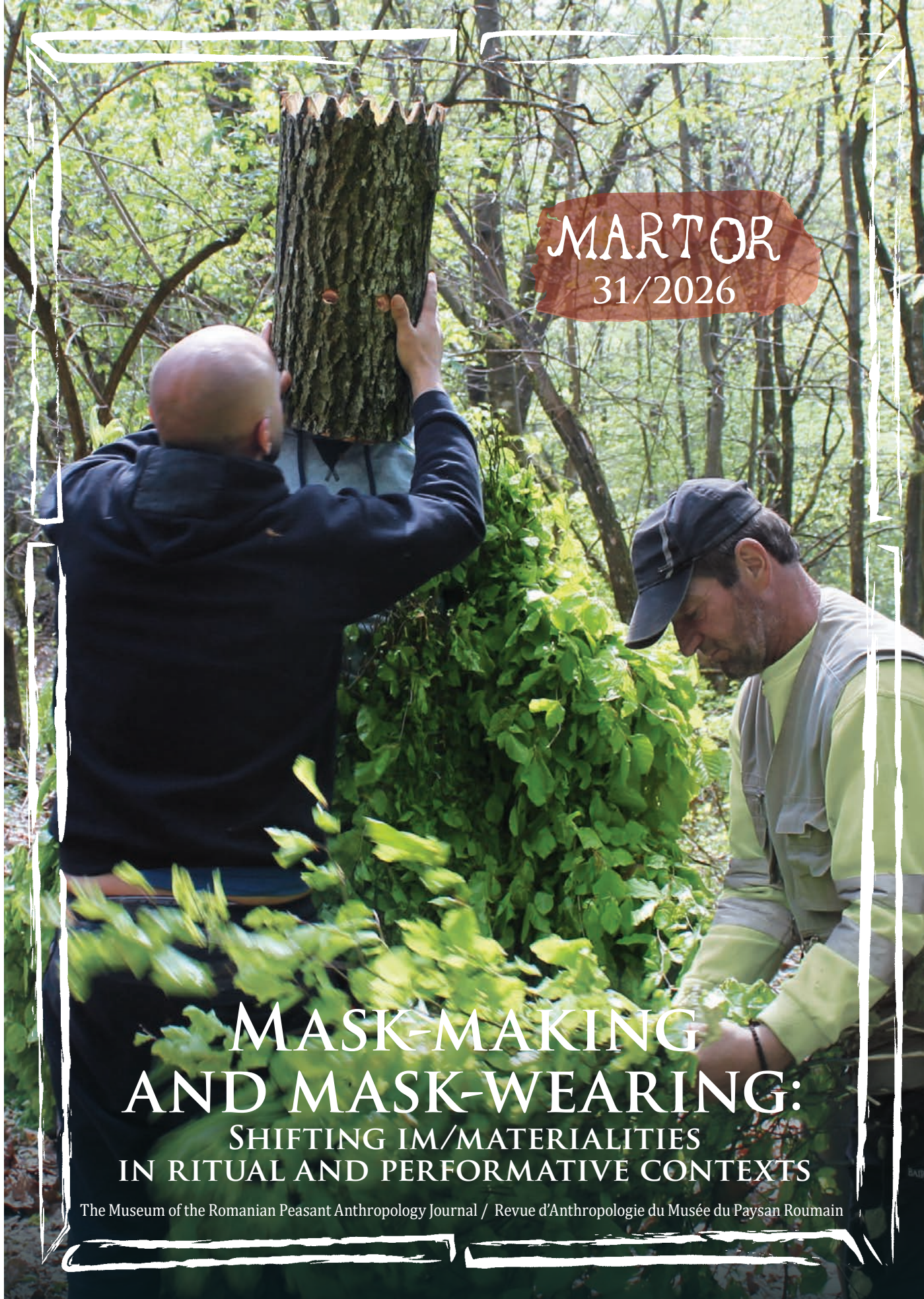


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31/2026

Mask-making and mask-wearing:
Shifting im/materialities in ritual and performative contexts

The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Journal / Revue d'Anthropologie du Musée du Paysan Roumain

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Șos. Kiseleff no. 3, sector 1, Bucharest, 011341, Romania
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Mask-making and Mask-wearing: Shifting Im/materialities in Ritual and Performative Contexts. An Introduction

María Pilar Panero García
Universidad de Valladolid, Spain
ORCID: 0000-0001-7346-0778

María Pilar Panero García is Professor of Social Anthropology. Since 2005 she has been affiliated with the Chair of Studies on Tradition, the university branch of the Joaquín Díaz Foundation, and she has served as its director since 2022. She holds degrees in Hispanic Philology (University of Salamanca) and in Literary Theory and Comparative Literature (University of Valladolid). She combines her teaching duties with management responsibilities. Her research interests and publications focus on cultural heritage, popular religiosity, ethnohistory, and literature approached from the perspective of cultural anthropology.

Correspondence author: mariapilar.panero@uva.es

Adelina Dogaru Alexa
University of Bucharest, Romania
ORCID: 0009-0001-6418-9362

Adelina Dogaru Alexa is a lecturer in the Department of Cultural Studies at the University of Bucharest and a researcher at the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore. She is a specialist in cultural anthropology, with particularly interest in sensorial anthropology, ritual studies, the anthropology of art, and material culture.

Georgiana Vlahbei
National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Romania
ORCID: 0009-0005-1419-0188

Georgiana Vlahbei is an inter-media creator/researcher with a background in Ethnology, Cultural Anthropology, and Folklore Studies. Her research engages with heritage-making processes, ritual expressions in traditional societies and contemporary creations, dynamics of customs with a focus on mask heritage. She is also co-founder, visual creator and maker for Plastic Art Performance collective.

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ABSTRACT

The introduction to the special issue of MARTOR dedicated to the European project "MASKS" provides a framework for understanding mask-making and mask-wearing as mutable, yet enduring material, embodied, relational, and performative processes. It argues that the contemporary significance of masks lies in their capacity to mediate between permanence and transformation, concealment and revelation, individual and collective identity, and inherited practice and reinvention.
The introduction integrates the volume's contributions into a four-part framework linking mask materiality and aesthetics, ritual embodiment and community, ethnographic experience, and contemporary artistic practice.
An interdisciplinary convergence of anthropology, ethnology, heritage studies, material culture, as well as creative ethnographies, visual and performance arts, the volume brings forth various analytical and creative formats (anthropological text, observational notes, dialogues etc.) to provide a diverse yet coherent account for how masks mediate relationships between bodies, objects, communities, and different orders of reality in the present day. Collectively, the eighteen contributions demonstrate how masks from particular local contexts actively participate in producing identities and social worlds rather than merely representing them.
The volume approaches masking as a process of representation, identification, othering, and ontological transformation, emphasizing the conditions through which identities, social relations, and forms of belonging are temporarily suspended, negotiated, or reconfigured. It further explores the heritage-making processes through which masks and associated knowledge are selected, authorized, transmitted, commodified, and re-signified by communities, craftspeople, institutions, and other heritage actors. Mask-making is presented as an embodied form of technical and cultural knowledge that articulates craftsmanship, local economies, professionalisation, and intergenerational transmission.

KEYWORDS

Masking; materiality; embodiment; heritagization; ritual masks.

Masks are one of those cultural objects whose historical persistence can hardly be explained solely by referencing their formal aspects or the functions they perform in specific ritual contexts (Pessahna 1940; Caro Baroja 2005; Gaignebet 1984, Vulcănescu 1970). Their distinctive nature lies precisely in their capacity to articulate relationships between bodies, objects, subjects and communities, whilst simultaneously facilitating shifts between different orders of reality. Present in religious practices and in secular, festive, artistic and performative ones alike, masks participate in processes of representation, identification, and *othering* and, in a significant manner, inhabit liminal spaces in which social, bodily and identity-related categories may be temporarily suspended, negotiated or transformed. From this perspective, interest in masks and masking is not limited to the study of their symbolic value (Pamfile 1997; Ghinoiu 1998; Marian 1990–1995) or to the reconstruction of their ritual contexts. Masks are at the same time material objects and relational agents, embedded in social, economic, political and affective networks of relationships (Broccolini and Ballacchino 2016), which, in turn, continually reshape the ways in which they are produced, circulated, used and interpreted. Their capacity to simultaneously reveal and conceal, to link the body with that which transcends it, and to produce other forms of presence makes masking a particularly fertile field for examining the processes through which societies construct and transform their categories of identity, otherness and belonging (Pollock 1995).

It is precisely against this backdrop that we have produced this special issue of MARTOR as part of the European MASKS project, which is dedicated to exploring contemporary transformations in masks and in the act of masking. The volume brings together contributions which examine the ways in which these objects and practices sit at the intersection of ritual and secularisation, heritage and commodification, tradition and innovation, craftsmanship and professionalisation, as well as between memory, contemporary creation and performance—all from diverse perspectives. Taken together, the articles enable a shift of focus from a conception of the mask as a finished object towards a view of masks as a process, practice and relationship, taking into account the trajectories they undergo in changing social contexts (Raposo 2023). The collected papers demonstrate, first and foremost, that the contemporary relevance of masks cannot be understood as a mere survival of traditional forms. On the contrary, their continuity arises through processes of adaptation, reinterpretation and transformation, in which inherited practices are subjected to new conditions of existence (Godinho 2010). The contributions focusing on ritual and festive contexts reveal how masks continue to play a role in the creation of specific temporalities, in the regulation of behaviour, and in the negotiation of social relations, whilst the ritualised practices themselves become subject to processes of change and reformulation (Creed 2011; Casimir, Nwakego and Umezinwa 2015). Masquerades and carnivals, (in both rural and urban contexts, emerge as spaces particularly revealing of the tensions between cultural continuity and transformation.

A second cross-cutting dimension of this volume concerns the heritage status of masks and the knowledge and skills associated with them. The so-called "heritage turn" has created new trajectories for objects and practices, which are now conceived simultaneously as cultural expressions, assets of memory, educational resources, museum exhibits, and elements with economic value. Vita Santoro, a contributor to this volume, has studied the processes of heritage designation and their discursive practices: authority in the construction of historicity, the certification of authenticity, cultural representation, and the consolidation of identity (Santoro, 17–84). The articles we are now publishing show how these processes involve a wide range of actors—communities, craftspeople, institutions, museums, associations and other heritage agents—and how the process of heritage-making is not one

of neutral conservation but rather a space for selection, negotiation, and the production of new meanings (Fienup-Riordan 1999; Kreps 2008; Stallaert 2016). Recovering, revitalising or safeguarding a mask also involves deciding which knowledge, practices, materials and memories should be passed on, and under what conditions. In this regard, the work carried out over many years by António Tiza (2013) is particularly interesting, as it has led to specific educational proposals.

In this context, the material and technical dimensions of mask-making take on particular significance. The transformations undergone by materials, techniques and methods of production allow us to trace the tensions between continuity and innovation and, at the same time, to gain an insight into the processes of transmission of knowledge involved. The mask-makers or craftspeople concerned cease to be secondary figures and become a central agent in these dynamics (Simões 2012, 107–12). Their work brings together embodied knowledge, technical skills, local economies, and new forms of professionalisation and entrepreneurship. The contributions in this volume therefore enable us to consider materiality not as a static property of masks, but as a dynamic field in which social relations, economic transformations and processes of cultural continuity and disruption are inscribed (Grimmes 1975; Shlossberg 2015). This focus on materiality inevitably leads us to consider the social trajectories of masks. Once removed from their ritual contexts, these objects can take on new lives as heritage artefacts, decorative items, tourist products, handcrafted goods or exhibition pieces. Commercialisation does not necessarily entail the disappearance of their previous meanings; rather, it can generate new layers of meaning and new relationships between producers, communities and consumers. Masks thus become part of economic and heritage circuits that help to redefine their value and status, revealing the extent to which the social life of these objects depends on the contexts in which they circulate.

Alongside these transformations, the volume also examines the resurgence of masks in the fields of contemporary art and the performing arts. The two contributions from these fields demonstrate that masking also serves as a critical framework through which key issues of the present can be explored. The reappropriation and recreation of masks from ethnological collections or from ritual traditions enables the establishing of complex relationships with the past and, at the same time, generates new discourses regarding the present. In these practices, a mask can function as an aesthetic resource, but also as an instrument of social and political critique, capable of sparking debates around identity, gender, class, belonging, power relations, memories of the colonial past, and the current environmental crisis, even becoming a means of resistance and protest. The contributions referred to above enable us to view masking as a practice of bodily and ontological transformation. The mask is not limited merely to covering a pre-existing face; rather, it alters the body's relationship with itself, with other bodies, and with the social space in which it acts. By altering the perspective and the conditions under which the subject appears, it can call forth other corporealities, other identities and other forms of presence (Emigh 2011). The masked body thus becomes a site of experimentation and the generation of possibilities, and the mask itself a process that allows us to explore the relationships between materiality, corporeality and performativity (Bouttiaux 2009, Emigh 2011; Gramigna 2026).

The articles in this special issue further enable us to address a question that is of particular relevance today: what happens to the materiality of the mask when it is transferred to new spaces of representation? The specific relationships that materials, textures, techniques and construction methods establish with bodies and with audiences do not disappear when the mask enters a museum, an exhibition, a stage or a digital environment. On the contrary, these shifts generate new forms of mediation and translation of the material

which compel us to reconsider how the sensory qualities of objects are experienced and conveyed in different performative and exhibition contexts (Panero García 2026, 180–8). Taken together, these approaches suggest that masks are not merely objects that represent identities, but actively participate in the creation and transformation of those identities. Their versatility in establishing relationships between the human and the non-human, between presence and absence, between concealment and revelation, and between the individual and the collective goes a long way towards explaining their enduring presence and their ability to adapt to diverse historical and cultural contexts. From rituals and festivals to museums, markets, craft workshops and contemporary artistic practices, masks continue to function as privileged devices for negotiating the boundaries between who we are and who we might become.

Finally, this issue adopts a deliberately broad conception of the ways in which knowledge is produced. By welcoming testimonies, interviews and the voices of the craftspeople and workshop participants themselves, as well as by drawing on visual methodologies and creative ethnographies, it complements analytical approaches with the experiences and knowledge of those directly involved in the practices of making and using masks. This openness is consistent with the very nature of the object under study, for if masks are spaces where materialities, bodies, knowledge and communities converge, studying them must likewise take account of the plurality of voices and perspectives involved in their production and their multiple social lives.

⁂

Although the contributions brought together in this issue share a number of cross-cutting themes, they are organised into five sections that reflect different approaches to masks and masking: the relationship between materiality and meaning; the processes of transmission and transformation; the ritual and performative dimensions of masks; and their capacity to produce forms of belonging, otherness and representation. This proposed division is not intended to create rigid compartments, but rather to highlight different perspectives from which to address a phenomenon whose complexity lies precisely in the intersection of material, social, symbolic and performative dimensions.

The first section, "The Aesthetics, Biographies and Imaginaries of the Mask," brings together texts that focus on the material, visual and sensory dimensions of masks, examining the processes of creation, transformation and circulation of their forms. The contributions demonstrate that the aesthetic dimension is not merely ornamental but plays an active role in the construction of meaning, in the revitalisation of traditions, and in the relationship between masks, their makers and their audiences.

This section is opened by Vita Santoro with a study of the practices of mask-making in the winter masking rituals of Basilicata, Italy. Her approach to the "cultural biographies" of objects allows us to trace the transformations of these masks through their materiality, their uses, and the knowledge embodied in their creation. Particular attention is paid to the figures of the mask-makers and to the knowledge of the hand, as well as to the processes of making, unmaking and reusing, understood as forms of creative negotiation between continuity and change. The mask-makers are portrayed as bricoleurs who draw on tradition not in order to reproduce it mechanically, but to affirm, transform and update it.

The notion of the "prefiguration" of facial features provides an analytical framework via which mask-making among Romanian artisans in Moldavia is examined by Marin Constantin. His work offers an insight into mask-making as an interpretative process in which imagining

and shaping a face also involves constructing characters, attributes and forms of representation. The artisans' recurring references to New Year celebrations and the "death of the Old Year" situate this activity within a ritual framework in which the mask is linked to processes of collective renewal and transformation.

Drawing on experience of the *Cocorícamo* of the Dominican Republic, Emelin Quevedo Márquez proposes a comparative exploration of zoomorphic masks crafted from complete bovine and equine skulls. This study shifts the focus towards the aesthetic pathways connecting the Americas and Europe, enabling us to observe the circulation, diversification and transformation of this particular type of mask across different local and temporal contexts.

Cristina Hurdubaia analyses the masks of the *Cucii* of Brănești (Romania) from the perspective of the social agency of the object. Her ethnographic study shows how material transformations—from organic elements to industrial wire and plastic—should not necessarily be interpreted as signs of a loss or deterioration of tradition. On the contrary, novel materials can generate new forms of participation, redistribute knowledge and prestige, and promote the continuity of the ritual. The mask thus emerges as an agent of cultural revitalisation, capable of simultaneously navigating the demands of local contexts and global stages.

The aesthetic and sensory transformations of Romanian winter masquerades are examined through the increasing scale, colourfulness, and visual impact of their masks and costumes. Adelina Dogaru Alexa shows how these material changes contribute to a broader shift towards spectacle, with the performance also extended beyond the immediate presence of performers and participants through new visual and sound media. The reworking, exaggeration, and reintroduction of older forms simultaneously respond to contemporary expectations and heighten the perceived archaism and continuity of the tradition. The study thus extends existing approaches to heritagisation by showing how this process is mediated not only through discourse, institutional regulation, and public representation, but also through the material transformation of ritual objects.

The meanings of the mask and the face are explored by Sorana-Cristina Man through a comparative reading of ancient Greek culture and Romanian folklore. Her analysis draws from the relationship between *prosopon*, the face, and the mask in Greek culture, in connection with the gaze and the possibility of being seen. In contrast to this conception, the study examines the masks associated with the spirits of the dead in Romanian folklore, such as the *Moși* and *Uncheși* of Nereju, raising the question of the different relationships that both traditions establish between mask, face, death and visibility.

The second section, "Embodying the Mask: Ritual, Representation and Community," shifts the focus from the mask as an object to its relationship with the body, ritual action and communal experience. The contributions brought together here show that the meaning of a mask is largely produced at the moment of its activation: when it is worn, when it enters into a relationship with other bodies, when it traverses a ritual space, or when it becomes part of a particular community organisation. The mask is therefore understood as a form of embodiment and as a device capable of producing community.

Cătălin Alexa examines the presence of masks in the documented history of the Romanian *Căluș* ritual, challenging the notion of a consistent and invariable use of ritual masks in this complex ritual. His diachronic approach raises a fundamental issue for studies of masking: the need to distinguish between historical forms of practice and later reconstructions. The latter can tend to become benchmarks of authenticity.

An ethnomusicological perspective on the *Vijanera of Silió* in Cantabria is offered by Susana Moreno Fernández, who explores its continuities and adaptations. Her analysis broadens the emphasis traditionally placed on the visual aspects of the ritual to incorporate the soundscape

as a constitutive dimension of the festive experience. The *Vijanera* emerges as a community practice in which rituality, local identity and heritage-making are closely intertwined.

The experience of a masquerade in the performances of the *Armagh Rhymers*, a group linked to the *Mummers* tradition of Northern Ireland, is presented by Caroline Joy Tatem. Her study links the liminality inherent in the masked performance with its capacity to produce shared experiences and forms of *communitas*. In the context of a society affected by sectarian division, play, interaction with the audience, and the transformation made possible by the mask take on a particular significance as mechanisms for healing and for the creation of positive social memories.

María Pilar Panero García examines the *Zangarrón de Montamarta* from an ethnographic perspective, reconstructing both the materiality of the character and its place within the complex ritual framework of the celebration. The analysis of the masked figure as an ambivalent *daimon* allows for an exploration of the relationships between playful violence, fertility, regeneration and social cohesion, while the episode of the Eucharistic communion and the *parallel* communion offers a reflection on the historical transformations and on the contemporary reinterpretations of the symbolic efficacy of the rite.

Elena Freire Paz and Marta Veiga Izaguirre study the makers and wearers of masks in the 21st century Galician *Entroido*, focusing on the continuities and transformations of these rural traditions in a context marked by touristification. Their contribution brings to the fore the material knowledge and processes of transmission that underpin the masks and their accessories, as well as the adaptations they are undergoing in a post-industrial and hyper-connected society.

Adrian Stoicescu analyses the transformation of the notion of authenticity in the contemporary performance of the Romanian *Bear Dance*, using the "Ursul lui Gavrilă din Asău" [Gavrilă from Asău's Bear] group as a case study. Drawing on a corpus of Facebook posts and using tools from digital ethnography and discourse analysis, the author demonstrates how authenticity is shifting from material practice and inherited ritual forms towards discursive, relational, and affective processes. In this context, the masked body continues to occupy a central place from a visual perspective, but authenticity is increasingly produced through interaction with audiences, narrative continuity, participation, and the dynamics of circulation and recognition in digital spaces. The article thus presents authenticity as a dynamic and distributed effect that is constantly being negotiated between the performance and its various audiences.

The third section, "Notes," brings together approaches that pay particular attention to the ethnographic experience and to the specific ways in which masked traditions are lived, represented, and negotiated by their participants. The very nature of the works gathered here allows the mask to be approached not merely as an object of analysis, but as part of situated practices in which the researcher shares spaces, experiences and processes of interpretation with the communities under study.

Ana Pascu follows the *Crai* of the Jiu Valley (Romania), showing how a popular religious performance linked to the celebration of Christmas has incorporated masked characters borrowed from other traditional forms of carol singing. The work provides an insight into the processes through which a practice acquires a specific identity-forming value and how masks are integrated into new ritual configurations.

Iuliana Dumitru offers an ethnographic and autoethnographic approach to the *Fuga Lolelor* [The Run of the *Lole*] as practised in Cincu (Romania). Drawing on field observations and her dialogue with mask-maker Uwe Constantin Boghian, the text illuminates the relationships between the ritual, the community and its preservation

as heritage. The contribution pays particular attention to the tensions between transmission, reflexivity and lived experience, showing how a sense of belonging is renewed and renegotiated through ritual practice and through the participation of both the local community and of former locals returning from the diaspora to take part.

The cinematic reinterpretation of masks in the Christmas folk traditions of the Carpathians as embodied in the works of Sergei Parajanov and Ivan Mykolaichuk is analysed by Kira Sadoja. The article accounts for how masks can cease to function as mere representations of a folkloric practice and instead become cinematic devices capable of expressing liminal experiences, subjective crises, and forms of communication that transcend the possibilities of everyday language. The comparison between the two filmmakers also reveals different ways of translating ritual logic into the narrative, symbolic and aesthetic language of cinema.

The fourth section, "Dialogues," deliberately broadens the range of voices and formats within the volume. In contrast to the conventional academic article, these contributions introduce alternative approaches to mask and performance, fostering dialogue between those who produce and those who experience these practices, thus allowing the subject of study to be approached from perspectives closer to creation and the performative experience.

Irina Apan presents an interview with Yuliya Tsukerman, a puppeteer and mask-maker who works across theatre, film and the digital sphere. The conversation offers an insight into the creative processes involved and the relationship between masks, emotion, characters and the online audience's perception, drawing on Tsukerman's project "Transmissions from the Ancient Forest."

Through a double-voiced self-ethnography, Georgiana Vlahbei and Alina Tofan of the Plastic Art Performance collective reflect on the embodied experiences on the two sides of the mask. In viewing masks as technologies for *becoming Other*, they trace agency–performativity relations and material ecologies of production. They thus position masks as narrative and political objects that critique anthropogenic ecological disruption and catalyse social transformation.

Finally, the work that concludes this journal issue emerges from a different format: a Visual Micro-essay (the fifth and final section) offering insights into two researchers' immersion in the Green Man ritual. This concluding visual narrative foregrounds the process of producing ethnological meaning about masks through the mobilization of documentary photography as artistic and aesthetic practice.

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Taken together, the five sections trace a journey that extends from materiality to embodiment, from ethnographic experience to dialogue with contemporary creation. This is not, however, a linear journey, as the issues raised in each section re-emerge and are transformed in the others. Materiality refers to ritual; ritual fosters community; community participates in processes of heritage formation; heritage generates new forms of representation; and these, in turn, can return the masks to new spaces of artistic and performative experimentation. This cyclical relationship between different levels of analysis (scales) and their contexts constitutes one of the major threads that run through the volume. Therefore, rather than presenting a homogeneous image of the mask, the contributions gathered here highlight its essentially relational and mutable nature. Masks change in terms of materials, makers, bodies, spaces and audiences; their functions and the discourses that accompany them also change. Yet in each of these transformations, their capacity to mediate between worlds, to make certain identities visible whilst concealing others, to produce forms of belonging and

otherness, and to open up spaces for bodily, social and aesthetic experimentation persists. It is within this productive tension between permanence and transformation that the collection of texts we present is situated.

The contributions in this issue demonstrate, in short, that the contemporary nature of masks lies not solely in their enduring presence, but in their capacity to shift. Between memory and creation, between ritual and performance, between heritage and the market, between technique and artistic experimentation, masks continue to generate new forms of relationship, representation and belonging. This volume aims to explore these transformations without reducing them to a dichotomy between tradition and modernity; it focuses instead on the processes through which these two dimensions intertwine and give rise to new materialities, new practices and new meanings. It is within this space of transition—between bodies and objects, between past and present, between heritage and reinvention—that we situate the contributions presented here.

We, the editors of this special issue, would like to thank the authors, the reviewers and the *Martor* team for their excellent work, characterised by unflagging patience and dedication. We would also like to express our delight that authors from outside the MASKS project consortium have contributed, broadening the scope of research into our area of study and, in addition, bringing in other regions including Northern Ireland, Ukraine, the Dominican Republic, and Galicia and Cantabria in Spain, which demonstrates just how vast and beautiful the culture of the mask is. We wish to convey our enthusiasm to the academic community and, of course, to all those who, in one way or another, celebrate (with) masks.

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More information at: https://unveilingthemasks.uva.es/.

MASKS
UNVEILING THE ARTS AND WORKS BEHIND THE MASKS
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I. Aesthetics, Biographies, and Imaginaries of the Mask

Making/Unmaking, and Reusing. Cultural Creativity of the Masks

Vita Santoro
University of Basilicata, Italy
ORCID: 0000-0001-6046-4972

Dr Vita Santoro is a cultural anthropologist. She is currently an assistant professor at the University of Basilicata (Italy) and the university coordinator of the European project MASKS. Her topics of interest include intangible cultural heritage, ethnographic museums, writing, memory, festivals, rites, migrations, margins, and masks.

Correspondence: vita.santoro@unibas.it

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ABSTRACT

Traditional craftsmanship, like other kinds of knowledge, know-how and technical skills, is one of the areas of cultural heritage whose importance and density of meaning has long been recognised. Heritage-making processes usually revolve around this domain and the creative and symbolic dimensions tend to be defined in relation to the divergent local and global dimensions. In Italy, mask making is not always recognized as a craft practice. Rather, the knowledge and techniques used in making masks tend to be counted among cultural practices and expressions, the result of individual craftsmanship and the cultural memory of the communities involved in masquerades. This paper aims to critically analyse some processes related to the artefacts produced or packaged during the winter masking rites investigated in the Italian region of Basilicata. These masks originate from technical skills learnt, embodied, and often informally transmitted, while also being enriched by artistic contributions, contaminations, and innovations. On the one hand, I will describe the masks with their "cultural biographies" and materiality, in addition to their symbolic meanings and their functions expressed in time and ritual space. On the other hand, the mask-makers will emerge, who draw heavily on local traditions, available techniques and materials, and the "knowledge of the hand" learned from scratch or handed down over generations. The "making," "unmaking," and "reusing" thus become a metaphor for the production of masks. Positioning themselves between continuity and change, mask makers, like "bricoleurs," draw on tradition in a creative way, confirming, transforming, and evoking it.

KEYWORDS

Masks; mask-makers; creativity; crafts; bricolage.

Introduction

In the 1990s, Italian artist Enrico Baj (1982), a great supporter of Alfred Jarry's 'Pataphysics[1] and an experimenter with new techniques and stylistic solutions that made extensive use of collage and assemblages using a wide variety of materials, focused his attention on a series of works called "Tribal Masks," which consisted of using discarded materials, assembled to create masks with mainly ironic, grotesque meanings and bright colours. Leaving to one side critical reservations of a semantic nature regarding the name adopted for the cycle of works, which reflects the methodical cultural appropriation that characterised part of 20th century Western contemporary art, Baj experimented with techniques, materials and models that we commonly find today in the creation of masks.

'Pataphysics[2] originated as a means of radical expression, inspired by François Rabelais' grotesque realism, which aimed to overturn the syntax of things, drawing attention to the exceptional, the particular, and the tangible. In the same way, in the creation and packaging of artifacts, the mask makers' attitude to recycling and reuse, the combinatory and unpredictable exercise of bricolage, intertwined with the traditional repertoire, contribute to determining a multifaceted and indefinable scenario of great individual and collective creativity.

Emblem of otherness, irony, the subversion of reality, the destruction of clichés, and the reversal of roles, as in the curious creations dear to 'Pataphysics, masks are capable of arousing wonder, disgust, and sometimes dissonance, producing reversals of direction and unexpected, non-linear symbolic meanings that lie outside the usual cultural models. In their conception and creation, as well as in the act of wearing them, and in the broader practice of disguise, which at a superficial glance might appear to be mere manual and performative operations, they have always expressed the human capacities for adaptation, change, and social and cultural (re)organization.

As a part of the research and documentation activities carried out within the European project MASKS,[3] I had the opportunity to investigate some masks worn during local winter rites that take place in small villages in the inner and rural areas of the Italian region of Basilicata. The fieldwork was carried out between 2024 and 2026 following a multisite ethnographic approach.[4] We should mention that the selection of mask-makers and techniques to be documented was made easier by previous studies conducted in the same areas by scholars and researchers, including anthropologists, based in some cases on ethnographic fieldwork, to which may be added the Unibas team's in-depth knowledge of these areas and the careful, long-term development of networks and relationships with local stakeholders, including event organisers and mask-makers.[5]

Many masking experiences, as Ferdinando Mirizzi (2016, 40), an authoritative expert on masking rituals in southern Italy, reminds us, are nothing more than "continuous reworking of widely disseminated models, which over time end up producing multiple variations within a complex narrative plot." These are always significant events for the definition of local cultures, which refer to "elements of a universal nature that respond to the same functions in the specificity of different contextual variations"; and they lend themselves to being incessantly "reshaped in their modes of execution and meanings to meet the contemporary needs of the protagonists of the ceremonies." Studies and research carried out in Basilicata over the past few decades demonstrate that local masks have come to be seen as a symbol of identity in the modern era; they also bear witness to the transformations and reinvention that these masked traditions have undergone over the course of history and in the face of changing economic and socio-cultural contexts (Mirizzi 2016).

Regarding this, Vincenzo Padiglione (2016) has clearly emphasized the value of masks in today's world, looking to the future, and to what manual and creative production represents in a changed local and global scenario, sometimes considered devoid of cultural horizons and meanings that are recognizable and shareable. As he writes:

> As ritual devices, masks guided, celebrated, and made the most difficult transitions in life conceivable. Today, they help us navigate complexity and see ourselves differently. They provide visual words to indicate suspended worlds, embodied deviations, announced revolts, possible deviations from the reality principle. A redundancy of hybrid beings which, we must not forget, are the basic elements of evolutionary mutations and therefore the most capable of allowing us to imagine the Future. (Padiglione 2016, 31)

The "ironic and tragic otherness" (Padiglione 2017) that inhabited traditional masquerades, such as those of Italy, has seemed, to some observers, to have abandoned contemporary rituals. However, according to Padiglione (2017, 124), it has "taken refuge elsewhere," in the interstices and marginal spaces of experimentation, such as those in which the mask-makers we met in Basilicata function, and in which they attempt to (re)activate that "social magic thanks to which not only does one become something else, but this different identity is imposed on the public" (2017, 124). In this sense, in most masquerades, and the rituals of Basilicata are no exception, masks contribute "to constructing the real world," while alluding to other possible worlds; since at the same time "the place of the mask is that of ambiguity, metamorphosis and transformation" (Bargna 2004, 144).

We know that masks should be observed above all through the practice of masking, understood as "a dynamic place marked by the ambiguity and reversibility of putting on and taking off (...) an action that can be performed in many ways and using different objects, often very far removed from the stereotype of the face mask" (Bargna 2004, 146). The identity of the mask cannot be established by limiting oneself, for example, to the analysis of the facial element or the costume worn, taken separately or isolated from the context of action, since "masks consist of masquerade" (Bargna 2004, 147). The protagonists of masquerades consequently recognise a certain ceremonial significance in their disguises, a ritual ethos, especially in relation to those actions that transform them into the desired otherness (Padiglione 2017).

It is not my intention to submit these masks observed during ethnography in Basilicata to a comparative or structuralist analysis, in order to highlight similarities and differences, or to emphasize the main cultural, ritual, and symbolic meanings and the semantic and aesthetic fields involved. However, the perspective I will adopt to observe the ways in which and tactics with which masks are created, worn, performed, and the contexts in which masquerades are produced, will be one drawn mainly from ethnography of material culture and critical and applied anthropology of heritage, with an approach to the study of masks and mask-makers which, in a broad sense, we might describe as "phenomenological." Given the consolidated symbolic structures of meaning and cultural horizons of sense, already extensively investigated for the masking practices of Basilicata, and continuing the reflections I have published elsewhere (Santoro 2025), in this article I will try to focus my attention specifically on a number of tangible aspects, so to speak, that pertain to the creative, productive, and artisanal moments of mask making. On the one hand, I will describe the masks with their respective biographies and in their materiality, without losing sight of certain underlying symbolic meanings and the functions that are expressed in ritual time and space. On the other hand, the figures of the mask-makers will emerge, who, like modern bricoleurs (Lévi-Strauss 2015; Favole 2009, 2010), draw heavily on local traditions, available techniques and materials, and the knowledge of the hand (Angioni, 1986; Sennett 2008; Ingold 2010) learned from scratch or handed down over generations. They operate retrospectively, combining, reorganizing, and intentionally adapting the pre-existing set of available and concrete elements, sometimes but not always finished. They are also capable of interweaving these traditional repertoires with innovative additions; they imagine original ones and invent new ones to create masks that will acquire a cultural biography (Kopytoff, 1986) over time, becoming a recognized fragment of local memory, of the traditions of masking that have been experienced and historicized.

In agreement with Adriano Favole, I would add that the forms of creativity highlighted in this paper do not seem to originate simply from the complex relationship between tradition and contemporaneity, nor are they limited to mere bricolage, as defined by Claude

Lévi-Strauss (1982). Rather, they will be analysed as dynamics of an articulated and dense process "arising from encounters, relationships, situations of coexistence or cohabitation, and even from the impact between different cultures and cultural styles." (Favole 2009, 23)

Furthermore, with regard to materiality, following Tim Ingold's reflections and endeavouring to apply them to the world of mask creation, we can regard making as

> a practice of weaving, in which practitioners bind their own pathways or lines of becoming into the texture of material flows comprising the lifeworld. Rather than reading creativity 'backwards', from a finished object to an initial intention in the mind of an agent, this entails reading it forwards, in an ongoing generative movement that is at once itinerant, improvisatory and rhythmic. (Ingold 2010, 91)

In other words, Ingold (2010, 92) argues that it is only by overturning the usual model, which assigns importance to objects and materiality, that we can focus our attention on the processes of formation rather than their final products, on the flows and transformations of materials rather than the states of matter. In any manual or craft practice, "preconceived forms are almost never imposed on inert matter," but rather "interventions are made in the force fields and currents of the material in which the forms are generated." So, my focus will therefore be on objects (the masks), considered as dense and polysemic devices, and starting from their conscious and creative makers within their respective contexts of production and use.

The knowledge of the hand

An anthropological perspective on the analysis of material culture could be based on a series of assumptions, such as those outlined by Mario Turci (2009, 27), according to which "the ethnographic substance of objects can be traced in their biography and, through the study of this, it is possible to probe the thoughts they contain". First of all, objects must be considered to be "prostheses of the body" and to "participate in the perception of reality and its consequent existence in the world," to quote the theories of Jean Paul Warnier (2005). Furthermore, it must be assumed that each object under consideration has a "prehistory (its production) and a history (its use)," and may experience "entry into a phase of obsolescence that will result in its exit from everyday life and possible entry into a new life (museum, heritage)" (Turci 2009, 27). Therefore, it can only be the "immaterial dimension of material culture that is the substantial point of interest of an ethnography which, although indebted to ergology and the history of technology, identifies the human nature of objects in the biographical content of things" (*Ibid.*, 27). All objects, including masks, can be traced back to specific socio-cultural contexts, which define their presence, but they are also capable of evocative functions and biographical density. Engraved in things and objects, Turci writes, we find "our individual presence and, as such, it cannot be assimilated to the processes of historical evidence but rather to those of testimonial evidence." (*Ibid*., 28)

Starting in the 1960s, in the field of material culture theories, Fabio Dei writes: "the combined influence of Marxism and cultural technology pushes anthropological attention to focus on work, matter, and 'things'" (Dei 2016, 446). Above all, objects resulting

from artisanal production processes seem to incorporate "technical knowledge, forms of hand-eye-mind coordination and collective cooperation, language, and memory—the very foundations of human evolution, which is entirely based on 'coming to terms with matter'" (*Ibid.*, 446). However, a different category of objects, serial objects, which are the "fruit of industrial production—and, consequently, the majority of those that populate modern living environments" (*Ibid*., 446)—are inexplicably excluded from anthropological interest. As Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986) argue, when studying objects and things, whether handmade or mass-produced, it is also essential to be open to ethnographic analysis of the market and consumption. This would be an ethnography of material culture that becomes an ethnography of consumption, but which is nevertheless capable of capturing the practices of object production "from the point of view of the agents involved and the changing contexts in which they are situated," Fabio Dei (2016, 446) writes, since

> if most of the objects that populate contemporary everyday worlds have been produced as commodities and have circulated at least once as commodities, their analysis can only be based on a rethinking of this concept; on the construction of a more complex relationship between the production system, forms of circulation and value regimes, processes of "singularization" (as Kopytoff calls them), "meanings" and subjectivity. (Dei 2016, 446)

Tim Ingold (2010) once again focuses on the importance of subjectivity and creative agency, arguing that we can consider artisans, like artists, as "itinerant travellers" who "make their way through the landscape of activities like walkers through the landscape, carrying on with their work as they go about their lives." It is in this sort of "forward movement" that we identify the "creativity of work." That is:

> Reading creativity "forward" means focusing not on abduction but on improvisation [...]. Improvising means following the paths of the world as they open up, rather than retrieving a chain of connections, from an end point to a starting point, on a path already travelled. (Ingod 2010, 97)

In the dual dimension of analysis proposed, on the one hand, we find material culture (Warnier 2005), such as handcrafted cultural objects, with their respective modes of transmission of know-how, which oscillates between acceptance and rejection of cultural innovations, in addition to any influences determined by the needs of local economic and tourist development. On the other hand, there are the subjects, in our case the mask-makers, other stakeholders, and the wider heritage communities.

Even in the specific field of masks, both materiality and the study of the body are important, since skills and manual dexterity are mainly embodied, and the notions and "skills acquired in doing" are skilfully "stored in the body's memory" (Angioni, Da Re 2003, 28), together with the tools that constitute its extension (Warnier 2005).

The body becomes the measure, the limit, the main tool of production and creativity. It is the device that gives meaning to the mask when it is worn, performed and acted.

This focus on the materiality of masks, which is part of a recognised and renewed interdisciplinary interest in the world of objects, is intended to be the starting point for a broader reflection on human creativity, without forgetting its numerous cultural implications and social relationships. I very much agree that masks make certain relationships visible, as Carlo Severi reminds us when he writes about the ritual dance that every young Iatmul[6] must perform for his mother's brother:

> We may conclude from all this that, in order for plastic representations—masks or other images—to become the props of a name, it is necessary not only that their form [...] be conventionalized, but also that the context in which they are used be ritually defined so that these representations are rendered clearly distinct from other, more familiar images that are less charged with meaning. (Severi 2015, 78)

Finally, there are other, so to speak, immaterial aspects that should not be overlooked, such as the relevant role of sociality inherent in craftsmanship, networks of relationships, contexts of production and use, and spaces for sharing that are built around it. Added to these are the complex dynamics determined by certain unprecedented and innovative scenarios in which we often find ourselves operating in the contemporary world. It is clear that the bricoleur-artisan, although accustomed to thinking with his hands (Sennet 2008), is capable of developing interest and agency in relation to the processes of orientation of local cultural, creative, and productive policies. In this regard, recent interesting experiences, documented around the masking practices in Basilicata, can be an emblematic example: strategic innovations in techniques and materials; social uses of tradition in an economic-tourism dimension; organization of promotion and communication initiatives using AI and new technologies; artification of masks; commodification of cultural memory through the invention of ephemeral objects or souvenirs inspired by masks. As Mirizzi (2021, 15) writes, from the beginning of the 21st century onwards, those same ritual forms that had appeared and been documented only two decades earlier as "in a state of inexorable decline" seem to have "re-emerged," within and as a result of processes of heritage-making, still ongoing, "aimed at actions and projects based on a sense of belonging and the enhancement of everything that was conceived as specific and exclusive to one's own context of life and relationships."

Masks of Basilicata

Since the 1950s, the availability of a good amount of literature and documentation, both locally produced and academic, has provided a fairly clear picture of the production of masks used in some Basilicata villages during different ritual and festive contexts. Moreover, thanks to several more recent anthropological research studies based on a well-established, long-term ethnographic relationship, over the years it has been possible to investigate in depth the masks of the region in the different contexts in which they are produced, packaged and used. In Italy in general, and in Basilicata specifically, these masking rituals are chiefly connected with the Carnival festivities and other so-called "winter rites." It is in the period between Epiphany and Shrove Tuesday that numerous zoo-, phyto- and anthropomorphic masks, accompanied by the sound of cowbells and the lighting of fires, all of which once had ritual significance, make their appearance in the streets, evoking a distant time and a world that no longer exists, "thus making relevant what is deeply irrelevant in the customs, gestures, and behaviours of the Lucanian people in the present." (Mirizzi 2021, 11)

The anthropologically interesting aspect here is the contemporaneity of these rituals, which are characterized by the production and the use or re-use of traditional masks. During present-day ritual practices these masks of Carnival ceremonials and traditional masquerades are re-actualized, re-signified, and re-functionalised in forms that are

almost always more organized and structured when contrasted with the improvisation that characterized them in the past (Mirizzi 2021). Sometimes they take on a different symbolic value for the heritage communities or for the new generations, such as for people who have decided not to emigrate or for those who have returned to live in their villages after experiences in other places and have been trying to discover a connection to their villages of origin. Furthermore, it is very important to look at the contextual dynamics and the processes of adaptation, transformation and patrimonialisation that characterize the individual Carnivals and masquerades, considered and investigated in their uniqueness and diversity, besides the hypothetical common traits that could be highlighted, as I have already stated.

Each ceremonial needs to be studied in its specificity, with a readiness to identify and reconstruct its history and to detect the differences, rather than the similarities, when it is compared to others that are apparently similar. Resemblances should not be automatically referred to presumed, but not proven and often invented, common origins. Each masquerade has its own specific characteristics, resulting from different traditions and "biographies," and contains recognisable symbolic elements of various origins, with elements that are similar to those found in other masquerades, but are always adapted to specific social and cultural situations in the contemporary dimension (Clemente 2016). Thus, each mask and masquerade ritual find its meaning within specific local histories, in which personal experiences and creative contributions converge. Contexts change, and so do masks, which perform their functions at a social level.

Contemporary Lucanian[7] Carnivals, which refer to a supposed local tradition, distant in time and more or less historically founded, are largely the result of processes of "re-traditionalization" based on multiple forms of relearning local masking traditions. These links between memory, present, and future also function as a prerequisite for such traditions, "as social practices in a not-too-distant past," to re-emerge and acquire meaning in the present as "cultural heritage" (Mirizzi 2016, 35). "Carnival is Carnival in the here and now," argues Sandra Ferracuti.

> It consists of an occasion that is at once creative and reflective, celebratory and critical of the status quo. On this level, the relevance of the mask (its "vitality") lies in its contemporary interpretations and uses and runs along the lines of activities that testify to the way in which cultural creativity, by reworking it, conveys tradition, symbolic support for the vitality and cohesion (dynamic and dialectical) of society itself. (Ferracuti 2016, 62)

The craft of mask-making is not recognized as an artisanal practice in Basilicata.[8] However, the knowledge and techniques used in making masks can undoubtedly be counted among cultural practices and expressions, the result of individual craftsmanship and the local memory of the communities involved in masquerades. Furthermore, masks are interesting as artifacts, both because they represent forms of artistic thought and because, unlike other objects, they are almost never destined for obsolescence and for leaving the horizon of everyday life; rather, as we shall see, they continue to have a practical function, or an affective and memorial meaning, in the context of contemporary masquerades.

The masks and techniques observed, given that there are currently no structured craft organisations that revolve around mask production, are significant because they involve different techniques and use materials that have the potential to represent the creativity of the kinds of local knowledge, expertise and know-how that are widely recognised in the context in which the masquerades take place. These masks are currently used for socio-

cultural performances and are an expression of gender balance and of communication between generations. Most are made of "sustainable" materials that do not compromise the human-environment or human-animal relationships, because they reflect the environmental sensitivity of the new generations of mask-makers. There are also masks that recall traditional shapes and characteristics, although these are artistically revisited. Other masks are the product of technical and craft skills for which the possibility of entrepreneurial development for commercial and tourism purposes is foreseen. This last category usually receives more attention from local stakeholders.

Lucanian mask-makers are often active members of local heritage communities and themselves wear the masks they make. At other times they create masks for others and do not wear them but sell them, reproducing them in original and imaginative forms that are more suited to being marketed than to being worn. This is the case, for example, with the mask-inspired souvenirs that have recently begun to appear at events devoted to masquerades in Basilicata. Let us not forget that the current practices and policies for promoting the masks of Basilicata, as is the case in other geographical contexts and for other masking rituals, are part of the so-called heritage-making processes.

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Santoro 2023), both handcrafted artifacts and technical skills learned, incorporated, and usually informally transmitted refer to specific territorial contexts. They are capable of placing themselves at the centre of dynamics that redefine local identities, in ways that can even be problematic, since they have become the subject of heritage processes and interact with economic and tourist dynamics, with popular culture, and with interesting and innovative museographic experiences. Heritage is cultural memory; it has to do with places, as well as with practices, knowledge, expressions, representations, traditions, and territorial identity. In other words: territory as a territory that remembers.

The mask is certainly a product of human creativity, requiring considerable manual, artisanal, and/or artistic skills. It is closely connected to a specific context and to the cultural memory of communities. But it is, above all, a technology for the construction of identity, "a device for the production of reality and, as such, falls within the realm of 'technique', understood on the one hand as a prosthesis and extroversion of the body and, on the other, as an agent of anthropopoietic introversion" (Bargna 2004, 143). Finally, when dealing with the craftsmanship of masks, it is entirely appropriate, as we shall see, to consider the informal modes of transfer of knowledge, practice, and technical know-how, since this is chiefly embodied and acted knowledge, bodily memory, connected both to the transmission of implicit and abstract notions and to the oral memory of mask-makers (Angioni, Da Re 2003, 28). We also include here the symbolic aspects linked to the different stages of work (Angioni 1986) and the tools and raw materials used in production.

It is well understood that the repertoire of Lucanian masks is not limited to the most ancient, time-honoured, and lived-in models, that is, to those thought of as traditional local masks. In the parades currently held in various villages in Basilicata, there will be people wearing other types of costumes. In addition to masks that are, so to speak, hybrid, i.e., freely inspired by historical forms, there are original ones, which are an expression of the creativity of individuals and groups. Finally, there are ones inspired by literary, cinematographic, and television productions (Ferracuti 2016).

In the following pages, I will discuss two case studies in which I have identified a particular creative ability on the part of mask-makers, as well as a more or less conscious desire to play in original ways with local masking traditions. The images and reflections I will present will move repeatedly from one mask to another, crossing the respective masking

rituals, the festive events in which they are currently included, and the practices, meanings, knowledge, and know-how embodied in them. The reasons for choosing these cases spring from an in-depth knowledge of masking rituals and from personal involvement over the years with the respective heritage communities. Finally, the description of the craftsmanship and the materiality of the artefacts will highlight the agency both of the material itself and of the mask-makers who act through them, while demonstrating how production practices are closely linked to the processes of heritage making taking place within their contexts of use.



Biographies of masks and mask-makers

In the polyphony of masks that characterize the winter rites of Basilicata, it is thanks to the mask-makers that knowledge, skills and know-how are able to oscillate creatively between tradition, innovation, invention and (re)use. I have already emphasized the striking feature that in this region there are no artisans working in special workshops to produce masks; rather, those who create them are members of the heritage communities, local people who participate in and give life to ceremonial rituals.[9] And yet these mask-makers, like recognised artisans, strike me as custodians of knowledge passed down orally, techniques of the body and hand learned within the family, or through other networks of relationships, as well as sometimes at work and during leisure time. The number of makers active in each village in which masks have been documented is highly variable.

Lucanian masks are made of a wide range of materials, including paper, ivy, wood, iron wire, metallic and textiles materials, straw, coloured fabric, plastic and metal string, recycled and natural elements. The techniques used by local makers range from papier-mâché to tailoring and sewing, but most masks are constructed using bricolage techniques employing different natural and recycled materials, as was the case in the combinatorial and unpredictable practice of 'Pataphysics. Several research studies have shown that each masquerade finds its meaning within its particular local story, in which personal experiences and specific creative contributions, individual or collective, act and converge in the constantly changing contexts in which people continue to live and perform their functions at a social level.

The techniques documented in Basilicata have chiefly concerned masks that are constructed and packaged ad hoc for use in local Carnivals. More rarely, they are produced to be sold. These masks are often assembled and made shortly before the festival concerned, using artefacts and materials already in the possession of the participants who need to wear them. In other cases, we observe an operation that we can once again define as the bricolage of fabrics, garments, hats, scarves, boots and other objects and sound-producing elements that are part of a family's heritage and are passed down from generation to generation with great care, because they are regarded as objects of affection freighted with memories.

As Mirizzi writes regarding the memory capacity of objects:

> the more Carnival is based on archaic and outdated elements, the more it is an expression of contemporary life and reflects the need for participation and dialogue, for the enhancement of local resources, experiences and knowledge, for the imagination of possible lives drawing on one's own history and cultural tradition, for encounters with other individuals and groups with whom one can share the same type of imagination. (Mirizzi 2016, 45)

For example, the masks of the Tricarico[10] Carnival are a good example of bricolage and the re-use of elements, often items that belong to the same people who wear them and who have inherited them from their families or via other life trajectories. During the fieldwork, we often found ourselves documenting the biographies of masks and of specific accessories, such as hats or scarves that had belonged to grandparents and parents or siblings. An example would be the mask hat worn by Francesco Santangelo, known as Ciccio, the president of the "Pro Loco" association that organizes the Tricarico Carnival, who recounted for us the significance of the coloured ribbons decorating the hat, which brought back memories of his childhood and of widespread material poverty.[11]

These are objects of affection which carry with them a wealth of feelings, emotions and sensations, contributing to the value of the mask and to the intimate meaning of masquerading. It is no coincidence that the ritual moment of dressing is significant. Masquerading for the parade in Tricarico thus functions as a kind of commemorative occasion: on the one hand it recalls an individual history with family memories, while on the other it involves participation in a shared collective tradition. More than this, the possession of biographical objects is certainly a tangible sign of belonging. (Figure 1)



Fig. 1. Dressing the *Vacca* mask for the Tricarico Carnival. Photo credits RVM.



Fig. 2. Holy card of Saint Anthony the Abbot on the *Vacca* mask in Tricarico. Photo credits RVM.

Similar points can be made about another important aspect: the links between masquerades and popular devotion. This is always the case for the Tricarico Carnival, but the connection is widespread in other Lucanian masquerades too. This Carnival consists of a parade of *Tori* (bulls) and *Vacche* (cows) through the streets of the village on 17 January, the day dedicated to St Anthony the Abbot, the protector of animals. It is characterised by a deep devotion to the saint—indeed the people who wear the *Vacca* mask have a holy card depicting St. Anthony the Abbot pinned to their waists. However, this is a devotional practice and religious ritual that "over the last decade, has seen the expansion of the limited, marginal human and territorial universe that produced it" (Di Paolo 2024).

