

Brancusi and popular Orthodoxy

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Résumé

Brancusi et l'orthodoxie populaire

Une étude anthropologique du paysan roumain au début du XXe siècle, illustrée par l'œuvre de Brancusi, révèle une orthodoxie populaire, syncrétisme religieux où se mêlent orthodoxie dogmatique et ritualisme populaire. L'analyse du monument aux morts de la première guerre mondiale de Tirgu-Jiu permet de décoder dans celui-ci deux sortes de messages, selon les deux registres de l'orthodoxie dogmatique et populaire. Cette dernière, structurée sur un modèle érotico-thanatique peut être identifiée ici sous la forme de deux grands rituels : "la noce du mort" et les "aumônes du temps de la vie", utilisables aussi pour une meilleure compréhension de la biographie de Brancusi.

Abstract

A study of the religious anthropology of the Romanian peasant at the turn of the century, exemplified in Brancusi's work, reveals a religious syncretism, in fact a "popular Orthodoxy", which comes from dogmatic Orthodoxy and popular religious ritualism. An analysis of Brancusi's memorial for the World War I dead from Tirgu-Jiu, Romania, would exhibit two kinds of religious messages, which can be used also for a biographical deciphering of Brancusi : in dogmatic Orthodoxy and in popular Orthodoxy. The latter is structured on an erotico-thanatic model, identifiable here under the form of two major rituals : the "wedding of the dead" and "life-time alms".

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Brancusi and popular Orthodoxy

A study of the religious anthropology of the Romanian peasant at the turn of the century, exemplified in Brancusi's work, reveals a religious syncretism, in fact a popular Orthodoxy, which comes from dogmatic Orthodoxy and popular religious ritualism. An analysis of Brancusi's memorial for the World War I dead from Tirgu-Jiu, Romania, would exhibit two kinds of religious messages, which can be used also for a biographical deciphering of Brancusi: in dogmatic Orthodoxy and in popular Orthodoxy. The latter is structured on an erotico-thanatic model, identifiable here under the form of two major rituals: the wedding of the dead and life-time alms.

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Une étude anthropologique du paysan roumain au début du xx^e siècle, illustrée par l'œuvre de Brancusi, révèle une orthodoxie populaire, syncrétisme religieux où se mêlent orthodoxie dogmatique et ritualisme populaire. L'analyse du monument aux morts de la première guerre mondiale de Tirgu-Jiu permet de décoder dans celui-ci deux sortes de messages, selon les deux registres de l'orthodoxie dogmatique et populaire. Cette dernière, structurée sur un modèle érotico-thanatique peut être identifiée ici sous la forme de deux grands rituels: la noce du mort et les aumônes du temps de la vie, utilisables aussi pour une meilleure compréhension de la biographie de Brancusi.

The aim of the present paper is to emphasize the existence, at the beginning of the twentieth century in Romania, of a way of religious thinking of the peasant which was parallel¹ with dogmatic Orthodoxy. In my opinion, its only visual representation in high culture appears in the works of the sculptor Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957), especially in the memorial that he erected at Tirgu-Jiu in Romania. This monument – an illustration of a kind of archaic religious thinking – can be compared, because of its grandeur, to the greatest religious monuments of the world.

Because of the war and then the introduction of communism in Romania, the memorial was neglected by scholarly research for a long time. Later analyses were decontextualized probably because Modernism removed death and sacredness from art², ignoring the ritualistic and religious context of the artist's formative milieu, although it is known that Brancusi, exiled in his Paris studio, conserved his cultural identity all his life by observing the religious feasts and by preserving the behaviour of the Romanian peasant³.

Along with the fading of Modernism, one notices during the past decades an attempt to free the discourse on Brancusi from the political correctness of Modern ideology. In this respect, some Western and native approaches in Brancusi scholarship suggested a ritualistic source for his art, and (although sustained with few arguments) the dogmatic Orthodox reli-

1. Cf. Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, New York, Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., 1960.

2. Except for Mircea Eliade's (The Sacred and the Modern Artist, in *Criterion*, Spring, 1964, p. 22-24, reprinted in *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred. An Anthology in Religion and Art*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, New York, Crossroad, 1986, p. 179-183), there were no other voices in favour of the sacred in Brancusi's art.

3. Information given by many Romanians who visited Brancusi in Paris, to cite only Sanda Tatarascu-Negroponte (personal communication, December 8, 1994).

gion⁴, especially for the memorial at Tirgu-Jiu⁵. In my opinion, the Orthodox approaches to Brancusi's religious understanding are inadequate because they do not differentiate between dogmatic Orthodoxy and *popular* Orthodoxy⁶, which was in fact the religious ritualism of the peasant. Also, a study of the religiosity of the peasant must be a study of anthropology, because it deals with unwritten history⁷.

Through an analysis of the religious anthropology of the peasant (*i.e.*, the popular Orthodoxy of the context in which the artist was formed in the area of Tirgu-Jiu) an accurate interpretation of Brancusi's religious work from Tirgu-Jiu will be possible, together with a new perception of the complexity of Orthodoxy at the beginning of the twentieth century.

