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## THE CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION AMONG THE AROMANIANS OF DOBROGEA

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**Abstract:** *A HOLIDAY HAS ITS OWN SPATIO-TEMPORAL ARCHITECTURE, WHICH INCLUDES ITS GENESIS, THE TIME AND SPACE OF ITS DEVELOPMENT AND FUNCTIONALITY, THE MOMENTS OF ITS PEAK AND DECLINE, AND ULTIMATELY, ITS DISAPPEARANCE FROM THE SOCIAL SPHERE. ALL PEOPLES SHARE A COMMON CONCERN FOR CREATING AND TRADITIONALIZING SUITABLE MEANS THAT, DURING FESTIVE MOMENTS, WILL INSTILL INTENSE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES; FOR THIS PURPOSE, THEY HAVE INSTITUTED CERTAIN HOLIDAYS AND CEREMONIES[1]. THROUGHOUT SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, THE FUNCTIONS OF A HOLIDAY HAVE MANIFESTED IN THE MOST DIVERSE FORMS: BY SEGMENTING TIME AND THE RHYTHM OF LIFE AND WORK, BY HIGHLIGHTING A SUI-GENERIS EXCHANGE PROCESS BETWEEN HUMANS AND NATURE, AND BY RAISING AWARENESS OF COMMEMORATIONS AND ANNIVERSARIES IN PEOPLE'S SOCIAL AND INDIVIDUAL LIFE.*

**Keywords:** HOLIDAY, CHRISTMAS, AROMANIAN, DOBROGEA, CAROL

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The elements that shape the form and content of holidays are in continuous flux, unfolding according to the size and solidarity of human communities, living and working conditions, and the level of culture and civilization[2].

Thus, for Aromanians, folk traditions related to a season are a complex of different types of manifestations, brought together by reference to a specific calendar date and an organizational framework with several defining elements: the actual ritual (gestures, attitudes, actions), culinary preparations, songs, prohibitions and recommendations in practical order, and a magical purpose (including folk medicine)[3]. The ceremonial moments found in the Aromanian holiday calendar cluster around the winter and Easter celebrations.



Christmas in Aromanian communities represents a moment of profound religious, cultural, and identity significance, the result of a long history and of a process of adaptation to the various Balkan contexts in which they have lived. The Aromanians, a pastoral-mountain people with Latin roots, spread across Greece, Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Romania, have preserved over the centuries a strong core of traditions and customs that define Christmas as a link between generations and a cornerstone of their community identity.

Christmas, celebrated in line with the Orthodox calendar, is more than a simple religious event; it symbolizes the birth of the Savior Jesus Christ and the strengthening of spiritual ties among family and community members. In Aromanian villages, people attend church services where, even though the number of believers has decreased in some areas due to urban migration or diasporic dispersion, the community spirit remains alive. Especially in places where Aromanians live alongside people of various confessions and religions, as is the case in Albania, they have preserved their Orthodox faith over centuries, taking care of old churches even during the communist period. The church, often the focal point of the locality, becomes the place where two essential dimensions converge: the ancient faith and the Aromanian language, transmitted through carols and prayers recited solemnly.

As in many Southeast European cultures, caroling is a central ritual of the Aromanian Christmas. On Christmas Eve, children and young people set out in small groups along the village streets, performing ancient carols. Passed down from generation to generation, these songs often have an archaic character, with lyrics that recall biblical events and evoke hope, fertility, solidarity, and well-being. Their simple yet profound melodic line reflects the connection to the pastoral environment and mountain life, where people have lived in harmony with nature.

Regarding the caroling tradition, Dimitrie Bolintineanu wrote in one of his travel books in 1858: “Carols are performed on Christmas Eve; they call them, as we do, ‘Colinde.’ On New Year’s Day, children go with the ‘sorcova,’ which they call ‘surva’; it is made of olive branches. During Carnival, they go with the Nativity scene and the Star”[4].

Later, in 1900, Pericle Papahagi noted in *Din literatura poporană a aromânilor* that the custom was celebrated “with great zeal” during his childhood years[5].