Observing devotional aspects of cultural elements, practices and expressions helps us to better understand the multiple dynamics of religions as immersed in the materiality of things. Devotional objects exert power over individuals in the context of religious experience; in the case of masquerades, they are tools for demonstrating one's devotion to others.

We know that the presence and ritual use of representations, objects, images, bodies, substances, artefacts, and things with material

consistency is fundamental to the existence of a religion. At the same time, in liminal practices situated between the sacred and the profane, as in the masquerades I have documented, the use of such devotional objects also becomes a device that enables the ritual or festival to function within the context of contemporary heritage practices. (Figure 2)

Mask making techniques, while adhering to tradition in a strict and "philological" manner, are quite flexible and responsive to the taste and creativity of each mask-maker. This makes it possible, for example, for people to make changes to decorations at will or introduce original elements into masks or masquerades. The younger generation in particular tend to be innovative with their masks, sometimes replacing traditional materials with others that are easier to find and use, or making changes to meet contemporary demands.

This is the case with the Satriano di Lucania[12] Carnival, where traditional masquerade coexists with contemporary masking practices, which have acquired new meanings and values while still drawing on tradition, but also with the invention of new masks. One example is the *Folletto* mask (Elf or Pixie), which I will discuss below.

The Satriano Carnival is the result of rediscovered and renewed traditions and practices that have become community heritage. Its masks, including the *Rumita* (hermit), the *Urs* (bear) and the *Quaremma* (Lent), are the result of a process of reinterpretation and adaptation to the heterogeneous historical and social circumstances that have shaped the life of the village. In particular, the phenomenon of post-war emigration has influenced the perception of certain masks, such as the Rumita, associated with the image of the local man who decides to remain in his homeland in poverty. (Figure 3)

As Sandra Ferracuti (2016) has written, thanks to long-term and still ongoing ethnographic research, the introduction of cultural models from the past into the contemporary world has led to the creation of new styles and practices. The Satriano Carnival has thus been imbued with symbolic values and transformed into a kind of catalysing event (see "The Walking Forest") that also conveys a universal ecological message. Here, people from different generations have the opportunity to participate in the masquerade, an event that provides an opportunity, especially for younger people, to learn informally from the village elders' techniques and knowledge related to the creation not only of the *Rumita* but also of other masks, such as the *Folletto*. Informal learning takes place during times of conviviality and dialogue.

With regard to intergenerational transmission, we should mention Donato Perrone, one of the main promoters of the Satriano di Lucania Carnival. He is known as *u' professor* (the teacher), because he taught technical education to many Satriano people who today play an active part in the creation of the *Rumita*.[13] Donato Perrone and Carmine Pascale, both belonging to the generation born in the 1950s, have facilitated and continue to facilitate (both technically and by providing moral support, cultural-historical information and knowledge to the younger generations) the transformation of Satriano di Lucania's Carnival. In addition to this, Donato has concretely supported the birth of a new heritage community, made up of younger people from the village who are involved in organizing the various events of the Carnival and in preserving local traditions. These younger generations, born in the 1980s, have been trained by Donato in the construction of this mask, both in its spontaneous version and the version used during "The Walking Forest," which requires a functional variation. This generation has also been passing on information on the construction of the mask to those younger than them. (Figure 4)



Fig. 3. Mask of *Rumita* emerging from the woods of Satriano di Lucania. Photo credits RVM.



Fig. 4. Donato Perrone makes the mask of *Rumita* in Satriano di Lucania. Photo credits RVM.



Fig. 5. Masks performance during the Tricarico Carnival. Photo credits RVM.

The social life of the mask between tradition and innovation

Returning to the Tricarico Historical Carnival, this is closely connected to the research conducted by many anthropologists, notably Enzo Spera, whose written memorial has become authoritative testimony for a reconstruction of the sequences and masks that make up the parade that passes through the streets of the village on January 17th every year. The detailed description of the masquerade given by Spera in the 1980s became, in the following years, a canvas of behaviours, performances and instructions to be followed in the representation of the transhumance herd staged at every Carnival (Mirizzi 2016).

Recent ethnographic research in Tricarico shows that over time, in addition to the shape of the masks, the methods and motivations behind the ritual of masking have also changed. As Di Paolo (2024) points out, participation in ritual events has changed significantly, as have the specific social actors involved, "citizens engaged on multiple fronts in collective, spontaneous activities that underlie complex relational mechanisms of revitalization and enrichment, not only economic." However, at least one basic principle remains unchanged: participation in the parade is always open to anyone who has a cow or bull costume, regardless of whether it is faithful to historical tradition or deviates slightly from the original.

The anthropologist Marina Bernardi believes that the Tricarico masks

> crosses a town that is disappearing because it is undergoing demographic contraction like many towns in Basilicata, but at the same time it enters into unprecedented strategies of appeasement, it enters into new urban fabrics, so that the carnival experiments with new forms of community, it stages new forms of living and new ways of practicing the ritual. (Bernardi 2022, 5)

As mentioned above, the Tricarico masquerade is characterised by two main masks, the *Vacca* and the *Toro*, the wearers of which parade ringing loud bells and perform a ritual dance that evokes the traditional practice of the transhumance, now no longer followed. As in other villages, local makers produce these masks, often the same people who wear them during the ritual. They are made from fabric, recycled elements, and coloured strips of various materials. In this specific case the makers are both men and women, part of the heritage community, who have learnt to make masks through oral tradition and preserve this knowledge to be passed on and shared with future generations. The craft techniques employed in these masks consist mainly but not exclusively of tailoring, sewing, and weaving textile and polychromatic materials. The mask wearers then use bells during the parade to produce the sound of a herd in movement. The wearers of both kinds of masks wave cowbells of different sizes to accentuate the choreotic actions that take place during the parade. (Figure 5)

The Tricarico Carnival has been shaped by the re-proposing, in a contemporary key, of certain traditional symbols of the Lucanian carnival, including zoomorphic masks.

The role played by the (male) body in performances highlights the central importance of the masks and their characteristics, including colours and symbols. In the colourful performative dance of the *Toro* and *Vacca* masks, the transhumance of animals is re-enacted and the mating of the two animals is simulated. During the parade there are riding scenes, in which the personification of the *Toro* courts the *Vacca* by "mounting" her: although the transgression is only simulated during the performance, nevertheless this moment appears to be, in participants' stories, a propitiatory ritual denoting fertility and procreation.[14] The procession, which evokes the transhumance of the herds moving from the mountains to the sea, characteristically has numerous *Vacche* compared to the far fewer *Tori* (about two bulls

to twenty cows). Thus, most of the masks are *Vacche*, while there are fewer *Tori*, as this is the proportion during transhumance.

As the procession passes, wine, cold meats and cheese are offered to the participants.

For Marina Berardi, this is a "procession of men/cows and men/bulls, with bells hanging around their necks, plow[ing] through the suspended time of the carnival to celebrate the alternation of life-death-rebirth and the return of a new era." (2022, 1)

Paola Langone, a young woman from Tricarico, is an expert in the creative manipulation, modelling, and transformation of materials used to make masks for the Carnival.

She is not a tailor by profession but a self-taught practitioner who has specialised, among other things, in making local traditional Carnival masks. Paola has been involved in tailoring and has devoted herself to making local masks, both the *Tori* and the *Vacche*, for about ten years. She participates in the procession by dressing as a *Vacca* and ringing her cowbell. For the inhabitants of the village, she is eminently capable of creating both masks. The two masks are similar in design but different in colour.

In particular, the preparation of the *Vacca* mask allows her to personally choose the decorations with great creativity.[15] The techniques she used to make this mask include tailoring, sewing, and weaving. The creation of masks and costumes, "which feature extremely refined and complex decorative elements, is entrusted to expert hands, usually women of the family, who embellish those traditionally worn by men with various feminine touches such as lace" (Berardi 2022, 2). The textile materials comprise a hat with a wide brim, lining, nylon ribbons (light and resistant), satin and double satin, a scarf, lace, decorations to embellish the headdress (beads, fabric flowers), and boots. Those who decide to dress as a *Vacca* wear beige or flesh-coloured clothing (a tracksuit, old woollen pyjamas, long johns); the neck, knees, elbows and waist are wrapped in many-coloured scarves, absolutely excluding black, because that is the colour used for the *Toro* mask. (Figure 6)

During interviews with mask-makers while they were producing masks, the differences between masks of the past and contemporary ones were repeatedly emphasized. As Paola recalls regarding the availability of materials for the masks: "In the past, recycled materials were used, such as old tablecloths, cut into rags or strips, anything that could be cut and made into ribbons. Today, however, with materials more readily available, we have much more choice."[16]

Even today when creating masks the trend is generally to reuse fabrics that are already owned and have also possibly been used for masquerading in previous years or have been inherited from masks of the past. Sometimes some elements of the masks remain the same (e.g., hats), while others need to be repaired or replaced because they have worn out or been damaged during the previous year's parade. Although there is a list of items of clothing required for the masquerade, and mandatory colours, which would seem to indicate that many participants respect tradition, there is a certain freedom of creative expression, at least in the choice of decorations and some accessories.

The dressing ritual takes place at home with the help of a second person, especially to tie the scarves to the arms. During dressing, as mentioned above, the holy picture depicting Saint Anthony the Abbot is attached at the waist.

The most eye-catching element of the *Vacca* mask is the rigid polychromatic headdress from which hangs a white lace veil, used to cover the face and neck, and to which numerous long coloured ribbons are attached which go down to the ankles, as if to simulate a long cloak, and various decorations. "Everyone does what they think is best. It's a subjective thing," Paola points out, and showing the finished hat, she adds: "This is the complete hat, sewn step by step and embellished in every detail."[17]

Fig. 6. Materials used to make the *Vacca* mask for the Tricarico Carnival. Photo credits RVM.



Fig. 7. Paola Langone creates the hat for the *Vacca* mask in Tricarico. Photo credits RVM.



Paola says that in the past the hat was sometimes adorned with objects belonging to one's ancestors. For her the spring colours used to adorn the headgear represent the cows during transhumance, but also rebirth and the ending of the winter period. (Figure 7)

According to the organisers, Ciccio Santangelo included, the Tricarico Carnival is characterised today by a new phase of creativity, evident in terms of participation, transformation and innovation: this marks an important difference from the past, when there was more improvisation and a more spontaneous and exclusively male participation. Specifically regarding the participation of women in the procession, Ciccio Santangelo says: "This creates some difficulties for those of male gender who dress up as a *Toro* in the riding simulation, especially if there is a friendship or family relationship between the participants. This inclusive innovation was nevertheless welcomed, at least by the majority."[18] We will return to this topic below.

Bricolage, invention and (re)use

"As an expression of freedom, the *Folletto* mask incorporates the creativity of those who make it." These are the words of a mask-maker describing the creative and original possibilities of making masks for the Satriano di Lucania Carnival.

This festival, held in a small town in the Potenza area, has also been the subject of anthropological attention since the 1980s. According to Sandra Ferracuti (2016), this recent tradition builds on the local historical mask of the *Rumita*, the purpose being to add a layer of meaning connected to the contemporary concerns of the generations of those born from the 1980s onwards. It especially focuses on the symbolic use of the mask to express the urge to re-establish a sustainable relationship with the natural environment. Ferracuti (2016, 55) writes that "with the invention—albeit in the wake of tradition, as is the case with phenomena that occur under the banner of 'cultural creativity'—of the Walking Forest," the group of young people from the village brought to Satriano "the forces of a second community: that composed of the people who gave it substance." Furthermore, these young people, all approximately the same age and sharing the same environmentalist metaphor attributed to *Rumita*, "built partnerships with individuals from different areas based on a shared desire to belong, generational unease, and a passion for the environment, bringing together a generation of probable orphans of rituality."

2014 saw the first edition of the "Walking Forest" as a "clear outcome of a process of revitalisation and reinterpretation of this figure, which is still ongoing" and "an event that has now also become a Satrianese tradition" (Crovato, Ferracuti 2025, 85), during which the organizers of Satriano di Lucania's Carnival parade have been developing innovative techniques for the construction of the *Rumita* mask. Starting that year, a new mask appeared in the parade: the *Folletto*. This is a mainly but not exclusively female character who represents another bridge between humans and the natural world. From then until now, local girls and women have been preparing creative interpretations of this mask every year and then wearing them during the parade on the last Sunday of Carnival, before Shrove Tuesday.

Ferracuti tell us about the appearance of this *Folletto* mask when describing the noisy and festive atmosphere of the "Walking Forest":

> Most *Rumiti*, as they make their way through the streets of the town centre, show a progressive tendency towards rowdiness and drinking. This tendency is also "fuelled" by the *Folletti* (elves)—or, more often, *Follette* (female elves)—who also appeared for the first time in 2014 and are responsible for "watering" the *Rumiti* with red wine transported in barrels on the "non-motorised carts" participating in the parade. The first accessories for making the masks of the *Folletti*, also "woodland" figures created to creatively "inhabit" the walking forest, were made during one of the "preparatory meetings" arranged by the organisers for the first edition (Crovato, Ferracuti 2025, 86).

One of the organizers of the contemporary Carnival in Satriano di Lucania is Raffaella Roberto. She has been the "*Folletta* capo" (head *Folletta*) since 2016 and is the main maker of outfits, ideas, and equipment for the *Folletto* masks that are distributed to be worn during the parade. Raffaella, known as Lella, born in 1985, is a native of Satriano di Lucania, where for the past ten years, as part of the Carnival event "The Walking Forest," she has been responsible for the preparation of the *Folletto* masks. She plays an active role in the Carnival, dressing as a *Folletta* and making herself a new mask every year. In addition, she regularly prepares further materials for these masks so that she can offer them to visitors and to other villagers who wish to wear such a mask.

The *Folletto* is an iridescent mask that does not respect any precise dress code. The results of subjective creativity can be seen in the crafting of the accessories that adorn the figures. Each mask is customized with original decorative elements, the underlying costume being a brown, green or purple shirt and leggings. Since this mask is innovative and versatile, there is no specific construction technique, and the aesthetic aspect of the mask itself depends





Fig. 9. Lella Roberto makes a *Folletto* mask in her workshop. Photo credits Lella Roberto.

Fig. 8. Lella Roberto shows the materials used to make *Folletto* masks in Satriano di Lucania. Photo credits RVM.

on the creativity of those who produce it. Its polychromy gives liveliness to the parade of masks that advances from Parco Spera, one of the natural parks among which the village is located, along the central streets of the village. As Lella states, the *Folletto* mask represents "the liveliness of the forest, since it is close to *Rumita*, which is a silent mask. The *Folletto* surrounds him precisely to contrast with this silence and make a noise, with music, songs, screams, and running. The *Folletto* is a very free mask."[19] (Figure 8)

Lella is a very interesting case because her know-how is truly embodied; dressing up as a fairy is not just for masquerades but is for her almost a lifestyle. She says, "I like it, I feel very much like a fairy. Even in the way I dress, always colourful, I change often, I'm never the same. And so I do the same for the costumes I create." [20]

The materials she uses with such creativity are varied, fabric mainly, but her work always includes ivy leaves and fibres, with which she decorates face masks, shoe covers, skirts, trousers, and camisoles. These are almost all recycled materials that Lella strives to reuse in her creations. Thus, the main craft techniques are reuse and bricolage.[21]

Lella's creativity—we might regard her as a contemporary "follower" of Alfred Jerry's 'Pataphysics—knows no bounds: "I use recycled materials. Basically, anything I come across that inspires me at that moment. Since I'm not an expert seamstress, I use a needle and thread or glue as I go along." She does not buy many materials but uses what she has or can find. "I study them a little and then let my imagination run wild."[22] (Figure 9)

The act of masking is not exclusive to men in the Carnival practice of Basilicata, even though there is often a predominance of the masculine gender over the feminine. Dances, music, the jingling of the bells on the costumes, the deliberately created noise and confusion and a kind of uproar that is felt as the masked procession passes by are particularly associated with masked men. Children and women may not be permitted to wear certain masks. This is not the place for an in-depth reflection, but it is clear that in addition to generational access, the issue of gender access too deserves greater attention when it comes to masquerade rituals. Almost always, the role of women in masquerades is relegated to a secondary one of little or no importance. In recent years, however, there has been a notably greater openness on the part of some event organisers, as we have seen happening in Tricarico, and as is also happening in Satriano. The new *Folletto* and *Folletta* masks allow both women and children to participate in the Rumiti parade. (Figure 10)



Fig. 10. Group of female *Follette* masks in the Satriano Carnival parade. Photo credits Lella Roberto.

The final interesting issue to highlight is the focus on the transmission of practices linked to the Satriano Carnival, which is also fostered through the holding of workshops, seminars, and public meetings. With the emergence of the "Walking Forest" event, this Carnival has taken on a collective value, offering the inhabitants of Satriano, and all who want to actively participate in the event, the opportunity not only to "become a *Rumita* for a day," but also to "become a *Folletto* for a day," through workshop activities.[23] The *Rumiti* and *Folletti* parade represents a fundamental moment for exploiting and communicating local cultural heritage, while also offering an opportunity for local and regional development through the implementation of new forms of participatory and experiential tourism, open to an interested public of visitors. For example, those who wish to make a mask and learn the creative technique can contact Lella directly through the website dedicated to the Satriano Carnival. Her availability clearly contributes added value to the practices of transmission and the exploitation and promotion not only of the Carnival event and its unique mask and masking practice, but of knowledge, know-how, creativity and ecological consciousness linked to local and youth culture.

Final considerations

Cultural creativity is a constitutive aspect of every culture, a skill and an area of human experience present in all societies and one which finds room for itself in very different fields (Santoro 2025). Considered in its historical, intersubjective, and intercultural dimensions (Favole 2010), it is open, dynamic, (re)generative, vital, transformative, and reflective. As a product of relationships and connections, it is articulated in the nexus that exists between memory and future. In other words, it can operate in an innovative way and in continuity with established traditions and rules.

The concept of creativity "puts agency at the forefront," Adriano Favole (2009, 22) reminds us, "agency" being understood as "the ability of social actors and cultures to relate to the dynamics of the contemporary world."

Although it is well known that the followers of 'Pataphysics were primarily devoted to producing works that defied the conventions and linearity of mainstream art through their use of bricolage and collage, we have seen that the mask makers of Basilicata give free rein

to their creativity, while yet remaining true to local traditions. This is a situation that might seem contradictory, but, as case studies have shown, the adoption of such a "combinatorial" approach and technique, capable of blending tradition and modernity, is fully in line with the processes of "re-traditionalisation" of masks, as well as the current trends towards heritage making and touristification practices. Judging by the original work of the mask-makers we met, in the way in which they create masks, it could be said that they go far beyond the art of 'Pataphysics. Whilst drawing creative inspiration from the bricolage technique, our mask-makers reinvent and transform, without in any way destroying them, their own local traditions. This is also related to the concept of agency highlighted in the article, which pertains to the agency of mask makers but also to that of the objects themselves in their material and embodied form, which I have defined as "knowledge of the hand."

Numerous references to tradition persist, and in a widespread manner. However, innovations, (re)inventions, and creative solutions adopted in the context of mask creation, and implemented above all through the practice of reuse, recycling, and bricolage, allow much more than in the past for practices, knowledge, know-how, and cultural expressions, and for artisans, artists, and mask-makers involved in their specific production, preservation, and revitalization, to adapt to the passage of time. This entails reshaping festivals and rituals and thus responding to the currently changing needs of increasingly complex global heritage arenas. The language of masks is both creative and original; indeed Pietro Clemente (2016, 17) argues that "even the world of masks [...] and their forms continue to vary between the ancient world and contemporary geographical varieties, caught up in the vortex of reborn creativity." This vitality, inventiveness, and relevance of the universe of masks observed in Basilicata, and the coexistence of past and present, is confirmed by Ferdinando Mirizzi (2016, 38), who writes: "Cultures use and re-use the symbols made available by tradition and passed down from generation to generation, re-contextualizing and re-functionalizing them according to the needs of individuals in their present lives." This is where references to the cultural heritage of the past become strategic, serving to construct unique ways of experiencing contemporary life, "through the use of a particular form of cultural creativity and, therefore, the introjection of cultural models derived from tradition to give rise to new and, at times, completely unexpected productions and styles within the codification of local culture" (Mirizzi 2016, 44).

My observation of experiences of cultural creativity focused on the material and production aspects of these masks, starting from ethnographic research, leads me to believe that the creation of masks and participation in masking rituals is an additional way in which the inhabitants of the villages of Basilicata are consolidating their belonging to fragile communities in mainly marginal territories. They are doing so creatively, both by engaging with and working within the materials available to them and with current social, cultural, technological, and aesthetic landscapes, and by regarding themselves as following in the footsteps of tradition. However, as mentioned above, creativity is not limited to the relationship between tradition and contemporaneity; in fact, it has become clear that mask-makers today are able to create "masks, sets, and performances that belong to different horizons (geographical, historical, and imaginative)." (Ferracuti 2016, 48)

At the same time, as conscious actors, subjects who are never passive but active and present in history, they are striving to ensure that cultural practices and expressions are recognized and appreciated and remain alive and vital. After all, "when the mask becomes a face, the season of change appears to be upon us: hybrids emerge, anthropological mutations become imaginable" (Padiglione 2016, 30). Since we know that it is above all "the work of the imagination" that influences the social practices of human beings, as a defining and

constitutive feature of modern subjectivities (Appadurai 1996), they are trying to reinvent themselves daily in original ways, generating new forms of locality, social contiguity, empowerment, and participation in diversity. In other words, they are endeavouring to navigate and better govern complexity in their own way.



NOTES

1. Sometimes referred to as the "science of imaginary solutions," Pataphysics was invented by French writer and playwright Alfred Jarry, who took François Rabelais' literary and intellectual tradition as his model and continued in its footsteps.

2. This "science," described using an atypical, irreverent, distorted linguistic code, as well as mixture of references, quotations, philosophical, artistic and mathematical allusions, blending nonsense, irony and absurdity into a single whole, is considered a sort of "parody" of metaphysical thought. It is based on the principle of universal equivalence and the conversion of opposites.

3. "Unveiling the Arts and Works behind the MASKS" is a project funded by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) in 2023 under the ERASMUS-EDU-2023-PI-ALL-INNO. As part of the research and documentation activities carried out for the Italian partner University of Basilicata, we had the opportunity to investigate some masks worn during winter masking rites, which take place in small villages in the inner areas of Basilicata region.

4. The Iatmul are a large ethnic group of about 10,000 people settled along the middle reaches of the Sepik River in New Guinea. The Iatmul people practice horticulture, fishing and hunting.

5. The ancient name of Basilicata is Lucania. Even today, many inhabitants of the region prefer to use nouns and adjectives referring to the old name.

6. The area selected for MASKS is the Basilicata, also called by the old name of Lucania. It is a little region located in the south of Italy and is subject to a strong and progressive demographic contraction, with an underdeveloped and fragile economy and a lack of infrastructures. The key sectors identified for a sustainable development are mainly: agriculture, tourism, and traditional or artistic crafts. Specifically, the economic sector of crafts is considered important, because it allows the inhabitants of smaller villages not to emigrate to other, more industrialised, areas and to engage in some work activities linked to the territory and local craft traditions.

7. As part of the MASKS project, a survey of masks from Basilicata was carried out, including interviews, inventory sheets (for the catalogue of masks in preparation), and audiovisual documentation on a selection of them. The video interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner by the team from the University of Basilicata and edited by RVM Broadcast Matera. All the interviews are available at the following link: https://unveilingthemasks.uva.es/.

8. Such rituals relate in all the cases we have documented to the festivities associated with the Carnival period. These events are highly attended not only by the local village communities, but also by visitors from neighboring countries and tourists. These Carnivals, which are considered "historic," are also part of a newly established "Network of Lucanian Carnivals."

9. The village of 4,634 inhabitants is located in the province of Matera on hill 698 metres above sea level; it has been a bishopric since 968. It has one of the most important and best-preserved historic centres in Basilicata and is characterised by several traditions such as the historic Carnival. Since 2012, Tricarico has hosted the International Gathering of Anthropological Masks every year.

10. Informal conversation with Francesco Santangelo held in Tricarico on 28 September 2024.

11. Satriano di Lucania is a village with a population of 4,634 inhabitants located in the province of Potenza at an altitude of approximately 653 metres above sea level. It is classified as a mountain municipality and is part of the Lucanian Apennines National Park. It is mainly renowned for its Carnival, consisting of a historical parade and a contemporary event ("The Walking Forest").

12. The materials used for making the mask are: natural materials, ivy, string, stick, butcher's broom branch. The technique is the creative bricolage of those materials, through practices of collection, composition and tying of ivy shoots and butcher's broom sprigs.

13. See the following website: https://www.prolocotricarico.it/il-carnevale-di-tricarico/

14. The *Vacca* mask fits perfectly into the context of the Tricarico Carnival, with the use of coloured ribbons derived from decorations, in particular multi-coloured ribbons similar to those placed on cows' heads during transhumance. The most striking feature of the mask is the rigid polychromatic headdress from which hangs a white lace veil, used to cover the face and neck, and to which are attached numerous long coloured ribbons that fall to the ankles, simulating a long cloak, and various decorations.

15. Interview to Paola Langone conducted in Tricarico on 21st October 2024 during the documentation activities for the MASKS project.

16. Interview to Paola Langone on 21st October 2024.

17. Informal conversation with Francesco Santangelo held in Tricarico on 01 June 2025 during the annual festival "International Gathering of Anthropological Masks."

18. Interview to Raffaella Roberto conducted in Satriano di

Lucania on the 31st January2025 during the documentation activities for the MASKS project.

19. Interview to Raffaella Roberto on the 31st January2025.

20. About the materials used there are: ivy, textile materials, hot glue, recycled materials (shirts, plaids, breakfast placemats, crepe paper, fake flowers, a sheet, diapers, cards). Through a creative and experimental approach, the various materials chosen for the creation of the mask are joined together using hot glue or needle and thread, thus creating a unique mask. The headdress is made with iron wires, weaving ivy around them, or with felt, on which fake flowers can be added.

21. Interview to Raffaella Roberto on the 31st January2025.

22. See the website: https://www.carnevaledisatriano.it/

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(Pre)figuring Physiognomy: Mask Making as an Interpretive Art among Romanian Artisans in Moldova

Marin Constantin
Francisc I. Rainer Institute of Anthropology, Romanian Academy, Romania

Marin Constantin is a researcher within the Francisc Rainer Institute of Anthropology, Romanian Academy, Bucharest (Romania). He also teaches cultural anthropology at the Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest. His areas of academic interest include pastoral transhumance, kinship studies, ethnicity, and history of anthropology.

Correspondence: marinconstantin@antropologia.ro



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ABSTRACT

The present text explores the creativity of mask makers in Romania, particularly with regard refers to their knowledge to envision the figures that populate their art galleries. Indeed, to an important extent, mask making consists of reproducing human facial traits that are prefigured by artisans. Based on the author' ethnographic material collected in the 2000s, this article examines mask making in several areas of Moldavia (Neamț, Suceava, and Vrancea Counties), with particular emphasis on (1) local mask-makers' interpretation of social portraits and self-portraits, as well as (2) their cultural "mission."

KEYWORDS

Mask making; artisans; portraying, Moldavia.

When interviewed today, folk artisans representing various crafts and ethnographic areas of Romania say that they "visualise" in advance, or somehow "prefigure," the artefacts they make. As a creative process, mask making thus appears to be an art of (pre)figuring social characters and even self-portraits. In Romanian, the verb *a închipui* (lit., "to shape a face") may be related to the way mask makers in Moldavia describe their work: they speak of "imagining faces" (especially, human ones) in order to associate them through the masks with various public social roles, attributes, or "endowments."

Folk masks and their contemporary use in Romania continue to be closely associated with ceremonial contexts, which, as will be seen below, seem to constitute the primary reference for authenticity in contemporary ethnographic accounts. Indeed, Romanian ethnologists generally agree in associating mask wearing first and foremost with the cycle of winter celebrations, as documented in various areas of country.[1] Artisans in Moldavia, in their turn, frequently evoke *Revelionul* or the New Year's Eve celebration (ŞT: N) and the "death of the Old Year" (PL: N) as part of a process of collective spiritual renewal. Within this framework, their goatskin or wooden masks representing the so-called "Elders" (*Uncheşi*) are most commonly displayed.

Theoretical remarks on the traditional use of masks in Romania

Mask making (as a traditional craft) and mask wearing (as a customary performance) extend beyond the winter season across the annual calendar and the broader socioeconomic life of

Romanian rural society. Alongside their winter traditions, masks connect to another "[ritual] pole of the year," that of the Summer Ancestors (*Moşii de Vară*) and to the processions related to the cult of the dead in many regions of Romania (Prut 2001, 14). In the Banat area, during the Roman Catholic Lent (*Zăpostit / Fărşang*), masked performers satirise fellow villagers who are subject to public disapproval (Vulcănescu 1970), while in towns with a medieval German guild tradition, such as Braşov and Sibiu, the masked performers known as *Lole* (*Urzlen*, *Lallen*) are said to fight evil spirits but also to whip rebels who disobey civic rules of conduct (Ştiucă 2001, 17). Further examples of mask ceremonies are described in Transylvanian pastoral communities, including the *Blaj*, *Goţoi*, and *Păpăluga*, in which masks and costumes are made of branches and leaves and worn as part of a kind of "bucolic carnival" associated with St. George's Day tradition) (Ştiucă 2001). In the Oltenia region, masking also forms part of the *Căluş,* a male group dance featuring zoomorphic masks of the harlequin-like character known as the "Mute" (*Mutul*) (Kligman 1981).

With no intention to provide an exhaustive account of the rich ethnographic repertoire of mask traditions in Romania, we turn next to the *Chipăruş* (or *Chiperiu*) ritual in the Moldavian village of Nereju,[2] a practice often cited in Romanian ethnological literature and particularly relevant to the discussion that follows. Indeed, as most of the available evidence describes *Chipăruş* as a burial ceremony, recorded as such in the well-known sociological monograph of *Nereju* (see Stahl, Brăiloiu 1939, 273-314), that has disappeared during the second half of the twentieth century century, contemporary researchers,[3] as well as artisans themselves, as will be shown below, tend to regard *Chipăruş* as foundational to the meanings they attribute to mask making in the area.

In the monograph *Nereju*, the *Chipăruş* is mentioned in connection with a "joyful [funeral] wake," the *priveghi*, during which several disguised "Elders" (the *Uncheşi*) dance and drag the deceased around a fire in a peasant courtyard (Stahl, Brăiloiu 1939, 293-5). In a short text, Henri H. Stahl presents such a mask from the *Chipăruş* ceremony, insisting on its "tin-made eyes," its "grin," and the "pagan mystery" it bears "from the bottom of centuries," as testimony to the way in which the *obşte* (the village community) knows how "to stay alive" beyond the funerals.[4]

The *Uncheşi* masks are associated with the "succession of ancestors watching the funerals," with their "austere and hieratic physiognomies" (Vulcănescu 1970), while the presence of zoomorphic traits, such as goat horns, in the making of these masks is discussed in terms of "incarnations of supernatural and ancestral spirits" (Repciuc 2024, 153).[5]

Some of the assumptions in the aforementioned texts on the *Chipăruş* ritual invite, at least indirectly, a necessary discussion of what could be called the historical dimension of mask wearing, insofar as such a dimension can indeed be sustained. On the one hand, given the festive context marking the end of the *Old Year*, masks appear, even within the cultural contexts in which they are displayed, as rather exceptional objects: they are associated with "overturned" roles (Mihăescu 2001), or with a "caricature" of the real world (Ştiucă 2001). Across generations, masks reproduce meanings associated with their mythical ancestors (Prut 2001, 11-2), which may also echo the "temporal return" of the ancestral spirits to the world of the living (Repciuc 2024, 153).

On the other hand, the same masks are understood as resulting from what the anthropologist Franz Boas referred to (1896, 4) as a "process of culture-stage development" moving from "protection from hostile spirits" to the "commemoration of deceased persons," and then to the "theatrical performance of mythological incidents." Re-enacted to mark the eternal renewal of time in the contest between the *Old Year* and the *New Year*, or mobilised within funeral ceremonies, masks retain a historical dimension in their very functioning. In

the Romanian ethnography of masks, Boas' sequence is reproduced in terms of the "magical transfiguration of primitive rites," followed by the "playful transfiguration of mask dancing in family traditions and calendar feasts," and finally by the "dramatic transfiguration from the folkloric theatre" (Vulcănescu 1970).

Historical, rather than purely spiritual hypostases of masks also reflect changes in mask morphology, including the replacement of hunter masks by those representing herders and farmers, and later craftsmen and traders, alongside masks of warriors, priests, and headmen (Vulcănescu 1970). Further interpretations concern, in the case of Moldavian *căiuți*, "little horses," "carnival figures for warriors and riders of the past" (Știucă 2001, 15), as well as "the domestication of goats," in contrast with the wild nature of the stags, as represented by corresponding masks in Romanian folk traditions (S. Ciubotaru [2017] *apud* Repciuc 2024, 167).

As noted above, the centuries-old character of the *Chipăruș* dance in Nereju village, as suggested by Henry H. Stahl, is itself a historical inference that goes beyond the funeral and the private circumstances of the *Uncheși*'s performance, to point instead to the deeper cultural survival of a "pagan mystery" within the norms of a Christian burial practice.

In retrospect, Romanian ethnologists generally agree on the transitional nature of masks and mask-wearing—not only at the level of micro-social and genealogical rites associated with funerals and the winter festive cycle, but also, and perhaps more importantly, as part of an enduring historical trajectory of a community's patterns of representation. In their symbolic functions, masks are transformed, of course, but this process is not linear, as it does not simply mirror more or less clearly defined stages of human history.

In other words, Boasian "spirits," also present in Romanian traditions of wearing masks throughout the winter holidays, are still active today and not only in the distant past of the "magical transfiguration of primitive rites." The "theatrical" traits of what has been interpreted as a later degradation of mask ceremonies may have been a cultural property or constant characteristic of mask-bearers, irrespective of their productive roles of "hunters," "herders," "farmers," "craftsmen," "traders," and so on. The funeral function of commemorating the dead within family or genealogical groups can hardly be chronologically separated from either the "magic" of "primitive" people or the "dramaturgy" of folk cultures.[6]

Mask makers and their work: records from two research projects in the 2000s in Romania

In 2002-2003 and in 2005, we conducted two research campaigns among several categories of folk artisans in Romania including ceramists, icon painters, makers of wind instruments, weavers, and woodcarvers (Constantin 2003, 2007). Among such craftsmen, we focused on mask makers in the Moldavian areas of Neamț, Suceava, and Vrancea. They produced masks from wood and sheepskin (ȘT and PL, Nereju, Vrancea County), cloth, wool, and sheepskin (IA, Timișești, Neamț County), wood (TE, Suceava city), and corn leaves (AG, Tomești, Iași County).

Except for TE, who says that his parents were carpenters, but that he is self-taught in carving his wooden masks, the other artisans have inherited their craft from family members (father and grandfather: ȘT[7]; father-in-law: PL; uncle: IA). Most of our interlocutors began learning the craft during childhood, at the age of 12 (ȘT, PL) or 14 (IA). Today, they work together within their own nuclear families, with relatives assisting them in various activities such as processing sheepskin (IA's wife), painting masks (AG's daughter), carving stylized

wooden spoons and cheese patterns (PL's wife), and weaving traditional rugs on a loom (ŞT's wife).

Beyond learning and pursuing mask making within the family, which provides them an important basis for claiming the traditional rootedness of their work, all the above-mentioned craftsmen are connected with public institutions to assist and promote folk culture. Such institutions include the Sibiu Artisan Association (PL), the Focşani Folk Arts School (ŞT), the Iaşi Ethnographic Museum (AG), the Iaşi Artisan Association (TE), the Târgul Neamţ *Nemţeana* Association and the Neamţ County Centre for Folk-Art Creation (IA).

With the support of such organizations, but relying above all on their own skills to build a clientele for the artefacts they produce, the mask makers included in our study are present at a series of folk fairs organised by ethnographic museums in cities such as Bucharest and Sibiu (ŞT, PL, IA), Oradea (IA, PL), Iaşi (TE, ŞT), Câmpulung Moldovenesc, Slatina, and Suceava (AG), Galaţi (ŞT, PL), Braşov and Caransebeş (PL), and Târgu-Mureş, Sighişoara, and Bistriţa (TE).[8] One of them, IA, was selected by a jury appointed by the Romanian Ministry of Culture to take part in the Folklife Festival organised by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. in 1999.[9]

When asked about the authorship of his work, IA argues that he does not need to sign his artefacts, as he relies on a wide public recognition of his craftsmanship and of the "particular vision" of the masks he makes, which distinguishes them from masks produced in other areas. By contrast, TE regularly signs his work to demonstrate that, although the masks he produces belong to the broader category of folk traditions, he also sees himself as an "innovator" of masks, especially because "he likes to make what he feels, not what is imposed on him." Although AG fears that some counterfeits could affect her rights as maker, she has not yet attached any descriptive label to the masks she makes.

The mask making process

Among our interlocutors, mask making is experienced as part of local ethnographic traditions, although the boundaries of these traditions are not always clearly defined. While artisans agree on the ancient, inherited, and authentic traits of tradition, they also uphold the role of personal "innovation" (TE) and "discovery" (AG) in developing their own working techniques. As a way of reconciling cultural heritage with the individual imprint of craftsmanship, modifications in the making of artefacts are expected "not to change their structure or form" (PL).

In obtaining their wood, especially willow, poplar, and linden, due to their malleability, but also alder and sycamore, mask makers from Vrancea ask for permission from the foresters who guard the woods belonging to the rural community (*obşte*). For his part, TE relates his specialization in woodcarving to the rich woods of the area of Suceava area where he was born and which also allowed his father and grandfather to pursue careers as carpenters. As such, TE shows that he makes use of the wood both in his artistic work and in making furniture. By contrast, IA does not use wood in making his masks because, as he claims, wooden masks are not characteristic of the traditions of his native area of Neamţ.

ŞT and PL complain about the difficulties they face in sourcing sheepskin, as they need the wool from the ţurcana sheep breed, which is longer than the wool of the *merino* breed and is more commonly available in Nereju. PL even learned tanning in a neighbouring village in



The artisan Toader Egnătescu in his workshop. Screenshot from the film "Prelucrarea lemnului–meșter Toader Ignătescu" [Woodwork–the artisan Toader Ignătescu], Centrul Cultural Bucovina, Suceava, 2022, min. 3:20.
Online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ws1_0--0NU, last accessed in October 2026.



Wooden masks carved by the artisan Toader Egnătescu. Photography retrived from the artisan's Facebook page, published on 7th of May 2026.
Online at: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=4677978959096799&set=pb.100006542237482.-2207520000&type=3,
last accessed in October 2026.



Mask made by the artisan Pavel Lupaşc.
Photography retrived from the artisan's Facebook page, published on 19th of December 2022.
Online at: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1589860044820672&set=pb.100013900746594.-2207520000&type=3, last accessed in October 2026.



The artisan Pavel Lupaşc with his masks. Photography retrieved from the online journal Ziare.Com, the article (with no author) "Măştile populare devenite celebre peste hotare, pe cale de dispariţie. Meşterul din Vrancea care se luptă pentru conservarea tradiţiei" [Traditional masks that have become famous abroad are on the verge of disappearing. The craftsman from Vrancea who is fighting to preserve the tradition], published on 30th of August 2020.
Online at: https://ziare.com/cultura/stiri-cultura/mastile-populare-devenite-celebre-peste-hotare-pe-cale-de-disparitie-mesterul-din-vrancea-care-se-lupta-pentru-conservarea-traditiei-1627989?uord=MT%3D_WbCvgdR%3DYB5glj4yHRMSTrZxnQusXWY/N%3DOuKGC4h8CiNCSrlD2JJRBhQdGYqBRyTswhU%3Db7SWKvgpB2MDerVmoyIkJFHJNxlAy/MWY/YkWrlrfjgdRuMSG7U249IxQVTrBC, last accessed in October 2026.

order to process the sheepskin in the making of his masks. According to ŞT, goatskin is also suitable for mask making given its longer wool and stretched fibres.

AG openly acknowledges that the corn leaves she uses in her craft would actually are in fact "banal," as they are easily available, and yet they prove versatile enough to be used for "everything," including her own masks. She practically adapted the older technique of making rustic floor mats (*rogojini)* from cornhusks to the weaving and shaping of wet leaves into masks and puppets.

In the home workshops of PL and ŞT, once the required wood has sufficiently dried, which may take up to two years, mask-making begins by splitting the piece of wood and hollowing it out with a chisel (*cuţitoaie*), to obtain the so-called *doage* (staves approximately 30 centimetres long). The face of the mask is then sketched in pencil onto this piece of wood, including its various traits and expressions which will be discussed below. According to TE, as long as traditional tools such as the saw, the hatchet and the chisel continue to be used in crafts, as he does, tradition is not "betrayed" even when it is interpreted in a "personal manner," as in his case.

As a result, artisans use penknives to carve some of the mask features, such as the mouth, the eyes, and the teeth, while the nose is shaped separately and attached afterwards. Another stage is dyeing the mask, which occurs before the goat horns and wool are attached. PL says he has to pay nearly one-fifth of the price he charges for a finished mask for a single pair of horns.

Alongside sheepskin facial masks, which are said to be lighter to wear when dancing, one of our interlocutors, IA, also makes more elaborate masking ensembles representing animals such as the *Goat* and the *Bear* at life size.

Based on their lifelong experience in woodcarving (43 years, in IA's case), the interviewed craftsmen are able to complete a mask in a single day (PL) and have no interest in storing many artefacts. ŞT, for instance, used to send five or six or even 11 masks to his clients. An exception was IA, who once sold 60 masks through the Village Museum in Bucharest. In a personal retrospect, TE claims that, in the 25 years of his craftwork activity, he has produced about 10,000 masks.

Conceptualizing mask making

Without doubt, craftsmen like AG, IA, PL, ŞT, and TE are deeply rooted in the ethnographic traditions of the regions where they were born and continue to work. They ground the masks they make within the figurative arts of Vrancea, Neamţ, and Suceava. Almost unanimously, our interlocutors argue that folk masks (including their own) are basically intended "to drive away evil spirits" (ŞT), "to chase away the evil" (IA), and "to instil goodness" (AG). In association with the winter festive cycle, masked groups taking part in the *Goat* and the *Bear* processions are still reported in Moldavian villages (IA), sometimes comprising as many as 60 participants (ŞT). According to PL, key details of the *Chipăruş* ritual as practiced during the interwar period are clearly remembered.

> When I was 5 [in 1969], a grandmother of mine died. I still bear in mind how some masked people came and carried her out of the house. They mourned her, and then lit fire [in the courtyard]. The masked people would break the fences, and they... those *Elders* also used to get drunk... They also took children and threw them over that fire... as the children were not allowed to be there.

Mask making is, in principle, understood as *folk* and *traditional* because it is felt to be embedded in the culture of one's native area (IA) and to represent "Romanian peasants, in general" (AG). Moreover, such a craft is not conceived as a purely imaginative work, nor does it primarily reflect hypostases of otherness or supernatural beings. In shaping their artefacts, as a creative process of *închipuire*, our informants are simply playing with images from their own everyday world—imagery in which they participate and which is, therefore, to an important extent, self-representational.

Indeed, first and foremost, the craftsmen's iconography draws on figures from their familiar social world, including *Moşi* ("Elders"), also called *Uncheşi* ("Uncles"), and *Babe* ("Old Women") (ŞT, PL, IA, AG), as well as *Flăcăi* ("Young Men") (IA). While such figures are represented in their generational framework, other masks refer to roles within the social structure, such as *Călugăr* ("Monk") and *Preot* ("Priest"), or some that struggle with ethnic marginalisation, such as *Ursari* and *Ursărițe*, who represent members of the local Roma population (ŞT). "These are human masks!" as PL puts it: portraits of ordinary people recognizable from the public interaction of Moldavian villagers.

Another repertoire of masks portrays what might be called deviant characters or personalities such as *Omul Rău* ("Evil Man") or *Omul cu două fețe* ("Double-faceted" alias "Liar") (IA). TE's variety of wooden artefacts expresses rather histrionic appearances of what he calls a "fairly aggressive human psychology." Among the same nonconformist masks one could notice *Păcală*, the trickster popular hero whom AG draws from widespread Romanian folk tales, as well as images of *Încornoratul* ("Horned Devil") (PL, IA).

The third category of masking representations consists of animal figures drawn from the local environment, such as the *Goat* (AG) and the *Bear* [IA], which are frequently used during local winter ceremonies, and from more distant and exotic settings such as AG's *Maimuța* ("Monkey"), which has no ritual function.

It must be emphasised that, in their work, artisans do not arrange their masks into the types or categories we described above in a positivistic manner. ŞT and PL attach horns collected from local rams and goats to some of their wooden masks. Such masks are in a sense composite, since they combine anthropomorphic traits of the *Uncheşi*, with their "Elder" faces, with zoomorphic ones such as wool and horns from domesticated animals. At the same time, while ceremonial masks are generally seen as Christian in character (AG), considering the Christmas ritual context in which many of them are displayed, the animal horns instead depict or suggest the dark figure of the "Horned Devil." The horns are said to grow out of the otherwise human physiognomy of such masks, as if they accentuate an evil development in someone's nature. The coalescence of such traits drawn from different existential regimes is perhaps an archaic technique of mask-making as a synthesis between the human and "more-than-human."[10]

Beyond any thematic typology of roles in the production of contemporary mask makers in Moldavia,[11] we may note the manner in which, through their different artefacts, our interlocutors seem to somehow explore different levels of understanding the human condition as such. Galleries of masks representing ordinary people, conflicting characters, and animal figures might, from an external perspective, be contemplated as a natural-history exhibition suggestive of evolutionary thinking. The question is, then: mask-making in the 2000s Moldavia is indeed "evolutionary"? Or, in other words, do masks provide evidence of folk taxonomies with a proto-scientific relevance? If not, how else can we explain the types of objects described above?

Instead of answering these questions for now, let us return to our earlier description of the mask-makers' work in terms of self-representation. In their village workshops and in





Ana Grunzu, at an Artisan's fair organised in 2019. Photography retrieved from: Buculei (2019).



Dolls made from corn husks by Ana Grunzu. Photography retrieved from: Buculei (2019).



The artisan Șerban Terțiu with his masks. Photography retrieved from the Facebook page: "Măști tradiționale" [Traditional masks], published on 14th of July 2023. Online at: https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=755750109889530&set=a.755750059889535, last accessed in October 2026.



08. Mask made by the artisan Șerban Terțiu. Photography retrieved from the Facebook page: "Măști tradiționale" [Traditional masks], published on 8th of October 2018. Online at: https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2151435785114276&set=pb.100063636440826.-2207520000, last accessed in October 2026.



The artisan Ioan Albu and his masks. Photography retrieved from the Facebook page:
"Ținutul Neamțului, locuri de legendă și povești" [Neamț Region: legendary places and tales], published at 26th of November 2016.
Online at: https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1152395701510560&set=a.1152394301510700, last accessed in October 2026.



Masks made by the artisan Ioan Albu. Photography retrieved from the Facebook page:
"Ținutul Neamțului, locuri de legendă și povești" [Neamț Region: legendary places and tales], published at 26th of November 2016.
Online at: https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1152394951510635&set=a.1152394301510700, last accessed in October 2026.

the folk fairs they attend in Romanian cities to sell their artefacts, our research participants are not only curators of their traditions, nor do they neutrally bear the cultural heritage of their ethnographic regions by making new artefacts that reproduce older ones. As we have already seen, they accept and promote innovation and change in their work.

A primary source for such creativity is "inspiration from one's native area" (IA) or simply "curiosity" (AG). Folktales, in particular, provide these mask makers with figures and themes that the craftsmen need to shape their ideas (*Old Christmas*, AG; *Omul cu multe fețe de apă, vânt, foc și tunet,* ["Multifaceted Man of Water, Wind, Fire, and Thunder"], IA). In each case, tradition is neither entirely forgotten, nor piously reproduced. Rather, it is continuously expanded through the artisans' own contribution to established patterns of execution and ornamentation themes, which they acknowledge as points of departure rather than immobile models in the practice of their crafts.

Another mask maker (TE) claims that the "[folk] art relies on someone's taste and insight into the real meaning [of things], not on [their] reproduction." As shown above, our informant's "taste" and "insight" lead him to perceive, or perhaps uncover, hostile physiognomies in society, which are not necessarily peasant ones. This takes TE once again beyond the original setting of his "wooded region." Unlike AG, who considers cornhusks to be "that raw material suited for representing peasants [in mask making]," in TE's carving wood is actually devoid of an exclusive consubstantiality with the rural world. In the same context, we may remember IA's argument that it is not wood, but sheepskin, that is distinctive of mask making in Neamț area.

In terms of both inspiration and the materiality of their work, our interlocutors know where different types of masks traditionally originate, and which environmental resources are most appropriate for making them. Such knowledge appears to be an important prerequisite for the complex process of shaping masks and associating them with particular social roles. Once these cultural and natural basics of performing crafts have proven to be efficient, artisans may expand their own handwork from simply "keeping ancient tradition alive, from father-to-son" (ȘT), as "it was upon the times of one's childhood" (PL), towards personal "rooting" (TE), "inventiveness" (IA), and "discovering" (AG). Through this process, a new tradition or working style may emerge.

As regards contemporary mask making in Moldavian regions, self-representation arises, in our view, from the encounter between tradition, understood as a collective folk-art heritage transmitted across generations, and individual interest, discovery, revelation, insight, taste, and ingenuity. ȘT, for instance, inherits from his father the template of the *Uncheși* ("Old-Men") masks, which in theory should align with the funeral ambience of the *Chipăruș* ritual. However, in his own workshop, ȘT produces not only sad masks with mouths curved downwards, but also joyful masks whose lips are curved upwards.

Likewise, PL provides his masked characters with "Old Men" traits, such as wrinkles, and deepens their cheeks to make them resemble the physiognomy of an elderly person. At the same time, as he claims to work with human facial expressivity, our interlocutor seeks to instil in some of his masks a "happy and surprised" look, "as if they were astonished by something." PL says that his masks may be made either with "simple eyes" or with "eyelids." In turn, alongside his own "Elder" catalogue and the masks of the "Devil" commonly worn in the villages of his area of Neamț, IA says that he has "invented" masks bearing two pairs of horns. Above all, such innovative artefacts reflect IA's "particular view" of mask making.

Two other craftsmen (AG and TE) similarly assert their originality in (pre)figuring characters like the "Old Men" and "Old Women," as inspired by the local peasantry (AG) or in "fantastic imagining" that develops out of the forms of the wood itself (TE). As already noted,

our informants equally choose their *personae* from folk tales, which once again confirms the extent to which innovation in mask-making remains rooted in the local ethnographic and folkloric background.

To conclude, in practicing their craft, mask makers from Suceava, Neamţ, and Vrancea, do not only safeguard and perpetuate their traditions, but also enrich them with ideas and life experiences drawn from the contemporary world rather than from collective cultural memory. When conceiving and creating their traditional masks, our informants actually endow them with the habits, manners, and values of their fellow villagers, co-ethnics, or compatriots. They also represent traits of their own identities, whether generational, occupational, or emotional.

Mask making in artisans' interpretation

What is the artisans' inner "drive" that mobilizes both their devotion to the folk traditions in which they were born, and their innovative or idiosyncratic approach to the art of mask making? In general, our interlocutors are quite reserved about revealing such individual motivations for their craftsmanship and artefacts, preferring instead to invoke the anonymous and established character of ethnographic culture, or (when speaking about their work) to emphasize the results of the adjustments and inputs to the crafts they have, in principle, inherited from earlier generations. And yet, the mask makers in this study do sometimes express a degree of reflexivity about various aspects and stages of their craft.

IA (for example) relates the apprenticeship he undertook, as a child, under his uncle's guidance, to an "ambition" he felt at that time. Such an impulse clearly goes beyond the strict conformity with or technical subordination to the traditions of Neamţ or other area. Craftsmanship, in this case, is less indebted to what other artisans have done in the past, and appears instead (in IA's words) as a "God's gift." The same mask maker does not accept a relatively common equivalence of folk artefacts, including masks, with "commodities" sold in marketplaces. Instead, he insists on the "beauty" and the "art" dimensions of such objects, and regards them as truly endowed with a "fine-looking exteriority."

