Konservatoryum - Conservatorium
Special Issue
CONS 2023, 10 (Suppl. 1): S1–S13
DOI: 10.26650/CONS2023-1247270

Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi

Dance and Festivals in Serbian Villages along the Romanian Danube Gorge: Contextualizing Selena Rakočević's Research

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to frame and contextualize Selena's research between 2010 and 2019 in villages with a Serbian population situated in the Danube Gorge in Romania and in particular the village of Svinița (Svinica). Selena's research focus was on the community dance practices and local customs and festivals, and especially interethnic/cross-cultural sharing between the Serbians and Romanians living in this area. In order to provide this contextualization this paper draws on the concept of positionality encompassing historical, geographical, political and cultural facets, and that identities can be multiple, shifting and situational. After setting the historical background for the Danube Gorge, it discusses local customs in this area especially those during the pre-Lenten carnival, Easter celebrations and the regular contemporary cultural events organized in these villages. The final detailed section contextualizes the contemporary dance practices in social settings where a local identity is portrayed versus the preference for performing Serbian dances as a way of representing Serbian identity in presentational contexts.

Keywords: Dance, interethnic-relations, Romanian Danube Gorge

Submitted/Başvuru : 03.02.2023
Accepted/Kabul : 18.03.2023

Introduction

Selena visited villages on the northern bank of the Danube river in Romania that have a Serbian population to undertake research on many occasions between 2010 and 2019. Her research focus was on the community dance practices and local customs and festivals, and interethnic/cross-cultural sharing between the Serbians and Romanians living in this area. This paper aims to contextualize Selena's research and publications within a wider framework. In order to provide this contextualization, it draws on the concept of positionality (Sheppard, 2002) and that identities can be multiple, shifting and situational (see Wilson & Hastings, 1998, p. 13).

Sheppard uses the concept of positionality "to describe how different entities are positioned with respect to one another in space and time" (Sheppard, 2002, p. 318), and in the case of the Danube Gorge villages we suggest that their positionality encompasses historical, geographical, political and cultural facets that are discussed below. These connections in the Danube Gorge are complex and subject (reason) dependent and can be seen most clearly within Selena's work in the Danube Gorge village of Svinița.

Sheppard suggests that positionality is first "a relational construct" where an agent (in this case the people living in a village) "depends on her or his position with respect to others as in network theory"; secondly this dependency gives rise to reciprocal "power relations" and thirdly "positionality is continually enacted in ways that both reproduce and challenge its preexisting configurations" (Sheppard, 2002, p. 318; see also Mellish, 2014, p. 17).

Culturally the Danube Gorge villages are situated in an interethnic zone of cultural interference, between the Romanian Banat Mountains, and southwestern Oltenia, and the eastern Serbia region of Timok across the Danube. People living in this area, although ascribing to a particular Serbian or Romanian ethnicity often adopt flexible situational identities (Barth, 1969, p. 10; Wilson & Hastings, 1998, p. 13) when it comes to taking part in customs and attending dance events (see Manos, 2003, p. 21).

For the people from Svinița, their concept of collective identity draws on their geographical location and historical past in the Danube Gorge, and their positionality is maintained politically via links with the surrounding villages and their local mayor, the country officials for Mehedinți county, and the Union of Serbs of Romania based in the regional capital of Timișoara. The positionality of the village is also placed within their friendship network with villages in the immediate vicinity, across the border within Serbia, and villages in other regions of Romania with which they have established twin village relationships.

Danube Gorge Villages – A Brief History, Involving Location, and Positionality

The river Danube passes through a narrow gorge where it forms the border between southwestern Romania and northeastern Serbia (known in Romania as *Clisura Dunării* and in Serbian as *Banatska* or *Đerdap Klisura*). The route along the gorge has been a thoroughfare since before the neolithic times (Dinu et al., 2007 Radovanovic, 1996, pp. 1–16; Tasić et al., 2011) and in more recent times a line of around thirty villages were established along the course of this route on the northern bank of the Danube, stretching from the flat lands to the west around Bela Crkva in present-day Serbia along the course of the river Nera that flows into the Danube then eastwards along the Danube to the town of Orșova (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Map of Danube Gorge villages

From as far back as historical records exist these villages, along with villages in the foothills above the river, have been inhabited by a population of mixed ethnicities, Romanians, Serbians, and from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Germans and Czechs. Although there have been population movements over time, there are still active populations with Serbian ethnicity in the villages of Socol, Belobrești, Radimna, Moldova Veche, Pojejena, Măcești, Liubcova and Svinița, with the latter being the most eastern of the villages whose inhabitants identify themselves as Serbians[1].

After the area was destroyed by the Ottoman army in 1738 the villages along the Danube were rebuilt. In 1764 after the Ottoman army finally withdrew from this area, Austria formed three border infantry regiments, each with 12 companies to control the military border (Marin, 2009, p. 20)[2]. The western end of the Danube Gorge was occupied by the Illyrian (Serbian) border regiment and by 1774 the Wallachian-Illyrian border regiment controlled the area around the town of Orșova in the east and the villages between Orșova to Svinița (see Draskić, 1971, p. 9). In this period there were population movements into the area of Czechs, Germans, and the so-called "Bufeni" from Oltenia in southern Romania who were employed as forestry workers and in the mining industries.

