

# SECȚIUNEA TINERILOR CERCETĂTORI

## The Romanian Way to Love. About the celebration of spring, love, and *Dragobete*<sup>1</sup>

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When Romanians think of Valentine's Day, there's an inevitable second thought that comes along with the western celebration of eternal love: "We have our own!". Nowadays it is celebrated 10 days after Valentine's and we call it *Dragobete*. The meanings behind this celebration go far beyond the surface of modern times and the celebration itself



Figură 1. The traditional symbol of *Dragobete*  
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has its roots in the Romanian mythology. However, not many Romanians know what exactly *Dragobete* is – all we know is that it is the Romanian Valentine's Day, but even its origins are uncertain – some ethnologists claim that it is as old as the Dacians (our ancestors).

The aim of this paper is to decrypt to some extent the hidden web of meanings underlying this very special day. The following explanations are based on a wonderful book, a lecture I would recommend for each and every one of you out there who can understand Romanian: *A sufletului românesc cinstire (Praising the Romanian Soul)* by the philosopher Alexandru Surdu, one of our most appreciated academicians.

The celebration of *Dragobete* means more than red hearts and stuffed animals. Like Valentine's Day, it is intrinsically influenced by history, religion and mythology. In connection to our culture, the word "*Dragobete*" has at least three meanings:

1. It is the name of a mythological being (when spelled with majuscule - ***Dragobete***);

<sup>1</sup> The first section of this paper (*Mythology and Dragobete – the celebration of love*) have been published at <http://bucharestlounge.wordpress.com> as an informative note on the celebration of Dragobete.

2. It is the name of the celebration of love (spelled with minuscule and held in the “memory” of the mythological being);
3. It traditionally designates a bucket of flourishing branches tied together, used during the actual celebration of *Dragobete* (spelled with minuscule).

First of all, *Dragobete* is the name of a young man who represents the love that is being resurrected in the beginning of the spring, after the winter paralysis, just like Valentine the priest symbolizes the love that survives the hardships of earthly life. He is the son of Baba Dochia (Dochia the Old Lady), an iconic figure that embodies everything that can be unpleasant in a mother-in-law (please note that in the Romanian culture the mother in law is seen as being rather evil than loving and understanding). Eventually, she pays for her sins (and especially for tormenting her daughter-in-law, *Dragobete's* wife) by being turned to stone while up in the mountains with her sheep. Despite his “genetics”, *Dragobete* is the exact opposite of his mother and Romanians acknowledge his name as being intrinsically linked with flourishing love. With this particular feeling being so important anywhere in the world, it is no wonder that Romanians started to celebrate *Dragobete* annually, near the beginning of the much awaited spring.

## Mythology

Figură 2. Sursa: [www.natgeo.ro](http://www.natgeo.ro)



The mythological *Dragobete* had the capacity to fly and sometimes was riding a flying white horse<sup>2</sup>, but always and only during daytime, never after darkness fell. “He was associated with light, sun and spring.”<sup>3</sup> The appearance of the first snowdrops and the flourishing trees was thought to be the result of his magical presence. The flowers

were gendered as well, being separated into lads and girls that found a “soul-mate” among its “peers”, but every now and then there was one that had no mate. Therefore, the flower buckets were made of “unpaired” flowers, so they will resist longer, due to the fact that

<sup>2</sup> This comes in opposition to *Zburătorul* (the Flyer or the Flying One), who is always imagined as riding a flying black horse. Note the *black/white* || *day/night* || *good/evil* fundamental oppositions and parallelisms. Mihai Eminescu’s *Luceafărul* was inspired from this part of mythology.

<sup>3</sup> Surdu, Alexandru. *A sufletului românesc cinstire*. Bucharest, Renaissance: 2011, p. 170.

*Dragobete* took care of their loneliness and paired them after being picked and gathered into a bucket.

He was also responsible for the multiplication of the number of insects and birds, but his skills never went beyond the borders of Mother Nature's realm. Even here his influence was not total – he never paired animals, wild or domesticated. Also, he did not have the capacity to make people fall in love, like Valentine, but it was believed that it was the flourishing nature itself that had this impact over people's lives, triggering the desire for love.

Regarding *Dragobete's* limited influence in the forest, it was believed that animals are subdued to the "horned one" (Satan), and they were not getting "married". Their pairing was purely sexual and the characteristic sounds came directly from Hell. For example, bears were mating during the fall and wolves during the winter, so *Dragobete* was not around then – it was not the right time for love. The wolves, foxes and bovines were making terrible sounds during the mating season, therefore Satan must have been involved in the process, strongly contrasting to the way the birds and flowers were getting "engaged" and then "married" – the flowers were leaning towards each other (like the snowdrop), the birds were singing and kissing each other (like pigeons do). The only exceptions from the rule were the crows and hawks that were thought to be possessed by the "Evil One" due to their unpleasant singing.

This is how *Dragobete*, a young and charming man, was represented in the Romanian folktales and traditional poetry. He brought the nature to life and with it the human heart was fiery again.

In the next section of this paper I will provide a description of when, where how and by whom *Dragobete* was celebrated. All information regarding this matter can be found in Surdu's book referred to above.