Another craftsman (TE) claims that, in the course of creating his masks, he loves "reading the people," particularly since the "would be" physiognomies he produces are meant to incorporate "personal features." In doing so, our informant implicitly argues that "the people who like this kind of art," that is, his clients, believe the masks he makes really reflect something of themselves. Above all, rather than invariably reproducing old or outdated prototypes of folk masks, TE is aware of the importance of leaving his own imprint on the cumulative development of his creative thinking.[12]

For AG, her craft means both "to strive to be a part [of folk tradition]" and "to make something, even if difficult, as a personal commitment." The characters AG creates are said to potentially "insufflate" something of their peasant character to the people, especially townspeople, who observe them. In our informant's terms, "once [such] an artefact is executed, it will follow its own [public] way." As for her own masks, she pleads for their "singular beauty," a quality that stems from her own soul and the spiritual investment she puts into performing her craft. While AG still remembers the "restlessness" she initially felt when attending folk fairs, she admits that "there's room for better" in the branch of artisanship she practices today and that "it is a matter of personal responsibility that compels someone to do his / her work properly."

Assertions such as those above outline the referential framework within which contemporary mask makers operate, one generally situated between two major sources of authorship, God and peasantry, but within which artisans actively intervene with their own "souls," "ambition," "imprint," and, last but not least, "responsibility." The exteriority of a mask, one might say, echoes such subjective traits in their interplay with public perceptions and with the extent to which either a broad clientele or particular connoisseurs agree on the beautiful and genuine attributes of mask making. If, as one of our interlocutors puts it, "reading the people" is a precondition of (pre)figuring the image of someone, an ancestor, an "evil man," or a "bear," we might equally assign the same interpretive exercise, and acuity, to visitors to a folk fair or a craft workshop, whenever they observe, evaluate, compare, remember, or simply recognize themselves in the artisans' creations.

A few conclusions

What we have previously inquired in terms of the historical "stages" of mask functionality, as reconstructed evolutionarily in anthropological and ethnological literature, may now be compared with the presumptive levels of understanding human condition among craftsmen, as artisan masks are representations of regular people, conflicting characters, and animal figures. Protection against hostile spirits, commemorations of the dead, and theatrical representations interweave with each other in synchrony, rather than unfolding in separate and successive chronologies. Similarly, rather than expressing folk-art correspondences of any retrospective "natural history," masks of "Elders," "Evil Men," and "Bears" simultaneously compose intersecting galleries of self-representational roles and faces, together with composite reflections of the "human" and "more-than-human" regimes of existence.

Beyond any "ritual process," "ethos," and "worldview,"[13] contemporary artisans evoke their traditional heritage in search of a broader recognition of their craftsmanship and the artefacts displayed than village community alone can provide. From this perspective, mask makers' approach is not primarily conservative; it is, so to speak, entrepreneurial. Indeed, ancestral masks become mercantile insofar as artisanship, including mask making, is now pursued with an entrepreneurial spirit[14] that brings together craftsmen and tourists, rural private workshops and urban folk fairs, long-established traditions and changing conjunctures…

In the ethnography of contemporary villagers in Moldavian regions such as Neamț, Suceava, and Vrancea, mask making and mask wearing clearly contain elements of historicity. Although masked performers still appear during winter holidays celebration, *Chipăruș* folklore is only reminiscent of what it was reported to have been one hundred years ago—a funerary ceremony. Mask-displaying traditions like the "Goat Dance" or the "Bear Dance" have declined in frequency and may appear bizarre when still staged in some rural or urban contexts. And yet, such removal of sheepskin or wooden masks from their original functions does not render them simply anachronistic, since they primarily reproduce or *închipuie* "selves," rather than contingent "materialities" of secular experiences of the world.

NOTES

1. In his monograph on the traditions of Christmas carols in Romania, Petru Caraman refers to the "*Walking of the masks*... often in association with the [New Year's Eve] *plugușor* or the little plough ritual, usually within the performance of New Year carols" (Caraman 1983: 8). See also C. Mihăescu (2001, 8) on the "confrontation of Old Year *vs*. New Year (as the main characters in Moldavian folk theatre") as well as N. Ştiucă (2001, 10) on the "Christmas-carol performers of the Birth of the Saviour mystery throughout Romania."

2. Nereju is a village in the Vrancea region (southern Moldavia, in central-eastern Romania). According to the latest Romanian census (2021), Nereju has a population of 4240 inhabitans, of whom 96,7% are of Romanian ethnicity and 96,25% are of the Orthodox Christian faith (see https://www.recensamantromania.ro/rezultate-rpl-2021/rezultate-definitive-caracteristici-etno-culturale-demografice).

3. "In the *Chipăruș* custom from Vrancea, masks are used during funerals [...] echoing perhaps the Dacians' attitude towards death" (Mihăescu 2001, 8); "the ritual meaning of the *Chipăruș* dance, that of marking the separation of the dead from the living and their integration into the uninterrupted chain of the afterlife, is still encoded in the configuration of contemporary masks" (Ştiucă 2001, 18).

4. In Ion Cherciu (2017, 140-1)

5. In approaching the ancestor worship as structured "according to cyclical time," Gheorghiță Geană points out that "[a]mong Romanians, the main form of the ancestor cult is the ceremony of *moși*," arguing that "[f]rom their unseen realm, ancestors play an active role in the world of the living" (Geană 2005, 353).

6. Boas' reconstruction of mask functionality along a "process of culture-stage development" and Vulcănescu's "transfigurations" of masks in "primitive," "family," and "folk" contexts are equally indebted to J. G. Herder's philosophical reconstruction of a "pre-historical" stage of cultural indistinction in the evolution of humankind. This stage precedes the "non-historical" stage of peoples (*Volker*), characterised by their particular languages, traditions, and ethnic character (*Volksgeist*), and, finally, a third stage corresponding to the history of modern civilization (Adams 1998, 278).

7. ŞT's father, Pavel Terțiu, who was born in Nereju village, in 1899, is described as having been "renowned" for his mask-making craft, which he had learned from the village "old men" who used to produce masks for the "local customs of life cycle" (Vlăduțiu 1981, 229-30). Both the raw materials, sheepskin and wood, and the anthropomorphic typology of masks have been preserved and developed by ŞT. Our interlocutor also acknowledges the contribution of his grandfather, Ioan Amăriei, to the local tradition of mask making.

8. Mask making might be differentiated into "main," "secondary," and "tertiary" client types, corresponding to "local-and-regional," "national," and "international" levels, rather than treating all clients as constituting a single "target" audience for their artefacts. The "main" type of clientele would include compatriots travelling abroad and foreign tourists visiting Romania. The "secondary clientele" consists of patrons of "folk" restaurants and shops, as well as folk-music bands and fiddlers. The "tertiary" client type is represented, to a lesser extent, by "collectors" and "connoisseurs of folk art" (Constantin 2009, 151-2).

9. On the participation of more than 100 craftsmen, musicians, and dancers from various ethnographic areas of Romania in the 1999 Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C., see Constantin (2014).

10. Speaking of an "ancient anthropological matrix" of "natures-cultures" (rather than of human society alone), Bruno Latour (1993: 107) reminds us that traditional cultures have always integrated "natural" elements from vegetal, animal, or meteorological "kingdoms" into their mythological and philosophical accounts. The emergence of "multispecies ethnography" (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010) and the debates it generated around issues such as the "intersubjectivity" in exploring the limits of ethnography when issues such as "othering of animals" (Madden 2014) and "more-than-human" representations (McLauchlan 2021) are central to the (re)discovery of such "ontological" unity of the world. As to the paleontological significances of figurative behavior in prehistory, see Leroi-Gourhan's interpretation (1993, 395) of the "sorcerer" from the Upper Paleolithic Cave of Les Trois Frères, in which mural painting details, such as horses, ibex, deer, or reindeer morphology, blend together within a human body, to make a "perfectly symbolical synthetic creature."

11. Across Romania in the 1960s, Romulus Vulcănescu identifies a number of 73 out of 263 ceremonial masked troupes representing "important historical occupations" such as "shepherds, ploughmen, hunters, blacksmiths, healers, monks, priests, soldiers"; masks of saints and demons are also mentioned, whereas "in the case of 25 bands, anthropomorphic funerary masks, which figure the ancestors of the family or village community, maintain their place in the hierarchy of symbolic values" (Vulcănescu 1970, 68).

12. TE's arguments basically describe, on the one hand, how an individual's personal traits are inspirational in the mask-making process though which his or her physiognomy is (pre)figured, and, on the other hand, how our interlocutor prioritizes his own imprint over folk-mask prototypes. Such imaginative and innovative potential of "conceptual thinking" has been attributed to human cognitive behaviour since the beginnings of tool making in prehistory: "People who made tools like [...] axes must have been able to form in their minds images of the purposes they were working towards. Human culture in all its diversity is the result of this capacity for *conceptual thinking*, but the driving factors in its development are tradition-and-invention" (Oakley 1961).

13. Masking ceremonies, such as the *Chipăruș* ritual, are carried out as a "life experience" consisting of "alternating exposure to structure and *communitas*, and to states and

transitions" (Turner 1991, 97). Likewise, masked ritual performers, including those involved in the *Chipăruș*, reveal their "ethos" as "the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood [...] the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects," and still their "worldview" as "their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order." (Geertz 1973, 127). However, "ritual process," "ethos," and "worldview" are not historical concepts, but ethnographic ones. As a result, they need, in our case at least, to be related to the "conjunctures" of tourism and folk fairs, in which masks are "lived" differently from their traditional life-cycle contexts.

14. Entrepreneurship in the production of folk masks in Vrancea is described as a "fashion" and "mass-production" phenomenon related to "uninformed amateurs" and to the "merchant nature" of Vrancean people, who have no interest in wearing masks during funeral wakes but only in selling them (Stahl 1981, 373). For an approach to Romanian artisanship as an entrepreneurial enterprise, see Constantin (2007, 2009, 2014).



LIST OF INTERLOCUTORS

IA: Ioan Albu (born 1948); Timișești, Neamț County, Romania.

TE: Toader Egnătescu (born 1957); Suceava, Suceava County, Romania.

AG: Ana Grunzu (born 1955); Tomești, Iași County, Romania.

PL: Pavel Lupaşc (born 1964); Nereju village, Vrancea County, Romania.

ŞT: Şerban Terţiu (born 1958); Nereju village, Vrancea County, Romania.

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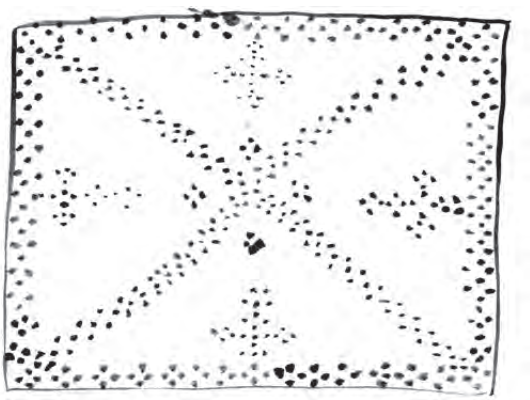
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The *Cocorícamo* of the Dominican Republic: Aesthetic Journeys between America and Europe through a Zoomorphic Mask

Emelin Quevedo Márquez
University of Valladolid, Spain

Emelin Quevedo Márquez is a predoctoral research fellow at the University of Valladolid. She specializes in social anthropology and cultural history, with research interests in cultural heritage and Ibero-American history.

Correspondence: emelinqm@uva.es

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ABSTRACT

The *Cocorícamo* is a traditional character in Holy Week performances in San Juan de la Maguana (Dominican Republic), characterized by a mask made from the complete skull of a cow. Drawing on the *Cocorícamo* mask, this article proposes a comparative analysis of zoomorphic masks made from the complete skulls of bovines and equines in the Americas and Europe. Besides outlining the uncertain origins of the *Cocorícamo* mask, the study highlights aesthetic journeys spanning both sides of the Atlantic through a type of mask that has been documented—with local variations—in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Jamaica, the Lesser Antilles, the British Isles, and the Iberian Peninsula between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries.

KEYWORDS

Zoomorphic mask; winter masquerades; bovine masquerade; *Cocorícamo*; Dominican Republic.

Introduction

In the Dominican Republic, the *Cocorícamo* is remembered above all for its mask: the complete skull of a cow worn over the face of a performer who roamed the streets of the town during Holy Week. A character bearing the same name, and a mask of the same kind, was recorded by Fernando Ortiz in the Cuban carnivals of the 1950s. Masks built in this way—from the entire head of a bovine or an equine, frequently with jaws articulated so that they open and close—are far from being a local peculiarity: comparable objects are documented in Jamaica and the Lesser Antilles, in the carnival of Recife, in Castile and León, and in the British Isles.

Carnival and masquerade travelled to the Americas as European practices and were reworked there over centuries, giving rise to a transcultural phenomenon (Burke 1996). Within that broad field, however, the *Cocorícamo* belongs to a narrower and more precisely defined type, the winter masquerade, whose traits it reproduces closely: a calendar running from Christmas to Epiphany, the sound of cowbells, sheep bells, or small bells, the use of whipping or threatening instruments, the collection of gifts or alms, and performance in the streets and public squares of the community (Calvo Brioso 2012). Both the masquerade and the mask are described in detail in the third section of this article.

Zoomorphic masks are abundant on both shores of the Atlantic, and donkeys, bulls, and cows are among the figures most frequently represented. Masks made from the complete skull of the animal, however—masks that cover the performer's face entirely—constitute a

much smaller and more distinctive set. It is this restricted corpus, rather than zoomorphic masquerade in general, that the present study addresses.

The existing scholarship has tended to weigh African against European inheritance, and has done so chiefly on the evidence of dance, music, and collective performance. Robert W. Nicholls (2012) attributes the masquerades of the Lesser Antilles and Jamaica to a fusion of traditions from Upper Guinea—from Senegal to Côte d'Ivoire—and from the southwest of the United Kingdom, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, in keeping with the origins of the enslaved populations and the colonists who migrated to the Caribbean during the colonial period. For the *Cocorícamo* in particular, Fernando Ortiz (1981) and Dagoberto Tejeda Ortiz (2008, 2010, 2013; see also Hernández and Tejeda Ortiz 2007) have emphasized African heritage, Tejeda Ortiz counting this mask among those in which such heritage is most strongly marked in the Dominican Republic (Tejeda Ortiz 2008, 513-4).

Comparatively little attention has been paid, by contrast, to the mask as an artefact: to the material from which it is made, the technique by which that material is prepared, and the economic and ecological conditions that make it available in one place and not in another. It is at this level that the present analysis operates, and it is what allows the *Cocorícamo* to be set alongside the Horsehead and Cowhead of Jamaican *Jonkonnu*, the *boi* and the *babau* of the Recife carnival, and the winter masquerades of the Iberian Peninsula and the British Isles.

Taking the *Cocorícamo* mask as its jumping-off point, this article proposes a comparative analysis of zoomorphic masks made from the complete skulls of bovines and equines in the Americas and Europe. The aim is to demonstrate aesthetic journeys spanning both sides of the Atlantic through a type of mask that has been documented—with local variations—in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Jamaica, the Lesser Antilles, the British Isles, and the Iberian Peninsula between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries.

The first section of the article summarizes socio-economic aspects of the colonial history of San Juan de la Maguana, emphasizing the region's connection to cattle ranching following the European conquest of the Americas. It then examines the historical development of masquerades and carnivals in the Americas between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as the recurring conflicts between these cultural practices and civil and ecclesiastical authorities. The third section focuses on a description of the *Cocorícamo* mask and on a comparison of this mask with similar masks in the Americas and Europe.

Cattle Ranching on the Island of Hispaniola and in San Juan de la Maguana (16th-17th Centuries)

The island of Hispaniola was the first colony of the Spanish Crown in the Americas and remained the only one until 1509. Today, the island is shared by two countries: the Republic of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. San Juan de la Maguana is an inland province of the Dominican Republic, located in the southwest of the country, approximately 190 kilometres from the capital, Santo Domingo.

San Juan was founded in 1503 by Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar, later governor of Cuba (Rodríguez Demorizi 1938). The origins of the settlers who initially populated the area were diverse. They came from Burgos, Soria, Segovia, Madrid, Salamanca, Zamora, Valladolid, Cáceres, Santander, Logroño, Seville, Cádiz, and Guadalajara, among other places (Benzo de Ferrer 2000, 586-600).

In 1509, San Juan had 150 residents; in 1514, 45; and by 1528, barely 15 (D'Esposito and Jacobs 2015). This rapid demographic decline is not surprising. After the socio-economic boom of the first two decades of the sixteenth century, a less favourable period followed. The mines appeared to have become exhausted, Indigenous populations forced to work in mining and agriculture declined dramatically, and an exodus of the Hispanic population to other parts of the Americas took place. As the native population decreased, wealthier settlers began to acquire enslaved people from Africa as labourers (Arranz Márquez 1991; Benzo de Ferrer 2000; Otte 1984; Rodríguez Morel 2007).

From that time onward, the socio-economic life of San Juan de la Maguana became closely linked to cattle ranching. There were no livestock on Hispaniola prior to the European conquest of the Americas. Livestock were introduced in the late fifteenth century, and their breeding and trade were consolidated during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Owing to the absence of natural predators and the abundance of grazing land, livestock reproduced rapidly, both on *haciendas*[1] and in the wild. Justo del Río (2012, 104-5) classifies the stages of cattle ranching on the island into three phases. The first, from 1503 to 1507, is characterized by the export of equines from the Iberian Peninsula to Hispaniola. The second period, between 1507 and 1510, was marked by the large-scale export of cattle, sheep, and goats. From 1511 onward, regional trade within the Caribbean—originating from ranches established on Hispaniola—gained greater economic importance, while the export of livestock from the Iberian Peninsula declined in significance.

Cattle ranching positioned itself as an economic alternative to the declining mining industry. A notable specialization in livestock production emerged in non-mining settlements such as San Juan de la Maguana (del Río 2012, 61). In addition to meat for consumption, hides were in high demand for the manufacture of clothing, equestrian equipment, furniture, tools, and various domestic implements.

Cowhides were sold legally through Santo Domingo and illicitly to foreign merchants along the northwestern and southwestern coasts of the island. In 1605, the persistent practice of contraband trading on Hispaniola led the Spanish Crown to decree the depopulation of several towns in the western part of the island, the area with the highest levels of contraband activity. San Juan was among the towns depopulated, and its inhabitants were forced to relocate closer to Santo Domingo (Burset Flores 2018).

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, San Juan de la Maguana also frequently served as a refuge for enslaved people fleeing the colonial system, owing to the large mountain ranges that surround the region. This phenomenon intensified in the context of the depopulations, as the area became even more isolated. As royal roads ceased to receive proper maintenance, the forests reclaimed them (Deive 1996).

It was not until the eighteenth century that San Juan de la Maguana was officially repopulated with settlers from the Iberian Peninsula and from other parts of Hispaniola. Exquemelin, a French surgeon who was on the island in the second half of the seventeenth century, described San Juan as a community inhabited by mulattos and mestizos skilled in hunting and tanning, which were the principal occupations in the area:

> [...] another village, situated in the heart of the island, called San Juan de Goave [Maguana], surrounded by a magnificent landscape of gardens, forests, and meadows; its territory extends for more than twenty leagues, where many wild bulls and cows graze. Within this village live only skinners of beasts and hunters, who are of mixed bloods, that is, white and black, from which comes the word mulatto; those born of Indians and whites are called mestizos [...] From this village great abundance of tallow and hides is obtained, and no other trade or labour is practiced

there, because the land in this region cannot be cultivated due to its great dryness. (Exquemelin 2021, 42)

The socio-economic trajectory of San Juan de la Maguana during the colonial period—marked by cattle ranching, demographic fluctuations, relative isolation, and limited institutional control—provides a framework for understanding the persistence and transformation of local cultural practices. These conditions not only facilitated the availability of materials such as bovine remains but also allowed for the survival and adaptation of festive and ritual expressions at the margins of colonial authority.

Popular religiosity emerges as a key sphere in which such practices were articulated, negotiated, and transmitted over time. In a comparative study conducted by Jan Lundius (1993), similarities are observed between the popular religiosity practised by the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit of San Juan de la Maguana and certain beliefs and cults of the European Middle Ages that disappeared following the reform movements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Lundius argues that the survival of these practices in San Juan de la Maguana is largely attributable to the geographical, social, and historical conditions that allowed its inhabitants to live relatively at the margins of the ecclesiastical and civil control system, which was concentrated in Santo Domingo. This hypothesis may be extrapolated to carnivals and masquerades.

Carnivals and masquerades, far from being merely recreational, must be understood as part of a broader system of social and symbolic expression, shaped by ongoing tensions between regulation and transgression, as well as by the interplay of European, African, and local traditions. The available documentation makes little mention of carnivals and masquerades in Santo Domingo, and does so only briefly. Even so, it is clear that these practices remained in force throughout the colonial period, despite legislation banning them. As the following section will show, these practices were frequently the locus of tension between the popular stratum of society and the civil and ecclesiastical authorities; this reveals both the resilience of local traditions and their central role in the cultural life of the colonial Americas.

Conflicts and Public Amusements: Carnivals and Masks (16th-18th Centuries)

Numerous legal provisions aimed at curbing public disorder suggest a sustained concern with regulating social life in the Spanish overseas territories throughout the colonial period. Nevertheless, cultural practices such as carnivals and masquerades displayed a constant tendency to elude these regulations (Núñez Sánchez 2006). Much of the information available to us today derives precisely from the tensions generated by these conflicts.

As a festive period marked by greater permissiveness—during which people were allowed to engage in both minor and major excesses normally subject to censure, such as eating and drinking to excess, dancing, gambling, and fighting (Calvo Brioso 2012)—carnival frequently brought social conflict with the authorities to the fore.

Moreover, in the Americas, carnival provided an ideal occasion for the much-feared blurring of boundaries between sexes and social classes (Garavaglia 2002). During the festivities, wealth and poverty, nobility and commoners, black and white people took to the streets and shared the same ludic space, while voices, songs, and bodily expressions intermingled the cultural legacies of Europe, the Americas, and Africa (Núñez Sánchez 2006).

According to Deive (2017, 396), the principal carnival activity in Santo Domingo consisted of boat processions along the Ozama River, during which participants threw oranges and wax balls filled with scented water. In 1538, according to the testimony of Francisco de Espinosa, even Archbishop Alonso de Fuentemayor was seen throwing oranges at passersby in the Plaza de Armas (Tejeda Ortiz 2008). Masks and revelry were, naturally, not absent during carnival time, although masquerades were by no means confined exclusively to carnival.

For example, Deive (2017) notes that priests donned masks to mingle anonymously with the crowd during the cavalcades held annually on the night of St John the Baptist. Likewise, some university students wore masks when celebrating the feast of St Thomas Aquinas, and, also in disguise, "people from all social classes, Blacks and mulattoes, joined them" (Deive 2017, 273). In addition, records attest to the use of masks during a parade commemorating King Charles I's victory at the Battle of Pavia in 1525, as well as at events marking the accession to the throne of Ferdinand VI (Deive 2017, 390, 397) and the conquest of Terceira Island in 1583 (Julián 2013, 22). The royal decree of 1554 prohibiting royal officials from participating in revelries, and the proclamation issued in 1577 by Governor Gregorio González—who condemned carnival-type expressions, including masquerades, as contrary to good morals—proved largely ineffective (Deive 2017; Tejeda Ortiz 2008).



Beyond Hispaniola, similar events are recorded as having taken place in other Spanish territories. Around 1600, in Santiago de Cuba, governors and the bishop attempted to prevent attacks or mockery directed at religion and its ministers during the *mamarrachos,*[2] imposing fines of up to sixty pesos or punishments of up to twenty-five lashes (Brea López 2012). In 1779, the customary masked carnival dances became a major source of conflict between the governor and the Church in the Río de la Plata region (present-day Argentina), as masks and disguises were used to ridicule decorated or prominent individuals (Garavaglia 2002, 410). Likewise, in Quito (Ecuador), mock masquerades targeting officials or members of the elite were among the aspects of carnival that caused the greatest irritation to the authorities well into the eighteenth century:

> There are natives who stand out for their skill in making masks, and with only a few hours' notice one can purchase the exact representation of any local face; thus it often happens that people are doubled—one sitting very solemnly on the grandstand while their double dances in the plaza—to the annoyance of the person being imitated and the amusement of the spectators. (Núñez Sánchez 2006, 15-6)

The situation in Castile was no different. By 1582, in the diocese of Palencia, Álvaro de Mendoza[3] was advising that clergymen should neither wear disguises nor take part in masquerades, as such practices diminished their dignity. During his pastoral visit to Ávila in 1731, Fray Pedro de Ayala[4] harshly criticized those who went about in disguise, as masked figures and *mamarrachos*, during the festivities of San Sebastián, calling for the prohibition of such practices. In 1827, the precentor of the Cathedral of Zamora, Pedro Tiburcio Gutiérrez, likewise argued against theatrical performances inside churches (Calvo Brioso 2012, 48-9).

Attempts to limit or eradicate masquerades and carnivals on both sides of the Atlantic extended over several centuries, without success. The total prohibition of carnivalesque activities proved impossible, as it risked provoking popular discontent that would lead to protests. At times, royal officials themselves defended carnivals against religious persecution, in which cases civil and ecclesiastical authorities became openly antagonistic toward one another.

Burke (1996) draws a parallel between the trajectory of carnivals in the New World over the past two centuries and that of European carnivals between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, interpreting this development as a process that unfolded in four phases. He terms the first phase one of participation, characterized by the fact that "high and low, rich and poor, learned and unlearned, all found masking suits for the Carnival" (Burke 1996, 16).

The second phase is that of reform, when certain members of the ruling classes demanded the partial or total abolition of carnival. This was followed by a third stage marked by the withdrawal of elites from public participation, as they began to organize their own private festivities—a form of closed or exclusive carnival. Burke bases his argument primarily on the cases of Brazil and Trinidad. Regarding Trinidad, he explains that following the abolition of slavery in 1833, the white elite ceased to participate in carnival while Afro-descendant populations gained visibility by using the festivities to commemorate their freedom and to mock whites. The fourth phase corresponds to the present and is linked to the commercialization of carnival and the rediscovery of popular culture (Burke 1996).

Today, masquerades tend to be socially organized through associations or institutions and to form part of the cultural policies of local, regional, national, and transnational administrations (Panero García 2020). More specifically, the challenge faced by contemporary carnival masquerades lies in reconciling their cultural functions with commercial imperatives, without undermining processes of heritage-making or patrimonialization (Panero García and Pinelo Tiza 2023).

The *Cocorícamo* in Relation to Other Masks

During the twentieth century, the *Cocorícamo* was a common character in Holy Week performances in several localities in the province of San Juan de la Maguana, Dominican Republic, for example Mesopotamia, Chalona, Pandié, Jinova, and Sosa. A character bearing the same name was described by Fernando Ortiz as appearing in Cuban carnivals during the 1950s (Ortiz 1981; Tejeda Ortiz 2013, 203-5; Tejeda Ortiz 2008, 513-14; Hernández and Tejeda Ortiz 2007, 97).

Like other European practices, carnival and masquerades were brought to the Americas, where they spread, were reworked, and transformed throughout the continent during the colonial period. The interaction of European, African, and Indigenous traditions, among other cultural contributions, gave rise to the transcultural phenomenon of Caribbean carnivals and masquerades (Burke 1996).

Masquerades are festive manifestations characterized by the use of masks. The most prominent context in which they occur today, though not the only one, is carnival. As is well known, carnival is a festive tradition associated with Christianity, the celebration of which precedes Lent.

Another type of masquerade is the winter masquerade, characterized by the season in which it takes place (from Christmas to Epiphany); the sound of cowbells, sheep bells, or small bells; the use of whipping or threatening instruments; the collection of gifts or alms; and its performance in the streets and public squares of the community, among other features. Over time, many winter masquerades became absorbed into carnival celebrations (Calvo Brioso 2012). The performance of the *Cocorícamo* corresponds to that of a winter masquerade, as it was customary for the character to roam the streets of the town in search of grocery

stores where he would demand money or other goods, while children were intimidated with a whip.

> [...] they used to move about the town [...] obtaining money by visiting grocery stores; certain mothers would wait for the masked figures with misbehaving children [...] they would seize them and make them kneel on the ground, draw a cross with the handle of the whip, and force the child to kiss it, after which the child had to promise to behave well. (Tejeda Ortiz 2008, 513-4)

The most striking characteristic of the Cocorícamo is its mask, composed of an entire horse's, cow's, or donkey's head (Figure 1), often featuring articulated jaws that open and close (Ortiz 1981; Tejeda Ortiz 2013, 203-5; Tejeda Ortiz 2008, 513-4; Hernández and Tejeda Ortiz 2007, 97). In the Dominican case, the costume consisted of rags or a woman's dress worn over men's trousers, a *higüero* (*Ficus citrifolia*) placed at the throat, stockings used as improvised gloves, and a staff employed to frighten children (Tejeda Ortiz 2013, 203-5; Tejeda Ortiz 2010, 45).

By contrast, the attire of the Cuban *Cocorícamo* (Figure 2) included:

> [...] old clothing worn inside out and generally in tatters, with weeds, palm fibers or guano (Coccothrinax), and numerous strips of fabric or colored ribbons [...] The kokoríkamos wore bells or cowbells on their waists and ankles [...] In some cases, these cowbells were replaced by simple old cans. (Ortiz 1981)



Figure 1. Photograph of a Dominican *Cocorícamo* with a horse skull (20th century). Photograph by Odalis Rosado. Source: Tejeda Ortiz (2010).



Figure 2. Drawing of a Cuban *Cocorícamo* (1951). Source: Ortiz (1981).

Researchers Fernando Ortiz (1981) and Dagoberto Tejeda Ortiz (2008, 2010, 2013; see also Hernández and Tejeda Ortiz 2007) agree in identifying a certain degree of African cultural influence in the *Cocorícamo*. Indeed, Tejeda regards the *Cocorícamo* mask as one of the masks that incorporate the greatest number of elements of African heritage in the Dominican Republic (Tejeda Ortiz 2008, 513-4).

Today, horse and donkey skulls are no longer used for making the Dominican Republic *Cocorícamo.* Currently, only cow skulls with their horns are employed, and these are coated with tar. Decoration varies, but crosses are frequently drawn on the surface, while the teeth are painted white and the palate red. In addition, horsehair is attached to the eye sockets,



Figure 3. *Cocorícamo* mask made by Rafael, San Juan de la Maguana (2025). Photograph by author.



Figure 4. *Cocorícamo* mask made by Vicente Camilo Suero, San Juan de la Maguana (2025). Photograph by author.

the upper part of the skull, and/or the sides of the muzzle, depending on the creativity of the artisan or mask maker (Figures 3 and 4).

In Dominica and Trinidad, a mask known as the *Burroquite*[5] is worn. In Barbados, Trinidad, and the Virgin Islands, a related figure known as the Donkey Man can be found. Both masked characters wear a wooden frame around the body, suspended from the waist and covered with fabric, creating the illusion that they are mounted on a donkey or a tournament horse (Burrowes 2013, 44). At the front of the frame, there is a donkey's head made of paper. There was also a simpler type of Donkey Man that did not use a frame but instead wore only a tail made of old rags (Nicholls 2012).

By around 1950, reports indicated that the *borricos* (donkeys) of Dominica and Trinidad no longer appeared in major cities, although they were still seen in rural areas such as Arima in Trinidad (Crowley 1956, 216). Likewise, from the 1980s onward, the use of the mask for the Donkey Man of Barbados declined, as it came to be regarded as unattractive and crude within the context of the national carnival. Today, the character is performed without a mask. Some authors have noted similarities with the British Hobby Horse and the Spanish *Borriquito* (Figures 5 and 6) (Burrowes 2013, 48).



Figure 5. A carnival character dressed up and wearing a donkey head. Marés (1864). Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, object number 1978.643.54(4).[6]



Figure 6. Two carnival characters dressed as a donkey and a cow. G. M. Foruny Lithography (1880).[7]

A variant on the tournament horse is the pole horse, whose structure consists of a horse's head mounted on a pole and carried by a costumed performer. Variants of the pole horse made from an actual horse skull are found in Guyana and Jamaica. These masks also feature articulated jaws; they are painted, fitted with eyes, and covered with a piece of cloth. Nicholls (2012, 123-4) notes that, given the weight of an adult horse's skull, performers in Jamaica often preferred the smaller skull of a mule, or even that of a cow. In this context, Bettelheim (1988) likewise indicates that the Horsehead of Jamaican *Jonkonnu* is made from the decorated skull of a mule.[8] Similarly, in Cheshire (England), the Horsehead, regarded as a traditional character, is manufactured using a horse skull attached to a pole and equipped with movable jaws (Bettelheim 1988, 55, 202).

At the same time, representations of bulls or cows account for the largest number of zoomorphic masks in the insular Caribbean. There are a number of different bovine representations, such as the Wild Bull and Jam Bull in the Virgin Islands; the Red Bull in

St Kitts and Nevis; the Cowhead *Jonkonnu* in Jamaica; *Junkanoo* in the Bahamas; and the John Bull in Antigua (Burrowes 2013; Crowley 1956; Hill 1985).

According to Nicholls (2012), African and European influences in taurine, bovine, and equine masquerades of the Lesser Antilles and Jamaica were shaped primarily through a fusion of traditions from Upper Guinea, ranging from Senegal to Côte d'Ivoire, and southwestern Britain, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. This dynamic is closely linked to the origins of the enslaved populations and the colonists who migrated during the colonial period. The author documents the use of animal skulls as masks in the Christmas bulls of the Scottish Highlands and the Outer Hebrides; in Tetbury, in England's West Country; and in certain localities in Sweden, Denmark, and Germany, among others (Nicholls 2012, 189-90).

The British and Irish evidence deserves closer attention, since it provides the nearest European parallels to the Caribbean pole horses. The best-documented case is the *Mari Lwyd* of southern Wales, and above all of Glamorgan: a horse's skull, whitened and decked with ribbons, is mounted on a pole and carried by a performer concealed beneath a white sheet, while the lower jaw, worked by a string or a lever, is snapped at the onlookers (Cawte 1978; Hutton 1996, 83-4). To these may be added the Christmas bulls of the Scottish Highlands and the Outer Hebrides and the masquerade of Tetbury, in England's West Country, in which Nicholls (2012, 189-90) records the use of animal skulls as masks, as well as the Cheshire Horsehead noted above, built from a horse skull fixed to a pole and fitted with movable jaws (Bettelheim 1988, 55, 202). Taken together, these cases share with the *Cocorícamo* the winter calendar, the ambulatory performance through the streets and houses of the community, the soliciting of food, drink, or money, and the use of the animal's own skull, with articulated jaws, as the central element of the disguise.

Regarding possible African influence, Nicholls (2012) mentions masks from Mandinka, Jola, Igbo, and some Senegambian groups. However, these are not made from bovine skulls, nor do they fully cover the wearer's face in the manner of the *Cocorícamo*. In this respect, the National Museum of Anthropology in Spain houses twentieth-century examples of bovine masks from Guinea-Bissau, known as *Dugn´be*, which are made of wood (inventory nos. CE11859 and CE11093).[9] Another example of a wooden bovine mask from Cameroon is documented by Paul Germann (1911).

In his study of Carnival, Caro Baroja devotes a section to what he terms *vaquillas*[10] (heifers) in the Americas, reproducing excerpts from two correspondents of the French magazine *L'Illustration*, Charton and Alluys, dating to 1853 and 1854 respectively. Charton describes a taurine masquerade in Quito, while Alluys makes mention of what appears to be a masquerade in La Paz (Bolivia), featuring horns and constructed from a wooden frame suspended from the waist of the masked performer,[11] as in the Donkey Man, for example. Caro Baroja (2006, 259) draws attention to the similarity between European *vaquillas* and those of Quito, Bolivia, and other parts of the Americas.

Rodríguez Pascual divided the masquerades of Zamora into diabolical and bovine masquerades (Panero García 2017). For Castile and León more broadly, Calvo Brioso (2012, 37, 59, 77) identified zoomorphic masquerades in which the central role is played by an animal-shaped mask and distinguished two main subgroups: taurine and bovine masks. He also noted the exceptional presence of horse masks. Relevant notable examples in Spain include the cows of Almeida, Carabelino, Peruela, San Martín de Castañeda and Abejar (Panero García 2017; Calvo Brioso 2012); the horses of Villarino Tras a Sierra; and the bulls of Sardoneo and Velilla de la Reina (Calvo Brioso 2012).

The use of animal bones or skulls as the principal element of the mask is less frequent in Spain, although examples do exist. One such case is *the Vaquilla* of Palacios del Pan, which

features a dry cow skull on its frontal section. Similarly, the *Gomia* of Llamas de la Ribera incorporates a horse skull with articulated jaws (Calvo Brioso 2012, 311-4, 456). Both *the Vaquilla* and the *Gomia* are supported by frames carried by one or more individuals, with the skull resting on a wooden structure. By contrast, the *Cocorícamo* is a mask designed for a single performer, whose face is completely covered by it.

During the twentieth century, some representations of the bull in the Antilles featured horns and were accompanied by a face mask, a cloth mask, or a textile hood. In other cases, the performer's face was simply painted black. Nevertheless, there is evidence of a *Jonkonnu* character described in 1839 by Michael Scott as being "clothed in an entire bullock hide, horns and tail … the whole of the skull being retained" (Nicholls 2012, 58). Preparing a bovine skull for use as a mask was a labour-intensive process, as it required thorough cleaning, whitening, and sanding until it could be fitted to the wearer's head. For this reason, it was more common to opt for a headdress made from a quarter section of the skull with attached horns, or a semi-spherical cap with horns, rather than using the complete skull.

> They clean it out, they get it, they sun it, they do everything to it, burn it out, sit down on it every day, sandpaper, every single day… When they finish, it comes out white, white, white, white, because the chemical is there, the system you call lime. They soak it in lime, throw a lot of lime on it and leave it there a couple of days. And there's meat—whatever meat—because they get it fresh from the market. They throw lime all over, inside every crevice, and that lime gets everything out. So, when they reach a point, they just carry it to water, the cattle drinking trough, and wash it out right there, then get sandpaper and scrub it well. They remove all the sharp edges of the bone and then fit it. (Nicholls 2012, 58)

Jonkonnu is a street festival characterized by the presence of groups of masked male dancers accompanied by musical bands. This practice dates back at least to the early eighteenth century. Variants of this festival exist in Jamaica, Belize, St Kitts and Nevis, Guyana, and Bermuda, among other locations. In contemporary Jamaica, Jonkonnu groups generally fall into two categories: *Roots Jonkonnu* and *Fancy Dress*. *Roots* masks include characters such as the Cowhead and the Horsehead. Indeed, these zoomorphic masquerades constitute one of the most significant distinctions between *Roots Jonkonnu* and *Fancy Dress*. They are typically found in eastern, peripheral, and rural regions of Jamaica—such as St. Elizabeth, Westmoreland, and Hanover—whereas *Fancy Dress* bands are mainly based in major urban centres.

According to Judith Bettelheim (1988), Roots *Jonkonnu* masquerades display a pronounced neo-African style, particularly in the case of the Cowhead. In popular Jamaican interpretations, the Horsehead and Cowhead characters of *Jonkonnu* embody African ferocity rather than British restraint, a quality clearly expressed in their dances. Bettelheim further suggests that the Cowhead may derive from a similar type of masquerade widespread in West Africa (Bettelheim 1988, 53-5).

By contrast, Katarina Real argues that popular theatrical representations such as *Bumba-meu-boi* (Beat my ox) are among the most significant medieval European traditions preserved in the carnival of Pernambuco, Brazil. These dramas are performed at Christmas, from southern Brazil to the Amazon, with regional variations, and revolve around the misadventures of an ox while simultaneously satirizing colonial society. Notably, in the Carnival of Recife (Pernambuco), the head of the ox is made from a cow skull, and the monstrous figure known as *babau* uses a horse skull (Real 2004, 230). The emergence of bovine and equine masquerades in Brazil is therefore understandable, as is the existence of

parallels with numerous masquerades of this type in Trás-os-Montes (Portugal) and Castile and León, such as the cow of Sayago and the cow of Santulhão (Calvo Brioso 2012, 59, 77; Panero García 2017).

Jeroen Dewulf (2021), who examines parallels between the earliest accounts of Jonkonnu and European *calendas*, proposes adopting an Afro-Iberian perspective in the analysis of Caribbean performative traditions to better understand their historical development. Many of the African groups forcibly transported to the Americas had already incorporated cultural elements deeply rooted in Iberian traditions prior to their arrival in the New World.

Dewulf (2021, 1-3) emphasizes Iberian dominance in the Atlantic world during the Early Modern period, particularly Portuguese influence in Africa from the fifteenth century onward and questions the traditional use of the terms "syncretism," "hybridization," and "creole" as phenomena that emerged only after Africans arrived in the Americas. On the contrary, processes of cultural integration had begun much earlier, in Africa and Iberia. According to Dewulf (2021, 16), a crucial factor in the formation of the cultural identity of enslaved Africans in the American colonies was the system of brotherhoods or confraternities, which constituted one of the principal mechanisms for transferring European social structures to other parts of the world. He concludes that the hypothesis that *Jonkonnu* represents the oldest and most enduring non-European cultural form in the Caribbean is untenable, since Iberian festive traditions form a significant component of the multiplicity of cultural influences that shaped *Jonkonnu*.

Masquerades encompass multiple voices, as they combine music, dance, performance, craftsmanship, and oral tradition. Given the heterogeneity of these cultural expressions, a wide range of analytical approaches is possible.

The most widely accepted explanations in the academic literature for parallels between European and American carnivals and masquerades are twofold and mutually complementary: diffusion, and parallel evolution. According to the paradigm of parallel evolution, similar circumstances produce similar outcomes; in other words, the selection of comparable materials or garments for mask-making arises from pragmatic decisions and considerations of convenience.

In San Juan de la Maguana—where a significant cattle-ranching economy existed during the colonial period—it is logical that bovine skulls were used to make masks, as they were readily available and, unlike hides, did not have a priority economic use. The same reasoning applies to localities in Cuba, Jamaica, Castile and León, and other regions whose economies were similarly linked to livestock raising and pastoralism. Likewise, pragmatic considerations can be observed in the preference for mule skulls over those of adult horses, since the former are lighter. This reasoning has been noted by Nicholls (2012, 123-4) and Bettelheim (1988) with reference to the Jamaican Horsehead.

It is likely that the *Cocorícamo* has undergone changes over time for similar reasons. Specifically, during interviews conducted in September 2025 with two *Cocorícamo* band directors from San Juan de la Maguana, Camilo and Rafael, both explained that, in order to create a new mask, it is customary to visit local farms in search of the remains of a cow that has died or is close to death. Horses are less frequently found, as they are less common than cattle in the Dominican Republic, more expensive, and closely guarded by their owners. In the second half of the twentieth century, when the photograph of the *Cocorícamo* with a horse's head shown in Figure 1 was taken, donkeys, mules, and horses were common means of transportation in rural areas of the Dominican Republic. Today, however, horses are more often regarded as luxury items. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for artisans to obtain horsehair to decorate *Cocorícamo* masks, leading some to opt for synthetic hair instead.

About diffusion and American carnivals and masquerades, including the *Cocorícamo*, it is indisputable that these practices have European origins and were transported to the Americas, where they spread, and were reworked and transformed throughout the continent during the colonial period. At the same time, it is evident that it was interaction among European, African, and Indigenous traditions, along with other ethnic contributions, which gave rise to the transcultural phenomenon that characterizes Caribbean carnivals and masquerades today (Burke 1996). The debate surrounding this issue centres on the fact that some authors see a greater or lesser African or European influence in specific masquerades, without entirely excluding either pole.

Some scholars who argue for a stronger African influence on the *Cocorícamo* (Ortiz 1981; Tejeda Ortiz 2008, 2010, 2013; Hernández and Tejeda Ortiz 2007) and on the Cowhead *Jonkonnu* (Bettelheim 1988) emphasize particular components of the masquerade, such as dance, as well as the fact that in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Jamaica, and the Lesser Antilles these performances are carried out predominantly by people of African descent. Burke (1996) and Flores Martos (2001) likewise maintain that African cultural elements associated with dance are among the defining features of American carnivals. However, for masks that fully cover the face and are made from bovine or equine skulls, such as the *Cocorícamo*, the available evidence points to a closer affinity with European winter masquerades.

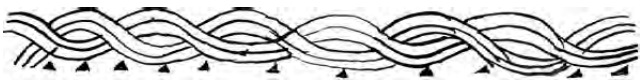
Conclusions

This article has examined the *Cocorícamo* mask of San Juan de la Maguana, Dominican Republic, situating it within a broader corpus of zoomorphic masks from the Americas and Europe, specifically bovine, taurine, and equine forms. The aim was to trace the aesthetic connections that link the two shores of the Atlantic through a single type of face mask, one whose material basis is the complete skull of a bovine or an equine. Masks of this kind are documented, with local variations, in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Jamaica, the Lesser Antilles, the British Isles, and the Iberian Peninsula between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. The comparative analysis was based primarily on a review of secondary sources.

Throughout the study, it was established that the *Cocorícamo* mask shares very close aesthetic features with the Cuban *Cocorícamo*, the Cowhead and Horsehead of Jamaican *Jonkonnu*, and the *boi* and *babau* of the Recife Carnival. These similarities include the use of the complete skull of bovines or equines as a mask, articulated jaws, and the continuing use of these masks within popular festive contexts, particularly in rural or peripheral areas.

Likewise, significant parallels were identified with European winter masquerades, especially those of the Iberian Peninsula and the British Isles: the *Vaquilla* of Palacios del Pan and the *Gomia* of Llamas de la Ribera, the *Mari Lwyd* of southern Wales, and the Horsehead of Cheshire, all of which take the complete skull of the animal as the central element of the disguise. While several authors have emphasized African cultural influence on the *Cocorícamo* and the Cowhead *Jonkonnu*, particularly with regard to dance, the available evidence indicates a stronger European influence in relation to masks made from the complete skulls of bovines and equines. Nevertheless, the *Cocorícamo* as a masquerade cannot be assigned a single cultural origin, nor can it be interpreted simply as a local or isolated tradition.

Finally, the study found that the performance of the *Cocorícamo* corresponds closely to that of a winter masquerade, as it takes place in the streets and public squares of San Juan de la Maguana and incorporates elements such as cowbells, whipping or flogging instruments, and the soliciting of gifts. Future research could examine the *Cocorícamo* in dialogue with the concept of the winter masquerade and with a broader corpus of bovine, taurine, and equine masquerades from the Americas, Europe, and Africa.



NOTES

1. *Hacienda*: a large colonial rural estate devoted mainly to cattle raising and mixed agriculture.

2. A *mamarracho* was anyone who dressed up in old clothes and sacks and covered their face during Carnival, usually involving satirical and grotesque characters who playfully subverted social norms.

3. Roman Catholic prelate, Bishop of L'Aquila (1622-1628) and Bishop of Jaca (1628-1631).

4. Apostolic Nuncio, Collector General, and *Legate a Latere* for Spain (1727-1738).

5. The *Burroquite* (also spelled *Burokeet, Burokit, or Burrokeet*) is a carnival masquerade in which the performer dances inside a donkey-shaped framework.

6. The caption at the bottom of the image reads: "Don Perico walks around with a donkey's head."

7. The caption at the bottom of the image reads: "Many dress up as what they are."

8. See Horsehead from the Spanish Town Road Jonkonnu Band, Kingston, Jamaica in Bettelheim (1988, 55).

9. *Dugn´be*. 20th century. Wood, 37 × 40 cm. Madrid: Museo Nacional de Antropología, inv. nos. CE11859 and CE11093. https://ceres.mcu.es/pages/Main.

10. Masquerade of Iberian origin in which a performer carries a small bull- or cow-shaped framework and playfully charges the crowd during carnivals and processions, combining dance, mock aggression, and comic interaction.

11. See Charton's drawing of a bullfighting masquerade in Quito (left) and Alluys' drawing of a masquerade in La Paz (right) in Caro Baroja (2006).

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The *Cuci* Masks of Brănești between Social Biography and Cultural Revitalization: Reflections on Object Agency

Cristina Hurdubaia
INALCO (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales), Paris, France
ORCID: 0009-0006-7946-5477

Cristina Hurdubaia is a Ph.D. candidate in Cultural Anthropology at INALCO (PLIDAM). Her research investigates biographical objects in a broad sense, with a particular focus on their material agency in historical and contemporary migration contexts, and on the reconfiguration of local traditions within transnational settings.

Correspondence: cristina.hurdubaia@inalco.fr

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ABSTRACT

This article, based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2019, analyses the social agency of the *Cucii* ritual masks of Brănești, Romania. The study posits that these masks act as dynamic agents of cultural revitalization whose power lies in their shifting materiality. By examining the transition from organic materials to industrial wire and plastic, the paper explores how masks configure contemporary ritual and social worlds.
Drawing on Alfred Gell's theory of agency, the analysis demonstrates how the technical complexity of wire masks (the *Chip*) imposes a specific discipline on the maker and a hierarchy of prestige within the community. Conversely, the adoption of industrial polymers by younger generations facilitates a democratization of the ritual, ensuring its survival through a pragmatic "culture in transit." The article also examines the "migration" of these masks to European festivals, where their morphology is recalibrated for global visibility, transforming them into material ambassadors of local identity. The study concludes that the hybridity of contemporary masks—where the handcrafted "aura" meets the pragmatism of industrial series—is a strategic negotiation that secures the continuity of the tradition in both local and global contexts, rather than a sign of decay.

KEYWORDS

Ritual agency; cultural revitalization; materiality; biographical objects; Brănești masks.

Entering the "World of the Mask"

The Brănești Cucii ritual takes place annually on Clean Monday, the first day of Great Lent for Orthodox Christians, and marks the transition toward spring through masking, noise, movement, and ritualized disorder. The ritual is performed mainly by young men, although women and children also participate in certain contemporary contexts, particularly through school activities and local cultural initiatives. The masked figures move through the village streets wearing *Chipuri* and *Cucoaice*, producing noise using bells, chasing passers-by, engaging in playful and sometimes confrontational interactions, and performing the ritual "health beatings" traditionally associated with purification, protection, and regeneration. In its contemporary form, the ritual is supported by local families, craftsmen,



Waiting for the masked procession on *Ziua Cucilor* [The Day of the *Cuci*] to start. Brănești, 2018. Photo credit: Cristina Hurdubaia.

schools, cultural actors, and the *Sedeanka* Group, which contributes to the preservation and public presentation of the custom both in Brănești and at festivals abroad.

The analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Brănești between 2015 and 2019. The research combined participant observation, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and the documentation of ritual performances, domestic workshops, and mask-making practices. Repeated visits during different stages of the ritual cycle made it possible to follow the preparation, use, storage, repair, and circulation of the masks over time. Particular attention was given to bodily techniques, sensory experiences, material transformations, and the changing relationship between masks, domestic space, and public performance.

The documentation and field research carried out in Brănești-Ilfov (Romania) between 2015 and 2019 began in the liminal spaces of a household workshop, the place where the ritual mask of the *Chip* (Romanian: literally "face"; the central masked male figure in the *Cucii*[1] ritual), begins to "demand" form, imposing on the craftsman a discipline of action and a rigour of material. Before being publicly displayed on the street on Ziua Cucilor ("The Day of the Cuci," the annual masked ritual in Brănești[2]), the object comes to life inside the household, where inert matter begins to dictate human behaviour and shape the stages of the ritual.

This article starts from the hypothesis that the Brănești mask, through its changing materiality, configures ritual and social worlds that ensure the revitalization of local identity in a contemporary context. The mask-object transcends the representation of the community, acting as an agent that mediates between the prestige of the author's craft and the pragmatism of hybridisation necessary for the survival of the custom on the street or on international stages. To understand the agency (Gell 1998, 6-18)[3] of a biographical object (Kopytoff 1986, 64-91),[4] we must observe the moment at which inert matter—wire, cloth, mirror—begins to dictate human behaviour. In Brănești, the mask is a carnival accessory that becomes a social

actor structuring time (the three weeks of fasting and work), space (the room transformed into a workshop), and interpersonal relationships.

It is not the man who wears the mask, but the mask that wears the man.

The present analysis confirms a recurrent observation in the anthropology of masks: during the ritual in Brănești, the power dynamic is reversed. Transcending the status of a mere item of clothing, the mask functions as a dynamic agent (Gell 1998, 16-8), dictating a new bodily *habitus* and a new social identity. This ontological renegotiation "works" on the craftsman, forcing him into an asceticism of meticulousness (*Ibidem*, 68-71), and on the wearer, to whom it lends the power of the archetype (*Ibidem*, 102-4).

