

The *Muruite*¹ [Smearred] Shirt as Sign of Occupational Status

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ABSTRACT

The article presents the traditional costume of the shepherds from the Eastern Carpathians, from an historical perspective, using narrative, bibliographic, iconographic, folklore, and archival sources. The *muruite* [smearred] shirts treated with soot become regional and occupational signs in the mountain area of Bistrița, Maramureș, and Bucovina regions.

KEYWORDS

Shirt; mark of occupational status; oil workers; Bucovina shirt; mark of occupational status; shepherd; Bistrița; Bucovina.

The theory of communication starts from the premise that everything that exists around us transmits a message. Any sign can be a vehicle of communication. People who have access to the same sign establish interpersonal relations and achieve a shared experience. Clothing represents an act of interpersonal perception in the field of non-verbal communication that is based on image. This type of communication requires the existence of an intermediary between the transmitter and the receiver, similar with the mechanism in which the creative intention of a plastic artist is transmitted to the viewer who becomes a consumer of art. The medium of communication is the work of art. Clothing has the same intermediary role in the relationship between individuals. At the same time, clothing is an important cultural element for nations and peoples. Pantelimon Golu (1989, 120) speaks of the image as "undeniable evidence" that has consequences on increasing the impact of non-verbal communication. They say that our civilization is a civilization of the image. Why?

Clothing becomes a mediator of interaction and interinfluence in interpersonal

communication. It is a non-verbal message "that accompanies, supplements or substitutes the verbal messages" (Golu 1989, 99). Clothing enters the sphere of paralinguistic signs.

"Le signe vestimentaire is a complete syntagme, formed par une syntaxe d'éléments" (Barthes 1967, 217). From a morphological point of view, clothing signs are articulated through a juxtaposition or superimposition of elements, the association of colors and lines, and the addition of decorative elements in well-defined spatial arrangements in single pieces of clothing as well as in clothing ensembles. From a semantic point of view, this process is an articulation at the level of meanings. In order to acquire a meaning, clothing signs must follow certain rules of signification.

Le signe est l'union du signifiant et du signifié. Cette union, comme il est classique en linguistique, doit être examinée du point de vue de son arbitraire et de sa motivation, c'est-à-dire de son double foundation, social et naturel. (Barthes 1967, 218)

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Photo 1. Sibian sheepfold, photographer Romulus Vuia, 1932, Museum of Ethnography of Transylvania.



Photo 2. Sheepfold in Rodnei Mountains, photographer Tiberiu Morariu, 1932, Museum of Ethnography of Transylvania.

The garment serves both as a means of demarcating and individualizing the wearer and as a way to integrate the wearer into the clothing norms of a specific social group. Gabriel de Tarde (1993) saw fashion as a form of imitation of contemporaries, in contrast to clothing norms that signify the imitation of predecessors, a trend to uniform and differentiate at the same time. As a rule, distinctive signs are adopted by members of society who are relatively economically or culturally well-off, such in the case of people with avant-garde views. The general public then adopts these trends. At some point later, the early adopters of trends and fashion adopt new models and clothing compositions to individualise themselves and to differentiate themselves from others.

Clothing can identify the individual, the social group he or she belongs to, or the role he or she fulfills within a social group. An individual can be defined by what they are, by the environment they live in or by the image they use to define themselves. The combination between different sizes of clothing, behaviour, environment, communication, way of being forms one's identity. However, as the ratio between these factors is rarely equal, one early priority of the wearers in any attempt to conceptualize identity is to determine which is the dominant factor.

Communication is one of the most important processes that operates on both individual and social levels. It embodies the essence of the relationships between individuals and social groups. Through communication, community members can share information about their identity background, and social and marital status within their social groups. From this observation, we derive a double message: a semantic message, which represents a universally translatable symbolism that follows an internal logic (e.g., the color red is valued in traditional cultures for its association with vitality and marriage), and an aesthetic message, whose symbols are unfamiliar to an uninitiated receiver. Deciphering the meanings of traditional costume pieces has become difficult due to changes in communication over time. In the past, both the sender and the receiver used to have a similar level of competence when interpreting the message. However, now the meaning of the respective code is often partially or completely lost.

Zonal brands do not refer only to the pieces of the traditional holiday costume but encompass a multitude of messages offered even by the specific workday or occupational costume. For festive costumes, the brilliance and richness of the ornaments provide information about the wearer, his position in society, marital status,

age and material condition. In the case of occupation-specific costumes, the embedded messages provide information about the particular activities performed by the wearer within their traditional community, as well as the communities they may enter. This is the case of *păcurari* [shepherds], who could travel to communities very far from their place of origin due to transhumance.

