

Cultural Tourism: Romania, a Promising Tourist Attraction

Aurelia Săbiescu

PhD Student University of Craiova, Craiova, Romania, aura79sabis@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: Romania holds a cultural, historical and ethno-folkloric patrimony of considerable value which advantages the increase of tourism attractiveness. The tourism industry in our country had its starting point back in the 19th century. The development of the cultural tourism entails the recognition, restoration and the renovation of historic buildings and, mainly, of the existent historical patrimony, the entire process being accompanied by the recognition and the encouragement of local traditions, subsequently stimulating this development by means of cultural products. Romania has followed some essential steps in order to be seen as a destination of cultural interest, and not only environmentally, considering the fact that a large amount of sites and attractions with a stark impact from a historical and aesthetical perspective. For Romania, cultural tourism is regarded as an essential matter, whereas most itineraries suggested by various tour operators from Italy are focusing especially on this field. The most known and popular tourist attractions seen in the Italian market are Transylvania and its three main cities (Sibiu, Braşov, Sighişoara), Bukovina with its painted monasteries. The tour continues from Bucharest to Sinaia, offering the opportunity to explore the lands of royal castles, and finally reaching Transylvania, a true land of fairy tales, with its Bran Castle, the famous Râşnov Fortress and other churches and medieval buildings. The trip is followed by a sightseeing of the main urban centers in Braşov, such as the Black Church, with its towers and strongholds; Sibiu, along with the Astra National Museum and the Brukenthal National Museum (being the first museum built in Central and Eastern Europe), and Sighişoara, a hidden gem destination in Romania, which presents a well-defined medieval center, along with the Clock Tower, watching over the entire city. Those who are specifically interested in finding out more about the Romanian cultural patrimony are invited to visit the 30 main destinations in Romania included in the UNESCO List, in which, apart from the monasteries, churches and the urban centers previously mentioned, there are also included the Dacian settlements in Orăştie Mountains (Sarmisegethusa Regia).

KEYWORDS: Tourism, Cultural Tourism, Urban Tourism, Urban Center, Historic Patrimony, Tourist Attraction, Church, Monastery, Tourism Market, Industry

The performing art called dancing entails a fundamental part displayed during one's bloom of youth times. The customs mainly regarded dancing as an element of celebration, but they were not strictly followed, thus not being practiced nowadays. In modern times, dancing is not seen as a form of art anymore, but just a "fun activity" done in the spare time. Its values have been long forgotten, not harnessed by anyone.

The dance represents a way of improving one's muscular strength at full blast (Bîrlea 1982, 9), which may then change into a state of composure and detachment from thoughts. This feeling might resemble that of a well-being state of mind – *catharsis*.

The dancer performs a number of movements called steps in order to communicate with the dance partner, this being the most simple and common process which helps fostering a more intense attraction between the dance partners.

Regardless of age, people first began to perform this activity many years ago, as through dancing they could express their own sense of being different, their uniqueness, concurrently with the attempt to get rid of the feelings that would often overwhelm them.

Moreover, usually, various dancing steps, movements or gestures indicated traits similar to superstitions in which people used to believe, such as the victory over your enemies or the pelting rain (Bîrlea 1982, 10), which could influence the crops' condition over the year.

It has been further revealed that dancing could hold a ritualistic role, although it had been performed for secular purposes (Bîrlea 1982, 10), this fact showing a gradual process of desanctification within art.

In contemporary society, the *căluș* dance is perceived as a “product of cultural export”, as it is frequently performed, particularly on multiple festivals in Olt region. Hence the *căluș* performance gets to be admired by the public solely during Whitsunday, it now contains only a typical structure.

Nevertheless, those who accept the visit of the *călușari* group at their house still believe that this way, they can be kept away from the evil or be cured of various diseases. Besides, the presence of the *călușari* group at one’s house is perceived by the owner as a great honour, conferring a high social status upon him.

The carol of the *călușari* began with the flag being “dug up”, as the leader (*vătaf*) guided the rest of the dancers to go caroling in the neighborhood. After the unspoken oath under the flag, the *călușari* group would begin the ritual using woodworm and garlic leaves placed in their mouths and ears (the ritual would often be performed on the seashore).