The center of the fluvial border of the Austrian administration that was responsible for supervising the river traffic was situated in the village of Svinița (Svinița, 2013) until 1873 when the border regiments were dissolved. The river only became navigable in this part in 1830 and between 1837 and 1840 a tarmac road was constructed along the northern river bank (Draskić, 1971, p. 8) that linked the city of Orșova at the eastern end of the Gorge to the village of Baziaș situated close to the 1918 Romanian–Serbian border that was established following the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

In the years following the drawing of the borders a customs agreement was made between the Romanians and the Yugoslav authorities that encouraged cross-Danube trade and cooperation and the people living on both sides of the river regularly crossed it for both trading purposes and village celebrations, especially after 1937 when a "regular line of flat bottomed boats was established in several places in the Gorge" (Stanojlović, 1938, p. 27, 48; Rakočević, 2015a, p. 118). This cross-border cooperation continued after the World War II, especially during the planning and construction of the Iron Gates Dams and Hydroelectric power station in the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1970 the lower slopes of the Gorge were flooded during the making of the Iron Gate hydroelectric plant. This affected the villages on the eastern end of the Gorge. The old town of Orșova was submerged together with the island of Ada Kaleh, and eight other villages[3]. This resulted in around 23,000 people needing to be relocated (Varan & Crețan, 2018), either into newly built houses on a higher position on the shores of the gorge as in the case of Svinița, or moved into adjacent villages such as those from the village of Tisovița who were settled in Svinița (Rakočević, 2012, p. 249).

Prior to the flooding teams of researchers from both the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade and the Institute of Folklore in Bucharest visited the villages that were due to be flooded to undertake 'rescue' archaeological, ethnographical and sociological research[4]. The results of their research were published in the Romanian *Atlasul Complex Portile de Fier* [*The Iron Gates Complex Atlas*] (Milcu et al., 1972) and five articles in the Serbian journal *Zbornik radova* (Nedeljković, 1971). These publications provide interesting ethnographical snapshots of life in these villages before this major disruption in people's lives. The Serbian team focused on the villages of Svinița and Liubcova with their Serbian populations whilst the Romanians investigated all the villages from Baziaș to Orșova, and the island of Ada Kaleh concentrating on the villages that were scheduled to be submerged when the dam was opened[5]. Hence the research of the two teams only overlapped in the villages of Liubcova and Svinița.

During the 40 years following the flooding the villages towards the eastern end of the Gorge and, particularly Svinița, became more isolated as during the 1980s all border crossings were tightly controlled. Also from the 1970s young people began to move to the towns, first for education at the high school in Orșova 40 km to the east of Svinița and later for university education or work in the large cities, especially Timișoara.

[1] In the Banat Gorge, there are the following villages, starting from the Nera river that flows south to the Danube, and along the Danube from west to east (Serbian names are brackets): Lescovița (Leskovica), Zlatița (Zlatica), Lugovet, Socol (Sokolovac), Baziaș (Bazijaš), Divici (Divič), Belobrești (Belobreška), Radimna, Șușca (Suška), Pojejena (Srpska Požežena/Rumunska Požežena), Măcești (Mačević), Moldova Nouă (Nova Moldava), Moldova Veche (Stara Moldava), Coronini (Koronini), Sfânta Elena (Sveta Jelena), Gornea, Sichevița, Liubcova (Ljubkova), Berzasca (Brzaska), Drencova, Cozla, Svinița (Svinica), Eibenthal, Baia Nouă, Dubova, Eselnița, Orșova.

[2] Between 1765 and 1768 three new Military Border subdivisions were formed: the Illyrian Border Regiment, the German Border Regiment and a Wallachian Battalion reinforced by later additions (Marin, 2009, p. 20). Draskić reported that "[t]here were 3,378 soldiers in the Wallachian-Illyrian battalion, who performed their military service in national dress and paid the land tax with benefits" (Draskić, 1971, p. 10).

[3] Eight villages submerged: Tisovita, Ogradena, Pescari, Plavișevița, Coramnic, Jupalnic, Tufări, and Vârciorova.

[4] "The immediate cause for the intensive archaeological research of the Iron Gates region from 1960, was the building of the first dam on the Danube River [...] It was therefore urgent to survey the banks of the Gorges and around Ključ and to organize rescue excavations in order to save as much archaeological material as possible in a rather short time. A number of archaeological teams from Yugoslavia took part in the research on the right bank, while teams from Romania worked on the left bank of the river" (Radovanović, 1996, p. 3).

[5] According to Anca Giurchescu the villages researched by the Romanian team "Berzeasca (1966), Dubova (1966), Eșelnița (1966, 1967), Ogradena (1966), Pescari (1966), Plavișevița (1966), and the island Ada Kaleh (1966, 1967), Coramnic (1967), Ilovița (1967), Jupalnic (1967), Liubcova (1967), Sichevița (1967), Svinița (1967), Tufări (1967), and Vârciorova (1967)" (Giurchescu, 2015, p. 24).

This period was also marked by the absence of any ethnographic research into this area by either Romanian or Serbian ethnographers, until around 2010 when the Serbian researchers became interested in exploring the music and dance practices along the Gorge, and a few years later teams of researchers from Romania and Vienna interested in food and linguistic identifiers also visited these villages.

