ION TIȚA-NICOLESCU

SACRUM AND HISTORICITY IN ARGEȘ AND MUȘCEL

Ion Tița-NICOLESCU

Sacrum and Historicity in Argeș and Mușcel

Editura Libertatea

Editura Academiei Omenilor de Știință din România

Pančevo, București, 2026

Impresum

Ion TIȚA-NICOLESCU

Sacrum and historicity in Argeș and Mușcel

Volum publicat în coeditare de Editura Libertatea și Editura Academiei Omenilor de Știință din România

Director Editura Libertatea: Mariana Stratulat

Șef serviciu Editura Academiei Omenilor de Știință din România: Mihail Căruțașu

Editor-Traducător: Elena Iagăr

Grafician copertă: Nicoleta Toma

© Ion Tița-Nicolescu

Tipărit la tipografia Editurii Academiei Omenilor de Știință din România

ISBN Editura Libertatea: 978-86-7001-434-3

CIP - Каталогизација у публикацији
Библиотеке Матице српске, Нови Сад
39(498)
94(498)
27(498)
TIȚA-Nicolescu, Ion, 1974-
Sacrum and historicity in Argeș and Mușcel / Ion Tița-Nicolescu. - Pančevo : Libertatea, 2026 (Bukurešt). - 194 str. ; 30 cm
Tiraž 300. - Napomene i bibliografske reference uz tekst. - Bibliografija.
ISBN 978-86-7001-434-3
a) Етнологија -- Румунија b) Историја -- Румунија v) Хришћанство -- Румунија
COBISS.SR-ID 194083849

ISBN Editura Academiei Omenilor de Știință din Români: 978-630-6518-59-3

Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naţionale a României
TIȚA NICOLESCU, ION
Sacrum and historicity in Argeș and Mușcel / Ion Tița-Nicolescu. - Pančevo : Libertatea ; Bucureşti : Editura Academiei Oamenilor de Ştiinţă din România, 2026
ISBN 978-86-7001-434-3
ISBN 978-630-6518-59-3
908

Contents

Sânziene or Drăgaica (June 24): Etymology And Origins; Magical Chastity, the Girls' Oath, The Dance of the Virgins, Ritual Bathing, and Traditional Girls' Attire 11

Architectural Styles Specific to the Argeș and Muscel Regions (16th–18th Centuries): Religious and Secular Architecture 25

Traditions on the Verge of Extinction: The Ritual of the Twigs 39

Argeș Through the Eyes of Foreign Travelers at the Dawn of the Modern Era (1821–1831) 43

The Romanian Realm: Insights Through Myth, Custom and History 53

Saint George and the Pre-Christian Myths of the Warrior Rider 63

Areas of Foreign Civilization in the Culture of the Early Romanian Middle Ages 69

Woolen Textiles and Wallachian Shaggy Blankets (*Plocade*) – A Brief History 79

New Perspectives on the Feast of the Nativity: Dogmatic Theology and Folk Religion 87

The Theological and Folkloric Symbolism of the Head Covering 93

The Symbolism of May Flowers (Chamomile Or Romaine, Lily, Basil, Poppy) 99

The Feast of the *Ascension*: Between Christian Dogma and Popular Tradition 111

The Summer Solstice, on the Nature Of Solstices, Solstitial Narratives, Christian Significance, the Symbolism of Light (June 21st). 119

Traditional Art and Religious Ethnology, Essential Elements of Romanian Identity 127

The Wicked Fairies` Day – April 16th. The Ropotin of the Baking Clay Covers 135

Ethnological Themes in the Religious Ornamentation of the Argeş Region - Theological Ethnology, a Research Discipline 141

Symbols of the Hereafter in Traditional Romanian Culture 153

Foreign Travelers Through the Romanian Lands in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries – History And Ethnology in Argeş and Muşcel 161

Distinctive Features of Christian Art in the Churches of Argeş 173

A Life, a Destiny, a Masterpiece Reflections on the Eminent Scholar Ovidiu Bîrlea 177

General Bibliography 187

FOREWORD

The volume *Sacrum and Historicity in Argeș and Muscel* represents a significant contribution to the study of princely residences in the Argeș and Muscel regions. It offers a synoptic analysis of ecclesiastical buildings that are of historical importance as well as intangible local heritage. The author employs an interdisciplinary approach - situated at the intersection of ethnology, history, and linguistics - highlighting elements of cultural continuity that transcend the pre-Christian North-Danubian era. This research methodology is further enhanced by a distinct stylistic expressiveness.

