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“Vow crosses” in Gorj county (Romania): symbolism and interpretation

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Rezumat

„Crucile de jurământ” din județul Gorj: simbolism și interpretare

„Crucile de jurământ”, considerate conform tradiției ca „locul de odihnă al sufletelor” celor decedați sau „casa sufletului”, reprezintă un obicei unic în România, specific unor localități din județul Gorj, cum ar fi Hurezani, Licurici, Aninoasa, Vladimir, Jupânești, Stejari ș.a. Acestea se prezintă ca și cruci pictate cu diverse culori, reprezentând figuri religioase, în rare cazuri cu scurte versuri, atârâte în copaci, la fântâni, în curtea unor biserici, la porți, dar cele mai multe pe marginea drumurilor, amplasarea lor făcându-se la 40 de zile de la deces. Atât crucile de pomenire, cât și cele de jurământ se fac pentru iertarea celor plecați dintre cei vii, o tradiție ancestrală ale cărei origini nu se cunosc, însă care este respectată cu sfințenie după deces. Simbolistica iertării celui plecat la cer o reprezintă cu prisosință „crucea de jurământ”, care pe de o parte sacralizează spațiul prin prezența sa, pe de altă parte, constituie un mijloc de iertare, de ușurare a sufletului celui decedat, deoarece prin cruce se obține mântuirea. Poate fi privită și ca un liant între dorința celui decedat de a i se face o astfel de cruce și datoria de îndeplinire a promisiunii a celor rămași. Ținerea jurământului de a pune o astfel de cruce reprezintă nu numai o promisiune față de decedat, ci și față de Dumnezeu, singurul care poate ierta păcatele.

Cuvinte-cheie: obicei, moarte, cer, arbore, „cruce de jurământ”

Резюме

«Обетные кресты» жудеца Горж: символика и интерпретация

Обетные кресты, которые, согласно традиции, считаются «местом упокоения душ» умерших или «домом души», представляют собой уникальный для Румынии обычай, характерный для ряда населенных пунктов жудеца Горж, таких как Хурезань, Ликурич, Аниноаса, Владимир, Жупанешть, Стежарь и др. Они представляют собой раскрашенные кресты различных цветов с изображениями религиозных фигур, в редких случаях – с короткими стихотворными надписями. На сороковой день после смерти их устанавливают на деревьях, у колодцев, во дворах церквей, на воротах, но чаще всего – вдоль дорог. Кресты, как поминальные, так и клятвенные, изготавливают

ради прощения душ умерших. Эта древняя традиция, происхождение которой неизвестно, строго соблюдается после смерти человека. Символика прощения души, отошедшей на небеса, в наибольшей степени воплощена в обетном кресте: с одной стороны, своим присутствием он сакрализует пространство, с другой – служит средством прощения и облегчения души умершего, поскольку через крест достигается ее спасение. Обетный крест можно рассматривать и как связующее звено между желанием умершего установить ему такого рода крест, и долгом живых исполнить это. Соблюдение обета означает выполнение обещания, данного не только умершему, но и Богу, единственному, кто может простить грехи.

Ключевые слова: обычай, смерть, небо, дерево, обетный крест

Summary

“Vow crosses” in Gorj county (Romania): symbolism and interpretation

“Vow crosses”, considered according to tradition as the resting place of the souls of the deceased or the “house of the soul”, are a unique custom in Romania, specific to some localities in Gorj County, such as Hurezani, Licurici, Aninoasa, Vladimir, Jupânești, Stejari and others. They are presented as crosses painted in various colors, representing religious figures, in rare cases with short verses, hanging in trees, at fountains, in the courtyard of churches, at gates, but most of them on the side of roads, their placement being made 40 days after death. Both the commemorative and vow crosses are made for the forgiveness of those who have departed from the living, an ancestral tradition whose origins are unknown, but which is respected with holiness after death. The symbolism of the forgiveness of the departed to heaven is abundantly represented by the vow crosses which, on the one hand, sacralizes the space by its presence, on the other hand, constitutes a means of forgiveness, of relief of the soul of the deceased, because salvation is obtained through the cross. It can also be seen as a binder between the desire of the deceased to have such a cross made for him and between the duty to fulfill the promise by those who remain alive. Keeping a vow means fulfilling a promise made not only to the deceased, but also to God, the only one who can forgive sins.