4. Micu Marcu, Brancusi a Tirgu-Jiu – Souvenirs, in *Revue roumaine de l'histoire de l'art*, XII, 1975, p. 131-133. See also Pontus Hulten, Natalia Dumitrescu and Alexandru Istrati, *Brancusi*, Paris, Flammarion, 1986, p. 8.

5. Friederich Teja Bach, *Constantin Brancusi - Metamorphosen plastischer Form*, Köln, Dumont Buchverlag, 1987; Tretie Paleolog, Death, Romanian Orthodoxy, and Brancusi, in Florence M. Hetzler (ed.), *Art and Philosophy: Brancusi. The Courage to Love*, New York, Peter Lang, 1991, p. 169-174; Matei Stircea Craciun, *Brancusi – Simbolismul hylesic*, Bucharest, Edinter, 1992; Ion Pogorilovski, *A Commentary on the Masterpiece of Brancusi. The Road of the Heroes' Souls*, Iasi, Junimea, 1987.

6. I coined this syntagm in order to define that particular aspect of popular religion which is performed in rural areas by Orthodox priests, *i.e.*, the principal rites of passage (birth, marriage, and death). For example, «[i]f someone died in a foreign land or in war, a post is made in his or her memory which, after six weeks (forty days) is dressed up with a shirt or a blouse; after that a religious service is performed as for a real dead person» (Simion Florea Marian, *Inmormantarea la romani*, Bucharest, 1890, p. 355); or:

«I've never seen such a groom [...]
That the priest comes to the house
To crown you on the table.
The groom is in a coffin;
The bride is God's»

(Gail Kligman, *The Wedding of the Dead. Ritual, Poetics, and Popular Culture in Transylvania*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, UC Press, 1988, p. 222).

7. A case similar with popular Orthodoxy is that of popular Hinduism which was studied from an anthropological perspective: «For the anthropologist of popular Hinduism, ethnography – not scripture – is both the major source of evidence and the touchstone of interpretation» (C. J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame. Popular Hinduism and Society in India*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 6).

The Popular Orthodox Context

At the end of the nineteenth century, when Brancusi was born⁸ (1876), Romania was an Orthodox agro-pastoral country having a « popular theology »⁹ with a parallel ritualism, which was most noticeable in rural areas on occasions such as rites of passage (birth, marriage, death) or religious ceremonies. Most of these rituals were closely connected to agricultural cycles, celebrating

8. Hobita-Pestisani, his native village, is situated at a short distance from both the town Tirgu-Jiu and the Tismana monastery – a religious center since the fourteenth century with wide ranging spiritual and historic significance. The influence of the latter on Brancusi's spiritual formation should not be ignored. While in Paris, he said: « I have opened a poor branch of Tismana in Impasse Ronsin » (Petre Pandrea, *Brancusi - Amintiri si exegeze*, Bucharest, Meridiane, 1976, p. 98). This means that St. Nicodim, the founder of the monastery who was both an artist and a spiritual leader, and a hesychasm practitioner (Pr. Mihai Zorila, *Viata si activitatea Sf. Nicodim de la Tismana*, Tismana, 1991, p. 22) might have had a moral ascendancy over him (see Petre Pandrea, *op. cit.*, p. 96-97) like he had on many other Romanian writers and artists for almost five hundred years. His last important work, accomplished in 1405, was the writing and decoration of a Tetraevangel (The Four Gospels).

9. This « popular theology » is characteristic of Romanian culture. Trying to explain only at the dogmatic level the religious thinking of a native, like Brancusi, is but a superficial approach. On the other hand, to understand his religious syncretism is quite a difficult matter for cognitive archaeology. « For Romanians, the national Church was, at the same time, a *popular church*, the Church of the people. Maybe this was the main difference between the Romanian Orthodox church and the Russian Orthodox church » (Dumitru Staniloaie, *Caracterul popular si cultural al Bisericii*, in *Telegraful roman*, n° 11, 1942). « Our peasant Orthodoxy is not so much a religion [...] as a sort of cosmogony in which the Orthodox elements of dogma are hypostasized into concrete realities » (Nae Ionescu, *Biserica taranilor*, in *Roza vanturilor*, Bucharest, Mircea Eliade Editions, 1937, p. 35). « Les paysans, de par leur propre mode d'exister dans le Cosmos, n'étaient pas attirés par un "christianisme historique". Les paysans de l'Europe comprenaient le christianisme comme une liturgie cosmique. Le mystère christologique engageait également la destinée du Cosmos [...]. Dans le folklore religieux du Sud-Est européen, les sacrements sanctifient la Nature [...]. Lorsqu'on écrira l'histoire de cette "théologie populaire", telle qu'elle se laisse saisir dans les fêtes saisonnières et le folklore religieux, on se rendra compte que le "christianisme cosmique" n'est pas une nouvelle forme de paganisme, ni un syncrétisme pagano-chrétien. C'est une création religieuse originelle dans laquelle l'eschatologie et la sotériologie sont affectées de dimensions cosmiques » (Mircea Eliade, *De Zamolxis à Gengis-Khan*, Paris, Payot, 1970).

the transformation of grain. According to Romanian peasant beliefs, a close look at a grain of wheat will reveal Christ's face on every grain¹⁰. The parallelism between Romanian popular belief about wheat and the Eucharistic mystery is evident¹¹.