Within the *Sedeanka* Group[5] (from Bulgarian *sedyanka*, meaning "traditional evening gathering"), the biography of the mask is marked by the duality between the two masks of the *Cuci*: *Cucoaică* (Romanian: "female cuckoo") and *Chip*. The *Cucoaică* possesses an agency based on a precarious materiality, which allows the wearer to behave in a subversive and playful manner in public spaces.

In contrast, the *Chip* represents an object of prestige, whose technical complexity—embodied in the *târn*[6] (Romanian term for the internal frame of the mask)—and elaborate aesthetics dictate the social hierarchy of its owner within the community (Becker 1982, 131-5). This material distinction shapes two different ways of addressing the village: one based on ritual chaos, the other on the authority of the spectacle.

Geography of the Sacred in the Domestic Space

Entering the home of the Secăreanu family—Gheorghe Secăreanu (b. 1948) being a representative craftsman in the village of Pasărea (part of Brăneşti commune)—on the brink of spring is equivalent to entering a social world (Strauss 1978, 119-28) governed by the mask-object. The agency of the *Chip* manifests here through its near-total occupation of the living space; the reception room loses its profane function, becoming a ritual construction site where time and space are dictated by the needs of the object, transforming the inhabitants from agents into "patients" (Gell 1998, 16-7) of the creative process.

> We are a team in the family. I make the basket for the *Chip*. The frame is made of iron, and it takes about two days. The wire must be wrapped... it is iron on iron, and the paper bud is twisted. This prevents it from turning. (Gheorghe Secăreanu, aged 70, interview 2018)

In this dialogue, we observe how the mask becomes an organizer of domestic collaboration and a bond that structures work within the household. The manufacture of the *Chip* involves different stages, ranging from the construction of the metal framework to the production of the decorative elements. As the object gradually takes shape, the preparation of the mask mobilizes several members of the family and transforms the household into a shared space of ritual production. The transition to the use of industrial wire reconfigured the organization of work surrounding the mask, introducing new technical requirements and expanding the possibilities of construction. This shift was a response to a need for visual prestige, as the wire allows for the construction of tall structures impossible to support using the old technique involving the use of branches. At the same time, the new metal structure provides the mask with an architecture of durability that facilitates long-distance transport. From the cargo

hold of an aeroplane bound for Italy to the confined space of a van on its way to Bulgaria, the mask renegotiates its materiality to survive: the wire *târn* and the robust flowers guarantee the object a biography of resilience, protecting the form against physical shocks.

This adaptation confirms Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (1998) thesis regarding how heritage objects modify their structure to survive the exit from their context. The status of the mask as a resilient and sometimes migratory traveller changes the role of the living room: the family space becomes a laboratory of cultural engineering, where wire and buds are adjusted to reconcile monumental aesthetics with the need for the mask to remain "upright" after thousands of kilometres travelled *en route* to European festivals.

Domestic collaboration restores, in a modern form, the structure of the old *clacă*[7] (Romanian: a communal work gathering). "Before, around age 12, there was a *clacă*; the girls made the paper buds and you gave them a chocolate in exchange," the craftsman recalls. Today, although the village *clacă* has disappeared, the agency of the mask mobilizes the extended family. "The grandchildren come too; we set them to cutting the wires. This learning is done through the hand, not through books," Gheorghe Secăreanu explains, emphasizing a *pedagogy of the hand*, understood here as the transmission of skill through embodied practice (Ingold 2013, 52-4), which ensures the continuity of the craft despite the digitalization of the domestic space.

Biographical Typologies of the Mask

Each type of mask in Brăneşti has a specific cultural age and agency, determined by its materiality:

I. Author masks (made of wire and cloth). Exemplified by the Secăreanu family's production, these possess the densest biographical agency (Kopytoff 1986). They are prestigious objects that are not sold to just anyone. The three-week manufacturing process gives them an "aura" (Benjamin [1935] 2008, 22-3) that forces the community to recognize the owner as a true bearer. Their agency lies in their ability to confer identity: a well-crafted *Chip* "makes you human" in the eyes of the village (Tudor V., aged 81, interview 2019)—a process of extending the person through the index-object (Gell 1998, 102-4).

These mask-costumes impose a total aesthetic: "The *Chipuri* wear white costumes with crosses on their arms and knees. They had the same before. They had everything they have now. The size of the flowers has changed. The boys with *Chipuri* are always tall" (Nicoleta B., aged 46, interview 2019). This material nobility of the mask is matched by canonical rigour: every element, from the thickness of the wire to the symmetrical arrangement of the mirrors, must comply with a visual code that validates the wearer's status in the village hierarchy. This process reflects what Alfred Gell (1998, 71-2) calls "the technology of enchantment," in which the technical difficulty of execution generates the social prestige of the object.

II. Storage masks (restored). These are objects that carry the memory of resistance in their fibres. Recovered from the communist period, they act as "witness objects" (Dant 1999). Their agency is archival in nature; they "force" the current generation to remember the period when the ritual was suspect or forbidden. They are "carriers of memory" (Assmann 2011, 6-10), preserving memories of collectivization and of the broader transformations of rural life during the communist period. Gheorghe Secăreanu recalls the resilience of these

objects that survive over time: "The masks were kept from one year to the next, especially the *Chipuri*, which were very difficult to make" (Gheorghe Secăreanu, interview 2018).

III. Educational masks. In pedagogical terms, the agency of the mask is reconfigured. In school workshops, the manufacturing process focuses on deciphering the structure and form, the magical purpose being replaced by an educational one:

> These cardboard masks, drawn with markers, necessarily have red cheeks and rabbit fur. We made them at school, on our own, and we keep them from one year to the next, at home. (Group of school students, interview 2019)

Cardboard, as an ephemeral and accessible material, democratizes the exercise of disguise, transforming mistakes into experiments. This approach indicates a shift toward a "reflexive modernity" (Giddens 1991), in which tradition is planned and stored. For students, the mask loses its character as an ephemeral, single-use ritual object, becoming an inventory item:

> Now it's easier, because they last from one year to the next, as do the costumes, so it's not such a big hassle. Before, we had to have a different theme every year. (Mihăiță R., aged 16, interview 2017)

This "ease" of the material radically changes the wearer's relationship with the object. If the wire *Chip* imposes a demanding technical engagement with the material (Gell 1998, 71), the cardboard mask offers a comfortable continuity, transforming the preparation for the celebration from an effort of production into an act of preserving one's own work. At the same time, the school mask is the space of negotiation between the "old-fashioned" and the "modern": "We had a bride and groom in the procession, but the bride had a pink wig; I said not everything should be old-fashioned" (Simina C., aged 15, school student, interview 2018).

IV. Prefabricated (plastic) masks. This type of mask has the most strident contemporary agency. "I've had this devil mask for about 3-4 years, I bought it [...] from a toy shop in Bucharest. [...] only now, walking around the streets, did I see that devil masks are back in fashion this year," explains Iulian D. (interview 2019). Industrial plastic shifts the object toward commodity status (Appadurai 1986). Its agency is one of democratization: it allows anyone to become *Cucoaică* quickly and cheaply, but the price is the loss of a unique biography (Kopytoff 1986). This adoption of industrial polymers is a form of adaptive material culture, where the mall mask meets "grandma's *capot*[8] (Romanian: "housecoat"), kept especially for this occasion" (Iulian D., interview 2019), creating a hybrid object that works perfectly in the economy of spontaneous ritual.

The Anatomy of the Object and the Senses of the Wearer

The agency of the mask may be a theoretical metaphor, but in practice it translates into a biological reality acutely felt by the wearer. The mask imposes a "corporal habitus" (Bourdieu 1977); the weight of several kilograms of wire and the high centre of gravity dictate a discipline of effort during the eight, twelve, or even fourteen hours of performance in the village streets.

"If the mask isn't tied properly, it cuts into your shoulders so much you can't stand it. After a day wearing the *Chip* mask, you have marks from the wire on your skin, but that's the pride,

that you endured," says one wearer (Tibi G., aged 30, interview 2015). Here, the mask "writes" on the human body. The agency of the wire translates into physical pain, and this pain validates the ritual and is often interpreted locally as proof of endurance and commitment.

The *Chip* mask "forces" a certain balanced, almost hypnotic gait, necessary to balance the scaffolding of wire and mirrors (Gell 1998, 16-7). "Even your gait must be changed, precisely so that you won't be recognized. If you are recognized, you must hurry home to change" (Ionuț N., aged 45, interview 2015). The biographical object thus becomes a protective barrier, a material immunity that ensures the success of the disguise in the face of the community's attempts to expose the wearer: "When the *Cucoaicele* came to beat us girls, we would pull on his mask to see who he was." (Ileana S., aged 77, interview 2017)

The bell, an object with a rich pastoral heritage, undergoes a process of re-signification that gives it a new "cultural biography" (Kopytoff 1986): once mounted on the performer's belt, it renegotiates its agency, leaving the domestic universe of cattle to become an instrument of ritual purification and spatial assertion. Its violent resonance does not merely accompany the procession but actively restructures the acoustic field of the village, transforming public space into a temporarily reordered environment. The performers adjust their bells to generate a din that can be felt in the chest, thus transforming the *Chip* from a visual artefact into an overwhelming sound device that acts upon bodies and reorganizes relations between agents and patients (Gell 1998, 16-8). It is this sonic materiality that converts the village street into a liminal zone, suspending ordinary circulation and instituting a distinct ritual temporality (Turner 1969).

Performing Materiality on the Street

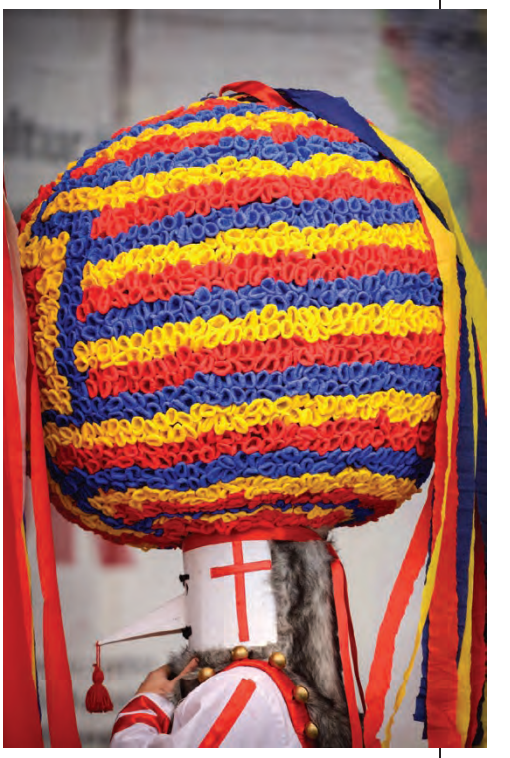
The interaction between the mask and the community goes beyond the visual sphere, being deeply tactile and kinetic. The wearer is not content to simply "show" the mask; he smashes it against the social reality of the village. The *Cucoaică*'s agency manifests itself through the *pământuf*,[9] an extension of the arm that erases the boundary between the object and the body of the other. "Through the small holes in the mask, you see the world as if through a sieve; everything is unclear, but you hear the cries and that drives you from behind." (Marian V., aged 22, interview 2019)

The ritual blow, the "health beating," represents the moment when the precarious materiality of the *Cucoaică* meets the physical resistance of the community. In contrast, the *Chip* imposes an interaction based on distance and respect, configuring a world of hierarchical spectacle. While the former is tactile, the *Chip* represents an overwhelming presence that reorders space through sound and volume:

> The mirrors beat in people's eyes, and the *acioi*[10] break your chest. [...] You feel tall, important, above everyone else, and the wire that constrains your forehead reminds you that you are carrying the whole village on your shoulders. (Costel M., aged 50, interview 2018)

This experience transforms the mask into a veritable prosthetic object, an extension of the body that profoundly reconfigures the wearer's sensory apparatus (Warnier 1999). Here, the materiality of the object dictates a new presence in the world: limited and fragmented visibility forces the individual to orient themselves by hearing and to negotiate a precarious





Chipuri masks in the festival procession.
Brănești, 2018.
Photo credit: Cristina Hurdubaia.

balance (Gell 1998, 16-7). Through this ritual "incorporation" (Bonnot 2002), everyday identity is suspended. Agency is redistributed within the ritual, as responsibility for gestures and force is displaced onto the object itself, which operates as a secondary agent. The interpellation of the community no longer belongs solely to the individual; it is mediated through the material interface that carries and externalizes his distributed personhood. (Gell 1998, 102-4)

Deconstruction of Materiality

Each element of the mask has its own biography that intersects with the greater history.

The pointed nose: a residual apotropaic agency. Even on new masks, the nose remains prominent. In the past, it was supposed to "pierce" evil spirits, being part of an aggressive morphology designed to shock. Today, it is a sign of otherness (Lévi-Strauss 1999, 82-5), visually marking the fact that the wearer has left the civilized world for an "upside-down" one. "The horns symbolize the *baba* (the hag/crone), an evil old woman with a big nose from fairy tales" (Emilian O., aged 25 years, interview 2018). This element is often linked to the

nose by a chain and accessorized with tassels or bells at the top, functioning as a veritable "visual trap" (Gell 1998, 76-7) that fragments the viewer's attention.

Mirrors constitute what Florentin Stoiciu (aged 66, interview 2018) calls the "magical core" of the mask, operating as a tactical interface between the visible and invisible dimensions of the ritual. Their agency is not merely symbolic but lies in their capacity to capture and destabilize the gaze through reflection; they function as decorative indices whose symmetry and surface effects induce captivation (Gell 1998, 76-7), suspending attention and transforming reflection into a protective visual barrier.

The shift from mirrors salvaged from gas lamps to ones purchased commercially marks the transition from "bricolage" (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 16-20) to standardized consumption, but the symbolic function remains unchanged. "The mirror on the mask is said to be the link between the visible and invisible worlds" (Florentin Stoiciu, aged 66, interview 2018). This transition has not altered the role of the five round mirrors fixed to the scaffolding, which continue to mediate the relationship between the wearer and the community.

The rabbit beard: a material sedimentation of virility**.** Although the community no longer lives off hunting, the rabbit beard "demands" to be present on the mask to secure its canonical presence. The evolution of materiality suggests a progression: from the organic phase of natural horns (ram, goat, deer) to the technical phase of horns carved from wood and, finally, to the triumph of the anthropomorphic, where rabbit fur remains the last material trace of a hunting economy that has vanished from everyday life. Even in school productions, this element persists, reproduced on cardboard masks and drawn with markers.

The paper bud and the *târn.* The transition from twigs to industrial wire marks a shift in manoeuvrability, with metal offering a freedom of construction that wood had limited due to its weight and rigidity. This technical change allows the *Chip* to gain height without becoming unwearable, the wire ensuring the structure's resistance during long journeys. On this slender skeleton, the mounting of the *tricolor*[11] decoration introduces a renewed articulation of identity, anchoring the ritual object in the symbolism of the national flag.

In this process, the dimensional increase of the bud from 1–2 cm to 3–4 cm (Maria Secăreanu, aged 67, interview 2018) can be read as an adjustment of the index to a new field of reception (Gell 1998, 26-8). What appears to be a minor technical modification functions as an optimization of visual legibility: volume and colour now communicate identity from a distance, adapting the detail to the perceptual conditions of major European carnivals.

Hybridity and Subversion

In the context of these field notes, the phenomenon of hybridization is particularly revealing for understanding the agency of the contemporary biographical object. The young people of Brănești are renegotiating local tradition through the strategic insertion of objects with global biographies into the ritual assemblage. From an anthropological perspective, the adoption of industrial polymers can be read as a form of "adaptive material culture" (Miller 2005), rather than as the degradation of a folkloric element.

The "pink wig" or the "plastic mask from the mall" operate as agents of synchronization with the present. These elements configure a hybrid world in which the traditional mask deliberately incorporates pop-cultural intrusions to avoid sterile museumification. What emerges is a form of reflexive self-ethnography (Mihăilescu 2018): the community

constructs its own spectacle while remaining aware of the external gaze.

A similar dynamic is observable in the use of prefabricated masks, which signal a simplification of disguise and a redistribution of access. The availability of industrial objects allows broader participation in the ritual, removing the temporal and technical barriers associated with manual production and, implicitly, destabilizing the hierarchy grounded in the possession of a prestigious object (Gell 1998, 71-2). Young people who lack the time or financial resources necessary to commission an authorial *Chip* resort to DIY practices involving mass-produced materials.



Chipuri mask in the festival procession. Brănești, 2018. Photo credit: Cristina Hurdubaia.

Rather than cancelling the ritual, industrial plastic repositions the object within a different regime of value. The mask shifts from the sacred domain of the author—associated with "aura" (Benjamin 2008)—to that of circulating "ritual goods" (Appadurai 1986), thereby securing the critical mass required for the custom's continued presence in the public space. The encounter between an industrial devil mask and a grandmother's *capot* produces a hybrid object—a functional (Baudrillard 1994)—whose effectiveness lies not in material purity but in its capacity to ensure anonymity and to interpellate the passer-by.

Within this geography of hybridity,[12] plastic is selected not as a substitute for tradition but as a material optimized for contemporary conditions: lightweight, weather-resistant, and logistically efficient. Agency, therefore, is relocated from the intrinsic qualities of the material to the performative capacity of the object—to its ability to generate social action within the ritual field (Gell 1998, 16-8). Hybridity, in this sense, does not signify dilution but rather a strategic recalibration of agency under changing material and social constraints.

The Conflict of Textures

Field research has revealed a subtle divide in how different generations perceive the material agency of the mask. For older craftsmen, the "true" mask is a product of suffering and time invested, while for younger people, its value lies in its immediate visual impact and freedom of movement. This tension shapes a social world in which the biographical object becomes a battleground between the "sacred" and the "commodity."

These guys nowadays don't have any patience. They go to the shop, buy that plastic thing, put it on their face and say they're *Cucoaice*. But that mask has no soul, no weight. We used to stay up all night, wire by wire, our fingers bleeding from the pliers. When you put the *Chip* mask on your head, you knew there was work behind it; it wasn't just a cheap toy bought from

a shop. This plastic is dead, it doesn't scare anyone; it's just there to make up the numbers (Vasile T., aged 80, interview 2018).

This resistance of the material, which "writes" itself on the craftsman's body through bleeding and effort, is what gives the object an undeniable agency in the eyes of the elders (Gell 1998, 71-2).

The younger generation's approach shifts the focus from the sacredness of execution to the effectiveness of performance. For them, the light materiality of industrial polymers allows a return to the dynamic function of the ritual—running and questioning—which was hampered by the monumental *Chipuri*: "The old men stick to tradition, but who spends weeks making a mask these days? [...] Yes, the plastic mask is good because it's light, you can breathe under it, and if it breaks, you don't cry over it." (Andrei P., aged 19, interview 2019). Following Miller (2005), this democratization through plastic can be read as an adaptation of material culture to the pace of post-socialist life. However, within the *Sedeanka* Group—a space for the preservation and negotiation of local tradition—the hierarchy remains dictated by the technical complexity of the object (Gell 1998, 16-8). Craftsman Gheorghe Secăreanu sees this hybridity as a form of "laziness of the hand" which threatens the very essence of revitalization.

> If we lose the *târn*, we lose everything. When I see these masks made in China on the street, I feel that order is being disrupted. [...] I say that it is better to have a *Cuc* with a plastic mask than no mask on the street. (Ion G., aged 83, interview 2019)

In this final negotiation, the agency of the mask proves to be pragmatic: the object must physically exist on the street for the ritual to survive, regardless of the degradation of its material biography (Gell 1998, 22-3).

Architectures of Anonymity and Disguise

The mask is inseparable from the rest of the costume, which, in Brăneşti, functions as an architecture of anonymity. The agency of the costume lies in its ability to distort the human silhouette—a process of extending the person through the material index (Gell 1998, 102-4)—thus preparing the ground for the visual impact of the *Chip*. In the context of current hybridization, we observe the use of pieces with symbolic significance, such as the "grandmother's *capot*" or the "inherited *ie.*"[13] "I dressed up as a boy with a *Cucoaică* mask so that the *Cucii* wouldn't put ashes on my head," says Cristina N. (aged 43, interview 2019). In this case, the garment acquires a protective agency. The textile object becomes biographical armour: the disguise allows the wearer to avoid ritual aggression and temporarily break the gender taboo so as to be accepted among those who control the street.

Historically, this ritualistic cross-dressing allowed boys to symbolically access the feminine power of regeneration. Through the migration of objects from girls' wardrobes to boys', clothing becomes a "biographical messenger" (Hoskins 1998), [14] capable of declaring affection in the absence of words: "Girls recognized the clothes worn by boys and thus knew which of them were their friends" (Elena Popescu, aged 70, interview 2018). The textile object "works" at the level of social relations, mediating romantic complicity under the guise of anonymity, even in risky contexts:



Cucoaice masks in the festival procession. Brănești, 2018. Photo credit: Cristina Hurdubaia.



> If her parents wouldn't let you into the house, the girl would put them [the clothes] in the newspaper and then in the bucket [...] we would take the package and leave. They were her cleanest clothes. (Tudor V., aged 80, interview 2018)

This clothing architecture included elements that signalled belonging to the local community, such as red crosses applied to peasant garments. Across different periods, the textile object conditions the possibility of participation in the ritual (Gell 1998, 16-8). The absence of a canonical element does not merely mark deviation but restricts the wearer's agency, weakening the relational link that authorizes his presence within the ritual field: "My father told me... all the *Cucii* had *opinci*,[15] but he didn't, so he didn't go with the *Cuci* anymore because of that, because he was ashamed." (Nicoleta B., aged 46, interview 2019)

Thus, beyond its function of disguise, the costume-mask acts as a filter that validates or invalidates access to the ritual space.

The Occupation of Private Space by the Mask-Object



Modern masks on Brănești streets, 2018.
Photo credit: Cristina Hurdubaia.

The agency of the mask as a biographical object operates at sensory and spatial levels, configuring an atmosphere that separates ritual time from the mundane. Field notes from 2018 record a marked transformation of the craftsman's domestic environment: the air becomes dense with the smell of cold metal (wire), glue, and wet crepe paper. This olfactory saturation accompanies the approaching liminal period of the *Cuci* and coincides with the gradual reorientation of domestic life toward ritual production.

Domestic space is progressively reorganized by material residues—wire offcuts, mirror fragments, scraps of fur. This "ordered disorder" follows what Lévi-Strauss (1966, 26-4) conceptualizes as *bricolage*: a mode of action grounded in a heterogeneous yet finite repertoire of available materials, recombined according to situational constraints rather than according to a pre-established technical plan. The master craftsman does not operate on a neutral surface; instead, he works within a field of fragments whose prior forms condition subsequent gestures (Gell 1998, 16-7). The mask thus emerges from an ongoing material negotiation rather than from abstract design.

The occupation of private space becomes total, suspending ordinary domestic order: "We no longer have room on the table, we no longer have room for the television; there are wires and paper everywhere. But that's how it is for us—after the winter holidays are

over, we start living for the *Cuci*" (Maria Secăreanu, aged 67, interview 2018). Domestic temporality is reorganized around the progressive assembly of the object, and everyday routines are subordinated to the demands of ritual making.

The fragment acquires significance through what Kopytoff (1986, 64-7) describes as the biographical continuity of things: elements of previous masks are incorporated into new structures, extending prior trajectories into the present configuration. In Gell's terms, these incorporated parts operate as distributed extensions of prior agency within the emerging index (Gell 1998, 102-4). The mask is therefore not an entirely new object each year, but a cumulative assemblage in which earlier material histories remain operative.

Tools themselves participate in this distributed network. The pliers "worn out, but gripping the wire like no new ones can," or the knitting needle used to twist paper buds, function as secondary agents within the making process, mediating the transformation of material into index (Gell 1998, 16-8). Technical transmission remains embodied and iterative, unfolding through practice, repetition, and direct engagement with materials rather than through formal instruction.

The workshop thus ceases to function merely as a site of fabrication and becomes a temporary reconfiguration of domestic life. The mask exists less as a finished artefact than as an ongoing material process through which space, time, and relational hierarchies are progressively reorganized.

The Archaeology of Materialized Memory

The testimonies of the elders reveal a period in which the materiality of the mask operated as a discreet medium of negotiation under the communist regime. The agency of the object manifested itself through its capacity to mediate participation within a context of political control, conditioning action while maintaining ritual continuity (Gell 1998, 16-8). In this space of negotiation, the borrowed garment functioned as a biographical object with a double valence: it concealed the boy's identity from the authorities while simultaneously revealing it to his beloved through the female clothing clandestinely passed via the bucket from the well (Elena Popescu, aged 70, interview 2018).

In the 1950s, materiality was marked by austerity: "You put a piece of elastic on it so it wouldn't fall off, you took the elastic from your underwear, whatever you could find, that's how it was" (Vasile T., aged 80, interview 2018). Feathers and down were also among the organic materials used in the construction and decoration of the masks during this period. Even this "elastic from the underwear" acquires significance through what Kopytoff (1986, 64-7) conceptualizes as the cultural biography of things: its prior domestic life is recontextualized within the ritual assemblage, carrying traces of earlier trajectories into a new performative configuration.

This archaeology of memory also reveals figures that have disappeared, such as the *Brezăiul* (a vestige of a vanished zoomorphic tradition), whose mask embodied a regime of material excess and sensory confrontation: "a man dressed in many dirty furs, carrying stalks and straw mats on his back and a dead animal, a dead chicken or a dead cat, in his hand" (Florentin Stoiciu, aged 66, interview 2018). The agency of these raw materials lay in their capacity to provoke, unsettle, and confront the public space through their visceral presence (Gell 1998, 16-8).

At the same time, the normative rigour of the object is illustrated by the biographical rupture involving Nicoleta B.'s father, who refused to participate because of his lack of *opinci*: "He didn't have them and was ashamed to leave the yard" (Nicoleta B., aged 46, interview 2019). The *opincă* operated as a material guarantor of belonging; the absence of a single canonical element restricted the wearer's agency within the ritual field (Gell 1998, 16-8).

Even in the 1980s, when school authorities kept pupils inside school buildings in an attempt to protect them from the ritual "health beatings," the attraction exerted by these objects remained powerful. Masks fitted with brushes made of "rubber scraps" (Mirela O., aged 57, interview 2019) exerted a form of relational agency that traversed institutional boundaries, drawing school order into the ritual dynamic of the street (Gell 1998, 16-8).

The Migration of the Mask

The biography of the mask extends beyond the domestic space and the ritual cycle itself, continuing through new forms of circulation, exhibition, and cultural representation.

When the *Cuci* mask leaves the village to be exhibited at European carnivals, its biography enters a new phase: that of a circulating object within a different regime of value (Appadurai 1986). In the cargo hold of an aeroplane or in the confined space of the *Sedeanka* Group's van, the mask undergoes a process of recontextualization, shifting from a device embedded in local ritual purification to an object operating within transnational circuits of display. Its agency in this migratory context is reconfigured as cultural mediation: the mask no longer functions solely within the intimate relational field of Brănești but externalizes a distributed identity within a new public arena (Gell 1998, 102-4).

The experience of the *Sedeanka* Group illustrates this transformation. The "trauma of transport" forces the object to adjust materially to the constraints of mobility. As Maria Secăreanu (aged 67, interview 2018) explains, the enlarging of the paper buds emerged as a pragmatic response to the demands of visibility and manoeuvrability. The craftsman thus extends the field of intended reception beyond the "neighbour's eye," recalibrating the morphology of the mask to operate within an expanded perceptual environment (Gell 1998, 26-8). The object's form is not merely preserved but strategically adjusted to maintain its indexical efficacy across borders.

Migration imposes on masks a biography of technical resilience and logistical agency. The architecture of the object is renegotiated to be both robust—capable of surviving handling at airports or on coaches—and lightweight, to comply with weight restrictions. This transformation can be read within the framework proposed by Clifford (1997, 24-9; 213-9), where culture is understood as constituted through travel, circulation, and recontextualization rather than rooted in static locality. Moving beyond its status as mere transported goods, the object is recalibrated in accordance with new exhibition spaces. Moreover, the migrant object loses its ephemeral character in favour of a process of heritagization that accompanies its circulation beyond the village (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). The mask acquires an "afterlife," becoming a repository of transnational experiences. The wearers gain prestige upon their return to the village; a mask that "has been out" exerts a greater agency than one that has remained in the village. This fascination with transit also marks the new generation:



Cuci's parade on the street in Brănești in 1976, 1982 and 1990.
Photos displayed at the exhibition organised in Brănești, at the Documentation and Information Centre in Brănești.

> Our favourite part of our carnival, on *Ziua Cucilor*, is when people from other countries come... and we would like to go to other countries one day, being *Cuci*. We were enchanted by the masks from Sardinia. (Group of school students, interview 2016)

Interaction with foreign groups, such as those from Sardinia, creates a world of cultural mirrors in which the local mask is measured against European otherness. Once integrated into a European carnival, the mask functions as a "metonymy of home"[16]: every constructive detail carries with it the memory of collective effort and native streets, transforming the object into a living presence that claims its own space amid global diversity (Gell 1998, 16-8; 102-4). The mask can reconstruct the original universe in a foreign space, functioning as a material witness of belonging. When a member of the *Sedeanka* Group puts on their mask at carnivals such as those in Bulgaria, Italy, or Switzerland, the object "works" on them, radically reconfiguring their habitus. The migrant mask mediates the tension between the local and the global, demonstrating that the agency of the biographical object intensifies with distance.

Through this process of museumification of ritual agency, the *Cuci* mask becomes a "boundary object" (Star and Griesemer 1989, 393-4), capable of inhabiting multiple social worlds. The mask concentrates personal memory, the craftsman's family pride, and the symbol of heritage. Overcoming the risk of diluting the ritual, international migration adds a new biographical chapter to it: that of survival through visibility. Brănești thus secures a stable place on the cultural map of the world through an object that refuses immobility, renegotiating its presence in each new geographical context.

Death and Rebirth of the Mask

At the end of its biography, the Brănești mask leaves behind a residual materiality with its own agency: ashes. Carried in a bag by the *Cucoaice,* ashes functioned as a marker of ritual punishment in the forms of the ritual documented in my field material; the sacred defilement with ashes meant the forced integration of the passer-by into mythical time. This volatile materiality served to punish women who violated the taboo of masking. The defilement was,

in fact, a marking of otherness that forced the victim to accept the rules of the community game (Gell 1998, 102-4).

Historically, the Brăneşti mask had a short and violent biography: it was born for a day and died symbolically at midnight. "We stayed *Cuci* until 11:30 p.m. and then we set fire to the masks" (Ştefan Arsene, aged 55, interview 2018). Incineration represented the final act of purifying agency; the object had to be destroyed so that the sacred time could end, allowing the wearer to return to their profane identity. Burning the cloth and feathers physically marked the agony of winter:

> We set fire to everything on the riverbank. The whole village smelled of burnt cloth and feathers. Then you knew that it was over, the evil had passed, winter was gone. (Ştefan Arsene, interview 2018)

This ritual destruction emphasized the ephemeral nature of the object: once consumed through performance, it had to disappear materially, marking the closure of sacred time and allowing the return to ordinary life (Huizinga 1949, 10-4).

Today, the agency of the mask has shifted toward conservation. Financial investment and the aesthetics of "beauty" make incineration impossible; masks become objects of self-heritaging, configuring what we might call, in an anthropological sense, a *personal heritage*,[17] a repository of intimate memory and craftsmanship, which suspends the ritual death of the object in favour of a continuous biography. This mutation indicates a profound change in the community's perception of time: from the cycle of regeneration to the line of historical preservation. The mask "refuses" to die, aspiring to the status of material witness of identity. Its preservation in the school or in the Secăreanu family room transforms the object from a "living agent" into a "document" (Gell 1998, 16-8), reflecting the transition from cyclical time, which consumes itself, to linear time—a process that marks a veritable museumification of ritual agency.[18]

Conclusions

Field research conducted in Brăneşti reveals that the revitalization of the custom is the result of a continuous renegotiation of materiality, rather than simple conservation. The *Cuci* masks transcend their status as folk artefacts, acting as symbolic devices endowed with forms of agency capable of restructuring social worlds (Gell 1998, 16-8). An analysis of their social biography—from the fragility of feathers and down in the 1950s to the hardness of industrial wire and the pragmatism of contemporary plastic—reveals a community that actively negotiates its cultural survival through matter (Kopytoff 1986).

Field data confirm that the mask operates simultaneously on interdependent levels. In the domestic space, it organizes collaboration and structures the work involved in mask production, while sustaining a pedagogy of the hand transmitted through practice rather than through formal instruction. On a sensory level, the object becomes an archive of raw effort: the marks left by the wire on the body, the fatigue that builds up during hours of performance, and the sensory experience of wearing the mask constitute the inscriptions of a bodily biography that the wearer "writes" over the course of up to fourteen hours of performance. Socially and symbolically, the mask mediates hierarchies of prestige and facilitates forms of courtship through the immunity of travesty, while on the global stage it acts as a "material ambassador" of local identity (Gell 1998, 102-4).



Masks in the festival procession (above), and modern masks (below). Brănești, 2018. Photo credit: Cristina Hurdubaia.



Beyond the case of Brăneşti, the article suggests that ritual objects can be approached as dynamic agents whose biographies continue to evolve through processes of material transformation, circulation, and recontextualization. Rather than opposing authenticity and change, the ethnographic material shows how continuity is produced through adaptation, allowing ritual objects to remain socially effective across different generations, material regimes, and cultural settings.

Material hybridity—the encounter between the rigour of craftsmanship and mass-produced objects—is evidence of adaptive agency, legitimizing the presence of ritual in the contemporary world.

The Brăneşti mask can absorb new materials and contexts, remaining the bridge between the micro-history of the workshop and the macro-history of a world in transition. The object's strength lies in its power to ensure the continuity of an experience that is sedimented both in the collective memory and in the material fibre of each *Chip*. By acting as a distributed person (Gell 1998, 16-8; 102-4), the mask transcends its immediate ritual use, becoming a physical vessel for a lineage of agency that connects past and present performers. Ultimately, the Brăneşti mask is defined as a total biographical object, whose agency is constantly recalibrated to ensure the survival of memory through matter. Transcending its status as a witness to the past, it remains an active agent of the present; in the universe of the *Cuci*, it is the object that, through its enduring biography, continues to "carry" the community into the future.

NOTES

1. The term *Cucii* (literally "cuckoos") refers here to the ritual masked figures, not the birds; the name denotes their specific role and identity within the Brăneşti tradition.

2. *Ziua Cucilor* is a threshold ritual held annually in Brăneşti on the first day of Orthodox Lent (Clean Monday). The custom marks the transition to spring through masked characters (*Cucii*), who have apotropaic and fertility functions.

3. *The agency* of *objects*: a concept developed by Alfred Gell (1998), according to which artefacts can mediate and influence human behaviour and social relationships.

4. *The cultural biography of things*: a theoretical perspective proposed by Igor Kopytoff (1986) which analyses objects as processes in progress, following their transition through different value regimes (commodity, sacred object, heritage).

5. *The Sedeanka* Group is a local cultural association representing the Danube Bulgarian (păvălani) community of Brăneşti. In addition to participating in the annual *Cucii* ritual, the group contributes to the transmission, preservation, and public presentation of the custom in Romania and abroad. The ritual itself remains community-based and involves local families, craftsmen, performers, schools, and cultural actors from the village.

6. The *târn* refers to the intricate wire scaffolding that forms the internal structure of the *Chip* mask. Its manufacture requires high technical skill, acting as a primary index of the craftsman's prestige and a fundamental element in the mask's "technology of enchantment" (Gell 1998, 71).

7. *Clacă*: A traditional form of communal labour based on mutual aid and social interaction. Within the ritual context, the *clacă* functioned as a primary site for the transmission of craft through observation and direct practice (embodied learning), ensuring the continuity of tradition across generations without the need for formal instruction.

8. The *capot* is a type of housecoat or lightweight indoor garment traditionally worn by women in Romanian households. In the context of the *Cuci* ritual, it is repurposed as a fundamental element of the male-to-female cross-dressing disguise.

9. The *pământuf* is a traditional ritual implement consisting of a wooden stick with a cord attached to one end, terminating in an old *opincă* or a piece of leather or rubber. It is used to strike passers-by symbolically for to bring health and good luck.

10. The *acioi* are large, locally forged copper or iron bells, traditionally part of the pastoral heritage in Romanian rural communities. In the *Cuci* ritual, they are repurposed as

acoustic devices of purification; their heavy metallic sound marks the transition into ritual time by subverting the participants' "self-possession" through sensory enchantment (Gell 1998, 76-7).

11. *The tricolor* (the three-coloured Romanian flag) on the *Chip* mask is a post-communist addition, marking the transition from a localised ritual to a state-sanctioned heritage display. In international festivals, it acts as a "national badge" that simplifies local identity for the global gaze, transforming the mask into a territorial index within a competitive European "market of traditions."

12. Hybridity here denotes the object's ability to navigate diverse "regimes of visibility" facilitating what Clifford (1997) terms a "culture in transit" between local ritual and transnational spectacle. This mobility suggests that cultural identity is defined not by static "'roots" but by "routes" of circulation within global contact zones. Consequently, the object functions as a mediator that renegotiates its meaning as it adapts to the aesthetic and commercial demands of the international stage.

13. The *ie* is the traditional Romanian blouse, characterized by a simple cut and rich embroidery (UNESCO 2022). When inherited, it functions as a "biographical messenger" (Hoskins 1998), carrying the memory of the female ancestors into the ritual space.

14. The concept of "*biographical messenger*" (Hoskins 1998) emphasises the ability of the textile object to convey and communicate the identity or affection of the wearer in a context of ritual or amorous secrecy.

15. *Opinci* (traditional leather sandals) act as an "index of authenticity" by preserving the formal schema of pastoral attire. Even when the leather is replaced by industrial materials like rubber, they ensure the symbolic recognition of the ritual persona. This continuity bridges the gap between archaic heritage and the contemporary globalised stage.

16. The concept of metonymy of home is used here through the lens of Gell's (1998, 102-4) theory of the distributed person, where the object (index) functions as a detached fragment that carries and represents the agency of the entire collective outside its geographical boundaries.

17. I use the term *personal heritage* here to describe a vernacular value regime through which the individual removes the biographical object from ritual destruction, investing it with the function of preserving intimate memory. This process is a form of self-heritage (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 149), which transforms the material index into a witness to individual resilience.

18. I use the phrase *museumification of ritual agency* to describe the ontological transition of the mask from the status of a "living agent"—capable of restructuring the social order through direct action—to that of a "document" (Gell 1998, 22-3), whose power now lies in preservation and memorial representation.

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Aesthetics and Archaization: Transformations in the Crafting and Sensory Impact of Romanian Carnival Masks

Adelina Dogaru Alexa
University of Bucharest, Romania
ORCID: 0009-0001-6418-9362

Adelina Dogaru Alexa is a lecturer in the Department of Cultural Studies at the University of Bucharest and a researcher at the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore. She is a specialist in cultural anthropology, with particularly interest in sensorial anthropology, ritual studies, the anthropology of art, and material culture.

Correspondence: adelina.dogaru@unibuc.ro

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ABSTRACT

The masks used in Romanian winter carnivals are becoming increasingly larger, more imposing, and more colourful. This evolution is driven by two key factors: the growing emphasis on visual aesthetic appeal and the need for masks to generate a powerful sensory impact that engages resonates with broader and more diverse audiences. These changes extend beyond the masks themselves to encompass the overall performance, incorporating larger groups of participants and soundscapes, thereby intensifying the sensory experience.
As part of this transformation, elements borrowed from various sources are deliberately reworked and exaggerated to heighten the impression of archaism, reinforcing the image of a genuine folk tradition whose apparent preservation of older forms is itself partly achieved through their reinvention.
These developments highlight the adaptive nature of ritual practices, where sensory and aesthetic elements play a crucial role in maintaining cultural relevance and sustaining ensuring the ritual's efficacy. By employing these strategies, such winter masquerades express and reinforce collective identities, power relations, and shared meanings within the community. By enhancing their sensory impact, masquerades not only appeal to contemporary sensibilities but also foster a sense of continuity, grounding the community in its cultural heritage.
Thus, ritual elements such as masks function not only as aesthetic artifacts but also as active agents in shaping and conveying identity, power, and collective meaning through evolving sensory strategies. By examining the case of *Uncheși* (lit. "uncles") masks of Păunești village in Vrancea County, this article explores how recent transformations of the masks and their performance reflect broader socio-cultural shifts, emphasizing the central role of sensory impact in preserving the ritual's efficacy and resonance in contemporary contexts. At the same time, it highlights the dialectical relationship between modern innovation and revival of tradition.

KEYWORDS

Heritagisation; Romanian winter masquerades; materiality; ritual masks; sensory experience.



Ritual context and performative actions over time

Among the emblematic figures of the winter carnival are *moșii* [lit. "old men"] and *babele* [lit. "old women"], masked characters representing elderly men and women whose presence during this liminal period of temporal renewal signifies the continuity of the community and the balance between life and death. The custom of the *Uncheși*[1]

[lit. "uncles"] from Păunești, which forms the focus of the present analysis, belongs to the broader group of carnivalesque practices that take place in the Moldavian region during the New Year period. Until the COVID-19 pandemic, the ritual traditionally unfolded between the night of 31st of December and 1st of January, the feast day of Saint Basil. On this occasion, households where someone was celebrating their name day were visited by groups of masked performers, and these visits sometimes continued into the following day. Masked groups would also stop at the homes of performers' fiancées, observing the strict rule that masks could not be removed until the ritual sequence had been completed. The visit to each household typically concluded with a shared meal, during which traditional foods and drinks were consumed.

Traditionally, the performers would move through the village using a cart drawn by animals and decorated for the occasion. Today, these carts have largely been replaced by motor vehicles pulling trailers, which are elaborately adorned with traditional blankets, tinsel, Christmas ornaments, coloured paper, and other festive decorations. From these mobile platforms, music is played, performers dance, and various comic scenes are enacted. These include playful performances such as parodies and other humorous sketches designed to provoke laughter, like mock weddings and mock funerals performances inspired by traditional ceremonial groups, which remain widespread today. These mobile performances resemble allegorical floats inspired by larger and more widely known carnivals or festival traditions.

The ritual documented in Păunești results, as in many other contexts, from the convergence of two distinct ritual practices that historically overlapped during the New Year festivities: the *Plugul* or *Pluguşorul* [2] and the carnivalesque masked performance.

In this context, at each household they visit, the masked performers enact the *Pluguşorul,* a rhythmic ritual text describing the successive stages of agricultural labour while simultaneously incorporating satirical commentary on recent actions, behaviours, and events involving villagers, local authorities, or politicians. Through irony, sometimes expressed in coarse or deliberately provocative language, the text alludes to recent events that have shaped and animated the life of the community. The recitation of the text is followed by the symbolic act of drawing a furrow in the host's yard, re-enacting the agricultural gesture that lies at the heart of the New Year ritual marking the beginning of the agrarian year.

Methodology

The present study draws on qualitative ethnographic research combining direct observation with semi-structured interviews conducted with members of the local community, as part of the research conducted in the *Unveiling the Arts and Crafts Behind the MASKS* project (101139852).

Informants were selected from different age groups and positions within the ritual, allowing the research to capture a range of perspectives on the custom and its contemporary transformations.

Particular attention was given to the material dimension of the ritual. As masks are typically crafted by the performers themselves, the fieldwork included documenting the processes of mask-making and costume preparation. Several interviews were therefore conducted with individuals involved in the making of masks and ritual accessories. Additional interviews were conducted with individuals specialised in producing certain elements of

the rituals, such as bells, in order to understand both how these objects are made and the role they play in the performance.

The research was further complemented by an analysis of community-managed social media channels used to promote the custom. Frequently identified by research participants as key sources of information, these platforms offer valuable insight into how the community represents, narrates, and publicly presents this cultural practice. Their examination provides an additional perspective on the contemporary evolution of the custom and on the ways in which its cultural significance is expressed and negotiated in the digital sphere.

Theoretical framing and context

Recent scholarship has challenged the understanding of heritage as the simple preservation of an authentic past, emphasizing instead its character as a cultural and political process through which communities, institutions and other actors negotiate what should be remembered, displayed, and transmitted (Bendix 1997, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 2004, Smith 2006, Harrison 2013). Many European masquerades have become subject to processes of heritagisation, as communities and institutions increasingly seek to preserve, promote and publicly represent them as elements of intangible cultural heritage. Rather than simply safeguarding existing traditions, however, heritagisation frequently generates new cultural forms by reshaping ritual practices, values, and material expressions in response to changing social and institutional contexts (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, Smith 2006, Bortolotto 2015).

Recent studies of European masquerades have similarly shown that heritagisation is not merely a process of conservation but an ongoing negotiation over authenticity, legitimacy, and public representation (Broccolini 2016, Panero García and Pinelo Tiza 2023, Perricone 2023). These negotiations extend beyond competing narratives about the past, reshaping the practices, bodies, and material objects through which rituals are performed.

The transformations described above suggest that heritagisation operates not only through the production of heritage discourses but also through the material reconfiguration of ritual objects. Rather than asking how heritagisation affects ritual, the question becomes how competing heritage discourses are translated into material forms that subsequently reshape ritual practice. Heritage interventions do not simply redefine the meanings attributed to ritual objects; they also transform the material conditions under which ritual action takes place.

In Păunești, one of the principal arenas in which these negotiations unfold is the mask itself. As local authorities have increasingly promoted a visually legible and publicly acceptable form of heritage, they have also acted upon an imagined audience whose presumed expectations privilege spectacle, order, and cultural display over embodied interaction (Smith 2006, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, Urry 1990). The community, however, responded not by abandoning the ritual but by investing more heavily in the materiality of the masks, redirecting creative effort from bodily performance towards the object itself.

Following Gell's (1998) notion of agency, while drawing on broader approaches to material culture (Appadurai 1986, Kopytoff 1986, Miller 2005), I argue that the mask should not be understood merely as a passive representation of heritage. Its changing material properties reshape the possibilities for ritual action and, in doing so, they actively participate in the

transformation of ritual practice. The argument developed here is therefore not simply that heritagisation changes ritual, but that it does so through the material reconfiguration of ritual objects. The mask thus emerges not only as an object of heritage but also as one of the main mediators through which competing understandings of heritage are negotiated, enacted, and contested.

The mask costume

The archaic form of the mask, as described by elderly performers, consisted of a large sheepskin shaped into a cylindrical form that covered the performer's entire head and chest. Openings were cut for the eyes and mouth, while irregular teeth were created from beans. A long, pointed nose made of cloth was attached to the front of the mask. On either side of the head, two goose wings were attached to wooden slats. The wooden structure was further decorated with dried pig intestines left hanging loosely, as well as an inflated and dried pig bladder filled with cereal grains, which produced a rattling sound whenever the mask moved Around the waist, performers wore a wide leather belt from which cattle bells, typically measuring around 15-20 cm, were suspended.

Beginning in the 1970s, the masks increased significantly in size. The wooden structure above the head was extended upwards, while the accessories made from pig intestines and pig bladder were gradually abandoned. In their place, industrially produced decorative elements such as ribbons, beads, and crepe paper were introduced. The upper part of the mask developed into a large decorative surface covered with patterned fabric. According to local memory, this area was sometimes adorned with postcards or even record covers featuring photographs of popular singers of folklore-inspired music.

As the mask itself grew in scale, so did the accessories accompanying it. The bells, which had once been ordinary livestock bells, began to be specially manufactured for the ritual and became much larger and louder. Today, these bells measure approximately 40-50 cm. Only children still wear the smaller bells resembling those used in the past. (Fig. 1)

As the masks became increasingly imposing, many of the traditional decorative elements were gradually abandoned. The wings remained an essential component, but goose wings, considered too small, were replaced by swan wings. Pig bladders disappeared entirely and were replaced by brightly coloured ribbons, Christmas ornaments, and tinsel. The head itself continues to be covered with a fur mask that preserves the traditional model, but the feathers are now mounted on a large wooden structure resting on the performer's shoulders. This structure can reach approximately 1.5-2 meters in width and rise up to 1.5 meters above the wearer's head, giving the mask a striking monumental appearance. (Fig. 2)

The masked groups themselves, locally referred to as *Pluguri*, are organised according to the different areas of the village from which the performers come. At present, approximately four such groups are formed, corresponding to the four hills across which the settlement extends (Novăcești, Surla, Bârnova, and Bostănești). In the past, however, there were significantly more such groups.



Fig. 1. Old and New Bell. Photo by Adelina Dogaru.



Fig. 2. *Uncheși* mask. Photo by Cătălin Alexa.

Mask and violence

Another significant component of the performance concerns the protective and transformative function of the mask. By concealing the identity of the wearer, the mask temporarily suspends ordinary mechanisms of social recognition and accountability, creating a space in which behavioural norms may be loosened or even inverted. Within the carnivalesque framework, such anonymity allows participants to engage in acts of symbolic disorder, including mockery and satirical denunciation of undesirable behaviours or events that marked the community during the previous year. In this sense, masking operates not merely as an element of costume but also as a performative device that enables the ritual articulation of social tensions. Within this temporary suspension of normative order, violence occasionally appears as a secondary but historically documented aspect of the custom. Collective memory preserves numerous accounts of confrontations between masked participants who took advantage of the anonymity afforded by their costumes to settle unresolved personal disputes. Oral testimonies collected in the community suggest that the festive moment itself was sometimes regarded as an opportunity to address grievances accumulated over the course of the year.

One such testimony recalls masked groups descending from the surrounding hills towards the centre of the village, carrying knives between their teeth and ready to confront rival groups if they encountered them along the way. While such episodes do not necessarily occur every year, their persistence in local narratives illustrates how the ritual context generates a liminal space in which ordinary forms of restraint could be temporarily relaxed.

> They used to cut each other. They would stand there under the mask with the knife in their mouth. After drinking a bucket of wine, he would suddenly remember that they had argued sometime during the year. You know, when you're under the mask you have a different kind of courage. (Niculai Cautici, 60, Păunești, Vrancea, January 2026)

During the communist period, local authorities introduced measures to regulate such behaviour and reduce the risk of violence. Masked participants were required to wear numbered armbands issued by the authorities in exchange for their identity cards. This administrative measure allowed individuals involved in conflicts to be identified and held accountable if injuries occurred during the festivities. The intervention illustrates an early tension between the traditional logic of ritual disorder and the modern state's attempt to maintain public order and exercise administrative control over the custom.

Such forms of strict administrative control were gradually abandoned after 1990, leading to a noticeable decline in the vitality of the custom. On the one hand, community interest diminished. On the other, recurring episodes of violence and disorder, whether ritualized or not, required the involvement of gendarmes to maintain public order and ensure participants' safety, which created a further source of tension. This decline prompted local authorities to intervene once again and introduce measures aimed at restoring the carnival's prestige and significance within village cultural life.

These successive interventions produced a series of transformations. In particular, they reveal the processes through which aesthetic choices and institutional initiatives have reshaped the masks and masking practices in Păunești, illustrating how local actors actively negotiate the form and meaning of the tradition.

Pandemic restrictions and the reconfiguration of the space

Another significant moment in the evolution of the custom came with the COVID-19 pandemic and the public-safety regulations introduced in its aftermath, which have significantly transformed the conditions under which the custom is performed. Traditional house-to-house carolling has been largely discontinued for safety reasons. Instead, substantial numbers of gendarmes are deployed to establish a clearly defined perimeter within which the movement of masked performers is permitted. The temporal framework of the custom has also been altered: carolling is now restricted to daytime hours, as nocturnal performances are subject to separate regulations and require special permits.

As a result, the traditional visits to individual households can no longer take place, and the presence of masked groups in the streets of the village is limited to a single day. The practice of carolling traditionally involved reciprocal exchanges with householders and the consumption of food and, in particular, alcohol. Once the performance itself became more restricted, alcohol consumption declined. Because alcohol had often intensified tensions within the community, this reduction has also contributed to a decrease in violent incidents.

Carnivalesque disorder is therefore no longer enacted primarily through direct social interaction but is instead condensed into symbolic representation mediated through sensory effects. The centre of the village, more precisely, the circular area surrounding the town hall, has become the designated space in which the masked performance can take place. This spatial reconfiguration also shapes a specific pattern of movement resembling a parade, reinforcing the festive character of the event. The value and significance of the custom are now expressed within an artificial framework of celebration, comparable to a theatrical stage.

