

# **Ernesto de Martino: The End of the World a Parallel Between Italian and Romanian Folklore**

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**ABSTRACT:** Within his own cultural era, Ernesto de Martino stands out as an illustrious ethnologist, by virtue of his capacity to emphasize and express inherent qualities possessed. As a history researcher regarding humankind's fathom origins from the farthest lands, de Martino was also an interpreter of the contemporary society, portrayed by suffering. The laborious commitment Ernesto De Martino shows throughout his literary activity during the '50s has an extremely vital role in anthropology and ethnology, not just due to the historic, background of his work, but above all, it exhibits his originality in the approach towards complex topics, flourished within the analysis of the philosophic mould and directed towards the socio-cultural reality of poorly developed areas in the post-World War II Italy. The basis of the Demartinian research broadens the approaches of the Italian folklore and the cultural phenomena – the mourning rituals in Lucania, the choral dancing therapy of tarantism in Puglia – and, moreover, it develops an interest towards Romanian folklore, represented by its mourning and funeral ceremonies.

**KEYWORDS:** tarantism, ritual, shamanism, myth, folklore

## **Introduction**

Born in December, Naples, Ernesto de Martino was an Italian anthropologist, folklorist and historian of religions. Throughout decades, he encouraged and advanced the research on popular culture in Italy in the XX century. The ethnologist is considered to be one of the most eclectic and creative thinkers, whose field of research situates in the context of historical religious documents. This predilection is strongly connected with the implication that Benedetto Croce has had, as the most important Italian intellectual of the first half of XX century, towards the ethnologist's work. Thus, it is well known that, during the last decade of his life, the renowned ethnologist Ernesto de Martino has dedicated himself with a particular interest to the research of cultural national backgrounds, mostly related to the traditions and folklore in Italy.

## **Cultural context**

A major event which had a hand in the development of de Martino's work occurred in 1955, in the context of a convention at the Ethnography and Folklore Institute in Bucharest, and the participants who attended the event were mainly Romanian intellectuals. Now, this meeting has paved the way to a convergence of perspectives, given that, during the '30, Constantin Brăiloiu and H.H. Stahl, two important ethnographers, have thoroughly discussed and interpreted Eliade's ideas similar to de Martino's ideas regarding the concepts of sacredness, myth and history.

Following this process, the Italian ethnologist enters the world of the Romanian cultural universe and, simultaneously, establishes multiple links with the inheritors of the flourishing times of researches and studies. In this context, the Sociological School of Dimitrie Gusti has experienced a harsh cultural and interdisciplinary conflict when working in the field in order for them to fully comprehend and properly illustrate the image of the rural world in Romania from a social and cultural point of view (Cerbone 2014, 2).

De Martino's analysis was placed within an „epistemological opposition against the phenomenology of religion elaborated by Eliade, and specifically, against the traditions of the Sociological School regarding the folkloric, anthropological and cultural research of C. Brăiloiu and H.H. Stahl” (Cerbone 2014, 1).

In 1958, de Martino publishes his work entitled *”Morte e pianto rituale. Dal lamento funebre antico al pianto di Maria”* (“Death and ritual mourning in the ancient world: From the ancient

funeral lament to the weeping of Mary”), depicting in the fourth chapter a Romanian mourning ritual, respectively the funeral of Lazăr Boia, thoroughly and rigorously described, also accompanied by musical staves and mourning lyrics.

It is also known that, during the '50s, de Martino visits Romania, his visiting time lasting one month, and with the support of Mihai Pop, chief of Institute of Ethnography and Folklore, Bucharest, visits the Clopotiva village, situated near the Hunedoara district, where he participates at several mourning rituals. In order to elaborate the thesis regarding the mourning ceremony of Lazăr Boia, he is helped by various Romanian intellectuals so that he can gain access to the archives of the institute. Afterwards, de Martino proceeds to write the fourth chapter based on the photographs and paperworks collected. Being profoundly impressed by the accurate and defined manner shown throughout the gathering of the paperworks, de Martino presents an exemplary description stating that „it’s difficult to estimate whether the mourning rituals can be placed in relation to the true crisis of lamentation or everything is directly connected solely with a ritual highlighting the inclusion in a certain community”.