Key words: custom, death, sky, tree, cross, vow

The custom of “the vow crosses”. The Romanian village and its elements of civilization, their authenticity and uniqueness, have abundantly demonstrated the ancient and autochthonous character of the Romanian village civilization, “shaped together with the nation” (Bernea 2006: 10) and full guardian of some old local traditions that have been constituted over time in the inexhaustible source of Romanian ethnicity. Even if the current village is impregnated to a lesser or greater extent by modernism, there are still mountain or isolated villages that have preserved the originality and ancestry of their traditions and customs, even if the understanding or knowledge of the roots has been lost over time. Such an example is that of some villages in the south of Gorj County (Hurezani, Licurici, Aninoasa, Vladimir, Jupânești, Stejari, Plopșoru, Turburea etc.), which practice the custom of vow crosses 40 days after death, a unique custom in Romania, crosses that double those at the head of the deceased in the cemetery.

It is known that death is part of the program of life and that it actually reveals the characteristic of the perishability and ephemerality of earthly existence. Man has developed since ancient times negative emotions towards death, especially fear, because it has always been perceived as darkness, as something about which nothing concrete is known, hence the absolute fear of it. In a way, in order to counteract the negative aspect, the various religions of the world have created conceptions according to which the soul is immortal, some adopting the belief in reincarnation, in order to form the idea of the survival of the soul after death and its arrival in the afterlife, in hell or heaven, or in other spiritual worlds, invisible to the world in which we live.

Many religions support the immortality of the soul after death, this final stage of life being considered only a passage to another world, “the one beyond”, in which the soul arrives to continue its existence in another dimension, a spiritual one. Thus, “For the religious man, death, according to the ancient beliefs, is a passage from one world to another world, from a known and familiar world to another, unknown world. This transition is irreversible, and if we visualize it as a path, we can say that there is no return, only forward. You walk along this road, but you never turn back” (Cotoman 2024: 145).

The Orthodox faith supports the theory of the immortality of the soul: after death it presents itself before God who will judge it and send it to hell or heaven, depending on its deeds during life. It is precisely in accordance with this belief that the oath crosses are used, they are a kind of mediator at the Last Judgment for the soul that during life has made various crooked oaths or lied, which has led to the commission of a sin that will hang in the balance of

judgment made by God, but which, together with the prayer of forgiveness pronounced by the priest, if such a cross is made for him, he will be absolved of the sin of lying or of taking a crooked oath.



Cross 1. The vow crosses from the Museum of Cross (Gorj County-Romania).

Photo: Gherghina Boda, July 2025



Cross 2. The vow crosses from the Museum of Cross (Gorj County-Romania).

Photo: Gherghina Boda, July 2025



Cross 3. The vow crosses from the Museum of Cross (Gorj County-Romania).

Photo: Gherghina Boda, July 2025

The living ones left behind the deceased, at his request, make him such an oath cross, which can be interpreted in several ways (Floroiu 2017): 1. Resting place for the soul of the deceased after wandering the known places for 40 days, after this period the villagers placing them in various places, thus doubling the usual ones in the cemetery; 2. They have the role of absolving the deceased from the lies told and the crooked oaths made in life, that is, they have the role of forgiveness; 3. Seen as memorial crosses, placed on the side of the road so that passers-by remember the deceased; 4. A covenant made with those who remained alive to keep them in memory through remembrance through the vow crosses. Therefore, “The vow crosses have symbolic value, and the places on the side of the road with the forest of crosses are as many spaces of confession and binder between those who have sworn and what is remembered. They are signs of the place, to which the souls of the dead return on the great holidays to complete the nation. And the forest of oath crosses is the symbolic image for a community united by the gesture of respecting the vow” (Nedelcu-Păsărin 2021: 102).

