

The Commercialisation of the Căluș Tradition

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Abstract: The paper presents a diachronic analysis of the Căluș ritual, a component of Romanian popular culture included on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008. We are considering the most important aspects of Căluș's genuine performative model, the specifics of its keepers and the changes occurring over time. Our analysis considers those evolutionary aspects that led to the diversification of the performative model and the repercussions of these changes, both in the traditional form of the ritual and in the way it is perceived by its own performers and direct beneficiaries. Following its evolution from the communist and post-communist period, we highlight the appetite of the protagonists to enhance in particular the spectacular and economic functions of Căluș, a trend that could significantly influence the performative model. The study also exposes the new contexts in which Căluș is presented today, proving that we are facing a living phenomenon, a constant process capable of generating new cultural models and beliefs.

Keywords: ritual, cultural product, Căluș, ritual dance, intangible, tradition

With an origin that remains uncertain even to this day, and is considered by many researchers to have strong pagan roots (Vuia 1922: 215; Opreșan 1969: 243; Bucșan 1976: 5; Ispas 2003: 152; Cristea 2008: 31–46), the Căluș ritual is one of the oldest and most valued traditions in Romania. As a demonstration of this, in 2008 Căluș was the first Romanian proposed entry for the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, thus confirming the special interest given to this ritualistic practice, which has been preserved in numerous localities.

First attested at the beginning of the 18th century (Cantemir 1909), the Căluș ritual has been shown through time to possess a remarkable capacity to adapt to social, cultural and economic conditions.

A diachronic analysis of the Căluș bears witness to a great variety of performative models that introduce different nuances from one area to another. In this paper,

I will refer to the Căluș variant preserved in the villages of southern Romania, a model considered to be the closest to the genuine form of the ritualistic dance, performed even today during the Whitsuntide (Rom. *Rusalii*) celebration.

Bearers of this tradition choose to practice and cherish Căluș in more novel contexts than before, frequently diverging from the ritualistic spatial and temporal framework that defines the traditionally acknowledged model. My purpose is to analyse in what way these new performative models can be considered part of an evolution that involves a diversification of the contexts in which the Căluș is present; or, on the contrary, if we are facing a deviation that introduces significant change to the traditional model, change that affect its heritage value and which transforms it and uses it more like a product or a cultural commodity (Giurchescu 2009a), with evident consequences at the level of known meanings.

In its traditional forms, Căluș was a masculine dance practiced in the week of Whitsuntide by a group of adults. The dances were performed in village squares as well as in cities or at fairs. The foregoing days of the ritualistic period were dedicated to practising the dance, preparing the costumes and specific props, and establishing the group members and its hierarchy, depending on the availability of the dancers and their abilities. The musicians of the group were also established during this period and they had to accompany the Căluș dancers for the entire period of the ritualistic performance. The costume worn by the Căluș dancers differentiated them during the ritual time. In the past, the garments used were day to day clothes embellished with specific decorations, and there is data which attests that in previous centuries all the protagonists were masked (Cantemir 1909: 232; del Chiaro 1718: 35). The shirt worn by a man was adorned with woven bands across the chest, while the hat displayed different decorations. Men also wore a special girdle tied to their waist. Depending on the region, some groups would wear an adorned red Turkish fez. Woven bands were also used to decorate the lower legs of the dancers, and below the knee there would be some small bells that were meant to produce sounds during the dance. In the past, a lot of the garments worn by the Căluș dancers were borrowed from community members (woven bands, shirts, handkerchiefs) (Oprișan 1969: 158; Ispas 2003: 173), with people believing that once they were worn by Căluș dancers during the ritual, the garments can help their rightful owners become healthier, or the garments can ward off illness, help younger women get married or adult women become pregnant. In the same period, the leader of the group was also chosen (the Bailiff, Rom. *Vătaful*) and, in places where this was the case, the man who would play the role of the burlesque character (the Mute, Rom. *Mutul*) was usually included in the structure of the group. The beginning of the ritual period was marked by the elaboration of the group's flag and by the swearing of an oath, defining moments for the ritual group now established. These acts, which were done in secret, involved a series of rules and