Through the studies of researcher Ion Țița-Nicolescu, this work explores the phenomenon of indigenous religious syncretism. Within this framework, Orthodox Christianity is analysed as a perfecting factor of archaic customs, in accordance with the philosophical paradigm of Ernest Bernea. In a contemporary context marked by secularizing trends, the volume proposes a recovery of the transcendent dimension, highlighting the way in which traditional rural society harmoniously integrated nature and divinity into the ontological fabric of daily life. The Romanian peasant, though lacking formal dogmatic instruction, manifested a profound phenomenological experience within the framework of Orthodoxy - a direct experience of the sacred that prevailed over any dogmatic conceptualization. This form of religiosity is defined by the concept of *cosmic Christianity* theorized by Mircea Eliade, in which ecclesiastical rites are grafted onto archaic sensibility, transforming nature into a receptacle of the divine presence. In contrast to the festive and often secularized character of modern celebrations, the Romanian peasant established an ontological relationship with the divine, integrating himself into what Lucian Blaga termed the *Mioritic space* - a spiritual horizon defined by the symbiosis between man, landscape, and transcendence.

The central argument of this analysis lies in Christianity's ability to assimilate and resemanticise a vast repertoire of pre-Christian symbols - both telluric and astral - integrating them into the corpus of Sacred Tradition. This form of religious acculturation did not involve a simple formal absorption, but rather a preservation of ancestral significances, thereby facilitating a decryption of the mechanisms through which traditional man interacted with the supernatural realm.

The hermeneutic interpretation of local symbolism—evident in the artistry of folk costumes, vernacular architecture (such as monumental gates), and the decoration of household objects—benefits significantly from the author's dual expertise. This combination of academic proficiency in Theology and Sacred Art, corroborated by exhaustive field research within the ethno-historical regions of Argeș and Muscel, lends the study indisputable scientific authority. From this perspective, the author emphasizes the organic correlation between occupational determinism and spiritual manifestations, arguing that the cultural act is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather the direct result of the community's interaction with its subsistence environment.

In this context, the folk calendar and rites of passage are structured around the biological and economic cycles specific to pastoralism and agriculture, transforming daily labour into a form of cosmic liturgy. Thus, the author's analysis transcends simple ethnographic description, proposing an anthropology of dwelling in which vernacular architecture and traditional dress are not merely aesthetic objects, but markers of identity that reflect the hierarchies and values of a cohesive, traditional society.

Several works within this volume capitalize on the accounts of foreign travellers, whose notes contribute to the reconstruction of the historical and administrative landscape of the Argeș and Muscel regions. These travelers bequeathed to posterity invaluable documentary references regarding political configurations, architecture, and traditional attire, as well as ethno-psychological observations concerning the customs and mores of Romanian society.

From a methodological perspective, the information is subjected to a rigorous critique of the sources, filtered through the hermeneutic grid of the historian, ethnologist, and theologian. This approach is imperative, given the heterogeneous intellectual backgrounds of the foreign authors and the high degree of subjectivity in their accounts. Thus, the author proposes a 'distillation' of factual data from perceptual distortions, ensuring the scientific accuracy necessary for understanding the realities of several centuries ago.

The rural universe of the Argeș and Muscel regions is defined by an ontology of the sacred, in which nature and divinity constitute the fundamental coordinates of daily existence. A remarkable exponent of this ethos is the women’s traditional dress, whose aesthetic and symbolic value has been historically validated, not least by the fascination it held for Romania’s queens. This identity marker transcends its utilitarian function, transfiguring the traditional chronotope and representing a spiritual infusion of superior axiological density within the broader framework of national culture.

In this context, the study dedicated to the theological and folkloric symbolism of the head covering constitutes a rigorous analysis of the Mușcel veil (*maramă*), viewed as a heritage object with profound metaphysical significance. The author demonstrates that this element of attire is not merely a piece of craftsmanship, but a conduit of communication between the immanent and the transcendent, confirming the intrinsic connection between the communities of the early Basarab dynasty, their natural environment, and the divine dimension.

This volume proposes an interdisciplinary synthesis in which history, theology, and ethnography converge to elucidate the mechanisms of cultural diachrony. The author's approach substantiates the premise that the intelligibility of the present is conditioned by an objective exegesis of the past, while any projection of the future requires a conscious relationship to identity landmarks and the 'mysterious face' of historical processuality.

In antithesis to the paradigm of liquid modernity, characterized by the volatility of axiological models and the rapid succession of cultural forms, this work offers a point of critical stability. In a context marked by unpredictable changes and a crisis of exemplary models, the study recovers the perennial values of tradition, proposing a reassessment of intangible heritage as a necessary foundation for the balance of contemporary society.