The custom reveals the strong connection within the family to the definitive disappearance of one of the members, the others having the moral obligation to keep them in memory through remembrance, hence the great respect for the ancestors. The mean-

ing of these crosses of oath goes beyond the juridical meaning of testimony and reaches the sphere of religious axiology which considers sin a violation of an ontological oath to God in the first place, this cross being made for the man who “swore in life”, “gave himself to evil, damned himself, betraying the promise made at baptism to deny Satan and all his works and to unite himself with Christ”. That is why “any bad covenant, which man has made or suffered in life, can be regarded as a kind of oath”, which makes the cross of oath a “resonance of the peasant to these biblical texts, to all those prayers and liturgical songs often heard by him in services”, transforming it into a “cross of respect for the truth, either the truth of Christ, or the truth of faith, or even our smaller or greater everyday truths” (Bilțiu 2015: 350).

When we speak of the crooked oath, we mean the transgression of the third commandment and the taking of God’s name in vain, the non-recognition of His supreme authority, His justice and punishing power, the misuse of the oath in an abusive and crooked manner for unimportant or untrue things¹. The perception of others about the one who commits this sin is that “He who swears crooked is morally corrupt, because no one who is morally sound dares to break either the oath by which he called God as witness and judge, or the word of his honour. He who swears falsely is cunning and deceitful, because he mocks both divine and human things, in order to deceive those who trust in him. He who swears falsely is shameless, because he is not ashamed by lying before God and men. He who swears crookedly despises his holy duties, because he denies his obligation to keep them”². On the 40-day almsgiving, the priest consecrates this cross and says a prayer of absolution from the oath.

This type of crosses is usually made of gorun (*Quercus petraea*) wood, generally painted in blue, on which there are figures of saints and angels, the figure of the Mother of God or of our Lord Jesus Christ especially, no taller than one meter and made either by family members or by the village painter, a good craftsman and connoisseur of ancestral traditions (Floroiu Țicleanu 2024). Not everyone is allowed to make oath crosses, only the most dignified and righteous in the village because those who had stolen or killed transmitted their sin to the ninth offspring, which would have defiled the cross made (Ion 2015). They are made either with straight arms or with rounded, carved, notched, or double arms, as well as in the form of crosses with rounded or discoidal arms and with trefoiled or rounded ends (Deleanu 2011: 85-89). In some villages, it is also practiced to write short verses, but in general the expressions “Cross

for the servant of God” or “The servant of God is remembered” are used (Floroiu 2017). The craftsman Gore Măciucă from Plopșoru said that an oath cross defends the dignity of the deceased, this being placed only “from children from 10 years old upwards, because the little ones are not in the pot with the man or woman who went through life and committed sins”, he also called them “traveling crosses” because “You don’t know where they belong in their place, but you have to put them somewhere: on trees, on poles. These are the vow crosses!”. At the funeral, a wooden pillar is placed on the grave, which shows the “accompaniment of the dead by the Holy Trinity”. That is why it has three nails, three holes and three notches, for the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. A cloth is tied to the pillar with a penny wrapped in it (Munteanu 2010). In some cases, 44 signs were made on the vow crosses, a number equivalent to the buckets of water that had to be brought or the number of flatbreads that had to be given for alms during the 40 days after death (Bilțiu 2015: 349).



Cross 4. The vow cross from the Museum of Cross (Gorj County-Romania). Photo: Gherghina Boda, July 2025



Cross 5. The vow cross from the Museum of Cross (Gorj County-Romania). Photo: Gherghina Boda, July 2025



Cross 6. The vow cross from the Museum of Cross (Gorj County-Romania). Photo: Gherghina Boda, July 2025

Popular belief says that after death, the soul visits all the known places and people for 40 days, at the end of which the oath crosses are placed at the gate so that the tired soul can rest after the journeys made, therefore they are also called “the house of the soul” or “the place of rest of the soul”. They are also placed on the side of roads, on the trunks of trees, in the courtyard of some churches or at wells after they are sanctified six weeks after death (Floroiu Țicleanu 2024), on the fence of cemeteries and households. After wear and tear, generally due to the action of the sun, rain, snow, wind, etc., they are gathered near fences or trees, but never burned because it would be considered a true blasphemy against the dead (Del-eanu 2011: 80).