prohibitions for all the Căluș dancers. They promised not to abandon the group, to respect the hierarchy and to remain chaste, not to let themselves be touched by women or to have any sexual relations, and to conduct themselves appropriately inside the group and during the performance of the ritual (Kligman 2000). The sacred oath was valued as a form of communication and related to the supernatural, which dominates that period, embodied by the mythical female representations named *Iele* or *Rusalii* known for their ambivalent character (good or evil). They were considered responsible for punishing and causing illnesses to those who violated the community norms specific to the Whitsuntide period, a time that was dedicated to celebration, when agricultural work and numerous household activities (such as washing, sewing, sweeping courtyards, cleaning the trees¹) were strictly forbidden. The sicknesses that befell individuals who violated these well-known rules, popularly called *luat din Căluș* (literally ‘taken from the Căluș’), could only be cured during the Whitsuntide week if the sick person witnessed the Căluș dance because the dancers were connected to intangible sources as a result of their oath (Neagota, Benga 2011: 128–131). Preserving the good health of the ritual group was achieved through the chastity the dancers had sworn to observe.

The ritual dance was usually performed around a pot filled with water and a plate with salt and a few garlic cloves and wormwood threads. These items were brought by the landlord of the house, who got them back after they have been used in the Căluș dance, the objects being considered beneficial for the household which would use them for prophylactic purposes (to maintain the health of people and animals, to guard and enrich the house, and so on). The Mute played an incredibly important role in the ritualistic structure and the scenes performed by the Căluș dancers in domestic courtyards or during movement from one host to another. Being differentiated from the rest of the group by his appearance, with torn garments and wearing (or not wearing) a ritualistic mask and using props (a phallus, a wooden sword, a whip, a bag filled with prophylactic plants, usually wormwood and garlic), this character contributed richly to the spectacle performed by the Căluș group. Apart from helping the Căluș dancers to rest, the Mute’s comical interludes also gave a memorable show and were greatly appreciated by the public. The special status of the Mute, a role with an ambivalent character, was also demonstrated by the distinct reward that he received in the form of a special payment that was not shared with the other protagonists, another aspect that differentiated him from other group members. The ritualistic period concluded with the releasing of the group from their oath and the burial of the flag on the Sunday of Whitsuntide week.



Fig. 1. Căluș ritual performed in Merișani (Teleorman County). In the middle of the group, the Mute oversees the dancers. Photo: C. Alexa, 12 June 2022.

Apart from the obvious preventative and healing functions, the Căluș dance was associated with matchmaking and the summoning of fertility (suggested by the actions of the Mute with the help of the phallus), and also had performative and economic aspects. Thanks to the impressive dance, many groups, including those who performed in previous centuries, were appreciated and highly spoken of for the spectacle that they performed. In time, the Căluș dance would come to be perceived more for its entertaining features in many places, with the participants' energetic dancing greatly contributing to the popularising of the dance more as a performance and less as a healing and protecting activity, two functions that were previously considered essential. The brief interludes of popular theatre performed by the Căluș dancers also contributed to this perception, with the representations staged by the performers watched by considerable audiences.

As to economic function, Căluș dancers were given payment at the end of the performances, an obligatory condition in the ritualistic context that illustrates how counter-gift was necessary to validate the magical functions of the ritualistic dance (Mauss 1997).

The payment was made with money and with food products. During tough economic times, the Căluș dancers were paid, it seems, only in food (Alexa 2022: 185). It is certain that the dance has always been compensated in one way or another, a fact that influenced the preference of the groups in choosing certain hosts, choosing those who had better material possibilities. This is a normal situation,

preserved to the present day. Moreover, the community prestige earned after receiving the healing group convinced many rich people to invite the Căluș dancers into their courtyards year after year. In this way, the authority of the călușari² also benefited, as performing in different contexts increased their fame. Evidently, the final payment was also more than necessary from a practical point of view. The expenses during the ritualistic period had to be covered, the musicians had to be paid. The end of the ritual period was marked by the burial or destruction of the group's flag, after which the money was shared between members of the group, with a small party following to mark the end of the Căluș.

