

## **History and Mentalities**

### **Ethnic Communities in the Danube Delta.**

#### **A Cultural Dialogue**

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**Abstract:** Ethnographic research in the Danube Delta reveals particular features of traditional culture and way of life in the area, pointing out to the importance of the human factor in shaping the specific character of the Delta habitat. As anywhere else, humans have engaged into a dialogue with nature, ready to adapt to the environment and to relate to it. The Danube Delta appears as an interethnic habitat. The way of life and the system of beliefs and customs prove that the Danube Delta area shares the coordinates of coethnicity with Dobrudja region with certain differences determined by habitat on one hand and by particular features of the ethnic groups living in the area on the other hand.

**Keywords:** Ethnographic research; Danube Delta; ethnic groups

In order to comprehend the specific aspects of the Danube Delta social life and civilization, some brief geographical and historical references are necessary. In his work *Știri despre populația Dobrogei în hărți medievale și moderne/ References to the Dobrudja Population on Modern and Medieval Maps* (Constanța, Muzeul de Arheologie/ Museum of Archaeology, no mentioned year, p.5), the Romanian historian Constantin Giurăscu refers to sources which certify the presence of Romanians in the Danube Delta as early as the Medieval Age. *Cronica a lui Ducas/ Ducas'Chronicle* (1461) and *Cronica de la Nuremberg/ Chronicle of Nuremberg* (1493), are quoted, the latter mentioning that "Romanians also inhabit the Danube islands, among which isle Peuce, famous with the ancient ones, and they [Romanians] have settlements in Thracia". By "isle Peuce", the German scholar named the whole Danube Delta or part of it and Thracia meant to him the right bank of the Danube, including Dobrudja.

XVI<sup>th</sup> century maps point to a series of human settlements in the Delta but their names are not concluding as regarding the Romanian population of the area.

Ethnographic information for the XV<sup>th</sup> to the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century is included in books with no possibility to check its accuracy on the field as data are few and general when they are not entirely lost in the course of time. Therefore, traditional civilization during that period has not been object to my present analysis.

Nevertheless, there are cartographic and other written sources on Dobrudja population, dating back to the XIX<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century, which explain a series of social and ethnographic phenomena that can be corroborated to resistant data in the collective memory of communities living in the late XIX<sup>th</sup> and the early XX<sup>th</sup> centuries. One of the most interesting XIX<sup>th</sup> century maps is the Russian statistical map drawn-up for Dobrudja region during the 1828-1829 war, before the Adrianopolis treaty, and printed in 1833. Several interesting Romanian toponymics are mentioned on that map, among which the Danube isles “Cap di drac”/ Devil’s Head, “Ivănești”, “Tataru”/ Tartar, “Chiper”, “Matița”, “Păpădia”/ Dandelion, “Gârla Șondrea”/ Stream Șondrea, “Periș”/ approx. Cluster of Trees).

The specific ethnic configuration of the Danube Delta has been marked by the arrival, in time, of Slavic populations (Lippovans, Ukrainians).

Hence, the issue of acculturation in the Danube Delta is of utmost importance and it should be studied as a social and ethnographic phenomenon, keeping in view that the geographic environment, the types of settlements and the arrival of different ethnics as early as the XVII<sup>th</sup> and XVIII<sup>th</sup> centuries have determined a peaceful cohabitation of Romanians and other ethnic groups. As consequence, beyond acculturation, there have also been several cultural interferences which have lead, in time, to isomorphism of culture and civilization factors. The resemblances in social life of the area have been determined by the natural environment, by the common Christian Orthodox religion and a shared worldview in a shared social and historical context.

At the same time, even if cohabitation of Romanians, Ukrainians and Lippovans in the Danube Delta even since before the XIX<sup>th</sup> century has lead to certain resemblance as far as traditional life facts are concerned, a few differences have also been maintained which confer individuality to ethnic groups living in the same area.

The arrival of Slavic ethnic groups (Ukrainians, Russian Lippovans) in the Danube Delta in different migration stages, beginning even before the XVII<sup>th</sup> century,

according to some sources, has determined a special and unique social and cultural pattern of the Delta area in comparison to other parts of Dobrudja region.

