

## TRADITION AND CONTEMPORANEITY IN DRĂGAICA

Mădălina RUCSANDA<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *Drăgaica (Midsummer's Day) is a custom specific to the summer period and integrated into the group of customs and songs which anticipate or accompany picking the harvest; it is celebrated on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June, on the eve of the summer solstice, and it both means the protective agrarian divinity of the eared cornfields, cattle and married women, being the equivalent of Sânziana<sup>1</sup> (St. John's Day), and the ritual which refers to the prosperity and protection of grain crops. Nowadays, the custom has disappeared, but sporadically it is still performed in the areas of Buzău and Teleorman. The custom is also known by the Slav peoples: Polish people, Ukrainian people and Bulgarian people.*

**Key words:** *Custom, songs, prosperity, protection, grain crops.*

Customs should be known in their beauties and splendour, as besides their spectacular character, they also embrace the human valences embedded, by harmoniously combining ritual acts and ceremonies, juridical and economical acts, moral values and aesthetic expressions, old myths and knowledge provided by the people's experience. All these are syncretically expressed by poetry, music and dance. Independently of their name or manner of performance, the customs do not belong only to the village in which they are performed, but to the nation, to the whole country due to the echo felt in the cultural life and the place they take in the contemporary Romanian culture. Nowadays, songs and dances have become cultural goods by including them into shows, TV programmes, radio programmes or concerts, as unlike other times, they are not produced for the needs of those who dance the dances or sing the songs, they are especially produced for the outside

audience. As regards customs, things are slightly different: a great part of them are integrated into the people's everyday life and their important moments in life, which have not changed.

*Drăgaica (Midsummer's Day) is a custom specific to the summer period and integrated into the group of customs and songs which anticipate or accompany picking the harvest; it is celebrated on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June, on the eve of the summer solstice and it both means the protective agrarian divinity of the eared cornfields, cattle and married women, being the equivalent of Sânziana<sup>1</sup> (St. John's Day), and the ritual which refers to the prosperity and protection of grain crops.*

Etymologically, *Drăgaica (Midsummer's Day)* – an autochthonous custom whose Dacian native name has been lost – is also the equivalent of *Sânziana (St. John's Day)*, a word which comes from the Romans from *Sancta Diana* (which is also common nowadays in Transylvania) and it

---

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Music, *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

is also known under this name in Oltenia, the Banat, Transylvania, Maramuresh, Bucovina; it is also known under the following names: *Dârdaică*, *Împărăteasă* (Empress), *Stăpâna Surorilor* (Mistress of the Sisters), *Regina Holdelor* (Queen of the Grain Crops), *Mireasă* (Bride), *Sora cea Mare* (Elder Sister). In the groups of people in which *Drăgaica* is accompanied by a girl dressed like a boy, the custom is called *Drăgan*, *Drăgănoi*, *Mire* (Groom), *Băieţoi* (Big Boy).

Nowadays the custom has disappeared, but sporadically it is still performed in the areas of Buzău and Teleorman.

For the first time, this custom was mentioned by Dimitrie Cantemir in the work *Descrierea Moldovei* (Description of Moldavia), where he identified the character *Drăgaica* with Ceres, the Roman agrarian goddess: "*Drăgaica seems to represent the goddess Ceres. Indeed, when the grains begin to ripen, all the girls in the neighbourhood villages select the most beautiful and good-looking one, whom they call Drăgaica. They crown her with an ear wreath, ornamented with many finely embroidered head kerchiefs, with the keys of the granaries suspended on her hands and accompany her with great ceremony on the fields. In such ornaments, with the arms unfolded and the head kerchiefs against the wind, as if she were flying, Drăgaica gets back home, singing and dancing, while she passes through all the villages she passed before with the great train of people and surrounded by all the other girls who often call her their sister and mistress in very nice songs. Moldavian girls, who live in the countryside, are willing to be honoured like this, although an eternal tradition states that the girl who performs the role of Drăgaica does not marry for the next three years*".

The customs, beliefs and the Romanian folklore of *Drăgaica* trace back to a Neolithic goddess, a lunar, equinoctial and

agrarian divinity, a counterpart of *Diana* and *Iuno* in *The Roman Pantheon* and of *Hera* and *Artemis* in the Greek Pantheon; in the popular belief it is considered that *Drăgaica* would walk on ears or float in the air during the summer solstice and would enjoy singing and dancing over fields and forests, accompanied by her bridal train of virgin deities and beautiful girls.

It is also considered that *Drăgaica* is born on the 9<sup>th</sup> of March, the spring equinox in *The Julian Calendar*, the day when *Mother Dochia* died; she miraculously grows up and becomes mature until 24<sup>th</sup> June, the day of the summer solstice in *The Gregorian Calendar*, when *Sânziana* (Our Lady's Bedstraw) or *Drăgaica*, the plant which bears her name, is in bloom. She is also invoked by virgins at marriage age and by wives holding their children in arms during the wedding dance.