The selection of a specific area of the village, transformed into a ritual *dispositif* (Lardellier 2008), preserves the festive dimension of the custom while simultaneously imposing a new form of conduct on participants. The boundary between performer and audience becomes more clearly defined through the allocation of separate spaces: a designated performance area, or stage, for the masked participants and a delimited viewing area for spectators.

This transformation generates a hybrid form in which the behaviour of stage performers intersects with the ritual gestures of traditional masked actors. The deafening sound of the bells is concentrated within this restricted space, while the performers' voices are amplified through microphones. At the same time, the performers' movements become more static and stylised, producing a more theatrical form of performance. The cracking of the whip, once a powerful sonic element of *Pluguşorul*, is now largely symbolic: performers move the whip through the air rather than striking it forcefully against the ground, as the narrow and crowded space no longer allows for its full use.

The delimited space, to which only performers wearing *Uncheşi* masks are admitted, thus becomes a controlled ritual arena in which the custom continues to be enacted under new spatial, temporal, and institutional conditions.

On the edge

Beyond its spectacular dimension, the custom must be understood within the broader carnivalesque framework that characterises many winter rituals associated with the

transition between the old and the new year. Such rituals unfold within what anthropologists have described as a liminal temporal space, an ambiguous interval situated between two symbolic orders, in this case between the end of one calendrical cycle and the beginning of another. As Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1969) have shown, moments of transition often generate ritual environments in which ordinary structures of social life are temporarily suspended or reconfigured. Within these liminal intervals, ambiguity, transformation, and symbolic inversion become not only possible but culturally meaningful.

The act of masking plays a central role in producing this liminal condition. By concealing the identity of the performer, the mask enables a temporary departure from everyday social roles, allowing individuals to assume alternative identities that would otherwise remain inaccessible within the ordinary framework of community life (Belting 2017). In this sense, masking constitutes a process of becoming other, through which the performer symbolically steps outside the social position ordinarily assigned to them. This transformation is accompanied by behaviours characteristic of the carnivalesque register, such as loud noise, mockery, exaggerated gestures, and other forms of temporary disruption of established hierarchies.



In this context, the ritual environment moves between normative acceptance and transgression. Acts that would normally be condemned, such as satire, ridicule, verbal aggression, or forms of controlled disorder, become tolerated and sometimes even expected within the ritual frame. As Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) famously argued in his analysis of the carnivalesque, liminal manifestations do not simply represent chaos or social breakdown. Rather, they constitute structured forms of temporary inversion through which communities symbolically renegotiate power relations, norms, and collective anxieties. These ritualised transgressions often function as mechanisms through which tensions accumulated within the social order are publicly expressed and temporarily negotiated (Girard 1977, Testa 2021).

The winter carnival thus produces a complex ritual environment in which temporal, social, and symbolic boundaries become porous. The thresholds between past and future, order and disorder, life and death are momentarily opened, allowing for encounters with figures that themselves embody this ambiguity. It is precisely within this liminal framework that the symbolic presence of ancestral figures, such as the *Uncheși*, acquires its full significance.

The *Uncheși*, figures present within the Romanian carnivalesque repertoire and understood locally as ancestral beings, are conceived as travellers from the world of the dead. They are invoked simultaneously as protectors and as agents of controlled ritual disturbance that mark the passage between two worlds, symbolizing both continuity and the ultimate triumph of life over death. In this context, the liminal framework of the carnival is constructed through the symbolic evocation of an uncertain boundary between the living and the dead. The wings of the mask reinforce the idea of the traveling, winged soul that materializes through the mask in ritual performance.

Elements associated with death and mortality also appear in the accessories sometimes used by masked performers, who in the past would carry small animals or animal remains, using them to frighten passers-by. Today, however, such practices are discouraged by the organizers of the parade, who exclude participants who incorporate these elements into their costumes.

The presence of dead animals, such as a cat, a ferret, or a mouse, or of animal remains, such as a pig's head or a chicken's foot, carried by *Uncheși*, may once have served magical or apotropaic functions. Over time, however, these objects have gradually lost their original ritual efficacy, becoming primarily a costume accessory. Nevertheless, until relatively recently these elements continued to play a significant role within the carnivalesque performance by deliberately provoking a form of ritualized disgust. Participants would bring these remains

close to spectators, intentionally provoking reactions of repulsion and fear, two emotions that are closely intertwined, as disgust frequently overlaps with fear, particularly when associated with death and bodily decay (Miller 1997).

What is at stake in this interaction is not death itself, but rather the unsettling material presence of the dead body. The object of disgust is the dead body, feared not because of the killing it implies, but because of its state of decomposition. By confronting spectators with this disturbing materiality, the masked performers temporarily disrupt ordinary sensory boundaries and social conventions surrounding the handling and display of dead bodies.

Within the carnivalesque framework, this deliberate transgression of sensory and moral norms serves a specific ritual function. The display of decaying matter, associated with impurity and danger (Douglas 1966) in many cultural contexts (Menninghaus 2003, Rozin and Fallon 1987), produces a momentary inversion of everyday sensibilities. Disgust here becomes a performative device that destabilizes the boundaries between attraction and repulsion and between laughter and fear. Such sensory provocations contribute to the creation of the chaotic and ambivalent atmosphere characteristic of carnival, in which the ordinary order of things is symbolically suspended.

At the same time, the emphasis placed on the materiality of the dead body resonates with broader anthropological interpretations of the grotesque and the carnivalesque. Grotesque imagery often foregrounds the body in states of transformation, decay, or excess, thereby highlighting processes of regeneration and renewal within the cycle of life and death. In this sense, the unsettling presence of animal remains within the performance may be interpreted not merely as an element of shock or spectacle, but as a symbolic reminder of the porous boundary between life and death that the carnival temporarily makes visible.

In recent years, as previously mentioned, such practices have increasingly been discouraged or prohibited by local authorities, reflecting changing sensibilities regarding public hygiene and the aesthetic expectations associated with the contemporary presentation of traditional customs. The disappearance of these elements therefore marks not only a shift in ritual practice but also a broader transformation in the sensory and moral economy (Howes 2003) through which the carnival is experienced and interpreted.

Transformations of spontaneous participation and performative practice. Gender and aesthetics

In addition to the *Uncheși* masks, the ritual repertoire traditionally included a female character known as *Baba* ("the old woman"). This figure was typically performed through travesty: male performers dressed in women's clothing and wore simple facial coverings that served only to conceal their identity. Over time, these rudimentary disguises were gradually replaced by commercially produced masks, but the association between the elderly male and the female figures remained a recognizable element of the performance and costume.

The presence of such gendered pairs is common across many European masked traditions, where the symbolic interaction between male and female figures often evokes themes of complementarity, fertility, and renewal (Testa 2021). In Păunești, however, this relational dimension has become progressively less visible as the variety of masks used in the performance has expanded. (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3. Capture from the movie *Mascații din Păunești, Vrancea* [The Masked Men of Păunești, Vrancea], Adina Elena Murgoci, 2013, Universitatea Media.

Until approximately one or two decades ago, the ritual landscape of the village during the festive period was characterized by a remarkable diversity of spontaneously masked participants. Their number significantly exceeded that of performers wearing *Uncheși* masks. These participants often wore latex masks representing grotesque, demonic, or decrepit figures and impersonated a wide range of characters. In some cases, the masks depicted figures drawn from contemporary public life, most notably political leaders or globally recognizable personalities such as Vladimir Putin or, in earlier years, Osama bin Laden, who were parodied within the carnivalesque framework. Within the logic of carnival, such representations functioned less as direct political commentary than as mechanisms of parody and symbolic inversion. The authority associated with these figures was temporarily appropriated, exaggerated, and ridiculed, turning them into objects of collective laughter. In this sense, the practice aligns with broader carnivalesque traditions in which power and hierarchy are momentarily suspended through mockery and performative exaggeration (Bakhtin 1984, Testa 2021).

Such satirical representations were frequently accompanied by short comic scenes performed collectively, including mock weddings and mock funerals, forms of ritual parody commonly encountered in Romanian winter masquerades (Pop 1999, Benga 2025). The participants who masked themselves spontaneously were often responsible for many of the more dynamic aspects of the ritual.

The relative mobility afforded by their simpler masks allowed them to move freely through the village, visit households, interact with relatives, and participate in behaviours characteristic of the carnivalesque atmosphere. These included playful or sometimes aggressive confrontations, the throwing of flour, water, or feathers, alcohol consumption, and other acts that contributed to the chaotic energy traditionally associated with the ritual.

Today, however, participants engaging in such spontaneous forms of masking are largely excluded from the official performance, and the range of characters represented in the ritual has consequently narrowed.

In this context, the mask increasingly functions as an object whose visual and material presence tends to outweigh the symbolic meanings it once conveyed within the broader dramatic composition of the ritual. This shift can be understood within wider processes of heritagisation, through which local cultural practices are reframed as cultural heritage and adapted for public display and collective representation. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) has argued, the staging of tradition often involves processes of selection, emphasis, and aesthetic refinement, through which certain elements are highlighted while others are marginalized in order to produce a coherent and visually compelling representation of cultural identity.

In the case of the Păunești carnival, these dynamics have contributed to the progressive establishment of the *Uncheși* mask as the central emblem of the custom. The growing institutional promotion of this mask has been accompanied by a process of formal elaboration

and enlargement that increasingly privileges visual impact. While such transformations reinforce the mask's role as a recognizable symbol of local identity, they simultaneously reshape the internal logic of the performance (Urry 1990). As the mask becomes larger and more elaborate, the performer's possibilities for movement and interaction are significantly reduced.

Consequently, the emphasis gradually shifts from the performative dimension of the ritual, once characterized by mobility, improvisation, and a wide range of carnivalesque interactions, towards the visual prominence of the mask as a heritage object. The monumental scale acquired by the *Uncheși* masks limits the performers' physical mobility and makes it difficult, if not impossible, to reproduce the gestures and dynamic forms of participation that once defined the ritual environment. In this sense, the transformation of the mask reflects a broader reconfiguration of the custom itself, from a participatory and fluid ritual practice towards a more staged and visually oriented form of cultural representation.

Aestheticization, identity, and the regulation of the carnivalesque

The contemporary transformation of the custom has also generated the gradual emergence of a specific aesthetic regime, shaped by both community pride and the desire to present an imposing and visually striking performance. The exaggeration of the mask's features, including its size, decorative richness, and visual impact, responds not only to internal dynamics of prestige among performers but also to the increasing importance of spectacle within the ritual environment.

This process of aestheticization is accompanied by a selective exclusion of elements that contemporary sensibilities perceive as disturbing or inappropriate. Practices that once formed part of the ritual repertoire, such as carrying dead animals or animal remains intended to provoke disgust or fear, are now prohibited by local authorities. The authorities criticize such practices as being in poor taste and as likely to drive away the growing number of tourists attending the ritual:

> There was one fellow who tied a pig's head to his back and walked around like that, frightening people. But is that why people come here? To see things like that? Others would bring cats, whatever they could find. I told him to go home. (Marian Chiriac, 42, Director of the Cultural Center in Păunești, Vrancea, interview, January 2026)

A similar tendency towards purification can also be observed in the content of the *Pluguşorul* recitations.

Although the text is adapted from year to year, older members of the community still remember certain verses that have become emblematic and were repeated for many years without alteration. In contemporary performances, however, a more neutral and largely standardised version tends to be recited. In this version, satirical elements are significantly reduced and references to specific local events are avoided, as the performance is increasingly directed towards a broader audience unfamiliar with the social context that inspired such references. The collection of older variants proved particularly difficult, as performers showed considerable reluctance to reproduce texts perceived as argotic, vulgar, of limited or no aesthetic value, or simply no longer relevant.

> They were parodies. Do people travel hundreds of kilometres just to hear parodies? I didn't think that was appropriate. They want to see something authentic. What is authentic about a bunch of parodies? (*Idem*)

The custom has increasingly been oriented towards a broader public, contributing to the construction of a favourable image of the community for external audiences. In this process, local authorities assume a regulatory and protective role, seeking both to sustain community participation and to ensure that the event presents a socially acceptable and culturally valued image. This intervention often results in a process of gradually "civilising" the ritual environment through the regulation of aesthetic standards, the disciplining of behaviour, and the exclusion of elements perceived as disruptive or incompatible with contemporary expectations of public representation.



According to the director of the local cultural centre, there has been a deliberate effort to concentrate the performance around the *Uncheși* masks, which are perceived as distinctive and emblematic of the village. This orientation reflects a broader attempt to present a coherent and recognizable image of the tradition to external audiences.

Within this framework, the ritual becomes increasingly subject to aesthetic regulation, through processes of heritagisation that privilege forms of public display compatible with dominant heritage aesthetics. I conceptualize this process as *visual hygiene*. Certain elements that were once present in the carnival, such as spontaneous masking or characters perceived as vulgar, grotesque, or excessively modern, have been gradually marginalized or excluded. The aim of these interventions is not only to maintain order but also to ensure that the event produces a positive and visually compelling image of the community.

Forms of spontaneous masking have also been progressively excluded. These participants often used latex masks representing grotesque or demonic figures, or impersonated characters drawn from contemporary public life, including international political figures parodied through masking and travesty. Such practices are now frequently perceived as vulgar or inappropriate for a tradition understood as ancestral and representative of local identity.

This perception rests partly on the idea that such masks involve little effort or creativity, since they are purchased rather than made, while the relative simplicity of assembling the overall masked costume is interpreted as a sign of vulgarity rather than creativity. At the same time, their explicit references to contemporary figures are seen as disruptive intrusions of modernity into a ritual domain increasingly framed as belonging to the sphere of tradition. The symbolic association between collective identity and cultural forms perceived as traditional thus generates a tendency towards aesthetic purification and standardization. What becomes emblematic of the custom is increasingly determined by what appears visually pleasing and morally acceptable within an idealized cultural economy of tradition, one that often corresponds less to an archaic model than to its contemporary reconstruction.

The effort to define which elements legitimately represent tradition simultaneously entails the exclusion of practices considered incompatible with contemporary norms of taste, morality, or public representation. Such processes of symbolic purification and aesthetic regulation can be understood within broader dynamics of heritage construction and the negotiation of authenticity (Bendix 1997, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). In these contexts, local cultural practices are not simply preserved but selectively reframed and curated to produce a coherent and publicly acceptable image of tradition. Elements perceived as disorderly, excessive, or morally ambiguous, such as violent encounters, grotesque imagery, or forms of spontaneous masking, tend to be marginalized, while visually striking and aesthetically refined components are emphasized and promoted as emblematic representations of local identity.

Interviews conducted with members of the community suggest that the progressive enlargement of both masks and bells is largely driven by the performers themselves. The creation of increasingly imposing costumes is often motivated by a sense of pride and competition among participants, with each seeking to create a more spectacular and visually striking appearance than the others. In this sense, the mask functions not only as a ritual object but also as a visible marker of prestige within the community. (Viorel Câmpanu, 33, bell maker, Păunești, January 2025)

The bells attached to the performers' belts, for instance, may weigh up to twenty kilograms, while the wooden structures supporting the masks can reach considerable dimensions. The preparation for the ritual therefore begins weeks before the performance itself. From the beginning of December, the sound of bells can already be heard throughout the village as performers prepare their costumes, repair masks, and rehearse so that they become accustomed to the weight of the costume and the movements required to perform in it.

Ringing the large bells requires considerable physical effort and often demands prior training. Without such preparation, the repetitive motion and weight of the costume may cause considerable discomfort or even pain. From this perspective, the performance of the *Uncheşi* masks can also be understood as an embodied practice in which sensory intensity, physical endurance, and collective preparation contribute to the production of the ritual experience. The sonic dimension of the ritual thus begins to shape the village's sensory landscape long before the actual performance takes place, building expectations and emotional intensity.

At the same time, these transformations respond to a contemporary regime of sensory consumption that privileges immediate visual impact and spectacle. As David Howes has argued, modern cultural environments increasingly operate within a sensory economy in which cultural products are designed to produce strong impressions and memorable experiences for audiences (Howes 2005). Within this framework, masks are no longer valued solely for their ritual efficacy or symbolic functions but also for their capacity to attract attention, impress spectators, and circulate as visually compelling markers of heritage. The emphasis on monumental scale, elaborate decoration, and carefully controlled presentation reflects this shift towards a *hyper-aestheticised* mode of experiencing tradition, in which the visual and sensory intensity of the object becomes increasingly central to its cultural value.

Negotiating spectacle: the limits of monumentalisation

The interaction between the competitive creativity of performers and the aesthetic regulation promoted by local authorities has produced significant transformations in the performance. As the masks and bells have grown in size and weight, the possibilities for movement have become increasingly restricted.

Under conditions of strong wind, the masks can no longer be safely worn on the performer's head, as they risk being damaged or blown to the ground.

> That's the Romanian pride… That boy who made that huge mask last year—the wind knocked him over. He couldn't even manage it. Just imagine, the mask is two and a half metres high… and he's about two metres himself. One gust of wind and you turn into a hang glider. (Marian Chiriac, 42, Director of the Cultural Center in Păunești, Vrancea, interview, January 2026)

Likewise, entering houses or indoor performance spaces becomes practically impossible. Participation in contemporary staged events, such as festivals, therefore often requires the use of smaller masks to allow performers to enter indoor venues.

> I made four or five smaller masks. Sometimes they invite you to perform at New Year's parties in restaurants. Where could you go with those big ones? You'd end up with every chandelier in the place getting hooked on your mask. (Marian Chiriac, 42, Director of the Cultural Centre in Păunești, Vrancea, interview, January 2026)

A revealing episode recalled by Marian Chiriac illustrates the tensions that emerge when these practices are relocated to new settings. During a festival organized in a cultural centre (*Festivalul de Datini și obiceiuri*), spectators reportedly left the hall shortly after the masked performers from Păunești entered the space.

The overwhelming sound produced by the massive bells created an acoustic environment that proved intolerable for an indoor audience. Such episodes highlight the difficulties that arise when practices originally embedded in open-air rural settings are transferred to controlled spaces designed for conventional forms of spectacle.

Children, spectacle, and the reconfiguration of ritual roles

This symbolic restructuring of the custom is also reflected in the increasing presence of children within a ritual domain that was traditionally reserved for adult male performers. Their participation responds in part to the growing emphasis placed on spectacle and visual impact. The presence of children dressed in miniature versions of the *Uncheși* costume creates a distinctive visual attraction: the figure of the child replicating the appearance and gestures of the adult performer generates a powerful sense of fascination. The appeal lies precisely in this logic of miniaturisation, in which the symbolic and visual features of the ritual are condensed into a smaller and more approachable form. In many cases, the miniature performer becomes even more captivating to the public gaze than the adult figure it imitates. (Fig. 4)

This fascination with miniaturized figures operates as a powerful visual device. The reduced scale amplifies the visual contrast between the monumental masks worn by adult performers and the smaller bodies of the children who reproduce the same aesthetic codes.

At the same time, the presence of children contributes to reshaping the social meaning of the custom. Their participation symbolically signals the continuity of tradition and the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations, while simultaneously reinforcing the image of a cohesive and harmonious community. Within the logic of public representation, children thus function as powerful visual markers of authenticity, innocence, and cultural continuity, qualities that resonate strongly with contemporary expectations of heritage and tradition.

The integration of children into the performance is also made possible by broader transformations affecting the ritual itself. The progressive suppression of violent elements and the weakening of the carnival's earlier ritual functions have altered the nature of the mask and its relationship to the body. The mask gradually ceases to function primarily as a ritual device through which identity is transformed; instead, it becomes an element of entertainment. Within this new framework, playful participation is understood as a



Fig. 4. Children wearing his *Uncheși* mask. Photo by Catalin Alexa.

legitimate activity for all members of the community, particularly for children, who are culturally associated with playfulness and joy.

Conclusion

The transformations observed in the Păunești carnival illustrate the complex processes through which local ritual practices adapt to changing social, institutional, and cultural contexts. Far from representing a simple preservation of tradition, the contemporary form of the custom emerges from the interaction between multiple actors, interests, and interpretive frameworks.

On the one hand, performers themselves actively shape the evolution of the ritual through practices of competitive display and personal pride, expressed in the increasing scale and visual impact of the masks and other costume elements. The increasing monumentality of the *Uncheși* masks and the amplification of their sonic presence through increasingly large bells reflect a dynamic internal logic of prestige and embodied performance. Within this

framework, the ritual continues to function as a demanding physical and sensory experience, requiring preparation, endurance, and collective participation.

On the other hand, local authorities play an increasingly important role in regulating and framing the custom. Through interventions aimed at maintaining order, ensuring public safety, and presenting a coherent image of the tradition to external audiences, authorities gradually reshape the ritual according to contemporary local norms of aesthetics, morality, and public representation. The promotion of the *Uncheși* mask as the central visual emblem of the carnival, accompanied by the marginalization of other masking practices, reflects a broader process of cultural selection and symbolic purification.

These transformations correspond to wider dynamics of heritagisation, through which vernacular cultural practices are reframed for public display, cultural promotion, and heritage consumption (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Bendix 1997). In this context, tradition is not merely preserved but actively curated, with certain elements emphasised while others are excluded in order to produce a recognizable and visually compelling representation of local identity.

At the same time, the increasing emphasis placed on visual impact and the spectacular reveals the growing importance of what may be described as a contemporary sensory economy, in which cultural practices are expected to produce strong impressions and memorable experiences for audiences (Howes 2005). The mask thus acquires a dual status: it remains a ritual device embedded in local practice while simultaneously functioning as a heritage object intended to attract attention and circulate as a symbol of the community.

Yet these processes also generate tensions. The increasing size of the masks and bells, while enhancing their visual and sonic presence, limits the physical mobility of performers and constrains the performative possibilities of the ritual itself. Similarly, the relocation of the custom into staged contexts such as festivals or parades may create sensory and spatial mismatches between practices originally performed in open-air rural settings and contemporary spaces of spectacle.

The Păunești case suggests that the effects of heritagisation cannot be understood solely at the level of discourse, representation, or institutional regulation. They also operate through the material reconfiguration of ritual objects. As masks are redesigned, enlarged, and aesthetically regulated, they do not merely acquire new meanings. They also alter the sensory, corporeal, and performative conditions of ritual action. Materiality therefore emerges not simply as the medium through which heritage is expressed, but as a constitutive dimension of the proces of heritigisation that reshapes ritual practice through heritagisation. This perspective extends existing studies of heritagisation by showing that both the process itself and its effects are mediated not only through discourse, institutional regulation, and public representation, but also through the material properties and transformations of ritual objects.

NOTES

1. In regional popular speech, a general appellative addressing or referring to an older male figure.

2. Literally "plough" (*pluguşorul* being the diminutive form) refers in regional popular tradition to a New Year ritual chant that symbolically re-enacts ploughing and invokes agricultural renewal. The term may also designate the group of carollers who perform the ritual.



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Between Face and Faceless: Meanings of Masks in Greek Antiquity and Romanian Folklore

Sorana-Cristina Man
National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Romania

Dr. Sorana-Cristina Man is specialized in Classics, with a thesis on Greek Tragedy published in 2020 at Cambridge Scholars Publishing. She has been a researcher at the University of Bucharest and works as an editor at the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant.

Correspondence: sorana.man@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

In Romanian folklore there are masks for the spirits of the dead (such as the *Moșii* and *Uncheșii* of Nereju), whereas in Greek folklore, the face and the mask are both conflicting with death.
The deceased lacks a prosopon in either sense of the term ("face" or "mask"), both in life and after death. While still on earth, his face is at once covered: to see another clearly in the sunlight presupposes mutual visibility, and death terminates this reciprocal visual relationship. In Hades, too, he has no prosopon: Ulysses calls the shades he encounters there *karena*, "heads," not *prosopa*.
A word that expresses sight, a link between "to see" and "to say," *prosopon* also implies being seen. For the Greeks, the mask is *prosopon*, it is that which stands before the eyes and has eyes, it is the face. The Romanian mask, on the other hand, seems rather to have inherited the Latin *persona*, which has emerged from the dark world of Persephone. The Greek mask, endowed with sight and meant to be seen, like the face with which it is confused, exists only in the light of day, only in its relation to the gaze directed upon it, to the other *prosopon*.
Are the two types of masks, the Romanian and the Greek, fundamentally different, or is there something that links them? If such a relationship exists, is it best understood as historical, as anthropological, or as grounded in a shared sensibility that links the two mentalities?

KEYWORDS

Mask; face; *prosopon; persona;* Greek mythology.

Dionysus and the mask

The mask, be it a part in ritual, theatrical, votive, cultic or funerary attire, has played a decisive role in the mentality of archaic and classical Greek antiquity, which it has shaped and has been shaped by. The masks visible today in European history and archaeological museums are overwhelmingly Roman imperial productions. No original Greek theatrical masks survive, since they were made of light, perishable materials such as linen, leather, and wood (Pickard-Cambridge 1968, 179; Webster 1970, 37-8). What do survive are Roman terracotta, stone, and marble objects—figurines, reliefs, and decorative pieces—that represent or imitate Greek theatrical masks rather than being the actual masks used in classical Greek performance (Bieber 1961, 89-92; Green 1994, 23-5).

The origin of the Greek mask is intrinsically linked to the figure of the god Dionysus: it appeared as a form of celebration of the god and as an object of worship that allowed his followers to get closer to him. Before becoming a tangible object, the mask had its origins in the smearing of grapes during the Dionysian festivals, representing a transformation, a splitting and an embrace of otherness, a liberation of the self from the rigours of reality in order to get closer to the god. Once theatre appeared, many tragic poets used mythological subjects as sources of inspiration, appealing to the cultural identity of the audience and representing elements of social and emotional cohesion (Cassidy 1991, 26) which triggered, above all, collective memory. The theatrical mask had the role of simulating the presence of one of the gods or heroes on stage, transporting the spectator *in illo tempore* (Eliade 1963, 11), so that they could be imbued with a sense of belonging to a glorious past and to a certain community. The Greek theatre thus reflects a desire to create a link between the human and divine worlds, but especially between the past, present and future.

Eliade (2000), Tailor-Perry (2003), Ridgeway (1910) and other researchers believe that Dionysus is a deity of Thracian origin, worshipped by the tribe of *satyrs,*[1] who practised orgiastic rituals. The laxity of social constraints would be an argument in favour of establishing the main Dionysian sanctuary in the area of Thrace.[2] Ridgeway uses Aristotle's view of imprinting the figures of gods with human qualities and defects to treat with irony the connection between the excess of freedom offered by the cult of Dionysus and the social mores of these Thracian populations. The orgiastic celebrations were, however, linked to vegetation rituals, Dionysus being a god of vegetation. At the beginning of the 20th century, such fertility festivals, which included ancient Dionysian elements, were still being organised every spring in communities in Turkey and Bulgaria (Dawkins 1906). The community members who performed the spectacle (the *kalogeroi*[3]) wore goat skin on their heads, stuffed so that it rose 20-30 cm above the head. This apparel covered their face and head like a mask; round holes were cut out for their eyes and mouth; one of the two masked men carried a wooden phallus in his hand. Together with other costumed characters, the *kalogeroi* went from house to house, knocking on doors with the aforementioned phallus; they were rewarded with cheese, eggs, or money. In the afternoon, they staged an imitation of a death and resurrection story alluding to the killing of Dionysus by the Titans.[4] The Thracians celebrated such plant rituals related to Dionysus, and these traditions, including the mask wearing, were perpetuated in Greek, Turkish and Bulgarian communities. They still exist today, having been modified in accordance with the Christian religion.

During the Dionysian festivals, in the frenzy caused by the high wine intake, believers, shedding their usual clothes and constraints, surrounded themselves with symbols such as vines and ivy or wore goatskin masks and staged symbolic deaths and resurrections. Theatrical death, in turn, substituted individual death, the hero confronted the world beyond in the presence and with the help of the spectators, the sacrifice was rendered by theatrical means, and thus a form of *catharsis* was produced that applied to the entire assembly present. The evolution of the mask took place alongside that of theatre, but it is not known whether it originated in theatre plays from the Dionysian ritual or whether it was introduced only as a necessary prop in the presentation of dramatic action.

The Dionysian world, populated by *maenads,*[5] satyrs, dancing men, and animals, is linked to the idea of the Stranger, who comes from the wilderness that lies at the edge of the human world. Thus, the orderly human world has access, through Dionysus, to the surrounding wilderness (Isler-Kerenyi 2009, 61-72).

There has been much talk on the transformation experienced by the actor wearing the mask, which gives him not only the feeling of closeness to the god or of being possessed

by him, but also the power to possess someone else in his turn (Csapo 2010). This is how access to a new and unknown world takes place, and simultaneously a warning about how small mankind is in the face of death and of the supernatural. The mask is therefore closely connected to the experience of possession and otherness.

For the Greeks, performances took place outdoors, and the mask was the most effective way to induce a sense of the theatre's presence. Meineck (2011) argues that the mask was attached with the help of a soft cap, called *sakkos,*[6] to which hair and facial hair were attached, as appropriate, but draws attention to the small, though wide-open mouth, which excludes previous theories about the inclusion of a device for voice propagation in masks. The features of the mask were naturally complemented by a play of shadows to give the impression that the mask was changing its expression, just as in Japanese Noh theatre.[7] Different expressions can be observed depending on the angle at which the mask is tilted, expressions that can vary from joy to sadness. The tragic mask had a fierce look, the actor's voice resounded through the wide-open mouth, and a conical part called *onkos*[8] was added to the forehead to make the character more imposing (Haigh 1907, 152). The masks were made of wool, cork or wood.

The myth of Dionysus' birth and death indicates an existence at the extremes of suffering, like human existence itself. In Thebes, there is a cult of Semele (the god's mother), where his apparition and the return of his mother from the realm of the dead are celebrated. In such celebrations, the emphasis is on the resurrection of Semele. They are found in several areas of Greece, including Delphi, being associated everywhere with her divine son (Otto 1965). Both in myth and in cult, the mother becomes immortal through her son. The death and dismemberment of the god, recurrent in the myths about Dionysus, are linked to the symbol of the phallus. The attention paid to the genitals is also found in the myths of deities such as Osiris, Attis, Adonis and others, being linked to the process of fertilisation. Dionysus's phallus is carried by believers in processions as a sign of the intimate connection between death and reproduction. Through death, the god becomes a scapegoat for the sins of the entire community, and the supreme sacrifice he makes brings the promise of new life (Leeming 1998). With the appearance of the mask, transfiguration was taken to another level: not only did the god and, later, other mythical creatures communicate with mortals through it, but the mortals also tried to communicate with the deities in this way. Through dances and songs, *the Liberator* (*Lysios*, another name of Dionysus) transformed the rigid into the flexible, breaking the chains of ordinary order and the barriers that separate the human world from the invisible aspects of everyday life and divinity.

Friedrich Nietzsche (2024) sees in the Dionysian experience the event that renews the connection between nature, whether wild or tamed, and people. This form of communion with the mythical realm entails an intrusion of the sacred into the profane, an alteration of the state of affairs characteristic of mortals, which culminated in a revelation that temporarily transformed the individual. The celebration of Dionysus was a rite of passage, during which the participant was initiated not only into the mysteries of the cult, but also into those of their own individuality, into the hidden recesses of the Self.

Dionysus represents a boundary between the life and death of the individual, but also between the disappearance of a temporary instance of the Self and the rebirth of a new one, or the same one as before, but deeply enriched by the contact with the sacred. Between man and divinity, he is somewhere in the middle, a stranger and a wanderer between the two realms, as well as between the different Greek cities. Impossible to limit to a single attribute, to a single valence, he was compared by the Greeks both to the other gods and to themselves as mere humans. Dionysus is life and death at the same time, both of humans and of vegetation. Not only does he symbolise the opposites, but he also bridges them. There were

representations of him alongside Hades himself. In a play by Aeschylus, *Sisyphus*, the name Zagreus borne by Dionysus refers to the lord of the underworld, and in another play by the same author, *Aigyptioi*, the term refers to a son of Hades identified with Dionysus (Seaford 2006). According to Heraclitus, Hades and Dionysus are similar in the principle of the unity of opposites.

A means of imitation, but also of concealment, the mask is at the origin of the concept of *mimesis*, the basis of religious processions and, later, of the dances and performances that took place in honour of the god. Imitating the divine figure in the form of a mask is also a way of evoking an archetype, a hero or even a danger, divine or human, which must be avoided.

The participant in the ritual and the actor are receivers of divine inspiration, imbued with a form of magic, driven by complete faith (Seaford 2006), and so the mask is the source of acquiring a ritualistic power. The effect of the mask persists in time, awakening memories of the character embodied, leading to the creation of a mental bridge across space and time. This effort requires the total commitment of the actor, who must step outside the boundaries of the self and abandon themselves to the character they are playing. By participating in the myth, the spectator steps out of everyday life and escapes mortality, as the performance brings together myth and everyday reality.

The mask allows one to conjure images. It hides or substitutes a presence, either by hiding the actor behind the character, or by substituting the presence of the mythical hero among people. It also opens the way to immortality for both the character and the actor, thus becoming a necessary object in a rite of passage. The mask reveals the existence of a secondary reality, often preferable to everyday reality and considered much more truthful.

While facilitating the assumption of another identity, the mask restricts the wearer, making them feel controlled by forces greater than themselves (Grimes 1992). By changing the expression of the mask following the actor's movements, the viewer seeks to interpret it and superimpose a certain meaning on it. The tragic mask did not display a fixed or neutral image. Instead, it gave the actor strong control over the transmission of emotions, by associating movements with music, text and song, arousing deeply personal responses in the mind of the viewer. Thus, the mask would be more powerful than an actor's real face because it constantly changed before the audience's eyes and elicited profound emotional responses from each individual (Meineck 2011).

In an undefined space, not isolated from the surrounding environment, the mask attracts the attention of spectators and stimulates a strong personal reaction, because it demands to be seen. The success of ancient theatre was based on a symbiosis between mask, text, movement and song, underpinned by the human instinct to associate movement with emotion, while wearing a mask deprived the actors of their peripheral vision. They were therefore forced to develop that instinct, thereby increasing the emotional response of the audience. In this way, the mask allowed the audience to contemplate and accept emotions at a much higher level than they would normally.

The main types of masks used by the Greeks. To see and to be seen

Designed for contact, communication and dialogue, both verbal and visual, the ritual mask of the Greeks could take the form of a goat, bear or pig head, referring to hybrid, fantastical creatures, such as the mask worn by participants in some religious ceremonies; but there

have also been documented ritual masks of warriors, young men and men wearing helmets (such as those on display at the museum in Sparta), old men and women, wrinkled and toothless, satyrs—both ritual and theatrical masks—or Gorgons. The mask is designated in Greek by the term *prosopon*[9] and its derivative *prosopeion*[10] is used only for theatrical and ritual masks. Two other terms, less common and with a more specialised meaning, are *gorgoneion*[11] and *mormolykeion.*[12] Decorative or cult masks are also called *prosopa*.

A mask from Syracuse (Sicily) made of fired clay in the 6th-5th century BC (Frontisi-Ducroux 2012), can serve as a tangible starting point in demonstrating the reciprocal nature of sight according to the Greeks and the incompatibility of both the face and the mask with the lack of mutual sight. Without colours, without the wig that covered it, the mask highlights the organs of sight and speech. All its orifices (mouth, eyes and nostrils) are widely perforated, necessary with the masks worn by actors, while the Roman replicas have different characteristics: some have pierced eyes and a closed mouth, others the opposite, and others have no openings at all. Sometimes the eyes are endowed with pupils and a gaze.

For the Greeks, the mask is *prosopon*, it is what stands before the eyes and has eyes, it is a face. If *prosopon* is the term for all other types of masks (except funerary ones, as we shall see), the Gorgon mask is designated by the term *gorgoneion*, which, unlike *prosopon*, is not a visual term, but an auditory one: the reduplication of *gr* suggests, in infantile language, through the sounds coming from the throat, the approach of a terrifying monster that devours. The name Gorgon evokes, through its phonemes, the various noises of mythical creatures, especially those at the moment of Medusa's death: blood gurgles from the severed artery, her mourning sisters grind their teeth, their jaws clatter, and furious moans and mutterings can be heard along with the hissing of the snakes in their hair. All this serves as a sound backdrop for the appearance of the term *gorgoneion*, suggestive of the monster's terrifying throat.

In the *Iliad*, on Athena's shield, ready for battle, there is not a *gorgoneion*, but a *gorgeie kephale*, "Gorgonian head," an expression referring to the severed head that Perseus offered to the goddess. In the *Odyssey*, the same expression is used to designate the object of Ulysses fear, which would have petrified him at the edge of Hades. Gorgo is, therefore, the property of Persephone, who uses it as a terrifying weapon to prevent the living from entering her realm. Due to its ugliness and lethal power, this deformed monster is inaccessible to the sight of mortals, whom it kills with its gaze. That is why the face of the Gorgon cannot and is never called *prosopon*: it cannot stand before the eyes, and no one can stand before her eyes. The impossibility of encountering the Gorgon translates, on a linguistic level, into an impossibility of describing her clearly. No Greek text gives a complete description of the Gorgon. Her featureless, amorphous, monstrous face, which kills with its appearance and gaze, surrounded by snakes, haunting the borders of Hades, her severed head or *gorgoneion* are rendered only through vague or allusive descriptions.

Mormolykeion, in turn, is defined as "a mask meant to frighten": tragic or comic, ugly and misshapen, it is named after the bugbear Mormo,[13] also a word that is more sonorous, than visual. If *Gorgo* had its origin in the throat and even in the noises of the digestive system, *Mormo* comes from the mouth and the edge of the lips, being formed identically, through expressive reduplication. It expresses a mixture of confusing noises and mutterings capable of arousing fear, designating the disturbing murmurs and deafening creaks that announce the appearance of ghosts. These are the masks with which children were frightened. Mormo has a less well-defined face than Gorgo, and it was easier for adults to joke about her. *Mormolykeion* was, however, sometimes used euphemistically for *gorgoneion* and is linked to the Dionysian universe, to his companions, the *satyrs* and *sileni,*[14] who embody the laughable



Greek theater mask, 2nd or 1st century BCE. National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh. Wikimedia Commons, online at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Greek_theater_mask,_from_Greece,_2nd_or_1st_century_BCE._National_Museum_of_Scotland,_Edinburgh.jpg.



Greek Tragedy Theatre Mask, Possibly by Silanion, 4th century BCE. (Archaeological Museum of Piraeus). Online at: https://www.worldhistory.org/image/3701/greek-tragedy-theatre-mask/.

but also hideous aspects of the Dionysian world. The hypothesis that they were masks of *satyrs* and *sileni* cannot be ruled out.

As for the gold foil funeral masks of the Mycenaean kings, these are supposed to be much older than the Greeks, being attested in the Archaic and Classical periods only on the periphery of the Greek world. The Greeks said nothing about them, as they could not see or even name the faces of the dead (*Idem, ibidem*). Polybius calls the funeral masks of the Romans *prosopa*, *imagines maiorum*, worn in Rome at the funerals of aristocrats. Modelled from a wax impression of the deceased's face and then painted, they were carried in the procession by figures who resembled the deceased in stature, appearance and clothing. They had a cap and wig, just like the theatrical ones, which is why Polybius calls them *prosopa*, but they did not cover the face of the deceased. There is no word for the latter in Greek. We are therefore dealing with a refusal to think about and name the faces of the dead.

If *prosopeion* competes with *prosopon* only to designate ritual or theatrical masks, for the others only *prosopon* is used. Decorative masks, those on vessels or furniture, as well as cult masks are called *prosopa*. The only term designating a mask that can never be replaced by *prosopon* is *gorgoneion*.

Persona (Latin for *mask*) was long understood by the Romans as "that thing through which sound is emitted" (*per-sonare*), i.e. a megaphone, thus having a sonic origin (somewhat similar to *gorgoneion* and *mormolykeion*, even if not onomatopoeic). Today, its etymology is linked to the Etruscan Phersu (see Frontisi-Ducroux, 2012), an infernal demon whose name is associated with Persephone, queen of the dead, and Perseus, both holders of the Gorgon's head. Therefore, for the Latins, the mask is an infernal power that has emerged from the world of darkness, the invisible and the amorphous, the world without faces.

Prosopon means "what we put in front of the eyes of others." The face is what can be seen. For Aristotle, the name *prosopon* comes from its function: the human being is the only being that stands upright and therefore looks straight ahead and speaks with their face forward, and, as Frontisi-Ducroux points out, this gives the term an active value. *Pros-opon*, however, means what is in front of the eyes of the other, in front of the eyes of a viewer. It requires a viewer, so its first value is passive. *Prosopon* is not perceived as a distinct unit, located somewhere in the body, but as a set of elements that offer themselves to the gaze. Hence the plural, *ta prosopa* (features), is found in Homer more often than the singular. For the Greeks, seeing is not separate from *being seen*. *Ops* designates both the function of sight and appearance, being sometimes the subject and sometimes the object of sight, for the eye is both transmitter and receiver, active and passive at the same time. By the simple fact of being seen, *prosopon* becomes what it sees.

If we close the eyes of the dead in order to expose them to the gaze of those around them, the Greek reciprocity between *seeing* and *being seen* requires that their face be immediately covered, so that it becomes invisible when their gaze fades. The fact that the dead no longer have a face is perfectly reflected in language, for the face of the dead is no longer called *prosopon*. Life is defined by the clear sight of daylight and other human beings, and the interruption of mutual visual relations announces and signifies death.

For ancient Greeks, the face does not conceal, hide, or close anything; it does not veil the mysteries of inner life, like in our case. On the contrary, it expresses and reveals, it is the mirror of an outward-looking personality. Similarly, the mask does not hide the face it covers, according to Frontisi-Ducroux (2012, 79). It abolishes and replaces it. Under the dramatic mask, the actor's face does not exist, and their individuality, which the face revealed, has given way to that of the character they embody. The same is true of the practitioner of a ritual. The tragic actor, like the celebrant of a ritual, performed a liturgical function: he was

the vocal or voiceless animator of the costume he wore and of the hero he brought back to life. The mask did not hide; on the contrary, it designated and signalled the hero it brought back to life. In this sense, it was a mouthpiece. Linguistically, the expression *hypo tou prosopou* ("under the mask") is not attested, because it could also mean "under the face," which is nonsense for a Greek. Besides that, in iconography, on Attic vases, the mask worn is not marked by any demarcation line, the face hidden under it cannot be guessed. It no longer exists as *prosopon* because it is no longer visible, but has been replaced by the new *prosopon*. Unlike Greek masks, Roman masks, with perforated holes, appear in opposition to the face, as indicated by the Eros figures on sarcophagi, with the face of a child hidden under huge, distorted masks of tragedy (*Ibidem*). The reason for this difference in figurative terms would be the linguistic distinction between *persona*, on the one hand, and *vultus*[15] or *facies,*[16] on the other. The two notions are autonomous, because the Romans thought of them together but distinct, superimposed.

The multiple meanings that *prosopon* came to have evolved from face and mask to character, then to role, from there to personality and, finally, to individual and person. The mask is thus the intermediary between face and character. The meaning of "character" could stem from the oral recitation of epic texts, whose representation already involved a form of performance, with movements and dances, gestures and even facial expressions. Therefore, the importance of the mask in the evolution of the meanings of *prosopon* cannot be appreciated as being too significant because very early on, *prosopon* began to mean "individual," the face being what identifies each human being.

Persona, which meant "mask" in Etruscan, already meant "character" when it was introduced into Latin, at a time when Roman theatre did not use masks, while *prosopon*, whose primary meaning is "face," became "character" based on "face" and not on "mask."

Masks among Romanians: similarities and differences

As with other peoples, the archaic Romanian mask[17] allows its wearer to identify with their ancestor or their tribe, defined as a supernatural being. Therefore, masks can be anthropomorphic or zoomorphic (but there are also phytomorphic masks), sometimes fantastic, always endowed with supernatural powers. Rituals with masks, processions with dances and songs were linked to vegetal, cosmogonic and astrological rites, such as *Dragobete night,*[18] *Saint Toader's Day,*[19] *Blajini Sunday*[20] or Pentecost. Romanian masks can be made of cardboard or paper, straw, wood, feathers, textiles, leather or fur, rubber, metal, reeds, tin foil, mirrors, beads, bells, horsehair, boar teeth, sequins, beans, practically from anything.

The libertine language, licentious expressions and gestures, and phallic symbols found in Greek masked rituals or in the Roman Saturnalia and Lupercalia are also found in numerous Romanian folk dances with masks. In the *Călușarii* of Muntenia, the *Mute*, who at the end of the 19th century wore a mask of an old man, a goat, a stork or a heron, has a representation of a horse phallus hanging from his belt, with which he touches women to ensure their fertility. In the masked games at wakes, once widespread in Moldova, Maramureș and Oltenia, the group of masked people make obscene gestures and jump over the embers, which is a manifestation of vitality and aims to ensure fertility. The text to which the goat from Nereju dances is also peppered with licentious expressions, which are part of the ritual of renewal of time and nature. The other masked figures (wearing masks of old men, old women and





Mutul [The Mute], the masked character of the *Călușe* ritual in Bârla village (Argeș county), 2014. Credit photo: Anamaria Iuga.



devils) make indecent gestures. The same thing happens in the New Year's masked games in Ostra, Suceava.

Just as the Greeks covered the face of the dead, who could no longer be seen by the living because they could no longer see them, in Romania, the faces of monks are covered with an embroidered veil when they are placed in the coffin, even though they can still be called "faces" (*chipuri*). In Gorj, the "eye cloth" with which the dead are covered is still preserved, a remnant of the funeral shirt mask, a means of defence against the evil power of surrounding corpses and the spirits of the deceased. In fact, the mask is present in moments of rupture in Romanian life: the face of the newborn is smeared with ashes or mud, that of the bride is covered with a veil, and that of the dead, during the night, with a white cloth. The child is "masked" until its consecration as a human being through baptism, being disputed, until then, by people and unclean spirits. The bride undergoes a transition from maidenhood to wifehood, a transition fraught with unimaginable dangers. The dead person is also ambiguous, as he belongs, for a time, to both realms. These hidden faces represent three cases of extreme masking. Similarly, the white veil covering the faces of the *Călușari* mummers, as described by Dimitrie Cantemir in *Descriptio Moldaviae* (Nicolau *et al.* 2002), symbolises the power of the unexpressed, which can be anything and nothing. In these cases, we are dealing with a temporary return to non-existence, in order to then acquire a new being. As can be seen, masks appear among Romanians at all moments of "transition": in some places, immediately after the birth of a child, during visits to the midwife, the godparents wear masks; the cloth covering the face of the deceased, the "shroud," hides their face, as does that of the young people in the masked games at the wake. In the game with the *hârca,*[21] the ancestors of the deceased also participate in the masquerade.

For Romanians, masquerading mediates between the community and the supernatural. Contact with the sacred involves risk and does not allow complete freedom. The scenario has serious stakes, community control is severe, and the identities assumed temporarily, as well as the words and gestures, cannot be arbitrary. The presence of masked people is only allowed in a certain space and at a certain time: "As an actor in more or less formalised scenarios, the masked man is ambiguous, oscillating between two worlds, and the whole community must benefit from the power conferred on him by the mask." (Nicolau *et al.* 2002, 25)

In the custom of *Boriţa cucilor,*[22] found among the Csangos around Braşov, there is a scenario of the death and resurrection of one of the four masked "Cuci." The Game of the Cuckoos, which takes place on the first day after "Lăsata Secului" (Shrove Tuesday), in order to purify space and time, belongs to the Thracian tradition or perhaps descends from the Dionysian Antesteria taken over by the Greeks from the Thracians. In some versions of the game, a cuckoo died and was resurrected. In *Boriţa cucilor*, there are masks called *chipuri* (faces). These are structures attached to a cylindrical mask and decorated with paper flowers like those used to make *sorcove* (sticks or twigs decorated with artificial flowers of different colors, with which children gently tap their parents, and acquaintances on the back on New Year's morning, wishing them health and good luck in special verses). In Romanian, there is also a special use of the term *închipuiţi* to name masked people (Nicolau 2002). The word obviously refers to the *face*, but also to something that is being imagined or that stands "as if" it were something else. In *Turca*,[23] a game played around the old man-animal couple, the animal dies, is mourned and is reborn. The same happens in the game with the bear. The goat game from Ostra includes a death and resurrection sequence, too, an archaic reminiscence of the vegetation cycle.

In the Nereju area, New Year's masked games have been juxtaposed onto the funerary game *Chiperul*, a very old wake game. It involved a funeral dance with an archaic mythical

substratum: the deceased had to be assisted in his passage to the other world by the spirits of his ancestors, who took the form of "uncles" and "aunts," the depositaries of the authority and wisdom of the tribe. The participants (10-15 masked people) were linked by a chain meant to suggest the cohesion of the tribe, which united to protect the deceased and to integrate them into its ranks. In the wake games of eastern Transylvania, in the Gurghiu Valley, there is even a mask of death. The player, wrapped in a white sheet, represents the demon of death and dances a fantastic dance while a mourner cries out in grief. The mask and the game protect both the dead and the officiant from evil spirits (Vulcănescu 1970).

The Greek comedy makes direct references to masks. The semantic ambivalence of *prosopon* can refer, through a wordplay, both to the character's face and to the actor's mask, the comic effect residing in the parallelism between the fictional plane of the text and the material reality of the performance, revealed suddenly, without the former being abolished. In Romanian popular culture, too, a member of the masked troupe addresses the bear or goat in the New Year's games in the Bacău area by the name of the mask worn by the performer, but the comic effect comes from the fact that the audience knows that there is a person underneath the mask.

Conclusions

Even though the Greek mask seems incompatible with death, while the Romanians have masks for the spirits of the dead and even for death itself, the mask is born, in Greek culture, in a way that is intrinsically linked to the god Dionysus. He represents life, but also death, oscillating between his association with wine, his priceless gift to humanity, nature, madness and the spirits of the dead. His journey is not only on the surface, but also through the world beyond. Dionysus represents the symbiosis between joy and suffering, between play and violence, between hunter and prey, going as far as the overlapping of life and death. He is a god who dies and thus embodies the contradictions that exist and manifest themselves in human nature. Like Persephone, Dionysus makes the distance between the world of the living and Hades more bearable for humans. He witnesses the same cycle of death and resurrection, both deities being associated with major rites of passage: birth, marriage, death and resurrection. They are always together, and those who knew their mysteries were convinced that both had power over the other world, so they surrounded themselves with symbols of the two in order to pass beyond. It can be said that Dionysus' popularity in the Greek world stemmed from people's desire to secure not only the god's goodwill in the earthly world and freedom from constraints, but also his help in passing into the afterlife.

The Gorgon's mask is not a face, it is only a head. It is not called *prosopon,* because it is charged by Persephone with driving away the living or killing them on the spot. Seeing it is equivalent to death. It eliminates both sight and life. Although it is a mask, it is not *a prosopon*, a name that designates the set of features that each person offers to the other's gaze and which implies visual reciprocity. We can therefore conclude that, if the Latin *persona* originates from *Persephone*, its counterpart in the Greek world cannot be just *prosopon*, which it is commonly thought to translate, but the Latin term also includes the meaning of *gorgeie kephale* in its semantic sphere. There is no etymological connection between *prosopon* and *persona*. On the contrary, as we have seen, the etymology points to opposite meanings. In fact, *prosopon* has only a secondary meaning of *mask*. However, the remarkably similar phonetics play in

favour of the overlap of the two terms, which, according to etymology, would otherwise be "false friends." The original semantic difference between *prosopon* and *persona* (face and mask, respectively) seems to be closely related to the etymological one and to account for the cultural hiatus between the two meanings of the mask.

As with the Greeks, in Romanian folklore, the mask is implicitly a face, even when it is not called that. The masked person retains their identity, which they enrich with the one they have temporarily adopted, but the solemnity of the ritual makes them more than just an actor.



NOTES

1. Greek: Σάτυροι, rustic deities represented as creatures with human bodies covered in hair, with horns and goat (or horse) legs, personifying brutal instincts.

2. For part of this bibliography I am indebted to Ms Eliza Lăzărescu's doctoral thesis, *Masca—de la imaginar la realitate în tragedia greacă* (*The Mask, from Imaginary to Reality in Greek Tragedy*), which was defended in September 2025 at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures of the University of Bucharest, within the Department of Classics.

3. Greek: Καλόγεροι, literally meaning "monk," a type of masked character believed to be connected to Dionysian rites as described in the text.

4. A name given in Greek mythology to each of the 12 sons of Uranus, known for their struggle against Zeus for the control of the Earth.

