The winter calendrical customs observed in Rumania appear to generate more varieties of folklore and ritual behavior, and over a longer period of time, than any other seasonal occasion. New Year proper is considered to extend from December 24 to January 6, or from Christmas Eve to Epiphany, yet many of the customs connected with the celebration of the New Year occur outside of this time. A brief survey of traditional behavior connected with Christmas and New Year shows that while religious influence is present, it most often emerges as a syncretic expression of paganism, thereby revealing the dual spiritual nature of the Rumanian people.

The New Year season starts even before Christmas Eve. December 22 is St. Ignatius' Day, referred to as "Ignat." A pig is traditionally slaughtered on this day to signal the beginning of preparations for Christmas. Celebrations actually begin on December 24 when the young people conduct a procession known as Breslaia by carrying figures of the capra, or goat, on long poles, "the beak-like mouth of which has a string attached which enables it to be opened and shut at the will of the mummers." Other celebrations which persist throughout the season proper are the productions of folk drama and the singing of colinde.

Folk drama evidently entered Rumania via Western sources, often literary ones. The mystery plays which deal with Christ's birth are the most common, and are mainly performed from Christmas to Epiphany. The Irozii is a mimed play "presenting the birth of Christ, the flight to Egypt, etc., the chief characters usually being Herod, one or two courtiers, the three Magi, and a heavenly messenger."4

The colinde, Christmas carols, compose a genre "which has preserved its most ancient traditions and retained an important social function, at least until after the First World War." They can be divided into two main categories: religious carols sung by children, and the more numerous secular carols. There are about 400 different subjects of the secular carols, while the carols with religious subjects are relatively few. Each village has a current repertoire of about twenty colinde. The young people who go from house to house singing the colinde select an appropriate colinda from the repertoire so that each household is sung a song suitable for its particular situation.

The colinde have also been considered on the basis of compositional structure, and two similar types emerge. Marin Buga has shown that children's carols have a relatively simple formula consisting of a salutary introduction, an enumeration of the attributes of the host, and a concluding formula. He demonstrates that the secular colinde, on the other hand, have more complex structures, exhibiting a well-defined esthetic conscience. These colinde once were associated with magical practices but no longer bear this association.

It has been shown that the colinde were once accompanied by dances, though this is no longer the case. Yet some dance tunes still accompany the texts of colinde, and colinda melodies are often played at dances. The close affinity between the two genres can be further seen in the close rhythmic relationship between them. The frequency of such common patterns is peculiar to Rumania, though some patterns of this kind occur in other nations, and suggests an ancient
and common origin of dances and colinde. 3

Several scholars have concerned themselves with certain themes of the colinde. Vrabie points to the Miorita motif which circulates in many Transylvanian colinda variants, as well as in a Moldavian plugusorul variant. The Miorita (Ballad of the Ewe-Lamb) is a festive ballad sung at winter festivals, glorifying the pastoral life. 9 Buga demonstrates by a structural analysis that the Miorita ballad is similar in form to the secular colinde. 10 This point affirms the theory previously forwarded by Birlea that the Miorita ballad in Transylvania developed from colinde that mourn the death or illness of a shepherd. Birlea's theory contradicts the previous opinion that the colinda variants with the Miorita motif developed from the ballad. 11 In another morphological study Monica Bratulescu analyzes the narrative structure of the colinda having the theme of the hunted stag. She shows that the metamorphosis of the hunted stag represents an ideological yearning for liberty by the Romanian people which supplies the motivation for singing this type of colinda. 12

The singing of the colinde is often accompanied by another custom, the carrying of the Steaua, "a huge star made of colored paper, lit inside by candles, the center of the star generally bearing a scene representing the Nativity." 13 The young people carrying the Steaua are similar to the German Sternsingers, who go from door to door and wait for gifts to be given in response to their carolling.

Another custom connected with Christmas is the making of round Christmas cakes, roata. This seems to be a form of homoeopathic magic, representing the rotation of the sun. 14

The widespread customs of ritual plowing and sowing (plugusorul) take place either on New Year's Eve or New Year's Day. In Transylvania the plugusorul custom differs from that in other parts of Romania. It once included the rite of decorating a plow with flowers on New Year's Eve, but now exists as a form of Thanksgiving for gifts received during the carolling at Christmas. 15 In most parts of Romania the plugusor customs generally consist of congratulatory verses sung on New Year's Eve by the young people. They include a description of agricultural habits such as plowing and bread baking. "The literary devices used in the plugusor are mythical, madrigalian, and satirical." 16 Besides relating everyday agricultural chores they can include historical allusions, such as to the rebellion of the peasants of Cuca Macai against the oppressive Boyars, which occurs in many variants of plugusor texts. 17

Mumming and wearing masks is an important feature of New Year celebration in Romania. Formerly the wearing of masks for celebrations occurred throughout the year, but due to the fragmentation of ritual meaning in modern times, the wearing of masks has decreased, now taking on a more entertaining function. 18 Now there is a wide variety of masks. 19 They are made of wood, leather, even women's silk stockings and gas masks.