By 2010 the new road built along the north bank of the Danube after the flooding was almost impassible due to regular rock falls. Around 2016 it was rebuilt but although the area is becoming developed for tourism with the construction of many new pensions along the banks of the Danube, travel is still subject to temporary interruptions due to new rock falls, the most recent in January 2023 which has resulted in the road being closed for at least six weeks while the necessary work is undertaken to stabilize the rock faces (Szendrei, 2023).

Selena's Research among the Serbians Living in the Danube Gorge

Selena first visited this area in 2010 and made regular trips until 2019 especially to the villages of Moldova Veche (situated on the banks of the Danube towards the western end of this area) and the village of Svinița, together with colleagues from various institutes of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, and some of her students from the Faculty of Music in Belgrade. Between 2011 and 2015 her research was funded by the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development under the project *Musical and Dance Tradition of the Multiethnic and Multicultural Serbia* and later (2017) by the Union of Serbs in Romania (Rakočević, 2018, p. 294).

Selena's main aim was "observing and documenting contemporary dance and music practice during contemporary cultural events" and during these research trips her work included "participatory observation of village celebrations and evening dance events, which are called *balls* by local Romanians (Serbian: *bal* or *igranka*)" (Rakočević, 2013). She recorded extensive video footage of the dancing and musicians, and made informal and formal interviews of the dancers and musicians:

> In addition to recording previous forms of traditional music and dance, I was very much interested in both the Romanian and the Serbian contemporary musical and dance practice of this border region and I was impressed by its vitality and variety. Opportunities for dancing in all the villages in the Danube Gorge are still very common and frequented. Dance events [...] which involve a large number of people are village and church holidays (Romanian: *ruga*; Serbian: *slava*), but also other traditional celebrations linked with the Orthodox Christian calendar. (Rakočević, 2015a, p. 120)

The many papers she wrote based on this research covered topics including: *Dancing in the Danube Gorge: Geography, Dance and Interethnic Perspectives* (Rakočević, 2015a), *Dance Practice Specifically in the Village of Svinița* (Rakočević, 2012), *Dance, Place, and Cross-cultural Exchange Dance Practice of Village Svinica (Romania)* (Rakočević, 2014a), *Interpreting Culturality: Dance Practice of Svinița Village* (Rakočević, 2014b), *Field Research of the Easter Balls in Svinița: Challenges of Dance/Music Experience and Ethnography* (Rakočević, 2015b), *Writing Movements and Music: Hora de Pomană in Ethnochoreological/Ethnomusicological Narrative* (Rakočević, 2015c), *Igra za Bog da Prost: Interethnic, Genealogical and Semantic Aspects of Dedicating the Dance to the Dead in the Village of Svinița* (Rakočević, 2017), and *Dance in Contemporary Carnival Events in this Area: Socio-political Implications of Dance and Dance Movements in Contemporary Carnival Events* (Rakočević, 2020).

Her intention was to write a book on the dances of the Serbian people living in the villages along the Gorge as this has not been covered in other Serbian publications but this remained an uncompleted work.

Occasions for Dancing during Customs and Festivals and in the Danube Gorge Villages

Many parallels can be found in calendrical and lifecycles customs practices in villages on both sides of the Danube, from Bela Crkva to the eastern end of the shared border between Romania and Bulgaria, which indicates that the people's movements across the river were a regular occurrence in the past rather than the river forming an insurmountable boundary.

The 1938 monograph of the Gorge mentions that people crossed the Danube in boats to take part in village celebrations (Stanojlović, 1938, p. 48) and later especially during the later years of the communist period, when border crossings were closed, people living along the Gorge in Romania were still able to access Yugoslav television and radio. Even nowadays the internet signal is much stronger from the Serbian side so in order to avoid high roaming charges it is essential to turn off roaming unless one has a Serbian mobile.

Kostić commented in his 1971 paper that "[t]he annual customs of the Serbian population in the villages of Svinica and Lupkova [...] are slightly different from the customs in the Yugoslav Banat, eastern and southern Serbia" (1971, p. 71). He, and the Romanian researchers from this time, also draw attention to distinct differences between the customs in these two villages, which reinforces the histories of these two villages as being different from each other despite

being situated only 30 km apart. The majority of these customs do not form the subject of this paper which focuses on Selena's research. However, it is worth noting that the people from Liubcova and those from Svinița practice a different bundle of calendrical and life cycle customs that can be linked to different populations elsewhere more than to each other.

Svinița customs include those linked to shepherding – measuring the milk in spring and taking the sheep up to the higher pastures, making sacred breads, and consecrated water, for example, before the World War II in Svinița at Epiphany the priest went down to the Danube and threw a cross into the water and the young men present would jump into the river to take it out (Kostić, 1971, p. 77). This custom is widespread in Serbia, southern Romanian and northern Bulgaria along the Danube, but is not found in Liubcova or other Danube Gorge villages with the exception of Moldova Nouă (Afronie, 2017).

Fărșang (carnival) is celebrated at the commencement of Easter Lent in Liubcova but Kostić confirmed that there was no recollection of this taking place in Svinița (1971, p. 78). He mentions that the only pre-Lenten custom practiced in Svinița was called the "Tudor horse" (*Tudor konj*) or *Marca Konjata* (Kostić, 1971, p. 79; see also Giurchescu, 2015, p. 42). This custom appears to link with Todorovden celebrated in northern Bulgarian villages along the Danube (see Todorova, 2021). Also Giurchescu (2015, p. 38–39) comments that the existence of the custom, *hora de pomană* in Svinița, a Serbian village (but not in Liubcova) is unusual as elsewhere it is only found in non-Slavic speaking communities including other villages in Romanian Banat, southern Oltenia and across the Danube with the Vlach populations in northeast Serbia and northern Bulgaria (see Mellish & Green, 2022).