*The common elements* of the above-mentioned pattern are due to cohabitation, which has influenced tangible culture, on the one hand, and to the ancient mythical background that shaped the spiritual evolution of human communities and materialized into beliefs and customs, on the other hand.

*The differentiating elements* which can be found in traditional cultures of each and every ethnic group are explained by variants of representation of ancient beliefs, shaped by particulars of religion, of the time sequence during which a certain custom has gained contour and of the geographical origin of each ethnic group.

Nevertheless, the differentiating elements have not blocked harmonious cohabitation of all the ethnics in the Danube Delta. Each group has contributed to shaping traditional civilization in the area, and that happened all around Dobrudja. Modern society has inherited that tradition of harmony and dialogue which can be regarded as a real “Dobrudja interethnic model”.

Contemporary ethnographers have difficulties when they attempt to identify the archetypes of traditional life in the area (in point of folk costumes, traditions or motifs), as the oral recollections they have access to only treasure data since the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century.

Traditional life in the Danube Delta and in Dobrudja region in general has undergone expected mutations due to a very early urban influence. For example, Romanians and other ethnics used to buy different goods from the towns Ismail, Tulcea or Chişinău. Leveling of differences or isomorphism of life aspects appeared as consequence of urban influence even at the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century.

Considering demographic statistical data beginning with 1904 (source: M. D. Ionescu, *Dobrogea în pragul veacului al XX-lea/ Dobrudja on the Threshold of the XX<sup>th</sup> century*) and references in the archives of Prefect’s Office in Tulcea District and the District Office for Statistics (since 1930 to 2005) and taking also into account field research data we notice that the real percentage of non-Romanian ethnics compared to the Romanian population is difficult to state precisely. Possible errors are due to the fact that ethnic identity used to be recorded according to individuals’ declarations (which could be biased) or to the practice of including all Slavic ethnics under the same label (“Russians”). Other statistics errors have sprung up from the practice of recording the non-Romanian spouse identity as

“Romanian” in the case of mixed-ethnicity families or they were due to linguistic assimilation that lead to considering different ethnic groups speaking the same language as one homogeneous ethnic group.

All the aspects mentioned above point out to the complexity of the issue. In spite of difficulties, an analysis of traditional culture with its mutations in the area is deeply interesting and challenging and we should approach the topic from several perspectives: ethnographical, folkloristic, linguistic and from the point of view of social relationships.

The following paragraphs underline some characteristics of settlements and households, of clothing, beliefs and customs in an attempt to reveal a particular way of life in an utterly special habitat.

### **1. Household and Habitation**

In traditional villages, people have adjusted their lives to the environment, man and nature intermingling into a harmonious whole. Adaptation of environment to human needs has not destroyed nature and habitation within an ecosystem has been created successfully.

Keeping in mind the statement above, it is easy to understand that settlements and households in the Danube Delta area are characterized by such structure and texture that are primarily linked to the geographical environment and only partially influenced by the ethnic group living in a certain settlement. For instance, settlements with scattered households along the river banks or settlements with households grouped into small „islands” are typical for the geography of the area.

From the economical point of view, settlements usually have mixed functions. Agriculture and cattle breeding in the Danube Delta usually are associated, in different proportions, to fishing, vegetable growing and natural resource processing.

Social and ethnographic data demonstrate that, irrespective of their ethnic configuration, settlements classify according to the development of occupations, which marks a *similar* response of ethnic groups to similar life conditions.

Households are structured according to several interdependent factors such as habitat, age of the settlement, type of settlement related to structure, texture and economic function, basic occupation of inhabitants, stage of building the household

and different phases of construction by addition of annex buildings and ethnic belonging of housekeeper.

Keeping in mind all those aspects, households adjust to daily needs of families and provide shelter for carts, tools, domestic animals and products of economic activities of inhabitants.

It is worth mentioning again the phenomenon of *similitude* that can be noticed when looking at similar households inhabited by different ethnics living in the same area, irrespective of fluctuations of majority population along time.

