

Notes on the Călușari

MIRCEA ELIADE
University of Chicago

Having all his life studied the origin and function of the seasonal masquerades, especially the early history of the mummers' play and the custom of riding the hobbyhorse at seasonal festivals, Theodor H. Gaster could not ignore the Romanian *Călușari*.¹ It is appropriate then to contribute to a volume in his honor these notes on one of the most spectacular popular dances of Europe, and the more so since some recent works in English might convey to a nonspecialist an incomplete or even devious image of the *Călușari*.²

The problem is far from simple. The most specific, and certainly the most archaic elements, indicate an association on the order of a *Männerbund*, with a choreographic ritual and cathartic purposes. However, the mythical model of the *Călușari* seems to be comprised of a specific group of fairies (*zâne, ieie*), namely the *Rusalii*. The patroness of the dancers is Irodiada (=Herodiada) or Arada, a folkloric demigoddess who is also called "Queen of the Fairies" (*Doamna Zânelor*). In addition, there are contaminations or influences from other seasonal masquerades. As it was performed during the nineteenth century, the *căluș* certainly presented a composite character.

The name of the dance, *căluș*, derives from the Romanian term for 'horse', *cal* (Latin *caballus*). Moreover, a wooden horsehead, partially or wholly covered, is carried by one of the dancers. These facts must be kept in mind while investigating the origin and function of the dance group. Symbolically, the "horse" inspires some of the most daring choreographic and acrobatic movements. The group is composed of seven, nine or eleven young men, selected and instructed by a leader (*vătaf*).³ One of them carries the "flag,"

1 In the Foreword to his edition of F. M. Cornford, *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (New York, 1961), xx, n. 33 (p. 231). Gaster quotes the article of R. Vuia, "The Roumanian Hobby-horse: the Călușari" (*Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* 11 [1935], 97-111.). However, he does not seem to be aware of Vuia's monograph, "Originea jocului de călușari" (*Dacoromania* 11 [1922], 215-54), which presents and analyzes all the pertinent informations available at the time.

2 For instance, the extract from Alex Helm's manuscript of his Lectures at Keele University, Folk Studies Conference (Summer 1966) published by Alan Brody as an Appendix to his book, *The English Mummers and their Plays: Traces of Ancient Mystery* (Philadelphia, 1969), 163-66, presents a distorted version, inappropriately designated as "The Rumanian Kalusari Play." Cf. our forthcoming review in *History of Religions* (1974). The most important documentary sources are: Tudor Pamfile, *Sărbătorile de vară la Români* (Bucharest, 1910), 54-75; Theodor T. Burada, *Istoria teatrului în Moldova* (Jassy, 1915), 1: 62-70. New materials are presented by Mihai Pop, "Consideratii etnografice și medicale asupra călușului oltenesc" in *Despre medicina populară românească* (Bucharest, 1970), 213-22; Gheorghe Vrabie, *Folclorul* (Bucharest, 1970), 511-31; Horia Barbu Oprisan, *Călușarii* (Bucharest, 1969).

3 In some provinces, the age of the *călușari* ranges between twenty and sixty years. Usually, one remains with the group at least three years. The leader (*vătaf*) is not elected, but appointed by his predecessor; he keeps the position as many years as he wants, in some cases all his life.

a pole⁴ decorated with multicolor ribbons and a bag of medicinal plants (mugwort, garlic, etc.) on the top. Another man, called the "Mute" (*mutul*, in Wallachia) or the "Dirty One" or the "Masked" (*bloj* in Transylvania) is, as we shall see, a figure clearly distinct from the rest of the group. The instruction given to these young men mainly consists of learning to perform the numerous dances, especially the acrobatic jumping in the air with the legs tucked together. The training is carried out during two or three weeks in a nearby forest. Once definitely accepted by the *vătaf*, the men gather on Whitsunday's eve at a secret place; and with the hands on the "flag" they swear to God to respect the *călușari*'s customs and rules, to be like brothers to one another, to observe chastity for the coming nine (or twelve or fourteen) days, to not divulge to an outsider what they will see or hear, and especially to obey the leader.⁵ During the oath-taking ceremony, the "Mute" stands at a certain distance, without uttering a single word. At the end, all of them pass under the arch formed by the arms of two *călușari*.

