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### **DANCING IN THE DANUBE GORGE: GEOGRAPHY, DANCE, AND INTERETHNIC PERSPECTIVES**

**Abstract:** This paper will look at dance practices of Romanian and Serbian villagers along the Danube Gorge which historically functioned as a natural and political boundary. Opportunities for dancing in all villages in the Gorge are still very common and frequented especially during the summer time. Based on my field research, carried out since 2011, the paper examines the contemporary dance practice of this region. My methodological orientation will be based on the ethnochoreological investigation of diverse repertoires, but also diverse dance structures as “predictable” dance texts designated during previous times as Romanian or Serbian, which are interpolated by the villagers. The notion of geographical place considered in the sense of a distinct “culture area”, which, according to Bruno Nettl is grounded in the history of ethnomusicology, but also ethnochoreology, will be challenged by applying Martin Stokes’ concept of (geographical) place as a social construction which involves notions of difference and social boundary. The following question will be raised: In what way does contemporary village dancing in the Danube Gorge correspond to the idea of establishing Romanian society as a part of the New Europe? In what way does the current (re)positioning of this historically and geographically distinct territory influence its contemporary dance practice? How is the concept of the ethnic dance (Romanian and Serbian) recognized both by insiders (villagers) and outsiders (the State institutions and scholars) and does this correspond to the new social and political context of contemporary Romanian society?

**Keywords:** the Danube Gorge, contemporary dance practice, ethnicity

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The Danube Gorge (Romanian: Clisura Dunarii; Serbian: Dunavska klisura) is a region which separates the southern Carpathian Mountains in Romania from their foothills in northeast Serbia.<sup>1</sup> Even though geographically this region should be considered as the area which comprises both sides of the River Danube, the term historically refers only to the area on the left (north) riverbank in Romania.<sup>2</sup> The Danube, which immediately before entering the Gorge is at its widest in this part of its course, functioned as a natural boundary between the “European” and the “Ottoman” territories for centuries and it consequently remained a political and administrative border in the modern history of this part of Europe. Along the Danube Gorge, there are a cluster of villages, which are generally divided into Romanian and Serbian settlements even though a small number of Czechs, Roma, Hungarians and Germans lived in them in the past few (Tomić 1989: 19).<sup>3</sup>

Along with its geographical separation, the cultural distinctiveness of this multiethnic region, which is recognized by both Romanian (for example, Giurchescu 1972: 246) and Serbian scholars (for example, Stanojlović 1938: 26) is historically grounded: during the period of the Habsburg Monarchy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Danube Gorge belonged to an administratively separated area, the institution of the so-called Military Border, which functioned as a geographical and military barrier to the Ottoman empire (Stanojlović 1938: 26; Draškić 1971: 9). As the border area away from the big cities and trading centers, but also because of the infertile land, the Danube Gorge was considered as one of the poorest isolated parts of Austria-Hungary (Stanojlović 1938: 26; Krstić 1987: 19). After the First World War, the Romanian authorities tried to develop this region by concluding a border customs agreement with the Kingdom of Yugoslavia which allowed trade and cooperation with border settlements on the other side of the river (Stanojlović 1938: 27). For the first time in 1937, a regular line of flat bottomed boats was established in several places in the Gorge, which enabled the cross-border travel of the inhabitants, especially during village celebrations of saints’ feast days in the summer time (Stanojlović 1938: 48). During the socialist period, cooperation with the Yugoslav, specifical-

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<sup>1</sup> The Danube Gorge extends from the Bazijaš monastery to the town of Drobeta-Turnu Severin, a total length of 142 km (Tomić 1989: 5).

<sup>2</sup> Southern riverbank, which belongs to Republic of Serbia, is known as Đerdap .