In the village of Turburea there is a unique custom in Romania, preserved from generation to generation, also without its origin being known, that at the death of a man he has three crosses without which the priest does not make the burial: one at the end, one of oath and one placed at crossroads, bridges or fountains, these, by their vivid colour, symbolizing the faith of the Gorj people in a brighter and more joyful passage to the afterlife (Iordăchescu 2009). They are made by the villagers, brightly coloured, painted with biblical scenes, especially with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and ordered before the six-week alms to remind the families of their dead, at whose tomb they worship, pray, say their names and wish to rest in peace, their remembrance being made on every holiday, when candles are lit (Iordăchescu 2009). Regarding this custom, a villager from Aninoasa said that “These crosses of oath or remembrance are placed 40 days after the death of man. The 40 days represent the time after which the Savior Christ ascended to heaven after the Resurrection. Thus, just as the Lord has ascended, so also our souls are exalted. That is why some crosses are placed in the trees, to be higher, towards God and Heaven”³.

In the village of Vladimir, six weeks after his death, the priest comes to consecrate the cross, a bridge over a water, a well, the table and the goods that are given as alms, he says a prayer of absolution from the oath, then the water from the well is poured over the dead⁴.

Therefore, the custom of oath crosses is practiced in several villages of Gorj, with only small variations.

Another ancient custom specific to Gorj is that of *prayer crosses*, practiced in Licurici commune, which are placed at the gates and without which the priest does not sanctify the 40-day parastasis, the people of Gorj stopping next to them to say a prayer for the deceased (Dragomir Țicleanu 2012).

In the commune of Aninoasa there is another custom related to the death of a family member, that of the “pillar of the soul”, ordered together with the coffin, a type of cross that is placed at the head of the deceased until his burial, where it remains until the alms of 40 days and which is made of fir or oak wood no higher than 60 cm, which has three notches in the middle and at the top symbolizing the Holy Trinity (Dragomir Țicleanu 2012).

It is worth noting that “The burial of the deceased is a drama clearly regulated by popular tradition, involving numerous people, each fulfilling a specific role” (Horofianiuk et al. 2025: 86), this custom involving the family, local artists, craftsman of crosses, locals etc.

Interpretation of the custom through the symbolism of the sky, the centre of the world, the tree and the cross. However, in order to understand the ancient symbolic charge of these rituals, it is absolutely necessary to make a historical incursion into the symbolism of the world vis-à-vis nature and its elements, their involvement in the daily life of man, the creation of a special relationship with them in order to facilitate the spiritual ascension and elevation of the soul after death in other dimensions. For regardless of time and space, man has reacted almost identically to the elements and forces of nature, as well as to the celestial divinity.

Since ancient times, when man tried to find himself in a foreign environment that he had just begun to explore and which then, as he understood, he encompassed in various signs and symbols, he created a special connection with Heaven, with that terrifying Cosmos which, in order to be improved, was sacralized. And this is because the sky, above him, symbolized first of all power, then perennality and sacredness, being inhabited by a divine celestial being, creator of the universe, accompanied by other divine beings, man never being able to rise to their level, from which derives the transcendental character of heaven (Chevalier et al. 1994: 285). Christianity considers heaven as the dwelling place of God, thus entering into the system of relations between the Creator and men, that is, between divinity and his creation. Over time, people have tried by various means to improve their relationship with the supreme Divinity, to gain His goodwill so that when they come before Him at the judgment they will benefit from clemency. That is why there are so many funeral traditions and customs that are meant to ensure the soul that has gone to heaven – indulgence for the deeds done during its ephemeral life on Earth. Heaven is also regarded as the source of light and life, the throne of God, church domes adorned with sym-

bolic scenes from the celestial universe representing symbolic copies of heaven, the church gate is synonymous with the gate of heaven, and the church itself is regarded as the symbol of the Lord's throne or "the heavenly Jerusalem" (Biedermann 2002: 84).

