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The Bride: the Museum of the Romanian Peasant and the betwixt and between

Sarah Posey

The Museum of Precarious Things?¹

Vintilă Mihăilescu in his paper ‘The Romanian Peasant Museum and the Authentic Man’ explores the nature of ‘the peasant’ which Horia Bernea and his colleagues sought to (re)present in the extraordinarily affecting and beautiful installations in the Museum of the Romanian Peasant. He refers to the archetypal “traditional man”, Horia Bernea’s “testifying museology” and Irina Nicolau’s reference to a “healing museum” in helping us to begin to understand their seemingly changeless, ahistorical, generalized and decontextualized displays. My first visit to Romania happened to be in the week that the Museum opened in 1993. I was fortunate to be taken around the galleries in the last days before they were revealed to the public. Horia was aghast that I should see the Museum in such a state, ‘like a bride in her underwear before her wedding’ he commented.

I would like to use Horia’s description of the Museum-in-preparation as a starting point to explore ideas of ‘precariousness’, and processes of becoming, to contrast with the static model of ‘the peasant’, beyond the realities of the everyday, in the Museum’s galleries. A bride is exposed to a period of ‘liminality’, betwixt and between girlhood and marriage.

Museums are physical spaces, collections of things and systems of classification. By definition they speak of fixity – a building, the order-

ing and storage of objects, and the setting down of often singular and definitive interpretations of the objects. My conundrum is how, in the mapping of things and meanings, displays might encompass nuance and slippage, change and compromise, conflict, contradiction and disjunction – the flux of which lived experience is made. How do we find ways of “illuminating and discussing the nature of precariousness and its connection to the *exhilarating fragility of normal life*” (Stone 2006, my italics)? I would like to explore a Romanian case study, *capră*, in this context, a peasant ‘tradition’ (a term which suggests something periodic, disorder and the predictable, a challenge to generalised models) that is essentially, and ironically perhaps, about precariousness (here referring to a time-out-of-time or liminality, the unpredictable). During *capră*, the values by which villagers define themselves and draw meaning from their world are explored and undermined through masquerade. The performances themselves are precarious, being to some extent improvised and specific to time and place and audience. And, being in part about courtship, *capră* refers back to Horia’s bride and her *rite de passage*.

Capra

Introduction

In Câmpeni, Moldavia, north-eastern Romania, villagers celebrate the New Year with a mas-

querade, *capră*, which visits village households to perform music, dance and episodes of comic spectacle. Initially, I set out to research *capră* in Cămpeni and then to contextualize *capră* by building a social and economic profile of the village. During fieldwork, it emerged that village ideas concerning work (*muncă*) – a central part of villagers’ identity as good householders (*gospodari*) – provided more than a backdrop; they became the key to understanding what is at issue in *capră*².

Cămpeni villagers place great value on individual physical labour, diligence, honesty, and thrift; respect for others and respectable behaviour; and the separation of private from public worlds. This is played out in the volume and nature of work required to support and develop each village household (*gospodărie*). But the projection of self-sufficiency and independence amongst households masks, in practice, an interdependence based on exchanges which include labour. This is the context within which *capră* takes place and draws its meaning.

Capra is, in large part, a carnivalesque festival of inversion which overturns the delimited nature of physical, aural and visual experience, and social contact, in everyday life, and highlights tricks and talk as a means to play with the high value villagers place on work. Inversion also relates to *capra*’s symbolic use of the “Gypsy motif” (van de Port 1998), through Gypsy musicians, Gypsy characters and characters with Gypsy behavioural traits³. For villagers, the world of the Gypsies is distinguished by talk (*vorbire*) and verbal tricks (*șmecherie*), which are opposed to village ideas about work. *Capra* is also a formal means to bring young men and women together. This role has dramatic implications. Courting and ultimately marriage most profoundly subvert the independence and distinctiveness of households, and point to the absolute necessity of inter-dependence in the village.

Capra’s ability to affect, indeed effect, village life in this way has led me to think about how villagers perceive themselves to impact on the

world around them and draw meaning from what they see. They rely on visual, material evidence around them to make judgments on diligence, the fruits of labour and the moralities associated with work. But *capra* questions the trustworthiness of such signs. It seemingly plays on distraction and illusion, the opposite of tangibility. Yet it effects a tangible and positively-valued outcome – male-female unions – the bedrock on which villagers’ world of work is built⁴.

Capra means female goat. It is the term for the masquerade and also refers to the team of performers themselves. Today there are four characters in the Cămpeni masquerade; the ‘little horse’ (*‘căiuț’*), ‘Gypsy’ (*‘bădănar’* – a special term for Gypsies who make horse-hair brushes for whitewashing houses), ‘old man’ (*moș*) and ‘old woman’ (*‘babă’*). The performers are young, unmarried men and boys, ranging from around 7 years old to 24. They gather in the bitter cold on two mornings – 31 December and 1 January – before performing in local villages and Cămpeni itself.