<sup>3</sup> There are a total of nine villages in the Danube Gorge where Serbs were the majority. They are: Divič (Diviç), Zlatica (Zlatița), Belobreška (Belobreșca), Radimna (Radimna), Požežena (Pojejena), Mačević (Măcești), Stara Moldava (Moldova Veche), Ljupkova (Liubcova) and Svinica. The villages where Romanians were the majority were: Șușca, Moldova Nouă, Coronini, Sfânta Elena, Sichevița, Gornea, Berzasca, Drencova and Cozla.

ly with the Serbian authorities continued, particularly during the construction of the Iron Gate Hydroelectric Power Station in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>4</sup> Inhabitants of the villages from both sides of the Danube would cross the border regularly for trading purposes and more rarely to work,<sup>5</sup> but also for the various village celebrations.

This situation changed greatly during the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu from 1965–1989. During the communist period, in the 1980s, all border crossings were closed and tightly controlled. However, Ceaușescu could not control the media completely: not only in the Danube Gorge but also throughout western Romania, radio and television production from Serbia had a large audience of viewers or listeners, mostly Radio Television Serbia and during the 1990s TV Pink. Many Serbian singers of so-called newly composed folk music (see more in Rasmussen 2002: xx) become very popular in Romania and their hits under the name *musica sârbească* were incorporated in the vernacular music and dance repertoire (see also Mellish 2015).

Although mixed marriages have become common during recent decades all along the Gorge, villagers still ethnically divide their settlements into Romanian and Serbian, supported by the more recent policy of the Romanian government, according to the general guidelines of cultural policy of the European Union based on the idea of multiculturalism and coexistence of ethnical and cultural difference (Inđić 2008: 103).<sup>6</sup>

One of the organizations supported by the government, which is very active all along the Danube Gorge is the Union of the Serbs in Romania (Serbian: Savez Srba u Rumuniji).<sup>7</sup> According to the founding documents of this organisation, its activity is primarily cultural, focused on the organization and promotion of various cultural activities, such as festivals and concerts of folklore groups, summer camps of the Serbian language, dance and music, and publishing various publications in Serbian (see more at <http://savezsrba.ro/>). Within the recent activities of this organisation, but also in the local municipalities, both

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<sup>4</sup> The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was a federation made up of six socialist republics: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia. Although the history of their mutual relationship was very turbulent and changeable, it could be said that each of the republics maintained control of its own local matters. That is the reason why cross-border relations were regulated between Romania and Serbia.

<sup>5</sup> Settlements in the Serbian part of the Gorge are also poor, and engaged in livestock breeding.

<sup>6</sup> Romania became a member of the European Union on 1 January 2007.

<sup>7</sup> This organisation was founded immediately after the fall of Ceaușescu on December 1989.

Romanian and Serbian, the notion of cultural distinctiveness of the Danube Gorge is not only retained, but emphasized. In the aim of promoting this region as historically and culturally unique, coupled with the fact that it also has great tourist potential because of its climate and geographical position, various activities are undertaken, such as printing advertising brochures in Serbian and Romanian, broadcasting radio shows and TV films about the Gorge, and participation in Tourism Fairs. All the advertising material emphasizes the cultural distinctiveness based on both the Serbian and the Romanian local folklore tradition of the Danube Gorge.

