

# The rooster in the transylvanian folklore

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Dans le folklore et les croyances de la Transylvanie, le coq occupe une place prédominante parmi les animaux domestiques. Il a des aptitudes exceptionnelles, sa voix signale également l'arrivée de minuit et celle de l'aube. Par conséquent, il est le symbole du soleil qui marque le début de la vie, en le saluant par son chant. Il est devenu l'emblème de la lumière qui naît et celui de la résurrection. Protagoniste des croyances et de la conception de la vie populaire, le coq est présent dans les rites de passage, dans les moments les plus importants, les points de changements de la vie. En même temps, il est un élément important: sacrifice au moment d'une construction, magie agraire visant la fertilité des plantes, ensorcellement pour faire venir la pluie.

From our domestic animals, the rooster is the one to play an outstanding role in the Transylvanian folklore and beliefs. He has special powers: with his crowing he signals midnight, but also the break of day. Thus in an abstract sense he is a symbol of the rising Sun, which symbolises the start of life, as with his crowing he is the first to salute it. Further more, besides the rising light he has become the symbol of resurrection. Thanks to his place within the system of symbols related to the Sun, he is an important character in the folk beliefs and the concept about the world. In the same time he differs from the other singing birds of the night by the fact that he delimits the dangerous dark night from the non-dangerous light of the day. He also acts differently within these two parts of the day: in the light he lives his usual profane life, while at night he has special powers. The cock-crow expels the maleficent creatures; therefore he confers order and rhythm to our profane sphere. As he divides the passing of time in regular segments, in the traditional life of the villages he functioned as a real clocker tool. Most of the scholars believe that Hungarians used to know the rooster and the hen before their settlement in the Carpathian Basin. This fact helped the formation of a rich palette of images about the rooster in the Hungarian system of beliefs. As the beliefs are a stable, hardly

changing part of folklore, we can run into ancient rooted practices and beliefs even in our present days<sup>1</sup>.

We can find the rooster in most of the rites of passage, at the turning points of the human life, when regularly his two functions (articulation of time and fertility) are expressed. His ambivalent character is due to his different qualities. The images and practices related to the rooster appear already at the first turning point of life: at birth. In the Călata region (Hungarian: Kalotaszeg), at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the priest was given a rooster at the baptism of boys<sup>2</sup>.

It is not only in the case of Hungarians, but all over the world the rooster is the symbol of fertility and sexual potency. In Christian symbolism he has become the expression of different sins, obviously because of his sexual hunger. Together with the hen, he is present within love magic as well. In the Ghimeş (Hungarian: Gyimes) region the liver of a black rooster was boiled and given to the young man. According to their beliefs, thus the lad would fall in deep love with the girl. At St Nicholas' Day (December 6) the girls of Mureş (Hungarian: Maros) county waited eagerly for the night to come, as they believed that as many times the rooster would crow, as many suitors they would have. Related to love magic, the rooster is also present in the beliefs of New Year's Eve. In this outstanding moment, the girls used to go out in the yard, and knock on the doors of the henhouse, and if the rooster had given any sounds, the girl would have married in the upcoming year<sup>3</sup>.

In relation to these beliefs there is also the function of the rooster in the customs and beliefs of marriage. In many parts of the Hungarian language area the rooster had a special place within the menu served at the weddings. Some interesting forms of this function could be observed within the folklore of the Transylvanian Hungarians. Even in 1979 in the village Carastelec (Hungarian: Kárásztelek) from Sălaj county the rooster was an important item within the gifts offered before the wedding. At the night before, the bride used to send a hen and two apples to the groom, while in return she used to get a rooster, sausage and two eggs. These gifts (e.g. rooster, hen, eggs, apple) in a symbolic way were oriented towards assuring fertility<sup>4</sup>. At the gates of Transylvania, in the villages around Satu Mare (Hungarian: Szatmárnémeti), the testicles of the rooster were served to the bride in order to avoid sterility<sup>5</sup>. In Hunedoara (Hungarian: Hunyad) county the roast rooster was the last dish at the wedding, representing the highlight of it, when the rooster was served ornamented

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<sup>1</sup> Pozsony 1998. 157.

<sup>2</sup> Wlislöckiné 1895. 209.

<sup>3</sup> Pozsony 1998. 158-161.