As for the men's traditional clothing as an occupational sign, it has the same composition as the suit intended for working days. First, these pieces of clothing had a functional role. Later, they took on the role of occupational signs. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the only occupational mark was dedicated to shepherds, *păcurari* from the sheepfold. In the 19th century, data from field research offers insights into the costumes of *păcurari* from all mountain and hill regions across the entire Romanian territory. The last wearers of *păcurari* clothes can be found in the Sibiu area in the interwar period (Photo 1). In the last century, however, the area of this occupational costume narrowed, being reduced to the area of the Eastern Carpathians and the tangent areas - Bucovina, Maramureş and Bistriţa (Photo 2), the other areas having ordinary work costumes.

Information about the clothing of *păcurari* comes from three directions. The first source are the popular museum collections found in the Ethnographic Museum of Transylvania, Suceava Royal Inn, ASTRA Museum—Sibiu, and the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant. The second source is field research, which identifies valuable information in the collective memory regarding the costumes of the shepherds, the ornaments they wore, and the methods used to create and treat these costume items. Another source is the photographic evidence preserved in the image archives of the major ethnographic museums in Romania. For Transylvania, Romulus Vuia conducted field research in Bistriţa and Maramureş areas during the 1930s. He documented everyday life at the sheepfold where shepherds still wore woollen clothes, including shirts, trousers, hats, foot wraps woven from wool

or hemp, and homemade leather breastplates. These garments underwent a waterproofing treatment involving successive boiling in whey, followed by an application of butter and soot. This research reveals the popular theatre—*Viflaimul*²—where the three shepherds who bring gifts to celebrate the Nativity of Christ are dressed in oilman costumes. In addition to the archive photos, in the Bucovina area, the homes of the “mountain masters” (*baci*) contain photographs taken in local photographic studios in the area, particularly on the Saint Elijah's Day (July 20), when *păcurari* were allowed to descend to the communities to sanctify the curd.

In analysing the identity significance of the traditional costume, it is necessary to understand material culture as a system of codes. The individual is surrounded by symbols and identity marks and the variety of populations that existed in such a small territory required the preservation of clothing symbols. Decoding these symbols can be facilitated by the analysis of the complex functionality of the popular costume, starting from the premise that its structures are regulated not so much by aesthetic canons as by utilitarian ones and that the practical purpose dominates the aesthetic one. In this way, the practical function of the costume is detached in the first place—determined by the relationship between man and the natural space in which he lives. The function of social integration follows, the traditional port cannot be separated from the social community in which it was created.

The multiple functions of the traditional costume find their concrete representation in the defining signs, those identity signs of belonging to a group. Additionally, in most cases, the group members are both the wearers and the creators of the costume pieces.

[W]e used to go down to Ciocăneşti and Cârlibaba at the *horă*,³ from Obcioara, in the village people knew us because we were *păcurari* from the sheepfolds of the people from Câmpulung, that we wore greased shirts and hats with snot.^{4:5}





Photo 3. Simion Piticar and Ion Piticar, 1947, Câmpulung Moldovenesc, Horațiu Silviu Ilea's collection.

We present the costume of the shepherds from the Rodna and Rarău mountains, which is a professional costume. The woven hemp shirt was soaked in butter, sprinkled with coal dust, and then treated (*crușită*) with a boiled mixture of alder tree bark and potassium sulfate as a mordant, “at the sheepfold, we had a special routine: we boiled the shirt in whey, we covered it with sheep butter and then with soot. I pumped until it held water in it.”⁶ Most of the time, this type of costume was found in all the sheepfolds in Bucovina that were owned by people from the Bistrița and Muntenia regions. The hemp trousers were also treated (*crușiți*) with the mixture described above. Black woolen trousers were worn as well. The *bondița*, or breastplate, was coated with soot collected from the bottom of the vessels used for boiling milk and then smeared with sheep's butter.

These treating techniques, *crușit* and anointing the garments with soot and sheep

butter, made them waterproof. The shepherds still wore wide belts and “Romanian” sandals (*opinci*) with black foot wraps (*obiele*). The black felt hat had a much wider brim than the village hats. Previously, when there were no hats, people used to wear *cibice* (*comănațe*) made of cloaks (*sumane*), in cones (Dan 1923).⁷

Hats were adorned with flowers, particularly by young men when they went out to *hora*. In addition, peacock feathers—especially the highly sought-after white ones—adorned with snowberry (*hurmuz*) and pressed and dried edelweiss (*floare de colț*), were popular decorations. When the shepherds returned to the village on Saint Elijah's Day (July 20), they adorned their hats with *nagară* (*stipa capillata*) flowers. (Florea Marian 1901).

