

7. THE PUBLIC SPECTACLE IN ROMANIAN SOCIETY PREMODERN. SCENOGRAPHY AND AUTHORITY IN DEVELOPING RELIGIOUS CELEBRATIONS

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Abstract: *In the case of pre-modern Romanian society, religious celebrations were not only religion lessons; its were lessons which practicing behaviors, gestures and social attitudes. Thus, they became a good opportunity for to show the political power and social differences. Having a large capacity of social mobilization, the deployment religious celebrations could be done anyway. Therefore, gestures were ritualized framework was carefully prepared, place and contribution of each well fixed. In our paper we showed some examples that illustrate that respect religious holidays are a form of public spectacle.*

Key words: *celebration, gestures, ritual, public spectacle*

The religious celebration is not only self-reflexive spell, it is the liturgical day established by the Church for veneration of the saints and the scriptural facts. For Christians, the religious celebration represented an occasion for a *Religion lesson*, during which they were being taught and were repeating notions regarding the church life and the customs of the Christian life. Having a great power of mobilization, the religious celebrations attracted the interest of the political authority. In this case, they has become a good opportunity for displaying power and social differences. In the Romanian premodern society the observance of holidays was essential, because these religious days were occasioned committing of certain gestures in an especial cadru and the practice of the religious- moral behaviors. These exterior forms of manifesting the renowned Christian holidays were specified by *the foreign travelers* from most curiosity and fascination , or from piety in *the intern writings*. Therefore, these holidays was noted with an ironic nuance (the local customs were mainly considered to be superstitions). Beyond its religious significance, the holiday seemed to be a spectacle in which everyone occupied a specific place, and had to do certain gestures. The following are suitable examples from this perspective, so that we will highlight that the religious celebration was a social magnitude.

Starting from thus mentiones, we had noticed that the celebration of the religious holidays was to seem a public spectacle, one for honoring the great divine acts that were meant to assure the salvation of man, and which the faithful were the *active spectators*, spectators and plaiyers. Besides participating at the sermon dedicated to honoring an important saint, usually the spiritual patron of a certain holy place, the people were interested also in the public events that were organized during those days (processions, fairs, etc.). In the Romanian space, the celebration of the religious holidays was manifesting as a spectacle. The framework, “the scenario” that involved even the people, the

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active spectators, makes us to believe that there was, besides an ecclesiastical ritual, even a public one for honoring the great divine acts that were meant to assure the salvation of man, and which took place even in the ecclesiastical setting and beyond it.

The Liturgies were usually organized by the high hierarchs of the Orthodox Church at the request of the lord¹⁶⁸. It was of course a “representation” offered by the Church and the lord, and therefore it could not be neglected. For instance, when they were organizing the Liturgies for Epiphany and for Easter, the participants were coming in such a great number that “if you were to throw a grain of corn in the palace court, it would have fallen on people and not on the ground”¹⁶⁹; the army had surrounded the “scene” so as to prevent the people “that were coming in great number, to disturb the audience”¹⁷⁰. The joy of the holidays was a collective one, the customs and the religious ceremonial were done in public. Intentionally or not, the lord’s presence (physical and gestural) has focused the attention of the community towards his own image: the lord is God’s chosen, he supports the Church and receives the recognition of his authority.

The holyday has become even an occasion to show off one’s social rank. Either participant at the religious service need to show their joy towards the celebration day or their need to reconfirm one’s social status, they all come to the solemn service dressed with their best and most expensive clothes (“they were all dress in their Sunday best”) („s-au îmbrăcat de sărbătoare”). *The clothes* of the lord’s family and of the boyars’ have caught the attention of the foreign travelers that have described their beauty and magnificence. Nevertheless, “the grandeur, the solemnity and the joy of the people that I have seen manifesting during Epiphany on these lands, it is something that I have never seen nor heard before, not even at the Christian kings”¹⁷¹.