The attitude of the Orthodox Church was one of tolerance¹² toward pagan magic practices among the peasants, while trying to assimilate them. Popular religious literature, parallel with the dogmatic texts written and read in Slavic until the middle of the nineteenth century, illustrates the parallelism between high culture and popular culture characteristic of Romanian society at the time. A famous interwar polemic like the one between Nichifor Crainic and Lucian Blaga was, in fact, a confrontation between dogmatic and popular Orthodox philosophies¹³.

In dogmatic Orthodoxy there existed a numerology of the number twelve¹⁴ which symbolized the church, or the Apostles or the religious «imperial feasts» (*praznicele imparatesti*). This numerology can be related to the kinship structure of the wedding, as for example, the number of possible ritual participants in a wedding ceremony (bride and groom, bride's godparents, groom's godparents, four parents, and two cousins¹⁵).

In popular Orthodoxy, the same symbolism is involved, but can receive a thanatic connotation, because here there are several common points between wedding and funerary rites such as: the dressing, the demand for forgiveness, the procession, gift/alms giving, ritual meals, ritual toasting¹⁶.

This erotico-thanatic symbolism is well represented in popular Orthodoxy by the religious service performed by priests

10. Lucian Blaga, *Spatiul mioritic*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 1994, p. 99.

11. L. Blaga, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

12. V. G. Paleolog, *Brancusi-Brancusi*, vol. I, Craiova, Scrisul Romanesc, 1976, p. 146.

13. See Dumitru Staniloaie, *Pozitia domnului Lucian Blaga fata de crestianism si Ortodoxie*, Sibiu, 1942.

14. «A favourite number in art symbolism [...] as representative of the Church generally», Edward Hulme, *Symbolism in Christian Art*, Dorset, Blandford Press, 1976, p. 15.

15. Cf. Gail Kligman, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

16. Gail Kligman, *op. cit.*, p. 218-219.

called the *wedding of the dead* (*nunta mortului*)¹⁷, a ritual characteristic of the entire Carpatho-Balkan area¹⁸. «Lamenters refer to the deceased as *mireasa* (bride) or *mnire* (groom). And like all brides and grooms, the deceased will be married in a “church” ceremony»¹⁹. The same ritual was used to appease the souls of those with unidentified sepulchers.

Unlike the *agape*²⁰ concept in dogmatic Orthodoxy, where Christ is the groom-of-the-souls, in popular Orthodoxy the funerary eroticism has a well-defined character, the virtual bride or groom in the ritual of «the wedding of the dead» being *with* God, not God/Christ Himself²¹.

17. Ion Muslea, *La mort-mariage*, in *Mélanges de l'École roumaine en France*, Paris, 1925, p. 1-25. «In the case of the decease of a person of marriageable age – the most pronounced and precarious case unless a symbolic wedding is performed during the funeral – then it is believed that this “person” will return in search of a mate to fulfill his or her social destiny as well as frustrated sexual desires. Until the soul is satisfied, it cannot rest and remains a menace to society. Hence, the *nunta mortului* (wedding of the deceased, or death-wedding) quietens the turbulence caused by the paradoxical coupling of sexuality and mortality» (Kligman, *op. cit.*, p. 216).

18. A similar ritual is performed in China under the name of «hell marriage». «The bride-to-be, the ghost of a girl who died in childhood, requests a wedding either by appearing in the dream of someone in her family or by inflicting sickness or bad luck on someone close to them. [...] The wedding actually takes place and looks like a real wedding, except for the fact that, when she is taken from the taxi, the bride is a dummy two and a half feet high, dressed like a dead person [...]» (Ioan Petru Couliano, *Out of this World. Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein*, Boston & London, Shambhala, 1991, p. 80).

19. Kligman, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

«The bride is God's,
Dressed in white clothes –
The groom is in a coffin;
Never shall she be seen»
or,
«Bride is in the coffin
Groom is with God » (*Ibid.*, p. 222).

20. See Ion Bria, *Dictionar de teologie ortodoxa*, Bucharest, Ed. Institutului Biblic si de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Romane, 1994, p. 14-15.

21. «The groom is the son of the king
He'll lead you by the hand in heaven»
(Kligman, *op. cit.*, p. 222).

An Indo-European version of the « wedding of the dead »²² ritual is that of the *fir-tree-groom* or the *fir-tree-bride*. A carved and decorated fir-tree or carved wooden column used to be placed near the deceased person's head, a practice still found in the cemetery of Pestisani village²³. A decorated tree is also used in the wedding ritual, but in this case the position is different²⁴. The tree appears in the funerary ritual in two hypostases, as a natural object (as in the wedding ritual), which is planted at the head of the deceased, or as a cultural object, as a carved post, also placed at the head of the deceased. Another cultural element derived from the tree is the gate's wooden post. The symbolic identity between the gate and the tree in funerary rituals becomes visible in the case of *intertwined trees* planted on the grave of a young person by his/her lover, a funerary custom quite popular in Oltenia at the time of Brancusi. I think that this Indo-European religious belief which identifies the body with a tree²⁵ is very well illustrated in one of Brancusi's self portraits from 1933-34. In the photograph a leafy bush has been superimposed over the image of the artist standing in front of carved wooden columns. The Christianization of the archaic phytomorphic rituals related to the tree or the gate is one of the distinctive and impressive aspects of popular Orthodoxy.