<sup>4</sup> Kós - Szentimrei - Nagy 1981. 358.

<sup>5</sup> Ujváry 1980. 213.

with flowers<sup>6</sup>. In most of the Transylvanian villages the rooster was served in a ceremonial way, and then it was cut into pieces. In the village of Armășeni (Hungarian: Csíkmenaság) the rooster was served ornamented with flowers and colorful vegetables. Usually it was placed in front of the new couple, and they were the ones to eat it after the roast meat was served to the public. In the customs related to marriage the rooster is definitely the symbol of masculinity, being a night bird, while his function of chasing away evil is not that accentuated. But in the beliefs about the other side and the malefic creatures he is often present<sup>7</sup>.

In the customs and beliefs related to death, the rooster appears as the protector of the deceased. Thus he helps the deceased to integrate into a new order, a new world, where he drives his/her soul. There is a belief in the Transylvanian villages, according to which the set off of the deceased soul towards the other side is signalled by cock-crow. The inhabitants of the Hóstát in Cluj-Napoca believed that the crowing rooster signaled the death of someone. It is a frequent idea in the Hungarian folk beliefs that the deceased can return to our world as a rooster<sup>8</sup>.

In the Hungarian villages of Călata region was collected the story according to which a sickle-feather was dropped from above the ill person, and if it landed on the person, he/she would survive.

The rooster as a gift in the funeral customs has its origin in the primitive funeral sacrifices. In Transylvania we have variants especially within the Hungarian communities which co-existed with Romanians. In the village Zăbala (Hungarian: Zabola) from Trei Scaune region (Hungarian: Háromszék) the Romanian inhabitants had a custom at funerals: rooster and lamb was handed over the coffin placed above the tomb to the poor relatives or acquaintances of the deceased<sup>9</sup>.

The rooster had an important role in the building sacrifices too. It was a frequent element within the Transylvanian rituals related to building. Up to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Seklerland there was a practice to place a black rooster between the walls of the new house. Usually he was placed in the sacred corner of the house, within the walls facing the street and the yard. Most of the times the slaughtered rooster was placed into some pottery, and built into the wall. In the village Suatu, situated on the Transylvanian Plain (Romanian: Câmpia Transilvaniei, Hungarian: Mezőség), the elders recalled even in 1979 the custom according to which the blood of a chicken was spilled under the threshold

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<sup>6</sup> Téglás 1979. 269.

<sup>7</sup> Pozsony 1998. 161.

<sup>8</sup> K. Kovács 1944. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Pozsony 1998. 164-165.

of the newly built house, then the chicken was consumed at the table<sup>10</sup>.

The rooster is frequently present in the legends and beliefs on the treasures hidden in the ground. One group of legends says that a living rooster must be sacrificed on the spot where the treasure lies, thus the sacrifice will obtain the grace of the protecting spirits, and the treasure will be revealed. Other legends sustain that the rooster is the one to protect the hidden treasure<sup>11</sup>.

Regarding the beliefs about weather, the rooster is a frequent presence. When the Gypsies of Saxonland heard the first spring thunder, they threw the feathers of a red rooster into the fire while saying a rune. According to their beliefs on that very year the lightning would avoid their houses. In many villages of the Hungarian language area people used to say that late night crowing of the rooster means bad weather, while his continuous early morning crowing means rain<sup>12</sup>.

On the Transylvanian Plain people used to believe that witches would cause aridity by burning a stolen rooster feather on the tumbleweed. Therefore we do not consider it accidental that in time of long lasting aridity the rooster is included in magic rituals for rain. In Transylvania especially the Romanians used to have a practice according to which in times of aridity the roosters were given a water and milk bath. On the Transylvanian Plain Romanian and Hungarian women grabbed their roosters and brought them to the river or to a well, and gave them a bath. When the aridity was so accentuated that springs and streams dried up, the roosters were sprayed with milk in order to evoke rain<sup>13</sup>.

Within the Transylvanian calendar customs we can find some rituals concerning the slaughter of the rooster at Easter time. For example at Apața (Hungarian: Apáca) the rooster was slaughtered by children with arrows on Easter Sunday, while in Săcădate (Hungarian: Oltszakadát) the bigger boys were the ones to do this with some sticks on the following Monday. According to their beliefs this sacrifice was meant to assure the fertility of the lands in a preventive manner<sup>14</sup>.

