

C onsiderations on the sacred space in the traditional Romanian culture

Anca Ceaușescu, Ph.D.

Scientific Researcher III, „C. S. Nicolăescu Ploșor” Institute for Research in Social Studies and Humanities – Romanian Academy, Craiova
anaceausescu@yahoo.com

Abstract

In the traditional societies, the space is perceived as a symbolic space, in tight connection with individual happenings and facts. For the traditional man, who is a *homo religiosus*, the sacred space is the only real one, the belonging to this space being fundamental for him. In the mythological conscience of the Romanians, the sacred spaces are those where many hierophanies take place. But a sacred space is also represented by the land of a village, on which different other parts are considered sacred as well, such as the precincts of the village, the graves of the forefathers, the boundaries or the crossroads. A special significance has the space around the house, or other sacred points, as the roadside crucifixes, the wells, the sacred trees.

Key words: traditional mindset, hypostases of space, symbolism, sacred space, popular beliefs.

The traditional man, who is a *homo religiosus*, lives in an “open” Cosmos in which, by relating to it, he gained his position in the Universe. Therefore, he is considered to be a micro-cosmos, namely a part of the gods’ creation, his entire life being connected to the cosmic life.

The sacred and the profane define the religious man. They represent “two modalities of existence in the World”, according to Mircea Eliade (Eliade, 2005: 15). These are actually determined by the

different positions that the man obtained in the Cosmos. Every time and everywhere, the human spirit has understood the sacred and the profane as separate fields, two completely distinctive worlds, “the energies that manifest in one of them not appearing into the other, on a different level of manifestation: they are profoundly distinct” (Durkheim, 1995: 47).

The way in which the sacred manifests represents essentially “a withdrawal from the profane” and it is called by Mircea Eliade hierophany (Eliade, 2005: 13), such is the manifestation of something extremely different, of a reality that is not a part of our world, in the things that belong to this world, a “natural” and “profane” world. The sacred manifests in objects and beings (from a rock, a cliff, a tree, a piece of wood, a house, a word, to the supreme hierophany that is, for the Christian, the embodiment of God into Jesus Christ), which become something different, undergoing a transmutation, but still remaining themselves religious, as they continue to be a part of their cosmic environment. On the occasion of the religious experience, the hierophany transforms the profane into Sacred.

Roger Caillois asserts that the sacred represents “a category of sensibility”, which the religious attitude relies on (Caillois, 1983: 11). In his work entitled “L' home et le Sacré”, the author talks about the ambiguity of the sacred, underlining the fact that it generates, in the same time, attraction and fear, fascination and terror, it is pure and impure, saint and tainted, and what is even more frightening for the man is “le mélange” (Caillois, 1983: 47-48).

The world of the sacred is, by definition, a special world, a field of dangerous and forbidden. As opposing to the Sacred, the world of the profane is that of the daily life, of the gestures that do not require prudence. But, altogether, the sacred and the profane are only apparently situated in opposable, nevertheless being in a permanent relation of inter-conditioning (Suiogan, 2007: 14). In the world of the Sacred and that of the profane, there is instituted a rather difficult relation, because it involves cautiousness and initiation. It is possible to the extent to which the profane is shaped, loses certain features and becomes, to a specific point, sacred in itself.

Further on, we are going to display few of the aspects that regard the space, as portrayed in the traditional Romanian culture.

For the traditional man, which is, as we have mentioned, a *homo religious*, the space, one of the four “mythical ontology categories” without which the content, the extension and the value of other categories cannot be explained (Vulcănescu, 1985: 15), lacks homogeneity. In its entire aspect, it presents discontinuances that determine qualitative differences between the different component parts of its entirety. Therefore, there is a sacred space, such as a “strong”, significant one, for other amorphous spaces that lack structure and consistency (Eliade, 2005: 19). The religious man separates the sacred space, the only one that bears an existential value for him, from the rest of the space that surrounds him. Unlike religious thinking, for the profane experience, the space is homogenous, without having qualitative differences in its structure. It is a neutral space, made of many “places” in which each individual carries on their daily activity.

In order to understand the lack of homogeneity of the space, we are going to mention again an example that Mircea Eliade mentions in his work “The Sacred and the Profane”: “For the religious man, the church is a part of a different space from the street where he lives. The door that opens towards the interior of the church marks a breaking off. The threshold that cleaves the two spaces shows, in the same time, the distance between the two ways of the existence, the profane and the religious one. The threshold is always the boundary that differentiates and divides two worlds and the paradox spot of communication between them, the point where the passing from the profane world to the sacred world is allowed” (Eliade, 2005: 22). Similar to the church threshold, that of the human dwelling place has a special significance too. In this place it is possible to pass from one state to the other, from an unknown and mysterious world, to the familiar one.