The connection between Heaven and Earth has been imagined in various ways, hence the appearance of universal symbols that have accompanied man throughout his entire earthly existence. One of these is that of the Centre of the World, clothed with an axiological, psychic and sacred value, the place of condensation of the opposing forces, identified with the Principle, the Absolute Reality, God independent of time and space (Eseev 2001: 32), which stands as one of the four fundamental symbols (the circle, the cross, the square and the centre). Thus, the idea that "The Center is, first of all, the origin, the starting point of all things, it is the main point, without form and without dimensions, therefore indivisible, and therefore the only image of the primordial Unity. Through its irradiation all things are produced ... and the space that it fills with its brilliance, existing precisely through its reverberation (that *Fiat lux* of Genesis), without which this space would be nothing but 'privation' and nothingness, is the World in the broadest sense of the word, the sum total of all beings and states of existence that constitute the universal manifestation" (Guénon 2008: 77-78).

Hence, it follows that the Center "is the focus from which proceed the movement from the one to the many, from the interior to the exterior, from the unmanifested to the manifested, and from the eternal to the temporal, all the processes of emanation and divergence, and to which all the processes of return and convergence lead back, as to an origin, in search of their unity", with Christianity identifying it with God. The centre of centres, regarded as "a sphere whose centre is everywhere, and the circumference nowhere. Which means that its presence is universal and unlimited, that it is, therefore, in the invisible centre of being, independent of time and space" (Chevalier et al. 1994: 280). And this is because man, in his beginnings, developed a special relationship with the reality in which he lived, giving it an almost absolute sacredness, the experiences being most often dressed in religious clothes, man thus living in a "sacralized Cosmos, participates in a cosmic sacredness, manifested both in the animal world and in the plant world" (Eliade 1992: 19). Over time, by moving away from religious experiences, a part of humanity has desacralized reality and entered another reality, *the profane* one. But for the religious man, the revelation of the sacred space acquires "an existential value: nothing can begin, nothing can be done

without a prior orientation; Any orientation implies the acquisition of a fixed point. For this reason, the religious man strove to place himself in the "Centre of the World". *In order to live in the World*, it must be *founded*, and no world can be born in the "chaos" of homogeneity and relativity of profane space. The discovery or projection of a fixed point – the "Centre" – is equivalent to the Creation of the World" (Eliade 1992: 22). Thus, in archaic and traditional societies, through his religious experiences, man, in order to create a sacred space, operates a rupture in the homogeneity of spaces, which practically founds, ontologically, the World, because in a homogeneous and infinite expanse in which there is no landmark, therefore no possibility of orientation, hierophany thus reveals an absolute "fixed point" called "Centre" (Eliade 1992: 22), that is, he looks at the surrounding world as a microcosm divided in two, one part formed by an inhabited and organized, familiar, i.e. cosmized space, in the other part an unknown and frightening space assimilated to chaos, death, night (Eliade 1994: 46). The Centre of the World is considered to be where heaven meets earth, a place marked either by the sacred mountain or by the world tree, by a stone, by a city, village, temple, palace, etc. (Eseev 2001: 32), which presents itself as an axis that supports the lower world, the earthly and the celestial, allowing the passage from one mode of existence to another or the communication between Heaven, Earth and Hell. Mircea Eliade brings to attention, along with the intimate solidarity between the life of the Universe, the problem of saving man, which is the engine of the infinite regeneration of cosmic life, death presenting itself to us as a consequence of our carelessness towards immortality (Eliade 1994: 69), that is, of breaking with the sacred.