There is a large palette of beliefs regarding the power of the rooster to drive away evil. The ideas regarding the crowing at day-break are well spread in Transylvania. Especially the darkness of the night was proper for the activity of malefic creatures. But after the cock-crowing all these creatures lost their earthly powers. There is some data collected by Zoltán Kallós in Răscruți (Hungarian: Válaszút), a village of the Transylvanian Plain, according to which the crowing heard just before midnight shows that there is a foreign witch in the village.

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<sup>10</sup> Pozsony 1998. 165-167.

<sup>11</sup> Pozsony 1998. 167-168.

<sup>12</sup> Wlislöcki 1891. 350.

<sup>13</sup> Pozsony 1998. 169-170.

<sup>14</sup> Pozsony 1998. 86-124.

When the crowing is repeated after midnight, the witch has to leave. We have mentioned above that the feather of the rooster keeps the malefic creatures at distance from the new born child. The feathers from the tail are especially effective against charming. In the Moldavian Csángó villages those who left the house used to nail the feathers to the door and to the entrance gate. But the folk beliefs included not only the protective function, but also the image of the rooster as impersonator of malefic powers. There was a belief in Transylvania, according to which the devil and the witch can appear in the form of a black rooster. But the rooster can be found in the folk medical practices too. In several parts of Transylvania it was said that the blood of the rooster slaughtered at Easter is benefic against falling-sickness and goiter<sup>15</sup>.

The Transylvanian Hungarian folk belief related the rooster not only to the fire in the sky, that is the Sun, but also to the devastating fire that ruined the plots, the houses or the farm-buildings. In many villages it was believed that a red rooster seen in a dream would mean firestorm, and during fire he was the one who carried the flames from one building to another<sup>16</sup>.

The rooster is present in the Christian mythology as well. In the archaic apocryphal Hungarian prayers the rooster awakes the sleeping Mary several times, telling her that her son was captured and would be crucified. In the opinion of Zsuzsanna Erdélyi the rooster symbolizing and signaling the rise of light was probably related to the image of Mary sleeping or resting in the red day-break, an image that appears in our prayers and religious songs. She stated that it is probable that the motif of the rooster waking Mary is preserving the marks of medieval mystery plays, and can be related to the epic on Mary's dream, an epic tradition with both eastern and western characteristics<sup>17</sup>. The rooster appears also on the crosses having a small roof against rain, raised on the lands near Făgăraș (Hungarian: Fogaras), being a part of their composition along with the lance, the hammer, the ledder, the claw and the nails<sup>18</sup>.

Not only within the Reformed congregation, but also throughout Europe was the rooster the symbol of loyalty, penitence, faith and vigilance. We have information starting with the 9<sup>th</sup> century about the metal rooster placed on the top of churches. In medieval times this – as the symbol of the returning morning light – represented the resurrection of Christ, but also penitence. With the strengthening of Protestantism it has become a Reformed congregational symbol<sup>19</sup>.

As we have seen above, the rooster on the roof of towers is related to the

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<sup>15</sup> Pozsony 1998. 170-172.

<sup>16</sup> Szendrey Zs. - Szendrey Á. 1940. 327.

<sup>17</sup> Erdélyi 1988. 746.

<sup>18</sup> Verebélyi 1993. 76.

<sup>19</sup> Pozsony 1998. 174-175.

teachings of Christian mythology. His appearance on the roof of peasant houses or columbaria is rooted in the same religious meaning. But he is also present on specific items of material culture (lanterns, lampions and other lighting tools), which is also related to his functions and meaning within the cult of light<sup>20</sup>.