The author’s approach constitutes an invitation to reconsider the fundamental values of the Romanian village, exploring the concept of 'eternity' as a form of archaic temporality, defined by an ethic of moderation and an organic connection with the divine. These studies propose a recovery of ontological time—characterized by that 'gentle' flow and the full harmony of being in relation to cosmic rhythms—in antithesis to the fragmentation and acceleration of modern historical time.

In the context of a contemporary society marked by a frantic pace and the mediatization of culture—where information is often received fragmentarily and without critical filtering—this volume offers a reflective alternative. The author highlights the contrast between the ephemeral transmission of knowledge through mass communication channels and the depth of direct, traditional experience, advocating for a return to the spiritual sources that have shaped Romanian identity.

This volume constitutes an imperative recourse to memory, inviting an incursion into a past governed by the sacredness of everyday experience and the peasant's unwavering faith in the divine. The author proposes an understanding of traditional society as an ontological structure in which human existence was 'a

mirror of the time originally granted to us,' as opposed to modern chronological fragmentation.

Although rigorously focused on the ethno-historical area of Argeș and Muscel, the work *Sacrum and Historicity in Argeș and Muscel* transcends the limits of a regional monograph. Through the depth of its analyses and the universality of the themes addressed, the volume is configured as a historiographical and phenomenological synthesis of the entire Romanian-inhabited space, offering fundamental landmarks for defining national identity in its diachronic evolution

Dr. Ligia Fulga
Senior Research Fellow I

SÂNZIENE OR DRĂGAICA (JUNE 24): ETYMOLOGY AND ORIGINS; MAGICAL CHASTITY, THE GIRLS' OATH, THE DANCE OF THE VIRGINS, RITUAL BATHING, AND TRADITIONAL GIRLS' ATTIRE

Before discussing the customs of Sânziene or Drăgaica, it is necessary to clarify the etymology of these two words and acknowledge that a pagan holiday, which still retains its ancestral name, is present in the Orthodox calendar. The names 'Sânziene' or 'Sâmziene' pose certain challenges to linguists, who have proposed several origins. The first, and most plausible, is that the holiday's name derives from an ancient cult of the Roman Goddess of Hunting, Diana - especially since the custom involves groups of virgin girls whose protector was Sancta Diana. Known as the Goddess of Endless Forests and Wild Animals, she was also associated with the moon, a feminine symbol with agrarian qualities. From *Sancta Diana* to *Sandiana*, and finally to *Sânziana/e*, there is but a single step.[1] The Romanian language contains such precedents, where the names of saints evolved by shortening the word 'Sfântul' (Saint) to 'Sân' and affixing a popular adaptation of the name: Sânnicoară (Saint Nicholas), Sângheorghe (Saint George), etc. This theory is also supported by historian Vasile Pârvan, who links Diana Sancta Potentissima with Bendis, the Thracian goddess who, according to Herodotus, was identical to Artemis-Diana. The name of the Roman deity survived the colonization of Dacia and, through association with the local goddess, became a central figure in Romanian folklore[2].

Another variant suggests that the name is a transformation of Saint John, which in Latin is *Sanctus Dies Johannis*. In popular language, this gave the feast its name: '(...) *Sanctus Dies Johannis*, just as the name of another feast has been preserved - *Sânjorz* from *Sanctus Georgius* - intended to replace the pagan feast of the Palils. *Sanctus Dies Johannis* became, without any phonetic difficulty, *sim(pt)-dzi-juane > sînziane > sânziene*'.[3]

---

[1] Ivan Evseev, *Enciclopedia semnelor și simbolurilor culturale,* Timișoara, Editura Amarcord, București, 1999*,* pp. 419-420; Romulus Vulcănescu, *Mitologie română, Editura Academiei,* București, 1983, p. 489.

[2] Mircea Eliade, *De la Zamolxis la Ghinghis-Han,* Studii comparative despre religiile și folclorul Daciei și Europei Orientale, București, 1995, p. 76.

[3] Revista "Institutului de Filologie şi Folklor", "Grai şi Suflet", III, published by Ovid Densuşianu, 1927, p. 428.

