once the oath had been sworn the group were bound together for the period of *Rusalii*, and the *Călușari* were bound to dance the *Căluș* for nine years. The flag (*steag*) was raised. This was made of a wooden pole, with a white cloth tied to its top. The cloth contained a bunch of green garlic and wormwood. These were vital elements in the ritual as they were considered to have magical curative powers. This ceremony represented the ‘Rite of Passage’ setting the *Călușari* apart. During *Rusalii* their normal social relationships within the village were suspended, and they took on a supranormal existence, thus coming under the *Iele*’s possession, being ‘betwixt and between’ (Turner 1969, p.95).

This gave them the power to mediate between the spiritual world and the real world and to cure anyone inflicted with ‘*Iele*’ sickness. A complex spiritual relationship existed between these fairies and the *Călușari* built on oppositions (Table 1).

Table 1 - Complex – Polarities between Călușari and Iele

Călușari	Iele
Male	Female
diurnal (sun) - dance / heal by day	nocturnal (moon) - active at night
real world	spiritual world
performed within the village boundaries	found outside the village boundaries, in woods, near water, or in uncultivated places
life (healing)	death (illness)

During the days of *Rusalii* the *Căluș* were bound together by a bond of communal liminality and solidarity, (which Turner referred to as ‘*Communitas*’ (1974, p.166) They travelled from house to house performing a suite of *Căluș* dances in each courtyard (liminal places between street and house). In south Muntenia dramatic plays similar to mummers’ plays were also performed. Parents invited the *Călușari* to dance either over their children or holding their

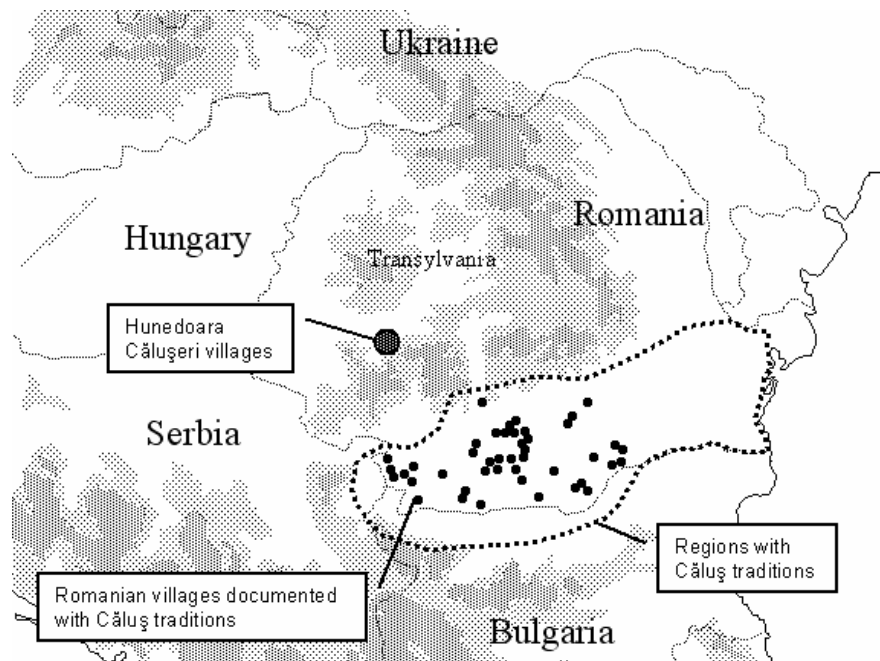


Figure A - Map showing locations of villages with Căluș traditions

children in their arms as this was considered to bring good luck and good health. Each performance finished with the onlookers joining with the *Călușari* to dance '*Hora Călușului*'. In South West Oltenia and northern Bulgaria ritual healing of the sick (*Vindecare*) or those possessed by evil spirits formed a part of the tradition. This diagnosis was made by the musician playing the *Căluș* dance tunes. If the sick person reacted to the music the *Vătaf* was able to make a diagnosis

that the person had '*tele*' sickness. The ritual cure could then take place with the *Călușari* dancing round and over the patient (picture 3 and 5). When the cure was successful the patient was lifted up by two *Călușari*. In some cases a ritual enactment of death and resurrection took place with one of the *Călușari* falling to the ground in a trance (*doborâre*) at the exact moment of the healing, symbolically taking on the illness (picture 4).

