

THE PLANT WORLD IN ROMANIAN TRADITIONS. SYMBOLS AND USES

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Abstract. The plant world has always been a base for the Romanian culture, both for material culture (practical uses) and for the spiritual one (myth and symbols). Authors who wrote on ethnographic subjects chose to talk only about a certain side or branch of the vast subject of nature/vegetation. After studying the subject it became obvious that every research on the practical aspects of using plants can not detach itself from the spiritual component, from the myth, which in the popular Romanian tradition is omnipresent, regardless of time and space. Research (in the office and on the field) demonstrates that in the Romanian village myth merges with reality. Nevertheless, we still don't have a complete paper which talks about the plant world in the traditional Romanian culture in a global way, integrating various uses and ways of interpreting its meanings, tracing a clear classification, which comprises all elements. This paper is a trial of „sketching” such classification, taking into consideration main features – for a better understanding of all the sides of this strong and complex relationship between the Romanian peasant and nature.

Key words: Romanian, traditions, plant world, spiritual, material

1. Introduction

In today's context, of great changes and mutations, both physical and especially symbolical, it is important to know and to be conscious of one's origin, to which you have the possibility to always report to and to identify yourself with (Gibbens and Bilan, 1981).

Together with pressuring problems regarding environment, nature and also discussions regarding globalization and its phenomena of „standardization”, which bring to

surface even more the problem of „national identity”, we can now feel a need, not necessarily to return to traditions, but at least to know and become more familiar with them, build a „safety net” (Bernea, 2007). Moreover, the accelerated alterations of the rural environment and the lost of traditions are issues of global concern, which some states have researched and dealt with as much as possible (Hughes, 1983; Relf, 1992; Wright, 1986), while Romania put the topic among the last points of its not so short agenda.

A large group of researchers and passionate people led and continue to lead a work of gathering and preserving the traditional Romanian heritage. An immersion in this field of ethnography and especially of that of Romanian ethnography, is a real journey, full of resources and results, but especially elaborated and with numerous ramifications (Bernea, 2006).

The purpose of this paper is to trace a map, which could facilitate a future orientation, at least on the trail that makes the connection between the Romanian peasant and nature (and especially the plant world), with its numerous implications on all the aspects of life in the traditional Romanian village.

2. Plant typologies in Romanian traditions

„Plant world” is a very wide term, meaning the „coating” of an area made out of plants, a plant community. It’s preferable to use it in this context and not using the word „flora”, because flora refers to plant species and their categories, taken into account according to geographical areas and exact scientific data (Collective author, 1984), while this paper deals with plants from a wider point of view, that of symbols and spiritual values. Due to the complexity of the topic, but also to the multitude of resources, the research stretches on a long period of time, with studies that can and deserve to be continuously updated. Furthermore, field observation and data collection in different rural areas contributed to bringing out new ideas, while strengthening the existing ones.

Special concern towards the topic of plant world in the traditional Romanian culture has led to a collection of data, images and analysis, using well established works

from the field (Vulcănescu, 1972; Vlăduțiu, 1973; Ghinoiu, 1988), combined with new ideas and the intention of presenting them in an unitary manner, as a separate topic – dedicated to the plant world (with all its levels of influence) – and not just a facade of the issue, treated in a paper about: mythology (Vulcănescu, 1987), medicinal herbs (Butură, 1979), architecture (Stahl, 1968) etc.

Different existing papers, by their general theme, have addressed the vegetation subject under different names: „plant mythology” (Vulcănescu, 1987), „botanical mythology” (Vulcănescu, 1972), „ethnobotany” (Butură, 1979), giving the opportunity to extract multiple lists and classifications. Thus, an unilateral, pragmatic classification views the plants used by the Romanian peasants as part of two major categories: grown plants and wild plants, from which we can extract the next sub-categories: the forest, wild edible plants, grown edible plants, plant dyes, medical plants, magical „weeds”, textile plants (Butură, 1979).

On the other side, classifications like that of Vulcănescu (1972) are made on a profound spiritual platform and they take into account a wide range of meanings and symbols. His complex classifications, connected especially with the studies of sacred Romanian trees, show an interesting side especially through the meanings explained together with their everyday life uses.

The approach of the sacred-profane duality and practices which stand at the border between them is a major contribution, especially because it underlines the lack of a clear line between matter and spiritual, an often observed characteristic in the Romanian culture (Bernea, 1977).