Within the Carpatho-Balkan area the cult of the dead generated a prominent funerary ideology in an attempt to

22. Romulus Vulcanescu, *Mitologie romana*, Bucharest, Ed. Academiei, 1987, p. 196.

23. See also Eric Shanes, *Constantin Brancusi*, New York, Abeville Press, 1989, p. 95, fig. 106.

24. Gheorghe Lazar, Contributii la cunoasterea obiceiurilor de nunta in Jud. Teleorman, in *Studii si cercetari - Muzeul Satului*, 1970, p. 239.

25. This religious belief is corroborated by Karl-Jean Longuet: « Je me souviens d'une histoire très jolie et très poétique que m'a racontée Brancusi : une année, il avait été très malade pendant tout l'hiver, et il ne pouvait plus quitter la loggia où il couchait, pour descendre travailler, lorsqu'un beau jour, au printemps, il constata que d'une vieille souche de bois déposée dans un coin d'atelier, avaient poussé quelques feuilles. Le même jour, Brancusi était guéri » (Friederich Teja Bach, *Constantin Brancusi. Metamorphosen Plastischer Form*, Köln, Dumont Buchverlag, 1987, p. 270).

neutralize²⁶ death and attract the favor of the deceased, in such a manner that communication with the dead became a very important cultural identity matter, the dead being identified with their ancestors, called *Mosi*²⁷ (the old ones). Several religious holidays²⁸, one of which is exclusively dedicated to the memory of the deceased called the «Day of the Dead», represent a communion with the divinity²⁹ in dogmatic Orthodoxy and an occasion for communication with the deceased through eating and drinking rituals³⁰ in popular Orthodoxy.

26. The death-watch ritual was almost always associated with «death-watch games» («jocuri de priveghi») which imitate sexual behaviour. All these games had a «kiss-penalty» (Ion Conea, *Clopotiva, Un sat din Hateg*, Bucharest, Institutul de Stiinte Sociale al Romaniei, 1940, p. 430-431).

27. Mihai Pop, *Sarbatori taranesti de primavara cu substrat geto-dac*, in *Stramosii poporului roman - geto-dacii si epoca lor*, Bucharest, Ed. politica, 1980, p. 196-203.

28. As for instance, in Oltenia, *Joia Mare* (Good Thursday in the week before Easter) is the day when «the dead return to their former houses [...] until Easter Sunday when alms are given for the departure of the souls, i.e., when pots and bread are distributed» (Simion Fl. Marian, *Sarbatorile la romani. Studiu etnografic*, vol. II: *Paresimile*, Bucharest, Institutul de Arte Grafice, 1899, p. 270). Peasants believe that the spirits of the dead prefer to stay at the eaves of the house (Ion Ghinoiu, *Varstele timpului*, Bucuresti, Meridiane, 1988, p. 169); Ion Muslea and Ovidiu Birlea, *Tipologia folclorului - Raspunsuri la chestionarul lui B. P. Hasdeu*, Bucharest, Minerva, 1970, p. 452.

29. Ioan Zugrav, *Cultul mortilor. Studiu liturgic-pastoral*, *Candela*, XLVIII, Cernauti, 1937, p. 28-73; Ioan N. Ionescu-Amza, *Rostul Parastaseilor*, Bucuresti, Cugetarea, 1937; see also Louis-Vincent Thomas, *Rites de mort. Pour la paix des vivants*, Paris, Fayard, 1985, p. 239.

30. In Romania, «[s]ouvent, le pope fait dresser une table dans la nef du sanctuaire, et l'on amoncelle dessus et sur les côtés toutes les «colivas» [a funerary cake made of wheat grains] de ceux qui sont morts dans l'année, plantées d'autant de bougies allumées que l'on a de morts dans la famille» (Éliane Georges, *Voyages de la mort*, Paris, Berger-Levrault, 1982, p. 144). *Table of Silence* one of Brancusi's sculptures in Tirgu-Jiu «may equally harbor an underlying religious significance, for the Greek Orthodox Church (of which Brancusi was a regular if desultory member and which was the prevailing faith in Oltenia), the act of eating is itself holy. Round communion tables are found in certain Greek Orthodox churches, including the old church in Hobita, where the sculptor worshipped as a child and where a round votive table can be seen behind the altar» (Eric Shanes, *op. cit.*, p. 88).

Among the rituals for the dead, a distinct place is held by the alms *per persona* known as «life-time alms»³¹ (*pomana de viu*) a ritual which is still performed in Oltenia. The ritual consisted of sacrificing a «symbolic household» during a banquet offered by the alms giver.

