

Mărțișor (Romanian pronunciation: [mərtsɨjor]) is an old Romanian celebration at the beginning of spring, on March the 1st, which according to old calendar was also considered as the beginning of the new year. Symbolically, it is correlated to women and to fertility as a means of life and continuity. The tradition is authentic in Romania, Moldova, and all territories inhabited by Romanians and Aromanians.

The name *Mărțișor* is the diminutive of *marț*, the old folk name for March (*Martie*, in modern Romanian), and thus literally means "little March". It is also the folk name for this month.

Mărțișor, *marț* and *mărțiguș* are all names for the red and white string from which a small decoration is tied, and which is offered by people on the 1st day of March. The string can also be black and white, or blue and white) Giving this talisman to people is an old custom, and it is believed that the one who wears the red and white string will be strong and healthy for the year to come.

It is also a symbol of the coming spring. Usually, both women and men wear it pinned to their clothes, close to the heart, until the last day of March, when they tie it to the branches of a fruit-tree. In some regions, a gold or silver coin hangs on the string, which is worn around the neck. After wearing it for a certain period of time, they buy red wine and sweet cheese with the coin, according to a belief that their faces would remain beautiful and white as cheese, and rubicund as the red wine, for the entire year.

Initially, the *Mărțișor* string used to be called the *Year's Rope*, made by black and white wool threads, representing the 365 days of the year. "The Year's Rope" was the link between summer and winter, black and white representing the opposition but also the unity of the contraries: light and dark, warm and cold, life and death. The "*Mărțișor*" is the thread of the days in the year, spun by *Baba Dochia* (the Old Dochia), or the thread of one's life, spun at birth by the Fates (*Ursitoare*). White is the symbol of purity, the sum of all the colours, the light, while Black is the colour of origins, of distinction, of fecundation and fertility, the colour of fertile soil. White is the sky, the Father, while black is the mother of all, Mother Earth.

The archeological finds show that over 8,000 years ago on the present territory of Romania this custom was alive. People were celebrated the coming of spring with long time forgotten rituals. They used small pebbles painted in white and red arranged alternatively on a string. It might be curious why they had chosen these two colors : red and white. In those times, many magical rituals involved human or animal sacrifices for determining their pagan Gods to listen to their prayers. So blood was associated with life, fertility and worship. On the other hand, the snow, the ice and the clouds were white. In a single expression the meaning of two colors might be : "let's forget about winter and pray our Gods to bring us fertility".

The Amulet's meaning was greatly enlarged. It was considered to be a protective charm for children and animals in the next coming year. Those tiny pebbles were changed into a couple of yarns, one colored in red and one colored in white. Red meant the Sun, the power of fire, passion and woman, and white meant the benefits of water, clouds, winter but also man's intelligence. The combination of those colors can be interpreted as the union of man and woman, these two opposite forces who will determine a new life cycle.

At the beginning of 19th century the beautiful Amulet was found in all Romanian regions. Especially children and women wore around their necks or on their left hands two woolen yarns (one red, one white) knitted together and a small silver or golden coin hung on them. The belief was that those who wore that Amulet were protected and would have good luck in the next year. It was written in books that young Moldavian girls wore Martisor from March 1st till March 12th. After two weeks, they used to tie their hair with that special red-white yarn waiting to see the first spring birds coming to their village. Only after that event, the young girls took out the Amulet and hang it to the first tree they saw in blossom. You must know that in the Romanian folk tradition each season has a different color : spring is red, summer is green, autumn is black and winter is

symbolized by white. All these colors can be found also having the same meaning on many patterns on Romanian pottery, carpets and folk costumes.



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