For the religious man, the sacred spaces are the only ones considered real, which are individualised and separated along some chaotic, unfamiliar spaces. Different from the profane space, the

sacred one, “perfectly structured, «centred», «con-centred», is constituted as a level rupture that enables the communication with trans-mundane, transcendent realities” (Tonoiu, 1989: 336). This rupture, produced in the homogenous universe, reveals “the fixed point”, the central axis of the ulterior orientation, a Centre in the profane world.

The fixed point allows the creation of the world, because, as Mircea Eliade notes, “nothing can start, nothing can be done without previous orientation, and any kind of orientation implies the gaining of a fixed point. In order to live in the World, you first have to found it, and no world is born from the «chaos» of the profane space, which is homogenous and relative. The discovery or the projection of a fixed point – «the Centre» – is similar to the Creation of the World” (Eliade, 2005: 20). Consequently, the fixed point implies a start, the constituting of the World.

From here, it emerges the desire of man to situate himself in the Centre of the World, and because the creation of the World started in a Centre, the creation of the man cannot take place elsewhere, but in the same real spot, where it is possible to communicate with the cosmic levels, with the gods. In the Mesopotamian tradition, as Mircea Eliade observed, the man was created “in the centre of the earth”, in UZU (meat) SAR (connection) KI (place, ground), in the same place where there is a connection between the Sky and the Earth (Dur-an-ki) (Eliade, 1992: 346).

By reducing the mythical space to a smaller dimensioned Cosmos in the folklore of each mythology, it is represented by the autochthonous ground. The mythical space is created and recreated through the activity of some sacred beings, through hierophanies, or different ceremonies and rites. The discovery of the sacred space is possible due to certain signs which are characteristic to it, as a place in which significant manifestations occurred, which were perceived as mythical. Nonetheless, in an equal extent, the space can also be consecrated by the human being, through ritual means, signifying that it is imagined as a place of purification for the establishment of a contact with the divinity.

For R. Vulcănescu, the saying “the man consecrates the place” does not remove the order of the archetypal sacralisation of the space, through the instauration of the neo-typical sacralisations (Vulcănescu, 1985: 16). In the mythological conscience of the Romanian people, the sacralisation is also a divine work. “The man, being the supreme creation, endowed with the ability to understand the world and the life, is the recipient in which the twin divinities put something: the Devil put the clay, from which he was modelled, and the God placed the Spirit that put him in clay, changing his destiny in this way” (Vulcănescu, 1985: 16).

In the mythological conscience of the Romanians, the sacred spaces are those where the hierophanies took place, along with the places where the Devil and the God travelled on earth, those where certain saints arrived (St. George, St. Elijah etc.), the spots where there is the cosmic tree or its derivatives (the tree of sky and the tree of life), or where there is the pillar of the sky, or its substitutes, along with the symbolic representations of the sky pillar (the grave or the road crucifixes etc.) (Vulcănescu, 1972: 86 ff).

Although the sacred space owns a hierophanic form that consecrates it, separating it by the wideness of the profane and homogenous surrounding space, sometimes, the sacredness of the place cannot be unravelled by a random sign. Here it is a significant example, presented by René Basset: “The legends say that the sorcerer, who founded El-Hemel at the end of the 16th century, stopped for the night next to a spring and thrust a stick into the ground. The next day he wanted to take his stick and go on his way, but he noticed that it got roots and sprang. Being aware of God’s will, he decided to settle down in that place” (Basset, 1907: 287, cited by Eliade, 2005: 23-24).

Actually, the sacred place is only discovered by the man, it is not chosen by him. Where there is no sign to point in no direction, he resorts to different traditional practices to make it emerge. For example, the choice of the spot for the future house that has to be on a “clean” place was usually done after a ritual hunting. The traditional man would use animals, which would discover the favourable place,

this activity being started from the idea that it is not the man who confers the place auspicious features for the dwelling, but that they pre-exist, and they have to be discovered. It is also well-known that the determination of the place favourable for the construction was done with the help of the cattle. They used to be freed during the night, and the place where they would sleep was considered an appropriate place for dwelling (Taloș, 1973: 76).

Most of the times, for the determination of the “cleanness” of the spot, the traditional man would resort to magical practices, done with the help of religious objects. For example, a cross was thrown upwards, and the place where it fell “standing” was the chosen one; in other cases, they would go with the Psalter to the place desired for the building and it was open three times; the place was chosen only if the Psalter would open at a good psalm (Taloș, 1968: 235).

In the traditional mentality, the space was understood as a “place”, a concrete, organic and living spot, with certain features, which creates an individualisation and a great variety for it. Ernest Bernea notes that “in the popular conception the space appears in a multitude of shapes and meanings, bearing great potential that is continually actualised, often in an unpredictable manner. This space, indestructibly connected to the real and concrete world, cannot be regarded as abstract, but as a real vital substance” (Bernea, 1985: 100). It is crossed everywhere by active spiritual beings that imprint a specific quality: “The space is a phenomenon that belongs both to the natural and the spiritual world” (Bernea, 1997: 113).

