

Dance practices in the Danube Gorge region

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The Danube Gorge in Romania connects the Banat plain region to the Oltenian region through the Banat mountains at the southern end of the Carpathians. The villages at the western end of the Gorge are predominantly Serbian where those at the eastern end are predominantly Romanian. The dance practices of the Serbians and the Romanians living in the Danube Gorge were researched in the 1970s before the flooding of many of the villages to build the hydro-electric plant at Kladovo, and more recently by our late research colleague Selena Rakočević. In this paper I reference the documented collections and research and contextualise this to the dance practices in the surrounding regions. I conclude that this region does not constitute an ethnographic zone, but might be considered as a two overlapping micro-zones, in which we find complex patterns of cultural sharing with connections to the neighbouring areas. This article is an extended version of the section on dance practices within our paper in a publication dedicated to our late research colleague Selena Rakočević.

Ethnographic region

The “Danube Gorge” region is known in Romanian as “Clisura Dunării” and in Serbian as “Banatska Klisura”.¹ This generally only refers to the northern side of the Danube, with the southern side attributed to other ethnographic regions and histories.

From the Serbian perspective Banatska Klisura² is the northern side of the Danube, which is predominantly Serbian between the villages of Divici (Divić) and Moldova Veche (Stara Moldava), but sometimes also includes the Poljadija zone on the Romanian side of the river Nera (comuna of Socol etc.). The region on the southern side of the Danube is Braničevo, a Slavic kingdom from the 9th century. These “Banatska Klisura” locations mostly had a medieval history with a Serbian population and immigration mainly from the Kosovo area during the Ottoman period [Rakočević 2018:294], but then were further repopulated after 1717 following the Austrian-Turkish war which devastated the area. There are two outlier village which have to be considered separately; Liubcova (Ljupkova) which was re-populated following the Austrian-Turkish war, secondly Svinița (Svinica) which arguably has maintained some of its old population.

From the Romanian perspective Clisura Dunării³ is less clear as a singular ethnographic zone. The main area centred on Sichevița links to the Almăj valley in the Banat mountains and the eastern villages are, in terms of communication, linked to Mehedinți county and the region of Orșova. On the southern side of the Danube, part of northeastern Serbia, is largely populated by “Vlach” as they are termed in Slavic languages. In the west the Ungareni speak Banat dialect and in the east the Țarani (or Carani in Serbian) speak Oltenian dialect. The situation of Oltenian Romanians in this area is made more complex by the 19th century immigration of Oltenians termed “Bufeni”⁴ into the forestry and mining industries during Hapsburg times.

This summary draws mainly from the works of Selena Rakočević (Serbia), Anca Giurchescu (Romania) and our own publications. The published information on the community dance repertoire covers the villages of: Berzasca, Coramnic, Dubova, Ieselnîța, Ilovița, Jupalnic, Liubcova (Ljupkova), Moldova Veche (Stara Moldava), Ogradena, Pescari, Plavisevița, Sichevița, Socol (Sokol), Svinița (Svinica), Tufan and Virciorova (see Figure 1).

¹ The word for Gorge: Clisura (Romanian regional), Klisura (Serbian), Cljisura (Aromanian), κλεισόρα (Greek), is derived from late Latin *clausūra* meaning “shut, closed”, most likely via Byzantine Greek.

² See <https://eliznik.org.uk/traditions-in-romania/ethnographic-history/ethnographic-zones/klisura/>

³ See <https://eliznik.org.uk/traditions-in-romania/ethnographic-history/ethnographic-zones/clisura/>

⁴ See <https://eliznik.org.uk/the-bufeni-and-oltenians-of-banat/>



Figure 1. Map of locations included in the research referenced.

The work of Giurchescu concentrates on the more easterly villages, including the Serbian locations of Svinîța and Liubcova, whereas Rakočević concentrates only on the Serbian villages thus including the more westerly locations.

Old “strata” dances

Hora, Brâul and Sârba

In all Romanian locations, and also the Serbian locations of Liubcova and Svinîța, the dances practiced within calendrical and life cycle customs include *Hora*, *Brâu* and *Sârba* dances considered to be from the “old strata” [Giurchescu 1972:247]. *Hora* and *Brâu* are related in structure and function within the community. Generically the title *Brâu* is associated with a men’s chain dance and often the Banat *Brâu* continues as a men’s dance commencing the dance cycle [Green 2014:29]. *Sârba* is largely associated with Oltenia and the Bufeni people, and predominates in the eastern locations. In Svinîța in 1969, Giurchescu recorded the order of the dance cycle as *Brâu*, *Hora*, *Sârba* [Giurchescu 1972:143].