I.A. Candrea agrees with the etymology but considers such an approach doubtful, in the sense that *dies* has no place next to *Johannis*, just as *Sanctus dies Georgius* or *Sanctus dies Nicolaus* do not exist, but only *Sanctus Georgius* or *Sanctus Nicolaus*; therefore, the name *Sânziene* originates from *Sanctus Johannis*, and under the influence of feminine plurals, it transformed into *Sânziene*.[4]

Furthermore, a Dacian origin for the holiday and its central figure cannot be ignored; it is difficult to believe that our ancestors - well-known as farmers and viticulturists - would not have had their own solar cult centered around the Solstice[5]. In the Thracian Pantheon, there was a goddess named Bendis, a personification of the Moon and protector of women, whose cult overlapped with that of Diana. Historical sources regarding their faith and deities are scarce, with the exception of Zalmoxis, mentioned by Strabo and Herodotus. Therefore, while we must avoid speculative claims, it is certain that the Dacians had reached a high spiritual level compared to their neighbors, rooted in their belief in the immortality of the soul[6].

Another proposed variant is linked to the omnipresent character in Romanian fairy tales, Ileana Cosânzeana - a name usually extended to identify princesses and sometimes used in the plural (*Ilene Cosânzene*). According to Aron Densușianu, as reported by Romulus Vulcănescu, both *'Ileana'* and *'Cosânzeana'* are similar, even pleonastic, as they both signify the Sun. *'Ileana'* has its roots in the Greek *Ilia*, the feminine form of *Ilios* or *Helios*, the Sun God in Greek mythology. Through linguistic transformation, Ileana becomes Iana - the Sun's sister, who is in fact the Moon—and thus identifies with *Iana Diana*, the personification of the night star and goddess of the hunt. As for *'Cosânzeana*,' her name is thought to derive from the Latin *Consens* (adviser). This title was bestowed upon the twelve great Olympian gods, including Diana, and through derivation, she became *Consentiana*. The final name thus becomes *Iana Consentiana*, or the Sun's sister, evolving in the Romanian language into *Ileana Cosânzeana*[7]. Given that the *Sânziene* were vestals (virgin priestesses), it is highly probable that both terms (*Cosânzeana and Sânziana*) share roots in the same cult of Diana. Another etymology, proposed by Atanasie Marian Marienescu, suggests that the golden-haired beauty of Romanian fairy tales originates from the cult of *Nehalennia*—a deity not clearly defined, but

[4] *Ibidem*, pp. 433-434.
[5] The solar discs at Sarmizegetusa prove a good knowledge of astrology. Regarding the civilization and religion of the Dacians, the following have written: Vasile Pârvan, *Getica. O protoistorie a dacilor*; Alexandru Popescu, *Cultura geto-dacă*; Alexandru Busuioceanu, *Zamolxis sau Mitul dacic în istoria legendelor spaniole*; Hadrian Daicoviciu, *Dacii* ș.a.
[6] Victor Kernbach, *Dicționar de mitologie generală,* București, 2004, p. 389.
[7] Romulus Vulcănescu, *Mitologie română,* Editura Academiei, București, 1985, p. 396.

whose name translates to *'the beautiful goddess*'.[8] Regarding *'Cosânzeana*,' Lazăr Șăineanu also notes a potential Slavic origin of the word. However, beyond these etymologies, oral tradition associates *Ileana* with *Sânziana*, either as a single name or separately, as sisters of the Sun, closely linked with mythical vegetative, agrarian, and silvan aspects.

Regarding the origin of the name ***Drăgaică***, it is of Slavic origin and overlapped with ***Sânziene*** during the period of Slavic influence in Early Feudalism.[9] The *Drăgaice* (as 'Sweethearts') and *Dragobete* share a common etymology and are personifications of deities of love. In the case of the *Drăgaice* as 'sweethearts,' we refer to female divinities celebrated from the Spring Equinox to the Autumn Equinox, known by different names depending on the season (*iele*, winds, hawks, *Sânziene*, or *Drăgaice*, etc.). The name *Sânziene* is primarily used in Oltenia, Banat, Transylvania, Maramureș, Bucovina, and Northern Moldova, while *Drăgaica* is used in Southern Moldova, Dobrogea, and Muntenia[10].

The rituals performed by young women on June 24 are reminiscent of the April ceremonies dedicated to the goddess Ceres, which featured processions and rural celebrations. They also evoke an obscure holiday in August where women, in order to offer fruits to the goddess of the harvest, had to observe nine days of sexual abstinence - a clear manifestation of sacrificial myths. Additionally, there are elements drawn from ancient Roman holidays, such as *Fornacalia* in February, dedicated to the ovens where wheat was ripened, and *Quinquatrus Minusculae*, celebrated on June 13. The latter brought together practices associated with crops, the summer Sun, and the Moon - elements that are also found in the celebration of *Sânziene*[11].

