

NOTES AND REVIEWS

FUNERAL RITES FROM MOLDOVA IN A NATIONAL CONTEXT

Ciubotaru, Ion H. 2014. *Obiceiurile funebre din Moldova în context național* (Funeral Rites from Moldova in a National Context). Iași: Universității “Alexandru Ioan Cuza”. 762 pages.

Ion H. Ciubotaru is a well-known Romanian ethnologist who founded the Folklore Archive of Moldova and Bukovina in 1970. This institution gathered more than 300,000 documents, consisting in audio, video and written fieldwork information from almost 800 villages situated on the north-eastern side of Romania. A questionnaire of 1,175 questions, also created by Ciubotaru, was used during the investigations. The nine chapters of the book focus on all traditional aspects of life: superstitions, folk medicine, rites of passage, holidays, magic beliefs, literary folklore, childlore, traditional clothing, folk architecture and occupations.

Death customs are pursued through 102 questions that permit further inquiries. This tremendous database, collected through direct and indirect fieldwork, allowed professor Ciubotaru to study folk beliefs on dying for thirty years. *Obiceiurile funebre din Moldova în context național* (Funeral Rites from Moldova in a National Context) is the third book on this topic and it is part of a larger Romanian Academy project that uses typologies to better explain folklore. In these books, each section of a rite and all subsequent convictions are presented in their ceremonial context and order, with specific indication of the villages where the information was found. The typology is preceded by a scientific study that decodes ritual meanings and compares Romanian traditional knowledge to universal patterns, while the last part of the book com-

prises a text corpus of ritual literature and other artistic work related to the theme.

This book completes an investigation into rites of passage, after the publication of wedding and childbirth customs, by Ciubotaru's colleagues Silvia Ciubotaru (2009) and Adina Hulubaș (2012). Thus, a recent perspective on these life events is provided to the reader in a coherent and integrated form. The obvious conclusion speaks about a high persistency of folk beliefs through time, in spite of social evolution. Nevertheless, Ciubotaru believes that funeral rites are more profound than other rites of passage because they connect the body with the soul and the dead with the living (p. 7). The stakes are therefore higher when it comes to funeral rites, since magic acts are not only intended to assure the well-being of the neophyte, but also to maintain social harmony. In Romanian folklore, as in the folklore of other parts of the world, it is believed that unfulfilled ceremonial gestures doom the soul to restlessness, and that the dead might come back to punish the entire community.

Ciubotaru placed Romanian Moldova (the space now divided between this country and The Republic of Moldova has a common historical and cultural unity) at the centre of a very ambitious perspective. The ethnological analyses unfold themselves vertically, with information starting from the dawn of mankind. Current practices are revealed as “late echoes of the archaic funerary complex”

(p. 12). The vastness of time is equalled by the large geographical spread of death traditions; hence a second perspective covers a horizontal type of investigation. All connections start from active rites observed in Moldova and eventually return to this space after having achieved even more meaning.

The introductory study covers 29 cultural patterns traceable in many parts of the world. Almost each archetype is discussed in connection with data pertaining to other civilisations. The same manner of investigation is found in the third section of the book, entitled "Anthropological perspectives". Funerary practices become the top of a cultural iceberg because the author masters the technique of revealing centuries of spirituality. A general coherence on death rituals is achieved through information from ethnography, archaeology, folk literature and cult books, paintings and mythology. Hence, a network of universal imagery sustains Romanian ceremonial acts.

The logical interconnection of the book is provided by the structure: themes from the introduction are traced in the typology of folk customs and in the literary corpus, while the anthropological studies convey them all. An enormous international bibliography supports Ciubotaru's contributions. For example, 'the road between worlds', 'the path to the right', 'following the sun and the waters' and 'the one way route' are archetypes analysed in the first part of the book, but meanings receive more consistency in ethnographic data on how the dead are prepared for burial and taken to the cemetery. The same patterns appear in the literary texts from the anthology and the author even created a motif index of funerary symbols from lamentations to help the reader identify them more easily. The poetic dimension of representations of death adds a sublimated dimension to a deep and complex experience of life.

Such is the case with texts that mourn the passing of an unmarried young person.

Although there is a long tradition of aesthetic interpretations made of a Romanian ballad in which death is portrayed as an empress (crăiasă) who becomes the bride for the entire world, Ciubotaru uses ethnographic documents and international information to prove that the metaphor is speaking about actual practices performed centuries ago by the Greeks, Eastern Slavs, Bantu Africans and Tatars: a bride was offered to the dead man in order to assure his peace. The conclusion that "funerary poetry doubles the rite" (p. 65) convinces the reader that folklore should be perceived in a more specific manner, with instruments that make use of mankind's history.

Unexpected information is also offered on the subject of alms given by the living for themselves, on the chromatic choice of mourning, funerary bestiary and on foretelling death and preparing the deceased. Controversies are discussed and clarified with powerful arguments that balance almost all existing information on funerary rituals. This impressive demonstration of scholarship, backed up by ethnographic facts that suggest a serene attitude towards passing away, manages to 'tame death' in some way. The reader gradually understands that the solitude of dying has received an essential antidote: culture. Ciubotaru's book is filled with mythical characters and magic gestures that intend to secure the great ontological transition. If death cannot be defeated, at least it can be explained without terror.

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References

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