Fărșang (Carnival) in Danube Gorge Villages

Many villages in the Banat region annually celebrate the end of winter and the coming of spring at Lent, the commencement of the pre-Easter fasting period, with canivalesque events mostly known as *fărșang* (spelt in various ways) the name coming from German[6]. These celebrations can be informal local (somewhat disorganized) events, or organized events funded by local village councils (Mellish & Green, 2020, p. 132). Kostić gives a description of carnival (*Fărșang*) in Liubcova around 1970:

> In Ljupkova in Bela Nedelja from Monday to Wednesday, which is called 'dlepeljiva', there are 'fasanges'. [...] It is a masked procession, the participants of which are also called 'Turks'. They disguise themselves by smearing their faces with black paint and wearing masks — 'lorfas' made of paper and leather with beards and mustaches, made of wool. In addition, they wear fur coats turned upside down and are girded with clappers. They hold crooked sticks in their hands – 'crosses'. 'Fashangas' go around the village, singing and having fun. In the procession, two men disguised as a bride and a groom go with musicians, as in a real wedding. On Wednesday, they bury one of the dead, which corresponds to the burial of the dead in other parts of our country. [...] The 'dead man' is placed on a 'nooila' or cart followed by the priest, [...] and the entire funeral procession. In those songs, the sexual theme predominates, and it is related to the cult of fertility. The procession goes to the cemetery where the dead person is symbolically buried. (Kostić, 1971, p. 78)

In recent years along the Danube Gorge carnivalesque events regularly take place in the villages of Liubcova, Coronini, Măcești, Socol, Moldova Veche, and the town of Moldova Nouă, organized by both the Romanian and Serbian communities[7]. During the daytime "disorganized masked characters roam around villages, in informal processions calling at houses and making rowdy noise in the streets, especially at crossroads. The participants can be dressed as participants in a mock (inverted) wedding or a mock funeral in which case they usually carry a 'hearse' containing a 'corpse' known as the *Fășangul* that can be either a dummy or a living person dressed up in 'suitable' clothes. The participants wear a wide range of masks portraying a range of 'dodgy' characters" (see Mellish & Green, 2020, p. 135).

The biggest events are held in the town of Moldova Nouă where the town hall continues to fund *fărșang* celebrations annually on the Sunday prior to the commencement of Lent. In this case for some years the previously week-long events are condensed into one afternoon when two processions take place representing a mock wedding and a mock funeral, that finally meet in the central park where dancing accompanied by live music takes place (see Mellish & Green, 2020, p. 137).

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[6] German sources date the word back to the 13th century, and give its derivation as from the word *fastenschank* which means "the last serving of alcoholic beverages before Lent" (The German Way and More, 2018).

[7] Folea in his 2007 article on *Interculturalitate around Moldova Nouă* explains the differences between the Romanian and Serbian *Fărșang* celebrations in that the Romanian celebrations take place on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, and the Serbian on Monday, Tuesday and the following Saturday, although he comments that "[d]uring this festival (*carnavalul mastilor*) one does not know who is under the mask: Romanian, Serbian or Gypsy, and as they are together at the ball that ends the event" (2007, p. 5). News items on *Fărșang* in Măcești and Liubcova in 2019 report that on the morning of the first day of *Fărșang* groups of masked characters go from house to house in the villages, where they recite ironic poems appropriately created for their hosts (Neagu, 2019a). "Another group goes to the main road and where they stop cars and dance and demand money from the drivers" and on the final day of *Fărșang* in the evening a ball is held at which they consume the food and drink collected during the house to house visits" (Neagu, 2019b). Note both reports include links to excellent video footage.

Events change over time and are dependent on the provision of funding. In the smaller adjacent village of Moldova Veche (Stara Modova) that has a core Serbian population Selena records that "[d]aily processions in this village were organized in 2011 for the last time (on Clean Monday), while evening balls still happen on Clean Monday and/or Saturday" (Rakočević, 2020, p. 131).

The majority of *fărşang* events finish with an evening masked *bal* that is held in the local village hall (*camin cultural*) or school. These indoor events are attended by all generations of locals, with mostly children and young people wearing masks that represent zoomorphic creatures, the ugly and the beautiful or topical characters. In some cases the masked people form a small group who act out a playlet characteristic of the masked characters they are portraying. Prizes are awarded for the best mask or group of masks. In villages that continue the daytime tradition of processions through the village the masked characters end up at the *bal* and are the main participants in the dancing (unlike at balls held at other times of the year when the majority of those present join in the dancing).