Regarding the categories presented in the book entitled „The Sky Column” (Vulcănescu, 1972), the botanical mythology is branched in:

- Tree Totemism (a type of „mana” which unites the family, tribe, clan)
- Tree Cult (sacred trees which gods use to send messages)
- Dendrolatry (sacred trees as an actual deity).

These materialized especially through „archaic monuments”, which branched in:

- Dendromorphic monuments (such as: cosmic tree, sky tree, tree of life, birth tree, wedding tree and others)
- Style-morpheme monuments: sky pillar, sky column, simulacrum of these, such as: triptychs, calendar pillars and others (Fig. 5).

Besides the sacred and meaning-charged character (Ghinoiu, 2001), the above mentioned were also a pretext and catalyst for developing an artistic expression. Romanians often use plant motifs in art, but this was never by chance or purely for artistic reasons – behind every piece of traditional art, ornamented with plant motifs, stands a purpose beyond the beauty of the object. Other papers approach material aspects regarding **plant growth and agricultural activities** (cereal crops, vineyards, orchards, vegetable crops, fiber plants, used in textiles), **vegetation as a source for constructions, crafts and folk art** (Vlăduțiu, 1973), but also the importance of some **plants used for calendaristic purposes**, for time orientation after a „biological clock” (Ghinoiu, 1988).

In addition to these, there must be taken into account other aspects, regarding the

spatial relation with the plant world: how are the planted spaces in the household organized, how is the household located and arranged towards its natural framework (forest, grasslands and pastures, orchards, road side vegetation etc.), how is the limit between household and nature seen. Regarding these aspects there was a number of observations made in the villages of Sibișel and Văleni-Mermezeu, both situated in the Hunedoara County, Romania, and which present significant differences in lifestyle and relation towards their natural environment, despite the fact that they are situated at a distance of approximately 25 kilometers and have similar geography and morphology.

From this we can obtain, by extrapolation, another feature of the Romanian village, know as „the custom of the place” or „local custom”, which doesn’t always depend on the physical, precise limits, which eliminates the hypothesis of a „pattern” or a „network” that can be applied for a diagnostic or as a solution for the inland rural environment.

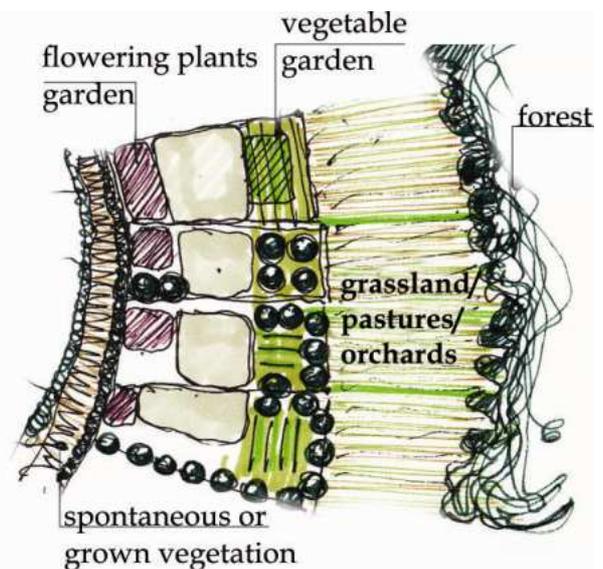


Fig. 1. Spatial relations between household and vicinities

The plant element, in a combination with the spatial element in which is placed, creates new categories of meanings and customs. Thus, we observe some spatial representations in the traditional, popular beliefs (Olteanu, 2009) related to some spaces and places in the household, village, surroundings which are invested with magical-religious features:

- the courtyard of the household: garden, trees, orchard, vegetable beds;
- outside the village: on the field, in the crops, in the vineyard, in the forest.

We observe in these cases the strengthening of the magic features of plants, by joining the symbol of the plant with the symbol of the space where it's located, but also the plant which sacralizes, offering to an apparently trivial space a pretext for rituals and symbolism. Regarding this aspect, Blaga, in his paper „The trilogy of culture” (1994) talks about the „**stylistic matrix**”, through which the „unconscious manages the consciousness” (Blaga, 1994), referring to the influence on the „style horizon”. The stylistic matrix is in fact an universal base, permanent for the creative spirit of an individual or an entire nation, which offers unitary character to a culture. This pattern is different from people to people, from a geographical area to another. The stylistic matrix of the Romanians is considered to be the „mioritic space” – the high, open realm, situated on a **green** mountain ridge, slowly streaming towards the valley.