Some characteristics of houses, with reference to *similitude* and *differences* are mentioned below:

a) *Building materials and techniques*: clay, wood and reed are common building materials in the area while the most frequent techniques are supporting forks on oak or locust tree pillars, *ceamur* or *chirpici* (building up house walls by using “bricks” made of clay mixed with reed or straw) techniques.

b) *Planimetry of house*: irrespective of the ethnic belonging of their owner, houses are usually built up longitudinally, starting from a nucleus composed of a central hall and two rooms.

c) *Architectural wood decoration* (technique of fretwork and added decoration): Houses of the area are simply decorated by use of a few elements such as: front, fascia board, crest of fret sawed plank and pillars. Techniques used to decorate houses are fretwork, sawing off decorations and application of motifs. In general, decorative motifs can be grouped into two geometrical categories, including semicircles and stylized or geometrically represented flowers. Fret worked flowers usually are placed along the fascia board. Decorative flowers can also be placed in a circular, flowerpot patterns on house fronts. Some reed-covered houses are distinguished by a sort of plank crest applied on the roof in order to protect it and decorated by flowers in the fretwork technique. House pillars are decorated by capitals. Decorative motifs on capitals are obtained by sawing off pieces of wood according to specific patterns.

Acculturation is interesting as phenomenon of co-ethnicity in the Danube Delta area. A common and basic house appliance in houses in the Delta is the so-called *lijancă*. That is a kind of clay bed raised by the stove, which can get warm during winter due to an original installation and a very ingenious building technique. The principle is to direct the heat of the stove through a circuit of “smoke-ways” dug

into the clay bed (actually, a kind of raised platform). This traditional heating system uses as materials clay (processed as *ceamur* or *chirpic*), stone, brick and wooden and iron bars. *Lijanca* is characteristic to the Slavic populations (Ukrainians and/ or Lippovans) but it can also be found in Romanian houses, as an adopted element for its usefulness in daily life.

## 2. Clothing between Tradition and Present Times

People living in the Danube Delta used to wear clothes made of industrial materials and with a cut influenced by urban fashion. Oral recollections don't mention a traditional home-made folk costume in the area at the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century. It is certain that such an ethnographical fact is due to a very early standard of cohabitation under similar social and historical circumstances. It is not by chance that I use the term *clothing* instead of *folk costume*, as the latter is associated to specific techniques, functions and signification in ethnological terminology. Field research in the Delta area certifies that people use to wear the same pieces of clothing, named with different ethnic (Romanian and Slavic) terms: shirt (Rom. *cămașă*, Sl. *rubașcă*), skirt (Rom. *fustă*, Sl. *iubca*), dress (Rom. *rochie*, Sl. *platia*).

As far as urban influence is concerned, it is worth mentioning that new clothing elements have been adopted especially by Romanians and Ukrainians after 1930: home-woven woolen dresses have been replaced by dresses made of industrial materials and tailored in towns like Izmail, Chilia Nouă and Tulcea; dresses have been gradually replaced by skirts with one pleated flounce and simple blouses. Men used to wear "German" trousers looking like modern ones but larger down the knee and their winter coats also looked like contemporary overcoats. That proves a substantial urban influence upon clothing of Delta people at the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century, which became more powerful in the late 1920s.

By comparing the clothing styles of people in the Danube Delta and paying attention to main tendencies, I notice the following:

– *similitude* - in the clothing manner of the three ethnic groups (very early influence of urban fashion and preference for industrial materials); nevertheless, some particular elements characterize the Lippovans' clothes: the girdle named *pois* and the woman head cover named *chicica*.

– *differences*: appears as a particular nuance in a context characterized by similitude and it can usually be noticed at micro-area level and only for isolated pieces of clothing. For example, Sfiștofca Lippovan population living in C. A. Rosetti commune preserve their traditional costumes especially for festive occasions, even if costume pieces are made of new, industrial materials. Lippovans living in Ceatalchioi - Pardina micro-area preserve the few already mentioned traditional costume elements: *pois* (girdle) and *chicica* (traditional head cover signalling the passage of the young woman who wears it in the group of married women). Nevertheless, Lippovans tend to dress more and more casually nowadays, even on holidays, because Lippovan population in that micro-area has never formed a powerful group or an isolated one (as for example Sfiștofca case) and their living close to urban areas has encouraged population movement and abandoning traditional materials and morphology of clothing.