One of the symbols that marks the Centre is also *the tree* that evokes verticality in all its magnitude, axiality, the symbol that facilitates communication between the three levels of the cosmos, representing "naturally the ascending path that those who pass from the world of the visible to that of the invisible travel" (Chevalier et al. 1994: 125). Not infrequently, the tree/tree is also identified with *the tree of life*, found in the faith and ethnology of many peoples, one of the ancient myths of mankind that can still be found today in the ornamentation and folk art of many countries. Among Romanians, depending on the geographical and ethno-folkloric area, about the tree of life (the tree of Heaven) there is a belief that it accompanies the soul, where "it would be eternally green and loaded with everything, so that the soul only looks at it and feels full; and if he feels like it, he climbs the ladder, pulls the hook and eats the berries;

those who have not been given such a tree as alms sit and look longingly at others" (Bucovina, Banat), in other beliefs it is said that this tree "would represent the sacrifice due for the last time for the reconciliation and union of man with God" (Bucovina) or it is believed "that when God brought Adam and Eve out of hell, the souls of the righteous clung to it like a tree laden with fruit, in other words the tree would thus serve as a ladder that the soul would climb to God in heaven" (Sibiu, Rădăuți), from which we can conclude that "the symbolism of the «tree of life» transits its meanings on human existence taken in its entirety, encompassing at the same time several meanings: tree of life, passing from this world to the next, the shade, refreshment and rest of the soul, after having passed through all the customs, ending up being a tree of Heaven or even Heaven itself" (Antonescu 2009: 545-546). In Christianity the tree is "the symbol of life given by the will of God, and the crossing of the annual cycles is a reference to life, death and resurrection, while the unfruitful or withered tree is the symbol of sin. From the wood of the Tree of Knowledge in Paradise later the cross of Christ had to be carved, which, for Christians, has since become the tree of life (Biedermann 2002: 31). Hence the very strong connection between the tree and the cross. The merit of Christianity is that it has considerably enriched the symbolism of the cross by adding a spiritual value. The crucifix, the fundamental symbol of Christianity, recalls the torture and death of Christ, signifying salvation, through crucifixion Jesus abolishing sacrifice and re-establishing the broken bond of sin between God and man, the cross symbolizing for Christians a total forgetfulness of self through commitment to faith (Pont-Humbert 1998: 84).

We believe that the placement of these oath crosses in the trees was not accidental, but that this choice finds its origin in the ancestral collective memory that regarded the tree as a form of *axis mundi*, in this case the soul of the one who went to heaven being helped by the verticality of the tree to ascend to the heights, like a ladder, passing through all the levels of existence to the highest where the Supreme Divinity is located because the tree is the element that unites the three worlds (subterranean, terrestrial and celestial), representing the universe itself, to the tree being connected "Jacob's ladder, symbol of the ascent to heaven that expresses an extension upwards, an ascent of a spiritual order" (Pont-Humbert 1998: 62). Thus, the Christian symbolism of the soul's ascent to heaven after death reveals the fact that the ascent expresses, on the one hand, the expectation of detachment, a break from bodily and earthly values, and on

the other hand, the hope of obtaining a certain harmony and bliss in heaven (Pont-Humbert 1998: 72).

The ritual of the oath crosses also refers to clemency, to the request for the forgiveness of sins before the ascension to heaven where the judgment of the deeds done during earthly life follows.

Another symbol is that of *the cross*, attested since ancient antiquity, which has two distinct origins, one as a geometric shape and the other as a connecting function. From a geometric point of view, the symbol of the cross is closely related to the symbol of the circle in the centre of which the point is located, that is, the emblem of the Divine Principle, the circle symbolizing the World, the relationship between the centre of the circle and its circumference being marked by the tracing of rays that start from the centre and stop at the circumference, in a variable number, the simplest form being that of four rays that divide the circle into four equal parts, that is, two rectangular diameters that form a cross inside the circumference (Guénon 2008: 79). Therefore, the origin of the cross lies in the circle divided by rays. Secondly, the symbol of the cross is also linked to the square, which it gives rise to when it is closed with four straight lines, and to the number four, regarded as a sign of solidity, of fullness, the figure of divine perfection, linked "to the four cardinal points, the four seasons, the four phases of the month, the four elements, the four Gospels, the four pillars of the universe, the four letters that form the name of God (YHWH) or tetragrammaton, which should never be pronounced" (Pont-Humbert 1998: 245). Furthermore, the cross serves as a link between the four cardinal directions and between the upper and lower realms; it forms the basis of all symbols of orientation and serves functions of measurement and synthesis, which explains the cross's rich symbolism.