In Banat, the ceremony is carried out on Whitsunday, at dawn, and is concluded with the "sunrise dance": the leader raises his sword upright and the first *călușar* (who carries the wooden horsehead) touches it with a stick, to which a small hammer is fastened at its end. In Transylvania the ritual of oath-taking is accomplished at a place "within the nine boundaries." The *călușari*, each carrying a bludgeon, arrange themselves in a circle and pray to *Irdeasa* (=Herodiada) for protection; when the leader sprinkles them with water "drawn from nine sources," the dancers raise the clubs and, looking towards the East, knock the clubs one against the other. Finally they go home, without glancing back.⁶ From then on, until the ceremonial dispersal of the group, the *călușari* stay together: no one is allowed to be alone, not even for a short period. After the oath-taking the "flag" with medicinal plants is hoisted and the *călușari* are forbidden to speak, for fear of being "taken by the *căluș*," that is, made sick by the *Rusalii*.

Most of these elements remind one of an initiation in a *Männerbund*; the isolation in the forest, the vow of secrecy, the role of a flag, the club and the sword, the symbolism of the wooden horsehead. In his *Descriptio Moldaviae*, Prince Dimitrie Cantemir adds some significant information. According to him, the *călușari*

dress themselves in women's clothes and wear on their heads wreaths made of mugwort. They decorate themselves with flowers; they speak with feminine voices, and in order not to be recognized they cover their faces with white linen. Each has a sword ready to slay anyone who would dare to uncover their faces.

4 Cf. Tudor Pamfile, *Văzdubul după credințele poporului român* (Bucharest, 1915), 75f.; Oprisan, *Călușarii*, 162f.

5 On the oath-taking ceremony cf., *inter alia*, T. Frâncu and G. Candrea, *Românii din Munții Apuseni* (Bucharest, 1888), 131f.; G. T. Niculescu-Varone, *Jocurile naționale românești* (Bucharest, 1938), 136f.; Octavian Bohociu, *Le folklore roumain de printemps* (typewritten thesis, Université de Paris, 1957), 239f.

6 Frâncu and Candrea, *Românii*, 130-31; Vrabie, *Folclorul*, 512, 516f.

If they kill someone, they are not held responsible, for they possess this privilege as an old custom. . . . They know more than one-hundred different dances, and some of the steps are so marvelous that those who dance do not seem to touch the ground, as if they were actually flying in the air. . . . They sleep only in churches, for, they say, if they slept elsewhere they would be tormented by the mischievous fairies. The simple people credit the *calusari* with the power of driving away many diseases.⁷

Some of the details communicated by Cantemir are nowhere else recorded during the nineteenth century; for instance, the masks,⁸ the change of voice ("feminine voices") in order not to be recognized,⁹ the "swords without sheaths." As for the "old custom" exempting the *calusari* from trial in case of homicide, this was a privilege also granted to other associations, especially that of the *colindători* (singers of Christmas carols). Until recently, when two groups of *calusari* met one another they engaged in a violent fight.¹⁰ The most important element in Cantemir's description of the *calusari* is his reference to their exceptional choreographic mastery. As a matter of fact, the first historical records emphasize exclusively the acrobatic excellence of the dancers. Thus, a certain Daniil Dozsa describes minutely the *fête* given by the Prince of Transylvania, Zigmund Bathori, at Alba Iulia, on the 19th of October 1599, in honor of the family of Mihai the Brave, the Voivode of Wallachia. Twelve pillars were planted in a circle, and on top of each was placed a plank of two square meters. On each plank a *calusari* was dancing. At a certain moment during the dance, all the *calusari* jump from one pillar to the next, exchanging their places simultaneously. As a finale, each pulls a rope at the end of which is attached a large piece of canvas. On it stands their leader who is gradually raised from the ground. As he nears the top, with a sudden jerk of the canvas, he is tossed high in the air.¹¹

Thus the central and specific attribute of the *calusari* seems to have been their acrobatic-choreographic skill especially the ability to create the impression of flying in the air. Even today the most spectacular of their many dances is a series of very high, repeated jumps in the air. These dances are exhausting but they are not "ecstatic," and the fatigue of a *calusar* does not resemble that of a shaman. It is obvious that springing, leaping, jumping and bounding indicate the galloping of the horse and, *at the same time*, the flying and the dancing of the Rusalii. As a matter of fact, those who are supposed to have been made sick by the Rusalii

7 Dimitrie Cantemir, *Descriptio Moldaviae* (Bucharest, 1872), 129-30 (new Romanian translation, Bucharest, 1956, 249). Most probably, Cantemir's memories from his childhood in Moldavia go back to the years 1685-86.