5. Greek: Μαινάδες, the boisterous female companions of the god Bacchus.

6. Greek: Σάκκος, meaning bag, sack or sack-cloth.

7. The Japanese Noh theatre is the oldest form of mask theater still performed in its original form, with a tradition dating back over 650 years.

8. Greek: ὄγκος, meaning bulk, heap, but also size, weight, dignity, importance, pride.

9. Greek: Πρόσωπον, meaning face, countenance, look, appearance, figure; mask; person.

10. Greek: Προσωπεῖον, meaning theatre mask.

11. Greek: Γοργόνειον, meaning the face of Gorgo on goddess Athena's shield.

12. Greek: Μορμολυκεῖον or Μορμολύκειον, meaning puppet which frightens the children, bugbear, spectre, phantom.

13. Greek: Μορμώ, the name of a monster in ancient Greek lore which frightened the children.

14. Greek: Σειληνοί, sons of the elder Seilenos (Silenus) and the fathers of the tribes of Satyrs. Seilenoi were depicted as fat, elderly, white-haired men, with snub noses, balding heads, and the ears and tails of asses. They were sometimes covered in fluffy white hair and occasionally sported a pair of ox horns.

15. Latin: *vultus* means facial expression, look, countenance, face.

16. Latin: *facies* means appearance, look, guise, aspect.

17. Archaic by symbolism and function.

18. *Dragobete* Night (February 23 to 24) is a magical time in Romanian tradition, heralding the arrival of spring and celebrating love. It is believed that this is the moment when *Dragobete*, the god of youth, appears in dreams to teach young people the secrets of love, and unmarried girls can find out who their soulmate is by placing holy basil under their pillow.

19. Saint Toader's Saturday (Toaderul Mare): Takes place during the first week of Lent. Tradition has it that Saint Toader asked his horses to stop limping, transforming himself from a feared saint into a protector of horses and the community.

20. Easter of the *Blajini* (or Sunday/Monday of the *Blajini*) is a Christian Orthodox holiday commemorating the dead, celebrated mainly in Romania and the Republic of Moldova. It takes place one week after Easter (usually on the Monday after Thomas Sunday, although in urban areas it has been moved to Sunday) and is dedicated to the *blajini*, gentle beings believed to be our ancestors. *Blajin* means "gentle" in Romanian.

21. Romanian, untranslatable, meaning "ugly" or "grotesque"—noun used to designate a distorted face, in this case a frightening masked character.

22. A mask game practised in the Middle Ages throughout almost the entire territory of present-day Romania, but found today only in southern Muntenia (in Brăneşti, Ilfov). *Cuc* means "cuckoo" in Romanian.

23. An agrarian fertility rite practised at the turn of the year, which comes from an ancient magical hunting practice.

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II. Embodying the Mask: Ritual, Performance, Community

The Masks of Silence. A Brief History of the Ritual Mask in *Căluș*

Cătălin Alexa
Constantin Brăiloiu Institute of Ethnography and Folklore, Romanian Academy, Romania

Cătălin Alexa is a researcher at the Constantin Brăiloiu Institute of Ethnography and Folklore. He is currently working on the recovery and use of the IEF archive materials, with a research topic on traditional foods. His academic interest in the Căluș tradition took concrete form in his doctoral thesis, The Căluș Ritual in the present social and cultural context*, which was published in 2002.*

Correspondence: alexa.catalin@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the use of masks within the *Căluș* ritual, as attested by texts published in the 18th and 19th centuries. Accepted as archaic but of unknown origin, the *Căluș* ritual was and is notable for the employment of a variety of means of masking when it is performed, with many writers perceiving it according to a model that would inevitably include the use of ritual masks. Through a diachronic analysis, we propose to examine to what extent, in the first centuries of the attestation of *Căluș*, we can indeed speak of a constant presence of ritual masks within it.

KEYWORDS

Căluș; ritual; mask; Mute; historic.

The unknown origins of the *Căluș* dance, together with its archaic nature and magical character, have long confirmed the exceptional importance of this ritual performance, whose continuity and significance remain evident to this day. The esoteric dimension specific to this ritual associated with Pentecost (*Rusalii*) celebrations is evident even from its earliest attestations. The aura of mystery surrounding the group of male performers of this healing dance was further intensified by the practice of masking; the concealment of the identities of the *călușari* is recorded by several authors from past centuries.

Over time, references to the use of disguises—intended to obscure the identity either of the entire troupe or of a single protagonist—have varied considerably, thereby illustrating both the adaptability of the dance to new contexts and the developments in the performed act itself. This is one of the reasons why a diachronic analysis of these ritual props will prove more than useful, as it has the potential to reveal significant aspects of the distinctive features of the ritual dance.

Accordingly, in what follows, we will focus on the most important documentary attestations of the *Căluș* dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, examining the extent to which evidence regarding the use of masks by the protagonists in the dance is present or absent. Before proceeding, however, we will provide a brief description of the ritual dance itself and the context in which it is performed.

In its traditional forms, the *Căluș*—a ritual element historically attested in Romanian villages—was a dance carried out in the week of the Whitsuntide Celebration by a group of adult men. The dance was performed in village courtyards and also in towns and at fairs. The days leading up to Whitsun were devoted to practising the dance, preparing the costumes and the specific props, and deciding on the group members and hierarchy, depending on the

availability of dancers and on their skills. The musicians of the group, who had to accompany the *Căluș* dancers for the entire period of the ritual performances, were also settled during this time. The costume worn by the *călușari* was a special one that marked them out during this week of the year. In the past, the garments used were everyday clothes embellished with specific decorations, and there is data that attests that in previous centuries all the protagonists were masked (Cantemir 1909, 232; del Chiaro 1929, 35). The men's shirts were adorned with woven bands across the chest, while their hats displayed different decorations. The men wore a special girdle round their waists. Depending on the region, some groups would wear an adorned red Turkish fez as headgear. Woven bands were also used to decorate the dancers' lower legs, and below the knee there would be small bells that were intended to ring during the dance. In the past, many of the garments worn by the *Căluşar* dancers used to be borrowed from members of the community (woven bands, shirts, handkerchiefs) (Oprișan 1969, 158; Ispas 2003, 173), with people believing that once they had been worn by the *Căluşar* dancers during the ritual, these garments would help their owners to enjoy better health, to ward off illness, or, in the case of younger girls, to get married, and for adult women, to become pregnant. In the same pre-Whitsun period, the leader of the group was also decided on (*The Bailiff*—Rom. *Vătaful*), and, in places where this was the case, the man who would play the role of the burlesque character, a local trickster (*The Mute*—Rom. *Mutul*), was usually included in the structure of the group (Iuga, Vlahbei 2022, 61).

The beginning of the ritual period was marked by the creation of the group's flag and by the swearing of an oath, defining moments for the ritual group now established. These acts, which took place in secret, involved a series of rules and prohibitions for all the *Căluşar* dancers. They promised not to abandon the group, to respect the hierarchy, to remain chaste, not to let themselves be touched by women or to have any sexual relations, and to conduct themselves appropriately within the group and during the performance of the ritual. The sacred oath taken by the *Căluşar* participants was valued as a form of communication with and connection to the supernatural that dominated that time of the year, embodied by mythical female representations named *Iele* or *Rusalii*, who were known for their ambivalent (good or evil) character. They were considered responsible for punishing and inflicting illnesses upon those who violated the community norms specific to the Whitsuntide period, a time devoted to celebration, when agricultural work and numerous household activities (such as washing, sewing, the sweeping of courtyards, pruning trees) were strictly forbidden. It was believed that illnesses that afflicted individuals who violated these well-known rules, popularly called *luat din Căluș* (which translates literally as "taken by the *Căluș*"), could be cured during Whitsun week if the afflicted person witnessed the *Căluș* dance, as the *Căluș* dancers were believed to be connected to supernatural powers (*Iele*) as a result of their oath (Benga, Neagota 2010, 206-7). Preserving the good health of the group was achieved by the chastity of the *Căluș* dancers, as they had to follow the rules they had committed themselves to via the oath they had taken at the beginning of the ritual period. The *Căluș* group's progress through the nearby villages and towns took place on several days during Whitsun week. The ritual dances were usually performed around a pot filled with water and a plate with salt and a few garlic cloves and stalks of wormwood on it. All these items would be provided by the owner of the house, who would receive them back after they had been used in the *Căluș* dance; they would then be regarded as beneficial for the whole household, where they would be used for prophylactic purposes (for safeguarding the health of both people and animals, for ensuring the material wellbeing of the household, and so on).

The Mute played an extremely important role in the structure of the ritual and in the scenes performed by the *Căluşar* dancers in people's courtyards and during the progression

from one host to another. Differentiated from the rest of the group by his appearance, with torn clothes, wearing (or not wearing) a ritual mask and carrying props (a phallus, a wooden sword, a whip, a bag full of prophylactic plants, usually wormwood and garlic), this character made a rich contribution to the spectacle performed by the *Căluș* group. *The Mute*'s comic interludes, besides serving the purpose of allowing the *Căluș* dancers to take a rest, were also memorable in themselves. He was highly appreciated by and in demand with the public. The special status of *the Mute*, a role characterised by its ambivalent character, was also demonstrated by the separate reward that he received. The gift presented to *the Mute* for his performance represented a special payment that was not shared with the other protagonists, another feature that marked him out from the rest of the group members. The ritual period concluded with the releasing of the group from their oath and the burial of the flag on the Sunday marking the end of Whitsun week.

As a conclusion to the above description, we reproduce here a definition of the *Căluș* that we have given in another study: "The *Căluș* is a ritual performed by a male group within the context of the Pentecost (*Rusalii*) celebration, characterized by a magico-esoteric nature, a communicative act with beneficial consequences at both the individual and communal levels, involving divine intervention." (Alexa 2022, 37)



The archaic origin attributed by numerous authors to the *Căluș* ritual is also supported by the ritual masks used by its performers. The presence of the mask, together with the specific features of the masked character, makes it possible to associate the ritual with representations of ancestors, deities, demons, or supernatural beings believed to possess the power to heal those in suffering (Eliade 1964, 520). *The Mute* of the *călușari,* a significant and influential figure within the ritual group, usually the wearer of a mask, has been regarded by some as the very character around whom the ritual dance originated (Ghinoiu 2003, 23). Others, by contrast, argue that he was introduced at a more advanced stage in the development of the ritual (Pop 1975, 21).

A definitive answer concerning the precise origin of *the Mute* or of the masks used throughout the history of the *Căluș* is, in the absence of conclusive evidence, impossible to determine. However, a more detailed analysis of the available data attesting to the use of masks in the ritual might contribute to the formulation of new hypotheses in this respect.

What, then, is the history of the *călușari* masks? Has there always been a mask within the *Căluș* ritual? And can we consider the masked character—*the Mute*—as having played a primordial role in the evolution of the ritual dance?

Significant data in this regard can be found as early as the first reliable attestation of the *Căluș* ritual. The extensive description provided by Dimitrie Cantemir includes unique information about the dance and its performers as they were at the beginning of the eighteenth century. We thus learn about the therapeutic purposes of the ritual dance, discover the beliefs of both participants and beneficiaries, and find details concerning the costumes worn in that period. The *călușari's* garments are described as feminine, with wreaths of wormwood and flowers worn on the head. Particularly noteworthy is the mention of the white cloths with which the *călușari* "covered" their faces, thereby concealing their identities—the first attested instance of the performers' masking practices within the *Căluș* ritual. Furthermore, Cantemir notes that the dancers would not have hesitated to use their swords to punish anyone who dared to uncover their faces, suggesting both the high status of ritual actors at that time and the gravity of such an act, which would have exposed their identities. The leader of the group, the *povățuitor* [guide], is called *Stareță*, while the second in hierarchical order, the *Primicer*, had the role of unobtrusively communicating the leader's commands to the performers. No additional information is provided about these two figures,

either regarding special attire for the one called *Primicer*, or concerning any out-of-the-ordinary behaviour. In the absence of such data, it is impossible to determine with certainty whether this presumed Mute (as he was later regarded as being; Ollănescu 1897, 52) also concealed his identity with the help of a white cloth, whether he differed in costume from the others, or whether he wore a special mask (Cantemir 1909, 231–32).

The presence of *căluşari* groups in Wallachia during the same historical period is confirmed by the brief mention made by Anton-Maria del Chiaro in *Revoluţiile Valahiei* [The Revolutions of Wallachia]. Though very concise, del Chiaro's description has the merit of confirming, for the Wallachian area, the model presented by Cantemir for Moldavia. The *căluşari* dance was carried out, in this case as well, during fairs, where the dancers appeared in masks (del Chiaro 1929, 35). However, no details are given that can tell us more about the types of masks used or whether differences existed between performers in this respect. No reference is made to roles resembling *the Mute* or the *Primicer* mentioned by Cantemir.

The first concrete data regarding the existence of *the Mute* within the *Căluş* ritual were provided by Franz Joseph Sulzer in a work published at the end of the eighteenth century. Referring to the ritual as practised in Transylvania, Sulzer lets us witness a spectacular dance made notable by the presence of a Mute, who is characterised by behaviours still found in the *Căluş* today: "They take with them a masked individual whom they call Mutul ('*the Mute*'), since, without uttering a word, he is in the habit of striking and frightening, in jest, those he happens to meet, especially women. Sometimes he wears as a mask a stork's head upon his face" (Sulzer 1995, 118). This account confirms, in this instance, the use of a special mask by the performer taking the role of *the Mute*. Particularly interesting is the information that the mask was not immobile—the bird's beak was so fashioned that a string could be pulled to make it open and close in time with the music during one particular dance. Sulzer also observes the evident resemblance between this prop and that used in performances of the *Turcă*, a ritual carried out around Christmas time (the *Turcă* involves a masked dancer wearing a stylized animal head, usually a goat's, who performs a ritual dance together with a small group). The author further notes that this unusual *căluş* dance was also performed during the Christmas period, although its presentation always involved the masking of the dancers: "This could be called the dance of the masked *căluşari*, although Transylvanians are accustomed to perform it also at Christmas, during their dance called *turca*. It is usually danced by one performer alone, and the virtuoso steps—around fifty in number—executed while masked and leaning on their staffs surpass anything one could imagine" (*Ibidem*). Sulzer offers no additional details regarding how the *căluşari* themselves were masked. However, his account confirms that in this region too the entire troupe practised masking, even if apparently only for one particular dance. As an eyewitness of the performance, Sulzer emphasizes the differences between the model described by Cantemir and that preserved in Transylvania, noting the total absence of similarities. In this case too, lacking complete information, we can only guess at how the *căluşari* concealed their faces—possibly only partially and involving the improvised use of items of their costumes. At the same time, we need to consider the evolution of the ritual within this region, where, as is known, it was moved from Pentecost week to the Christmas season, and where it very likely reached, in other respects as well, a different stage of development.

Information regarding the specifics of the *Căluş* in Transylvania at the end of the eighteenth century is also provided by Samuil Micu-Clain. A prominent representative of the Transylvanian School, Micu-Clain offers a brief overview of the *Căluş*, attempting in this way to support the Latinist theories of the origins of the Romanian people that were emerging at

the time. Consequently, his description of the ritual is concise, limited to highlighting those aspects of the *Căluș* that were of use to him in his wish to draw comparisons with the dances of the Roman Salii priests. No reference is made to the use of masks, nor to the existence of a character similar to the one described by Sulzer, or to any figure who might create a discordant note within the *călușari* group.

In the same tendentious style as that found in late eighteenth-century accounts, Damaschin Bojincă's description of the *Căluș* in Banat was also given with the purpose of supporting Latinist theories. This time, we learn that, in the first part of the nineteenth century, the Banat *călușari* group was accompanied by a *Sbicer*, a feared figure equipped with a whip, likely used to keep the audience at a distance (Ollănescu 1897, 55). Bojincă, however, does not specify whether ritual masks were employed within the troupe. In this way, both Bojincă and Micu-Clain, although witnesses to the *căluș* tradition in their native localities, fail to provide us with more detailed information that might have confirmed or refuted the inclusion of masks in the costume of the *Căluș* in their respective regions.

The practice of masking the protagonists of *căluș* dances is however attested in the early nineteenth-century writings of the boyar Iordache Golescu. According to his notes referring to the *Căluș* as it existed at the time, two types of performers could be distinguished: the *borăcenii*, who danced in female attire, and the *călușarii*, who danced in male attire, leading the way with a flag. Golescu confirms that the protagonists covered their faces "as with masks, so that their faces could not be seen." (Călin 1976, 96)

The female-style costume first described by Dimitrie Cantemir, which also involved concealing the identities of the *călușari*, is thus confirmed for Wallachia more than a century later. Golescu's observations are also relevant for the comparative analysis of the *Căluș* with similar South-Danubian ritual practices. In this context, the female attire of the *borăcenii* finds parallels in Balkan ritual practices (*kraljice*, *rusălci*), performed by women and also involving the covering of the face with a veil. If we consider the theories that have been proposed regarding these ritual practices, to which an archaic character is attributed, the model of the *Căluș* performed by the *borăcenii* would represent an ancient form of the ritual, preserved in the North-Danubian space only in vestigial form (Călin 1976, 95).



This underscores the importance of Golescu's information, which can be seen as relevant for understanding the different evolutionary stages of the *Căluș* in that era, reflected in both the performative and the material aspects of two distinct models of the dance. This may also explain the absence of references to a figure similar to the *măscărici*, a masked character, which is not mentioned in texts describing related Balkan rituals. It is possible that in the ritual dances observed and described by Iordache Golescu such a character may simply not have existed. We can only hypothesize that, if such a figure did exist, either he did not stand out in terms of costume from the other participants, or he was regarded by the author as unimportant and therefore omitted.

Additional evidence of the transformations occurring within the *Căluș* during the first half of the nineteenth century—and, at the same time, an argument supporting the observations made above—is provided by Ion Heliade Rădulescu. In an article from 1843, he notes the unusual role of one of the performers: "One of them, with a very religious superstition, undertakes to remain silent for the entire week, or throughout the entire dance, no matter how long it lasts, and thus becomes mute of his own accord" (Niculescu-Varone 1938, 33). Although Heliade Rădulescu provides a detailed description of the *călușari's* dance, clearly identifying aspects specific to *the Mute*, he gives no information regarding the masking of any member of the ritual troupe. Considering that this text was published shortly after Iordache Golescu's, we are witnessing here, in the same region, the attestation

of a different performative model, one that makes no reference to any means of concealing identity within the *Căluș*.

Similar observations are found in the writings of Ulysse de Marsillac from the second half of the nineteenth century. Based in Bucharest, this French journalist commented on the purposes and origins of the *căluș* dance as he observed it at urban fairs. Like Heliade Rădulescu, he remarks on *the Mute* primarily regarding the ritual prohibition against speaking, a way of preserving the secrecy associated with the tradition. Regarding costumes, we learn that *the Mute* was the only performer to wear a pointed cap, an item which had also been worn by other *călușari* in the past. In Marsillac's account, however, no mention is made of any form of masking for any of the performers.

Accounts of the Transylvanian *Căluș* in the second half of the nineteenth century attest to the presence of a Mut-type character within the troupes. However, the writers who record him provide limited details, insufficient for us to form a comprehensive picture. This is the case with George Barițiu, who, although he presents the *Căluș* in the Sibiu area village of Hosman in detail, mentions *the Mute* of the *călușari* as being present only "occasionally" within the troupes. We also learn that he was responsible for performing various comic acts designed to protect the male dancers from the gaze of ill-intentioned spectators (Barițiu 1882, 73, 76), but it is not specified whether a mask or special props were used. Similarly, Candrea and Frâncu, after a detailed exposition of ritual practices associated with the *Căluș*, mention *the Mute* only at the conclusion of their material. They suggest that the role may have been abandoned by that time, with *the Mute* included in the troupes only when they were invited to perform in the courts of boyars or at fairs, where the "comic" was responsible for entertaining the audience (Frâncu, Candrea 1888, 133). Again, no reference is made to masks in *căluș* performances.

Investigations conducted by Hasdeu at the end of the nineteenth century, in addition to attesting *căluș* dances in several localities, produced some entirely novel information regarding the *Căluș* in Banat. The teacher Sofronie Liuba, in a highly detailed description, brought to light specific aspects of the *Căluș* preserved in villages around his native locality of Măidan (today Brădișoru de Jos, Caraș-Severin). Liuba's troupe included two special characters: *Ceiușul* and *Blojul*. Their roles were distinct. *Ceiușul* was equipped with a *negiac* ("a staff with a hammer at the top"), was described as "the best speaker," carrying with him the ritual necessities and defending his brothers through word and deed (Ms. B.A.R. 3436, 151v, 198). In contrast, *Blojul* carried a whip, following the model of the *Sbicer* described by Bojincă. He is the first character to recall attributes reminiscent of *the Mute* in the *Căluș*, as he would later be known.



In a lengthy article published in 1898, Liuba describes *Blojul* as a clown-like figure: "in disposition ugly, and even uglier through his coarse manners," wearing a goatskin cap and making comic gestures that "terrified the children" (Liuba 1898, 147). This is the first attestation of facial blackening as a masking technique for the protagonists of the dance. However, it is noteworthy that *Blojul* covered his head with a goatskin cap, and that in subsequent records of the *Căluș* the use of a cap or coat as a mask is mentioned. This differentiation in costume is also noted by Aurel Iana in a description of the ritual in the same region, with the *călușari* wearing woollen caps while only *Blojul* wore one of goat-skin, though no mention is made of facial blackening (Iana 1890, 66).

Nicolae Densușianu's investigations at the end of the nineteenth century provide the most substantial information on the state of the *Căluș* up to that date. In the questionnaire he sent out in 1895, Densușianu included several items specifically on the *Căluș*, two of which referred to the performers' attire ("how are they dressed?") and roles within the





Images 1 and 2. Groups of *călușari* from the late nineteenth century, photographed by Carol Popp de Szathmari.
In both images, the absence of ritual masks is evident (Collection of the Romanian Academy Library, inv. no. 10302, 10301).

troupe ("what is the name of their leader, and what are the names of the other members?") (Densușianu 1895, 30). The results proved substantial: the phenomenon was attested in over eighty localities in Oltenia and Muntenia. The role of *the Mute* was confirmed in forty localities, but the use of a mask in only nine. No reference was made to any other masking practices; the models described by Cantemir, del Chiaro, and Golescu were not confirmed. In most localities, the Mut-type role is merely mentioned. Occasionally, he is noted as the leader of the group. Most frequently, the prohibition against speaking and the comic nature of the role are reported.

Of the nine localities where mask use was attested, brief descriptions were provided in only five: "*Blojul* wears a goat-skin '*burduf*' with the hair on the outside and unshorn, covering the head to the shoulders. Openings are cut for the eyes, nose, and mouth, without removing the patch. At the mouth, a few beans are sewn in as teeth." "*Blojul* (one of them) has on his head a hairy goat-skin '*burduf*'." "There is also an old mute (who does not speak while walking and dancing), with a goat beard and bean teeth, called *bloji*, performing various jokes and antics." "*Mutul* wears a kid-skin cap; his eyes are painted red or as he wishes." "*Mutul* has a beard made from a piece of fur" (Fochi 1976, 40-2, 46, 52).

Thus, a preference among *the Mutes* for using goatskin in mask-making is confirmed. As observed in Banat, the *călușari* were distinguished from *the Mute* by caps made of sheep's wool rather than goatskin. Beyond the practical advantage of this material, readily available in pastoral communities, the symbolic association of the goat with malevolent forces (Antonescu 2016, 123) provides support for the pagan character attributed to the *Căluș* and its connection with such representations.

A diachronic analysis of attestations of the *Căluș* from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries makes it possible to draw certain conclusions regarding the use of specific masks and the evolution of the ritual. As previously noted, it is evident that a performance model involving the masking of all troupe members was abandoned. Even Densușianu's writings attest to the designation of *borăceni*, without any reference to the wearing of a protective veil over the face. Moreover, a brief survey of the relevant texts published during this period demonstrates the absence of individual ritual masks such as those worn by *the Mute*. In no way can these be seen as a general feature of the entire phenomenon during this time.





Images 3 and 4. Postcards from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, depicting groups of *călușari* that include masked characters (Foto 4: H. Wichmann, Galați).

Nonetheless, by the end of the nineteenth century, as shown by a text published by Dimitrie Ollănescu, the *Căluș* ritual had become regularly associated with the presence of a "masked man," an observation that we interpret as referring to a form of physical masking rather than merely a costume serving to suggest an alternative identity for the wearer. The writer was clearly referring to *the Mute* of the *călușari*, whom he identified in troupes moving through the streets of towns and villages (Ollănescu 1897, 123). Ollănescu's conclusions can be attributed to a performative model observed at that time in urban centres, where the mask was presumably used more frequently. But what explains the rarity of references to masks in the attestations of the phenomenon from the centuries under consideration?

First, it is possible that the masks simply were not there. We tend to favour this hypothesis, given the visual impact and spectacular effect of masks, which, if present, would have made a strong impression on observers. Performances of the *Căluș*, especially at fairs of the time, could easily have assumed spectacular forms, where masking props would likely have been employed if they were available. The same applies to other characteristic elements of the *Căluș*, such as the dancers' beaks or the phallus of *the Mutes*, which became relatively common and are frequently mentioned in twentieth-century accounts. While these elements, also rarely noted in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century descriptions, may have been displayed with discretion, perhaps only in specific contexts, the same cannot be said of ritual masks, which had evident performative and spectacular functions.

Second, the mask may have been used only in certain situations rather than throughout the dance. Even today, *the Mutes* sometimes lift their masks and only replace them at specific moments—a practice easily explained by the intensity of the dance or by the fact of performances taking place in hot weather. We should also note the historical preference of *the Mutes* for making their masks from standard articles of clothing (caps, coats), which could have been perceived as ordinary attire rather than masks *per se*. These hypotheses, combined with insufficient knowledge of the ritual dance on the part of the writers, and perhaps a lack of interest in such details, offer another explanation for the absence of attestations of masks.

Third, the purpose of many accounts of the *Căluș* has to be considered. In some cases, the sole intention of these descriptions was to lend support to the Latinist theories of the time. Comparative analyses linking the *Căluș* dance to the practices of ancient Rome focused primarily on costume and choreographic elements relevant to these theories, leaving no space for a masked figure. It is also possible that some writers paid no attention to the masked character, directing attention instead to the troupe as a whole.

It is evident that the *Căluș* is a ritual capable of constant adaptation to social, cultural, and economic conditions. This is clearly demonstrated by contemporary performers, who modify their presentation of the dance according to the context. Historical documents similarly reflect this adaptive capacity, offering glimpses of a *Căluș* that mirrors the conditions of its time and a particular performative model. This is apparent in the diversity of props used, which should not be regarded as uniform across the entire phenomenon, either diachronically or synchronically.

Although the present study does not resolve the mysteries surrounding the origins of the *Căluș* or its specific *paraphernalia*, it does highlight the necessity of interpreting this ritual dance in light of local models, which frequently introduce unique nuances that should not be applied generally. Consequently, we maintain that the *Căluș*—renowned for the complexity and variety of its performative models—should always be studied through a diachronic lens, situated within clear geographical coordinates. This approach may provide a means of uncovering significant insights into the true nature and evolution of the ritual.

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The Mask as a Privilege. Continuities and Adaptations in Cantabria's *Vijanera*[1]

Susana Moreno Fernández
Universidad de Valladolid, Spain

Susana Moreno Fernández is Associate Professor at the University of Valladolid (Spain). Specialized in ethnomusicology, she is the author of a number of publications on musical instruments, traditional practices, music festivals, and cultural processes in the Iberian Peninsula. She is the chair of the Study Group on Musical Traditions of SibE/ICTMD-Spain.

Correspondence: susana.moreno@uva.es

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ABSTRACT

The *Vijanera* is a traditional winter mask festival celebrated every year in the small village of Silió in Cantabria, a region located on the northern coast of Spain. This ritual drama features colorful handmade costumes representing animals, mythological creatures, comic characters, and figures characteristic of rural agrarian society.
Historically, local variants of the *Vijanera* were celebrated in different localities throughout the Cantabrian valleys, but today most of these celebrations have disappeared or acquired new meanings. The practice of the *Vijanera* still thrives in Silió, where it was revitalized in the 1980s by local practitioners. As a ritual of renewal marking the transition from one year to the next, the festival embodies a series of values and meanings. It is a community celebration representing local identity and culture, while also serving as an attraction for heritage tourists. Several researchers have studied the *Vijanera* from various perspectives. Their publications help to reconstruct the history, main characteristics, uses, meanings, and significance of this festival, which has undergone transformations and adaptations. The visual aspects of this ritual drama have received the most attention, while music and sound have only been mentioned occasionally by authors who recognize their importance. The aim of this article is to examine the *Vijanera* from an ethnomusicological perspective, drawing on archival and online research as well as on my own fieldwork. I focus on key processes in the development of this festival in Silió and draw attention to the soundscape as an indispensable part of the celebration, which I examine here in a preliminary manner and which warrants more detailed study in the future.

KEYWORDS

Vijanera; Cantabria (Spain); Carnival ritual; winter mask festival; music and sound.



The *Vijanera:* a revitalized tradition

The *Vijanera* is a traditional winter mask festival celebrated in Cantabria, a region located on the northern coast of Spain. This cyclical ritual drama[2] marks the passing of the old year and the arrival of the new, while reinforcing community cohesion and the collective identity of its participants.

In the rural valleys of central and southern Cantabria, numerous *vijaneras* and similar mask festivals were celebrated in the past during the Carnival season. In the twenty-first

century, these rituals that were central to agrarian society have undergone a considerable decline. David López San Juan (2021, 29-30) attributes this decline to cultural and socio-economic changes that affected traditional culture throughout the twentieth century, as well as to the fact that carnival celebrations were generally banned in Spain between the 1930s and the late 1970s. He also calls attention to the fact that today the *Vijanera* that marks the transition of the year is only celebrated in Silió.[3] Silió is a village of 484 inhabitants (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2024) with a long tradition of livestock farming, located in the municipality of Molledo, in the Iguña Valley, in central Cantabria. The festival takes place in this village on the first Sunday in January, or the second Sunday if the first coincides with New Year's Day. The local community displays a clear awareness of the singularity of their festival, which is deeply linked to their identity and culture.

Every participant in the *Vijanera* ritual is known as a *vijanero*, a status reserved for those with a connection to Silió through birth, family or friendship ties, or residence in the village. At present, being a *vijanero* is regarded as a distinct local privilege, reflecting both social belonging and cultural continuity. Although Silió is a rural community, it is located in a valley marked by industrialization and the urbanization of local lifestyles, processes that began to leave their mark on Cantabria in the early twentieth century. Extant documentation indicates that the *Vijanera* was part of everyday life in Silió from at least the second half of the nineteenth century until 1936.

As evidenced by the works of several researchers and by the testimonies of those who promote and participate in the *Vijanera,*[4] at the beginning of the twentieth century, this festivity attracted both local residents and visitors from other towns and valleys who came to witness the performance. However, the celebration was interrupted during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the subsequent Francoist authoritarian regime (1939-1975), when it was banned. In the early 1980s, the social and political changes that took place in Cantabria and throughout Spain paved the way for the revitalization of the *Vijanera*.[5] The changes include the restitution of freedom of expression, the consolidation of Spanish democracy, the creation of Autonomous Communities, including Cantabria, and modernization driven by capitalist development, among others. It was during this period that a group of young people from Silió and the Iguña Valley, organized under the name *Bígaro* (snail), decided to revitalize this festival, which they considered significant for local culture and identity.

Since 1989, the ritual has been preserved by the *Asociación Cultural Amigos de la Vijanera* ("Friends of the *Vijanera* Cultural Association," hereafter the *Vijanera* Association). The members of this association, founded that same year in Silió, have been committed to reviving various festivals and rituals, with the active participation of local residents. The most notable of these is the *Vijanera*, which they promoted in order to gain official recognition. To this end, the association serves as the authoritative voice on matters concerning Silió's *Vijanera*. It also maintains ongoing contacts and negotiations with the media, institutions, and official bodies.

The revitalization of this ritual, which is highly valued by the inhabitants of Silió, has been a resounding success. As evidenced by my interview with the members of the *Vijanera* Association, César Rodríguez and Alberto García (August 2025), at the local level, the festival is not regarded as a "historical reenactment," but as a "deeply rooted lived experience" of profound significance. The organizers believe that the visitors who come each year to experience the *Vijanera* are much more than mere passive spectators. They are expected to mingle with and integrate into the troupe of *vijaneros*, who playfully tease each other and interact with attendees, occasionally directing mock confrontations at them. In this way, the "non-locals" also become active participants in the ritual.

This mask festival, which perpetuates an important part of the region's heritage, is also recognized for its connection to similar traditions not only in the Iberian Peninsula, but also in other countries in Europe and elsewhere. Today, institutions, academics, and custodians of these traditions highlight such affinities, which some researchers began to observe several decades ago. For example, in the 1960s, the renowned anthropologist and historian Julio Caro Baroja included the *vijaneras* in the corpus of masquerades that commemorated the turn of the year in Spain and other European countries (2006, 256-8). More recently, authors such as the anthropologist Eloy Gómez Pellón point out that the *Vijanera* of Silió is analogous to winter mask festivals celebrated not only in northern regions of Spain, but also in many parts of Europe. These traditions feature similar characters, costumes, masks, and cowbells (Gómez Pellón 2003, 44).

The *Vijanera* has received notable recognition from both Cantabrian institutions and external organizations due to its importance as cultural heritage. Among other distinctions, it has been officially declared an Intangible Ethnographic Cultural Asset by the Government of Cantabria (2021), as well as a Festival of Regional Tourist Interest (2000) and a Festival of National Tourist Interest (2009). It has also become part of networks of Iberian masquerades and international events. The *vijaneros* have occasionally traveled throughout Spain and abroad to participate in festivals, exhibitions, and parades alongside participants to similar celebrations from Spain, Portugal, and other countries.

The recognition of the *Vijanera* as regional cultural heritage, together with the media and social media impact that this entails, has contributed to increasing the number of visitors to the *Vijanera* of Silió in recent years.[6] These developments have also encouraged new researchers to take an interest in its study or to refer to this celebration in their publications.[7] In their public statements, institutions, official bodies, and the media tend to highlight the most ancestral and spectacular elements of this celebration. Drawing on both the work of anthropologists and ethnologists on winter mask festivals in Cantabria and the local knowledge passed down to the people of Silió, the official documents for the designation of the *Vijanera* as intangible cultural heritage highlight that this festival "was consolidated as an ancestral tradition" in the nineteenth century (BOE, 14 de Agosto de 2021, Sec. III, p. 100589). This tradition is considered typical of peasant communities and is linked to secular celebrations dating back to the Middle Ages and even to Antiquity (BOE, 14 de Agosto de 2021, Sec. III, p. 100589; BOC, 21 de Junio de 2017, p. 2). The spectacular elements are highlighted in references to the "performance and staging" of the ritual drama (BOC 21 de Junio de 2017, p. 2) which describe the colorful characters, the clamour and commotion, the spectacle, the humor, the metallic clanging of the cowbells, the display of vigor by the *zarramacos*, the frenetic dance of the *vijaneros*, and the bear character's roars and swipes (BOE, 14 de Agosto de 2021).

Now that Silió has secured its place on the cultural map, the *vijaneros* continue to promote this ritual as a form of community self-celebration, while adopting certain dynamics characteristic of tourism.[8] Welcoming visitors and, consequently, generating some income provides a boost to the local economy and that of the surrounding area, while helping to keep the festival going. Although it receives some support from the municipal government, the *Vijanera* remains essentially self-managed and self-financed.[9] At the same time, members of the *Vijanera* Association maintain that this festival, which has welcomed visitors from other places throughout its history, continues to be celebrated by and for the inhabitants of Silió. The representatives of this association are reluctant to be overly constrained by regulations that could alter their experience of the ritual. This makes them somewhat wary of official heritage recognition by national and international entities such as UNESCO.

As I will illustrate, the organizers maintain a deliberate fidelity to the *Vijanera* that they consider to have been inherited from their ancestors. However, they are aware that they live in a different society, governed by different principles. The testimonies I have collected in this regard remind us that "urban life is no longer as rooted in nature as it was in ancient agricultural settlements, so periodic rituals, including festivals, have become denaturalized" (Aguirre Baztán 2018, 434). Driven by the need to present their culture in a way that appeals to visitors, the promoters of the *Vijanera* have adapted the communal ritual celebration to the new circumstances. As a result, they have increased both the number and variety of characters that take part in the ritual drama, while intensifying the spectacular elements of the festival. These changes are reflected in aspects such as the costumes used and the development of various festive activities, in which music and sound play a prominent role.

These self-conscious processes respond, in part, to a desire to display, together with the satisfaction of a job well done, the pride that the inhabitants of Silió feel in their place of origin and their local culture. They consider the festival fascinating and unique. In shaping this distinctive image of the village and its festival, the analyses and accounts provided at different historical periods by researchers and chroniclers of the *Vijanera*, such as those referred to in the following section, must be considered.

Interpretations and Meanings of the Festival

From the perspective of anthropologist Antonio Montesino González, a specialist in popular mask festivities in Cantabria, the *Vijanera* is an expression of popular Carnival culture. This is partly due to its traditional date of celebration, which falls between New Year's Eve and the Sunday following Epiphany, within a festive period that extends from December to Lent (Montesino 1982, 24; Montesino 1987, 266).

Montesino also identifies in the *Vijanera* a series of morphological elements and expressive functions characteristic of carnival manifestations: revelry, commotion, masks and costumes, farce, satirical drama, grotesque realism, collective reparation, rites of passage, delimitation of symbolic boundaries, containment of evils, reversal of sexual roles, liberation from taboos, and symbolic dissolution of social differences (Montesino 1982). All these characteristics indicate a temporary and symbolic transgression of the established social order, carried out in a renewed act of collective catharsis (Montesino 1982, 24; 1991, 188).

The deeper meanings of the *Vijanera* are difficult to unravel. This festivity stands out not only for its aesthetic quality that displays a multiplicity of phenomena, but also for the complex network of ritual actions it entails (Montesino 1987, 286). Actions are performed in part consciously, but their symbolic meanings, which refer to the birth of the New Year, natural regeneration, or the eternal return of things, often transcend the intentions of local participants (Gómez Pellón 2003, 47). Moreover, the various fields of significance interwoven in this and other similar celebrations of popular culture have fluctuated over time, evolving as traditions continue to be transformed and reinvented (Montesino 1991, 188).[10] Publications on the *Vijanera* by writers and scholars from various backgrounds help us understand many aspects of this celebration and the ways in which it has been interpreted. Among the early researchers and chroniclers, Hermilio Alcalde del Río (1906), who linked this festival to prehistory, and Adriano García Lomas and Jesús Cancio (1928) stand out. Influenced by the

prevailing mindset of their time, these authors attributed qualities of historical antiquity, mythical features, and primitivism to this festival.

In doing so, they established some stereotypes about the *Vijanera* and its characters,[11] providing a basis for etymological speculations and static, romanticized, essentialist conceptions.[12] These discourses were later reproduced by other researchers[13] and prompted Antonio Montesino's criticism of the "quietist fundamentalism of folklore" (1987, 264).

With his research and publications since the 1980s, Montesino inaugurated an analysis based on more scientific perspectives and theoretical paradigms, to which other researchers of the *Vijanera* have contributed in recent decades.[14] Interest in research into traditional celebrations in Cantabria since the 1980s is part of a broader trend that has been observed throughout Spain. As Eloy Gómez Pellón pointed out in the early 1990s,

> It is no coincidence that in recent years there has been a resurgence of research in Spain into the study of festivals in particular, and customs and traditions in general, from a local and regional perspective. This phenomenon has emerged under the influence of the socio-political situation, combined with the development of anthropological science. (Gómez Pellón 1993, 24)

Under these renewed approaches, scholars view the festival as a dynamic phenomenon in which the most atavistic aspects of the ritual, its characters and festive actions, its history, and its metaphorical meanings and social functions, are continuously redefined. Several authors also acknowledge the ongoing processes of revitalization, heritagization and tourism promotion, which are important for understanding the *Vijanera* and other cultural manifestations in contemporary Cantabrian society.[15] These are also significant twenty-first-century phenomena that are being studied in connection with these rituals, both in Spain and internationally.[16]

Among the interpretations offered thus far, several aspects stand out. These include the aforementioned notions of carnivalesque transgression and the regeneration and renewal of annual, natural, and life cycles. Other notable features are the cohesive nature of the ritual, which serves as a festive expression not only of collective identity, but also of individual, family, and generational identities. It provides a means of articulating the tensions, hopes, and image that festival participants have of themselves and others. In addition, the festival expresses a particular way of life and a distinctive worldview in which the natural, cultural, and supernatural converge. Researchers also attribute social functions to this celebration, such as showing people and communities the norms that govern daily life. Furthermore, they recognize this ritual as a foundation of cultural identity for the people of Silió, combating oblivion, isolation, and abandonment. By assuming this role, the ritual guarantees the perpetuation of the social structure, fostering the regeneration of society. Finally, the *Vijanera* has been seen as a celebration of an important element of autochthonous tradition that was consciously revitalized and preserved, integrated into the regional cultural heritage, and turned into a tourist attraction.

The results of my research clarify certain aspects and reveal dimensions of the ritual that complement the contributions of other scholars. First, the importance of strengthening and maintaining the community and fostering local pride acquires new significance if we focus on demography. Several inhabitants of Silió, a village with a somewhat aging population, must commute daily to work. Many others originally from the village had to emigrate and, given the significant identity value of the *Vijanera*, they return each year during the period designated for the festival. This situation leads organizers to bring together and coordinate local residents and people who live elsewhere. Secondly, the activities involved

in carefully preparing and celebrating this festival, which brings together people of different ages, help to instill or revive values and ways of life characteristic of the rural past. The community collaboration required to perform the *Vijanera* helps to counteract the lack of social interaction and community life associated with the individualism of contemporary urban society. Thirdly, the festival promotes among younger generations respect for cultural and family heritage, as well as for their elders and ancestors, some of whom were *vijaneros* and revitalized this ritual. To express their appreciation, some locals continue to play the same roles and characters as their relatives did in the past, evoking important personal memories and emotions. Fourth, lyrics and other ritualized verbal expressions used in the songs and performances of the *Vijanera* highlight the local parlance, which the inhabitants of Silió are keen to preserve. Fifth, for those who wear masks, other aspects serve as an incentive, such as the experience of momentary liberation and licentiousness. Finally, people connected to Silió feel proud of belonging to a special place possessing a distinctive cultural heritage that integrates the broader phenomenon of European winter mask festivals. The local and regional significance of this celebration, as I have observed through fieldwork and interviews, stems, on the one hand, from a sense of local belonging to the village and an assertion of identity that distinguishes the inhabitants of Silió from other groups. On the other hand, it is due to the fact that the *Vijanera* has become a symbol of the entire region of Cantabria. This is confirmed in official documents recognizing it as intangible cultural heritage (BOE, 14 de Agosto de 2021, Secc. III, p. 100588, 100589).

The explanations provided by experts such as those mentioned here have influenced, to a certain extent, the meanings that the festival has today for participants and organizers.[17] At the same time, the members of the *Vijanera* Association maintain their own narratives and local perspectives. For example, although researchers classify it as a Carnival festival, for contemporary *vijaneros* the *Vijanera* is not a Carnival, since they do not simply wear costumes, but rather become possessed by the characters they adopt and embody. This feature, common in ritual dramas, is distinct from the conventional patterns of Carnival celebrations. These ideas were emphasized by César Rodríguez, representative of the *Vijanera* Association, during the interview I conducted with him and Alberto García in August 2025:

> ...you don't dress up. You are. What are you? You are a character. The character you happen to be... And on top of that, if you haven't eaten, you're nervous, and you drink a little bit of *orujo* (spirits), then... you transform yourself and the character possesses you.
> ...this is not a Carnival. And we don't dress up... I find that term particularly offensive, because if our grandparents never talked about carnival, why do we have to talk about carnival now?

Beyond this, the custodians of this ritual have no objection to the *Vijanera* being—and signifying—whatever each person wishes to find in it. As César also put it during the interview when I asked him about the meanings of the ritual: "*Vijanera* means whatever you want it to mean."

In the publications consulted, some aspects of the celebration have received less attention. When narrating the events that take place during the festival, authors tend to focus mainly on the ritual action itself, leaving aside aspects of organization, management, and the media and tourist promotion that are also evident and that I will outline here. Previous scholars have also not paid sufficient attention to behaviors related to the spectacularization of the *Vijanera*, which encompasses both the theatrical performance of the ritual drama in the morning and the recreational activities that follow in the afternoon and evening. Furthermore, the attention paid to sound is rather limited. The mere presence of many performative actions

expressed through sound often goes unnoticed, as does their importance to the ritual. Researchers of this festival recognize the relevance of noise, sounds, and music alongside movement, gestures, and words. However, in their accounts and explanations, they focus solely on specific musical or sound moments, rendering invisible a central element of the *Vijanera's* identity that contributes to the coherence of the entire celebration: its unique soundscape. This concept, understood here in the sense of Murray Schafer (1977) and Steven Feld (2012),[18] is not foreign to the organizers themselves,[19] and seems to be highly relevant to understanding a ritual so closely intertwined with the cultural and sound ecology of Silió. Feld's theoretical proposals influenced Nicola Scaldaferri's (2020) work on the Campanaccio of San Mauro Forte (Italy) and other festivals and rituals involving animal bells which, like the *Vijanera*, are celebrated around the Carnival period. This work was another source of inspiration for my research.[20]

Having introduced the *Vijanera* and outlined the main meanings and interpretations attributed by participants and researchers, I will now provide evidence that the soundscape is an inherent element of this celebration, which allows for a deeper understanding of it. To this end, I will present the most prominent characters in this complex ritual drama, along with their attributes and sonic behaviors. Next, I will offer an overview of the unfolding of the festive action, which is expressed through a rich variety of gestures, movements, words, poetry, sounds, and instrumental and vocal music. The initial analysis presented here, which identifies the key elements that make up the soundscape of the *Vijanera* and provides evidence of their symbolic significance in the ritual, lays the groundwork for a more detailed examination of this complex issue in future research.

Towards a study of the soundscape of Silio's *Vijanera*

The characters

At present, in Silió, the ritual troupe of the *Vijanera* is made up of around 150 *vijaneros* who take on the roles of a remarkable variety of characters, identified by specific traits and names. Some of these characters wear masks, such as the bear, whose costume completely conceals the wearer's identity. Other prominent figures, such as the *zarramacos* and the *danzarín negro*, paint their faces instead of wearing masks, making their identities recognizable.

An important part of the *Vijanera* ritual can be explained by the metaphorical capture and killing of the bear, which signifies the expulsion of all evil. The bear is portrayed as destructive figure, a representation that dates back to the agrarian society in which this celebration probably originated, at a time when the animal posed a real threat



Fig. 1. The bear and the tamer along with *zarramacos* and other characters. Credit photo: Luis Ángel Moreno Landeras, *Vijanera* in Silió, 5 January 2025.

by attacking livestock and destroying crops. This animal was important for the culture of several Cantabrian valleys, but became extinct in the region about a hundred years ago. Today, the NGO *Fundación Oso Pardo* contributes to the study and preservation of native bears, as well as their habitat and ecosystem. During the *Vijanera* ritual, the bear is accompanied by *el amo* (the tamer).[21] (Fig. 1)

In the hunt and killing of the bear, as in much of the celebration, the emblematic *zarramacos* (heroic warriors) of the *Vijanera* play a central role, also contributing significantly to the soundscape of the ritual. These characters blacken their faces and wear striking costumes with tall conical hats adorned with rosettes and sound-producing elements, such as jingle bells. The use of sheepskins and objects made of leather or esparto grass in their clothing gives them an almost zoomorphic appearance. They also carry a staff, which they use to support themselves as they move and sway. The presence of the *zarramacos* throughout the ritual drama is accentuated by the powerful volume and timbre of the eight cowbells that hang from eacg performer's body and that they ring frequently. In Silió, there is a specific emic term to designate that sound-producing action: *jorricar los campanos* (to ring the cowbells). As my research reveals, during the course of the ritual action, the *zarramacos* use the thunderous sound of these instruments to guide the procession of the *vijaneros*. According to local accounts, it is also the clanging of the cowbells that awakens and frightens the bear, overwhelming it at the moment of its symbolic death. For this reason, some researchers attribute supernatural powers to the "warriors" who sound the bells.[22]



Fig. 2. *Zarramaco*. Credit photo: Luis Ángel Moreno Landeras, *Vijanera* in Silió, 5 January 2025

The considerable weight of the large cowbells they carry requires the role of *zarramacos* to be performed by men of great physical strength. Four bells are placed on the chest and four on the back: the largest ones on the torso and the smaller ones around the waist, all firmly secured with ropes. Traditionally, and even today, several young men from Silió compete for the role of *zarramacos* as a way of publicly displaying their strength and virility.[23]

The considerable physical effort involved in carrying and ringimg the cowbells during the parade through the village, combined with the intense noise, frayed nerves, limited food intake, and occasional alcohol consumption, can lead these performers to experience altered states of consciousness.[24] (Fig. 2.)

The symbolic expulsion of evil, which revolves largely around the figure of the bear, is an important element in the *Vijanera*. However, many other components and figures are involved, enriching its meaning and symbolism. Particularly noteworthy are the *danzarines* (dancers), who structure various moments of the ritual performance as leading figures who lead and clear the way for the procession, jumping and dancing while leaning on the staffs they carry in their hands.

The *danzarines* are divided into two categories: the *danzarines blancos* (white dancers) and the *danzarín negro* (black dancer), with meanings corresponding to their colors (the bright side and the dark side). These dancers carry musical instruments associated with



Fig. 3. Black dancer. Credit photo: Luis Ángel Moreno Landeras, *Vijanera* in Silió, 5 January 2025.



Fig. 4. White dancers. Credit photo: Luis Ángel Moreno Landeras, *Vijanera* in Silió, 5 January 2025.

pastoral and livestock culture, such as a hunting horn and small bells. As my interlocutors emphasized, these instruments, together with the large cowbells carried by the *zarramacos*, are traditionally used in Silió to emit signals and communicate at a distance, as well as to identify, locate, and give orders to livestock. The *danzarín negro*'s face is blackened. He wears esparto grass clothing and sandals, as well as and a straw hat. His costume is adorned with hanging corn cobs and, sometimes, small bells hang from his staff. He also carries a hunting horn, which he sounds at key moments, acting as the "master of ceremonies" (López San Juan 2021, 36). It is important to highlight the role of the black dancer in playing the horn and producing central verbal expressions during various festive actions. His function, which remains largely unexplored, is crucial for the ritual's efficacy, guiding the action and signaling pivotal moments. (Fig. 3)

In contrast, a small group of *danzarines blancos* wear white masks that partially cover their faces. Each of them wears a white blouse and trousers, a red sash that extends from one shoulder to the opposite side of the waist, and white esparto sandals. Their tall, cylindrical hats are adorned with ribbons, jingle bells, and pompoms, and they wear a leather belt from which small bells hang. As they move and jump, the instruments they carry as part of their costumes produce a high-pitched metallic sound. (Fig. 4)

The troupe includes many other figures who contribute to the visual spectacle and revelry of the festival. Some of them occasionally assume a central role in the performance. It is difficult to list and classify them, but López San Juan offers a systematization that helps to understand the forms that the *vijaneros* can take, distinguishing between fixed and variable characters (2021, 30-42). Among the fixed characters, *los negros* (embodying the dark side) represent the less privileged members of society or take on zoomorphic and vegetal forms, while *los blancos* (characters of light) reflect wealth and social status and appear refined and elegant in contrast to the coarseness of the characters of darkness. In general, the characters take on human or zoomorphic forms, represent objects, or assume the appearance of fantastic beings or elements of nature. Some are linked to local myths, beliefs, and superstitions.

Among those with a human appearance, in addition to stereotypical comic figures, several are associated with the transition of life and annual cycles (youth and old age, the old and new year), or represent individuals from different backgrounds, social groups, and professions associated with traditional rural society.

In recent years, López San Juan has highlighted the large number of *vijaneros* who carry out a richly staged performance with extraordinary energy (2021, 63). The meticulous craftsmanship of the costumes contributes to the spectacular nature of this festival, in which color and movement are further enhanced by the fact that it takes place in broad daylight. Alongside young people and adults, children now also participate, and a "children's *Vijanera*" has even been created for the day before the traditional *Vijanera*, with the aim of promoting generational succession. The characters in the adult *Vijanera* continue to be exclusively male, as tradition dictates.[25] Women participate in preparing the costumes and organizing the festival, which includes a community dinner on the days around the celebration, attended by *vijaneros* of both sexes and all ages. In the children's *Vijanera*, boys and girls parade together.