The symbolism of the cross knows several aspects, one of which is the one that identifies it with the "Middle Tree", one of the many symbols of the "Axis of the World", the vertical arm of the cross constituting the trunk of the tree, while the horizontal arm forming the branches (Guénon 2008: 97). In the Christian conception, the cross is one of the fundamental symbols, although its representation predates Christianity, being present on almost all continents and among all the peoples of the world in various forms. It represents a model of the totality of the cosmos, but also of the man with his hands folded, and in Christianity it is called a "sign of signs", a symbol of Jesus Christ, of the torture of his crucifixion, but also of the miracle of the Resurrection, an "obligatory attribute of the priest, crowns any iconostas, is placed on the top of the domes and at the foundation

of churches, is deposited on the body in the mystery of baptism or at the funeral, it is worn by the neck by the Christian faithful, it is imitated by the gesture of worship during prayers”, it is the seal that sacralizes any object used by the Christian cult (Eseev 2001: 47-48).

The sign of the cross first appears in the rite of baptism, then in the Holy Mysteries in confirmation with Holy Chrism, in the Holy Sacrament of the Unction and in the Eucharist or the Holy Sacrament of Communion (Daniélou 1998: 121-122), then in daily life when man sanctifies his daily activities, the gesture defending the Christian from the danger of demons, as well as after death when the sign of the cross is made on the forehead of the deceased also with the purpose of defending the soul from demons in its great passage in the afterlife.

As far as Romanian spirituality is concerned, crosses “are the expression of the anonymous life of the villages” being found on large and small roads, in settlements or between villages, at crossroads, wells, bridges, all being related to certain facts, erected collectively, anonymously or individually. Oath crosses fall into the category of the type of individual crosses ordered specifically for a specific ritual performed by the family of deceased people who died unforgiven, who swore crookedly or lied. And this is because death is part of ancestral rituals converted into tradition. The Romanian peasant does not see death as a consolation or a deliverance from sins, but as a separation from loved ones, as a reorganization of the nation already gone into the “great unknown”, the loss of the existential condition and the integration into the absolute not having a positive connotation at all, but on the contrary, it is a generator of pain and longing, but also of the hope that at some point they will unite in eternity, which means that death is no longer regarded as something definitive, those who left, through remembrance by their descendants, remain alive in memory. This remembrance of the dead by placing crosses in the cemetery, on the roads, at wells, in trees, at water crossings, etc., by ritually performing alms at certain intervals of time after death or whenever the remaining family feels the spiritual need, by recollection at the grave, by prayer or by lighting candles, represent the most relevant forms of remembering and preventing the forgotten of the departed among us, but also to avoid the mental suffering of the descendants, marked by the disappearance of some family members from the physical space.

Vow crosses, beyond their traditionally religious connotations, can be seen as means of fulfilling the ritual in a practical way, but also as things made to be

seen and read as objects of folk art (Crețu 2011: 182). They are the testimonies in wood and colour of ancestral traditional rituals, with unknown origins, but whose practice has not been lost, but is still carried out with holiness by the people of the Gorj village.

From the above, it is concluded that this custom is closely linked to Heaven where we will all arrive at some point at the Great Judgment, to the symbol of the cross seen both as the place of torture and suffering of our Savior Jesus Christ, and as the hope in Resurrection and forgiveness, the gesture of hanging them in the trees being seen as a help given to the soul to reach Heaven as quickly as possible and without too many obstacles, therefore also by the symbol of the tree seen as a true axis of the world, a Christic ladder towards the Godhead. That is why we believe that the symbol of the centre of the world, of the sky, of the cross and of the tree are closely linked in the interpretation of this ancestral custom still practiced in an increasingly modern world of the Romanian village, but which nevertheless still retains a great resistance in the face of changes that harm customs that are too deeply rooted in the collective consciousness and memory to be able to be modified or transformed in any way.