## ***Dragobete - The celebration of love***

Traditionally, girls' direct interaction with the outer world was very limited and had to be permanently mediated by older men or women. For example, unmarried, young girls were not allowed to wander around the village by themselves and had very little interaction with one another. No wonder they awaited so dearly the moment of their liberation. One of such moments was the meeting that took place on *Dragobete* Day or sometime around it. It was called "*logodna de dragoste*" and always took place in the beginning of the spring, on a beautiful, sunny day. If the weather on *Dragobete* Day was not appropriate for this celebratory event, then another, more suitable day, was chosen. The place of the event had to be a sunny glade, surrounded by forest, if possible. The cheerful families arrived in groups, always having among themselves a young unmarried (but of marriageable age) lad or girl. It was mandatory that the lads would wear some flowers on their hats and that the girls had beautiful, hand-made flower crowns on their heads. Musicians were also present, entertaining the audience during the entire ritual.

The first phase of this symbolic engagement consisted of the formation of two groups, organized accordingly to the gender of the participants. Following the rhythm of the music, they were shouting each other's names until two separate, distinct and distant groups were formed. Then the dancing began – the girls with their "sisters", the lads with their "brothers".

This whole time the relatives and spectators were forming a large chattering group on the side of the glade. The dancing took place like this: for a while, the members of each group danced together, but after a while they were separating from the larger circle and danced in pairs (lads with lads, girls with girls), hugging and kissing each other on the cheeks. The girls' hugs were very delicate and expressed love and care, whereas the male embraces expressed strength and power. After this, the two groups were supposed to re-form the original circle-shape, and then they would separate from it again and so on. The kissing and hugging one's same-sex peers meant that the girls were now sisters and the lads were brothers. This brother/sisterhood was stronger, more important than the blood ties between the members of a community. They became related by making a superficial cut in the form of a cross on the inside of their arms and then placing these wounds one on top of the other, so the blood would be "exchanged".

After this "bloody" rite, the two circles would start dancing again but, this time, at the signal of one of the girls, all of them had to run towards their families and hide behind them, after which they would sneak out into the woods and pick few flourishing tree

branches, which they called “dragobete” (read dragobetze)<sup>4</sup>. After picking these branches, they tied them together with some colorful scarves (bete), turning the dragobete into...*Dragobete*.

After a while, the lads’ circle was also disrupted and they went searching for the girls – first, among their families, then all around the glade and into the woods. This entire time the girls remained hidden and were secretly picking a favorite of the lads whom they would kiss as soon as they would get the chance. A girl had to run silently from the woods, touch the lad with her *Dragobete* (the branches tied together) and then kissed him wherever she could – on the cheek, on the chin, on the moustache, it did not matter. After kissing her chosen one, the girl had to run back to her family and it was their duty to hide and protect her (Surdu 2011). “This once-in-a-lifetime gesture, made in front of the entire community by a scared girl towards an unknown young man, but beautiful as *Dragobete* himself, was the sentimental equivalent of the catharsis as it had been described by the ancient writers – a strange combination of fear and pleasure, closely related to death itself, but, at the same time, of authentic life, of true fulfillment of the human destiny.”<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, the lads were not passively waiting to be kissed – they were running all over the place, grabbing the girls, holding them up in the air and finally kissing them. These very lively and entertaining moments were interrupted by a sudden loud noise (a scream or so) and the girls would instantly start running towards their homes. No one followed them – the lads and everyone else had to form a huge circle and dance to the music of the band. Once they reached their destination, these young women carefully hid their *Dragobete*, so no one would find them. As a prophylactic measure, they also cursed the *Dragobete*, so anyone who would disturb them (and, therefore, their love) would pay for the damage. The end of the ritual finds the girls in a cathartic state and it was not a rarity that they would cry the whole night, until the next day.

This was “*logodna de dragoste*” – the only one which did not underscore other values but the pure love itself. The following ritual was called “taking out the girls for a dance” and it meant the actual acknowledgement of an individual as being “on the marriage

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<sup>4</sup> This is a very interesting word. Besides the obvious resemblance with “Dragobete”, it is actually formed of two parts: **drago-** (which is short for **dragoste**, meaning **love**) and **-bete** (read: betze), which means **branches**. Therefore, these flourishing branches were love branches.

<sup>5</sup> Surdu, Alexandru. *A sufletului românesc cinstire*. Renaissance, Bucharest, 2011, p. 180.

market". During this one, the lads invited girls to dance with them, they picked a favorite and few days later, if the families came to terms the "real" engagement took place.

This is how love and marriage were enacted in a traditional village in Transylvania, near the city of Brasov (Kronstadt), as described by acad. Surdu in his book, *Praising the Romanian Soul*. Everything had *Dragobete* as a starting point. Although it was not he himself who would "marry" the unmarried youngsters, it was due to his work in the nature that all the above rituals took place. *Dragobete* meant spring, life and love and the above-described symbolic engagement came as complementary to nature's resurrection.

## Interpretation

Moving on to less descriptive and more explanatory models, I will try to analyze and explain some of the facts exposed above.