In the Romanian space, the great holidays (The Epiphany, Christmas, Easter, The Whitsuntide, at which one might add the great *patronal feasts*) was manifesting on public alwas. Most of the times, the foreign delegates were being invited by the lord to participate at the religious ritual. Certainly, the foreign envoys had the privilege to notice the pomposity of the holidays, the connection between the lord and his people, the main role played by him during the religious service, even though it was not officiated by the lord, and his enjoyment of his status. Every time when in the country were present high Orthodox hierarchs, they were all invited to attend the ceremony and even to officiate the service. Also, the missionaries were not neglected; we find them sometimes implicated in the manifestations occasioned by the religious holidays.

The grandeur of the holiday was even greater due to the presence of the highly valuable liturgical objects which were involved in the ritual and the

¹⁶⁸ Paul de Alep, în *Călători străini despre Țările Române* vol. VI, îngrijit de M.M. Alexandrescu-Dersca Bulgaru, Mustafa Ali Mehmet, București, 1976, p. 160-161

¹⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 115

¹⁷⁰ De La Croix, în *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, vol. VII, îngrijit de M. Hollban, M.M. Alexandrescu-Dersca Bulgaru, P. Cernovodeanu, București, 1980

¹⁷¹ Paul de Alep, în *Călători*, vol. VI (1976), p. 115

presence of the gestures of the hierarchs that were all dressed in “shinny vestments”: a table (the altar) with a silver-gilt basin, six silver candlesticks and a seventh one which was longer and was held by a young men next to the table, a short chair with a pillow made up of linen, upon which church bookes were sitting on, a tab, surrounded by fifteen wooden chandeliers, filled with holy water. The metropolitan bishop was wearing on his head “a ducal crown made up of shinny gold and precious stones” and in his hand he was holding “a one and a half span cross made with great skills out of a green sapphire. Also, it had a fine gold on its sides”¹⁷².

The great celebrations were starting a day before (in the celebration’s eve) and might have lasted for days, according to their meaning in the Christian life. Starting the celebration’s eve¹⁷³, the icon of the saint that was to be celebrated was placed inside the church, on a lectern. For the event, the church was to be embellished with “flowers and basil” and the participants, both the hierarchs and the commoners, “were wearing their best and most expensive ceremonial clothes.” During the sermon, the icon was being kissed by the hierarchs and afterwards all the participants were to adore it. During the sermon, there were some moments when the people attending were to intervene with songs, thus completing the priers and the readings of the priests. The same was to happen during “The Assumption” celebration, when the “choir was singing from both sides.”¹⁷⁴ The foreign travelers were interested mostly in the Epiphany, a reason for which we are going to insist upon it as well. Usually, the ceremony was taking place in the church’s court and it was followed up by an imposing procession. The metropolitan bishop “was blessing the water in which he has dipped a small branch of basil”. There were always present the lord and his family and of course, his whole court, the boyars, and the common people that were drawn by the grandeur of such religious manifestations.

The lord was arriving to these celebrations accompanied by a great crowd, similar to a procession: “all the leaders of the clergy and all of the priests, dressed with their finest clothes and with crosses in their hands, were coming to the palace court where they were forming a big circle”; then, the patriarch and the lord were walking together towards the places that were prepared for them, according to their social importance¹⁷⁵. Before starting the sermon, “a great number of candles were given to those present.”¹⁷⁶ in the eve of Epiphany, all the priests or the Orthodox bishops of this country have gathered at the lord’s palace in Iasi, they “have officiated the service for him” with incense, holy water, he has kissed the cross”, and they did all sorts of rituals and they “have wished him a happy reign, happy years and good luck”¹⁷⁷. Some other times, “the ceremony ends up with the baptism of the orphan children to whom the lord

¹⁷² Marco Bandini, în *Călători străini despre Țările Române* vol. V îngrijit de M. Hollban, M.M. Alexandrescu-Dersca Bulgaru, P. Cernovodeanu, București, 1973, p. 339

¹⁷³ Paul de Alep, în *Călători*, vol. VI (1976), p. 104

¹⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 97

¹⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 16

¹⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 116

¹⁷⁷ Marco Bandini, în *Călători*, vol. V (1973), p. 335

gives clothes and money”¹⁷⁸, Even Paul de Alep has mentioned about “the baptism of babies in frozen water”¹⁷⁹.