Selena attended the evening *fărșang* balls in Moldova Veche (Stara Moldova) on several occasions, and wrote about her observations of *The Role and Semantics of Dance and Dance Movements of Masked Participants* during these events (see Rakočević, 2015a; Rakočević, 2020)[8]. She recorded that in 2011:

> The evening celebration included a local show which consisted of sequences of various cabaret-style, stage performances and the masked ball. The stage performances, mostly folk dance choreographies and funny sketches, but also vocal, instrumental, and modem dance pieces, were prepared by the local youngsters [...] both local Romanians and Serbians" (Rakočević, 2015a, p. 121) and during the masked ball the dances include "various dance practices, which belong both to the contemporary Romanian and Serbian round-chain dance practice [...] which demonstrated that the contemporary dance practice of the Danube Gorge is complex and hybrid in itself. (Rakočević, 2015a, p. 125)

Positionality of Svinița in the 21st Century

The village of Svinița was first mentioned in documents in 1437 which recorded the existence of the citadel Cetatea Trikule (Pro-Mehedinți, 2013, p. 4). Svinița, according to Stanojlović in his monograph of the Banat Clisura (Danube Gorge), was (re-)settled in 1735 (1938, p. 112) and developed into a border center under the Austrian administration to supervise the fluvial traffic. The village monograph notes that the population of the village since its foundation was recorded in the 1930 census as being over 90% Serbian (Pro-Mehedinți, 2013, p. 5). Until the 1960s marriages mostly took place between the villagers, with Pantelić reporting in 1971 that marriages with Romanians from neighboring villages had recently become more common (1971, p. 51).

The village of Svinița has several cultural markers that draw outsiders' interest; as a village with a majority population of Serbian ethnicity situated within Romania it is of interest to both researchers from Serbia as a 'minority' village within the border of Romania, and those from Romanian in respect of its minority position. Secondly, the origins of the old Slavic dialect of Serbian spoken in Svinița has been explored by several generations of academics including in 2016 the VLACH vanishing language group based in Vienna[9]. Thirdly, the local produce and cuisine that has a combination of Serbian and Romanian influences, interests academic groups researching food and cuisine (including the FOODie group with academics based in Bucharest and Timișoara) and, also the local production of figs and the annual fig festival draws an interested audience of tourists to the village. Finally networking by the local mayor has led to Svinița being twinned with a long list of villages along the Gorge, and from other parts of Romania, Serbia and Macedonia[10].

According to the village website Svinița is "a Serbian center isolated in a network of Romanian villages on the banks of the Danube, not integrated into a certain ethnographic zone of populations of that origin" (Svinița, 2013). This statement gives insight into the interest of the Belgrade researchers in Svinița culture because "the villagers maintain cultural practices that are not found in other communities with Serbian identity" (Mellish, 2014, p. 24) and Selena's aim to "explore relationships between the specific geographical position of the village of Svinica in Romania and the dance practice of its inhabitants and to look at issues of cross-cultural exchange in the village" (Rakočević, 2014a).

Easter Customs in Svinița

At Easter 2013 Selena organized a fieldwork trip for the members of the Sub-Study Group on Field Research Theory and Methods of the ICTM Ethnochoreology group to observe Easter customs in Svinița. The call for participation listed the main aims of the fieldwork as:

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[8] In a different article Selena also wrote about the masked ball in the village of Grebenac situated on the Banat plain in Serbia that has a Romanian minority (Rakočević, 2016). She refers to the work of Naumović when she mentions that the "inhabitants of Grebenac maintain the *fărșang* ritual as a means of strengthening their own cohesion and unity, but at the same time for gaining higher visibility and better positioning in the surrounding society" (Rakočević, 2020, p. 124) this statement also being valid for the *fărșang* celebrations in the Danube Gorge.

[9] For more information about the community, see https://www.oeaw.ac.at/vlach/.

[10] Drajna in Prahova country, Stei in Hunedoara country and Armeniș in Caraș-Severin county.

- Observing and documenting the custom of dedicating a dance to the dead,
- Observing and documenting contemporary dance practice,
- Revealing and exploring different ethnic perspectives both of the performers (insiders) and researchers (outsiders) considering the customary practices. (Giurchescu, 2015, p. 25).

The group attended the Easter Orthodox service in the village church and took part in a procession from the church to a shrine in the lower part of the village and the village graveyard where the priest blessed the family graves. They joined a local family for a custom of pouring water in remembrance of a deceased relative, and took part in a competition for breaking colored eggs, and recorded and participated in dancing during the evening balls held on Sunday and Monday evenings (Rakočević & Mellish, 2015a, pp. 9–10).

On the Monday evening (2nd day of Easter) at the start of the evening *bal*, the mayor organized a *joc de pomană*[11] in memory of his deceased parents. A *joc* or *hora de pomană* is the custom of dedicating a dance in remembrance of a deceased relative that usually takes place during a community cultural event. In Svinița it can take place on the second day of Easter or at *Rusalii* on the occasion of the local church Saint's Day.

Following this trip Selena published the edited book *Dance, Field Research and Intercultural Perspectives: The Easter Customs in the Village of Svinița* (Rakočević & Mellish, 2015b) in which the participants wrote about their perspectives on the shared experiences during the short period they stayed in the village.

The participants (see Figure 2) in this fieldwork included Anca Giurchescu, doyenne of Romanians ethnochoreology and in her mid-80s at the time. This was Anca's first visit to the area of the Danube Gorge since 1966–1967 when she was one of the team of researchers from the Institute of Folklore in Bucharest, who undertook rescue ethnographic research prior to the building of the Iron Gates dam and the flooding of the villages situated below the level of the new water course. Her chapter in the book included her reflections on her previous time in the Gorge:

> In my memories, Svinița (that together with Liubcova were considered Serbian villages) comprised only two streets aligned along the Danube (about 2–3 km). From the top of the hill the cemetery dominated the village reminding people of their transient existence. Close to the water there were gardens and fields: Everybody had a (low) garden near the Danube and a *colibă* (cottage) up in the mountains. [...] [T]he new houses were built on the hill and therefore, the old cemetery that once was above is now placed below the village. In spite of being rather new the village, escaping standardization, preserved its character. Clean and well-kept each house has its own "soul" in combining tradition with novelty. (Giurchescu, 2015, p. 24)

Figure 2. Easter 2013: Participants in Svinița fieldwork

[11] In Svinita this custom is known as *joc de pomană* whereas elsewhere it is more often called *hora de pomană*. Giurchescu explains that the term "*joc de pomană* is mainly found in southern Banat. This may be connected to the fact that in Banat the Sunday dance was referred to as *jocul satului* rather than *hora satului*" (Mellish, 2015, p. 71).