The sociocultural and political changes during the 20th century considerably influenced the evolution of the Căluș phenomenon, a situation that became more noticeable especially after World War II. During the communist regime that was installed in this period, special attention was given to practicing and cherishing public manifestations of heritage belonging to popular culture, the Căluș ritual being exploited intensely and with priority. Being valued as a national symbol, the Căluș ritual was celebrated year after year, beginning in 1969 with a specially dedicated festival, and starting in 1976 as part of the manifestations of the *Cântarea României* festival (Stoian 2015: 248–252). Although the traditional model would co-exist with new forms of practicing the ritual during festivals, in many localities the staged form would become the most important, the Căluș being presented by performers from those villages only in festival contexts. In some situations, the traditional dance performed in private courtyards would be abandoned. In these cases, we witness an obvious change of paradigm. The new performative model would introduce significant changes, not only with respect to the spatial and temporal context of the presentation of a non-ritualistic Căluș, but also with respect to the aesthetics of the garments and dance repertoires. The performance became more spectacular on the stage in terms of group composition, props and the impact it had on the beneficiaries. The famous Mute would be included more rarely in these performances. The stage would prove inadequate for the traditional, village theatrics presented in people's backyards. The Mute's props would also be considered improper, with explicit displays of the phallus being perceived with reservations on the part of many Căluș dancers and some festival organisers. Another defining ritualistic element of the Căluș, its healing function, was also abandoned.

The dance could now be seen all year round, not only during Whitsuntide, when the impact of the performance was quite impressive. In its new form, the Căluș would be present on numerous national and international stages, becoming a common commodity that could be watched in different non-ritual contexts. In these circumstances, special attention was given to the chorological component, which drew the attention of certain specialists whose intervention aimed to raise the entertaining aspect of the dance repertoire. We are witnessing a change of

paradigm which practically redefines the Căluș tradition after many decades in which this model was established and diversified, and is now perceived by its performers as having authentic value even within these new circumstances, despite the obvious differences from the genuine model. In spite of this, many groups that were used to performing strictly on stage said, when asked, that they could easily adapt their performative model, accepting the solicitations that involved the presentation of the traditional dance and even including, when needed, healing rituals (Giurchescu 2009b: 91; Alexa 2022: 389–391).

Participation in these kinds of festival would become so common that the festivals became an integral part of the phenomenon, without any negative perception from the participants, performers or audience. On the contrary, an appreciation developed for the visibility and the assurances given to the groups, as well as the possibility of supplemental financial gain through the Căluș dance. In time such motivations produced evident structural modifications of the performances on stages. Stemming from the desire to impress juries at some festivals, Căluș groups became grander and grander. The visual and auditory impact of the performance was a primary objective for the participants and groups started to include tens of Căluș dancers from different generations, from the oldest men to young children. As for the children, it was considered that their involvement would be beneficial for maintaining the tradition, although using them was also certainly intended to influence the jury and the public. In this way, the ritual initiation of younger Căluș dancers was no longer marked by the emotion and rigor of the traditional dance, but by their ability to deal with factors associated with the stage such as the presence of judges and the importance of prizes. In this way, there was a change to a new status quo that modified the perception of the dance, given that at the most important festivals such large groups had, many times, the status of winners. And so a new performative model was born that clearly explains actions of the kind that, in 2017, brought together more than 1,000 Căluș dancers. They were encouraged to perform a dance figure in the central square in Slatina with the purpose of the World Record Book officially recording the moment. In this way, the tradition of staged performance is continued, while the Căluș parade becomes a national brand with no ties to the traditional model. This is then sustained and appreciated in this form by its many guardians who are sensitive to the prestige of the Căluș as well as to the personal fame gained in this way.



Fig. 2. Căluș group from Stolnici photographed on stage. Photo: C. Alexa, Hârsești (Argeș County), 16 June 2019.