Thus, it is underlined a genesis of culture, closely dependent to the spatial element, but also to the omnipresence of the plant element.

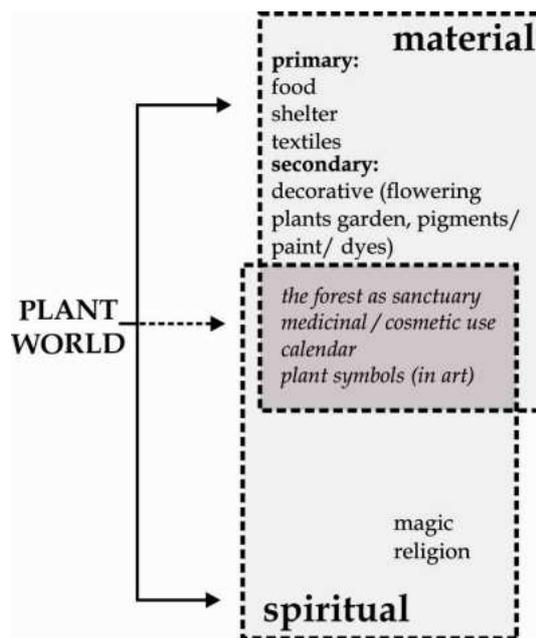


Fig. 2. Possible classification of the plant world in the Romanian tradition

Through the analysis and filtration of the gathered information, additions consisting of personal ideas and rethinking the resulted system, a possible classification was sketched (Fig. 2), reflecting a current state of knowledge, from the influence of the plant world on the material culture to the spiritual significance, with a special, intermediate category, which contains elements of material importance, but which also possess a strong spiritual load, in which the two aspects combine in a diffuse manner, thus being hard or even impossible to place them in one of the first two categories.

2.1. Material culture

The idea of material culture refers to practical uses and to the utility part of the plant world. For the Romanian people, as for many other cultures, plants had a very important role. Grown or wild, plants stood at the base of the existence and creative activities, whether it was a primary use (food, shelter, clothing) or secondary use (decorative).

Primary uses

Food – As a primarily agrarian people, the growth and gathering of the harvest were basic activities for the Romanians, around which, in some areas of the country, gravitated the all year round routine (agrarian dates functioned as time landmarks). The most often met crops were: wheat, millet, rye, barley and vines. Pomiculture was practiced especially in the hill areas (Vlăduțiu, 1973). At a household utility level, people practiced vegetable farming and cultivating different herbs and condiments at a small scale, in the courtyard of the household or near it (Fig. 2 and 3).

Shelter – Vegetation provided shelter to the Romanian peasant in more than one way. Besides the general meaning – that of being a source for construction materials (massive wood, sticks, bark, branches, reed, straw etc.), there is also the role of „impregnable fortress” (Vulcănescu, 1987), the woods as an enclosed botanical ecosystem. It is well known that old sacred forests stretched on the territory of Romania (Vulcănescu, 1987), difficult to enter and easy to get lost in, which lead to a strong bond between Romanians and forest, having the symbol of kinship, from this important role as an „armed shelter at tribulation” (Vulcănescu, 1987), when people found refuge behind these green curtains.

Textiles – Cultivation of flax and hemp were tightly connected to the Romanian material culture since the Neolithic (Vlăduțiu, 1973), having numerous traditions and a rich collection of methods, tools and terms connected to the growth and processing flax and hemp.

Secondary uses

Decorative – After analyzing the cartograms (Ghinoiu, 2003), it becomes clear that a high density of decorative gardens, arranged with flowering plants, existed especially in the mountain areas, in the South, East and South-East of the country. These were arranged anywhere in the household, but in most of the cases people arranged them in the front part of the courtyard (Toma, 2001), in order for the garden to be admired from the porch, but also from the street (as a reason for pride and sign of a well cared household – Fig. 2 and 3).