Characters and their attributes

The ‘old man’ (*moș*) and an ‘old woman’ (*babă*) lead the group and cajole householders to accept the team to perform in their courtyards through a mixture of joking and clever talk. They are persistent. If a gate is locked, one or other of these characters will swing up onto it and reach over to release the catch. They will enter the courtyard and, if he is in, confront the householder at the door to his house, teasingly reprimanding him for hiding from his obligation to accept the *capra*. But largely, the negotiations take place at the gateway. Even if the householder is keen or willing from the start to invite the *capra* to perform, the ‘ritual’ of persuasion and negotiation takes place. Once the householder has agreed to accept the *capra*, the ‘old man’ blows his horn as a signal to the rest of the team, and they soon follow. The ‘old man’ is dressed in broadly traditional male costume and wears an aluminium mask, heavily bearded with

grey-white sheepskin. He carries a long stick with a pronounced knob on the end in one hand and a trumpet made of cow-horn in the other. The 'old woman' wears the traditional costume of a village woman. Her papier mache mask features a long nose and has a scarf attached to the back, with black synthetic fibres protruding from beneath it for hair. She carries a spinning stick to which are attached various items.

The *moş* and *babă* are followed by a number of 'little horses' (*căiuţ*) and then a larger group of 'Gypsies' (*bădănari*). All the characters are masked and costumed, except the 'little horses'. They wear a complex outfit draped over a wooden frame suspended from their shoulders and secured around their waists. The masks of the 'Gypsies' are made of beaten copper with an added, gnarly nose in the same metal and holes for the eyes. They have a sheepskin beard, a moustache of boar- or horse hair, sheep's teeth or similar, and human hair which often reaches to the middle of the back of the performer. The outfits of the 'little horses' and the tunics of the 'Gypsies' are tacked together from old, embroidered, decorative towels (*prosoape*) and handkerchiefs (*batistas*). The 'chief' of the team (*şef*), who parades behind the 'old man' and 'old woman' wears the costume of the 'Gypsy' and the hat of the 'little horse' but his face is uncovered.

The *capra* team walks along the streets, stopping at each house and, if invited in by the householder, performing in the courtyard for the householder's family, friends and neighbours. In return, the performers are given money and refreshments, and the *şef* dances with the young women of the house. The closer to 'home' the more boisterous the performers become, teasing onlookers and playing pranks.

Sound is defining and essential. Each character has its own, identifiable noise without which it is incomplete. The noise of the 'little horses' is the sound of the jangling bells. Since they have no specific cries or calls they are in a sense mute. The 'Gypsies' make a throaty but unintelligible roar which echoes the cries of some of the Gypsy traders who sell house-to-

house. On some occasions they also fire off sulphurous, deafening, home-made explosions using a length of metal pipe.

The 'old man' and 'old woman' make no sound when parading except when they stop to persuade a householder to accept the team to play in his courtyard. At this point they become clever, fast talkers. The *şef* blows his whistle to keep the team in time and to add to the general din of bells and cries. He also shouts instructions to the players. Between the various 'dances' the *şef* makes set calls to the rest of the team, and they make shouted responses, all using their usual voices.

But the team is incomplete without music. It is music that brings the *capra* characters to life and defines the frame of the masquerade. Three musicians, Gypsies from a neighbouring village, accompany the Cămpeni masquerade, a drummer playing a wide, squat drum (*tobă*) suspended across the body, a trumpet player and an accordionist. Each of the three groups of characters in the *capra* has their own 'dance' and distinct dance tune when they perform. However, beyond this, the music emboldens the performers since it serves to define the limits of the 'special' time in which *capra* is played.

There is a clear distinction between the demeanour of the various characters towards the householder and his family. The 'old man' and 'old woman' are cheekily disrespectful to their hosts. Ironically, although it is they that ensure *capra*'s acceptance into a household, their behaviour once inside is unacceptable in terms of village norms. Their costume and dances explicitly refer to sex – to gender roles and sexual union – which are not usually referred to in public at all and rarely in mixed groups of men and women.

In their various dances the 'old man' and 'old woman' rub up against each other and thrust their 'sticks' between each others' legs. They represent an 'inappropriate' and therefore uncontrolled sexuality. But the onlookers do not show any signs of shock at the behaviour of these characters, indeed their antics are entertaining.

Their dances are intended as comical, and both men and women appear to be amused. Whereas the ‘old man’ will dance only with the ‘old woman’, she regularly approaches groups of onlookers, teasing men specifically by thrusting out her ‘breasts’ and even trying to ‘butt’ males with them, or lifting her skirt at a selected target. The dances of the ‘little horses’ and ‘Gypsies’ are quite strictly formalised. It is the ‘old man’ and ‘old woman’ who have the greatest scope for improvisation and creative performance.