The moving of the rural ritual from its original environment and its transformation into an easy to sell commodity that is promoted on national and especially international stages, could be considered a consequence of the interventions made by the authorities of the times. Evidently, in the case of the Căluș, the communist period marked its evolution in the most definitive manner, even if activities aimed at constructing a national identity based on popular cultural phenomena had been promoted since the interwar period (the first official presentation of the Căluș dance on stage took place in London in 1935). How such an evolution, evidently prejudicing the traditional model that was followed prior to commercialisation, could have been avoided, is hard to say. Thanks to its spectacular character, we can consider that the Căluș was meant to be changed to fit the stage. This was suggested in a short newspaper article by Valeriu Braniște on the Transylvanian Călușer, which was previously enacted during the Pentecost period but which from the end of the 18th century came to be performed during the Christmas season (Braniște 1891: 231). Certainly, the international context in this period could be considered somewhat responsible as this period is clearly marked by trends that encouraged festivals (which frequently included prizes for participants). Evidently, these circumstances involved a certain competition tension, capable of affecting the psycho-emotional state of the participants. In such conditions, with performance of the Căluș we are witnessing a major mutation that marks a change in the protagonist's status from community *healer*, to performer whose *staged ritual* produces joy in the public as beneficiary as well as producing a similar state of well-being as produced by the

music and dance of other consecrated healing rituals (Lüdtke 2009). The giving of prizes and distinctions after such staged performances would prove to have a great impact on the simple Căluș dancers. For most unprofessional Căluș performers this type of recognition equates to a tremendous success, one that will last in the collective memory for multiple generations.

As proof of its specific variety, the Căluș is constituted from a mix of performative models, with contemporary groups constantly adapting to the local conditions and contexts in which the dance is preserved in one form or another. In numerous localities, one can encounter groups of Căluș dancers who have knowledge of the purposes of the ritual and respect the conditions that uphold the consecrated functions, including the preservation of its esoteric character. However, the number of days in which the dance is performed in villages has dropped significantly, and it is now performed on only one or two days, in comparison to the three to five days or even a week in the past. The depopulation of rural communities in Romania has affected the Căluș groups, as well as the level of the performance dynamics. The traditional model of the masculine dance is no longer respected today, and in some places the groups now also include female dancers, which constitutes an important mutation to the framework of the Căluș, whose performers were obliged to avoid contact with women. The festival-like actions, considered in the academic community to be responsible for the mutations of numerous phenomena in traditional popular culture, have increased. The Căluș is valued on stage in the some big Romanian cities as well as in numerous towns, which organise events dedicated to the ritual dance during the period of Whitsuntide. Evidently, this stops the dance following the traditional model, with numerous groups of Căluș dancers accepting invitations from festival organisers because of the prestige earned through performance or because of the prize money offered, resulting in something that changes the usual Căluș performed in village and town squares.

In the case of the festival-like manifestations, there are also some performances that make themselves noticeable by allowing the unfolding of the dances in open spaces (squares, parks), where the access of the public is no longer limited by a stage-like construction, as it is the case in Craiova or Giurgiu. In these conditions, those that are watching the spectacle of the groups of Căluș dancers have the liberty to buy the plants used in the performance (garlic, wormwood), to bring their children to be held by the Căluș dancers, or to join the dance at the end, thus obtaining the quality of beneficiary of the Căluș ritual, reiterating, practically, the traditional model. In addition, during such manifestations one can easily observe the preference of the public for certain groups, the spectators demonstrating a good knowledge of them and of their performative style. In this way, the prophylactic plants are bought only from preferred or known groups, and the children are given only to certain Căluș dancers to participate in dance figures where the dancers jump on one leg over the

child. Such manifestations, resulting from the *tradition* of the Căluș festival, prove that these festivals constitute not only cultural events that bring about changes in the structure of ritual practices, but can also ensure, under certain conditions, a form of continuity for them. From this point of view, we can even talk about a cyclicity in the evolution of the Căluș, whose image, radically changed at the level of public perception as a consequence of staged manifestation, could reinvigorate its old messages even through these cultural events. Evidence of this is seen in the new festival format proposed in Olt County, beginning in 2021. Apart from classical staged demonstrations the Călușul Oltenesc festival aims to promote the genuine model of the traditional dance, inviting groups of Căluș dancers to perform in the courtyards of the inhabitants of organising towns. In this way, we are witnessing a novel form of preservation and promotion of the Căluș, with the purpose of entertaining communities where the dance was not known or where local groups became inactive, as well as with the purpose of activating some mechanisms of carrying on the tradition in some localities, resulting in the reactivation of some old groups or in the initiation of some local projects that propose the formation of new groups. At the same time, we notice an aspect relating to the number of days in which the groups are active during the period of Whitsuntide. As lots of these events are organised during this week, there are some groups that, in addition to performing for their local communities, always participate in festivals, succeeding in remaining active in this way for three to five days. Likewise, some group leaders consider that we are experiencing a continuity of the tradition from a temporal point of view, even if in the villages the dance is performed only on one day, or at most on two days, with the rest of the performances involving driving to unique, staged performance.