A numerology derived from dogmatic Orthodox symbolism like, for instance, the one generated by the number forty (e.g., the forty days before the Ascension, «The Forty Martyrs»), is also related to the burial ritual³² in popular Orthodoxy. Prayers for the dead or the sick uttered by the Orthodox priest during a forty-day period were called *sarindar*³³. A forty-day ritual was performed for those who died away from home³⁴. Human life chronology also had its own numerologic symbolism in rural areas, «at the beginning of the twentieth century, youth was around thirty [...] and old age over fifty»³⁵.

Brancusi, born in a peasant³⁶ community, was moulded culturally by the «peasant Orthodoxy» of these syncretic fune-

31. Life-time alms is the rite fulfilled by the adult peasant [...], who gives alms for himself being distrustful about the duties of the next generation toward ancestors' traditions. Ioana Armasescu and Sanda Larionescu, *Ritualul "pomenii de viu" in zona de sud a Olteniei*, in *Studii si cercetari*, Bucharest, Muzeul Satului, 1971, p. 394.

32. «Pendant quarante jours après le décès, une femme "pure" payée par la famille endeuillée se rendra, avant le lever du soleil, chez une femme nécessiteuse ou malade pour lui porter de l'eau. Le temps écoulé, elle reviendra donner aux deuillants la baguette marquée de quarante entailles qui témoigne de sa mission» (Éliane Georges, *op. cit.*, p. 144).

33. *Dictionarul explicativ al limbii romane*, Bucharest, Ed. Academiei, 1975.

34. Simion Fl. Marian, *Inmormantarea la romani*, Bucharest, Ed. Academiei Romane, 1892, p. 355.

35. Ion Ghinoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

36. For the peasant origin of Brancusi, see his birth certificate (State Archives in Craiova, newborn record from Pestisani, 1876, n° 17), in Barbu Brezianu, *Opera lui Constantin Brancusi in Romania*, Bucharest, Ed. Academiei, 1974, p. 266; see also: Sidney Geist, *Brancusi Catalogued?*, *Arts Magazine*, XXXVIII, Jan. 1964, p. 67; Petre Comarnescu, *Universalitate si specific national*, *Tribuna*, Febr. 24, 1966, p. 1; Edith Balas, *Brancusi Romanian Folk Traditions*, New York, East European Monographs, Boulder, Columbia University Press, 1987, p. XIV.

rary, sexual, and food³⁷ rites of passage³⁸; this is the reason why the religious level should be examined in his work³⁹. It is important to note that *alms* (*pomana*) in Romanian, meaning «a religious service or feast (*praznic*) after a funeral», has the same signification as *commemoration* (*pomenire*), «a religious service or prayer in memory of the dead»⁴⁰, which is the central concept of the anthropology of Orthodoxy⁴¹.

Therefore, any information about the presence of dogmatic Orthodoxy in Brancusi's life⁴², as that from Sanda Tatarascu-Negroponte⁴³, the daughter of the commissioner of the memorial and a witness of its creation, should be seen from the above-mentioned syncretic perspective.

37. Of which, the seed is a particular case. The seed/grain is transformed into flour, then into paste and at the end into bread (food for the living) or *coliva* (food for the dead). Usually the shape of the funerary bread for alms is round, but anthropomorphous forms are not uncommon. (Vaduva Otilia, *Semnificatii stravechi ale unor forme si motive ornamentale perpetuate in contemporaneitate*, in *Anuarul Institutului de Cerceteri Etnologice, Dialectologie*, Nr. 3, 1981, p. 139). The image of the seed overlapping a human couple will be used by Brancusi on the pillars of the *Gate of the Kiss*.

38. An analysis of the symbolism of numbers related to the rites of passage would reveal that Brancusi's creative activity started at the age of 30 and ceased after the Tirgu-Jiu memorial, when he was 60 years old (old age by rural standards). While the age of 30 meant the beginning of his independent artistic life, the age of 60 marked its conclusion, or his *spiritual death*.

39. For the importance of ritual in Brancusi's art, see also Balas, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

40. *Dictionarul Limbii Romane*, Bucharest, Editura Academiei, t. VIII, 1980.

41. See n. 23; see also Serghei Bulgakov, *L'Orthodoxie*, Paris, Alcan, 1930.

42. «In 1922, Brancusi gave 6000 Lei towards the building of a new church in Pestisani, which signifies his continuing identification with the church in Oltenia. (His gift is recorded on a plaque in the new church.) That Brancusi continued his allegiance to the Greek-Orthodox Church is demonstrated by the fact that after his mother's death in 1919, he had prayers said on her behalf "as long as he lived" (see Hulten *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 124)» (Eric Shanes, *op. cit.*, p. 103).

43. «Brancusi was a practicing Christian. I saw him kneeling in the Church in Tirgu-Jiu [...] He knew by heart the whole Liturgy, all the Orthodox rituals with fasts and alms. [...] He liked *coliva*, he enjoyed rituals. [...] Before every meal he signed himself. [...] I saw a crucifix above his bed. [...] When entering a church, he behaved as a good Orthodox. [...] We cannot overlook the Christian idea which, undoubtedly dominated him. [...]» (Sanda Tatarascu-Negroponte, personal communication, December 8, 1994).