We can observe a completely different function in the case of ceramics' ornaments<sup>21</sup>. First of all we deal with items of folk ceramics as bowls, jugs and pots, with the rooster as a central figure, dominating the whole surface, thus the accent is on his fancy feathers and decorative illustration. The motif of the rooster appears most frequently on the dishes manufactured in Corund (Hungarian: Korond), one of the most important ceramic centres in Transylvania. Mostly the rooster is illustrated in a quite naturalistic way, not really being stylized. In our opinion the appearance and spread of this decorative rooster image on the ceramics of Corund in the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be explained also with a strong Romanian influence. After 1918 the craftsmen from Corund brought their works to the Moldavian and Wallachian markets, as the pottery was requested especially at funeral customs such as "pomana" (repast) and "mosi" (commemorating fest), where frumenty and candles were put into them and they were given as gifts to acquaintances, relatives or even strangers. Up to our days one of the most popular Wallachian ceramic centre was Horezu, where the specific decoration of the plates was the extremely decorative and colourful rooster. As we have mentioned, the craftsmen from Corund were dealing with the specificities, ornaments and requests of the Romanian pottery market, thus they "naturalized" the rooster too. But it is not exclusively the Romanian influence that led to the appearance of the rooster on the Transylvanian ceramics, as especially starting with the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the rooster was a quite frequent item on the Hungarian ceramics and other ornamented items<sup>22</sup>.

Hungarian ornamental folk culture includes the image of the rooster on textiles as well. At the Moldavian Csángós the broidery named after the hen (e.g. pimpernel) always symbolizes the woman, while the one named after the rooster (e.g. cockscomb) symbolizes the man. All over the Hungarian language area those motifs were named rooster-like broidery, which were made with hemstitch<sup>23</sup>. The motif of the rooster on folk textiles appears first of all on shrouds. Certainly, the meaning of it is related to the Hungarian dead cult. Up to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Hungarian peasants from Sălaj, Călata and Seklerland used to make their own shrouds and burial textiles. In most of the villages these were ready at the time of marriage, being a part of the girl's outfit.

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<sup>20</sup> Takács 1986. 83-85.

<sup>21</sup> Pozsony 1998. 175-179.

<sup>22</sup> Kocsi - Csomor 1980. 29-30.

<sup>23</sup> Kós - Szentimrei - Nagy 1981. 293.

In the more archaic villages of the Transylvanian Plain even in the decades after World War II the textiles of the coffin and the funeral room were manufactured by the women of the family. We think that probably the presence of the rooster on the funeral sheets and pillows is connected to the meanings and functions within the dead cult: the rooster helps the person who is preparing to go onto the other side; likewise he expresses the resurrection of the deceased<sup>24</sup>. In Emőke Lackovits' opinion the rooster-like and bird-like images of the burial textiles are related to the beliefs on Hungarians about the soul. In many places the door of the funeral room was opened to enable the soul to exit. Therefore the birds on the funeral textiles too symbolized the same vanishing soul<sup>25</sup>.

The cockscomb and the leg of the rooster were also beloved elements of the Transylvanian folk ornamentals. On the Easter eggs given to the lads in Ghimeș, the rooster as the symbol of manhood was represented by his most specific body part, the cockscomb. On the surface of the egg, at the meeting point of the vertical and horizontal line the motifs meet in such a way as if they would roll in the same direction, thus forming the symbol of the rolling Sun<sup>26</sup>. It is possible, that the rooster on the fancy pillows that were given to the new couple at the wedding had a similar function. The cockscomb was a common presence also on the pillow embroideries from Araci (Hungarian: Árapatak)<sup>27</sup>.

Based on the examples from above we can state that the images, beliefs, practices and customs related to the rooster deeply rooted into the Hungarian folklore<sup>28</sup>.

The rooster appears at the most important turning points of human life: at birth, at marriage and at death. After birth people tried to endure the safety of the new born child with the help of the rooster, while throughout youth they were seeking for a future life partner. At weddings the role and meaning of the rooster related to fertility and sexuality was accentuated. In the dead cult he is the omen, but also helping the deceased's soul to make the journey to the other side. The rooster used to play an important role in the primitive funeral sacrifices, thus we think that his appearance as an ornamental motif on funeral textiles is not accidental. Therefore his influence and power stretches all over the course of a human life, from birth to death, escorting the soul even beyond.

We will meet the rooster as building-offering, too. In these cases it is also the positive meaning that is outstanding: he helps to preserve a person's life and health, giving him/her luck. Secondly he serves for the reduction, the lightening

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<sup>24</sup> Pozsony 1998. 177-178.

<sup>25</sup> Lackovits 1990. 42.

<sup>26</sup> Gazda 1998, Kovács 1994.

<sup>27</sup> Csulak – Gazdáné 1972. 42.

<sup>28</sup> Pozsony 1998. 179-182.

of the imminent sacrifice which occurs at moving into a new home.