Festivals in Svinița

Similar to all the villages along the Gorge and in the rest of Romania, Svinița has an annual calendar of funded festivals that draw outsiders' attention to the village. These are linked to local customs, the church calendar, or more recently established festivals, such as ethnicities or food festivals.
The main annual festivals in Svinița are:

- *Rusalii* (50 days after Orthodox Easter) including the 'Festival of the twinned villages'(*Festivalul înfrăţirii*) and the 'Day of Svinița' (*Zilele comunei Svinița*),
- 'Festival of the Danube villages' (*Festivalul Satelor Dunărene*) in mid-July,
- 'Fig festival' (*Festivlual smochilor*) on the last weekend in August.

Selena first visited Svinița in 2011 for the annual 'Fig festival', returning twice in 2012, at *Rusalii* and for a wedding in September, in 2013 at Easter, in 2016 at *Rusalii* when she presented the book that resulted from 2013 fieldwork and again in September, in August 2017 and a final visit in July 2019 for the Danube villages festival. During all her visits to the village she was greeted with respect by the locals because of her interest in the village and her academic position in Serbia.

The 'Fig festival' is the most prominent festival in the Svinița calendar. Fig trees were planted in Svinița during Ottoman times (Sălceanu & Curici, 2012, p. 302) and the local micro-climate is considered responsible for their special quality. Locals make the figs into conserves, jam, brandy (*rachia*) or wine ready for the 'Fig festival' when the local produce is displayed and prizes are awarded for the best products. The program for the day includes a costume parade in the afternoon followed by a short performance by the Svinița ensemble Dunav, and invited dance groups from the Serbian villages in the Danube Gorge and other locations in Romania. This is followed by an evening ball during which both locals and the members of the visiting ensembles join in with the dancing (Rakočević, 2012, p. 251).

Rusalii weekend (50 days after Orthodox Easter) incorporates several celebrations in Svinița. On the Saturday the 'Festival of the twined villages' (*festivalul înfrăţirii*) takes place (2019 was the 10th edition). This event includes sports contests, a costume parade, dance performances by the participating groups and an evening *bal* accompanied by musicians from Romania and Serbia. Delegations including sports teams and dance groups from villages that have formed a friendship bond with Svinița are invited to take part. This usually includes those from the Danube Gorge, Serbia and the twinned villages of Drajna (Prahova country) and Stei (Hunedoara country).

The following day, *Rusalii* Sunday is the annual celebration for the village saint. In Banat this day is usually referred to as *ruga* or *nedeia* or as in Svinița is known as the day of the village *Zilele comunei Svinița*. In the morning a church service is held to honor the village saint after which local families return home for a celebratory meal. In the evening the locals gather in the school playground and awards are given to members of the community who have made a special contribution during the past year. In 2016 this formal part of the evening included the presentation of the book *Dance, Field Research and Intercultural Perspectives: The Easter Customs in the Village of Svinița* (Rakočević & Mellish, 2015b). This was followed by a performance by the local children's school groups and ensemble Dunav. The day closed with fireworks on the bank of the river and a *bal* with local musicians that lasts until the morning.

The 'Festival of the Danube villages' (*Festivalul satelor Dunărene*) is held annually in mid-July and is the longest-running festival in Svinița reaching its 41st edition in 2019 the occasion of Selena's last visit to Svinița. The program for the day includes sports competitions, a communal meal, a costume parade and a performance by local Serbian and Romanian dance groups from the Danube Gorge villages followed by an evening *bal* (Pro-Mehedinți, 2013, p. 11).

Community Dances in the Danube Gorge

The focus of Selena's work was recording and studying the community dance repertoire of the Danube Gorge villages and mainly those with Serbian populations. In 2013, during the ICTM Ethnochoreology Sub-Study Group visit to Svinița, her research perspectives on the Serbian Banat traditions were juxtaposed with the authors' work on the Romanian Banat traditions and Anca Giurchescu's decades of research in Romania and especially her early 1970s research in the lower Gorge villages. In 1972 Anca Giurchescu recorded that:

> The existing repertoire of dances in the Iron Gates Zone, especially in its old substrata, shows a series of characteristics which are within the framework of the choreography specific for the Danube zone. Over time, a strong influence has been exercised on the structure of this repertoire, as well as on the local dances, from the zone of Caransebeș. (1972, p. 246)

She follows with a description specific to the Serbian villages:

> In the (Danube Gorge) localities with a population of Serbian origin (Svinița and Liubcova), a number of Serbian dances that are done with

> some stylistic variation co-exist beside the repertoire of Romanian dances. Among these, the dances belonging to the older local fund are in the course of disappearing. They were replaced by Serbian dances with a wider circulation, practiced especially by the younger generation. (1972, p. 246)