Thus, the first ritualistic dance takes place; as the performance is completed in the village of origin, the group carols the villages in the nearby areas and the hosts take responsibility for paying the *călușari* for their efforts shown during the dance.

As the *călușari* group held a protective role for the entire community, one could assume that every villager took benefit from their dancing. Moreover, the performances would be held on a daily basis, specifically during the Whitsunday holiday, when rumor has it that the danger awaits the villagers as they could have been attacked and harmed by the *iele*.

In the daytime, the dancing session could last from morning till night as long as the ritual was not performed after the sunset. By nightfall, as the sunlight got dim, dancing was seen as a risky act and everyone could have been perceived as vulnerable during that time. "But is there a cultural field in which tradition is not present?" (Bîrlea 1981, 23). This means that the presence of the Sun entails a shielding function, keeping the fairy-like creatures, the *iele*, away. Moreover, as the *călușari* gifted the villagers with the woodworm and garlic leaves during the ritual of “taking into the *căluș*”, the latter would be sheltered from harm and diseases.

People could often be sighted as they were holding the garlic and absinthe leaves around their belt, whereas this type of plants present a precautionary measure, given that they can be used to lubricate windows and doors.

At the same time, those who danced along with the *călușari* group were guaranteed protection from the faeries known as *iele*. As there’s a firm belief that those who meet these mythical creatures might get permanently injured or lose their own sanity, the *căluș* dance exhibits a ritualistic value through which the entire community is livened up after gaining energy and rhythmicity.

This rhythmical structure is given by a loud heel kicking as the feet constantly touch the ground but, most importantly, by multiple moves performed in air, as if the *călușari* were defying gravity. The whole performance takes place in front of the ill, who sways to the rhythm of the *căluș* dance, whereas the *călușari* try to wake him up by resorting to loud shouts in order to revive him after the ill has been immersed in the *iele*’s magic charms. Each *călușar* passes then by patient, slowly touching him with the foot as the dancers try to “take the disease away”.

The leader, the *vătaf*, oversees the ritual performance as he steps aside from the *căluș* and watches everyone involved, this being followed at times by a moment in which the leader bestows on one of the *călușari* the „duty” to carry the disease of the ill previously cured by the *iele*’s forces.

The one vested with this power is touched by the master of the group using a wand, followed by an emblematic act through which the *călușar* deliberately falls on the ground, reproducing, thus, the presupposed state of trance generated by the fight with the magic powers of the *iele*.

The *căluș* ritual, performed within Romanian rural areas, holds three main roles: it offers protection from malicious spirits which can be encountered mostly on Whitsunday, it boosts fertility and prosperity over the year and, ultimately, it watches over those who were „taken by the *căluș*” by means of the healing power of the *călușari* group. The latter consists of those who have not abided by the Whitsunday special customs and traditions, for various reasons, on the occasion of farming and harvesting season and, as a result, they suddenly became ill.

Apart from its typical ways of expression, met in dancing and hypnotical and repetitive melodies, the healing carries out a purifying role, restructuring the order in the mythical sphere and providing, through consistency, a new context for the entire system of customs and meanings, which play an essential role in the old social life within Romanian rural villages. This type of dancing contributes to the safety of people, cattle and crops against the forces of evil.

Furthermore, the *căluș* ritual is generally known as one of the most impressive performances as a particular and valuable Romanian folk creation, being a fundamental folkloric form of expression of Whitsunday. Given the fact that it displays multiple voices, met within various geographical areas, this choral dance can be described as having a polysemic quality as it can be concurrently interpreted as a ritual, a ceremonial way of paying respect to a certain tradition, a symbol of identity, a performance art or a show.

Particularly noteworthy is that the *căluș* ritual can be transposed between the physical world – the rural world – and the underworld, a place ruled by feminine creatures known as “*iele*”. The choral group consists of an odd number of men, guided by a leader (*vătaf*) who firmly establishes the intensity of the ritualistic dance, followed then by the “mute” (*mutul*), who possesses enhanced powers, although he is unable to speak during the ritual. If he were to break this rule, the “mute” would have a high risk of losing his mind. The group is completed by the flag-bearer, a leader’s help, the other *călușari* and some musicians. The *căluș* dance takes place by means of full musical accompaniment, fulfilling three main steps: the hoisting or tying of the flag, the “playing” of the *căluș* dance on the boreens or in the villagers’ courtyards; the last step also includes the burying or breaking of the flag.