In Teleorman, the custom is performed as a show presented at the housekeepers' houses on 24<sup>th</sup> June by a group of 5-7 girls aged between 14 and 19, dressed in white, with a veil on their faces, on which flowers of Our Lady's Bedstraw are pinned. The girls hold a scythe in their hands and their meaning is to announce the forthcoming harvest and the symbolic death of the spirit of wheat. One of them is selected to be *Drăgaica*, who is wreathed with wheat ears. In the groups of people in the south of Muntenia, the girl who performs the role of the divinity is dressed like a bride, in a white dress, wearing an Our Lady's Bedstraw wreath on her head.

A few weeks before the event, the bride (*Drăgaica*) and the groom (*Drăgan*, *Drăgăicoi*, *Băieţoi*) are selected. In Dobrogea, girls use to wear men masks. The scythe is an important object, which girls with men masks and other female participants hold in their hands; in Teleorman there is a banner ornamented with garlic, coloured ribbons and flowers

(similar to those used by the *căluș dancers*). Once set up, *Drăgaica's* train of virgins goes to the village or over the fields; at stopping places or crossroads, the girls get into a circle singing and performing a lively dance whose movements draw up a cross.

An important element of the dance of *Drăgaice* is the imitation of a scythe fight, which uses to happen especially when two groups of people meet; in old times, this custom used to cause much pain, as it was a kind of bravery, similar to a duel<sup>2</sup>. After the dance, the girls receive gifts from the owner of the grain crops for whom the girls dance and sing and, in some places in Dobrogea, they are also offered honey. All the people whose grain crops have been passed through by *Drăgaice* believe that their harvest will be rich and protected from drought and hail. The group of girls wanders in the village accompanied by a child who is holding a banner (on which ears, garlic, absinth, Our Lady's Bedstraw flowers are pinned), a whistler (who accompanies the girls' song and dance by playing the flute, the bagpipe or the clarinet) and sometimes by a drums player.

The ritual song of *Drăgaica* is followed by *Hora drăgăiciei* (*Drăgaica's Hora*), which is usually a dance tune, and by other two, three dances, specific to the custom: *Brâu* and *Geamparale* or *Cârlișu* and *Floricița* (in Brânceni village) or *Băluța* and *Floricița* in Beiu village (always present in the ritual dance of the *Călușari*) or *Buceacul* (in Poroschia).

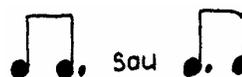
Among other ritual acts, *Drăgaicele* use to tear strips of their handkerchiefs or head kerchiefs and give them away to the hosts while the women who attend the performance use to give them in return items of their children's clothes to be pinned on the banner. Children are often hold by *Drăgaice* in their arms to be dandled. Although in Moldavia and in some counties of Muntenia and Oltenia

fighters among the groups of *Drăgaice* armed with sticks, sickles or scythes have not been attested, they are mentioned in the folk expression with reference to fight, scuffle, wrestle, tussle: "*Iată Drăgaica*" (*Here is Drăgaica*), "*A căpătat Drăgaica*" (*They received Drăgaica*), "*S-a făcut Drăgaică*" (*He/She became Drăgaică*) - (Dolj, Prahova, Râmnicu Sărat, Putna, Suceava).

In Transylvania, on 24<sup>th</sup> June, the girls pick up Our Lady's Bedstraw; they make up bunches and splash circular and cross-shaped wreaths on the musical background performed by the country lads and their extempore songs. These wreaths and bunches are brought to the village, where they are hung on gates, doors, windows, sheds, beehives and even on vegetable beds or thrown over houses and leant against eaves; people believe that they will protect their house and household against evil forces, and they will also bring good luck, health and wealth to people, animals and crops.

From a musical point of view, the lyrics of the song are made on an octosyllabic catalectic or acatalectic pattern, by the appearance of the completion vowels (like u, in example no.1 or i, in example no. 2); the melody is generally syllabic, unornamented, the profile is sinuously descending.

The loss of the initial ritual character allowed the amplification of the lyrics with new, satirical, moralising elements. The aksak rhythm is characteristic to the vocal melody of *Drăgaica*, which is based on the identical repetition of the same specific formula (see examples no. 1, 3):



The sonorous patterns are varied, from the hemitonic tetrachord system in which

the fourth step is situated at an increased fourth interval as compared with the fundamental chord (like in the example no. 1).

*Tetra chord system*

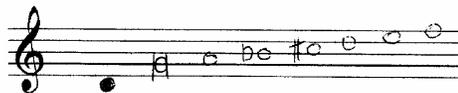


Anhemitonic pentatonic system type 1



The anhemitonic pentatonic chord-system of type 1, with a crenellated profile, is in favour of the perfect fourth intervals and the great third (e.g. no. 2) and the modes like the Doric-Mixolydian heptatonic chord system with increased second between the steps III-IV; here, the characteristic is the presence of the great third, which is ascendant on the fundamental and the perfectly ascending jump of the fourth to step I at the end of the melodic stanza (example no. 3).