An aspect of clothing characteristic to Ukrainians can be also a mark of micro-area *difference*, more than that of an ethnic one. There are some villages with mixed Romanian and Ukrainian population (Chilia, Sf. Gheorghe) where men use to wear the shirt with *manișcă* (that is a piece of cloth applied over the shirt breast and over the cuffs). That is an original Ukrainian clothing element that Romanians have accepted. Except for the two mentioned villages, Ukrainian population in other villages that we have researched knows nothing about such a clothing element. That can be explained by the fluctuating number of Ukrainians who have never preserved their tradition homogeneously, by population movement, by town proximity and by the influence of commercial relations with towns like Izmail, Chilia Nouă and other Bessarabian (from Republic of Moldavia) settlements.

In conclusion, traditional clothing has not been preserved in the Danube Delta, not even for holidays and ceremonies. Contemporary casual clothing completed by some home-made pieces (waistcoats or knitted vests, knitted woolen socks etc.) is characteristic to that area.

### **3. Customs and Traditions**

Speaking of customs, ritual gestures and beliefs shaping traditional mentality, the Danube Delta area is also characterized by *similitude*. Common elements can be traced back to archetypes and archaic thinking. Variations are determined by religious aspects (old rite calendar is one of them, although it has gradually lost importance) and are not object of my analysis.

*House building beliefs and customs.* People living in villages that I have researched have preserved such ancient beliefs, but obviously in forms closer to contemporary mentality. Nevertheless, preservation of the belief that the site of building should be *clean* and of the belief that a new house should be purified in order to be protected against evil show that people cannot entirely detach from tradition, especially when a new creation comes to life. Beliefs connected to house building are more or less the same throughout the Delta area. When a new house is built, people use to place a coin in the foundation hole for the first fork or the house pillar. Then they would sprinkle holy water over the site “to make it clean”. When reed walls are stuck together by using *ceamur*, a small wooden cross is made. The cross is decorated by flowers, a towel and a coin. When the house has been built, the mason takes the towel and coin and the cross is placed in the attic. At the end of work, a priest is called to sanctify the place. Neighbours, relatives, builders and people who have helped make *ceamur* take part in the ceremony. Guests would not come empty-handed. They would bring kitchen utensils and other gifts for the new house.

Some particular nuances can be distinguished in that co-ethnic context, although they are not real differences. For example, when houses in Pardina village are sanctified, four small wooden nails would be hammered into the four walls, to mark the four cardinal points (east, west, south and north) in the shape of a cross. The wood used to make those special nails is of a special essence called *osecenă*. Other particular nuance is given by the Lippovans’ accounts referring to the religious ceremony as the only traditional practice for a new-built house. They often say that they have taken over other rites from “the others” but in former times they only used to have the house sanctified by the priest.

It is likely that future research will enlighten that aspect of the Lippovans’ mentality.

Field researchers of the Danube Delta area have also recorded some other traditions besides those connected to house building. A series of beliefs and traditions refers to human behavior ethic code under different life circumstances and with regard to certain occupations (agriculture, fishing). I will further refer only to those beliefs, ritual gestures and customs recorded in my own field research and mentioned by my informants.

*Traditions connected to agriculture.* Religious service to bring rain is customary in villages afflicted by draught. Besides the priest’s action, people use to pour water



on themselves on such dry days, practicing a gesture of imitation magic. Another local rule is the interdiction to work in the garden on Thursdays of the weeks in the period from Easter to Ascension Day.

*Traditions connected to fishing.* The only ritual gesture that my informants have mentioned is a religious service officiated by a priest for sanctifying the fishing tools when the fisherman goes fishing for the first time in the year or in the season.

Further research of traditional mentality and other aspects of social life in the Danube Delta area can refine my analysis or can start a new scientific enterprise to reveal still original aspects of the co-ethnicity phenomenon.