Although there is a considerable span of time between these holidays, this was not an impediment in the Italian peninsula, where the same festival was celebrated in different seasons depending on the geographical region[12]. It is an authentic example of religious syncretism when ritual elements of a winter holiday are found within summer ones.

It is with good reason that we can link *the mysteries of the goddess Demeter* to the processions, incantations, and dances of the Sânziene. In Greek mythology, Demeter -the deity of the fields, particularly those of wheat - wandered the world

---

[8] Atanasie Marian Marienescu, *Cultul păgân și creștin,* vol. I, Editura: SAECULUM I.O.,colecția Mythos,
București, 2008, pp. 329-333

[9] Romulus Vulcănescu*, Mitologie română,* Editura Academiei, București, 1985*,* p. 489

[10] Ion Ghinoiu, Hábitouri populare de peste an, Bucharest, pp. 178-179

[11] Tache Papahagi, *Mic dicționar folkloric,* București, 1979, p. 424)

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 431.

in search of her beautiful daughter, Persephone, who had been abducted by her uncle Hades, the God of the Underworld. Devastated by her daughter's disappearance, Demeter refused to ascend to heaven, abdicating her divine duties. As a result, the fields became barren and scorched, threatening the survival of the mortals whom the gods relied upon for worship. To restore balance to a world plagued by crop failure, Zeus, the supreme deity of Olympus, proposed a compromise: Persephone would spend half the year in the Underworld with her husband and the other half with her mother on Earth. Whenever the beautiful Persephone emerged from the darkness, her mother's joy was immense, and the Earth burst forth with fruit and bountiful harvests (from spring to autumn). When she returned to the Underworld, Demeter's maternal grief plunged the world into chaos, cold, and hunger - thus, winter arrived. In this context, the dance of the Sânziene at the Summer Solstice can be compared to that of the nymphs, Persephone's companions. They rejoiced in her presence while knowing that as the sun began to fade after the solstice, the girl's return to her husband in the dark realm approached, bringing with it the wintry scourges that her grieving mother would soon sweep across the earth.

It is easy to understand that the custom of the *Sânziene* originally possessed distinct regional characteristics depending on the ethnographic and historical areas of our country. The uniformity we see today - featuring barefoot girls in white dresses wearing floral crowns and heading to the river - is partly due to the commercialization of the holiday and the gradual loss of its defining sacred elements. Initially, the date of the celebration - the Summer Solstice - was deeply rooted in the community's daily life, as the custom was dedicated to protective deities with specific agrarian or pastoral roles. In mountainous regions, where shepherding was the primary occupation and wheat was scarce, mountain flowers became the *'raw material'* for wreaths. These were placed around the necks of sheep for an explicitly apotropaic purpose - to ward off evil.

In this regard, we reproduce the following custom from June 24, 1916, collected from the Vâlcea Mountains by Tache Papahagi: 'On the eve of June 24, all the girls and young wives go to the spring where they weave crowns from the flowers they have gathered. These crowns are placed around the neck of the first sheep that emerges before them. They also weave a floral wreath, beautifully decorated, which they place on the two pillars forming the second gate of the sheepfold through which the sheep pass to be milked; thus, every sheep passes under this wreath. Afterward, the same group of girls takes the floral arrangement back to the spring and hides it among boulders or tall grass, concealing it as best as possible so that the shepherds can never find it. If the shepherds do happen to find

it, they fill buckets with fresh water to drench the entire group of girls and wives; otherwise, they are left to regret their failure and are themselves sprinkled with water by the women. The next day, the *hora* begins."[13]

The custom of the *Sânziene* hiding the floral wreath[14] is found throughout the Balkans. Placing the wreath - a solar symbol - around a sheep's neck refers both to Christianity, where the white sheep is assimilated to the sacrificial lamb, and to paganism, where this domestic animal represents family abundance as well as the embodiment of forest and pastoral deities. As is traditional, young girls hold a central role in these customs; on *Sânziene* Day, they hike up to the sheepfolds to fulfill the ritual of gathering flowers.

Their ascent to the sheepfolds gave rise to the so-called 'girls' fairs' or local rural celebrations known as *nedeia*, where young people from villages scattered across the mountains could meet. In the lowland basins, where wheat cultivation held a central place as the primary occupation, *Sânziene* traditions are even more spectacular. They involve larger groups of girls, as the villages were closer together—and wherever there were girls of marriageable age, there were even more eligible young men. To truly grasp the scale of this pre-Christian holiday and its impact on these communities, one must emphasize that at no other time of the year did young women of marriageable age hold a more important or sacred role. The ritual was performed exclusively by these girls and, at most, the youngest wives; older women never participated, as on this day they became, symbolically, negative characters.