The space seen by the Romanian peasant expresses itself thorough the features that belong to it, and much less through surfaces or lengths, being, nevertheless, a qualitative space. Taking into account his aspect, the man of the traditional village carries on his activities according to these essential characteristics of the space. There are a lot of ritual practices and customs that evidence the boundaries and realise the safe passing from one place to another, without the implication of major risks.

The space and the time are defined as “two coordinates that subordinate the human existence” (Știucă, 2001: 29), as two

dimensions of our world that cannot exist one without the other. A qualitative space participates actively to whatever happens inside it. Through its nature and attributes, the space can influence the condition of the individual, but, to the same extent, the community too. Not every spot is appropriate for the carrying out of a ritual act. According to the popular belief, there is a good place and a bad place. The first is beneficial for the human, and the other generates evil. The features of the place close to the house are different from those near the boundaries, those in the yard from those in the field, by the quality of the place next to a fountain or a crossroads.

Therefore, the differential aspects of the traditional village space are obvious, each place being a concrete reality, defined through its specific qualities. The traditional man thinks and acts according to these characteristics. The throwing away of the new born bathing water is done on a "clean spot", usually on the root of a tree or in the garden, the umbilical cord and the child's "house" (placenta) are also buried in a clean spot, or under the threshold, the married couple is met by the in-laws and the God-parents on the threshold.

In the category of the way in which the traditional man regards the space, and especially the qualitative space, a special consideration is given to the land surrounding the village, on which different other parts are considered sacred as well, such as the precincts of the village, the graves of the forefathers, the boundaries or the crossroads. The boundaries are spots that, in the traditional man's mentality, mark the limit between the known world, a world which he spiritually belongs to, and unknown spots, where different magical-religious acts take place: of defending against the wraiths, against the natural phenomena, harmful for the harvest, ritual ceremonies for the banishment of the people who infringe "the law of the country", of healing the children who suffer from different diseases, especially epilepsy, through their symbolic selling "over the borders". Here is the place where it is performed the head-by-the-furrow oath, some ritual customs related to the household being done

with earth taken from the four cardinal points of the village boundary.

A special signification has the sacred space of the house. As much as the temple or the citadel, the house is the centre of the world for the people who live in it, is a good and fruit-bearing place, with specific qualities. As Romulus Vulcănescu remarks, "For the Romanians, the house has become the microcosmic centre of their magical-mythical spiritual activity, in which it is reflected the organisation of the entire macro-cosmos. It is the sacred spot where the autochthonous was born, as his forefathers before, where he lives, facing all the life difficulties, the aspirations, the dreams, the customs and the traditions of his kin, in which he will eventually pass away" (Vulcănescu, 1985: 452).

In the traditional world, to build a house is similar to building a sacred place, where the entire life of the family will be carried out, where there are symbolically reunited generations of people (children, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents). Essentially, the house "represents" the world. It is not only a material form, but also the place where the tradition is preserved the best, the place where a significant part of the customs, from an individual's life, take place (the "passing" rites directly related to the cycle of life, the calendar customs and all the others that aim at the human being).

Both inside and outside, the traditional house reunites several sacred spaces: the hearth, the threshold, the doors and the windows. A place with specific qualities, significant for the traditional man, is the hearth, considered by all the Indo-European peoples a sacred space to which numerous beliefs, practice and customs are related. It is perceived as a symbol or a steadfast pillar, a domestic shrine, a convergent spot between the intern space and the dwelling one. A symbol of permanence, the hearth also expresses "the materialisation of the divine spirit", "a sanctuary, upon which the Holly protection is invoked" (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1993: 273).

The hearth was described as "a place that concentrates a lot of household activities, along with the most suitable measures, meant to assure the continuity of the kin, the material and spiritual comfort of

the family nucleus, the harmonisation of the relations inside the wider space of the community, the obtaining of the forefathers blessing, material fulfilment, especially prosperity on all the existential levels" (Bratiloveanu-Popilian, 2004 - extract). Around the fireplace, the entire quotidian life would gravitate. In our traditional village, the women would give birth near or on the hearth, and the new-born was also placed on it, where they used to be kept for three days, until the arrival of the faith-fairies. The hearth is the place where the bride, looking upwards, would pray for divine blessing. When singing carols in the villages in the south of Oltenia, "few of the carolling people - called *pițărăi* in Mehedinți County - stir the fire with the help of the carols...until the sparks appear, then they touch the ceiling or the girder" (Ilin-Grozoiu, 2013: 23), and this was also the place where the unmarried girls would find their husband, by throwing wheat seeds in the fire (Enache, 2001: 25).