The metropolitan bishop started the sermon with the incension of the lord and of his family, a gesture followed also by the bishops, “the blessing of the holy water which was done in a silver vessel”, with priors and incensements, “and all of these were followed by the sound of the cannons and of the cheers of all the people present. The lord was used to be the first one sprinkled with the holly water and only then would come the turn of all the other participants, after they were kissing the cross and they were receiving the blessing”. At the end of the ceremony, they sprinkled with holly water, twelve horses, “in the sound of the drums and tambourines”¹⁸⁰.

Representing the holiness of the celebration, at the procession that was starting from the parish were attending twelve children dressed like angels, followed by the priests’ choir, three crowned kings and “two children that were wearing masks made up of wood, representing the Sun and the Moon”¹⁸¹. On great holidays, and the days of the apostles and of saints, they gather all their food to church in order for it to be blessed. Between Easter and Whitsuntide, on every Thursday, they carry church banners and they go in procession to the fields and the priest blesses the field so as to give a rich harvest (...), but they do not know any prayers to say on this occasion, which makes the Polish right when they say: ‘there are no such things as: *Polack bridges, German fasts and Moldavian liturgies*’ („poduri leșești, posturi nemțești si liturghii moldovenești, nu sunt decât sminteli”). On Easter, when they meet each other, they kiss and say ‘Christ is risen!’ („Hristos a înviat!”), Christ is risen from the dead („Hristos s-a sculat din morți!”) and they keep on doing this until Ascension Day; they do not greet each other with any other words and when they toast, they still say the same words. And the other responds ‘Truly, He is risen!’ and they offer to each other red eggs and use to spray each other with water and to do all sorts of pranks and tomfooleries, and they even use to throw their priests into water, otherwise the priests have to offer to people a great feast”¹⁸².

During the Epiphany service, “for the Moldavian lord (Vasile Lupu) and his son, two big seats were created in the German style and they were covered with red velvet (...) and when the lord was to go to the water, he was welcomed by men with drums and by others carrying guns and lances”¹⁸³. And at the end of the service (1637-1638), when the lord and his family had to come back from the water, a cannon was being shot and the guns were being fired”¹⁸⁴. The scene was similarly described, but more detailed by M. Bandini: “the lord was seated on a throne oriented to the East; the children were seated to the left on another throne situated at a distance of ten feet („pași”). His wife was sitting on a third