The ‘Gypsies’ are not respectful of their hosts. Although they dance as directed by the *șef*, they help themselves greedily to refreshments, and usually drink too much. They are also jokers and tricksters. Whereas the ‘old woman’s’ targets are usually young married men, ‘Gypsies’ latch their attention onto girls of marriageable age (particularly when the team walks along the road as it moves from house to house). Singly, or in twos or threes, a girl will be approached and the ‘Gypsy’ will try to embrace her and wriggle close to her. While the other two groups of characters perform their dances in a householder’s courtyard, or again while on the road, the ‘Gypsies’ will perform pranks.

By contrast, the ‘little horses’ are respectful of their hosts. They, like the *șef*, are unmasked and therefore easily identifiable, so that the usual rules of social intercourse between villagers to some extent apply. They are often younger performers and therefore more careful with older villagers. But it is also in the character of the ‘little horse’ to perform obediently and behave well as guests.

It is the *șef* who, once inside homestead, is the interface between the householder and his family, and the performers. He is polite and respectful to the hosts and tries to curb the excesses of the wilder members of his team. He instructs the musicians which tunes to play for which dances, limiting or extending the team’s repertoire depending on the hosts’ interests, and actively directs the performers. It is the *șef* who is first offered, and who first accepts, the re-

freshments of wine and cakes provided by the household and served by its female members. And, before the team leaves, it is he who accepts the payment of money from the householder calls out the value of the gift and gives thanks on behalf of the team. *Capră* presents the *șef* in the manner of a suitor, one of the village’s most eligible male youths – unmarried but having completed military service – whilst simultaneously being a display of unruly and licentious behaviour.

A series of five balls held in the village hall (*cămin cultural*) over four days form part of the *capră* tradition. Organising them is part of the *șef*’s responsibilities and they are funded by the *capra* performances. The musicians engaged to accompany the *capra* performances are also employed to play at these events. Entrance is free for villagers from those households who will or have accepted *capră* to perform in their courtyard and all of the performers are obliged to dance with the unmarried daughters of these homesteads at the final ball. Several (male) villagers proudly pronounced that ‘even the most ugly girl is asked to dance on 1 January!’ Girls thus make the tradition financially viable, the dances possible (since the villagers dance as couples), and the *capră* performances and balls particularly intriguing and exciting.

If *capră*, like many carnival and masking traditions elsewhere, encompasses “framed disorder” (Kasfir 1988:8) it is essential to view it within its wider social context, the frame of the everyday from which it stands out. Through noise, colour, movement and sociability, *capră*’s materiality challenges the structured social and physical boundaries of daily life. Its specific goal is to gain access to the homesteads of young girls the young performers might court and ultimately marry. The breaching of social barriers is important here. With *capra*, young men are able to enter homes, and approach girls, to whom they normally do not have access. The inversion of everyday codes pertaining to physical space and mobility relates to performers in *capra* and also their audience. The team roams the whole vil-

lage, and many of the spectators go with them to parts of the village where their presence would ordinarily arouse curiosity or suspicion. And as the team performs, spectators peer around doorways, and peep on tiptoe over fences, to watch *capra* and take in the courtyard of alien homesteads. Physical license pertains to individual movement also. Although each of *capra*'s characters has specific attributes, there is some scope for creative interpretation (and for the 'moş' and 'babă' greatest of all) and performers put tremendous energy and emphasis into their dances and when parading in the street. The *şef* and 'bădănari' may dance with the young women of the house and, again, all villagers are able to participate at the accompanying village balls.

Music and the range of cries, calls, bells and explosions that accompany *capra* also serve to break through the 'sound barrier' between street and homestead. *Capra* brings the unstructured cacophony of the street into the homestead, usually the site of moderated and repetitive sounds reflecting industry. Music sets the frame for this 'time-out-of-time', a period not of work but, through the performances and village dances, and for performers and spectators alike, of play.

Returning to the characters of *capra*, I would like to suggest that one can begin to see a pattern which places these characters into one of two groups according to their attributes. In one group are the 'old man', 'old woman' and the 'Gypsies'. In short, these characters are masked, are characterised by talk or roars, and show flamboyant, even improvised, behaviour which is disrespectful of social and physical boundaries. In the other group are the 'little horses' and the *şef*. These are unmasked performers that demonstrate self-restraint in their behaviour. The 'little horses' are mute and ring attractive-sounding bells, and the *şef* has moderated speech. Their behaviour is polite – respectful of social and physical boundaries. Spectators would recognise this latter group as respecting village norms of accepted behaviour. The former group represents their opposite. This dualism suggests that

capra is a masquerade of inversion, a playing with the 'other'. But perhaps there is a further twist.