8 One can still recognize the traces of a mask on the ribbon hanging down from the back of the *calusar's* hat; cf. Romulus Vulcănescu, *Măști populare* (Bucharest, 1970), 168.

9 As a rule, the *calusari* do not speak much.

10 We shall discuss this problem in a comparative article on the seasonal and cathartic dances in Eastern Europe.

11 The relation of Dozsa was abundantly quoted; cf. Burada, *Istoria teatrului în Moldova*, 68f; idem, *Istoria teatrului în România* (Bucharest, 1965), 1:48; Vulcănescu, *Măști populare*, 165f. On the ground another hundred *calusari* were dancing. Being an official reception in honor of the reigning Prince, most probably the *calusari* were not permitted to wear masks; cf. Vulcănescu, *ibid.*, 166.

begin to jump and shout "like the *călușari*" and it "seems that they do not touch the earth."¹² The intimate relationship between the Rusalii and the *călușari* is undoubted; specific diseases¹³ are caused by the Rusalii during the Whitsunday week, and only the *călușari* have the power to cure them, and they have this power only during these days. Furthermore, the patient is indifferently designated as having been "taken by the Iele" (Rusalii), or "taken by the *căluș*." As we have already noticed, the *călușari* are very much afraid of the Rusalii and they protect themselves by following certain rules, and making special use of medicinal herbs.¹⁴

The relations between *călușari* and Rusalii are paradoxically ambivalent: the dancers ask for and count on, the protection of Herodiada, but they also risk becoming the victims of her troop of attendants, the Iele and Rusalii. At least in the past (cf. Cantemir) the *calusari* endeavored to look like women, and in their dances they imitated the flying of the Rusalii. At the same time they emphasized their solidarity with the horse, a masculine and "heroic" symbol par excellence (in spite of the horse's funerary role as a psychopomp). It was generally held that the Iele were afraid of horses and ran away from them. For this reason there is the custom of sticking a horsehead on a pole, or of carving the image of a horse on a door, on the pillars of a veranda or on the beams sustaining a roof.¹⁵

These ambivalent relations between the *călușari* and the Rusalii are manifest also in their patterns of behavior and their activities. For approximately two weeks the *călușari* visit all the villages and hamlets in the neighborhood, accompanied by two or three fiddlers, dancing and playing, and at times trying to cure the victims of the Rusalii. It is believed that during the same period, that is, from the third week after Easter until around Whitsunday, the Rusalii are flying, singing, and dancing, especially by night; one can hear their bells, and also the drums and other musical instruments, for the fairies have at their service a number of fiddlers and bagpipers, and even a flag bearer.¹⁶ According to the general tradition, there are nine Iele or Rusalii, but others believe that there are either twelve or more, or else only two or three. They have wings and fly disheveled, sometimes with the breast naked. They paralyze or maim those who see them dancing, or who work on the Thursday after Easter or on Whitsunday.¹⁷ The most effective protection against the Rusalii is the garlic and the mugwort, that is, the same

12 Cf. Vrabie, *Folclorul*, 525.

13 Among them, rheumatism, hemiplegia, epilepsy, cholera, pellegra, and pest; see Pop, *Considerații*, 216f. Cf., also C. C. Ghenea, "Contribuții la studiul dansului călușarilor," *Istoria Medicinii. Studii și Cercetări* (Bucharest, 1957), 232-41, esp. 237f.

14 In the province of Oltenia there is a belief that among the *călușari* those who have broken the oath are "taken by the *căluș*." (Even the entire group is "taken" if it let the "flag" fall down). The same thing can happen to anyone who comes too close to the dancers. For this reason the dancing ground is marked with a circle (cf. Pop, *Considerații*, 217) and also the "Mute," whirling his whip menacingly, keeps the spectators away from the *călușari*'s circle.