The Tirgu-Jiu Memorial, a Popular Religious Monument

In full artistic glory, Brancusi returned⁴⁴ from Paris to Tirgu-Jiu – a small town very close to his native village⁴⁵ – to erect a memorial dedicated to World War I soldiers, a practice frequent in Romania between the two wars⁴⁶. I believe that an analysis of the memorial can reveal important data for the history of religion in the twentieth century, providing valuable material on popular-dogmatic Orthodox syncretism. It is worth noting that popular Orthodoxy is, in its turn, a syncretism consisting of Proto-Indo-European local archaic agricultural and Indo-European pastoralist cults.

44. « Brancusi did not want to return to Romania. Initially, he refused the invitation to come. My mother [Aretia Tatarascu] insisted. She continued to ask him to come saying that he would be completely free to decide what kind of monument he would like to erect, and choose the site » (Sanda Tatarescu-Negroponte, personal communication, December 8, 1994).

45. The testamentary connotations of this act suggest the beginning of a spiritual kinship relationship between the artist and the inhabitants of the city, which can still be observed fifty years later, the artist being considered an « ancestor » of the city (Unidentified informant from Tirgu-Jiu, personal communication).

46. Paul Rezeanu, *Artele plastice in Oltenia, 1821-1944*, Craiova, 1980, p. 183; Ion Mocioi, *Brancusi - ansamblul sculptural de la Tirgu-Jiu*, Tirgu-Jiu, 1971, p. 8. In 1919, General Artur Vaitoianu decided to found the Society for the Graves of War Heroes (Societatea Mormintele eroilor cazuti in razboi) (*Monitorul oficial*, 123, 19 September 1919, p. 7042). Its purpose was: « to discover where those who died for their country are buried; to take care of their graves by improving the walls, crosses, funerary stones, monuments, mausoleums [...] » (*Ibid.*, p. 7042). In 1926 the Association for the cult of the Fatherland (Asociatia Cultul Patriei) was established with a similar purpose (*Lamuriri asupra Asociatiei Cultul Patriei*, Bucharest, 1927, p. 7). In 1927 the Law for War Graves in Romania (Legea asupra regimului mormintelor de razboi din Romania) was adopted to stimulate private enterprise in building monuments and commemorative plaques in every settlement of the country. (*Monitorul oficial*, 119, 2 June 1927, p. 7517.) One such a private enterprise was that of Aretia G. Tatarascu, the president of the National League of Romanian Women from Gorj (Liga Nationala a Femeilor Romane din Gorj), who first commissioned the sculptor Milita Patrascu to build a monument for Tirgu-Jiu. At the suggestion of the latter, the league offered a second order for a monument in Tirgu Jiu to Brancusi who accepted it (Barbu Brezianu, Pages inédites de la correspondance de Brancusi, in *Revue roumaine d'histoire de l'art*, 2, 1964).

The first project for the memorial consisted of one piece⁴⁷, a column⁴⁸. The column, consisting of overlapping brass-plated cast iron modules, suggests by its form and colour the image of a funerary notched post or a tree trunk, the Indo-European «tree-bride» of the «wedding of the dead». In my opinion, the «tree-bride» is best visualized in a gouache⁴⁹ Brancusi painted in 1907 where the funerary column sustaining the bust of the defunct has the form of a praying woman.

The second variant for the memorial consisted of two pieces⁵⁰ because Brancusi added a triumphal arch (or «gate»), a visualization of a rite of passage⁵¹. In dogmatic Orthodoxy this passage can have a sacred significance, as can be seen from the inscription on the main gate of Sinaia Monastery (north of Bucharest): «God bless our entrances and exits».

The subject of the gate was not new for Brancusi; as early as 1915 he had studied this ritual object which concerned him until old age, as can be seen in some of the photographs from his studio. The Tirgu-Jiu «gate» consists of a massive lintel decorated with forty embracing couples (a symbol of the Forty Martyrs or funerary days or a *sarindar*) supported by two square columns (*Columns of the Kiss*). Each of them is decorated with four stylized embracing couples presented in the form of two concentric circles placed on the top of a cross – the stylized image of his sculpture *The Kiss*, also used as a funerary

47. According to V. G. Paleolog (Brancusi, conceptie urbanistica, in *Arta plastica*, n° 3, 1967, p. 18-19) and Ioan Pogorilovski (*op. cit.*), Brancusi offered a column in the first version of the monument (see also *Gorjanul* of 8-15 Sept. 1938) as in the popular-Orthodox funerary ritual.

48. A funerary «Column of eternal gratefulness» had existed since 1885 in Oltenia at Bailesti (in Rezeanu, *op. cit.*, p. 60). This is an example of high-culture import from folk culture.