Conclusions. An ancestral tradition with unknown origins, the custom of making vow crosses for people who leave this world with the sin of the crooked oath made in certain circumstances or of the lies that have sometimes marked the lives of those they know, of the unforgiven soul, is still preserved with holiness in some villages in the south of Gorj. Although they do not know their meaning or interpretation, they perform all the rituals and transmit them transgenerationally as a common heritage that should not be lost in any form or enriched, but practiced with holiness as the ancestors did. The cross, in the intimacy of its symbolism, is linked in Christian worship to God the Father, to Jesus Christ the Savior who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, to the Resurrection and salvation, to the sacred covenants made through baptism that should permanently guide man's life and his relationship with the Godhead. And when they have made mistakes and violated customs, people have invented this cross through which they hope to be absolved, through God's great love for his creation, from the sins committed, from the violation of promises to keep a pure relationship with both God and the World.

In the community life of Gorj this custom is respected and practiced from generation to generation even if the seal of modernism is acutely felt in the village world, this fact demonstrating the particularly strong connection of the villagers with the tradition-

al ancestral world transmitted transgenerationally, that reality that has permanently “contaminated” the Romanian ethnic character. Under these practices there is in fact the connection with the ancestors constituted in a true foundation on which the cult of the family, of the relationship beyond time with those who formed the roots of the family, of popular traditionalism is supported with more and more vigour.

Tradition claims that after death the soul rises to heaven, in the kingdom of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ the Savior, where he waits to enter into judgment of his acts during earth life. That's where you end up with the sins and the good deeds, the only “goods” you can take with you after death and depend on the place of eternal soul. Therefore, the Gorjans who committed the sin of false oath or lie, through these crosses of oath, seek to redeem their trespasses, that in the heavenly judgment they may be wiped out, and benefit from leniency. Their settlement in the trees, according to tradition, would help the soul to reach the sky faster, to leave the land world easier, to help it ascend to the heights to the underworld. And the cross placed with the one in the cemetery would double the hope of salvation, but especially forgiveness. It is also a perpetual act of remembering, of remembering, of neutral, of diluting labour. These oath crosses respect the wish of the deceased to be made such a cross, but also the obligation of the family left behind to observe this desire, thus creating a biunivocal bond between the two entities, a covenant with unwritten power of law.

Even though the origins of this custom are lost in the darkness of time, we believe that its roots lie in that universal ancestral symbolism that can be found in most peoples of the world and that has also entered the Romanian space, proof of the suite of symbols that populate our ethnography and ethnography. The relationship between heaven, tree and cross is particularly relevant in this burial habit, Christianity conferring a sacral surplus value.

As a tribute to this ancient custom, in the commune of Măceșu near Târgu Cărbunesti, a museum of crosses, unique in Romania and Europe, opened in September 2012, was established by Pompiliu Ciolacu.

Notes

¹ Despre jurământ. <https://www.crestinortodox.ro/carti-ortodoxe/despre-credinta-ortodoxa/despre-juramant-79912.html> (vizited 23.06.2025).

² Sfântul Ierarh Nectarie Taumaturgul de la Eghina. Cugetare despre jurământul strâmb. <https://doxologia.ro/cugetare-despre-juramantul-stramb> (vizited 23.06.2025).

³ Crucile de jurământ din Gorj, scară spre Cer. <https://www.activenews.ro/prima-pagina/Crucile-de-juramant-din-Gorj-scara-spre-Cer-30230>, 2014 (vizited 21.05.2025).

⁴ Crucile de jurământ din Gorj, scară spre Cer. <https://www.activenews.ro/prima-pagina/Crucile-de-juramant-din-Gorj-scara-spre-Cer-30230>, 2014 (vizited 21.05.2025).

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