In Muntenia the *Călușari* were accompanied by a transvestite figure called the Mute (*Mut*). This character played a comic role. He wore an ugly mask, dressed in a mixture of men's and women's clothes and carried a red wooden phallus, which he used to revive 'dead' *Călușari*. He was not allowed to speak during the period of *Rusalii*, but communicated by comic mime, humorously poking fun at any *Călușari* who dared to make a mistake in his dancing. His role as of '*anti-vătaf*' played out symbolic reversals of accepted norms of behaviour, and contained a complex interchanging of identities (Turner 1969, p. 167).

On the final day of *Rusalii* the flag was ceremonially taken down and buried ready for the next year, at the place where the oath had been taken. This ceremony was a reversal of the initiation ceremony and signalled that the *Călușari* were released from their oath until next year and could return to their previous roles within the village.

Căluș as a symbol of Rural Community

But what role do these traditional symbolisms play in Romanians lives today and what additional symbolisms does the *Căluș* represent in the modern world?

When Kligman carried out the research for her classic book on the *Căluș* in 1976 the ritual symbolism was still prominent. At that time many villages in Romania could only be reached by unmade roads and the only media available was state-controlled television and radio. By 2000

roads had been asphalted, and Western television had reached Romanian villages, thus opening up the villages to the process of acculturation¹. The *Căluș* tradition still has its place in the village community although the form of its practice has frequently been changed². In some cases there has only been minor modifications, whilst in others locations the changes have been more extensive although still within the essential framework of the custom. There has even been a revival of the traditional *Căluș* in some villages since 1990³.

The main changes in the last thirty years are that the period of *Rusalii* observance has been shortened to a maximum of three days due to work constraints, and the period of commitment under the oath reduced to one year. Ritual healings take place rarely, due to modern medicine and state taboos on magic, and belief in the power of the *Iele* is rarely verbalised (Table 2).

Table 2 – Evolution of Căluș

Progression	Place	Time of year
Ritual	Village / Comuna	Rusalii
	<i>Or</i>	
	Regional towns (village groups dancing in streets)	Rusalii
<i>To</i>	<i>To</i>	
Staged performance with elements of ritual	Căluș Festivals (village groups performing adapted version of custom out of context)	Rusalii (at State direction) or any other time during summer
<i>To</i>	<i>To</i>	
Staged performance without ritual elements	Larger town / capital cities (urbanite version)	Anytime of year

The position of ritual in village communities is discussed by Creed (2004). He considers that the term ‘community’ has not been problematised by anthropologists but has always been considered harmonious. In his view the community is made up of conflicting groups and this conflict is expressed during the practice of village rituals which define the boundaries within the community. He uses the example of the *Kukeri* ritual, a Bulgarian parallel to the Romanian *Căluș*. As with the *Kukeri*, conflicts exist both within *Căluș* groups and between groups. In the past when groups meet in local towns or en-route to other villages, a ritual fight to the death would take place, though this has now developed into a dance competition, with the winners acquiring the right to perform in the other group’s territory.

Whilst I agree with Creed that ritual can be a method of acting out conflict, I would also agree with Turner that ritual as a social drama is a means of reinforcing group cohesion in a

¹ Kroeber, A. L. (1948) *Anthropology: Race, Language, Culture, Psychology, Prehistory*, New York and Burlingame: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. p.425

² There is a contradiction between Romanian written sources which state ‘No more nowadays than a suite of dances’ (Constantinescu 1999:125) and the findings of foreign ethnographers. The ICTM Ethnochoreology study group visited villages in Romania where traditional *Căluș* still took place in 1993, and in 2001 they undertook similar research in Northern Bulgaria. (Giurchescu 2004, and personal email communication, Anca Giurchescu). I have seen performances of a staged version of the traditional form at the Koprivshtitsa Festival in Bulgaria in 1995, 2001 and 2005

³ Personal email communication, Anca Giurchescu.

village where conflicts exist, as the feeling of community during such occasions can act to strengthen social relations (Turner 1969, p 178).