As an aside, on this day, the 'Old Men' turned into positive figures - an aspect reflected in fairy tales and stories where the Old Woman's daughter is consistently wicked, while the Old Man's daughter is always virtuous. The positive image of the 'Old Man' also refers to his patriarchal stature and his resemblance to the Sun as it begins its descent - symbolizing Time that declines only to be reborn. On no other day of the year was the honor bestowed upon a girl, and her future status as mother and wife, greater than on *Sânziene* Day

Through nocturnal and - more rarely - diurnal rituals, the almost obligatory nudity, spoken of only in whispers, and the ritual bathing in the morning light, the girls sent shivers through the boys. In their fiery minds, the young men could only imagine the virginal dances of those who, until then, had been mere village girls.

---

[13] Take Papahagi, *Din folklorul romanic şi cel latin,* studiu comparat, Bucureşti, 1923, pp. 95-96.

[14] In this context, the ***mătăuz*** is a bouquet of flowers and basil tied with a red thread and usually blessed in church. It serves as a substitute for a solar-vegetational deity; its concealment by girls and young women suggests the struggle between light and darkness. The men who search for the ***mătăuz*** embody the role of the fecundator, while the sprinkling with water belongs to initiatory rites similar to the sacrament of baptism.

In fact, the message conveyed to the young men by the *Sânziene* was one of profound erotic impact: they were no longer just the girls from the harvest, the weeding, or the hay-gathering; they had attained a different status. Now, they were *Sânziene* - benevolent fairies who enchanted and 'stole' men's minds

The strict fulfillment of these rituals was not merely about creating a mystical balance between *this world* and *the hereafter*, but also served a pragmatic and rational role by giving meaning to the community's existence. One can imagine the year's celebrations linked together like a spiritual path from which no one could deviate. While boys proved their diligence, strength, and wisdom through tasks like plowing and marking field boundaries, *Sânziene Day* belonged exclusively to the girls. On this day, they no longer had to prove their skills in spinning or sewing - as they did on *Joimari* - nor their industriousness, as seen during the *'Shouting over the village'* or the harvest on 'Elisha's Days.' Instead, their only concern was to embody beauty through purity. *Sânziene Day* was an initiation, much like a baptism, for those who *'rose to the hora*.' Their presence in the group proved they were *'ready for marriage*,' placing them at the center of attention for young men who, until that day, had not yet considered them as potential partners.

At the *hora* during the local *nedeia* celebrations that followed, the girls danced dressed in festive costumes, but this time with their heads adorned with wreaths made of yellow *Sânziene* flowers[15] over white veils. Generally, girls attended the *hora* with their heads uncovered: their hair was tied in a single braid if they were 'in conversation' with a boy, or in two braids if they were single. Wearing the floral crown - a symbol usually reserved for married women - signified their future status as wives and mothers. Furthermore, wearing this crown over a white silk veil created a nimbus-like effect, symbolizing their state of spiritual and physical purity.

On the morning of June 24, shortly before sunrise, the girls would gather in a group they had formed long before, covering their heads with long white veils that they let fly in the wind. They placed upon their heads the floral crowns specific to *Sânziene Day* - which attested to their virginity - and wore their most beautiful traditional blouses and aprons, often woven and embroidered specifically for this day[16]. They held bouquets of flowers and ears of wheat in their hands, both elements - the crown and the bouquet - being considered a covenant with the worshipped deities. Thus, the deities became guarantors of their virginity, acting as an unspoken oath taken by the young women before the entire community.

[15] Romulus Vulcănescu, *op. cit*. p. 489.
[16] *Ibidem.*

Furthermore, it was considered a sacrilege - one that no young woman would dare risk - to wear the crown and bouquet on *Sânziene Day* if she was no longer a virgin.

Sometimes, the girls also fashioned belts from *Sânziene* flowers to wear around their waists. These symbolized both their chastity and the blessing granted by the Vegetation Deity, ensuring their bodies would be fertile and capable of giving birth to healthy, blemish-free children. This magical belt also served a protective role, shielding the girls from lower back pain during the harvest, thereby ensuring they could meet the village's expectations of hard work and endurance[17]. Along with their ritual bouquets, on *Sânziene Day*, the women carried sickles - either real or made of wood - which alluded to the crescent shape of the Moon and the fertility it represented. Furthermore, the sickles, carried alongside bouquets of wheat ears, symbolized the agricultural cycle of harvesting (birth, death, and rebirth), as the girls' path always culminated in a wheat field. If several groups of *Sânziene* girls met, they would simulate a ritual battle with their sickles. After dancing the *hora* in the middle of the field, they ran back to the village, where groups of young men awaited them with vessels full of water. The men would sprinkle them, simulating fertilization, much like Heaven-Father sends fertilizing rain to Mother Earth.