My field research of the musical and dance practice of the Danube Gorge started in 2010. In addition to recording previous forms of traditional music and dance, I was very much interested in both the Romanian and the Serbian<sup>8</sup> contemporary musical and dance practice of this border region and I was impressed by its vitality and variety. Opportunities for dancing in all the villages in the Danube Gorge are still very common and frequented. Dance events (Romanian: dans; Serbian: igranke or balls) which involve a large number of people are village and church holidays (Romanian: ruga; Serbian: slava), but also other traditional celebrations linked with the Orthodox Christian calendar. In this article, my case study will be a dance event within the carnival celebration which marks the beginning of Lent, the Fast before Easter, recorded in 2011 in the village of Moldova Veche (Romanian)/Stara Moldava (Serbian). The methodological orientation which will be applied will be based on the ethnochoreological investigation of diverse repertoires, but also diverse dance structures as “predictable” dance texts (Hughes-Freeland 2008: 161), which are mutually interpolated and signified both by insiders (villagers) and outsiders (the State organizations and scholars) as geographically and ethnically distinctive. The notion of geographical region considered in the sense of a distinct “culture area”, which, according to Bruno Nettl is grounded in the history of ethnomusicology (2005: 321), which can equally be applied in ethnochoreology, will be challenged in the direction of the constructivist concept of geographical place as a political and social construction which involves notions of difference and social boundary (Barth 1969: 15; Stokes 1994: 3; Bechev 2006: 4–5). I want to argue that the region of the Danube Gorge could be considered as a malleable entity, which is contingent on the various communal social practices of its inhabitants, or to put it in Barth’s

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<sup>8</sup> The term “contemporary dance practice” is used to signify the present-day communal dancing of the inhabitants of the Danube Gorge. The cognate term vernacular (see more in Jakovljević 2012:298–299), which I also use, is more geographically orientated, but also designates the musical and dance practice of “modern” times, which means the last several decades.

words “situations of social contacts” (Barth 1969: 15), among which are certainly various local dance events.

### **Masked ball in Moldova Veche/Stara Moldava: a case study**

The beginning of the Eastern Lent is marked by carnival processions all over Eastern Europe (Prošić 1977: 72; Antonijević 1997: 11; Marjanović 2008: 112). In the Danube Gorge, as well as in other areas of Banat in Serbia and Romania (Zečević 1978: 107; Kostić 1971: 78–79; Krstić 1987: 1980; Pavković and Naumović 1996: 699), they are known under the name *fășanțul* (Romanian) or *fašanke* (Serbian),<sup>9</sup> and were practiced continuously during the last few centuries on the so-called Clean Monday (the first Monday in the period of Lent), but also on other days during the so-called White Week (Bela nedelja) (Dolić 2002: 9; Rakočević 2015: 20). The celebration consists of two segments: the daytime masked procession around the village and the evening celebration, which in the last several decades has been organized in the local culture center. Even the standard masked characters from the past – the pregnant bride, the childish young bridegroom, the Orthodox priest and the dead man – have been retained till today (see more in Bosić 1996: 193–194; Marjanović 1999: 246; Dolić 2002: 9; Marjanović 2008: 141), in the contemporary forms of *fašanke*, various masks that could be used especially during the masked ball in the evening (Krstić 1987: 183). In 2011 the whole event was organized and financially supported by the Union of the Serbs in Romania and participants were both local Romanians and Serbians.

The evening celebration included a local show which consisted of sequences of various cabaret-style, stage performances and the masked ball.<sup>10</sup> The stage performances, mostly folk dance choreographies and funny sketches, but also vocal, instrumental, and modern dance pieces, were prepared by the local youngsters. No matter what the content, all performances included lascivious behaviour, off-colour stories and gestures with metaphorical sexual connotations, which are the immanent semantical weft of the carnival celebrations and *fašanke* ritual (Prošić 1977: 48; Prošić-Dvornić 1984: 154; Zečević 1978: 107). Even though the daytime procession and stage performances are of themselves very intriguing for analysis and discussion, this time we shall focus on the event where the basic content is dance – the masked ball.

The masked ball started around 10 pm and lasted until late in the night when “the best” masks were proclaimed by the local jury, consisting of several older

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<sup>9</sup> The term originated from the German word “fasching” which means carnival (Bosić 1996: 191).