The figure of the rooster appears in many treasure legends, too. In most of these he is the protector of the hidden treasure, but very often one can find the treasure only after sacrificing him. A very rich material deals with the practices and beliefs related to weather. The role of the rooster is multi-functional, as one the one hand he helps predicting the weather, but on the other hand with certain acts and texts one can create the wanted change of weather.

The polysemy of the symbol (the multitude and variety of the beliefs about the rooster) comes from the different classifications of the object (the rooster). Most of the time he keeps the malefic creatures and evil powers at distance, but he also appears as the embodiment of evil, plus he has the power of predicting about weather or guests and so on.

It is very interesting how some of his meanings are transferred onto his body parts: his feathers, blood, heart, testicles, gizzard are often used in magic practices. We can observe a slight differentiation in functions between these parts: the feather signals a certain status, the gizzard cures people, the testicles are sexual symbols etc.

The figure of the rooster can be found also in the Christian mythology. This helped his appearance, as a protector motif, on the top of sacred and profane buildings; meanwhile he serves the strengthening of Christian values.

His function within the Hungarian ornamental material culture is first of all related to his magical meaning.

In the archaic folk art the rooster had an important role especially in the dead cult. But starting with the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century mostly it has played only a decorative role on textiles and ceramics. However his role in the Hungarian folklore reflects the relation between man and animal, between mankind and its environment. It is also illustrating how man picked up the rooster – similarly to the goose – from his domestic animals, that is only from his well-known, profane and neutral environment, and gave him special symbolic meanings. In this context the meaning of the rooster can be included into the following oppositional pairs:

*rooster - hen*  
*nightly - daily*  
*masculine principle - feminine principle*  
*seminal - fertilized*

The role played by the rooster and the related meanings in the Hungarian folklore can be demonstrated also with the help of the so-called “rooster-calendar”:

<i>New Year's Eve</i>	an element of love magic and prediction
<i>First day of the year</i>	one must not consume rooster but pork



<i>Open-tide</i>	slaughtering the rooster at the initiation of lads or music band leaders
<i>Early spring</i>	keeps off lightning
<i>Easter Sunday</i>	an element of love and loyalty magic
<i>At noon</i>	consuming rooster brings luck
<i>Easter Monday</i>	shooting or hitting the rooster for fertility the blood of the sacrificed rooster has healing powers
<i>St George's Day</i>	eating the rooster makes you invisible
<i>At Pentecost</i>	shooting or hitting the rooster
<i>In the summer</i>	in time of aridity brings the rain sacrificing the rooster at harvest
<i>St Gallus' Day</i>	sacrificing a rooster at the election of the king of students
<i>Nicholas' Day</i>	love magic
<i>Christmas Eve</i>	awaking Mary in the religious songs the symbol of light and resurrection

The *rooster-calendar* from above shows that the rooster has been included in the most important points of the Christian feasts. He is used in lack of something at the most important points of the calendar year: with his help people realize or evoke luck, health, fertility, thus some positive value, harmony, and another balanced condition. According to the examples shown, the rooster in the Hungarian folklore often represents meanings that are far from each other:

- delimits day and night
- signals day-break
  - resurrection
  - conversion
- symbol of Christ
- protects from malefic powers and lightning
- appears in weather predictions
- in love magic
  - the symbol of sexual potency
  - the symbol of fertility
- important element of rain magic
- appears in folk medicine
- can personalize evil powers
- protector of treasures
- has to be sacrificed to the protector spirit of the treasure
- building sacrifice
- helps the integration of the deceased on the other side

Regarding the rooster we can state the conclusion, that in the folk belief

and folk culture one single object can bare different magic powers, and there is always some of its characteristics that makes it fulfill one well-defined function. From the infinite possibilities, the traditional communities always choose and use the most suitable one.

From the point of view of the present topic it is important that in the Hungarian folklore there is a rich concept about the rooster. The multitude of examples outlined above consolidates the fact that the beliefs and cultural practices related to the rooster are elder elements of the Transylvanian Hungarian folk culture.

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1. Apáca, Apața



2. Apáca, Apața



3. Hatolyka, Hătuica



4. Oltszakadát, Săcădate



5. Oltszakadát, Săcădate



6. Válaszút, Răscruci