At Easter 2013, when it came to the evening ball the authors found that "the melodies played were familiar tunes from the Banat mountain zone. The dances were only slightly different from the repertoire from nearby villages, and many of the songs were the latest favorites from the well-known Timișoara singers" (Mellish & Green, 2015, p. 10). The aim of the authors, as ethnochoreologists was to unravel the history of the community dancing in the Danube Gorge in terms of borrowings, acknowledged ethnic attribution, and performance of ethnicity in the localities. In the case of Svinița, as Selena observed the local dancing can be termed as interethnic:

> However, even though the multiethnic character is kept within the official narrative about the Gorge, the communal dancing of its inhabitants clearly showed the opposite: that the notions of their ethnic identities are suppressed in the favor of their interethnic permeation. (Rakočević, 2015a, p. 126)

When observing the currently popular dances during the community events, Rakočević reports that at the Moldova Veche (Stara Moldava) masked ball the dance cycle was *šota, vlaško kolo* (also known as *četvorka*), *šestica* which is also known as *moravac, žikino kolo* and *užičko kolo*, then prior to the masks contest, the Romanian dance *brâul* and finally the last dance was named by the musicians simply as *kolo* (Rakočević, 2015a, p. 125). Until 20 years ago, in Măcești (Mačevic) the first dance was most often *žikino kolo* followed by *sitno kolo*, then a *mađarac*, and, it was recorded in Moldova Veche that they started with a *mađarac* (Rakočević, 2018, p. 296).

In 2013 at our joint fieldwork experience in Svinița (also observed at events in the following years in Svinița) the sequence of dances started with *brâul* (which was the case for both the *joc de pomană* custom and the community balls) followed by *žikino kolo, četvorak, ardeleana, învârtita* and *de doi* (Rakočević, 2017, p. 1269).

Giurchescu's research (1972) only included two villages of predominantly Serbian ethnicity, Liubcova and Svinița. In this work she records the dances *hora, brâul* and *sârba* of the old strata dance cycle as the dances within community customs at all the locations. The newer dance cycle of Banat Romanian couple dances *ardeleana, de doi* and *învârtita* was not completely adopted by the early 1970s, and the integration of the two cycles into *brâul, ardeleana* and *de doi* which is now the norm was only starting to happen.

This follows a theme of popular dances being borrowed or adopted into the local community repertoire. In 1972 Giurchescu listed various dances all of which are linked to neighboring regions that were fading from popularity, and these are now not included in community dancing: *poșovaica* and *tandăra* from Banat; *ropota, rustemul*, and the new strata *bordeiul* mostly likely from Oltenia; *tudorka* and *bătuta* most likely linked to the Vlach of northeast Serbia and *đurđevka* from the Serbian repertoire.

Selena mentions *moravac*, or *šestica*, as the Banat dance to this popular Serbian melody, arrived in the Danube Gorge villages in the decades after the World War II (Rakočević, 2018, p. 300) and that *malo kolo* and *mađarac* from the wider Serbian Banat repertoire have been fading from practice during the last twenty years (Rakočević, 2018, p. 299). This theme of adopting dances from the Serbian repertoire includes most recently the Kosovo Albanian dance *shota* which gained great popularity in Serbia in the 1970s but only crossed the border in to Romania in the 1990s (Rakočević, 2012, p. 256) and continues to gain popularity among the Romanian population.

Žikino kolo was adopted among the Serbs in Banat and the Danube Gorge after the World War I (Rakočević, 2015a, p. 124). Although this dance is linked to the area of central Serbia (Rakočević, 2017, p. 11) by the form typical for *kolo u tri*, interestingly *žikino kolo* in the Danube Gorge conforms to the local step pattern structure in common with the local *hora* and *brâul* (Green, 2015, p. 130) and their local *kolo*, but not the *kolo u tri* pattern.

This reveals a possible old strata dance structure from the older practices in the wider area. The same step pattern construction (1101 in Leibman notation of step weight changes (Leibman, 1992)) is nearly universal in the locally specific dances from Pădureni (Hunedoara regions of Transylvania) south through the Banat mountains to the Vlach of north east Serbia (see also Giurchescu, 2015, p. 33–37) specifically in this region the old strata dances *hora* and *brâul* plus the local version of *žikino kolo*, and the fast couple dance *de doi* and *četvorka*. The later, *četvorka*, is an interesting adoption, that can be attributed to the Vlachs of northeast Serbia through the local popular title of *vlaško kolo* and as the musicians call it *wallachian kolo*. Structurally and functionally this dance has the same place in the Vlach community as *hora* or *brâul*, yet it was not danced on the north side of the Danube until the 1990s when it was probably adopted in Svinița (Rakočević, 2015a, p. 123). More recently there is another variant of this dance popular with the youth in the Danube Gorge.