At the level of performance, and even beyond, the *şef* can be seen as a nascent *gospodar*, self-restrained and respectful. Furthermore, a *şef* has to be well-prepared and organised, he is upholding a tradition the village is proud of, he acts as a good host to the Gypsy musicians on 31 December and 1 January, and for the village dances that accompany the performances. And although independent in his endeavour, he relies on a team, and village social obligations (ie householders obliged to accept the team), for success. One villager directly likened the *şef* to a *gospodar* in terms of the husbanding of resources effectively.

I was told that a *şef* has to be unmarried but have completed his military service, and be good-looking. In response to questions about what makes a 'good' *capra şef*, villagers suggested he should know well the various tunes and dances of the characters, and be a strong leader. On the cusp of establishing his own *gospodarie*, *capra* frames the *şef* in part as a well-behaved 'suitor' during performance.

However, the preparations involve the leader in kinds of activities which contradict the norms of the good *gospodar*: as his costume suggests, the *şef* is half 'Gypsy'. Indeed the role of *şef* requires trickery, skills of persuasion, cleverness with money, opportunism and deals-making to pull off. This became clear to me in 1995-6, when the full sequence of accompanying village dances did not take place as they should have, and the *capră* was considered a failure. The *şef* was accused of being a *mămăligă*, the polenta cake eaten throughout Romania as the staple for most savoury dishes. Turned out onto a wooden board for serving, *mămăligă* wobbles a little like a jelly-fish. As a *mămăligă* the *şef* was being accused of being weak and soft, dull and lacking in dynamism, unable to make decisions and see them through, incapable of organising others. Worst of all he wasn't a 'man'. (There is a Romanian phrase using *mămăligă* similar to the

English 'Are you a man or a mouse?'.) The main accusation was that the *şef* had not been *şmecher*: *şmecherie* - an ability with tricks, talk, deals and money - emerged as a necessary quality for the *şef*.

It slowly became clear that there are a number of deals that the *şef* can make in organising the *capră*. These may be to ensure a successful and therefore more profitable *capră* that would benefit all the performers, but the *şef* may also fiddle the money and line his own pockets. While criticised in the village, it is also accepted that every *şef* will try to do this. The most lucrative of these arrangements is one that can be made with the musicians: agreeing one figure with them, but telling the rest of the team another, higher figure, and splitting the difference. The *şef*'s negotiations with the musicians prior to *capră* are acknowledged as daunting, by performers and non-performers alike. The *şef* is required to be *şmecher* in his dealings and with the very people who are seen to be practitioners par excellence of *şmecherie*, Gypsies.

In essence, for *capră* to be a success, the *şef* has to negotiate a number of deals with competing parties within the team during the preparatory stages, most particularly with the musicians, and the 'old man' and 'old woman' have to sweet-talk or bluster an entree into a household's courtyard. It is *şmecherie* and talk, the realm of the Gypsies, not the 'good householder's' toil that is key.

And this is of particular interest with regard to the young man who plays the *şef*. For, while he is framed in part as a nascent householder and well-behaved 'suitor' during *performance*, the *şef* as team leader is involved in certain kinds of activity in *preparation* which contradict the norms of the 'good householder'. Marking the transition from irresponsible youth to married adulthood *capră* can be seen as a *rite de passage* for man who is *şef* and the opportunity to express behaviour ambivalent towards societal norms.

Close

In exploring *capra*, I have wanted to highlight liminality or precariousness in village life. Here, precariousness has concerned a delimited period of disorder when structures of everyday life and belief are challenged and seen to be unstable. As curator, this raises two issues, however. First, how do you present or represent such precariousness in a museum? Second, if you reproduce precariousness, is it still precarious? And last if, as Mihăilescu and Hedeşan suggest in 'The peasant and the national ethnology', we are at the crossroads of conflicting discourses of 'the peasant' how, as academics and curators, do we present our own professional precariousness?



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Note

¹ I draw this phrase from Barnaby Stone's Arts Council-funded 2006 symposium and temporary exhibition 'Aftermath: the Museum of Precarious Things' at the Battersea Arts Centre, London. In this paper I take 'precarious' to mean 'Dependent on chance; insecure, unstable' and 'Exposed to danger, risky' (New Shorter Oxford Dictionary, 1993 edition).

² My fieldwork on *capra* was sponsored by The British Museum (London) where I was a curator at the time of this research, 1993-2002.

³ Romany-speaking Gypsies in Romania, call themselves Rom, while non-Gypsies call all Gypsies *țigani*. The latter is the term I use here since I am concerned with what villagers say of Gypsies, not what Gypsies say of themselves.

⁴ These themes are explored more fully in Posey, 2004.