¹⁷⁸ De La Croix, in *Călători*, vol. VII (1980), p. 263

¹⁷⁹ Paul de Alep, in *Călători*, vol. VI (1976), pp. 117, 161

¹⁸⁰ To see also La Croix în *Călători*, vol. VII (1980), p. 263

¹⁸¹ Marco Bandini, în *Călători*, vol. V (1973), p. 335-336

¹⁸² E. Weismantel in *Călători*, vol. VIII (1983), p. 354

¹⁸³ Paul de Alep in *Călători*, vol. VI (1976), p. 115

¹⁸⁴ Vasile Gagara, în *Călători*, vol. V (1973), p. 148

throne situated at about 20 feet from the one of the lord and 10 from the one of her sons (...). On the right side of the lord, towards East, there were the closest seneschal and his two companions that shared the same title, but of a lower authority. Behind the throne, there were 3 sword bearers that were holding: the first, the scepter covered with pearls, the second, the yataghan and the third, the great sword that had two edges, "then there were 10 spearmen and 100 pedestrian riflemen. Five feet from the throne, still on the right, there were: the great chancellor, the minister of war, the judge of the country and other great high officials, seated according to their job and high office, with their head uncovered. Behind them, there were 40 spearmen that were making up a wall, 200 pedestrian riflemen, towards West; between the lord and his lady, there were the Ottoman flag and 100 janissaries. "All around the lady, there were the wives of the great boyars, all dressed in silk and shining due to their bracelets and necklaces. Behind them, glorifying the throne of the lord and of the lady, there was the army made up of 10000 riders that were then pedestrians. (...). Towards South and North, the place was adorned with icons representing different saints ("prapuri") (...), there were the pipers, the drummers and all sorts of musicians that were singing at their instruments. The crowd was made up of 20000 people: wherever the lord was looking from his place, he could see people bowing in front of him"¹⁸⁵.

On New Year day, "in the morning, as it is accustomed, they were all coming to church" and they were all following the same ritual of showing their obedience towards their lord and his authority: "they were congratulating their lord and they were kissing his right hand"¹⁸⁶. The presence of the lord and of his court during the great religious holidays was attracting a great audience¹⁸⁷. The luxury, the splendour of the ceremony and the number of participants was also an expression of Power¹⁸⁸: the more people were coming to the sermon, the stronger was the lord. On the other hand, if the lord's cortège was not so bright, this could have risen suspicions regarding the wellbeing of the lord, an image which was also associated with the authority.

It was a way to highlight the model of a society which had a well individualized hierarchy, a society in which the protagonists were in the top of the pyramid as the only important actors from the public life, while the commoners were perceived as simple and humble viewers for which the appearances were the most important ones and they had to be sustained with any cost¹⁸⁹.

¹⁸⁵ Marco Bandini, în *Călători*, vol. V (1973), p. 337-338

¹⁸⁶ Paul de Alep, în *Călători*, vol. VI (1976), pp. 85, 169

¹⁸⁷ Fr. Pall, *O vizită în Țara Românească în anul 1644 (relatare inedită a lui Bakšić)* în SMIM, VIII (1975), p. 219

¹⁸⁸ Sorin Iftimi, *Ceremoniile Curții domnești. La Crăciun. Anul Nou și Bobotează (secolele XVII-XIX)*, în Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu și Măria Pakucs Willcocks (coord.), *Spectacolul public între tradiție și modernitate. Sărbători, ceremonialuri, pelerinaje și suplicii*, București, Editura Institutul Cultural Român, 2007, p. 43-78. p. 44

¹⁸⁹ Sorin Iftimi, *Ceremoniile Curții domnești. La Crăciun. Anul Nou și Bobotează (secolele XVII-XIX)*, în Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu și Măria Pakucs Willcocks (coord.), *Spectacolul public între tradiție și*

Certainly, it is considered that the great holidays orchestrated by the Church were actually moments meant to show to the large crowds representing “the whole country”, the grandeur of the lord and his autocratic position. Showing publicly the importance of the lord was manifesting by preparing the context in which the lord has to show himself and his companions to the people (the scene described above), and by involving the lord in the religious ceremonial and in other customs associated to holidays. The examples may continue, but they will not bring any new and relevant information for the present paper.

In conclusion, we considered that in the living of holidays, the emphasis made on the social forms of expression. Based on the observations made, we might conclude that at least in the case of the Romanian premodern society, the main priority was the social dimension of the holidays. Even though the religious connotation of it was not neglected, still the way in which the Christian holidays were celebrated was dominated by the social feelings.

We cannot confirm if the great number of people that were coming to church was due to a powerful belief, but it is known the fact that these wonderful sermons were not always allowed to be seen by everyone. By combining their belief in God with their desire to see what is grand, the people were joyously getting ready for the big holidays. The ceremonial was prepared in due time, similar to a public show, and it was waited with enthusiasm by the people. The lack of an educational system that might have satisfied the learning needs of Romanians, the religious feelings like those exteriorized with the occasion of an approaching holiday, were for a long time the only ones capable to revive the life of the community.

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