The situation in Svinîța is particularly interesting. *Brâul* has a change in foot work structure [Leibman 1992]⁵ from the typical “1101” to a “1011” pattern, although a dance contact who participated in balls in Svinîța during the 1980s does not recall this being the case at the time. This pattern has been maintained into the more recently introduced fast *De doi* (couple dance, but danced in the current dance fashion of small circles). Although Rakočević proposes [Rakočević 2017:6, 10] that the dance used in the *Hora de pomana* custom in Svinîța was a different dance known as *Sitnana* until 1989, this view is not upheld by the documentation [Milcu et al. 1972:123]. Additionally the reconstructed dance presented as *Sitna* (or *Sitnana*)⁶ by Rakočević is only the typical *Brâul* danced to Banat mountain melodies [Luchin 2021:14]. Hence, the probability is that the dance in Svinîța was previously in the “1101” pattern, as recalled by our contact, and recorded in 1972 by Giurchescu as *Brâul*, and when discussing this dance in Serbian language it is referred to as *Sitnana* by the older generation. At some point in the past decades the dance mutated in structure and become stabilised in this mutation. This

⁵ See our website for a brief explanation of Bob Leibman’s notation <https://eliznik.me.uk/research/topic/dance-structure/bob-leibmans-notation/>

⁶ The term *Sitnata* may not refer to an actual dance, but to the valued quality in dancing in the small stepped way, see [Grancharova 2008:137].

same change can be found in other unconnected locations such as Cornereva (a village in a mountain valley some 100km from Svinița).

Rakočević recorded that during the second half of the 20th century in Moldova Veche the dance *Vlaško moldavsko kolo* (meaning Romanian dance from Moldova) and also called *staro kolo* (old dance) was danced in Moldova Veche. This dance is one of the symmetric versions of *Brâul*, but is no longer performed [Rakočević 2018:303]. We have no other information about dances practiced during Serbian customs in the predominantly Serbian locations.

Romanian old strata dances

In addition Giurchescu [Milcu et al. 1972:123] lists further old strata dances which include *Poșovaica* (Plavisevița, Dubova, Ogradena, Tufan, Coramnic), *Ropota* (Plavisevița, Dubova) and *Țandăra* (Plavisevița, Dubova, Ogradena) that are outside the common dance cycle and were only occasionally danced by the 1970s.

The dances *Poșovaica* and *Țandăra* were common names for Banat Romanian dances, either as men's dances in the mountain region or couple dances in the plain region, although these regional words are most likely derived from Serbian and German respectively.⁷ The dance *Ropota* was recorded as part of the winter *Căluș* suite in the village of Hunia (Dolj county) [Giurchescu and Bloland 1995:233; Surdu 2004] and is part of the dance suites in the Vlach villages of Gamzovo and Pokrayna in the Vidin region. The name, from Bulgarian *ponom*, refers to the sound of the hooves of a running horse which could infer a link to the *Căluș* (the horse men).

Additionally Giurchescu [Milcu et al. 1972:123] gives a further two dances in the old repertoire predominantly in the Serbian locations; *Bătuta* (Liubcova, Berzasca and Svinița) and *Tudorka* in Liubcova and Svinița [see also Niculescu-Varone and Gainariu-Varone 1979:180] which could indicate links prior to the 1970s to the regions on the southern side of the Danube. No information is given about the choreology of *Bătuta* (meaning “stamping” in Romanian) which is very common dance name throughout Romania. It is probable this name is linked to the dances in the repertoires of the Vlach villages Gamzovo, Negovanovtsi, Kutovo and Topolovets in the Vidin region. *Tudorka* (*Todorka*) is a dance name common among the Țarani Vlach of northeast Serbia and is known as *Dudorka* by the Ungareni Vlach [timoceanul 2009]. This link could be related to a community memory dating from the 1930s of people from Timoc region coming to Svinița [Stanojlović 1938:112] which is borne out by the similarities in language between Svinița and the village of Novo Selo in Vidin region [Andrey 2020].

There are also few references to the Oltenian dance in asymmetric 5/8 called *Rustemul* (Berzasca, Ogradena, Ilovita, Virciorova).

Serbian old strata dances

Rakočević used interviews to recall the older repertoire in the Serbian locations, predominantly Moldova Veche. Of these dances, two are typical from of the wider Serbian Banat, *Malo kola* and *Mađarac*. This leaves *Kukunica* of the typical Serbian “kolo in three” form as representing the basis of the local repertoire during the first decades of the 20th century [Rakočević 2018:299].