At present, as the troupe has more than doubled in size compared with the traditional number of *vijaneros*, more people embody the same types of characters, with new variants being incorporated along with other costumes that were already in use in the past. I have found that this important increase is governed by criteria of material and acoustic sustainability. In the case of the *zarramacos*, in the previous decades there were around eight of these figures in a group of approximately 60 *vijaneros*. Today, there are 26 adult *zarramacos* and around 10 children within a troupe of roughly 150 *vijaneros*. Maintaining the proportion of these figures relative to the entire troupe allows their cowbells to continue to guide the performers, by producing an adequate sound volume. This characteristic demonstrates that a significant part of the ritual action in the *Vijanera* is guided by sound.

Furthermore, as summarized in the following section, throughout the festive day there is a wide variety of sounds produced by elements worn as part of the *vijaneros*' costumes, by their gestures, actions, verbalizations, and songs, and by the human and animal cries they utter. At specific times, the celebration includes live music, performed with musical instruments or the human voice, as well as some recorded music.

The festive action

On *Vijanera* Day, the *vijaneros*, nervous and excited, gather together, put on their costumes, take on their character roles, and then parade through the streets to perform various ritualized acts. The ritual follows a series of actions in a predetermined order, which has been subject to certain adaptations over the years. Below, I describe the main moments of the celebration as I have experienced and reconstructed them,[26] guided at all times by my particular interest in the musical and sonic components. The very soundscape of Silió is transformed on the day of this ritual. The village is unusually quiet and peaceful, as much of it is closed to traffic to allow the procession to pass through the streets. This situation highlights the sounds produced by nature, local residents, visitors, and the *vijaneros* themselves.

The first significant act of the celebration is marked by sound. In the darkness of the early morning, between six and seven o'clock, some young men take to the streets and ring large cowbells, announcing to the villagers that it is *Vijanera* Day. From that moment on, the different characters begin to put on their costumes and prepare for the festival, gathering animals and items necessary for the ritual. For this purpose, most *vijaneros* congregate in the old school building, which serves as the headquarters of the *Vijanera* Association.

From around 9:00 a.m., visitors begin to arrive in the village of Silió and disperse across various points along the route where the procession will later pass, eagerly awaiting the start of the festivities. Television crews and journalists also begin to make their presence felt, starting to document the festival and interviewing the participants. Numerous photographers are present as well, later moving into the midst of the parade to capture the moment.

In the field next to the schools, where a significant part of the subsequent action will take place, an outdoor stage has been set up along with a tent with a bar serving food and drinks, providing shelter from the cold typical of early January. From this location, to entertain both residents and tourists, a loudspeaker system plays recorded folk music throughout the village, broadcasting music by popular folk bands from both Cantabria and other regions and countries.

At around 11:00 a.m., acoustic signals can be heard again: the firing of three rockets, indicating that the parade is about to begin. At that point, the *vijaneros* take to the streets from various strategically located places. The most spectacular moment occurs when part of the troupe descends from the Santa Marina neighborhood, located in the upper part of the village, along a tree-lined path, accompanied by the deafening sound of the cowbells rung by the *zarramacos*, who move in a more or less synchronized manner.

As in the rest of the parade, throughout this part the *vijaneros* interact with visitors, who stand on the sides of the paths and streets or mingle with the troupe, risking more than a few whippings. Many spectators also record or photograph various moments of the performance or take selfies with their mobile phones. Upon reaching one of the meadows located above the lower part of the village, the *zarramacos*, aided by the tamer and other characters, chase and capture the bear. In doing so, they are helped by the loud sound of their cowbells, which drowns out the music from the loudspeakers. This music is silenced at this point so as not to interfere. This is a key ritual moment that attracts the attention of many spectators. Once the bear has been captured, the procession continues downhill to meet up with the rest of the troupe in the square next to the church.

Then, the entire group of *vijaneros* heads to the village's border with the neighborhood of Santián to perform the ritual of "the defense of the territorial boundary." In the past peasant society, this rite was of great importance and was performed by members of the *vijaneras* of Silió and the neighboring villages. Today, there are no other *vijaneras*, so this ritual is performed as a simulation, in which the *vijaneros* of Silió position themselves in two groups on either side of the white line painted on the road that divides the territories, thus recreating the ancient rivalry. (Fig. 5)

Along the route to the boundary, black and white dancers lead the procession, jumping and running, causing their small bells and jingle bells to sound. They are followed by the *zarramacos*, with the enveloping metallic sound of their cowbells. The rest of the troupe, which adds to the sound density of the parade, moves forward and backward irregularly, mingling and interacting with each other and with the spectators. At this and other moments, various gestures, movements, and playful antics enrich the soundscape, accompanied by shouts, noises, sounds, and verbalizations. When everyone reaches the boundary, while the audience settles down to watch the performance, the *danzarín negro* points his staff at the white line painted on the road. At that moment, he sounds a long blast on his hunting horn, creating a marked silence amid the festive revelry, a silence that signals the sacred nature of this point in the ritual. The dancer then shouts: *"Esta es la raya. El límite el pueblo. ¿Qué queréis, guerra o paz?"* ("This is the boundary. The limit of the village. What do you want, war or peace?"). The rest of the troupe responds: *"¡Guerra!"* ("War!"), and everyone begins



Fig. 5. Defending territorial boundaries. Credit photo: Luis Ángel Moreno Landeras, *Vijanera* in Silió, 5 January 2025.



Fig. 6. The *zarramacos* sounding their cowbells. Credit photo: Luis Ángel Moreno Landeras, *Vijanera* in Silió, 5 January 2025.



Fig. 7. Singing of the *coplas*. Credit photo: Luis Ángel Moreno Landeras, *Vijanera* in Silió, 5 January 2025.

to jump and move energetically, producing a din dominated by the powerful sound of the cowbells of the *zarramacos*. Silence returns and, after another horn blast, the dancer repeats the question *"¿Qué queréis, guerra o paz?"* ("What do you want, war or peace?"), receiving the same response. On the third occasion, the troupe replies that it wants peace, moving and jumping even more energetically. After a final horn call, the black dancer shouts: *"¡Viva la Vijanera de Silió!"* ("Long live the *Vijanera* of Silió!"), to which the troupe responds with another *"¡Viva!"* ("Long live!"). The procession then resumes its parade back to the center of the village. (Fig. 6)

After midday, the group arrives at the field next to the schools, where two important performances take place on a stage equipped with a public address system. The first and main performance consists of the singing of *coplas* (short verses) by two or more *vijaneros*. The second performance is the "pregnant woman giving birth" (*parto de la preñá*). The *coplas* consist of between sixty and seventy satirical poetic compositions that refer to events that have taken place in Silió throughout the year, as well as to current social, political, and economic issues at the regional, national, and international levels. The *coplas* are anonymous, since they are composed and written down collectively each year by "the *Vijanera*." Several scholars attribute to their lyrics the functions of expelling the old year, along with all its evils, and facilitating cyclical renewal. (Fig. 7)

After the *coplas*, a song that is a current hit is sometimes performed to engage the audience, using the original melody, but altering the lyrics by means of *contrafactum* to achieve a satirical effect. This is one of the most entertaining moments of the festival, as the lyrics of the *coplas* and songs provide a public space for scathing criticism, vulgarity, and transgression. Non-local spectators find the lyrics amusing, although they are unfamiliar with some idiomatic expressions and remain largely unaware of the deeper meanings of those verses that allude to the daily life of the village. For their part, the villagers show a particular fondness for the *coplas* that refer to events that have taken place in Silió. Visitors often fail to realize that one of the main objectives of celebrating the transgressive *Vijanera* is to offer a critical and satirical review of local daily life throughout the year. Several organizers of this ritual spend the entire year taking note of noteworthy episodes to incorporate them into these *coplas*, which allow them to verbalize issues that would otherwise remain unspoken.

Residents also tend to prefer lyrics that are not explicit, requiring some effort to guess who they refer to. Not every villager welcomes criticism and satire, and tensions have sometimes arisen with the *vijaneros*, but during the *Vijanera* season everything must be accepted. These episodes are part of the exchange of messages among residents in front of the outside spectators. Printed versions of the *coplas* and songs are sold in small booklets on the lawn. With their donations for these booklets, attendees help the *Vijanera* Association finance the festival. For visitors, these booklets—which are sometimes mistaken for event programmes—serve as a kind of souvenir and help them follow the content of the staged performance. By contrast, many residents of Silió value and collect these texts, as they narrate part of local life and serve as a resource for reconstructing the historical collective memory of the village.

After the sung recitation of the *coplas*, on the same stage located in the field next to the schools, a festive satirical-burlesque event is performed, one that is highly representative of the *Vijanera* in its sense of marking the annual transition and the cycle of life. This is the "pregnant woman giving birth," a fictional birth in which a female character—played by a man—represents the old year and gives birth to an animal, which serves to predict the nature of the coming year.[27] Both the singing of the *coplas* and the subsequent scene in which the pregnant woman gives birth are punctuated by the thunderous sound of the cowbells

of the *zarramacos*, who, together with the rest of the audience, stand up to watch the action unfold on stage. The *zarramacos* sound their bells especially at the moments indicated by the *vijaneros* who are acting. From time to time, singers and actors address the entire audience and ask for applause to allow a brief respite during the lengthy recitation of the *coplas*. On other occasions, members of the public spontaneously respond to the content of the lyrics with cheers or boos, as appropriate. To reinforce the staging, liven up the festival, and serve as a transition between scenes, pop music and Celtic rock music are occasionally played loudly over the loudspeakers in the field. The presence of recorded music creates a different atmosphere, but does not seem to interfere with the overall soundscape of the ritualized action.

While the performance is unfolding on stage in the field next to the schools, journalists and television crews interview some organizers and local government representatives. In addition, they broadcast the events live or record them for later release in the media and on social media platforms—such as Facebook and Instagram—which many festival-goers also use for the same purpose.

After the scene in which the pregnant woman gives birth, the audience is invited from the stage to join in the collective cheers that conclude this part of the performance: *"¡Viva Cantabria! ¡Viva Silió! ¡Viva la Vijanera!"* ("Long live Cantabria! Long live Silió! Long live the *Vijanera*!"). The troupe then returns to the square adjacent to the church, which is located nearby, where one of the most important rituals of the festival takes place: the allegorical death of the bear. The tamer, who has kept the bear captive during the procession, tries to control the animal, which resists, while the *zarramacos* corner it in a circle, sounding their cowbells with increasing intensity and getting closer and closer, as other *vijaneros* move around them. (Fig. 8)

When they are close enough, the *zarramacos* enact the threatening and beating of the beast, which, stunned and disoriented by the clamor, falls to the ground, exhausted. A group of *zarramacos* place their staffs on the bear, signaling its death, which symbolizes liberation from all evil. (Fig. 9)

Finally, as the sound of folk music re-emerges from the loudspeakers in the nearby field, the *danzarín negro* blows his horn again. Just as during the performance of "the defense of the territorial boundary," the sound signals produced by the horn alternate in a call-and-response pattern with verbalizations, jumps, movements, and other sounds produced by the *vijaneros*. On this occasion, another character successively shouts after each of the three sound signals: "Long live Cantabria!" "Long live Silió!" and an energetic "Long live the *Vijanera*!"—each acclamation being repeated by the *vijaneros* and some audience members. At around 2:30 p.m., for the media and many spectators, the event concludes, prompting their departure.

The festivities continue from that moment on for the *vijaneros* who, after the ritualized dramatization, want to experience "our *Vijanera*, going to the bars with the revelry of traditional music and having a good time" (Interview with Alberto García, December 2024). Some visitors often choose to stay for lunch and prolong their participation in the festival. Until late evening, music and entertainment are provided. The *vijaneros* mingle with family, friends, and other attendees, sharing jokes and fun in spaces such as local bars, the village streets, and, in particular, the field next to the schools. In these spaces and at these times, recorded and live music is offered—in fact, some musicians and participants arrive at this time of the day—while some *zarramacos* and *danzarines* occasionally continue to ring their iconic bells and jingle bells. Inside the tent set up in that field, the bar installed by the *Vijanera* Association offers food and drinks for purchase, as well as lottery tickets and merchandise,



Fig. 8. The *zarramacos* circle the bear. Credit photo: Luis Ángel Moreno Landeras, *Vijanera* in Silió, 5 January 2025.



Fig. 9. The *zarramacos* threaten the bear while other vijaneros move in a circle around them.
Credit photo: Luis Ángel Moreno Landeras, *Vijanera* in Silió, 5 January 2025.

through which visitors can also contribute to financing the festival.

Contemporary editions of the *Vijanera* feature instrumental and vocal performances, which may be presented live—with or without sound amplification—or through recorded music. Performers may include the *vijaneros* and other festival participants, as well as musicians who come specifically for the occasion. Some improvise songs and music spontaneously, while others are hired. Delegating musical performance to professional or amateur artists, who may receive some remuneration, seems to mark a certain distancing from the earlier forms of traditional entertainment.[28] (Fig. 10)



Fig. 10. Improvised songs and music.
Credit photo: Luis Ángel Moreno Landeras , *Vijanera* in Silió, 5 January 2025.

A few performers of traditional and folk music who regularly participate in the *Vijanera* are prominent throughout the region. In fact, a few years ago, this celebration brought together a significant number of renowned musicians and groups who gathered in Silió to play music and share the festive atmosphere. For the 2025 edition, as in previous years, the organizers hired Gustavo Gutiérrez, presented as DJ Tavuko, who is a well-known musician specialized in Cantabrian traditional and folk music. Gustavo sets up his mobile DJ equipment[29] on a small trailer pulled by a tractor inside the tent and plays traditional regional music, as well as pop, folk, and folk-rock from local, national, and international repertoires, getting a large group of participants of different ages to dance.

During this final recreational moment of the *Vijanera*, the loud music often drowns out the occasional ringing produced by the few *zarramacos* who, still in their costumes and wearing their cowbells, remain scattered across the field. At this stage, their sound no longer carries the same significance, as it is understood that they have already fulfilled their main ritual function.

Conclusions and future perspectives

This article examines essential components of Silió's *Vijanera*, while revealing other dimensions that underscore the value of studying the festival. It examines aspects of the festive action that highlight not only the continuities with the past, but also the new forms of organization, management, and promotion of the festival as a tourist attraction. Its increasing spectacularization and mediatization have enhanced the division of the event into two parts: the ritual drama that unfolds until lunchtime and the leisure time that follows. These dynamics, characteristic of its recent history, can be explained by the fact that the *Vijanera* remains a living ritual, adapting its forms and meanings to the needs of society at a given time.

The *Vijanera* offers visitors an aesthetically striking spectacle that evokes mythical imagery to provide recreational experiences for heritage tourists. At the same time, for the

inhabitants of Silió, this festival—now geared toward tourism—continues to carry profound meanings and lived experiences. It is a celebration that reveals, to those willing to look beyond the visual appeal of the spectacle, numerous aspects of life, idiosyncrasies, and elements of the local community's history and culture. The people of Silió assert their role as custodians of the *Vijanera* ritual in the municipality of Molledo in the Iguña Valley, thereby expressing a sense of privilege and responsibility. Beyond this local framework, a broader regional identity emerges. The cheers for the Autonomous Community of Cantabria heard during the festival serve as a reminder that—as recalled in a recent publication by César Rodríguez (2024, 57), the representative of the *Vijanera* Association—this festivity was revitalized in the context of the political changes that established the current autonomy (Rodríguez 2024, 57). Furthermore, as explained above, the Regional Government of Cantabria has played an active role in the efforts to recognize this festival as part of the region's cultural heritage.

At the same time, this article draws attention to the importance of focusing on the *Vijanera*'s exuberant soundscape, structured and regulated by the powerful sound of the cowbells of the *zarramacos*. Building on the presence and function of music and sound outlined in this preliminary approach, future ethnographic study of this ritual will allow for a more in-depth examination and enable comparisons with existing studies of analogous traditions in other European contexts, such as Scaldaferri's (2020) sonic ethnography. Further research in this area will help identify some key elements that participants consider fundamental to this multifaceted celebration, which compellingly expresses and showcases local identity, pride, and prestige.

NOTES

1. This article is a result of the R&D project "Tourism and processes of spectacularization of contemporary Iberian musical traditions" (reference PID2020-115959GB-I00), funded by the Spanish State Research Agency (MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033).

2. Following Victor Turner (1982) and Richard Schechner (1988), I understand ritual drama as a collective performative action that transforms the celebrating community and connects it to transcendent, non-physical dimensions of existence. Such an action requires the repetition of sacred symbols, gestures, and narratives, combining various expressive practices that include words, music, dance, songs, masks, costumes, and gestures. Through its connection between ritual and theatre, this form of stage performance allows for the dramatization of social processes and seeks symbolic efficacy.

3. Other winter mask festivals have been preserved or recovered and are currently celebrated in Cantabria, but not at the beginning of the year. Rather, they take place during the following months, within the Carnival period.

4. This article draws on archival and online research, as well as fieldwork conducted in Silió. I have consulted bibliographic sources, newspapers, and official documents containing legislation and regulations, as well as other written materials that provide primary and secondary sources on the *Vijanera* and similar rites and rituals. Some of the materials were provided to me by the *vijaneros*. I have conducted a systematic search of audiovisual sources and websites that document and depict the festival under study, such as the *Vijanera* Association's website, YouTube, and the social media platforms Facebook and Instagram. My fieldwork included audiovisual recordings of two editions of the *Vijanera* in Silió (in 2018 and 2025), which provided me with very useful data and insights. I also took a guided tour of the *Vijanera* Interpretation Center in Silió and gathered very valuable information from interviews conducted there with two representatives of the aforementioned association. The first interview was with Alberto García Gómez (27th of December 2024) and the second with him and César Rodríguez Fernández (12th of August 2025). In addition, I have had informal conversations with some residents of Silió and with musicians and visitors who regularly attend the *Vijanera*. In the final section of this article, I include the main bibliographic references and online resources consulted, as well as the interviews conducted.

5. As proposed by Juniper Hill and Caroline Bithell (2014, 3-4), I understand revitalization as a revival, that is, a process that involves the active performance, promotion, and dissemination of music and other cultural practices that

are valued as ancient or historical and are usually perceived as under threat or at risk of disappearing.

6. According to the information provided by the *Vijanera* Association, most visitors come from Cantabria and neighboring regions, such as the Basque Country and Asturias, but also from Galicia, Madrid, and Barcelona in Spain. A number of foreign visitors come from Portugal, Belgium, France, other European countries, and the USA.

7. In recent years, two master's theses have been defended on this festival (Herrero Laborda 2016; López San Juan 2021). The latter highlights the great popularity and significant recognition that this festival has achieved (López San Juan 2021, 6). Furthermore, in his book on Cantabrian identity, sociologist Adrián G. Gómez prominently mentions the *Vijanera* of Silió as a festival that reinforces the cultural and political expression of regional belonging (Gómez 2022, 82-3, 108-9).

8. The increase in tourist numbers has led festival organizers to control access to the village, provide parking areas, ensure safety standards, and provide facilities, such as bars and portable toilets.

9. Gómez Pellón (2003, 44) explains that this kind of ritual festivals has always relied on fundraising strategies at the local and regional levels to remain financially viable.

10. Montesino (2004, 92, 512) reminds us that all cultural manifestations are the product of historical evolution. They refer to tradition and collective memory, but also to the reinvention of tradition by generations living in a different era from that of their ancestors in agrarian society.

11. Stereotypes primarily refer to the idea that this ritual is celebrated according to a fixed, idealized sequence of festive acts involving archetypal characters who represent humans, animals, and natural and mythical elements to express universal symbols, such as the struggle between good and evil, life and death, or the cyclical conception of time. Some clearly stereotypical images have been created around the figure of the *zarramacos*, who, clad in sheepskin and cowbells, are portrayed as ferocious, performing "wild dances" and producing a deafening and unbearable noise.

12. For example, in line with his work with Jesús Cancio in 1928, in a later publication, Adriano García Lomas defined the *Vijanera* as a "festival of remote pastoral origin" that represents a "Cantabrian racial manifestation" (García Lomas 1999).

13. This is the case of Joaquín González Echegaray (1979-1980), who presents this festival in the valleys of Iguña, Anievas, and Toranzo as a kind of Carnival of supposed pastoral origin that preserves features of unquestionable primitivism and witnesses remote pagan customs found not only in the north of the Iberian Peninsula, but also throughout Western Europe and other regions of the world.

14. These include Gómez Pellón (2003), Durán Cabrera (2004), Herrero Laborda (2016), and López San Juan (2021), all mentioned in this text.

15. In fact, during the process of heritage designation, the rural winter masks were not initially officially recognized by the Autonomous Government of Cantabria as an Intangible Ethnographic Cultural Asset. This was because the experts responsible for the report concluded that the primarily tourist and commercial nature of some of the celebrations undermined their heritage value (BOE, 26 de Enero de 2018, Secc. III, Pág. 10687).

16. Examples of this can be found in recent publications by researchers from various disciplines, such as the article on winter mask festivals, tourism, and ICH by Fernández-Álvarez, González-González, and Sara Ouali-Fernández (2026). Also worth noting are several chapters from the book on masks, carnival celebrations, and heritage, edited by Panero García and Pinelo Tiza (2023).

17. This is evident, for example, in the section "Origins and historical documentation" on the website of the "Asociación Cultural Amigos de la Vijanera" (https://www.vijanera.com/origen/), which contains a selected list of publications and news about this festivity.

18. According to these authors, the soundscape can be understood as the acoustic environment or landscape of a particular place, comprising natural, human-made, and artificial sounds. Steven Feld's acoustemology extends this concept by focusing on the embodied, sensory, and culturally shaped experience of that environment, which enables sonic ways of knowing and being in the world, assuming that sound is central to making sense of life.

19. When I asked them about the sonic elements that make up the "soundscape" of the celebration, members of the *Vijanera* Association mentioned several that they considered relevant and characteristic, such as the sounds of the cowbells and other smaller bells, the blast of the hunting horn, the tambourine played by one of the characters, and the shouts and jokes of others. They also referred to a wide variety of sounds, such as the rustling of the leaves used to make the costumes of some *vijaneros*, the cracking of whips that other *vijaneros* direct at the spectators, and the continuous movements that produce multiple sounds.

20. As indicated by Scaldaferri (2020, 54), Feld has carried out sonic ethnographies on bells, soundscapes, and winter festivals in Europe and elsewhere, and has edited a series of CDs (e.g. Feld 2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2006). Some editions resulted from the collaboration between Feld and Scaldaferri on ethnomusicological research projects and publications.

21. The tamer represents the character who captures, chains, publicly exhibits, and dominates the bear throughout the parade.

22. Cristina Herrero points out the transformative power of the sound of the cowbells carried by the *zarramacos* as a vehicle for bringing joy, warding off evil spirits, establishing communication with the sacred and the transcendental, and dominating the wild (Herrero Laborda 2016, 61).

23. Traditionally, the *vijaneros* were young local men who participated in the initiation rite that was part of this ritual marking the transition from one year to the next. Today, both young and middle-aged men play the role of *zarramacos*.

24. According to Alberto García (interview, December 2024), some *vijaneros* "go into a trance" when they transform and the character possesses them. This is a special moment in

which, while remaining aware of what is happening, they feel happy and special, as if they were in another dimension.

25. From a gender perspective, this may seem quite striking, but although I heard some criticism of this from spectators during my fieldwork, the participation of both sexes in the performance of the ritual—which is currently permitted at many winter mask festivals in Spain and the Iberian Peninsula—is not allowed in Silió's *Vijanera*. The organizers prohibit female participation, arguing that it contravenes the traditional norms governing the ritual that they inherited from their ancestors. The text of the declaration by which the Government of Cantabria designates this celebration as an Intangible Ethnographic Cultural Asset (BOE, 14 de Agosto de 2021, Sec. III, p. 100589) reiterates that it is performed exclusively by young men.

26. I base the description largely on my systematic observation of the 2025 edition of the *Vijanera*, checking the information against my previous knowledge and the narratives and explanations provided by other researchers.

27. In 2025, the pregnant woman gave birth to a hen, which the actors presented to the audience as a symbol of fertility.

28. Limited evidence from *Vijanera* celebrations in the early twentieth century briefly suggests that recreational activities included "folk dance with local airs" (Montesino 1982, 24). My hypothesis is that musical performances were provided by local residents and visitors who played music spontaneously. However, it would be interesting to try to find out whether musicians were also hired, and whether they were paid for this purpose.

29. This is a mobile entertainment service that includes sound equipment, lighting, and a professional DJ to animate and create the right atmosphere at events such as parties, weddings, festivals, and corporate events.

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Masking with the Armagh Rhymers: Liminality and the Ritualesque

Caroline Joy Tatem
Indiana University, USA
ORCID: 0009-0009-5157-9706

Dr. Caroline Joy Tatem recently graduated with her PhD in Folklore from Indiana University, where she completed the dissertation, Archival and Ethnographic Perspectives on Mumming in Ireland in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries: Tradition and Innovation*. She currently works for the Modern Languages Association as a folklore bibliographer and indexer.*

Correspondence: cjtatem@iu.edu

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore the use of masks by the internationally acclaimed performance group, the Armagh Rhymers. The Armagh Rhymers are a charitable nonprofit comprised of talented musicians, dancers, and amateur actors who perform for children and adults in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and overseas. Their performances are based on the mumming tradition, a masked, rhyming folk-drama tradition featuring combat, death, and resurrection that was brought to Ireland from England in the seventeenth century. The group formed in the late 1970s to bring schoolchildren of Protestant and Catholic faiths together in one room during the Troubles, a period of intense sectarian violence that affected everyday life for all of Northern Irish society. To entertain audiences throughout the year, the Armagh Rhymers' expanded their repertoire to tell stories and to acknowledge the ritual calendar and special places.

My fieldwork from 2022 sheds light on the creation of their masks and the liminal experience of performing in a mask. The masks are spectacular, sculptural and memorable. Not only that, but the interactive nature of the Armagh Rhymers' performances brings audience members into the narrative in a way that encourages play. I argue that the liminality of performing in the Armagh Rhymers' masks, and the ritualesque elements that audience members participate in, allow for the transcendence of the self. This feature of transcendence and entrance into a play frame allowed for social healing in their early years, creating lifelong positive memories of neighbors from the other side of the sectarian divide.

KEYWORDS

Mumming; liminality; ritualesque; Northern Ireland; masks.

Masks are emblematic of the Irish mumming tradition. Irish mumming is a midwinter dramatic house-visiting tradition which focuses on a short play featuring combat, death, and resurrection. The tradition in Ireland originated in England, first appearing in areas of British settlement in the late 1600s. Despite colonial origins, mumming adopted uniquely Irish features with local variations, making it a Christmas tradition integral to many Irish communities, with the greatest concentration being in Ulster. Alan Gailey, a scholar who devoted his life to Irish mumming studies, states, "…If the plays were imported from England, they were later reworked into what can now only be called an Irish tradition" (Gailey 1969, 12). Mumming belongs to both British and Irish custom, which, as we shall see, made it a powerful opportunity to bring unity to the segregated society of Northern Ireland during the period of sectarian conflict known as the Troubles.[1] For centuries, small groups of mostly men and boys referred to as mummers or rhymers performed during the Christmas



Fig. 1. The death and resurrection scene of the mummers' play with the Fingal Mummers. Ballyboughal, North County Dublin, December 26, 2023. Photography by Ishmael Claxton.

season going door to door. There are elements of disguise, procession, verbal art and rhyme, traditional music and dance, comic tricks, luck-bringing, and money collection as the entertainment. (Fig. 1)

The play involves a cast of core characters, particularly a leader or Captain, two combatants, a Doctor, and a character that collects money. The combatants vaunt in rhyme and have a sword fight where one of them is slain, and a Doctor is called in to revive the dead with a litany of absurd cures and concoctions. Following the dramatic action is a procession of other characters who simply introduce themselves in nonsensical rhymes. There are standard characters documented in the archival plays I studied in the National Folklore Collection (NFC) at University College Dublin (UCD) and the Ulster Folk Museum (UFM), but they vary play by play, sometimes localizing in particular regions, and not all characters have a dramatic action of their own. Of these characters, usually the final one solicits money from the audience in their rhymes. Following the play is impromptu *céilí*-style entertainment,[2] such as traditional music, poetry recitations, dance, and song. Mumming is an oral tradition, with localized rhymes appearing in particular counties, but also chapbooks with printed scripts helped to expand and continue the tradition.[3] Mumming allows the community to come together convivially in the darkness of winter.

Masking is the most iconic feature of mumming. In my studies of six archival folklore collections from the twentieth into the twenty-first century in Ireland, 55% of the research participants report that their mummers wore masks, and 30% report that hats of some kind were worn. I learned in my 2022 fieldwork with Leitrim mummers that the masks were referred to as hats, so this might account for some of the use of the term hats. The collections I consulted to find these statistics were housed at the NFC and the UFM. The fact that information about masks was supplied without being asked about headwear indicates that it was so notable to the audiences of the tradition. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2. Mummers visiting a house in costume. NFC The Photographic Collection, H054.30.00183. Time and Festivals: Christmas. Jack Straw and Father Christmas. Photograph by Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh. Ederney, Fermanagh. December 21, 2001.

According to my archival findings, descriptions by twentieth-century scholars such as Gailey and Henry Glassie, and testimonies of mumming revivalists that I interviewed, mummers in Ireland wore conical straw masks, often woven into plaits that allow the wearer to see through the gaps. Sometimes the masks would be paired with straw skirts and jackets or belts. Being a rural tradition, straw was readily available, but as time went on, other

costume materials became easier to access. The archives reveal that at times mummers wore hats with ribbons attached to cover the face. Sometimes hats with charcoal or face paint were used to disguise the wearer. Dressing according to character is a trend that began in the mid-twentieth century due to the availability of store-bought materials and Halloween masks. Many revival groups of mummers today stick closely to the tradition of using natural materials.

Glassie writes in *All Silver and No Brass: An Irish Christmas Mumming* that "The players were costumed. They spoke in rhyme and rann. Their entrance and exit, their appearance and sound, all removed them from daily life, welcoming a suspension of the usual, and calling attention to the play as an independent entity" (Glassie 1975, 60). Not only were masks prominent, but so was the disguising of the voice when lines were given. In neighbors' homes, sometimes the audience would guess who was under the masks, to much amusement. The masks defined the performers as such, differentiating them from the audience and clearing the way for the brief drama to unfold. Indeed, in my experience mumming as a fieldworker with the Fingal Mummers of North County Dublin in 2022, I noticed that the mask is what designates you as a performer, as giving the lines alone in a crowded pub room wasn't enough to create the carnivalesque atmosphere that mummers imbue.

Donning a mask puts the wearer into a performance persona before they even take the stage. Masks put the wearer in an in-between space, neither themselves nor entirely who they represent. Masks are liminal objects and are a significant part of the liminality in mumming. Mumming is a midwinter custom connected with the agricultural calendar, contributing to the notion of pagan origins of the tradition. Early mumming scholars were influenced by Sir James Frazer's myth-ritual theory, where they understood mumming to be the playful degradation of a solemn pre-Christian fertility ceremony. In the 25-minute documentary film shown to visitors at the Mummers' Museum in County Fermanagh, *Mummers, Masks, and Mischief,* Threase Finnegan-Kessie observes that pre-Christian burial tombs appear 10 times, symbolically leading the viewer to conclude that there is a connection between mumming and pre-Christian Ireland, an idea shared by the Aughakillymaude Mummers who are affiliated with the Museum (Finnegan-Kessie 2015, 63). However, recent studies, such as Peter Harrop's 2020 work on English mumming, emphasize the speculation of these arguments and refer to mumming as a secular dramatic custom deriving from secular sources rather than sacred ritual. So how have mummers in Northern Ireland invoked elements of liminality to expand the generic features and performance contexts of mumming into what they term ritual today, as compared to the hundreds of more conservative testimonies documented in the archives from the last century that never use the term ritual?

The Armagh Rhymers

In this article I will introduce you to the world-renowned Armagh Rhymers, mummers who made their art a full-time profession to intentionally combat the sectarianism in their society by invoking the carnivalesque and ritualesque elements of liminality and *communitas,* the merging of the Self with the Other in carnivalesque contexts, ultimately bringing Irish mumming to international audiences. I have been working with the Armagh Rhymers since 2016, visiting Ireland almost annually to conduct brief stints of fieldwork, conducting interviews and performing alongside them as an amateur actress. The Armagh Rhymers



Fig. 3. Portrait of the Armagh Rhymers, courtesy of the group.

are active educators of the tradition, and they welcomed me with open arms to study their work and enter their creative community. This chapter is based primarily on my January to June 2022 fieldwork in Armagh City,[4] where I conducted ethnographic interviews and participated in a range of dramatic performances that go beyond the mummers' play. To spend a year conducting fieldwork on mumming in Ireland, what a better way to learn about the tradition and its present iteration than with a group who performs mumming all year long as professionals who've made it their life's work. (Fig. 3)

The Armagh Rhymers formed in the 1970s in Armagh City, a location where mumming had a long tradition that declined. The original founders were Dara Vallely, Peter Shortall, and Brendan Bailey, and the core cast numbered to about seven performers. Peter and Brendan passed on before I met the group, but Dara remains the group's artistic director and agreed to interview with me well over a dozen times across nine years. I also regularly interviewed Anne Hart, the director, who joined the group after Peter and Brendan died, but supported the group throughout their earlier days as well. The artistic director makes creative decisions about what goes into the performances, whereas the director keeps track of communications and strategic plans of the group's mission. Dara is a prolific painter of mythology and often performs concertina while dressed as the sacred bull from local Ulster mythology or as the Irish sun god, Lúgh, whereas Anne performs as the locally celebrated horse goddess, Macha, and she cherishes this role. She does not consider herself a musician, but she often plays percussion on the horse's jawbone and sometimes on the bodhrán, the Irish ritual drum. Being community-minded, the Armagh Rhymers formed as a revival of their local tradition, looking to local scripts for inspiration. However, they had to greatly expand their dramatic repertoire, entertaining repeat audiences throughout the year. This was a natural

evolution, putting them on a more innovative end of a spectrum from traditional—performing folk dramas similar to what I found in early twentieth-century descriptions—to innovative practice that in some cases barely resembles mumming of the past only through the use of the same ritualesque features like masks and music. Some other revivalists[5] of the late twentieth century stuck more closely to the tradition than the Armagh Rhymers, but still brought their own innovations of characters and contexts to the hero-combat play documented in the archives. (Fig. 4)



Fig. 4. Anne Hart, director of the Armagh Rhymers, dressed in her costume as the local horse goddess Macha, performing at the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium with the Roman Catholic St. Patrick's Cathedral in the background. June 21, 2022. Photograph by Ishmael Claxton.

Both Anne and Dara are Catholics who worked as schoolteachers before they brought mumming to school-children and the wider public. Anne speaks of the importance of the group's work in primary education and public education, having also worked in the education department at the Navan Centre, the visitor center at the nearby ancient ritual center, Emain Macha, also known as the Navan Fort, where they regularly perform. Anne grew up with a deep interest in China and Irish mythology and wrote her own play combining these interests, *The Navan Dragon,* which the Armagh Rhymers used to perform. Anne's reason for being a member of the Armagh Rhymers is central to the mission of the group. She explains,

> This is a group that had an ethical basis and part of that was to bring factions together here, to be a part of the peace process. That's what attracted me. Irish music, of course, I like it. But I certainly wouldn't have put the work and time into the Rhymers over the last thirty years than if it had been just a music group. I would have spent my volunteer time doing something else (Hart, Interview 3, 04/07/22, 2:21).

Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh sheds light on the fact that mumming performed before, during, and after the Troubles has been one of Northern Ireland's extremely rare cross-community customs. He remarks, "Indeed, it seems often to have been an important feature of mumming that representatives of the minority religion in a given area be invited to participate with majority religion groups in an effort to promote social cohesion" (Mac Cárthaigh 2007, 159). Additionally, there is evidence that mumming has often been applied to charitable causes in previous decades. In archival evidence from the early twentieth-century, there are rare examples of money being donated to the poor in the district. Money collected by the mummers would be used to pay for a dance at the end of mumming season, bringing the whole community together, but from the mid-twentieth century onward, mummers more often than not applied their income to local or international charities. In the later half of the twentieth-century, mummers expanded their routes to include more public settings like community centers and pubs, visiting homes much less frequently, a pattern that the Armagh Rhymers follow.

The Armagh Rhymers' Masks

The Armagh Rhymers today are a folk performance and charitable nonprofit, with a handful of core members and many performers who join in for one-off events. Perhaps nothing is more impressive about the Armagh Rhymers than their fantastic straw and wicker basket-style masks, which cover the head all the way to the shoulders. They also wear hats and face masks that only cover the face, but these are used only by a few people and more rarely. In their collection, they have a number of traditional straw conical masks, some braided and some with loose straw. They provided me with a list of the thirty masks in their collection, which they've named as follows: Dragon, Wren, Horse, Devil, Leather nose, Lá Lúgh (referencing the Irish sun god), Pig, St Patrick, Brown Bull, Willow Point nose, Macha (the Irish horse goddess from whom Armagh takes its name), Chinese Man, Celtic Cross, Heron, Jester, Conical stripped willow, Fionn, St Bridget, Conical Ribbon, Angry Man, White Bull, Harvest, Small Deer, Happy Man, Work Horse, Giant Blue Beard, Large Deer, Telephone Man, Cromwell, and Unicorn. These masks are mostly figurative and differ widely from the traditional homemade mummers' mask meant only to disguise the face. Some of the masks personify elements of Irish folklore, such as the Irish gods or patron saints, which is not a feature found historically in mumming. The sculptural masks are a creative innovation by the Armagh Rhymers and their mask makers.



Fig. 5. James Mulholland crafting a basket. Photograph courtesy of the Armagh Rhymers.

The first mask maker for the Armagh Rhymers was James Mulholland. Dara Vallely discovered Mullholland's work at the Gate Inn in Craigavon where his elaborately made wicker horse was displayed on the wall, with a moveable jaw, in the style of hobby horses. Dara asked about the maker and ultimately, he was invited to Mullholland's house in Aghagallon. Mulholland grew the willow that he used in his craft on his farm. Dara commissioned his first mask from him, a horse head with a moveable jaw. His next mask was a conical mask. He asked for a bull mask to represent the sacred brown bull from the *Táin*, local Ulster mythology. The horse mask was meant to represent the horse goddess Macha for whom Armagh is named. The horse and bull are staples in the Armagh Rhymers' performances to this day. James Mulholland created about a dozen of their sculptural wicker masks. (Fig. 5)

Dara's primary contemporary mask makers are Bob Johnson and Paul Carvel. Bob Johnson studied with the mask makers Alison Fitzgerald and Joe Hogan and began making wicker sculptures in 2000. I interviewed both Bob Johnson and Paul Carvel. Interestingly, these mask makers find different motivations for doing the work they do. Carvel is interested in the way that mask-making connects to folklore, being an avid collector of local folk poetry, and Johnson is interested in the technicality of the craft, challenging himself to create ever more elaborate designs.

Bob Johnson

I met Bob Johnson in May 2023 at his studio at the UFM in Cultra, Northern Ireland, where he was making traditional straw conical masks for a wedding scene with strawboys (a related masked Gaelic custom performed at weddings) for an Irish horror film. Bob's workshop is open to the visitors of the UFM, allowing the public to try on masks and admire his wicker sculptures, as well as to learn about the process of making them as I did in my interview. Bob was inspired by the Armagh Rhymers' masks by James Mulholland. Bob does very little straw work, even though that's what he was working on during my visit. Bob is from Bangor, Antrim and he was trained as a textile weaver where he was able to work with basket weavers who use willow, the primary material that he works with. He finds weaving textiles and weaving willow to be similar crafts, except you don't need a loom for willow and the material is so much firmer. Half of the willow that he uses comes from the land of the UFM, which is an open-air living history museum. The rest is shipped in from commercial growers from Somerset in the UK (Johnson, 05/07/23, 14:26). (Fig. 6)



Fig. 6. Bob Johnson in his studio making straw mummers' masks, May 7, 2023. Photograph by the author.

When it comes to working with willow, he says,

> It's a constant challenge. You're always looking to improve, or to learn something to develop. There's no such thing as a perfect basket. So it's quite nice if you can see faults and flaws and ways to improve it. To be honest, I try to focus on what's wrong with it rather than step back and see what I like about it (Johnson, 05/07/23, 39:08).

It takes a couple weeks of soaking in water to make the willow flexible, but at that point it's very forgiving to work with. It could take anything from a couple of hours to a couple of days to make a mask or sculpture. He explains that you must work from the bottom to the top for structure, and that you can end up spending most time on the detail at the top, which is risky, because you could end up ruining your hard work of the base if something goes wrong. "The more unusual the shape, the more of a challenge it is. Certainly, the sculptural side of it does interest me greatly" (Johnson, 05/07/23, 08:21). Indeed, as one of my other research participants discusses later, they can be thought of as living sculptures.

Paul Carvel

I met Paul Carvel at Aonach Mhacha, Armagh City's Irish cultural center, at an event for St. Brigid's Day[6] in 2022, where he helped a class of children create St. Brigid's crosses out of rushes. After the event ended, he continued to make use of the rushes to create a pile of St. Brigid's crosses. We talked over a tea, and I helped to make a few of my own, where he

taught me a couple of techniques. Paul is from Lurgan, County Armagh, and usually works with straw and more recently rye grass, not willow, although he has used it on occasion. He grows rushes and oat straw in his yard. He learned straw craft from his grandfather who lived on a farm by a bog where they collected turf. Paul has been making masks for thirty-two years and has made masks for wren boys (another related midwinter masking tradition found in Gaelic heritage) and folk performers in the US. Just like Johnson, he challenges himself to create sculptural designs. His latest creation is a St. Brigid's mask which features a woman's face, and he's also created a mask that Dara often wears, a mask of the Irish sun god, Lúgh. (Fig. 7)



Fig. 7. Paul Carvel and his masks and *críos bride* for the Armagh Rhymers, February 1, 2022. Photograph by the author.

Paul has been making masks for the Armagh Rhymers for ten years, mostly conical masks with a variety of ornamentations. He commented that he makes the masks for himself as well as for Dara. He explains, "If you don't put yourself totally into them, the standard slips… The standard is something you're setting for yourself" (Carvel, 02/01/22, 28:19). You must start with the base and factor in how the mask will balance on the shoulders. Once the base is made, you can start becoming more creative, producing more sculptural works like his face of St. Brigid.

Paul explains that he is particularly inspired by Irish folklore and that he does his work for his community, the music, the songs, and poetry, saying that it's "the whole package," meaning that it integrates a variety of Irish folklore genres (Carvel, 02/01/22, 47:18). He explains that poetry and mythology inspire him, saying, "The spoken word drives your imagination" (Carvel, 02/01/22, 54:56). He recited some lines that Dara often performs.[7] He feels that the "soul of humanity" can be found in poetry (Carvel, 02/01/22, 55:49, 58:25). He has been collecting folk poetry in County Armagh for the last thirty years and is compiling his findings into a book. Besides poetry, Celtic holidays influence his works, just as he was celebrating Imbolc with the children and the Armagh Rhymers.

Ritual Work

So how have the Armagh Rhymers put these fantastic masks to use? Masks disguise the wearer and free the performers from social norms, creating an opportunity for carnivalesque social inversion and communitas. The founders of the Armagh Rhymers' knew of the carnivalesque community-building effects of mumming which they performed in their youth and decided to put it to work to unite their divided society. Dara grew up mumming like his father in a mixed community of Protestants and Catholics. The Armagh Rhymers formed in the late 1970s in response to their social situation, the Troubles in Northern Ireland, a period of

violent sectarian unrest that affected every aspect of daily life from the 1970s until after the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

During the Troubles, the sectarian conflict between Protestants and Catholics colored the social and political landscape and affected all members of society throughout their daily lives. To this day, there are neighborhoods in Northern Ireland that are segregated along religious lines, and additionally most public schools are designated as Catholic schools or state schools, with state schools being Protestant. The Protestants who identify their heritage as being British seek to maintain their identity as part of the United Kingdom, the Unionist viewpoint, whereas the Catholic population with Irish ancestry seeks to acknowledge the Northern Irish counties as part of the island of Ireland, the Nationalist viewpoint. The Nationalist viewpoint is that Ireland should unite all its counties into the Republic of Ireland.

Most of the people who died during the Troubles were civilians, slightly more so than paramilitary members or soldiers. Many roads were blocked to inspect cars for bombs. Bombs, killings, and assaults were frequent realities. Local shootings were the most frequent cause of death. Many killings were "tit for tat" revenge killings on both sides. It was difficult to trust strangers and even neighbors, and this fact of life made mumming a risky activity. Over the course of the thirty-some years that the Troubles took place, over 3,000 people died and over 47,000[8] were injured (Wallenfeldt 2024).

In my own fieldwork with the Armagh Rhymers, the topic of the Troubles appears prevalently, mostly coming up in private conversations with Dara. With the onset of Brexit, new conversations and concerns arose around the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The news was always on the television when I visited Dara and his wife, the director of the Armagh Rhymers, Anne Hart. I would frequently listen to memories of the Troubles over dinner or in the long car rides to performances. Memories of the Troubles are connected to places that once were sites of tension. There are some remnants of the Troubles in everyday life in Armagh.

Dara began his career teaching in an elementary school, where he developed the idea of bringing mumming to schools where children could socialize and play no matter what their political affiliation. He formed the original group with his friends, not particularly as a mumming group like other revivalists, but as a workers' cooperative aiming at uniting schoolchildren of both faiths in Northern Ireland through the enactment of the mummers' play. Not only did it help the children, but it was a break for the teachers and it combatted the mass unemployment of young men during the Troubles. Dara knew that mumming was about more than just the spectacle of the masks and the drama for a passive audience. As Ray Cashman argues, the audiences perform neighborly reciprocity during the mummers' house visit: "Audience members are themselves performers, in a sense: they enact an ethic of reciprocal exchange and hospitality" (Cashman 2007, 52). Mumming contested the dark days of winter, bringing distant neighbors into an exchange of entertainment, and Dara saw that this ethos could be called forth to combat dreary days at school in a time when their society was at basically at war. In other studies, we learn that the Armagh Rhymers were not the only mummers interested in bridging the sectarian divide in response to the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

For example, in Cashman's study in Aghyaran, Fermanagh in the early 2000s, we learn that the Aghyaran Mummers performed for both Protestant and Catholic audiences in their neighborhoods, which was common for other mumming groups in the North. The *Room to Rhyme* Collection at the NFC, an ethnographic folklore collection project that explores the cross-border and cross-community nature of mumming, spearheaded by the NFC archivist Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh in 2001, demonstrates that there were cross-community aspects



Fig. 8. The Armagh Rhymers processing at Brynn Celli Ddu Burial Chamber in Wales over the 2025 Solstice weekend. Photograph courtesy of Rebecca Lampert.

in all eleven mumming groups studied in the border counties. Cashman explains, "Whether as mummer or audience member, participation in the tradition does much more than afford *cross*-community contact. Participation in mumming helps to re-establish *community,* as the higher ideal and more ambitious project whose time has come again" (Cashman 2007, 56). Through the liminality of masks, the playfulness of rhyming folk drama, and the conviviality of live music and dance, communities normally engaged in merely civil relations could see each other as friends. (Fig. 8)

Dara envisioned the mummers' play being extended to include interactive elements that would bring the children into the drama, taking turns in the action to the entertainment of their classmates and neighbors. The Armagh Rhymers were the only traveling dramatic performers in the country in their early days. They used mumming to create change in their society, seeing that mumming had long been a source of cross-community connection, belonging to both Catholic and Protestant tradition. The Armagh Rhymers expanded their performance repertoire to include various stories, using poetry, music and dance, and ritual elements like fire jumping to bring people together through play and *communitas.* The Armagh Rhymers and other mummers I have met in Northern Ireland think of what they do as ritual and have expanded the tradition into new contexts like sacred sites featured in Irish mythology. Being fully devoted to the tradition, Dara is well versed in the early literature on mumming by scholars like E. K. Chambers (1964), Alan Gailey (1969), Alex Helm (1980) and E.T. Kirby (1971), who identify mumming as a ritual with ancient pagan origins. Dara has also memorized dozens of poems that he writes down in a notebook to reflect back on so that

he remains word-perfect. Poetry recitation is a tradition in Ireland that Dara inspired in his students when he was a teacher. An example of a verse that he regularly recites is by John Montague's "Like Dolman's Round my Childhood, the Old People":

> Ancient Ireland, indeed!
> I was reared by her bedside,
> The rune and the chant, evil eye and averted head,
> Fomorian fierceness of family and local feud.
> Gaunt figures of fear and of friendliness,
> For years they trespassed on my dreams,
> Until once, in a standing circle of stones,
> I felt their shadows pass
> Into that dark permanence of ancient forms (Montague 1967, 213).

A clip of an early Armagh Rhymers' performance involving poetry recitation can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-w1Xmkp13WU.

For the Armagh Rhymers, the use of the word "ritual" gives them more creative license to adapt mumming to new contexts, such as the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium for musical fire-jumping for the staff on the summer solstice. Mumming as documented in the archives never involves fire-jumping at the solstice, a calendrical purity rite, only sharing similarity in that mumming is a calendar custom with elements of luck-bringing to those visited. An example of the Armagh Rhymers' calendar for the half-year I spent with them is as follows:

> Zoom mummers' play for The National Museum of Ireland
> Lunch break music, dance, and rhyme at a meeting at the Northern Irish Assembly
> St. Brigid's Day children's workshop at Armagh's cultural center
> Twenty primary school interactive bilingual storytelling visits for St. Patrick's month
> St. Patrick's Day Parade
> Urban Orchards ritual for tourists at St. Patrick's Cathedral gardens, Armagh City
> Children's strolling interactive performances and activities at Hillsboro Castle for Easter
> Music indoors at a local cultural night in Armagh City
> Sky Productions comedy fire-jumping film set at Emain Macha (sacred site) for May Day
> Mick Moloney tour bus stop ritual with Maypole dancing at Emain Macha
> Music and dance at a local children's barn dance night
> Film set at Beaghmore Stone Circles (sacred site)
> Confucius Institute Chinese Tea Ceremony at Armagh's cultural center
> Staff fire-jumping summer solstice ritual at Armagh Observatory and Planetarium
> Musical entertainment for a local care home visit

As you can see from this list, they only performed one mummers' play in the entire time that I spent with them. All of their other shows were original productions that involved elements of mumming like masks, costumes, poetry recitation, traditional rhyme, dramatic action, music, song, and dance. Dara has expressed to me that he sees everything that they do as "mumming," directly connected to the house-visiting tradition, but also he said to the group as they were preparing for the Zoom mummers' play and the Beaghmore Stone Circles film set, "Remember this is a ritual." He said this to emphasize the quality of the background in the Zoom play, and also to highlight the importance of ritualesque features like references

to mythology in the poetry chosen and the use of local songs for the filming. Throughout the year there are dozens of children's school visits that involve interactive storytelling with music and dance, their most common activity. Many of these plays are bilingual English and Irish to normalize the use of Irish in their society. While they may not perform the mummers' play during occasional visits to private homes, they perform music in friends' homes and at gravestones of friends, following the house-visiting element of the custom more in line with the Gaelic wren boy tradition which doesn't involve drama. Weddings are a frequent activity for the group, the setting where straw boys (another masking tradition derived from Gaelic heritage) would perform, although there were none during my extended stay. Their variety of contexts and creative productions highlights a desire to think about mumming as ritual, in a way that, as far as we know from hundreds of archival testimonies, it wasn't conceptualized by those who practiced the tradition un-self-consciously decades ago before the biggest revival period of the 1970s and 1980s (although there is evidence of many rises and falls in the popularity of mumming throughout the last century). The term ritual establishes a new a connection between masking and Celtic spirituality. In Ireland, mumming has long been associated with the Gaelic masking customs of the wren boys, who also perform house visits at midwinter, and strawboys at weddings, both of whom entertain through music and traditional rhyme. We can think of these customs as rites of passage marking change in social status for the community and the individual. Ritual in the scholarly sense produces change in society and rites of passage in particular reduce harm in the state of transition. Mumming performed historically and in some cases to this day, like the related wren boy tradition, marks the seasonal change between fall and winter, bringing the community together at a time when it might drift apart.