For the sake of brevity, I will only take into account the male-female interaction during the celebration of *Dragobete*. The ties between one's same-sex peers are at least as important, but I feel that it is beyond the aim of this paper to dive so deep into the social organization as it is revealed during this day.

### The celebration of *Dragobete* and the collective being

Such rituals and traditions might raise a few feminist eyebrows, for they may seem as an oppressive tool for men to use their culturally prescribed power against women. It is my aim in this paper to reveal the underlying meanings of the *Dragobete* practices described above and the status of masculinity and femininity as shaped in interaction with their relevant others (families, "sisters", "brothers", other men and women and the community as a whole) during this very special day.

First of all, when I refer to the concept of *ritual* I take into account the following definition: "[...] a dramatic form of symbolic action that articulates the relationship between a symbolically constructed order of meanings and a system of interpersonal and institutional relationships"<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, it is not the individual, subjective being this paper is concerned with, but rather the community as a whole and what *Dragobete* meant inside this particular time-space continuum (a village in Brasov area, during the first half of the twentieth

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<sup>6</sup> Kligman, Gail, *The wedding of the dead: ritual, poetics, and popular culture in Transylvania*, Univ. of California Press, Berkeley, 1988, p. 10.

century). Moreover, as we shall see, the celebration of *Dragobete* was one of the most important and awaited rites of passage.

Also, it is important that the reader keeps in mind that everything written here and whichever conclusions I will come to at the end of this paper, it is my subjective and perhaps romanticized perspective over this special occasion in the life of a young individual that is omnipresent.

Mainly, the celebration of *Dragobete* was about love and, ultimately, marriage. As shown above, in the descriptive section of this paper, the finality of *logodna de dragoste* was the *real engagement* itself, which, obviously, led to marriage and the formation of a new family. It might seem strange to the modern human that only fifty years ago people were so preoccupied with the matter of starting a family and that they did not wait until an economically fulfilling status was achieved. As the Romanian sociologist H. H. Stahl noted in one of his works, anything was better than to die unmarried<sup>7</sup>, and, with death being so far beyond the reach of our reasoning and predictive capacities, it is no wonder that youngsters wanted to start a family as soon as possible. In the Romanian (traditional) culture, marriage rationalizes both life and death (Kligman 1988).

Gail Kligman, an American anthropologist, conducted a wonderful study in Ieud (county of Maramureș) in the late 70s. She mainly focused on wedding, funeral and death-wedding rituals and, regarding weddings and marriage, finally came to the conclusion that it was the most awaited event in the life of the young women of Ieud (after child bearing). She also notes on the deeply dualistic structure of the wedding rites, especially as revealed in traditional poetry (*strigături/shouts*): although the main topics of these verses of ritual poetry were imbued with feelings of grief and sadness, which gave the wedding a deathly contour (for the bride was soon to leave her parental home and go to live “among strangers”, with her husband and his parents), the wedding still remained one of the happiest moments in a girl’s life. Getting married was a symbolic terminus point of a very beautiful and calm timespan in a woman’s life: her childhood; it was equal with becoming a woman and this is especially evident when taking a closer look to the Romanian vocabulary itself: a married woman is simply called a woman (or somebody’s woman), her social status is that of a mature feminine being and it is recognized in unanimity by all the members of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

the respective community. On the contrary, an unmarried woman, no matter the age, is called a girl or even an old girl (*fată bătrână*).

Although referring to two completely different communities and times, both Kligman and Surdu note that a girl's life was not very fulfilling, to put it under a modern concept. The two scholars reveal that an unmarried girl was not allowed to wander around the village by herself and that she had little interaction with peers of her own age. Her virginity (*cinstea*) had to be preserved and it was her mother and the older women of the family who had to make sure she remains untainted. Reputation is very important in Romanian villages and one's social status is also ascribed accordingly to facts accepted as truths about the person. Dimtrie Gusti named it *the voice of the village* (*gura satului*) and it had the power to marginalize or even exclude the individual from the larger community if he or she did not follow the generally accepted norms. *Gura satului* was a particular type of public opinion, characteristic to the rural areas of Romania and, like the modern concept of public opinion; it contained a huge amount of data and information about other people and their activities. However, *gura satului* was not just a factual description, nor a non-judgmental collective voice. Its main function was to criticize and "take out the trash", so the community remained healthy. Those who were not performing as expected and accepted by the written and unwritten norms rules were "victims" of *gura satului* and were automatically considered outsiders. Holding on to traditional customs was one of the imperatives, so we should not be surprised that tradition was such a powerful and important part of culture and that the vast majority of the villagers chose to obey it, whether they personally liked it or not.

However, Kligman notes that there is a notable difference between prescription and actual action. "Rituals inform (but do not determine) consciousness and action"<sup>8</sup>, therefore the individual is still free to play a role of his or her choosing in the life of the village; but choosing not to follow habits, traditions and rituals deeply embedded in the collective consciousness is equal to negating the "spirit of the place"<sup>9</sup> and all its history and to placing one's self outside the spiritual and cultural life of the community.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Blaga, Lucian. *Trilogia Culturii*. Editura pentru Literatură Universală. Bucharest, 1969.