Couple dance cycle

Ardeleana, De doi and Învârtita

The suite of Romanian couple dances, *Ardeleana*, *De doi* and *Învârtita* “belong, comparatively, to a newer strata” [Milcu et al. 1972:123]. *Ardeleana* and *De doi* are associated with the Banat mountain region. The name *Ardeleana* is a reference to Transylvania and is described in the late 19th century [Liuba 1898:141] and is closely connected to the *Hațegana* dance types of Transylvania. *Învârtita* is best known as the turning dance of Transylvania and is clearly related to the version in the Banat

⁷ See <https://eliznik.org.uk/banat-plain-column-dances/>

mountains. *De doi* is a Banat creation with the foot pattern closely connected to *Brâul* but in a couple dance formation [Green 2015:128].

Ardeleana and *De doi* were not recorded in all locations in 1971 [Milcu et al. 1972:123] showing that these are relatively recent additions to the current repertoires. This is the case at Svinița and Liubcova. *Învârtita*, or the older form *Diclița* (listed as *Pe loc* in Svinița [Niculescu-Varone and Gainariu-Varone 1979:138], was recorded in most locations in 1971 [Milcu et al. 1972:123]. *Învârtita* has continued to be danced in Svinița, but to the melody of *Bordeiașul* [Niculescu-Varone and Gainariu-Varone 1979:27], which interestingly has the same footwork pattern as the fixed form version of *Învârtita* as danced in Svinița.

Mađarac

The structure of the Serbian Banat couple (or trios) dance *Mađarac* is very different to the Romanian couple dances. *Mađarac* (meaning the “Hungarian” but with no obvious connection to any Hungarian dance) can be dated with certainty to the second half of the 19th century [Rakočević 2011:124]. This was recorded in Moldova Veche [Rakočević 2020:127] and was previously in the dance repertoires at Svinița [Milcu et al. 1972:123; Niculescu-Varone and Gainariu-Varone 1979:124] and Liubcova [Niculescu-Varone and Gainariu-Varone 1979:125].

Dances from Serbia

Durđevka

Durđevka was recorded in Liubcova [Niculescu-Varone and Gainariu-Varone 1979:67] and Svinița in the late 1960s [Milcu et al. 1972:123] but has now fallen out of the repertoire. *Durđevka* belongs to the 19th century and pre-First World War repertoire in Serbia and was also danced until the mid-20th century in the Serbia immigrant communities in the USA [Crum 1993].

Žikino kolo

Žikino kolo was adopted among the Serbs in Banat and the Danube Gorge after the First World War [Rakočević 2015:124]. This dance is linked to the area of central Serbia [Rakočević 2017:11] by the form typical for “*Kolo*” although this version appears to be Banat centric. The most prominent characteristic of the *Žikino kolo* is that it is in triple meter with a lengthened first beat. In the Danube Gorge and Banat this approximates to a ratio of 4+3+3 [Green 2015:130], while all other dances in the Danube Gorge are in two-four meter (2/4) [Rakočević 2015:124].

Žikino kolo in general conforms to the standard *Kolo* step pattern “0111”, but interestingly *Žikino kolo* in the Danube Gorge conforms to the local common step pattern structure or “1101” in common with the local *Hora* and *Brâul* [Green 2015:130]. This can be seen in the DVD “Traditional dances of the Serbs in Banat. An anthology” [Rakočević 2014] where the example from Moldova Veche (track 17) is of the local “1101” structure and the examples from Crepaja and Izbište (Serbian Banat between the cities of Belgrade and Vršac) (tracks 15 and 16) are the typical Serbian “0111” structure.

Moravac or Šestica

Moravac arrived in the Danube Gorge villages in the decades after the Second World War. Although the melody is the well-known Serbian *Moravac*, the dance is quite different and not of the “Kolo in three” structure. *Moravac* is still danced in all the Serbian villages except in Svinița [Rakočević 2018:300].

Shota (Šota)

Shota (*Šota*) has its origin as a popular dance of the Albanians from Kosovo. This dance was popularised in a choreography of the Serbian national ensemble “Kolo” by Olga Škovran in 1952 and a resulting song to the same melody in the 1970s became very popular at events. *Šota* was a new dance practiced on the southern side of the Danube Gorge in the 1970s [Rakočević 2012:256], however it did

not reach the northern side until the borders opened in the 1990s [Rakočević 2012:256] and some 30 years later is now becoming a popular dance at Romanian events in Banat.