Apart from festival-like initiatives organised by local authorities, the preservers of the Căluș are also responsible for practicing the dances in some contexts that we can consider to be slightly atypical. We are referring to actions organised especially outside of the ritualistic period that involve groups known for their staged dances which are capable of creating a great show and a specific atmosphere. Presently, there is nothing unusual in encountering a Căluș group at private events (weddings, christenings) or at corporate events (a brand release or product promotion), on stages organised for the anniversary of a locality, during electoral promotion shows, at sports events or scientific conferences and even on TV. With the exception of TV shows like Romania's Got Talent, where the decision to participate is presumably taken strictly by the protagonists, in the other cases the Căluș dancers are invited to perform and are applauded and paid, reiterating, in a certain form, the classical performative model. Are the preservers of these traditions to be blamed for this excess in practicing a secular tradition? Are they to be blamed for using this tradition for purely economic purposes? Or are we witnessing a reinvention of



Fig. 3. To ensure that they will be healthier for the rest of the year, the children are brought to the *călușari* to be held. Even though we are dealing with a festival context, the protective rites are still performed. Photo: C. Alexa, Craiova (Dolj County), 27 May 2018.

tradition, as has been proposed in the literature (Hobsbawm 1983), a reinvention that involves the intensification of the entertaining and economic functions of the Căluș dance? At first sight, we could consider that we are facing a distortion of a particular heritage value, the importance of which has been recognised internationally (UNESCO, 2008). Of course, the Căluș is present in such contexts outside the acknowledged period and, apparently, devoid of the purposes that confirmed its community importance and the other known purposes (the healing and protecting of the community).

However, as I mentioned earlier, the staged practice of ritual dance has occurred since the interwar period. In these circumstances, perception of the contemporary Căluș dancers, who consider such performative models an integral part of what they call today the tradition of Căluș, should not take us by surprise. From the point of view of the protagonists, the two models, although perceived differently, are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they are part of the same whole. In these conditions, the use of the Căluș in such contexts, sometimes blamed on the academic environment, are considered normal by the Căluș dancers, and even desired since they generate income and authority. This is one of the reasons why we witness the constant promotion of the Căluș as a *commodity* by the same performers of this dance. Thanks to modern means of communication (Facebook, YouTube, etc.), Căluș performers can promote themselves, thus making sure they have greater visibility, even when considering the traditional dance or the staged version. Promotion is meant to increase the impact the performers have with their

existing public, and also to attract potential new beneficiaries who could solicit them to dance. By repeatedly presenting a certain type of spectacle, a *cultural product* is proposed, loaded with a certain set of beliefs that attain the status of an *offer*. The visibility and successes of some groups, especially those that travel internationally, have consequences at the level of the whole phenomenon and bring these groups a models of success that sustains them financially as well as keeping them active and making them famous.