When we came down to the village on Saint Elijah's Day with *baci* to bless the curd, we wore black shirts, white trousers and felt hats with a nagara flower or with *olocotici*, so that everyone would know that we were *păcurari*.⁸

In the middle of the 20th century, shepherds who descended on Saint Elijah's Day in the village were still recognized by these distinctive clothing marks. Simion Piticar and Ion Piticar from Obcioara descended in this manner in 1947 (Photo 3).

These practices in the mountain area of Bucovina lasted until the beginning of the 21st century:

When I went to the sheepfold for the first time, I was 14 years old, had a new *boandă* made for me by Orest of Cocuții. When I got to the sheepfold, it started to rain, and it soaked me to the skin. *Boanda* was heavier than me. Then, my uncle who was *baci* greased the *boanda* with butter and soot from the cauldron, after that, I spent the summer well because I didn't get wet anymore.⁹

In the Bistrița and Maramureș areas, the specific costume of *păcurari* unfortunately disappeared by the end of the 1950s (Photo 4), making way for simple work suits made



Photo 4. Sheepfold in Rodna Mountains, Museum of Ethnography of Transylvania.



Photo 5. Sheepfold in Rodna Mountains, Museum of Ethnography of Transylvania.



Photo 6. *Vîflaim ceată* [Carolers], Bistrița, photographer Romulus Vuia, 1932, Museum of Ethnography of Transylvania..



Photo 7. Sheepfold in the Rodnei Mountains, 1932, Horațiu Silviu Ilea's collection.

of durable materials. Photographic evidence allows the reconstruction of this costume: the black hemp trousers, made of wool (either treated or not treated in *piuă*¹⁰), or the hemp trousers woven using four threads and smeared, the straight hemp shirt woven in two threads treated in the same way (boiled in whey and then sprinkled with crushed coal or soot). The waist belt (*chimir*) was made of leather and decorated with large brass studs. The felt hat was buttered and then covered with a thick layer of soot to make it waterproof (Photo 5).

The presence of these shirts as an occupational sign is also certified by their appearance in the ritual framework of the popular theater, when the characters embodying *păcurari* from the Viflaim custom are dressed in costumes specific to Romanian shepherds from the region. This provides valuable clues about these garments that constitute a very meaningful symbol within the community to which they belong (Photo 6).

The topic of the costume of the *păcurari*

from the Eastern Carpathians (Photo 7) has two essential dimensions. On the one hand, it involves the effort to preserve certain pieces of traditional costume from the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century within the communities of the region. On the other hand, field research facilitated the collection of information from the 20th century, including clothing items from museum collections and photographic archives and personal photographic archives still present in the researched areas.

The article presented an item of traditional costume with identity values and occupational significance that is no longer in use and has disappeared from the field, but which remains present in the collective memory. The research was based on the rather few bibliographic references that have been published from the second half of the 19th century to the mid-20th century. Museum archival photos and family photographs were an important source, supplemented by my own field research in villages of Bistrița and Bucovina.



NOTES

1. The Romanian shepherds use to soak in whey their shirts, grease them with butter and soot, in order to make them waterproof. This shirt bears the name *muruit* (RO) [smeared].
2. Regional name for Bethlehem.
3. Traditional circular chain dance widespread in rural Romania and in other countries in the Balkans.
4. The plant *colilie*, also known as *păiuș* or *pănușiță* (*stippa capillata*) that grows in arid and sandy places.
5. D.U. (born in Pojorâta on 19 June 1927), recorded on 15 August 2016 in Câmpulung Moldovenesc.
6. S.P. (born in Câmpulung Moldovenesc, 23 June 1914), recorded on 12 april 2006 in Câmpulung Moldovenesc.
7. Square crown hats made of thick materials (*aba*) and produced in waistcoat workshops.
8. D.U. (born in Pojorâta, 19 iunie 1927), recorded n 15 August 2016, Câmpulung Moldovenesc.
9. F.L. (born in Câmpulung Moldovenesc, 8 April 1982), recorded on 16 April 2020, Câmpulung Moldovenesc.
10. *Piua* is a felting machine.

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