<sup>10</sup> Various stage performances have been the standard part of the *fašanke* celebrations since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Marjanović 2008: 151–152).

people from the organizational staff. All dance pieces were performed one after the other without a break, sharply separated by the musicians. The band consisted of two players on synthesizers,<sup>11</sup> two accordionists,<sup>12</sup> one sax player and two singers. The presence of two singers, one for the Serbian repertoire who sings in Serbian, and the other for the Romanian songs,<sup>13</sup> is one of the typical features of the contemporary music in the Danube Gorge (see for example, Rakočević 2013: 253). Although the usage of the accordion is typical of both the bands of Serbian newly composed folk music and Romanian traditional dance music (Rakočević 2005: 133; Giurchescu and Bloland 1995: 152),<sup>14</sup> the leading role of the saxophone as a melodic instrument,<sup>15</sup> which represents the characteristic feature for Romanian folk music from Banat from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see more in Fracile 2015), directly gave the quality of “Romanian-ness” to the sound of the band. Virtuoso passages played occasionally on the saxophone and one of the accordions in fast unison emphasized this impression. All the musicians and singers were from different places from along the Gorge. Even though they were mostly Serbians (only the sax player was Roma), their ethnic identity was not made evident during the gig.

The short informal interviews with the dancers, which I conducted during the masked ball, revealed that there were both Romanians and Serbians (many of the participants used only the Romanian language). Along with the masked dancers, there were also many unmasked participants who came to enjoy the communal dancing.

The first piece was the *šota*. Like all the other dances, it was a round chain dance performed in an open-circle formation of linked dancers. The step pattern

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<sup>11</sup> In the local Romanian dialect, the synthesizer is called *orgă* (Serbian: *orgulje*). The one played the melodic line and the other was used as “an accompaniment” (Serbian: *pratnja*), that is the harmonic and rhythmical base.

<sup>12</sup> There were two different accordions; one was a button- and the other a piano- accordion. According to the band leader, one of the synthesizer players Braca Šaca Stojanović from Moldava Veche, the button-accordion is rarely used by Romanians. “Uglavnom ovde kod nas u Rumuniju, samo Srbi sviraju dugmetaru. Vrlo malo je Rumuna koji sviradu dugmetaru” (“Mostly here in Romania, only Serbs play the button-accordion. Very few Romanians play the button-accordion”), said Šaca Stojanović.

<sup>13</sup> Dejan Žigum, from the village of Zlatița (a student of Serbian Orthodox theology in Timișoara) was in charge of the Serbian repertoire, while Petrica Pavlović from the village of Pojejena (Petrica is a Romanian first name, and Pavlović is a Serbian family name) sung songs in Romanian.

<sup>14</sup> One accordionist was Radojica Milivojević Kajica from Moldava Veche, while the other was Marko Taban from the village of Zlatița.

<sup>15</sup> The saxophone player was Vladan Radu, a Roma from the village of Zlatița.

of this dance is the three measure step pattern, known also in ethnochoreological literature as the *branla simple* (Giurchescu and Bloland 1995: 271). The *šota* music consisted of several newly composed folk music hits from Serbia, composed mostly in the 1970s,<sup>16</sup> performed in a so-called *rumba* rhythm. The *šota* dance was very popular in the vernacular dance practice during the 1970s and 1980s throughout Serbia (Mladenović 1974: 103, Vasić 1997: 440).<sup>17</sup> However, one of the accordionists, Radojica Milivojević Kajica, pointed out that the *šota* started being performed in the Danube Gorge, at the beginning of the 1990s,<sup>18</sup> which most probably was one of the consequences of the opening of the border crossings after the fall of Ceaușescu. Even though it is no longer popular in Serbia nowadays, the *šota* is still one of the most popular dances not only along the Danube Gorge but also in the wider area in Romania. It is danced mostly at dance events which are organized by Serbians.

The second dance was the *vlaško kolo* (the older name for this dance in the Danube Gorge is *čtvorka*). The step pattern of this dance represents one of the most popular traditional dances from Northeastern Serbia (Mladenović 1974: 101; Vasić 1997a: 273; Vasić 2005: 314). The eight measure step pattern of this dance is laterally asymmetrical, performed in an open-circle formation. At the masked ball, as is usually the case, the hybrid instrumental melodic line of the *vlaško kolo* consisted of a mixture of segments (parts, phrases and/or motifs) of different traditional or composed melodies.<sup>19</sup> Considering the fact that this dance was not typical of the traditional dance practice of this part of Romania (cf. Giurchescu 1972: 246; Krstić 1987: 206; Giurchescu and Bloland 1995: 264), one could assume that it was also adopted from Serbia, most probably during the 1990s.