Promoted in this way, it is not surprising that the dance of the Căluș performers can be encountered today in many milieus that researchers of the phenomenon could find atypical. At present, the number of Căluș groups that are invited to entertain at private events is not low, confirming the spectacular function of the dance. With respect to the presence of the Căluș dancers at weddings, a situation attested to also in the past (Burada 1915: 91), even if incredibly rare, could be easily justified if we take into account the energy and good spirit produced by the music and dances, as well as the function of invoking fertility attributed to the old ritual, which is more than suitable in this context, although these events take place outside the consecrated ritual period. Less known by those who invite the Căluș performers to such events, these archaic purposes could, in time, be reintroduced at the level of the beliefs associated with the ritual, which could be revitalised in this way and in these contexts. Surely, such a process of returning the significance of ritual meaning would also be proposed by the protagonists of the dance who choose to promote themselves in this way, making sure they have a great effect on the direct beneficiaries. This is how we could explain certain gestures made by the protagonists in these situations, which confirms their status as performer of a ritual and acknowledged authority, as well as the capacity to introduce some rites that could possibly generate new beliefs. In this manner one can explain the throwing of garlic attached to a performer's girdle and given to the public in the final part of the staged presentation of the Căluș. In the past prophylactic plants were offered to the public as beneficiaries of the ritualistic dance, and so some Căluș performers attempt to establish a connection with the public even in the context of stage performance. In other situations, even event organisers try to endow the stage with a certain significance by symbolically breaking a clay pot, inspired by the tradition of călușari breaking pots filled with water or salt in people's courtyards. This is an attempt to substitute the stage for the acknowledged space of the rural household, where the Călușar groups would originally presented their performances. In the category of original acts, we also include the custom of the bailiff (Rom. *vătaf*) breaking his stick on the stage and offering the pieces to the people present. In this way, a novel practice is introduced, endowed with magical significance, and the audience is assured of the beneficial properties of the pieces of wood despite the fact the event not taking place during the ritual period dedicated to the Căluș.

We are witnessing the birth of a ritual practice which, although associated with new, non-ritual, contexts that were launched and promoted by well-known bailiffs, could easily be introduced into and absorbed by the practices and beliefs associated with the Căluș. Such actions, together with the reestablishment of significance of some abandoned practices, are rewriting the image and the script with which the Căluș is performed today.

As for the preference for a certain performative model, the decision belongs to the guardians of the Căluș, who choose to maintain the local tradition without taking into account recommendations made by authorities unknown to them, and who are limitative and not directly involved (UNESCO, The Ministry of Culture). In addition, from the discussions that we had with numerous Căluș performers, such regulations are not even familiar to them. The decisions are made locally, and belong to the people directly involved. This is obvious when one analyses the connection between Căluș groups and local authorities. The Town Halls that directly support the local groups, for example by covering transport expenses, payment for the musicians or costume costs, can be directly involved even in the performative programme of the groups in the Whitsuntide period. In such villages, the authority of local mayors is evident, and there have been cases in which the final performance, the greatest of all, has been staged in the mayor's own courtyard.



Fig. 4. Audience members buying wormwood threads at the end of the performance.

Photo: C. Alexa, Craiova (Dolj County), 27 May 2018.

The *reinvention* of the Căluș, in one direction or another, will be performed without any doubt by those who, year after year, make efforts to preserve it. It is hard to believe that certain external interventions, such as those by festivals, where par-

ticipation is allowed under certain conditions (traditional costumes, no females in the group, mandatory live music), will significantly influence the evolution of the Căluș. Today's Căluș performers need to adapt to local conditions when needed, for example they make their own costumes within the confines of their financial possibilities, they include women in the groups, they use modern audio technology instead of live bands, which are becoming more and more scarce and expensive. And, if they could ever profit in any way from their cultural commodity, i.e. from this from local heritage, they will not hesitate to do so, especially if the interests of the group are at stake, as some of them argue.

The research done in numerous localities where the Căluș is preserved, confirm the tendencies of change in the performative model, without it being, at this moment, generalised. The traditional model is still encountered in numerous villages, where there are also groups that do not participate at festivals, the tradition being maintained strictly in the place where the group members live, with a significant presence during Whitsuntide within their own community. From a diachronic point of view, the Căluș shows a specific capacity for adaptation, confirmed by today's groups. Treated or not treated excessively as a commodity in some localities, exploited by certain people for surprising reasons, the ritual of Căluș seems to be constantly resourceful and resistant in many different forms, making it, as it was in past centuries, a true reflection of the societies and communities that support it.

Notes

¹ Cleaning the trees is a spring activity. People do this every year in their yards, they take care of their trees by removing the old branches, preventing the spread of diseases.

² Călușari are the participants to an old traditional Romanian dance known as the căluș.

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