Mircea Eliade has established that there are two types of masks, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic. The zoomorphic masks are older and originally ritual in nature. 20 That today's masks are mostly anthropomorphic is evidence of the breakdown of ritual meaning of the performances. Mythical animals, such as the Turca, have changed to become common animals, such as capra, the goat. 21

In the villages of Birsesti-Topesti and Nereju-Vrancea, the mummers perform in the folk drama "Jianu," where a personified "Ancestor" symbolizes the fight between the Old Year and the New Year. 22 In Nereju-Vrancea the procession lasts twenty-four hours, beginning at noon on December 31 and ending at noon on January 1. During the procession the mummers dance. All the village participates in the celebration, either as onlookers dressed in traditional dress or as mummers. The
old man (Mos) and old woman (Baba) are popular figures and appear in all the festivals of masks. The old man conducts an obscene dialogue with the villagers. The female leader of the bears foretells the future. After the symbolic fight between the Old Year and New Year, the bears (urs) and goats (capra) dance. At the end all the mummers climb on the rooftops where they feign sexual intercourse, drink, and talk with the onlookers.

The dancers are almost always young men who belong to a closed brotherhood. The masked figures never appear alone but always in groups of at least two. Certain figures always dance with certain others. Usually the masked dancers change their voices when they wear masks so they will not be recognized.

One important type of masked dancer is the "dumb fool" (mut) who performs at New Year and also dances during the spring celebrations with the calusari dancers. Variants of the dance performed by the calusari (the little horses) can be found among the Bulgarians, Greeks, Macedonians, and Serbs. Buhociu has stated that "this dance has an agricultural and Dionysiac structure in the Balkans, but a pastoral structure, with Indo-European influence, in the Carpathians." The calusari dancers seem to have retained a more unique ritual meaning for the people than any of the other ritual dancers. They are generally referred to in relation to their performance on Whitsuntide which is associated with a cult of the fairies. The dancing of the calusari is believed to drive away the bad fairies who cause illness. The villagers all invite the dancers to dance into their yards "because they believe that he who receives them will not get ill and will have good luck." The masked dumb fool who dances with the stags at New Year appears with a phallus and kills the stag, while at the Whitsuntide performance of the calusari, it is his symbolic killing and revival which is portrayed.

The role of the mut in both the New Year and Whitsuntide celebrations points to the Roman Saturnalia as the origin of both the New Year and the spring celebrations. The Roman Saturnalia was held for the purpose of putting to death a mock king. The survivals of this custom are widespread throughout Europe today in figures such as the Lord of Misrule, whom the mut figure resembles. Since the Saturnalia probably was originally observed at the end of February, which is obviously a more logical time for the spring custom of plowing and sowing, those New Year customs which are now performed during the New Year season may have once been performed in the spring.

Thus the texts of the lugusor which describe agricultural habits may have once been associated with the spring new year fertility rituals of the dying and rising god. The rituals of this ancient vegetational cult now are probably retained in the custom of Lazarel, songs which are sung on Palm Sunday by young girls. Lazar seems to originally have been a vegetational hero similar to Osiris, Adonis, and Attis, who all possess the traits of a vegetational hero, such as miraculous birth, premature and violent death, and resurrection. Enumerations of these traits are also the main themes of the Lazarel songs.

A similar custom observed the fourth Sunday after Easter is the festival Coloian during which time the women and girls invoke a god of fertility for the benefit of the crops. While this festival and the Lazarel are fairly obvious pagan survivals, it should be pointed out that even customs now associated with the Christian religion and calendar, such as the singing of the colinde at Christmas and the wishing of "Happy New Year" on January 1, with the sorcore or sorcova (a branch or bough decorated with paper flowers) also have ancient Roman antecedents.

Even a cursory glance at the more obvious aspects of cultural activity and ritual
customs annually precipitated in Rumanian villages by the advent of the New Year can yield certain conclusions concerning the nature of these folkloric expressions. The amount of purely Christian celebration is small if it exists at all. The colinde and the plugusor are probably pre-Christian and were formerly accompanied by other genres of expression such as the dance. The occasion of the winter celebration of the New Year was very likely a spring custom in earlier times, being formerly connected with the Roman Saturnalia. The purpose of these ancient rites were to symbolize the agricultural rebirth of spring, possibly as a form of homeopathic magic, by paying homage to a resurrected vegetational figure. Today the performances of the ancient ritual celebrations vary from region to region, even village to village in Rumania. Due to the loss of meaning of the old rituals and customs, a fragmentation of the celebrations is evident, as in the incoherent nature of the masked dancers. The result is that the celebrations for observing the New Year exist today mainly as entertainment.

NOTES


2. Ibid.

3. Information given by Constantin Eretescu in a series of lectures on Rumanian Folklore given at the Folklore Institute, Indiana University, February 2-March 29, 1971; hereafter cited as Eretescu.


6. Eretescu.


20. Pop and Eretescu, p. 163.


25. Pop and Eretescu, p. 163.

26. Eretescu.


34. Eretescu.