Another tradition was that of ritual bathing, when virgins went early in the morning to flowing water, wearing crowns on their heads, barefoot, and dressed only in long white chemises, carrying bouquets of flowers and ears of wheat. Walking barefoot through the dew was the first act of this ritual bathing, and sometimes young wives participated as well. The dew held rich symbolism, both pre-Christian and Christian: ranging from passionate and burning, yet fleeting love, to 'living water' that springs from the earth rather than falling from heaven, and even mysterious Christian meanings related to protecting the family. Furthermore, the dew was sipped from flower petals or leaves like a liquor that purified the body from within. This practice had the magical role of transforming a girl’s youthful body into the fertile body of a woman[18].

Once at the riverside, the girls chose a secluded spot where, undressed, they began their ritual bathing as a form of purification. This followed an ancient rite similar to the sacrament of baptism (the act of immersion), echoing the early centuries of Christianity when baptism was performed at adulthood. This gesture symbolized the transition from the status of a child to that of a young woman - an

[17] Ion Ghinoiu, *Obiceiuri populare de peste an. Dicționar,* Editura Fundației culturale române, București, 1997.p. 179.
[18] Sabina Ispas, *Meanings and Mores of the Past, Angelic Heroine of the Romanian Fairy Tale,* Bucharest, 2012, pp. 159-160).

essential stage in a girl's life when marriage became her primary concern. The ritual bathing took place under the full moon, after midnight, at the moment when the heavens were said to open. However, a superstition persisted in the region of Moldavia; as ethnologist Marcel Olinescu noted, it was forbidden to bathe in rivers or lakes on *Sânziene Day* due to the great danger of drowning[19].

Bathing in lakes or flowing waters bears a striking resemblance to the baptism in the Jordan River performed by John the Baptist. It is highly probable that this Christian custom merged, within ancient communities, with a pagan rite of purification through ablution. In the context of the ritual bath—where the flowing water becomes one with, or at least in communion with, the worshipped deity—the crystalline waves serve a purifying role for both the girl's physical body and her fertile essence. The magical bathing on *Sânziene Day* does not limit the influence of the heavenly and earthly deities to the physical realm alone, but extends it to the girl's soul. She becomes a sanctified being, touched by the blessings of water, earth, and sky, as their germinal properties are transferred to her.

Their nudity suggests a renunciation of childhood; when they emerge, completely transformed, they put on the traditional blouse of a woman ready for marriage. The sacred water washes away their childhood but leaves their purity of soul intact. Thus, the child who had been consecrated to the gods and the woman she has become continue to exist under their protective wing. The water buries the past, removing any possibility of return, and pushes them inexorably toward an expected and desired future. Furthermore, their nakedness served as a visual confirmation to the entire group that their bodies had matured for marriage and childbirth, creating a powerful, covenant-like bond among them. They were all equal, just as they had come into the world; clothes and, by extension, social status ceased to exist. This same equality was expected to endure in the future when, as wives, they would provide balance not only to their own families but, through their mutual bond, to the entire community.

The dance performed by the *Sânziene* after their ritual bath transformed them into solar beings - pure brides of the sky - and rendered their presence apotropaic. Indeed, many households featured the motif known as *'the girls' hora'* as a decoration on the ridges of their roofs. The dance of these *Sânziene virgins* banished curses from the fields and warded off drought, hail, disease, and insects, bringing the blessing of abundance to both the village and the land. Their image is Edenic: they are beautiful, sensual, tender, and gentle - true consorts of the Sun. They embody what humanity has sought since the dawn of existence: deification

[19] Marcel Olinescu, *Mitologie românească,* Editura Cetatea de Scaun, București, 2025, p. 290.

alongside benevolent deities who possess the power to transform imperfect man into something approaching perfection[20].

Through ritual bathing, the transition from child to young woman is sacralized; their chastity aligns them with the divine [21].