The Italian historian shows the absolute poverty behind the meaning of the mourning ceremonies during funerals in the Christian tradition, as the mourning rituals represent the core of the previous Mediterranean civilizations placed at the actual origins of the European civilization; this complex is build up by a set of manifestations called „*il saper piangere di fronte alla morte*”. Throughout historiography’s times, we can observe the dispute between the inheritance of the ancient history, which perceived the lamentation as part of the mourning ritual as it continuously reproduced the mythical episode of a god being on the verge of death and brought back to life, the same as with the effect of the Christian joy at the idea of a sinful death and eternal life” (Benga I., and Benga O. 2004). The lamentation symbolizes the pain transposed into paroxysm; it displays the rage, the process of crying seen as the ritual of rhythmical sequences, harmonizing complex verbal structures with certain gestures. De Martino’s thesis illustrates ethnographic facts which can render useful in the analogy of the funeral of Vasile Borca from Budești. The author emphasizes the frequency of the motifs of lamentation (de Martino 1958, 92), then proceeds to discuss about the mimics having their roots in the stereotypical patterns related to the cultural background of the mourner (or the mute) (de Martino, 1958, p. 95), this idea being strongly linked with multiple ritualistic events; these diminish the improvisation, considering that it is more important to „remember” rather than „make changes and have variety” (de Martino 1958, 101).

The Romanian funeral of Lazăr Boia (de Martino 1958, 169) presents several similar traits with the funeral of Vasile Borca: three women, relatives of the deceased, mourn simultaneously on the same song, but each one of them singing different lyrics.

The lyrics used during the mourning process follows the steps of the funeral in Lucania as well, its end consisting in the person who performs the mourning ritual and the one who passed away being separated. In this manner, it is considered that the funeral lamentation can offer the deceased person a specific amount of time in order to communicate with the dear ones, forcing the person to come back by means of a stable and beneficent return (de Martino 1958, 170).

De Martino’s analysis focuses on the mourning rituals performed in his own cultural tradition and its ways by which they have been instilled by the civilization in Lucania: for example, even since his childhood, he participated at the funeral ceremonies, later re-interpreting the funeral scenarios of the children, as well as participating at the olive oil and cereal harvesting (the latter is related to the ritual of the last sheaf, performed during a mourning ritual).

The Italian ethnologist reveals different aspects of the fear of the deceased person, who might return as an undead being, hunting and torturing the dear ones who are still alive, as part of the traditional mourning ritual (de Martino 1958, 105-106); de Martino also differentiates the methods of distinction between the deceased – the existing and defines the modality by which the „precious memories” substitute the „painful memory” of the deceased in terms of a psychological risk.

Romania represents a land of researches utterly engaged in the historical and anthropological studies by means of practice methods, but at the same time, by analysis methods,

being structured after labels such as "witchcraft", "possession" or "shamanism" (Pizza 2004). In this context, it is worth mentioning the impeccable work of Mircea Eliade, entitled "*Șamanism la români?*", in which the author explains the difficulties in the inclusion of the term "shamanic" in the occult Romanian ceremonies (denotative/connotative meaning) (Eliade, 1951; cf. Di Nola 1973), as well as the categorization of the complex knowledge, practices and symbols mentioned by the writer. This also portrays an essential and valuable picture for Italian anthropologists in regard to the similarities and differences between the Romanian ritual of the "Falls" during Pentecost and the tarantism from Puglia studied by de Martino (Pizza 2004). Thus, the trances rituals during Pentecost, characterized by many authors as being "shamanic", are perceived by Eliade as an experience resembling tarantism: "*The falls on Pentecost remind us of the tarantism phenomenon from Puglia, remarkably studied by de Martino and his research group. Both cases involve a temporary crisis of the consciousness, refined by a traditional context from a mythical and religious view, and exceeded by means of a choreomusical catharsis. We must be reminded that, within certain Romanian regions, the călușarii operate through the same catharsis when being called to cure the diseased with their ritual dances and songs*" (Eliade 1975, 178).

## Conclusions

De Martino's heritage offers a truly authentic and innovative contribution within Italian academic work. His thesis and studies reveal a contemplative analysis towards the changes throughout contemporary history, which might even foster the evolution of the anthropologic and ethnographic fieldwork. Irrevocably, de Martino holds the title a classic in the field of ethnographic theory and the study of magic's role within culture.

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