15 Cf. Ghenea, *Contribuții*, 239.

16 The most complete survey of the belief in Iele and Rusalii, based on materials collected around 1885, is to be found in Ion Muslea and Ovidiu Bîrlea, *Tipologia folclorului, din raspunsurile la chestionarele lui B. B. P. Hasdeu* (Bucharest, 1970), 209f.

17 The Romanian name of Whitsuntide (Pentecost) is *Rusalii*, from Latin *Rosalia*, a feast of the dead, when the tombs were adorned with roses. The fact that the old Italic name was adopted by the mixed

magico-medicinal plants that are in the bag tied to the top of the "flag." The *călușari* chew as much garlic as they can stand, and in the course of the cure, the *vătaf* spits garlic on the patient's face.

Essentially the cure consists of the performance of specific dances dedicated to the invalid and concluded by some ritual acts. The sick person is touched with herbs and spit on with garlic, a jug with water is broken, one black chicken is sacrificed, etc.¹⁸ In the province of Oltenia the patient is carried outside the village to the edge of a wood and placed in the middle of the *călușari*'s circle. The most dramatic moment is the "throwing down" of one of the dancers. A particular *călușar*, who has been indicated by the leader's steady gaze upon him, dances more and more frantically and, at a certain moment, when the *vătaf* touches him with the "flag," he "falls down." The syncope, whether real—that is, obtained through suggestion or autosuggestion—or faked, lasts between two and five minutes. At the moment of the *călușar*'s fall the patient is supposed to rise and run away; in any case, two *călușari* take him under their arms and run far from the place.¹⁹ The therapeutic intention of the syncope is obvious; the illness leaves the patient and enters into a *călușar*, who consequently "dies" but soon returns to life for he is an "initiate." A similar scenario is re-enacted, but in a gay and parodying mood, in the intervals between the dances and particularly on the last day of the *căluș*.

A series of burlesque sketches are usually performed between the dances or at the end. For instance, one of the *călușari* disappears and the leader orders the "Mute" to go and search for him. When the "Mute" brings back the fugitive, a number of his companions begin beating his soles with their clubs. The "Mute" tries to rescue him, but he himself is seized by the *călușari*, raised on the clubs and suddenly dropped on the ground. Considered dead, the "Mute" is lamented by the entire group and prepared for burial, but not before they skin him, etc.²⁰ The most successful of the "dramatic" sketches take place in the last day, when the group returns to the village. The final dramatization is called the "war." The "flag" is solidly fixed in the ground and one *călușar* climbs the pole and shouts: "War, dear ones, war!" After that, four *călușari* impersonate in a grotesque manner a number of familiar characters—the

population (Greek, Getae, Romans) of the towns and villages of Scythia Minor and Dacia, and persisted in Romanian, proves the importance of the corresponding autochthonous festival of the dead. It is still unclear how among the many names of the fairies (*iele, zâne, 'dânsele', 'frumoasele', etc.*) that of *Rusalii* was included. Morphologically, the *Rusalii* are different from the spirits of the dead.

18 See some examples in Pamfile, *Sărbătorile de vară*, 56f., 67f: Vrabie, *Folclorul*, 519f. In some regions it is believed that the cure takes place after the invalid is visited three consecutive years by the *călușari*. Many young men decide to learn the *căluș* in order to protect themselves against the *Rusalii*; cf. Vrabie, *ibid.*, 524-25.

19 Cf. Pop, *Considerații*, 221. A similar cathartic, but in a different psychopathologic context, was utilized by the dancers called *cărăbuși* ('cockchafters') among the Romanian population of Timoc (Yugoslavia); cf. M. Eliade, *Zalmoxis, The Vanishing God* (Chicago, 1972), 199f. See also Alois Closs, "Südosteuropa als ethnohistorisches Untersuchungsfeld über ekstatisches Brauchtum," *Wiener Ethnohistorische Blätter*, vol. 3 (1971), 3-22, particularly 8f.