The next dance was a dance which is known among the Serbians in the Danube Gorge under the name of *šestica*.<sup>20</sup> It was performed in the four measure laterally asymmetrical step pattern, accompanied by the famous dance melody

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<sup>16</sup> It started with the song “Fato, mori, Fato” (the version recorded by Serbian singer Aca Matić in 1972), and continued with the songs “Bre gidi džanum” (recorded by singer Dragan Kojić Keba in 1991), “Žena prijatelja mog” (recorded by Bosnian singer Meho Pužić in 1974), “Ramo, Ramo, družo moj” (the version recorded by Serbian singer Slobodan Ilić Boban in 1974) and others.

<sup>17</sup> Olivera Vasić pointed out that the *šota* originally was the ritual wedding dance among the Šiptari from Kosovo (Vasić 1997: 439).

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Radojica Milivojević Kajica.

<sup>19</sup> Among the composed *vlaško kolos*, some of the most popular are those composed by Mirko Kodić.

<sup>20</sup> The dance got its name from the series of short and quick, eight note long steps that appear at the beginning of the step pattern (Krstić 1987: 208).

known as the *moravac*. This instrumental melody was one of the most popular *kolo* melodies all over Serbia during the 1960s (Mladenović 1968: 105), but also during the successive decades (Vasić 2002: 158). Due to the fact that the *šestica* dance is considered to be an old dance among the Serbians in the Romanian Banat (Krstić 1987: 208; Popov 2012: 152, 157), the belief is that it appeared in the Danube Gorge in the period between the two world wars (see more in Rakočević 2012: 60).

The next two dances, *Žikino kolo* and the *Užičko kolo* belong to the so-called *kolo in three* (*kolo u tri*) dance type, which has been the basic and the most popular dance type in Serbia in the last fifty years (Vasić 2002: 158; Ranisavljević 2012: 558–559). While *Žikino kolo* was adopted among the Serbs in Romania after the First World War (Popov 2012: 168; Rakočević 2012: 60),<sup>21</sup> the instrumental melody of the *Užičko kolo* did not arrive before the 1960s, given the fact that it was composed in 1962 (Ranisavljević 2013: 265).<sup>22</sup> Due to the fact that it has been the most popular *kolo* melody in Serbia during the last few decades, most probably the *Užičko kolo* was adopted in Romania through the media, most likely Radio Belgrade.

Both of the dances *Žikino kolo* and *Užičko kolo* were danced in the same way: in the laterally asymmetrical version of the eight measure step pattern performed, as all other dances, in an open-circle formation.<sup>23</sup> This version of the *kolo in three* step pattern is typical of the Serbs in Romania (Rakočević 2013: 254; Rakočević 2014: 281).<sup>24</sup> However, simultaneously with the round-chain *kolo* formation of those dances, individual performers danced also in a formation of trios (a man between two women) continuously using small triple-steps, which was one of the typical ways of dancing in the older<sup>25</sup> both Romanian and Serbian dance practice of Banat (Giruchescu and Bloland 1995: 86; Rakočević 2012: 63–64).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The most prominent characteristic of the *Žikino kolo* is that it is in triple meter (7/16), while all other dances in the Danube Gorge are in double two-four meter (2/4). The rhythm was the reason why the dancers sharply indicated the differences between *Žikino kolo* and the *Užičko kolo*.

<sup>22</sup> The melody of the *Užičko kolo* was composed by Milija Spasojević (Ranisavljević 2013: 265).