Vlach dances from northeast Serbia

Četvorka or Hora de patru

In a survey of village events in the wider area [see Green 2015] it is clear that *Četvorka* or *Hora de patru* is not practiced on the northern side of the Danube except in *Svinița*, whereas it is the common form of *Hora* danced at all events in the Vlach locations in mountain regions south from Kladovo. Vasić says that *Četvorka* or *Hora în patru* represents the basic dance of northeastern Serbia for the Serbian and Vlach population [Vasić 1997, 273; Vasić 2005, 314 in Rakočević 2017:11]. It could be assumed that it was also adopted in *Svinița* most probably during the 1990s [Rakočević 2015:123].

Četvorka is now a popular Serbian dance in the wider area and in Serbia, and with this the dancing style has changed to a more elevated and enthusiastic approach to the steps. At the *Svinița* ball the musical for *Četvorka* was named the Wallachian [Vlach] kolo by the musicians [Rakočević 2012:254], plus the way of dancing *Četvorka* is smooth and flat in the way of the Vlach people, suggesting the dance in *Svinița* was adopted directly from the Vlach regions rather than from the Serbian popular dance.

To position *Četvorka* as a dance ethnochoreologically the dance structure and the function of this dance in the community should be considered. The dances *Hora* and *Brâul* on the northern side of the Danube are of the “1101” step pattern, and the floor pattern is 4 measures to the right, 2 measures in place and 2 measures moving slightly to the left. The function of *Četvorka* in the communities south of the Danube is identical to *Hora* and *Brâul*, the only difference is the first two long steps in the dance are changed to two “side and close steps”, creating four side steps to the right [Green 2015:129], hence the name *Četvorka* in Serbian and *Hora de patru* in Romanian. In some YouTube recordings from the villages south of Kladovo the standard *Hora* and *Hora de patru* can be seen danced simultaneously in the same chain of dancers.

In common practice now, particularly in the Serbian locations, there is another dance similar to *Četvorka* but where the side-close steps are replaced by side-in front and side-behind (“grapevine”), and the style is more elevated in the way of current Serbian dancing. When asking for the name I have only been given *Vlaško kolo*. This dance is also practiced socially in the villages in Vidin county and the earliest documentation I can find is on [Vasilescu <2001] under the title “Joc din Slatina”. We can only assume this is a recent popularisation of a variant of *Hora în patru*.

Bordeiul

Bordeiul (or *Bordeiașul*) has a particular melody and choreography and is attributed to the Mehedinți region. In 1971 this was an infrequent dance in Berzasca, Plavisevița, Dubova, Ogradena and Ilovita [Milcu et al. 1972:123]. This dance is known as *Manastireanca* around Kladovo south of the Danube where it remains part of the performed repertoire in some Vlach villages. Interestingly the melody of *Bordeiașul* [Niculescu-Varone and Gainariu-Varone 1979:27] continues to be known in the village of *Svinița* but is used for *Învârtita*.

Conclusion

Having participated in joint fieldwork trips, attended local festivals and social dance “balls” over the past 10 years, as well as reading all the ethnographies and histories available, I have formed my understanding of the dance practices in this small region. I would maintain that the “Danube Gorge” does not constitute an ethnographic zone, but might be considered as two overlapping micro-zones.

1. Firstly the west, the predominantly Serbian locations, the town of Moldova Veche and neighbouring villages, on the open lands before the narrow gorge. These places have been subject to repopulation post the Ottoman period and have maintained cultural links to both the Serbians of Banat and Serbia itself.

2. Secondly, towards the east the villages are mostly Romanian, but also a couple of majority Serbian villages, where the cultural links appear to be (more recently) to the Romanian Banat mountain region and (in the past) to the lower Danube regions. The link to the Banat mountain region of Valea Almăjului is not unexpected as the village of Sichevița connects via farmsteads from the Danube across the mountains to Valea Almăjului.

Thus we find there is little that constitutes a music and dance practice specific to the Danube Gorge, rather we find complex patterns of cultural sharing with neighbouring connected regions; this being an adoption of fashions in social dancing over more recent times, in a continual state of change in community dancing.

However there is a common dance structure to dances specific to the wider region. The “1101” step pattern and a floor direction structure (4 measures to right, 2 in place and 2 measures slightly to the left) prevails across the whole wider area from Pădureni (Hunedoara region), south through the Banat mountains and the adjacent regions in Gorj, Mehedinți and Caraș Severin counties, and south into the Vlach dances in north east Serbia, but not in the villages in the Vidin region [Green 2015:121].

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