The inclusion of this regional dance structure into the dance practices in the Serbian communities might also be recorded in the past repertoire that Rakočević discovered during interviews in Serbian. In Svinița older informants talk

of a dance *sitnana* (Rakočević, 2017, p. 6, 10) that was danced before the 1990s in place of the current dance named *brâul* which is actually a Sviniţa specific structural variant of the typical Romanian *brâul*, whereas the reconstructed *sitnana* is identical in dance and melodies to old-style Romanian *brâul* (Luchin, 2021, p. 14). Similarly during the second half of the 20th century in Moldova Veche the dance *vlaško moldavsko kolo* (also called *staro kolo*) was practiced in Moldova Veche, this dance being identical to a symmetric version of *brâul*, but is no longer performed (Rakočević, 2018, p. 303). Beyond the Gorge, in wider Banat communities, their version of *kolo* to Serbian melodies follows the same structural pattern, as do the Romanian *hora* and the Vlach *hora*. Our interpretation of this analysis is that the repertoire of dances done by the people in the Danube Gorge villages and surrounding regions during their social gatherings reveals a mixed repertoire with a basis that cannot be categorized as Serbian or Romanian. It is a specific local repertoire that belongs to what the Romanian ethnographers term as an 'interference zone'.

Presentational Dance

On the first evening in Sviniţa at Easter 2013 the researchers attended a presentational performance by the village ensemble Dunav who performed several choreographies from Serbia. They proudly discussed their participation in festivals in Romania and in Serbia with the researchers saying that they preferred to dance the Serbian choreographies, although they included local dances in their repertoire (see Mellish, 2014, p. 22).

In a recent paper on the *Politics of Representation, Identity and Minorities as Portrayed through Local Dance in the Banat Region* (Mellish & Green, 2021, p. 183) the authors observe that during the various cultural events, local and international festivals in which the various ethnicities participate they (the group leaders) chose the material to perform based on three parameters "the representation that the dancing is portraying, the context in which the dancing takes place, and the adaption of the dancing to the context" (Mellish & Green, 2021, p. 181). In the case of ensemble Dunav from Sviniţa by performing suites of dances from Serbia they set themselves aside as 'different' when participating in festivals and events within Romania (including their own festivals) as they represent one of the co-located ethnicities. Conversely, when they travel to festivals in Serbia by performing Serbian dances, they are demonstrating inclusiveness with their Serbian 'brothers'. In their case their leaders choose to represent their Serbian ethnicity as the collective identity they perform in the context of presentational performances as they deem that this is the most appropriate and will give them access to wider opportunities for participation (see Mellish & Green, 2021, p. 183).

As Selena comments, although the same dynamic and fluid situation is seen with both the Romanian and Serbian dance practices over the past century, in performances on stage they are markers of ethnicity:

> Although the dance practice of the Serbs in the Danube Gorge must be seen as changing, dynamic and fluid, within the heterogeneous repertoire it is possible to single out dances that in the past represented the ethnic marker of the Serbs in this area, and which even today the performers consider the identification basis of their own cultural identity. (Rakočević, 2018, p. 303)

However, conversely as Anca commented, when dancing socially at community events in Svinita:

> Almost all young people (including the dancers of Dunav) took part with great enthusiasm and an impressive energy at the village *joc*, demonstrating that the current dances of the traditional repertoire are still an integral part of the youth dance culture. It has to be stressed that as long as the local dance repertoire is practiced by the young generation in the existent social contexts, the traditional dance culture is still alive and has a chance to survive. The survival of dancing as a social practice is due to its capacity of transformation and adaptation to new and constant changeable circumstances and aesthetic norms due to the impact of globalization. (Giurchescu, 2015, p. 29)

Conclusion

Selena visited the Danube Gorge many times and wrote extensively on her research in papers published both within Serbia and internationally. She wrote in total almost 20 papers in the period between 2012 to 2020 that provided detailed descriptions of the customs and dances done at community events together with discussions on interethnic relations, cross-cultural exchange interpretations of culturality, geography and place. Her work gives a reflection on the historical, geographical, political and cultural facets of the positionality of the Danube Gorge villages and their dances. This reveals how the people from these villages adopt flexible local identities that can be multiple, shifting and situational that are, in the case of Svinita, based on the notion that their ancestry is 'different' from the inhabitants of the surrounding area (see also Mellish, 2014, p. 24), even though it is clear that their customs, music and dance practices have continued to exchange and merge with cultural practices of the surroundings.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest: The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

Grant Support: The authors declared that this study has received no financial support.

Author Contributions: Conception/Design of Study- L.M., N.G.; Data Acquisition- L.M., N.G.; Data Analysis/Interpretation- L.M., N.G.; Drafting Manuscript- L.M., N.G.; Critical Revision of Manuscript- L.M., N.G.; Final Approval and Accountability- L.M., N.G.; Material and Technical Support- L.M., N.G.

Hakem Değerlendirmesi: Dış bağımsız.

Çıkar Çatısması: Yazarlar çıkar çatışması bildirmemişlerdir.

Finansal Destek: Yazarlar bu çalışma için finansal destek almadıklarını beyan etmişlerdir.

Yazar Katkıları: Çalışma Konsepti/Tasarım- L.M., N.G.; Veri Toplama- L.M., N.G.; Veri Analizi/Yorumlama- L.M., N.G.; Yazı Taslağı- L.M., N.G.; İçeriğin Eleştirel İncelemesi- L.M., N.G.; Son Onay ve Sorumluluk- L.M., N.G.; Malzeme ve Teknik Destek- L.M., N.G.

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How cite this article

Mellish, L., Green N. (2023). Dance and Festivals in Serbian Villages along the Romanian Danube Gorge: Contextualizing Selena Rakočević's Research. *Konservatoryum – Conservatorium*, 10(Suppl.1), S1–S13. https://doi.org/10.26650/CONS2023-1247270