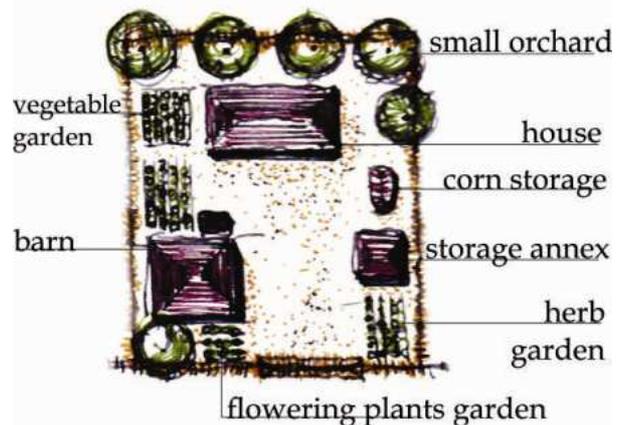


Fig. 3. Organization of a traditional Romanian household

Also with a decorative role, but this time as dyes, plants like: alder, walnut, maple, apple, corn, madder were used (Butură, 1979), from which people obtained basic colors, like black and red and which, if proportioned and mixed after a certain recipe, would result in hues of red and yellow. These natural dyes were used for coloring textiles, rarely for cosmetic purposes, for painting objects and wooden monuments: triptych, pillars (Vulcănescu, 1972), having an esthetic purpose, but also a protective one (against insects, moist, combining the dyes also with oils and other processes, like smoking of the wood).

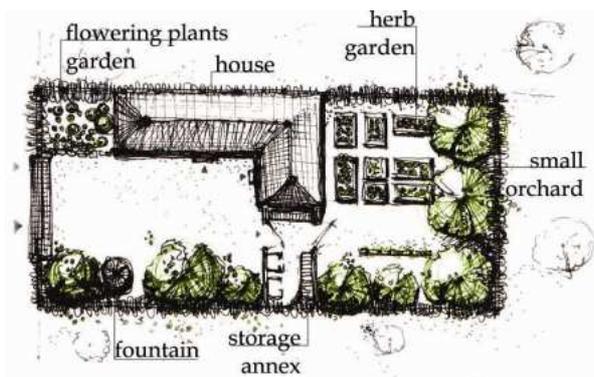


Fig. 4. Organization of a traditional Romanian household

2.2. *Spiritual meanings*

The implications of the plant world in the spiritual life of people everywhere are extremely branched and complex (Kandeler și Ullrich, 2009; Pieroni *et al.*, 2003). The parent unit, true and used at a global level, is the concept of *Terra Mater* as „mother and universal source for nourishment” (Eliade, 2000) – a concept which is tightly connected and sometimes mixed with the idea of Nature – „nature mirrors always something that exists beyond it, something transcendent” (Eliade, 2000). This ancient concept gave birth and fueled other primordial symbols – those of the Cosmic Tree and different cults of surrounding vegetation, together with their subsequent derivatives (Becker, 2002).

The Tree symbol has always been the most powerful, used and prolific in creating other meanings and representations (Dafni, 2006; Farhadi, 1994). The tree was chosen to represent cosmos, life, youth, immortality, wisdom – „it expresses everything that is sacred and real” (Eliade, 2000). All the trees, bushes and other plants considered sacred owe their status to the fact that they represent, in one way or another, the archetype of vegetation. These plants considered sacred are wild plants (fir tree, wild apple, hazel,

willow, wild herbs) or grown because of their religious value, beside the household utility one (basil, garlic, apple) (Vulcănescu, 1987; Butură, 1979) and they created a whole botanical mythology, with an evolution and consequences, from essential ancient rituals to everyday life.

Once modernity came and with it, the scientific discoveries, Nature suffered a process of profanity, of losing its sacrality, but only for some people (especially scientists); for others „Nature remains full of charm, a mystery, a grandeur” (Eliade, 2000). Another change of these beliefs and symbols took place through the metamorphosis of sacred objects in objects of art (Eliade, 2000), a world in which we contemplate nature, we look at it as a landscape, we miniaturize it, arrange and control it (Hughes, 1983).

Regarding other adaptations and transformations of primordial, pagan beliefs and meanings, we can mention also the mutations resulted from Christianization. Taking into consideration the strong, deep rooted beliefs connected with nature and especially plants, which could not be changed or removed, Christianity adopted a lot of symbols and meanings, changing its own rituals and celebrations, in order to overlap itself on the already popular events, which Romanians respected and carefully kept.

