
THE ROMANIAN TRANSYLVANIAN BELLS AND THEIR CULTURAL, ARTISTIC AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE (19th-20th CENTURIES)

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Abstract

Bells, important objects of worship, have long been associated with particular religious practices and went almost exclusively to the attention of church ministers. Also, researchers were interested in capturing the profound implication of these objects in other aspects of daily life, in the diversity of meanings assigned to them. Therefore, the present research aims to emphasize the cultural, artistic and historical importance that the Transylvanian people of the 19th-20th centuries assigned to these acoustic instruments. To achieve the goal that we have set we had analyzed a variety of sources: archival, memoirs, monographs, parish reviews, press and church periodicals, oral sources.

Keywords: bells, Transylvania, meanings, cultural, artistic

1. Introduction

In their attempt to thoroughly investigate the past, historians have turned their attention to less conventional fields of study that are nonetheless endowed with an extremely valuable contribution to understanding both past and present facts. One such area was church history, which began to be addressed from different points of view, some hitherto neglected, but not at all insignificant for understanding the past.

The Romanian historiography followed this example too and it began to recover some themes related to ecclesiastical history, to religious feelings, attitudes and people's approach to faith, church, religious practices, etc. The religious practice concerns the concrete way of expressing the faith and the religiosity through services and rituals. The proper conduct of religious services requires the presence of cult objects such as bells. Although primarily associated with religious practices, bells had and continue having many meanings.

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2. Main objectives

Objects were and are seen as active agents that influence the human behaviour and not as mere passive subjects of human action. People create objects but in a sense objects create people too, as objects are invested with a particular meaning.

For a long time bells were almost exclusively associated to religious practices, thus they seemed to capture only the attention of church ministers. Also, researchers have not been interested in the profound implications that these objects had on other aspects of the daily life and in their role of active agents in the transmission of meanings and values. Therefore, the present research aims to approach the cultural, artistic and historical importance that the Transylvanian people of the 19th-20th centuries assigned to these acoustic instruments.

3. Methodological framework and sources

To achieve the aim of this paper we will focus on the Romanian communities from Transylvania, a province located in central Romania. Surrounded by the Carpathian Mountains at the Eastern, Southern and Western borders, this macro-area was called in the Middle Age ‘Transylvania Voievodship’ (the land beyond the forest), its total surface measuring about 57,000 km². We will also analyse a variety of sources: archival, memoirs, monographs, parish reviews, church press and periodicals, oral sources etc.

4. Transylvanian Romanian bells. Cultural, artistic and historical significance

In many parishes, communities considered that the church was not complete until it was equipped with bells [1], their sound having a profound effect on most people [2], as it sends a series of cultural significance.

Thus, bells give time a liturgical measure meant to call the faithful to the divine services [3-5], celebrated by the Church (*vivos voco* – ‘I’m calling those that are alive...’).

This main attribution of bells, to gather the faithful for the service is known and confirmed by witnesses “... *first and foremost, the role of bells is to call the Christians to prayer at the Holy Church ... their main role is to gather Christians to pray together ...*” [V. Rotar, interviewed by the author, audio recording, Vătava, 2004]; “... *bells ... are rung for the religious service during feasts and on Sundays at the Church ...*” [D. Gherman, interviewed by the author, audio recording, Vătava, 2004]; “... *firstly for the service*” [M. Pop, interviewed by the author, audio recording, Vătava, 2004]; “... *ringing the bell, this primarily signifies the calling of people to the service, for prayer ...*” [I. Haida, interviewed by the author, audio recording, Laz, 2005]; “... *for gathering Christians at the Holy Church, for Christians to come at the Church, to*

participate in the Holy Church ...” [A. Herța, interviewed by the author, audio recording, Războieni, 2005]

An essential attribution of bells was and is that of announcing the termination of the life of a person (mortus plango, ‘cry for the dead’) [6], “... *through the bells it is announced that someone died ...*” [D. Gherman]; “... *to let people know when a Christian from the community dies. This is, also, an important role: to let everybody know ... that within the community one of its members went to eternity ...*” [V. Rotar]

Another important function of the bell was and continues to be the prophylactic one, that of protection of the community’s territory against bad weather or against natural threats. Bells are rung to “turn away the bad weather” [7], to “break and scatter the clouds” [8], to “remove tempests and storms” [6], “... *when there’s bad weather, when strong clouds are coming, when there’s hail or such things ...*” [G. Onița, interviewed by the author, audio recording, Laz, 2005]; “*to remove hail, storms*” [I. Haida]; “... *when bad weather is coming ...*” [V. Rotar]; “... *when there’s bad weather such as great rains, thunder, hail, they say bells have that echo, their power to push, to reject the coming bad weather ...*” [D. Gherman]; “... *they ring the weather, they still ring, their ringing is different, it sound different...*” [M. Pop]; “... *when there’s bad weather ...*” [A. Herța]