A true communion is forged between the virgins and the worshipped deities through their honoring of the water - water which, only a few weeks later, will be defiled by the deer [22]. They offer themselves as a final tribute to the light and warmth of summer, striving through these rituals to embody the very radiance and abundance that, unknowingly, will soon fade into the depths of winter. The garments the girls wore on this special day had to define their status and align with magical practices; like priestesses, they became worthy servants of the female deities of fertility and the Sun. The white blouse worn during divinatory acts symbolized purity, but above all, a change of state. The aprons woven for the *nedeie* were intended to be part of the future wife's attire. She would eventually take off the long white chemise of a maiden and put on that of a mature woman—a ritual exchange of garments through which her thoughts, hopes, and aspirations also transformed. This celebration was one that no girl of marriageable age could afford to miss; her belonging to the sisterhood of *Sânziene* had to be visible, perhaps even ostentatious. These garments had to differ from those of children and younger girls, as they displayed before the entire village the symbol of chastity—the most precious gift a bride could offer her husband. The community was well aware of the gravity of sacrilege, and a lie in this regard was unthinkable.

The ritual was resumed every year by the girls who remained unmarried; the white blouse served as a reconfirmation of their virginity, as the same garment would eventually be worn by the bride on her wedding night. This item of clothing functioned much like a priestly vestment, with one key distinction: while a priest's attire is marked with numerous symbols of faith and divinity, the *Sânziene* blouse bore none. Its complete whiteness was its only symbol. This white was angelic, evocative of holiness, as the Gospel tells us: *'And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning,*

---

[20] Mircea Vulcănescu, *Logos și eros*, Editura Paideia, București, 1991, pp. 94-96.

[21] From here stems the ancient custom in which a maiden was deflowered before marriage through a ritualistic act, performed solely by the community's magus. The medieval abuses where the lord claimed the right of *primae noctis* originate in the belief that the nobleman, a ruler by divine grace, was the only one entitled to 'harvest' this sacred gift of the gods.

[22] It is believed that bathing was permitted until *Pobrejenie* (the Transfiguration – August 6th) or August 15th (the Dormition of the Mother of God); after this period, the water grows cold and is *'defiled by the stag'* (Tudor Pamfile, *Sărbătorile de toamnă și postul Crăciunului,* București, 1914, p. 4).

and his clothing as white as snow' (Matthew 28:2-3). A white *ia* (traditional blouse) without decorations was never worn by a married woman; doing so would have been a violation of all moral norms. Once the marriage was consummated, she no longer held the right to dress or act as a maiden.

Regarding the dance of the *Sânziene* virgins, it represents an intimate and magical form of celebration - an act of invoking fertility by those who, on that night, are blessed by the divine. This nuptial dance is slow, resembling a solemn prayer, in stark contrast to the fast and frenetic dances of the Serbians or the lively *hora* of the following day. Its deliberate pace mirrors the smooth flight of the fairies who, in popular tradition, glide over fields and households on this night, descending to earth to weave the destinies of young men and women, to heal the sick, or to banish poverty and bring forth abundance. The girls who danced undressed on this night formed a secret circle - a female sisterhood - and their chosen location, usually a secluded forest clearing or a distant meadow, was a closely guarded secret. It was the sacred dance of the world's beginning, a moment when primordial life began to cover the earth, brought from the cosmic depths by the Great *Fârtat*; it was the prayer that girls sent to the afterlife. The dance acted as an amulet against the demons of the gale and the spells of witches, spiritually adorning the girl in an invisible gown of eroticism. Those who participated in such a ritual emerged transformed - more self-assured and aware of their own sexuality - which made them exceptionally attractive in the eyes of the village youth.

Girls sought to marry men who had never been married before, driven by the superstition that 'a maiden avoids marrying a widower because they say that in the next world she will be a widow; the man will have his first woman as his wife, and vice versa.[23]

While a man past his prime could still find a consort - often with the help of an older woman - the same was not true for a girl. It was difficult, if not impossible, for a young woman to marry after a certain age. Girls usually *'rose to the hora'* around the age of fifteen, and by twenty or twenty-one at the latest, a girl was expected to be married, with her own household and children. After the age of twenty-five, she was already considered an 'old maid'.[24].

This 'race against time' toward marriage helps us understand the behavior of the girls on ***Sânziene*** Day. Time was a limited resource for them; it was not enough simply to marry - they had to secure a 'good' husband, free of vices and troubles, of similar social status, and of a relatively equal age. This was a compelling reason not to miss the ritual bathing and dancing, nor the enchantments

[23] George S. Ioneanu, *Superstițiile poporului român,* Buzău, 1888, p. 70.
[24] Artur Gorovei, *Datinile noastre la nuntă,* București, 1910, p. 6.