During the Ceaușescu period State organised *Căluș* Festivals were set up⁴. These were timed to coincide with the traditional village ritual in order to try to displace ritual practices. In the village of Optași, județul Olt, two teams were trained, one to go to the festival and the other to carry out the ritual at the correct time in the village (Giurchescu 2004). The position in Romania



Picture 3 – Căluș dancers from northern Bulgaria dance performing a staged ‘healing’ (note the “flag” of the lead dancer).

and Bulgaria are similar in that state ‘control’ has been met with resistance and consequently failed to totally displace deeply rooted traditional beliefs and in some case has even assisted their survival (Creed 2004, p.60). According to Kligman ‘Ritual as symbolic expression has the potential to assist the state in legitimating its cultural heritage, while at the same time, allowing participants to express a certain resistance to that legitimising process’ (Kligman 1988, p.275).

Căluș festivals also acted to reinforce social relations among *Călușari*. At these festivals traditional village groups met town performance groups, and both staged performances and informal social dancing took place. The performances presented to

the judges were either an abridged version of ritual *Căluș* choreographed for the stage or else only the *Căluș* dance suite⁵. Prizes were given for team and individual performances thus encouraging competition among the *Călușari*. This resulted in exchanges of dance elements between groups in order to make performances more spectacular, thus encouraging the dilution of the traditional form. The concept of a solo dance was completely foreign to the village ritual, but this element has gained popularity as it allowed individuals to demonstrate their dancing prowess⁶.

Village Căluș in the world - Comparison of 1935 and 1999

In 1935 the *Călușari* and mute from Pădureți, județul Argeș represented Romania at an International Folk Dance Festival in London. They created a stir in London by refusing to dance until Douglas Kennedy, Chairman of the EFDSS scored London to locate fresh garlic for the ritual flag, as without this they did not consider they would have their supernatural powers (Giurchescu 2004). They performed an adaptation of their ritual village *Căluș* and won first prize and were acclaimed as the highlight of the Festival.

⁴ Slatina, Oltenia and Deva, Transylvania (Cernăianu, L & Stancu, L, 1974, p.29 & p.248). Caracel, Oltenia from 1969 (Giurchescu 2004).

⁵ I have witnessed staged versions of the ritual Căluș at the Koprivshtitsa festival in Bulgaria in 1995 and 2000.

⁶ During a folklore trip to the town of Gaiesti, in 1997, the musicians played the classic Căluș melody and the dance teacher got up to demonstrate his dance ability. He was soon joined by the local mayor who could not resist the temptation, and they competed each trying to out do the figures performed by the other.

In 1999 a similar team from Optași, județul Olt, performed at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, in Washington, USA. In order to create an ‘authentic’ experience for the audience, they were told to perform as ‘in the village’ but they left the mute behind (the central figure in their performance), as they were concerned that his actions would give a negative impression to the ‘cultured’ Americans (Giurchescu 2004).

Căluș, as a symbol of Romanian identity

Gellner (1983, p.40) considers that the development of nationalism was a response to industrialisation. Romania was subject to rapid industrialisation and urban growth in the mid 1970’s. Kligman describes the new forms of social organisation as only superficially urban (Kligman 1981, p.140), equivalent to the ‘Peasant urbanites’ of Yugoslavia (Simić 1973). The new urban dwellers retained their rural beliefs and customs, which resulted in a ‘clash of cultures’. The Romanian political elite attempted to impose the prevalent ‘national ideology’, which led to a discrepancy, in what people said and what they did. Ritual practices were often continued but in a ‘hidden’ way. During Rusalii in 1976 Kligman observed that city workers were wearing garlic tucked in their belts (Kligman 1981, p.142). This hidden observance of ritual



Picture 4 - Căluș dancers performing a staged ‘healing’ where one of the *Călușari* has fallen to the ground in a trance. Dancers are from a ‘Romanian village’ in north Bulgaria

symbolisms resulted in meanings being lost over time while practices continue. This can be seen at the Smithsonian performance in 1999 when American-Romanian onlookers gave their children to the *Călușari* to be ‘danced, as in the village ritual (Giurchescu 2004). Creed mentions that this also still takes place during Kukeri festivals in Bulgaria (Creed 2004, p.60). These are examples of Tylor’s ‘survivals’ where the remnants of ritual symbolisms have been passed down through generations but the full meaning has been lost (Moore 2004, p.12). This situation is also seen in English Morris, which had completely lost its ritual meaning by the 20th century.