Among Aromanians, the custom is called *colindi* or *colinde*, which takes place on the night of December 24 to 25, when children go from house to house to announce the Birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Often, the carols are accompanied by folk instruments such as the flute or small drums, supporting the sacred rhythm of the songs. On December 24, the carolers are called *colindar*[5], and they carry beautifully adorned staffs, decorated with colored ribbons and traditional motifs, serving protective and auspicious purposes. They may symbolize the fertility of the land, abundance in the household, or the health of the flocks—vital aspects in a community historically dependent on transhumance and shepherding.

According to Pericle Papahagi, “the children’s staff, painted on the outside in red-white, is called *buzdugan* or *stupagană*”[5]; it has an important ritual role, but also serves as a decorative weapon with a protective or threatening function.

Papahagi also mentions that when the carolers would bend down to gather fruits or boiled chickpeas from the floor, they had to imitate the sound of sheep, believing that if the Savior heard, He would bless the shepherd’s household. Moreover, he specified that if a shepherd was among the carolers, they would give him money “because he was the first to announce that Christ was born.”

In cases where carolers were not received, they would take revenge, often causing damage in the yards of those who refused them or stealthily taking some of their belongings. This act of revenge, called “*descolindare*,” was accompanied by threatening formulas that essentially indicated that those who did not welcome the carolers would remain poor, with their house deserted, etc.[7]

### **The Christmas Star and its Symbolism**

An essential element of Aromanian caroling is the carrying of the Christmas Star. Carefully made from colored paper, cardboard, or even wood, and adorned with religious motifs—such as the image of the Virgin Mary with the Child or cross-shaped symbols—the Star recalls the bright celestial body that guided the Magi to the place of the Lord’s Birth. The Star is not just an accessory but a central piece in the act of caroling, a visual and spiritual link to the biblical narrative.

In his 1900 work, Pericle Papahagi records that the custom of carrying the Star had been introduced from Romania about ten years earlier: “About ten years ago, the custom was introduced for boys to walk with the Star on December 24, several of them together. This custom, brought from Romania, was first practiced by the students of the Romanian high school in Bitolia, Macedonia, and then gradually spread to the villages”[5].

### **Cultural Interferences and New Year Customs**

Cultural influences from the North-Danubian Romanian area and the Balkan region have harmoniously intertwined with local traditions. Rituals such as *Plugușorul* or *Sorcova (Surva)*, originating north of the Danube, were adapted by Aromanians and integrated into their winter customs. These practices, based on wishes for prosperity, abundance, and health in the New Year, have become an organic part of Aromanian identity. Practiced with devotion and joy, they reveal the capacity of Aromanian communities to adopt and assimilate external cultural elements without losing their essence.

Children go out on New Year’s Day with *Surva*. The *Surva* branches are then thrown onto the roof of the house to ensure abundance in the coming year.

*Plugușorul* is another ancient custom that celebrates the peasant’s work and the fertility of the land.

On New Year’s Eve and the first day of the new year, the villages come alive with the characteristic sound of the carolers echoing through the cold winter air. One of the most beloved and widespread customs in the area is *Plugușorul*, an old and highly symbolic tradition, deeply rooted in Romanian folk culture.

Caroling groups, dressed in traditional attire, fill households with wishes of health and abundance. This custom is not merely a simple greeting but a true celebration of the peasant’s work and the cyclical nature of the earth, fundamental in the daily lives of Romanians.

*Plugușorul* is a living tradition, reflecting the strong bond between humans and nature, between fieldwork and the fruits of the land. It speaks of agricultural tasks—plowing with twelve oxen, sowing, reaping, and grinding wheat—which were and remain essential activities for Aromanian communities.

The *Plugușor* carolers are warmly welcomed by the hosts, who receive their good wishes and offer gifts in gratitude. Alongside the traditional refrain “*Ia mai mânați măi, Hăi, Hăi!*,” the performance of *Plugușorul* is accompanied by the crack of the whip and the sound of bells, signaling that the festivity is energetic and full of strength, so that the new year will be bountiful and abundant.

This tradition is essentially an evocation of the ancestral bond between people and the land, expressing the wish that the coming year brings good harvests, fruitful labor, and health for all those who till the soil. Each verse of the *Plugușor* carol features images proudly depicting peasant life, conveying a message of hope and gratitude for the gifts of the earth.

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