20 C. Rădulescu-Codin and D. Mihalache, *Sărbătorile poporului, culegere din părțile Muscelului* (Bucharest, 1909), 69f.; Vrabie, *Folclorul*, 520f.

priest, the Turk (or Cossack), the doctor, and the woman. The plot is simple: each one of the "actors" tries to make love to the woman. Eventually the woman becomes pregnant, one of the actors is "killed," but is ultimately "resurrected," and so forth. The pantomime is licentious and sometimes brutally enacted. The "Mute," wearing a wooden phallus, plays the most important role; his grotesque and eccentric gestures provoke general hilarity.²¹ The influence of other folkloric spectacles (winter masquerades, puppet shows) is obvious.

The "breaking of the *căluș*" is effected on the same spot where the oath was taken. The leader unfastens the bag with garlic and medicinal plants, distributes the garlic among the dancers and gives the bag to the flag bearer. He takes back the clubs. He also takes the sword from the "Mute," breaks the flagpole and buries the chips at the root of a tree. He then orders the *călușari* to disperse as quickly as they can.²²

In a future article we will compare the *căluș* with other similar European dances, particularly those of the Balkan peninsula. Whatever its origin, the *căluș*, in the forms known in the last centuries, is found only in Romania and can be considered a creation of Romanian folk culture. What strikes the researcher is both the archaism of the scenario and, at the same time, its open structure. We have already pointed out a number of para-*Männerbund* elements. We may add that in some regions the *călușari* wear spurs.²³ Like other military emblems (the flag, the sword), the spurs indicate a feudal tradition. But this rather recent paraphernalia was superimposed on a rural and more archaic layer of culture, still recognizable by the ritual use of the club and by the fact that the pole of the "flag" is made from a fir tree. The solar symbolism, rightly emphasized by Vuia, partakes of a pre-Christian tradition. Although the oath-taking is made in the name of God, the mythico-ritual scenario of the *căluș* has nothing in common with Christianity. We can assume that in early times the ecclesiastical authorities fought against the *călușari* with the same virulence displayed against the seasonal masquerades. Even as late as the end of the nineteenth century the *călușari* were, in some regions, excluded from communion for three years.²⁴

It is apparent that the open structure of the scenario allowed a continuous assimilation of new elements from other mythico-ritual systems. A contamination from the winter masquerade is probably quite recent.²⁵ However, we must not conclude that the open structure permitted only such type of syncretistic assimilation. *The paradox and the ambivalence characterize this mythico-ritual scenario from the very beginning.*

An illuminating parallel to the ambivalent relationship between the Rusalii and the *călușari* is to be found in the feast of the Sântoaderi. According to tradition they are the seven sons of St. Theodor (=Sântoader) and they have manes and hooves.²⁶ The Sântoaderi are also described as nine young men with long teeth and with manes covered by their cloaks who visit

21 Cf., *inter alia*, Oprisan, *Călușarii*, 178f.

22 Cf. Vrabie, *Folclorul*, 522. There are, of course, a number of variations; see, for example, Oprisan, *Călușarii*, 195f.

23 E.g., in Muscel; see Vrabie, *Folclorul*, 515.

24 E. N. Voronca, *Sărbătorea Moșilor în București* (1915), 92; Buhociu, *Le folklore*, 244, n. 3.

25 In some places, the *călușari* dances are performed also between New Year and Epiphany.

26 Marian, *Sărbătorile la Români*, 40f.; Buhociu, *Le folklore*, 164f.

the villages during the three nights before Shrove Tuesday. They advance singing and beating the drum, appearing suddenly and again mysteriously disappearing. One hears the metallic sound of their heavily shod feet. They dance on the bodies of their victims or they bind them with chains, thus provoking rheumatal pains. The Sântoaderi are considered to be very malicious; if a woman works on their days, they come and take her. Particularly are young girls afraid of the Sântoaderi and do not dare to venture out of the house during the three nights. Most of these elements seem to be remnants of an old *Männerbund* with its characteristic violence aimed at terrorizing women.²⁷

However, on the night of Saint Theodor, the unmarried girls go to the forest or climb a hill, and around a kindled fire they dance and sing in chorus: "Theodor, Saint Theodor, make grow the girls' mane like the mare's tail. I give you bread and salt, you give me lots of hair, I give you bread and nuts, you bring me sweet lips!" They sing and dance until dawn and then return to the village gathering on the way all sorts of herbs and flowers. What they have gathered is boiled in water and with the water they wash their hair. They believe that they will marry soon.²⁸ Thus the patron saint (or the father) of the horse-like Sântoaderi, the terror of women and particularly of young girls, is invoked by them to make their hair as beautiful as the horse's mane and to hasten their marriage.