*Chromatic mode 1*



The architectonic pattern is fixed, and binary; the song has two melodic lines, which are similar in terms of content; the second line or both lines are repeated: in example no. 2, the pattern is ABBv, in song no. 3, the pattern is AA<sub>v</sub>BB<sub>v</sub>.

The custom is also known by the Slav peoples: Polish people, Ukrainian people and Bulgarian people.

In the Romanian mythology, *Drăgaica* is a special name given to a certain category

of female aerial spirits dressed in white and appearing at night to bewitch men (*Iele*), who according to the folkloric superstition, take revenge on people scalding them with boiled water. People in villages state that *Drăgaica* (*Midsummer's Day*) is an "evil" feast; in case they do not celebrate it, they could have many misfortunes: for example, the ones who ignore the feast, continuing to perform their daily chores, could die by drowning or be struck by lightning.

Old people also believe that the girls who want to get married soon have to turn somersaults naked in grass and wash themselves with dew early in the morning. Married women can also perform this ritual to be loved by their husbands all year long and have healthy and beautiful children. The dew in the Midsummer's Eve has mysterious qualities; in many parts of the world it is believed that if you sprinkle with it all over your body it will become attractive and fit, and if you wash your face with it, you will become good-looking and haughty.

On *Drăgaica* it is believed that medicinal plants can be successfully picked up in the forests. Many of the flowers and plants picked on this day to be used as remedies are brought to church to be consecrated and thus purified of the negative influences of *Rusalii/ Iele* (*Whitsuntide/Female Aerial Spirits*), the evil fairies of the forests. The laurel leaves and the plants picked before the first rays of the sun, still covered with dew (then dried and kept in a white silk satchet) get magical properties.

*Sânzienele* are also considered by the young girls a way to find their predestined husband and the time they are supposed to marry. The men's cross-shaped wreaths and the girls' circle-shaped wreaths are thrown over their houses. If they get stuck on the roof, this is a sign of wedding, otherwise the predestined man or woman still have to be expected. In some villages,

there is another custom: on their way back home, the girls watch through the wreath, and the age and the physical appearance of the person they can see are signs of the moral qualities of their future husband.

If on Drăgaica's Eve, the girls put untwined Our Lady's Bedstraw under their pillow, at night they will dream their predestined husband; if the flower is pinned in their hair by virgins or young wives, they will become attractive and lovable.

After Drăgaica, there are first signs that summer turns to winter: days become shorter, and nights become longer, the wheat's root gets dried and grains get ripen, the hen constellation (the Pleiades) is visible, flowers lose their perfume and their healing power decreases, cuckoos stop singing, fireflies start roaming in forests, the leaves in the elm tree, poplar tree and lime tree turn upside down. The cultured country or mountainous feasts to celebrate the agrarian goddess have become opportunities for young people to meet each other in view of marriage.

## 1. DRĂGAICA

Musical notation for "1. DRĂGAICA". The score is written on a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 2/4 time signature. The melody consists of a series of eighth and quarter notes. Above the staff, there is a double bar line with a repeat sign and a fermata. The lyrics are: Hai, Dră-gai că, să să-ri - mu. The tempo and mood are indicated as *F, EC, 207*.

## 2. HAI, DRĂGAICĂ, SĂ SĂRIM

Muntenia, Teleorman

Musical notation for "2. HAI, DRĂGAICĂ, SĂ SĂRIM". The score is written on two staves in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 2/4 time signature. The tempo is marked *Moderato*. The melody is characterized by a series of eighth notes with accents. The lyrics are: Hai, dră-gai-că, să să-rim, să să-rim, să ră-să-ri-mî, Că ştii iar-na ce pă-ţim.

### 3. DRĂGAICA

Poroschia, Teleorman

Au ve - nit dră - găi - ci - le Au ve -  
 nit dră - găi - ci - le Să re - te - ze  
 spi - ce - le Să re - te - ze spi - ce - le

#### References

1. Petriceicu Haşdeu, B.: *Etymologicum Magnum Romaniae. Dicţionarul limbii istorice şi poporane a românilor*, vol. I-II. Bucureşti: Editura Minerva, 1972-1974, p. 490.
2. Nicola, Ioan R. et al. *Curs de folclor muzical, part I*. Bucureşti: Editura Didactică şi Pedagogică, 1963, p. 192.
3. Oprea, G.; Agapie, L. *Folclor muzical românesc*. Bucureşti: Editura Didactică şi Pedagogică, 1983, p.172.

<sup>1</sup> *Our Lady's Bedstraw* is a yellow-golden flowered plant, nicely perfumed, which grows in the lawn, in grasslands, in forest edges and glades.