49. Private collection, in Hulten *et al.*, p. 69.

50. Barbu Brezianu, *Opera lui Constantin Brancusi in Romania*, Bucharest, Ed. Academiei, 1974, p. 138.

51. Antje von Graevenitz, Brancusi: <trecere> si lacas, in *Arta*, 10, 1983, p. 35-37; Ion Pogorilovski, *op. cit.*, p. 261-273; see also Carola Giedion-Welker, *Constantin Brancusi*, Basel-Stuttgart, 1958; Sidney Geist, *A Study of the Sculpture*, London, 1968.

monument in Montparnasse cemetery, resembling grain or the funerary anthropomorphous bread for alms. The resulting image is similar to that of St. Constantine and St. Helena, flanking the cross, a very popular religious image in past centuries. Because St. Constantine was Brancusi's patron saint, the above-mentioned image incised on the columns can be considered a biographic connotation. The embracing couple in the lintel decoration could represent the psychopomp groom with the deceased soul from the *wedding of the dead* ritual, a hypothesis sustained by the presence of the funerary column. In popular belief the anthropomorphous symbols on a lintel could be decoded as the spirits of the deceased⁵².

Later Brancusi added, as in the popular Orthodox funerary ritual, a third element to the monument in the form of a round table surrounded by twelve « stools ». Along the alley which links *The Table* to *The Gate* there are another thirty stone « stools ».

According to evidence given by Brancusi's stoneworker⁵³, the artist grouped *The Table*'s stools in pairs in a first variant, trying to focus on the symbol of the couple⁵⁴ and consequently on the wedding. Thanks to this information and to the artist's inability to name the table⁵⁵ (*The Table of the Hungry, The Table of Apostles, The Table of the Last Supper, The Table of the Quietness, The Table of the Family, The Table of the Wedding Supper, Memorial Table, Alms' Table*, etc.), to choose between dogmatic Orthodoxy and the profane, I believe that the table was added to the monument in order to maintain the ideology of his initial popular Orthodox project.

The monument, conceived in a triadic form, can be deciphered from the perspective of *The Gospels*, because *The Gospels*, as in all rites of passage, has three phases: detachment, passage, and integration. Looking from *The Table* to *The*

52. Ion Ghinoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 169; Ion Muslea and Ovidiu Birlea, *op. cit.*, p. 452.

53. Barbu Brezianu, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

54. See also Ion Pogorilovski, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

55. Stefan T. Gorjan, *Amintiri despre Brancusi*, Bucharest, Scrisul Romanesc, 1988, p. 175.

Column one can interpret the three pieces of the monument as representing the scenes of the *Passion*: *The Last Supper*⁵⁶, *The Resurrection*⁵⁷, and *The Ascension*. Another argument in favor of an Orthodox symbolism for the memorial seems to be the name given by Brancusi: *The Road of the Heroes' Souls* (*Calea Sufletelor Eroilor*)⁵⁸, a Christian⁵⁹ symbol.

The importance of the monument for the history of religions is that it represents a visualization in high culture of the rituals of popular Orthodoxy, being at the same time one of the greatest monuments of popular religion in Europe.

The Personal Religious Messages

As the present paper tries to demonstrate, Brancusi's work at Tirgu-Jiu was a visualization of popular Orthodoxy, and as a consequence, subjected to its specific chronological symbolism. Seen from this perspective, the memorial may explain some of the artist's subsequent decisions, namely the possible underpinning of personal messages with religious meaning.

56. Brancusi «me laissa entendre que la Table serait une allusion à la Cène, et que les chaises qui bordent l'allée – groupées par trois – évoqueraient la Trinité», confessed Micu Marcu (*op. cit.*, p. 131). See also Friedrich Teja Bach, *op. cit.*, p. 172. From this perspective, the twelve «stools» in the form of the Eucharist chalice, and the round table in the form of a loaf of bread or dough, in accordance with Byzantine iconography, support the alimentary-funerary character of the theme, which can be found also in the grain symbol on the *Gate's* columns. The grain appears as a symbol of the Resurrection in the first three Parables of the Erminia, the authorized manual of the painter of churches. One translated issue from the late 19th century Greek manual is Vasile Grecu, *Carti de Pictura Bizantina*, Cernauti, Glasul Bucovinei, 1936.

57. «I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved and shall go in and out, and find pasture» (*St. John*, 10, 9). See also *St. Luke* (13, 24).

58. See Tretie Paleolog, *De vorba cu Brancusi*, Bucharest, Sport-Turism, 1970, p. 79.

59. «One of the most ancient names for Christianity is simply "the Way". [...] It is a name that emphasizes the practical character of the Christian faith» (Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, Crestwood, NY, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986, p. 8; see also *John* (14, 6)).

From the point of view of popular Orthodoxy Brancusi's triad with *The Gate* placed between a funerary *Table* and an ascending *Column* to separate two different spaces, could be interpreted as a representation of the separation of the «world of the living» from the «world of the dead», as the village is separated from the cemetery⁶⁰ by a gate. Thus the «world of the living» could be symbolized by the table with twelve stools – the number which could represent the number of kin participants in a wedding ceremony – and the «world of the dead» by the number forty which could be related to the prayers and ceremonies performed for the dead.