The windows, the doors, the thresholds, the eaves of the houses are not just architectural elements, they become open elements towards the exterior that have to be protected against the hostile forces. This is precisely the function that the symbols from their decoration gain (sun, cross, snake, horse head) and, along with the threshold, they play a complex part in the passing rites (for the part played by these during the birth and death ceremonies, see Ceașescu, 2014: 183-188; Ilin-Grozoiu, 2014: 283-312; Ilin-Grozoiu, 2015 (in press)).

Hence, the space, as it is perceived by the man of the traditional societies, is a complex, homogeneous space, with qualitative differences in its structure. There are sacred spaces, those places with specific qualities, beneficial for the human, and the profane spaces. The space participates actively in whatever happens inside it, its specific features being able to influence the condition of the individual.

References

1. Bernea, E. (1985). *Cadre ale gândirii populare românești*. [Typologies of the Romanian popular ways of thinking]. Bucharest: Romanian Paper.

2. Bernea, E. (1997). *Spațiu, timp și cauzalitate la poporul român*. [Space, Time and Causality at the Romanian people]. Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House.
3. Bratiloveanu-Popilian, M. (2004). Valori ale vetrei și pragului regăsite în practica populară din spațiul carpato-danubian. [Values of the fireplace and Threshold, as seen in the folk practice from the Danube-Carpathian space]. *Ethnos. Scientific journal ethnography, folklore, folk art*, 5, Bucharest (extract).
4. Caillois, R. (1983). *L' home et le Sacré*. [The man and the sacred]. Paris: Gallimard.
5. Ceașescu, A. (2014). *Rituri de trecere în societățile tradiționale. Nașterea*. [Passing rites in the traditional societies. Birth]. Craiova: Universitaria Publishing House. Bucharest: Pro Universitaria Publishing House.
6. Chevalier, J. & Gheerbrant, A. (1993). *Dicționar de simboluri. Mituri, vise, obiceiuri, gesturi, forme, figuri, culori, numere*. [Dictionary of symbols. Myths, dreams, customs, gestures, forms, figures, colours, numbers]. Vol. III (P-Z). Bucharest: Artemis Publishing House.
7. Durkheim, É. (1995). *Formele elementare ale vieții religioase*. [The elementary forms of the religious life]. Iași: Polirom Publishing House.
8. Eliade, M. (1992). *Tratat de istorie a religiilor*. [History of religious ideas]. Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House.
9. Eliade, M. (2005). *Sacrul și profanul*. [The Sacred and the Profane]. 3rd edition (translated from French by Brândușa Prepeanu). Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House.
10. Enache, Șt. (2001). *Viziunea românească tradițională asupra lumii*. [The Romanian traditional view of the world]. Craiova: Sitech Publishing House.
11. Ilin-Grozoiu, L.M. (2013). Colacul - simbolism și ofrandă rituală. Interferențe între practica folclorică și tradiția creștină din Oltenia. [The Knot-shaped bread and the ritual offering. Interferences between the folkloric practice and the Christian tradition from Oltenia]. *Memoria ethnologica*. XIII, 46-47, 20-31.
12. Ilin-Grozoiu, L.M. (2014). Preluări de idei, concepte, superstiții privind nemurirea sufletului și cultul morților de la vechile credințe în tradiția populară românească. [Ideas, concepts, superstitions on the immortality of soul and the cult of the dead, taken from the

- beliefs of the Romanian folk tradition]. *Archives of Oltenia*, New Series, 28, 283-312.
13. Ilin-Grozoiu, L.M. (2015). Funerary remnants of the Geto-Dacians in the Romanian popular culture. *Yearbook Humanistic Research Institute "C. S. Nicolăescu Ploșor"* no. 16 (in press).
 14. Suiogan, D. (2007). Forme de integrare socială și cosmică. Gândirea simbolică. [Forms of social and cosmic integration. The symbolic thinking]. *Memoria etnologica*. VII, 24-25, July-December, 14-21.
 15. Știucă, N. Al. (2001). *În pragul lumii albe*. [On the threshold of the white world]. Bucharest: National Centre for Conservation and Recovery Tradition and Folklore.
 16. Talos, I. (1968). Rituri de construcție la români. [Rites of construction at the Romanians]. *Literary Folklore*, vol. II. Timișoara.
 17. Talos, I. (1973). *Meșterul Manole*. [Master Manole]. Bucharest: Minerva Publishing House.
 18. Tonoiu, V. (1989). *Ontologii arhaice în actualitate*. [Current archaic ontology]. Bucharest: Scientific and Encyclopaedic Publishing House.
 19. Vulcănescu, R. (1972). *Coloana cerului*. [The Sky column]. Bucharest: Academy Publishing House.
 20. Vulcănescu, R. (1985). *Mitologie română*. [The Romanian mythology]. Bucharest: RSR Academy Publishing House.