Saint Theodor is certainly related to the dead; he is supposed to have discovered the *coliva* (boiled wheat with honey and nuts), an archaic funeral dish; moreover, the Saturday of the Dead is called *Moșii* of San Toader, *moșii* (lit. 'old men') being another name for the dead.²⁹ Twenty-four days after Easter there is the feast of Todorusale, when the Rusalii meet the Sântoaderi and play together, and finally offer each of them a bouquet of the flower called *todoruse* (*Melites melissophylum*, "mélisse des bois").³⁰ There is a general belief that the Rusalii and other fairies (Iele) are powerless with those who know when and how to collect medicinal plants.³¹

In sum, there is a curious rapport between the Rusalii and the Sântoaderi: both groups travel by night at a specific date, singing, dancing, and accompanied by fiddlers (with the difference that one of the most characteristic sounds of the Sântoaderi is that of chains and hoofs, and the Rusalii are afraid of iron); both bring specific diseases, punishing those who do not respect their holidays; both are mysteriously related to magical and medicinal plants (in the case of the Rusalii, a few specific herbs keep them afar; and other plants, collected in the name of Saint Theodor, make the girls' hair grow and hasten their marriage). In spite of the fact that the Sântoaderi incarnate an antagonistic "principle" par excellence (the horse and the iron), the Rusalii meet and play with them and before separating offer each of them a bouquet of flowers. The feast of Todorusale *emphasizes the desire to bring together two*

27 See the horse-like mask-costume of a Sântoader in Vulcănescu, *Măști populare*, 172.

28 See the literature quoted by Buhociu, *Le folklore*, 175.

29 Ibid., 180. In the Danube plains of Valachia, horse racing takes place during the "days of Saint Theodore"; cf. the literature quoted by Buhociu, *ibid.*, 196.

30 Pamfile, *Sărbătorile de vară*, 18. In some regions of Valachia, the *călușari* gather for the first time in the day of Todorusalii; Buhociu, *Le folklore*, 234.

31 Buhociu, *Le folklore*, 233f.

classes of supernatural beings who represent, for the human society, different but equally malicious forces.

The Sântoaderi cannot be identified with the *călușari*, but their mythico-ritual scenario helps us to understand the basic intention of the *căluș*. It is doubtful that we will ever be able to reconstruct the *căluș*'s "original" form. But as far back as we can trace it, the scenario actualized by the *călușari* consistently implies *the merging of the opposite, through complementary, magico-religious ideas and techniques*. It is probably this daring and successful integration of antagonistic principles which explains the important role played by the *căluș* in Romanian folk culture. Thus, a para-*Männerbund* association, with specific masculine initiation rites, is nevertheless under the protection of the Queen of Fairies; its cathartic and therapeutic techniques are based mainly on a particular choreography, that is, on the ritual imitation of the mode of being and behavior of the Rusalii. At the same time, the apotropaic imagery and substances (the horse, the medicinal plants) which protect them against the Rusalii are used. The *căluș* includes a series of elements which are also present in other mythico-ritual systems, but without developing them in the directions they indicate there. Thus, we have a scenario comprising quasi-ecstatic episodes (for instance, the "throwing down" of the dancer), but without attributing to them the central role, that is to say, without transforming the *căluș* into a parashamanistic dance. On the other hand, the *căluș* assimilated from the winter festivals the parodying masquerade of death and resurrection, but did not integrate the funerary elements which are present in the scenarios of St. Theodor and the Sântoaderi, in spite of the many resemblances between these two mythico-ritual systems.

The open structure of the *căluș* fostered the metamorphosis of the archaic, and probably fearful, personage of the "Mute" into a comic and licentious character, without losing, however, his mysterious aura. The paradoxical ambivalence of the "original" scenario encouraged from the beginning a number of innovations and reinterpretations. Most probably, the creativity of the *căluș* has its explanation in the fact that the antagonistic "principles," which are pacified and brought together—sickness and death, health and fertility—were personified in one of the most inspiring expressions of the primeval feminine-masculine dyad, the fairies and the horse-riding cathartic heroes.