The music of the ritual, accompanied by typical Romanian dances, such as *brăuri*, *hore* or *sârbe*, intends to immerse the participants in a state of trance, establishing a link between the ill man and the *călușari* group through a set of melodic and rhythmical *ostinatos*.

In 2005, UNESCO included the *căluș* ritual in its heritage list and was proclaimed a “*Masterpiece of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*”. Then, in 2008, the *căluș* was included in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The main criteria that have been under the spotlight were represented by the peculiarity of this tradition, as well as its genuine nature and complex meanings behind it, as the *căluș* dance presents a long-running history.

The second half of the 20th century saw several changes, as the *căluș* gradually began to be performed solely as a show. The National Festival “*Călușul Românesc*” (“*The Romanian Căluș*”) which has now reached its 21st edition, opened the door to a lasting typical dance choreography from one generation to the next. As the competition between the *călușari* was fully supported, the choreography has been constantly improved by using ritualistic elements taught through traditions.

Hence, this dance is considered to be one of the most energetic, dynamic and impressive treasure piece in Romanian folk culture. Until 20 years ago, the *căluș* was included in the repertory of each Romanian folklore ensemble. So, “in folklore, the tradition is more tyrannical, more dominant and even exclusive” (Bîrlea 1981, 24).

As it is considered to be an outstanding dance performance in the Romanian folklore, the *căluș* does not solely denote a typical symbol of national identity, but an ancient custom, deep-rooted in mythology, which calls for detailed research due to its emblematic and semiotic multiple values added to it. Ultimately, these focus on the hermetic and mysterious accentuated side of the ritual.

The *căluș* dance is, therefore, the oldest, most intricate form of ritualistic choreography in Romania, including practices and magic charms which are used following a very strict tradition. Apart from its sacred and mystical traits encapsulated in the ritualistic performance, the *căluș* has also developed an aesthetic side, which fascinates with its euphoric and energetic spirit of a mystical dance having the aspect of performance art.

The modern version of this dance is mainly determined by its unconventionality, especially when it comes to the dance composition, presenting higher virtuous qualities. The dance is not only performed on a feast day, but on every regular festival event as well.

Nowadays, it is worth mentioning some of the most important events, such as The National Festival “*Călușul Românesc*” in Slatina, which has reached in 2019 its 21st edition, along with The National Folk Festival in Caracal, on its 50th edition.

The contemporary groups of *călușari* don't take their artistic talent lightly and, even though they might not find themselves performing in a show, they still pay house-to-house visits, dancing in front of people as if they were on stage.

They immerse in the rhythm of the dancing as they get completely carried away by the amount of energy shared with those who watch them. As a result, a lot of them admitted to have been in a state of trance due to the rhythm and melody.

Conclusion

The interest of the people living in urban areas for the *căluș* tradition remains truly remarkable, even up to this day. To get a deeper insight into the matter, we can conclude that this interest is strongly tied in with a more prominent wish of the urban inhabitants to reclaim the sacred world. This illustrates a reestablishment of links and a harmonious connection with nature and the things that exceed the secular world as people yearn for expressing the liveliness through dancing and receiving from the *călușari* hidden values. For the latter, this translates into true knowledge and ability to balance the norms of the customs with modern “trends”, thus accomplishing fine stability which strives to maintain both the tangled past stories and the curiosity in comprehending the traditions, all this being completed in a world stripped of its mythical nuances.

References

- Bîrlea, Ovidiu. 1981. *Folclor românesc I. Momente și sinteze (Romanian folklore I. Moment and syntheses)*. Bucharest: Minerva Publishing House.
- Bîrlea, Ovidiu. 1982. *Eseu despre dansul românesc (Essay on Romanian dance)*. Bucharest: Cartea Românească Publishing House.