Bells have been and continue to be used in rural areas to alert people in case of fire or other dangers that come over the village. In case of fire or danger the big bell of the church is rung “*on one side*” [8], or “*on one ear*” [6]. This situation can also be observed in the field research: “... *in case of fire, a long time ago, and now, God forbid, it is said that in case of fire bell is rung on one side, it is rung in a special way in order to warn people that there’s no celebration or funeral. They ring the bell like this, rhythmically and people realize it’s something special and people come out.*” [I. Haida] “... *and our big bell is used in case of fire or if something falls, it gives the alarm. When a house, forest or anything else is on fire, then I run there ... ring the bell a few times and shout out the window. People hear there’s a particular place with a house or forest burning, and I keep on ringing until people come out with buckets, with things to put out fire.*” [7] “... *they are also used to, God forbid, when there’s fire, again a means of announcing, then someone goes, runs to the bells and rings it in one ear*” [D. Gherman]; “... *in case of fire it announces people so that they should be able to defend themselves*” [A. Herța]. One of the witnesses was deeply marked by the threat of fire, coming from her youth, during the interview reminding several times about this fact: “... *about fire, because when something is burning bells are rung again ... and when a house is on fire ... also if a house is burning. Earlier houses used to be covered with straws and they started burning out of nothing...*” [M. Pop]

Bells have fulfilled and continue to fulfil in community life a number of functions related to gathering believers for the divine service, to announcing the deaths, to protect the community territory and alarm in case of fire or danger of

any kind. Through all these performed functions bells acquired great importance in human life, cultural significance made known through sound.

The force of the rural community's attachment to the bell and to its sound was also captured by the inquiry made in the village Vătava in Mureș County. The research highlighted the profound connection between the bell sounds and the homeland, a connection which seems to have perpetuated over time. The sound of the bells is for the people of Vătava a reason of pride and distinction in comparison to the other neighbouring communities. "*... ours are very nice ... I haven't heard any other bell ring as nicely as ours, if there is someone to ring them nicely, if not they rumble as if you put a bell to a sheep ... and it goes rumbling ... Here, close at Râpa, they have a little bell, that just goes rumbling, they ring badly. Our bells sound so nicely if there's someone who knows how to ring them ...*" [M. Pop]. "*... in all the surrounding villages you won't find two bells matching as well as these ones here ... they go very well together ... as for those of Dumbrava, you'd say Gypsies are jangling ... they have no tact. In Râpa a little quarrel: ding, ding, ding ... as if there's a poor man begging at your door.*" [D. Gherman]

The sound of bells helps create local identity, the territory circumscribed by its sound falls within the classic frame of beauty and being reduced to a closed area, ordered by the sonority of the centre, the church, the tower bell or steeple being the symbolic centre of this territory. By the sound of the bell, the man fits into the space and harmonises, identifies himself with it.

The sound sensitivity of the past was almost exclusively assigned to bells, given that in rural areas there were basically no other sources of strong noise [9]. The sound of bells should also be put in relation to the religious feeling, as it coordinates the connection between the earthly world and divinity. Also, it was through the bell that the connection between past and present, between living and dead, was made. Through the sound of the bell joys and sorrows are announced. The attachment to the bells is also related to the belief in their magic, prophylactic and protective power, exerted on the community.

Also due to the sound, bells were invested by people with a range of artistic significances. The sound of bells had, especially in the rural world, an important role associated with a series of symbolic connotations and the sonority of the bell in the native town was completely special, being invested with a series of epithets. Thus, bells had a "*sweet and harmonious voice*" [10], "*nice and clean sound*" [11], "*beautiful and well harmonized sound*" [12], "*here was no such clear and strong sound all over the region*" [13], "*the harmony of sounds similar to the organ*" [6, p. 186]. The bells from the village Ilva Mare (Bistrița Năsăud County) were also distinguished by a series of artistic, aesthetic and acoustic qualities "*three very beautiful bells, that there was a true music both in the village and on the Meadow when they were rung, they were so well attuned and placed by real experts from Bohemia*" [14]. And the bells of the Bulgarian Greek Catholic community "*they both together give a whole sound*" [15].

But the bell is not only an object that can be heard. It can also be seen, viewed from other perspectives [16], such as the historical one. And a concrete method to capture historical aspects can be carried through the analysis of inscriptions. The study of bells epigraphy provides an interesting insight in the life and thoughts of people of ancient times, being at the same time a way of communicating local or national historical events. Thus, the bell of the Greek Catholic church of Ighiu, Alba mentions a sad event related to the history of the village “*After the whole village burned*” [17]. The bell of the wooden church of Reghin mentions an event related to the renovations that took place between 1790-1791 “*they were renovated per pagum Magyar-Regen*” [18].

The bells epigraphy also mentions some events in the life of the country, either sad or happy. Thus, one of the bells of the Orthodox Cathedral in Sibiu recalls the World War I and the melting of bells for military needs “*My predecessor kidnapped by oppressors was turned into a killing cannon ...*” [19]. The Union of 1918, an important event in the lives of all the Romanians is cited by the inscription on the bell in the village of Bica, Cluj “*After 15 years of the union of all Romanians*” [20]. Also, the great bell of the Greek-Catholic church of Bucium “*... was bought to remember the anniversary of 200 years since the union with the Roman church ...*” [21].

On the other hand, the historical importance conferred to bells is evident from their association with very ancient periods of the life of the communities, sometimes even with the origins “*... being so since ancient times, people treasure the bell ...*” [22]; “*... as this is a souvenir bell from the establishment of the parish ...*” [22, p. 3]. But the historical and artistic significance is even better caught in the case of the bell from Cristurul Șieului “*... knowing its historical significance related to the establishment of the parish and to its silver voice, coming from the smoothness of the material ...*” [22, p. 3].

5. Conclusion

The analysis of archival sources, memoirs, monographs, parish chronicles, church press and periodicals, and of oral sources pointed out that, although long associated with ecclesiastical history, bells have had and continue to have a special meaning in the life of Romanian communities in Transylvania [23]. Through bells the past and the present meet almost daily, as they play the role of active agents in the transmission of cultural, artistic and historical meanings.

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