As seen earlier, these two symbolic numbers structure the popular Orthodox ritual of the «wedding of the dead» which is essentially a rite of passage between two worlds. When correlated with the biographical data of the artist⁶¹, the number 30 (the stools between *The Table* and *The Gate*) can be interpreted as visualizing a rite of passage, from youth to old age. The same ritualistic argument could explain the artistic «sterility» which followed the Tirgu-Jiu memorial, shedding fresh light on the artist's last works⁶². Illustrating the popular Orthodox rituals of passage, Brancusi's art acquired a

60. In this interpretation the church of St. Peter and St. Paul can be perceived as the village church, Tirgul Finului (the place near the cemetery where the *Column* was erected) as the village cemetery, the *Table* and the *Gate*'s grain/bread decoration as the alms-giving (*pomenile*) ritual and the *Gate*'s embraced couples as the «dead-watching games» (*jocuri de priveghi*).

61. The age when he quit Rodin's studio, starting to work independently.

62. All the subjects of Brancusi's themes after Tirgu-Jiu, *The Cocks*, *The Tortoise* and *The Flying Tortoise*, seem to have the same funeral character in relation to the «wedding of the dead» ritual. The cock, as a symbol of biological time, is associated in popular culture with the wedding ritual as a gift and with the funerary ritual as alms (Simion Fl. Marian, *Ornitologia*, vol. I, Siret, 1883). *The Tortoises*, can be related to the funerary ritual because of their symbolic meanings. According to folk tradition, the tortoise is, together with the other reptiles and insects, the symbol of a cyclical «death» and «resurrection», because of its seasonal behaviour, appearing «when the earth opens» and disappearing «when the earth closes» (Ion Ghinoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 97). Therefore, an object in the form of a tortoise can be connected in the peasant's conception with death and resurrection, *i.e.*, with the funerary ritual.

sacred⁶³ dimension, which can be sustained with arguments⁶⁴ from his childhood.

In 1935, nearly in his sixties – a very important moment in the anthropologic symbolism of the peasant – Brancusi started to envisage an eroto-thanatic memorial dedicated to the «wedding» of those who died unmarried and away from home. In this respect, from the popular Orthodox perspective of the memorial, Brancusi, an unmarried peasant away from home⁶⁵, prefigures also his death among strangers⁶⁶ attempting to obtain quietness for his soul through the visualization of the ritual of the «wedding of the dead».

At the same time, the offering to the native community of all his important⁶⁷ works as a symbolic donation⁶⁸ could be

63. «Don't look for obscure formulas or mysteries. I am giving you pure joy. Look at the sculptures until you see them. Those nearest to God have seen them» (Some of Brancusi's Maxims, in Petre Pandrea, *Brancusi. Amin-tiri si exegeze*, Bucharest, Ed. Meridiane, 1976, p. 248).

A symptomatic example of the sacredness of the monument was the reaction of the architect G. M. Cantacuzino when he saw the column for the first time: «He fell on his knees and began to cry. The intellectual elite understood this marvel» (Sanda Tatarescu-Negroponte, personal communication, December 8, 1994). The same sacredness of the *Column* can also be identified in popular culture: «At Easter, in Oltenia, there is a custom to bring candles and offerings to the graves. I remember one Easter in Tirgu-Jiu when people who went to the cemetery (the *Column* was near the cemetery) left lit candles at the *Column*», (*ibid*).

64. Brancusi's mother, who came from a family of vergers, wanted her son to become a priest and from his early childhood, before he became attracted to art, she tried to influence his studies with this end in mind (see Petre Pandrea, *op. cit.*, p. 161). In Paris he was chorister at the Romanian church for some time.

65. See also Ion Pogorilovski, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

66. An old idea of Brancusi, expressed as early as 1913 was that «it is too late for me now to move back to my country. I no longer have the time to assert myself» (I. N. T. [Tudor Arghezi] *Sculptura noastra*, in *Seara*, 23 May 1923; reprinted in Barbu Brezianu, *The Beginnings of Brancusi*, p. 24 and in Edith Balas, *op. cit.*, p. 7-8).

67. Except for *The Cock* which, according to Sanda Tatarascu-Negroponte, was, at the time, commissioned for a French monument (Sanda Tatarescu-Negroponte, personal communication, December 8, 1994). See also Barbu Brezianu, *O idee a lui Noguchi*, in *Secolul 20*, 295-297, p. 198.

68. «Brancusi did not ask for a material retribution for his work [...] He made a donation to humankind. It could be a donation with a religious message; the kind of donation we make for the after-life» (Sanda Tatarescu-

interpreted as a «life-time alms giving» ritual banquet (suggested by the table, stools, and benches), where the artist donates a «symbolic household» (suggested by the *Gate* and *Column*) as a *per persona* alms (*pomana*) for memory (*pomenire*); perhaps, this is the reason why all the chosen sculptures have an architectural as well as furniture symbolism. All this assemblage makes up his Paris studio – which in fact was his household and which he donated to the French government before his death.

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Negroponte, personal communication). According to Ovidiu Papadima (*O viziune romaneasca a lumii - Studiu de folclor*, Bucharest, Colectia Convorbiri literare, 1941, p. 53), «one of the three basic ideas of the Romanian vision about the world is [...] the idea of alms/charity [*milostenie*], in order to give the surplus back to the world».