Romanian national identity had its earliest roots in the mid 1700s (Verdery 1991, p.27). The *Căluș* tradition was first used as a means of establishing Romanian identity in mid 19th century Transylvania. *Căluș* dances collected in southern Transylvania villages, were brought to Brașov, ‘cleansed’, choreographed and re-taught to village dance groups throughout Transylvania (thus spreading the ‘tradition’ to a considerably wider area than the area from which the material was collected). In the Ceaușescu period Romanian intellectuals, seeking to link Romanian origins to Latin and Dacian roots, identified ancient rituals such as *Căluș* as icons ‘suitable for an authentic and valuable Romanian being in the world’ (Verdery 1991, p.21). Urban ethnographers documented village *Căluș* dances and compiled an ‘official’ choreographed version, containing a succession of the most complex figures. This version, cleansed of all forbidden ritual elements, can be termed a ‘state ritual’ or ‘invented tradition’ (Creed 2004, p.59). This was re-taught to urban folkdance groups, throughout

Romania, including areas where the *Căluș* tradition had died out many years previously. Gellner claims that this new national high culture ‘celebrates itself in song and dance, which it borrows (stylizing it in the process) from a folk culture which it fondly believes itself to be perpetuating, defending and reaffirming’ (Gellner 1983, p.58).

Images of Romania based on this new ‘high culture’ were used as national symbols on tourist literature from the 1970s. Pictures of *Călușari* dancers were frequently used to symbolise the national ‘folk culture’, and can still be seen today on Romanian tourist websites. Dolls dressed as *Călușari* dancers are the most popular children’s souvenir from Romania, and picture postcards of *Căluș* dancers are frequently sold at tourist destinations.

Symbols of Căluș in Romanians minds in 21st century

A questionnaire completed by a small sample of Romanians born during the Ceaușescu period revealed that they regard *Căluș* as a symbol of Romanian nationalism and tradition, and believe it to be representative of Romanian culture both for Romanians and for Romanian tourism. Their earliest memory of *Căluș* was from television or performances at state organised festivals. Romanians who had danced in urban folkdance groups were aware that *Căluș* had a connection with good health and phallic symbols but were not aware of the ritual healing, powers of the *Iele* or the existence of the mute figure.



Picture 5 - Căluș dancers from northern Bulgaria dance around a sick boy in a staged performance taken from the village tradition.

Migrants living away from their birthplaces often feel a heightened interest in their national culture. When performing with the London Romanian Dance Group for the Romanian community in the UK, it is clear that the audience's enthusiasm increases with the performance of dance suites such as *Căluș*, which have been used as symbolic ‘state rituals’.

Conclusion

The Romanian *Căluș* tradition played out in its various forms portrays a variety of symbolisms, which fall into the two polarisation’s of Turner’s spectrum, depending on the individual person and the time and place of the performance. The symbolisms associated with the ritual village *Căluș* fulfil the physiological end of the spectrum, with this emphasis shifting along the scales towards social relations over the last thirty years.

In this paper I set out to examine changes in the symbolism associated with the Romanian Căluș tradition on its journey from the village to the global platform. The conclusion from my investigation is that much of the traditional symbolism has been lost but this has been replaced by new symbolisms associated with community, nationalism and Romanian identity.

Kligman considers that rituals are not a static preservation of culture at a fixed point in history, instead they 'produce a structure of relations in time and space sensitive to historical transformation' (Kligman 1988, p.10). For this reason many rituals have continued to hold their place in the modern world, albeit in a form moulded to suit the circumstances in which their existence is perpetuated. Romanian *Căluș* is one such ritual.

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