<sup>23</sup> The floor pattern of this step pattern is asymmetrical: moving to the right lasts for four measures followed by two measures on the spot and two measures to the left.

<sup>24</sup> According to Nick Green, this version of the step pattern of the *kolo in three* has structural similarities with the Romanian dance *brâul bătrân* (see more in Green 2012: 121).

<sup>25</sup> That means from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>26</sup> In the former dance practice, the step pattern that consisted of small triples-steps and was performed in trios was called the *mađarac* (Krstić 1987: 206; Rakočević 2012: 63–64).



The dance which was performed immediately before the announcement of the winning masks, was the old Romanian dance *brâul* known also as the *brâul bătrân* (the old *brâul*), one of the most popular dances at various social dance occasions all over Banat (see more in Green 2014: 29–33). This version of the *brâul* is characterized by the asymmetrical floor shaping of the step pattern: moving to the right it lasts for four measures followed by two measures on the spot and two measures to the left.<sup>27</sup> Although their step patterns were different, the special modeling of this dance was exactly the same as that of *Žikino kolo* and the *Užičko kolo*.<sup>28</sup> The music of the *brâul* consisted of several songs in Romanian.

The very last dance was named by the musicians simply as the *kolo*. While the instrumental music was a mixture of several *kolo* melodies, the step pattern was the same as the one used in the *brâul*. This immediately confirms a structural closeness between those two dance types, which has already been indicated by Nick Green (see more in Green 2012: 121), and clearly demonstrates the complexity and hybridity of the contemporary dance practice of the Danube Gorge (Rakočević 2014: 283).

### **Closing remarks: communal dancing and interethnic permeation**

The ethnochoreological investigation of the masked ball held in Moldova Veche in 2011 showed, as is also the case in the surrounding villages (Rakočević 2013: 257; 2014: 283), that the contemporary dance practice of the Danube Gorge is complex and hybrid in itself. In their communal dancing, the performers include various dance practices, which belong both to the contemporary Romanian and Serbian round-chain dance practice, but they still use the traditional way of dancing in trios, as well, which was a typical feature of the Banat dancing during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Along with the dance formations, various step and floor patterns, as well as the dance music are mutually interwoven even though the dances are separate one from another. The notions of geography, tradition and modernity are mixed and fuzzy.

The repertoire of communal dancing in the Danube Gorge, reflects processes of socialization and othering, building and preserving a sense of cohesiveness and at the same time, difference, which is, according to Dimitar Bechev (Bechev

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<sup>27</sup> Most of the dancers used the same step pattern as in the dance known as the *aksion* (cf. Rakočević 2013: 2).

<sup>28</sup> This confirms the research by Nick Green, who claims that in the “*brâul bătrân* dance category” the shaping of the spatial (floor) pattern of the dance is one of the “independent” parameters of the dance structure which defines the “rules” within a particular performance (see more in Green 2014: 29–30).

2006: 5), the case of constructing regional identities in general. One of the mediums for reproducing the multiethnic character of the Danube Gorge, based on the notion of cultural difference, has been the vernacular dance practice of this region.<sup>29</sup> However, even though the multiethnic character is kept within the official narrative about the Gorge, the communal dancing of its inhabitants clearly showed the opposite: that the notions of their ethnic identities are suppressed in the favor of their interethnic permeation. The River Danube is bridged and its riverbank (at least the left one) functions, not as a separate territory, but as an intermediary area between Romania and Serbia.

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<sup>29</sup> While the same process has also been recorded in other areas of Banat (Pavlović 2012: 156), Liz Mellish notes that in the capital of this region, the city of Timișoara, locals (meaning both Romanians and members of the so-called co-located ethnicities, that means ethnicities that have lived in Timișoara for centuries) maintain their connection to the locality through dance, both at the regional level (Banat as a whole), and micro level of specific ethnographic zones of provenance within the Banat (see more in Mellish 2015), such as, in this case, the Danube Gorge.

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