Thus, spiritual meanings of the plant world still survive today, incorporated in the Christian Orthodox religion and highly respected (using in religious rituals plants like: basil, willow, different flowering plants, wheat, apple; the traditions regarding the wedding tree, the blessed tree used on the roof of a new

construction, in order to thank the tree for its sacrifice and help).

2.3. Plant world – between spiritual and material

The traditional Romanian village, together with all its customs, has always been a source for creation, perceived as a fairytale world, a universe in which myth mixes with reality and in which common rules do not apply. This feature is met in all aspects of the traditional life – the lack of a clear line between sacred and profane: a collection of rituals, mixed with household customs, magic in every tool and kitchen vessel, a common plant used as spice but also as a tool for the consecration of waters and as omen (Grasser *et al.*, 2012).

Among the chosen elements to be included in this intermediate category there are : *the forest as a sanctuary, the plant as cure and for cosmetic use, the plants as calendar landmarks and the plant symbol in art*. All these were considered to have uses in the material culture, but strongly influenced by their spiritual side.

The forest as sanctuary derives from the use of the woods as a „plant fortress in a state of permanent watch”, different parts of the forest having different features (considering the presence of sacred trees, their location etc.) which, by their meaning and conformation, took the shape of a plant sanctuary (Vulcănescu, 1987).

The curing weed was most of the times a wild plant (sometimes grown) (Stepp and Moerman, 2001). This type of folk medicine was practiced with the help of 876 useful species (Butură, 1979) from which people used different parts (root, stem, leaf, seeds, flowers, buds), used both internally and externally, under raw

form or as ointment, tincture, steam, tea, juice, smoke, decoctions, ash (Butură, 1979). Their inclusion in this intermediate category is owed to the strong magical aspects that accompany them, which overwhelm sometimes the medicinal side, leading to situations when the cure is actually the ritual, the incantation, and the plant is only a mediator, a helping tool. Although they used plants that had real therapeutic properties, the very complex gathering ritual - a local tabu, together with incantations and preparation procedures and actual administration to the patient, were actually dominating and taking over the entire practice.

Cosmetic use refers to different plants that women put in their bath water or in the water used to wash their hair and face on certain holidays. These had also a magic-religious purpose, with an omen role or to ensure a certain step in life (usually connected with the desire to get married) (Ghinoiu, 1988).

The Calendar has numerous sections according to the plant world clock. This mainly refers to plant cycle and its implications on human activities. Thus, some plants became time landmarks, such as the Snowdrop (to proclaim the arrival of spring), Crocus (to proclaim spring and autumn) and Lady's Bedstraw, which marked through their blooming the middle of the summer. Among these there is also a tree and vine calendar, related to apples and vines procedures (cleaning of the trees, blooming, „the crying” of the vines) (Ghinoiu, 1988).

Art – Plants were and still are a source of inspiration in art creation, from poetry, songs, legends in which plants had supernatural powers, offering support to

the hero, to symbolical representations on wood, stone, ceramic objects, fabric – used in the household, but also in rituals. These were more often presented as stylized symbols (fir tree, wheat ear, flowers) in basic geometrical shapes, with great symbolic load.



Fig. 5. Morphological structure of the triptych, compared with the „Celtis australis” tree, according to Caramizi V. (Vulcănescu, 1972)

3. Conclusions

This paper made a quick exposure of the rich collection of meanings and symbols of the plant world in the Romanian culture, adding a possible classification of it, in an unifying manner, which aims to integrate all its elements.

In the history of cults and beliefs everywhere, the plant world represented a layer on which the culture of an entire nation was built. For Romanians especially, in comparison with other nations, because of life conditions and environment, the relation between man and nature got stronger, sustained by a primordial pattern and subconscious searches.

Vegetation built a frame for life, shelter, source for food and materials, a source for meanings, connection with the sacred, an icon, all of these woven in beautiful customs ruled by a magical way of

thinking and ancient beliefs, later evolving through Christianity and art (old and modern – see Brâncuși). Romanian people benefit from a layered culture, a palimpsest, which is unique in the world especially through the „twinning” of the human community and the follow-up that it has on all the layers of Romanian traditions.

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