The Armagh Rhymers have applied the liminal and carnivalesque features of mumming to create performances that functioned to heal their divided society. The Armagh Rhymers applied mumming to new contexts like schools, using rhymes found in their local library's archive, performing in quick costume changes as a procession of unrelated characters, some of whom engage in brief moments of dramatic action, and Irish traditional music to create interactive performances geared towards influencing a sectarian society in positive, groundbreaking ways. In this way, while not being the relic of an ancient pagan ritual, indeed mumming marks seasonal change and has been applied to ritual purposes and taken on ritual features.

Catherine Bell considers the characteristics of ritual to be formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacred symbolism, and performance (Bell 1997, xiv). These characteristics usually apply in elite institutionalized formal contexts. We can see echoes of rule-governance and in some cases sacredness in the Armagh Rhymers' ritualesque performaces, and mumming is traditional and performative, but it is not, as we have seen, invariant or formal, meaning that scholars would hesitate to think of mumming strictly as a ritual. Jack Santino references Mikhail Bakhtin's term the carnivalesque in his 2011 article where he introduces the term the ritualesque. He explains,

> We recognize the carnivalesque in the festivity, but the ritualesque lies in the performative use of symbols—images, music, movement—to effect social change. Just as there are events that are not fully carnival but share some features with carnival, so too are there events that are not fully ritual but share important features with ritual (Santino, 2011, 62).

As I learned in my interview with the Armagh Rhymers' director, children who participate in and watch their play, "Fionn MacCool and the Scottish Giant," are aware of social

symbols that validate the distinct identities of being Protestant or Catholic, giving them the impression that the play is relevant to them no matter which background they are coming from, and allowing them to see the connection with the other side of the sectarian divide, which exists in subtle ways even contemporarily. Anne explains, "Even young children are aware of [the cultural politics] here," as the tartan worn by the Scottish Giant symbolizes Protestant heritage, while the use of the Irish language references Catholic heritage, adding that children will think to themselves, "This is a play I can watch…" (Hart, 04/07/2022, 21:27).

A clip about the Armagh Rhymers' interactive drama for Northern Irish children can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_t8gL2oOyBY.

The Armagh Rhymers perform mumming year-round for a variety of contexts, occasionally marking special days throughout the year such as the St. Brigid's Day event where I met Paul Carvel. Mumming with the Armagh Rhymers has the ritualesque feature of *communitas* that they bring to their interactive performances. For decades, the Armagh Rhymers have fascinated audiences with their masks and brought people together through the play frames and performative symbols that Santino refers to with his term ritualesque.

While mumming typically only involves audience participation at the end, the Armagh Rhymers invite the audience to take part in the theatrical entertainment as well. The playful interaction of the audience inspires connection between mixed Protestant and Catholic audiences, drawing on the element of *communitas* found in the house visiting tradition. By referring to their work as ritual work, the Armagh Rhymers free themselves from the conventions of the hero-combat / death-and-resurrection play and the context of neighbors' homes, elements of mumming that are emblematic of the genre historically, to expand what their shows involve and accomplish. Through their work we can see the expansion of the genre on a spectrum of traditional to innovative, with their mumming-inspired performances being at the extreme end of the tradition. One factor in expanding the genre of mumming is the nature of revival, where the tradition is being brought back to meet specific contemporary needs like the celebration of place and community. The Armagh Rhymers draw on the ritualesque elements of mumming to create their original interactive performances, particularly masking, dancing, and verbal art.

Masking with the Armagh Rhymers

Masks are integral to all of the Armagh Rhymers' performances, and I was able to learn more about the intentions and experiences of masking with the group through my archival and ethnographic research. In the *Room to Rhyme* questionnaire of 2001, a survey issued by the NFC as part of the larger ethnographic project, Dara explains that the purpose of the mask for the Armagh Rhymers is to "reveal the character represented." In this sense, the masks are more part of the costume than a disguise. This fits with the trend in the broader archival evidence that costumes became more fitted to the individual characters in the mid-twentieth century. They have a couple half-masks that fit tightly over the face. However, while some modern mummers' costumes involve Halloween masks with monstrous faces, the Armagh Rhymers use mostly hand-made masks of natural materials.

The Armagh Rhymers' short documentary film from 2007, *Na Cleamairí (The Mummers)*, discusses the experience of wearing masks. Dara says,

> The wearing of the masks is part of the tradition. Masks have survived intact over the years. Anyone not familiar with the mummers would get a fright jumping into a group of otherworldly looking creatures. The most important feature of the mummers is the mask. Wearing a mask is quite a silly thing to do. We're clowns in a way, but there might be a magical element to it too (Vallely 2007).

Dara's suggestion that there might be a magical element too is something I experienced when I first met the group in 2016 at the festival of Lughnasa at Emain Macha, an ancient sacred site near Armagh, where I experienced ego death, or an out-of-body experience where I felt that I transcended my consciousness beyond my present life, in meditation with drumming following an hour of masked dancing with the group, which I described in detail in a previous publication (Tatem 2016, 34-44). In *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, Maya Deren explains that drumming has a powerful out-of-body effect on ritual dancers through the concentration and relaxation of the rhythm (Deren 1953, 242). I felt very tense and anxious during my dancing with the Armagh Rhymers, as I wasn't used to performing, and then went immediately into a relaxed state with drumming, which I imagine caused my shift in consciousness.

From this experience I know the power of a mask to pave the way for an experience of transcendence. In *Dan Ge Performances: Masks and Music in Contemporary Côte d'Ivoire*, Daniel Reed's research participant says about masking in the Dan tradition that

> From the instance that he places himself behind the mask, he becomes different. He is inhabited by wisdom, he is transported, he transcends, and at that moment, he becomes at the same time the physical mask that you see, and he becomes at the same time, spirit. (Gueu Gbe 1997) (Reed 2003, 87)

This is not a typical experience with the Armagh Rhymers, in fact, it has never happened before or since, as far as the group knows. I see that this performance and meditation ceremony was my initiation into the study of Irish mumming. Reed's primary research participant reports that an altered state of consciousness led to his initiation into working with masks (Reed 2003, 85), and also considers his involvement in the author's fieldwork as part of his initiation (Reed 2003, 216). It would be interesting in a future study to interview audience members at their Celtic-spiritualty-themed events like the annual Lughnasa festival where I encountered transcendence to learn if anyone could comment on the performance's influence on their spiritual state or perspectives.

Ray Dunne, a former Armagh Rhymer, appears in the film saying, "As soon as you put that mask on…The mask has a way of changing your normal self into this character and when you have these masks on, these costumes, you can be mad as you want to be." Deaglan Mac Thréinfhír, a man who I met at a book signing in Armagh, says in the film, "The first time I wore a mask it took me by surprise. What am I doing with this thing on my head? I thought it was probably a good thing… I could do the silliest things. So I take on a different persona." Masks affect the wearer as much as the audience, and in this section, I hope to give you a sense of what it's like to wear one of the Armagh Rhymers' masks from the point of view of contemporary performers and my own participant-observation.

Besides community building in the school system, sometimes the Armagh Rhymers are invited to lighten the mood at professional and political events through their carnivalesque performances. In the car on the way to a performance at a lunch meeting at the Northern Irish Assembly, Stormont, I asked their star performer Annie June Callaghan to give me some advice on performing, as it had been a couple years since I'd done anything with the Armagh Rhymers, and I felt nervous. Performing reminded me of my experience with teaching, but

without any content to share and without being able to use my face, I realized I was up against a different challenge. Fortunately, Annie was brimming with advice, some of which I recorded when I realized that it was amazing ethnographic material besides being a good pep talk. (Fig. 9)

Annie was born in Armagh, spending five years there, and grew up in Roslea, Fermanagh. She feels as though she is from both places and was raised Catholic. Annie is a couple generations younger than Anne and Dara. Annie's mother was an interior designer consultant for her community. Annie says that she was always interested in "textures and patterns and colors" and when she was younger, she was interested in fabrics and costume design and made all her own clothes (Callaghan, 05/04/22, Interview 1, 2:30). Her mother encouraged her creativity, and she went to art school in Belfast at age eighteen. She then lived in Wales to study fine art and in Bristol to study illustration. It was during her time in Bristol that she discovered the masks of the Armagh Rhymers in an ad for a performance. She says,



Fig. 9. Annie June Callaghan playing guitar and bell for the summer solstice performance at the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium, with the author and James McKee in the background. June 21, 2022. Photograph by the Ishmael Claxton.

> They were really striking. And I just felt a real draw...When I saw the Armagh Rhymers' masks, it just captured my imagination of everything that I've been, all these things have interested me over the years. So then I started drawing the masks (Callaghan, 05/04/22, Interview 1, 3:00-6:27).

Dara refers to Annie as an animator, someone who brings the show to life. Annie plays guitar and tin whistle, sings a variety of children's songs and folk songs, dances with ribbons and other props, and performs mime and dramatic roles. She also makes puppets for the group and creates all her own costumes rather than borrowing from the Armagh Rhymers' collection. The experience of wearing a wicker mask or straw mask is different than that of wearing a face mask that has slots for the eyes. She explains,

> With a mask that is sitting on your shoulders, it feels like you're in a world. Whereas if there's a mask straight against your face, then you still have most of your vision. It might be a little bit impaired around the outside, but it's coming over your face and it's pressed against your face, whereas if you're in a basket or in a straw mask, it is like you're in a little inner world and you can just see the woven straw. And you just see sort of patches of the world, patches of the environment. Which is a cool way to see the place because you know that people don't know who you are, so they're not looking at your face or your eyes. They're looking at your form, and that captures the imagination, because you've changed your form. You don't know if you're a man or a woman or a child or an animal (Callaghan, 06/15/22, 4:19).

She explained that you "just hold your space" (Callaghan, 03/04/2022, 12:35). Wearing the mask alters your sense of space and slows down your ability to move. I said that I will try to dance to the music, but she suggested that, "The music can lead you astray" (Callaghan, 03/04/22, 13:08). Annie explains that it is not important to move with the music, but rather that you don't want to make sudden movements. You want to make subtle movements that are independent of what's going on around you. She describes the person in the mask as a "living sculpture." She says in a later interview,

> You become like a vessel or a mediator. You're not yourself. You can be disoriented. You lose some of your senses spatially. So you have to be really aware of yourself and your surroundings, especially when you're on stage, and there's bright lights. You're out in sort of unfamiliar places. So you kind of have to really know the lay of the land (Callaghan, 06/15/22, 0:44).

I recall wearing the mask at Stormont and being careful not to bump into the audience members who were sitting all around the performance in the banquet hall. You can only see through the slats in the wicker. She explains that it affects your hearing as well. The mask affects your sense of spatial orientation and can muffle the sounds around you. She elaborates,

> It requires you to slow down. You can't be sort of ahead of yourself. You have to be really present, aware of where you are, and aware of every move that you're making. You can't walk because you're sort of debilitated a wee bit. Visually, if you're wearing a full mask over your head, your hearing can be distorted. And then, it depends on the room as well. If the music's loud, and there's shouting, cheering, and clapping, and you're moving around, and the sound is always changing, that can be disorientating as well (Callaghan, 06/15/22, 1:37).

Annie performs regularly in and out of masks, so I asked her how performing in one of the Armagh Rhymers' masks compares to performing without one. She explains,

> I think you can focus more on the lines or the music or the song when you're not wearing a mask. When you are wearing a mask for me because you haven't got eye contact, you haven't got your facial expression. So all you can do is kind of tune into the voice, or tune into the notes. That's all you have really. With a mask on you, you're a sculpture, you're sort of like a half, half animal, half human sculpture. And you've kind of lost a bit of your humanity. So there's something magical about that (Callaghan, 06/15/22, 2:56).

Annie expresses that the slowed-down pace that the mask requires came as a surprise to her initially. She says,

> At the beginning when I was wearing the mask, I thought that I could be really animated and moving around. I thought that that would lend itself to the character but then I realized that it doesn't. Just because you've a mask on doesn't mean that you need to be moving and doing all this action. There's beauty in that too, that playfulness but then just holding your character still in the space is also equally as powerful, not feeling like you have to overcompensate because you haven't got a face. Being still and owning your position and your skirt and your form (Callaghan, 06/15/22, 6:24).

Annie mentioned more than once that there is something significant about wearing one of the Armagh Rhymers' wicker and straw masks in that it changes your form. Face coverings might get rid of one's facial expressions, but the basket-style masks can transform

the upper body into a different shape. I related to her experience of feeling like you need to overcompensate for a lack of having a face. While you no longer have your own face, you indeed have a new face, and this speaks for itself.

Another member of the Armagh Rhymers in 2022, Larry Harte, spoke to me about wearing a particular black hat when he was performing rock music in his early years as a musician. He feels that, like the mask, the hat brought him into his stage persona. Now the Heron mask does that for him. He explains that even if you're having a bad day, once you put on that hat or mask, you are "in the zone" and you "leave all that behind" to put yourself "100% into the gig" (Harte, 04/28/22). He wears the new Heron mask regularly, but he finds a connection to previous performers when he wears the older masks on occasion.

Dara argues that disguise is essential and explains that performers must use the masks to disguise their height and practice a different walk or strut from their everyday comportment so as not to be recognized. He explains that because there are no facial expressions in the performance, body language is the most important element. He says, "The dash backward and forward, the quick turning of the head…thrashing the ground with a stick" create the drama (*Room to Rhyme* questionnaire, 2001). It was also important for the other members of the cast to sit or stand perfectly still while someone takes the floor.



Fig. 10. The Armagh Rhymers preparing for their procession on the summer solstice at the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium, 2022. Dara Vallely, founder and artistic director of the group stands in the center without his mask. To the left are Larry Harte and Barry Lynch and to the right is Anne Hart as Macha with James Mckee who holds a replica of one of the horns found in the nearby archaeological site, Emain Macha. These props demonstrate how the Armagh Rhymers incorporate local mythology and folklore into their performances. Photograph by Ishmael Claxton.

Conclusion

Mumming with the Armagh Rhymers allows performers to connect with their audience in entertaining ways, with humor, music, dance, and stories. The play frame that is established through elements of carnival and ritual such as masking and clowning allows mummers to step outside of their usual persona and take on a dramatic persona, taking the role of a fool, a character, a dancer, or a musician. In Northern Ireland particularly, the interactive

element found at the end of mummers' plays, or during the action with the Armagh Rhymers, brings people of both sides of the political divide together in creative ways into a mode of communitas. The Armagh Rhymers capitalized on this function of mumming to become first a workers' cooperative and later a charitable nonprofit that is ever expanding in their novel performance contexts and the content of their mummers' plays and mumming-inspired performances.

The Armagh Rhymers incorporate these ritualesque and carnivalesque features into original creative performances that invite *communitas* between mummers, musicians, and audience members. Not only do they share the mumming tradition with audiences, but also other elements of Irish folklore like legends and straw craft in their live performances. This puts their work at the end of a spectrum from traditional to innovative, expanding their mumming practice into one of invented rituals as compared to the house visiting hero-combat plays documented in the archives from the last century. (Fig. 10)

Mumming has long been a unique cross-community custom, but one that the Armagh Rhymers specifically mobilized to bring about social change during and after the Troubles. I argue that the liminality found in the masking element of mumming allows people of both faiths to relax their regular persona and take on a playful one that invites them to celebrate their common humanity. By referring to mumming as an ancient and ongoing ritual tradition, the Armagh Rhymers implicate a sense of wonder in masks and highlight their ability to transcend modern problems. The Armagh Rhymers highlight the role of masks cross-culturally, making them Irish representatives in the global context of masked performances, that allow for transcendence of the self through masked drama.

NOTES

1. The Troubles refers to the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s to after the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 where bombs and killings were part of everyday life, initiated by paramilitary groups on both sides. The Protestant/Unionist side wanted Northern Ireland to remain in the United Kingdom, and the Catholic/Nationalist side wanted Northern Ireland to join the Republic of Ireland.

2. A céilí is an informal gathering in Ireland.

3. Below is a version of a popular mummers' rhyme found in plays both historically and contemporarily: "Here comes I, wee Beelzebub / Over my shoulder I carry a club, / In my hand a frying pan / I think myself a fine wee man" (Heaney 2004, 7).

4. Armagh City is a medium-sized town in the south of Northern Ireland with a population of roughly 16,300. It is known as the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland, in ancient times being visited widely at the ritual center just outside its limits, Emain Macha, and today boasting of two cathedrals that are the seats of the Primates of All Ireland for the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland.

5. For example, the Sidh Gaoth Mummers of Sligo, the Fingal Mummers of North County Dublin, and the Aughakillymaude Mummers of Fermanagh took a more conservative approach to reviving mumming in their areas.

6. This holiday for one of Ireland's patron saints has pre-Christian origins as a feast of a fertility goddess, Brigid, known as Imbolc, marking the halfway point between the solstice and the equinox.

7. John Montague's "Like Dolmens Around My Childhood, The Old People": "Ancient Ireland indeed, I was reared by her bedside."

8. https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/ni/security.htm#05.

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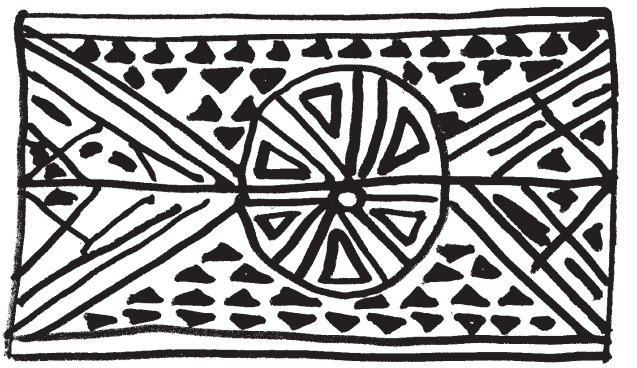
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Ritual Symbolism and Communion in the *Zangarrón* of Montamarta

María Pilar Panero García
Universidad de Valladolid, Spain

Professor of Social Anthropology. Since 2005 she has been affiliated with the Chair of Studies on Tradition, the university branch of the Joaquín Díaz Foundation, and she has served as its director since 2022. She holds degrees in Hispanic Philology (University of Salamanca) and in Literary Theory and Comparative Literature (University of Valladolid). She combines her teaching duties with management responsibilities. Her research interests and publications focus on cultural heritage, popular religiosity, ethnohistory, and literature approached from the perspective of cultural anthropology.

Correspondence: mariapilar.panero@uva.es

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an ethnographic analysis of the winter masquerade of the *Zangarrón* of Montamarta (Zamora), one of the most complex rituals in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula. On New Year's Day and on Epiphany, two different young men repeat the rite and embody this masked figure, who is the central character of a festival of considerable ritual density in which the entire village participates. Drawing on fieldwork and a review of the ethnographic literature, the article examines its historical development, the transformation of the figure, and the organisational changes promoted by the community. The ritual dressing, the materiality of the mask and costume, the route followed, the collection of offerings, the runs, the interaction with civil and religious authorities, and the integration of the ritual into the Christmas celebrations are described in detail. The analysis interprets the rite as a symbolic structure of solstitial regeneration, in which the masked figure embodies an ambivalent daimon that articulates playful violence, fertility, and social cohesion. Attention is given to the episode of the bread, proposing two readings: the historical hypothesis of a possible paraconsecration that has now disappeared, and the contemporary interpretation of the ritual "theft" as a redistribution of blessed food with symbolic efficacy.

KEYWORDS

Winter masquerade; *Zangarrón*; ritual costume; communion; blessed bread; identity.

In memoriam Bernardo Calvo Brioso
Debitum tibi

That divinity may inhabit a material object—whether a sanctuary, a mask, a fetish, or a piece of bread—is ritualism in its purest manifestation.
(Mary Douglas, 1998)

Introduction

The *Zangarrón* of Montamarta (Zamora) is one of the most complex winter masquerades in the Iberian Peninsula. It belongs to the typology of *zangarrones*, distinguished by the centrality of a single masked scourger whose symbolic importance persists within its original communities. In the province of Zamora (northwestern Spain), three winter masquerades of this type survive: two under the name *zangarrón*,[1] in Sanzoles Montamarta, and one known as *tafarrón*[2] in Pozuelo de Tábara.[3] Since 1987, when the first gathering of the

three was held, the communities that preserve them have developed a strong awareness of both what unites them and what distinguishes them (Rodríguez Pascual 1987).

Although there have been significant changes in the past decades, the celebration in Montamarta retains the archaic elements that have survived to the present day. This is because, although the festival continues to be organised by the village youths—as in many other traditional celebrations—they are guided and advised by association the Asociación Cultural "El *Zangarrón* de Montamarta," which belongs to the provincial federation of associations "MascaraZa." The association is highly active and, in addition to maintaining the tradition in Montamarta, it frequently takes part in parades and other extemporaneous and decontextualised appearances of the mask.

The winter masquerade of Montamarta is performed by a single principal masked character who acts on two separate dates—1st of January (New Year's Day) and 6th of January (Epiphany)—without a fixed procession or permanent companions, leaping as he runs so that the cowbells attached to his costume produce a continuous ringing sound. This physically demanding performance, now undertaken by a different young man on each day—whereas traditionally the same performer appeared on both dates —evokes pre-Roman rites of winter purification and fertility. In these rites, the character embodies the *demone*, who renews both the community and nature, as noted by Bernardo Calvo Brioso (2012, 447). (Photos 1 and 2)

We shall not dwell further on this question for reasons of space, but there is evidence that the celebration may once have been held, as it still is in Sanzoles and Pozuelo de Tábara, on the feast day of Saint Stephen, one of the seven deacons ordained by the apostles themselves and who was martyred by stoning for his charity. Bernardo Calvo Brioso (2012, 439-40) provides various historical data concerning the confraternity dedicated to this saint, which was suppressed in 1725 owing to a lack of active members, when its goods—lands, revenues, and obligations—had been incorporated into the benefice of the Parish Church of San Miguel in Montamarta. The liturgical and charitable obligations in honour of the saint were still recorded until 1840. This confraternity, typical of unmarried young men in solstitial contexts, reflected the general decline of such institutions during the eighteenth century under Tridentine pressures that required formal statutes, normative adaptation, and the deposit of financial accounts under ecclesiastical supervision. The parish of San Miguel, where the principal acts were held, was extinguished in 1824, and the statue of Saint Stephen was removed in 1827 owing to its poor condition. Nevertheless, certain customs survived among the young men until 1899.

However, we must not lose sight of the fact that the *Zangarrón* de Montamarta mask—which is actually made up of two masks, as we shall see later—has a history that we do not fully understand, and that it part of a long-standing tradition of cultural diffusion that remains difficult to decipher. Today, we are observers situated in a particular time and place, perceiving a contemporary reality;[4] yet we are aware that, in the *longue durée*, in cultural phenomena such as masquerades multiple temporal layers coexist. This indeterminacy, which provokes a certain "horror" (as described by Zygmunt Bauman 1993, 97 ff.), often suggests recourse to the idea of survivals in the search for ancestral origins. However, ways of life are not timeless, and there is also a changing history of shorter duration, supported by recent historical records that contextualise the use of masks in modernity and suggests that their existence can no longer be considered ancestral (Calvo Brioso 2021).

In this regard, the four-stage periodisation proposed by Paula Godinho (2011, 56) for the masks of Trás-os-Montes[5] (a region in northern Portugal) is particularly illuminating. In a study that synthesises two of her earlier publications, she distinguishes four stages. The first corresponds to traditional rural society, where masks fulfilled a cathartic function



Photo 1. The *Zangarrón* walks through the streets in the morning to offer Christmas greetings to all the villagers in their homes and to receive the traditional Christmas gift. In the image, he wears the black devil mask. Photo credit: Miguel Ángel Cruz Sánchez



Photo 2. In the surroundings of the parish church of Santa María and the adjacent cemetery, the *Zangarrón* interacts with people who tempt him with money to make him start running. Wearing the red mask of 6th of January, he displays his prize. Photo credit: Jesús Caramanzana Carrera.

and served as mechanisms of social control, allowing symbolic transgressions of norms. The second is a phase of suspension (1960-1970), when mass emigration and religious and civil repression caused the decline of the festivities. The third is a post-1974 revitalisation, when, following the Carnation Revolution (25th of April 1974), the masks were reinvented as symbols of cultural hope in a revolutionary context.[6] The fourth is a stage in which the festivities have been emblematised and exported as tourist spectacle, losing part of their ritual context while gaining greater external projection.

The *Zangarrón* of Montamarta has likewise become a consumer good within "liquid modernity," where fashion and ephemerality shape group belonging and the search for identity. Although this mask, like others in the surrounding area, is not a major tourist product, it is nonetheless highly valued by public institutions.

The mask moves between gift and commodity. It acts as a synecdoche for the entire Zangarrón celebration, and as an object with a social life that forms part of the communal life of Montamarta and of masking traditions more broadly. It is a gift on the 1st and 6th of January each year, yet it becomes a commodity when the festive sphere is extended to serve the logics of heritagisation and tourism (Panero 2025, 180-8). In this article, we disentangle the ethnographic development offered by a unique celebration that nevertheless shares similarities with others, and in which a complex ritual has endured for as long as living memory allows, providing the people of Montamarta with an inherited yet restless identity that is continually reconstructed. We describe this specific variant from the northwestern area of the Iberian Peninsula, exploring its meaning in contemporary practice.

A complex ritual

The selection of the *Zangarrón* role—today regarded as a source of pride and family honour—has evolved over time. In the past, the choice was made on New Year's Eve and "in secret." The *Zangarrón* was either a volunteer young man or, if several young men were interested, the role was decided by drawing lots. Cards from a deck were distributed, and the young man who received the ace of coins was chosen. His identity remained secret until he arrived at the church shortly before Mass. Nowadays, if there are several candidates, the role is still decided by lot, and the selection continues to be made by the *quintos*—and the *quintas*.[7] However, the identities of the two young men who are to perform as *Zangarrones* on New Year's Day and Epiphany are known much earlier, sometimes even a year in advance. The element of secrecy[8] has thus disappeared, and the *Zangarrón* now speaks to journalists and photographers even before the preceding Mass have begun. His name appears in the local press as a sign of prestige for the young man and his extended family—which, in effect, is the entire community of Montamarta. This highly positive perception contrasts markedly with a widespread belief, which we have not been able to verify, that during the difficult post-Spanish Civil War years, the *Zangarrón* was chosen from among the poorest youths in order to ease the economic hardship of his household through the gifts he received. Such a situation is plausible, although the association with poverty does not appear to have threatened the continuity of the tradition, as might otherwise be expected. According to this collective memory—whether historically accurate or merely plausible—a transition has taken place from a certain stigma during a significant part of the twentieth century to a form or mark of distinction today. One change that did take place, by decision of the young people at a certain

point, was the introduction of two performers—one for each of the two festival days—instead of a single *Zangarrón*. (Photo 3)



Photo 3. The mystery surrounding his former anonymity has disappeared. The *Zangarrón* poses and, before the mass, speaks to the media. Photo credit: María Pilar Panero García.

In any case, originally the role functioned as a rite of passage in which the young man was required to demonstrate his physical strength.[9] Just as in the past, today he must jump and run almost continuously for hours, after first standing almost motionless for approximately three hours while his costume is put on. During this time, he must refrain from eating and drinking—except for a cup of coffee and occasional rinsing his mouth—because his costume is sewn directly onto his body. Consequently, he cannot urinate, put on additional clothing, or remove any layers during the roughly twelve hours in which he performs his role. In preparation, the young men train during the preceding months by running and climbing the stairs leading to the church of Santa María del Castillo, situated on high ground in Montamarta, in order to achieve an adequate physical condition, as some former *zangarrones* attest.

In recent years the process of making the costume directly on the young man's body has ceased to be a private act and has become public, even though it begins very early in the morning and lasts for about three hours. The costume is assembled by a specialist costume-maker and an assistant. José Ramón Pérez Pérez learned the craft from Feliciano García, known locally as "Señor Tano." He has carried out this task for twenty-five years—first as an assistant and, since the death of "Señor Tano," as the principal expert. Before dawn, the young man arrives at the place where he is to be dressed, having spent the night at home, and stands still, even though his peers and other young people gather in the same space in a festive atmosphere and dance and drink alcohol. His companions may approach him occasionally, but he follows only the instructions of the tailor. He removes his clothes and remains either in underwear or in thin thermal garments.

The first items to be sewn onto him are the trousers, made from two towels forming the two trouser legs. On the 1st of January the towels are yellow and brown, while on the 6th of January they are red and yellow. These terry-cloth towels have replaced the small shawls used in earlier times. The towels are sewn to white socks, which match the footwear—today typically tennis-style trainers. From a damask double-bed bedspread, a blouse is fashioned with an internal pocket that serves as a purse. The tailor keeps his sewing box containing thread and needle close at hand throughout the celebration in case any seam needs repairing.

Once the trousers and shoes are in place, they are decorated with flowers made of tissue paper, with one larger flower standing out, sewn at groin level. These flowers are prepared in the days preceding the festival by people from the *Zangarrón's* social circle, although in the past this task was performed by the *quintas*. The young man's mother and other relatives are present during the process. On New Year's Day, he wears relatively few flowers on the trousers, since he is said to represent "a devil who ends the year and dies;" whereas on Epiphany he wears many more flowers because "he is a devil of good fortune," dressed in

festive splendour to welcome the New Year, as José Ramón Pérez Pérez explains. (Photo 4)

Once fully dressed, a scarf is placed on his head to protect him from the mask. Afterwards, a belt bearing three large cowbells is fastened to his back. This task requires the assistance of two men, since the belt must be tightened firmly to prevent injury while the *Zangarrón* jumps under their weight.



Photo 4. An expert tailor, José Ramón Pérez Pérez, sews the costume directly onto the young man's body. The process, which begins before dawn, lasts approximately three hours. Photo credit: María Pilar Panero García.

Finally, the mask is placed on the *Zangarrón's* head and, like the number of flowers on the costume, distinguishes the festival day. It consists of a cork disc mounted on a frame of horizontal and vertical wicker supports, crowned with hare ears. On the 1st of January the mask is black, representing a devil, while on the 6th of January it is red, signifying the end of the festivity or gala. Black symbolises absolute passivity and a state of death, although the flowers indicate that this state is reversible. Red represents life, strength, and imminent rebirth. In both masks, the eye and mouth holes are outlined in white, resembling teeth. A cork nose painted black is attached, and moustaches and eyebrows made of horsehair or synthetic fibres are added—white on the 1st of January to contrast with the black mask, and black on the 6th of January to contrast with the red mask. Over the cork frame and attached to the upper part of the mask is a *mantilla*, which covers the back of the head and falls from the shoulders down the back. The *mantilla* was traditionally made of animal skin (kid, goat, or dog in the past), but now it can be made of synthetic material. Coloured satin ribbons are also attached, including the Spanish flag and the traditional red stripe, while historically strips of coloured paper were used. On the 6th of January mask, small paper flowers similar to those on the costume are added. Traditionally, the mask did not bear flowers, not even on Epiphany. However, in recent years they have been added to make it more visually striking, as José Ramón Pérez Pérez notes with calm resignation. As with any aesthetic practice—and the mask, as a handcrafted product, is a unique object—both formal and structural changes occur, becoming visible in its appearance (Ocampo 2007, 91). Pérez Pérez also makes masks and advocates maintaining the traditional model while using the materials and techniques available in the twenty-first century. This formalisation, accounting for the two festival days, helps stabilise or institutionalise the mask at a time when many innovations elsewhere emphasise the bestial and diabolical qualities that are entirely alien to the Montamarta mask. While it clearly has animal elements and represents a devil, even today, in a disenchanted world, it retains a religious dimension because it is numinous: "something vague, mysterious, supra-human, not yet crystallised into 'divinity'" (Otto 2009, 79).

Once the *Zangarrón* is fully dressed, he is given his main attribute: an iron skewer shaped like a trident (Rodríguez Pascual 2009, 73), larger than an ordinary skewer and adorned with brightly coloured satin ribbons. He will use this tool to strike those who come within reach during the performance. It is remembered that in the past the *Zangarrón* used to strike people more lightly with pig bladders rather than with a trident. Other masked figures still use pig bladders,[10] but not in Montamarta. Regarding the ritual implements used for striking, we note the information provided by Pedro Álvarez [Gómez] to Julio Caro Baroja in

his famous *El Carnaval*... (1986, 321). It is important that this work was published in 1965, but the work had begun to take shape before the Civil War (1936-1939). Julio Caro Baroja refers to a *purridera* ("pitchfork") instead of a skewer and a *zurriago* ("leather whip" or "cord") instead of pig bladders. It is likely that in the past the *purridera* was used only during Mass, since using an agricultural implement to strike people would have caused serious injury, while the *zurriago* served as an instrument and symbol of temporal and playful authority.

The difference between the celebrations on the 1st and the 6th of January lies in the costume and the mask, worn by two different young men. The route, collections, and skirmishes described below, are repeated on both days with only minimal variations, reflecting that different people perform them on different days, though they appear almost identical.

Around 9 a.m., the *Zangarrón* starts to visit all the houses in Montamarta, except those where the inhabitants are in mourning. He is closely accompanied by a friend who provides assistance. Rodríguez Pascual calls this person "a page" and mentions that there are two (2009, 73-4). We have observed one or two, although in recent years many people—particularly photographers and photojournalists—have followed mostly the *Zangarrón* due to the interest the celebration generates.

In the past, it seems that the New Year *Zangarrón* toured the old quarter, while the Epiphany *Zangarrón* covered the new quarter (Calvo Brioso 2011, 220). Today, each young man visits every house to extend New Year greetings and receive the *aguinaldo* (Christmas gifts), which traditionally consisted of products from the pig slaughter, especially *chorizo* (a sausage made from pork and paprika). Families would save these items to offer the *Zangarrón's pitorro* (*chorizo*). Nowadays, these gifts in kind are largely symbolic, and neighbours typically offer money instead. With the collected funds, the two *Zangarrones* may invite members of their age group to dinner, although participation is voluntary.

Around midday, the *Zangarrón* makes his way up to the parish church of Nuestra Señora del Castillo, Montamarta, located on a hill outside the village.[11] Access is via the Roman road, and along the way he pursues young men who challenge him. Upon catching them, he strikes them three times on their backs with his trident. Upon arriving at the church, he first kneels and, traditionally, recites the *Lord's Prayer* at the entrance of the cemetery, as a sign of respect for the ancestors, whose memory is thus incorporated into the festival. This is followed by runs and skirmishes in which someone shows money to provoke the *Zangarrón*, who then chases the person and attempts to "steal" it.

As in many other masked festivals, in the past he would "harass" young women by attempting to lift their skirts. This practice is now obsolete and occurs only rarely for two reasons: few girls wear skirts that day, and the gesture is considered in poor taste, especially when directed at strangers. When it does occur, it is regarded as a playful prank and received with the same good humour as striking with the trident. The violence associated with this character—like that of other masked figures—is symbolic; he is a scourger, and his transgression unfolds within a playful, agile, and festive performance. When he catches someone who has



Photo 5. The *Zangarrón* strikes three times those young and old whom he manages to catch during the run. Photo credit: Miguel Ángel Cruz Sánchez.

provoked him, he always delivers three strikes. If the target is one of his peers, a young man like himself, the blows are strong, but in other cases they are lighter. (Photo 5)

Before Mass, on the esplanade in front of the atrium of the parish church of Santa María del Castillo in Montamarta, the *Zangarrón* symbolically marks the space by tracing a circle on the ground with his trident, flanked by the year's *quintos* and *quintas*, who wear black Castilian capes adorned with a rosette from which satin ribbons hang. In front of the civil and religious authorities, he performs a codified sequence. First, he traces a circular or near-circular space—the "ring"—to clear the area. Once the circle is complete, he flexes his left leg, plants the trident in the ground, raises the mask, and performs three jumps as a gesture of submission to the priest and the civil authorities. The sequence ends with three more jumps, after which everyone—the authorities, the *quintos*, and the community—enters the church, except for the *Zangarrón*. (Photos 6 and 7)



Photo 6. The *Zangarrón* shows respect to the civil and religious authorities before and after the mass. The image captures the bows performed prior to the Eucharistic celebration, under the gaze of his peers—*quintos* and *quintas*—the young men and women of the same age group, recognizable by their black cloaks and the satin ribbon rosettes pinned to the cape at chest height. Photo credit: Jesús Caramanzana Carrera.

The Christmas Mass follows its four main components. First, the introductory rites prepare the assembly for the celebration, including the procession and entrance hymn, followed by the sign of the cross, the priest's greeting, and the penitential act ask forgiveness for sins. Then the *Gloria* is sung, and the introductory rites conclude with the *Collect* prayer, which gathers the prayers of everyone in the church. In the Liturgy of the Word, a reading from the Old Testament is followed by a responsorial psalm, a second reading from the letters of the New Testament, the proclamation of the Gospel, for which the congregation stands followed by the homily. The *quintos* and *quintas* participate in the readings, and the priest addresses the young participants with affectionate words, acknowledging the importance of the *Zangarrón* celebration for the community. The assembly responds with the *Creed* and



Photo 7. During the mass, the *Zangarrón* remains alone in the church atrium, wrapped in a blanket.
Photo credit: Miguel Ángel Cruz Sánchez.



Photo 8. During the final blessing of the congregation, the *Zangarrón*—as if enacting a parallel celebration—pierces two round loaves of bread with his roasting fork under the gaze of all present. Photo credit: Jesús Caramanzana Carrera.



Photo 9. The *Zangarrón* "steals" the bread and leaves the church with his face uncovered, as a sign of respect, without turning his back on the altar or the priest. Photo credit: Jesús Caramanzana Carrera.



Photo 10. A young volunteer, who is not one of the quintas, distributes one of the loaves "stolen" by the *Zangarrón* among the whole community. Photo credit: María Pilar Panero García.

the *Prayers of the Faithful*. Third, the Liturgy of the Eucharist is celebrated: the bread and wine are offered, the Eucharistic Prayer is recited, and during the consecration the gifts are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. The Communion rite then follows, including the Lord's Prayer, the sign of peace, the breaking of bread, and the reception of the Eucharist. Finally, the concluding rites include the prayer after Communion, the final blessing, and the dismissal, sending the faithful forth to live out what has been celebrated.

During the Mass, the young man—without his mask and wrapped in a blanket to keep warm after several hours of activity—remains seated on a bench in the atrium. This pause allows for any necessary adjustments to the costume after the physical exertion. The costume-maker remains nearby with his sewing kit until the celebration concludes.

On the altar, on the Epistle side, the *quintas* have placed two *obladas* (round loaves of bread), which have been kept in a basket during Mass. In the final part of the service, when the priest gives the blessing, the *Zangarrón* enters the church with his mask raised and performs three bows before the altar. He then impales the two loaves on his trident, steps back without turning his back to the tabernacle, and performs three genuflections. He leaves the church, and once everyone else has exited, he offers one loaf to the *quintos* and the other to the *quintas*, who distribute it among all those present, according to Rodríguez Pascual (2009, 78). Today, this blessed bread—acquired through the ritual "theft"—is shared among members of the village community, although the distribution is handled by whichever volunteers are available. We will return to the distribution of this bread later. (Photos 8, 9 and 10)

The Zangarrón then returns to the village, arriving at the Plaza del Sol next to the fountain, where he waits for the villagers coming down from Santa María del Castillo and for the authorities to take their positions within a second circle. He then repeats the three bows and three jumps before the authorities, this time holding the trident aloft, and continues running through the streets until he returns home to eat and rest.

In the traditional rural society, a complete festive sequence included collections, rounds, ritual shared meals, Mass, physical tests, social critique, and dance. In Montamarta, there is no trace of social critique, although the memory of the dawn rounds accompanied by the two *dulzaineros* (double-reed pipe players) remains, and there is interest in reviving this practice. Despite these losses, the ritual preserves archaic elements associated with a numinous past.

The symbolism of the festival and two forms of the ritual theft of bread

Within the symbolic worldview of Christianity from the Middle Ages onwards, the number three signifies fullness and perfection. Its meaning, however, is not understood in mathematical terms but in theological and cosmological ones. Three represents the totality of the mystery of the Trinity and therefore possesses a sacred and supernatural dimension. The number three is widely associated with abundance and spiritual harmony. It represents an intellectual and sacred order—in God, in the cosmos and in the human being—and expresses the synthesis of unity and duality (1 + 2), as well as the union of heaven and earth. For this reason, it appears in multiple traditions: the three Magi (King, Priest, and Prophet), the three theological virtues, and the three principles of alchemy (sulphur, mercury and salt) (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1989, 1577).

The *Zangarrón* of Montamarta carries three cowbells, bears a trident, strikes and leaps three times, and pays respect three times to the village represented by its authorities. The community itself explains the association between the masked figure and the number three, by reinforcing—even if not explicitly articulated—its sacred character and its function as a *daimon* (Greek δαίμων).[12]

As has already been suggested, the *Zangarrón* of Montamarta was originally linked to the annual regeneration of nature, as it is part of a solstitial celebration and its figure participates in rituals associated with bringing fertility and abundance. Its mask is ambivalent as it possesses both sacred and profane qualities, particularly within Christianity that has tended to diminish the former profane meanings. Where such pre-Christian ritual elements could not be eradicated, as is the case of Montamarta and in other cases, Christianity adapted festivals of ancient origin into its own ritual framework.

Depending on the perspective adopted, we are faced with either a pure or an impure form of representation within a framework of public theatricality and a highly complex allegorical structure which, beyond the striking aesthetic of the principal character and the elaborate ceremonial, ultimately finds its purpose in the participation of the entire village community. In traditional society, blessed bread (*pan bendito*) represented the solidarity essential for collective survival.



Blessed bread can be prepared as cakes or ring-shaped loaves, either sweet or savoury, and is a religious offering, either collective or individual, made to a saint or to the Virgin Mary within the framework of patronal festivals, confraternities, and guild-based forms of stewardship. It is therefore a practice that combines spiritual meaning, social cohesion, and festive expression, and appears throughout the ritual calendar, including in winter celebrations such as the feast of Saint Blaise (Gaignebet 1984, 86-7; Sierra and Boldú 1934, 649).

In Pozuelo de Tábara, on the 26th of December, during the Mass in honour of Saint Stephen, the steward or stewardess carries a branch decorated with fruit, while other young people bring a *bollo maimón*[13] and a basket containing pieces of bread. During the Mass, the priest expressly blesses the branch, the cake, and the bread. The bread is then distributed among the devotees after they have kissed the saint's relic, as they leave the church. The Tafarrón, one of the Zamoran masked scourgers, also participates in this Mass, although with his face uncovered.[14] In other masked festivals of Trás-os-Montes, such as those of Grijó de Parada, Ousilhão, Parada de Infanções, and Rebordãos, bread is likewise blessed during the Mass of Saint Stephen. In Pinela, the festival *A Festa do Natal e o Charolo*[15] is celebrated, during which the priest blesses the bread at Mass. In Varge, the bread is not blessed but is distributed outside the church (Pinelo Tiza 2015 and 2026, *passim*).

From a symbolic perspective, blessed bread represents a popular offering through which divine protection is sought in response to a particular need. Such protection could assume a collective character, when it was requested for a local community or for the members of a confraternity, or an individual one, when protection was sought for the extended family. In many celebrations, both dimensions were combined, addressing communal and familial concerns simultaneously.

Integrated into ecclesiastical festivities, blessed bread acquires a specifically Catholic symbolism that reflects the Christianisation of earlier traditions. The blessing of the bread transforms this offering into an element with Eucharistic resonance. When the faithful consume it, they symbolically partake of the body of Christ, understood as spiritual nourishment. In this way, the act of eating transcends the material dimension and becomes a gesture of religious communion.

A particularly significant feature of this practice is its equal distribution during festive celebrations. Blessed bread is shared among all those present, regardless of their socio-economic status. This gesture embodies a central Christian principle: the equality of all before God.

Likewise, the distribution of blessed bread was understood as a manifestation of Christian charity towards those most in need. It is therefore no coincidence that, in certain contexts, it received designations such as *caridades* or "bread for the poor" and was accompanied by cheese and wine (Prieto 1622, 330). Such expressions underscore its solidarity and redistributive functions, as well as its capacity to reinforce social cohesion within the community. Bread symbolises essential nourishment, both material and spiritual. In Christianity, it represents Christ, the "bread of life", and the sustenance of eternal life (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1989, 1232). This is the food that the *Zangarrón* "steals" from the altar.

According to the information provided by the writer Pedro Álvarez Gómez, at a time that cannot be precisely determined, but before the 1960s,[16] when Julio Caro Baroja revised his work for publication, the *Zangarrón* is said to have performed a parallel and false form of consecration at the same place and at the same moment as the priest: "He disguises himself as the Devil and attends the High Mass, positioning himself in the centre of the church crossing; to his right and left they place wafers which he pierces and raises aloft with a *purridera* at the moment of the elevation of the host" (Caro Baroja 1986, 321). For the faithful, the consecration was believed to bring "great goods and benefits, and among them one—and not the least—was [...] that by virtue of this Sacrament, says Jansenius, the Saints shall multiply like hay and grass upon the earth, for the predestined are countless and without number, as Saint John said after having counted the predestined of each tribe." (Prieto 1622, 269)

We do not know whether, at that time, the *Zangarrón* entered with the mask fully covering his face or raised, as he does today, leaving his face uncovered. If such a parallel and false consecration[17] did indeed take place, then the act of distributing the bread would likewise be interpreted as a parallel and false form of communion, and the masked figure as a parallel and false priest. This is an interpretation that cannot be verified, and no memory of such practice survives in Montamarta. It would likely have been prohibited, like other youthful performances enacted by burlesque authorities, which operated at the margins of excess, mockery, and laughter, such as the *boy bishops* or the *swineherds' kings*, which the Church endeavoured to suppress (Caro Baroja 1986, 298 ff.). This brief account suggests that a masked figure enters the Mass and imitates the actions of the priest, although there is no indication that the priest and the *Zangarrón* interact.

From living memory to the present day, however, this ritual theft takes place at the end of the Mass, precisely during the final blessing of the faithful, rather than during the

consecration. The priest has previously consecrated the bread and wine during the Mass, transforming them into the Holy Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, and the faithful have received Communion. Unlike other celebrations, such as that of Pozuelo de Tábara, there is no explicit blessing of the loaves deposited by the *quintas* on the right-hand side of the altar, which the *Zangarrón* pierces with his trident, carries outside the church, and offers to the people at the church door. A ritual ambiguity thus arises: the bread is considered blessed and therefore a form of spiritual nourishment, yet it has not been explicitly blessed. It is difficult not to associate the consecrated host with the *Zangarrón's* loaves, which have occupied the same ritual time and space, yet they actually belong to different symbolic planes. The *Zangarrón* is a *numen* combining human and animal traits and distributes gifts of abundance and regenerative vital energy that reinforce the community through their shared consumption. This practice bears the characteristics of a non-institutional form of the sacred. First, it does not belong to the sphere of everyday life. Second, its presence is indetermined and ambiguous. Third, it follows normative and ritualised patterns. Finally, it concentrates essential values of the community, including the respect for the deceased, whom it honours in the cemetery and acknowledges by avoiding entering the homes of relatives in mourning.

According to Mary Douglas (1998, 64-5), Catholic communion represents the most intense form of this ritualism. In consecrated bread, the cosmos, the history of the Church, and the tradition linking the sacrifice of Melchizedek to Calvary and the Mass are symbolically condensed. Its meaning is not limited to symbolism but also entails real and transformative efficacy. According to Catholic doctrine, through the prayers of consecration, an invisible transformation of the bread and wine takes place, and communion exerts a salvific effect on the person who receives it. The *Zangarrón* of Montamarta, like the priest, offers *communio*, understood as the union created through participation in what is shared. The mask serves as a highly recognisable marker of Montamarta's identity, both within and beyond the community. However, the ritual gesture operates on a different plane, constituting a parallel rite. The inhabitants of Montamarta participate in both without perceiving a contradiction between them, accepting both as part of their tradition.

Final considerations

Ritual functions as a kind of "symbolic mask" through which human beings interpret the world and organise their relationship with the past and the future from the standpoint of the present. To understand a ritual in relation to its origins is to recognise that it is not an arbitrary act, but a practice linked to specific historical and social conditions, as well as to a communal need, whether religious or civic. Ritual contributes to group cohesion because, through a precise formalism, it enables deeply held convictions to be expressed without the need for explicit articulation. In this way, it transforms individual emotions into collectively recognisable forms and strengthens the individual's integration within the normative frameworks of society. Beyond its representational dimension, every ritual may refer back to an originating event whose meaning is renewed through the ritual act itself. At this level, ritual not only conveys meaning but actively re-enacts and reaffirms it (Flores Arroyuelo 2006, 11). This is precisely what takes place in Montamarta on the 1st and 6th of January each year.

The mask is an extraordinary artefact because of its capacity to engage and provoke/unsettle the viewer, exerting a powerful attraction on the viewer through the encounter

with an extraordinary face. This capacity has been reflected in modern art from the works of Francisco de Goya to the present day. However, a distinction must be made between the use of masks in art, which tends to treat the mask as an extension of the face and thereby obscures its status as an autonomous object (Ocampo 2007, 46), and ethnological masks such as that of the *Zangarrón* of Montamarta. The latter does not challenge notions of identity or individuality, since it is understood that behind the object lies the concealed face of a unique individual, with his own subjectivity.

We are aware that, in a society such as our own, masks—like other objects that have come into fashion—form part of an economy of spectacle in which aesthetic considerations often predominate. Masks are displayed and marketed as products of cultural, tourist, and heritage consumption, serving institutional and commercial interests. Their appeal frequently lies in their exoticism, their perceived ethnic rarity, and their aura of mystery (Panero 2026, 180 ff.). Nevertheless, masks belong to a living culture meant to be experienced and shared, whose principal function is transformation: they cover the human being and turn him into something other, insofar as the person wearing the mask acquires attributes or prerogatives of the beings represented. In this metamorphosis into a *daimon*, the mask is accompanied by a costume, shawl, and accessories arranged according to a more or less fixed model, whose origins remain unknown to us. We do not observe any cathartic function or actual transformation, as is sometimes claimed, but rather a form of play that has persisted into the twenty-first century through tradition.

The *Zangarrón* of Montamarta, like other masks that have endured through history—albeit with necessary adaptations—finds in the circuits of spectacle an opportunity to reinforce its use in the original context. It functions as a powerful marker of identity, both internally and externally. However, we consider that the central element of this celebration lies in the cultural articulation of the blessed bread, given its symbolism and communal function, which is associated with the act of extending seasonal greetings to all members of the community without exception. Beyond its symbolic or magical dimension, the celebration embodies desirable values such as equality, charity, and social cohesion. As part of a carnivalesque form of religion, it is expressed not through dogma or scripture, but through a network of festivities, tales, characters, foods, costumes, and gestures that function as myths and rites in action (Gaignebet 1984).

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NOTES

1. A character who wears a comic, eccentric, or grotesque costume at public festivals, particularly during Carnival or other traditional festivals where masks are worn. In this context, the term also refers to a masked figure whose role is to strike participants.

2. A *tafarrón* is a type of *zangarrón*. It is a masked figure who carries a weapon.

3. The foundational literature has addressed the following figures. Ramón Menéndez Pidal (1968) characterised them as figures of a minstrel-like figures, while Julio Caro Baroja (1963, 227-34) linked them to folklore, paying particular attention to the *zamarrones*—an older form of *zaharrones* or *zaarrones*—from which various lexical variants derive, such as *zafarrón, tafarrón, zanfarrón, zancarrones, cigarrón*, and others. However, in the Zamora region, the *zangarrones* extend beyond the role of minstrels to embody archetypal figures of popular celebrations, marked by a demonic and ambivalent character.

4. We draw on the fieldwork we carried out on 1st and 6th January 2024 and on the descriptions provided by Francisco Rodríguez Pascual (2009, 67-80) and Bernardo Calvo Brioso (2012, 439-49). We also draw on a lengthy interview we conducted with José Ramón Pérez Pérez on 7th of December 2024, during which hemade a *Zangarrón* mask for the Three Kings' Day, as well as on other shorter exchanges with him at various parades and gatherings. We would like to thank them for their time and patience, as well as for their ability to convey not only facts but also the values of this festival and the emotions it evokes in those connected to Montamarta. There is no doubt that the work presented here has been enriched by their dedication and cheerful disposition.

5. This region has a long tradition of winter festivals featuring masks. The festive season begins with the feast of Saint Lucy (13th of December) and ends with Carnival.

6. Although there was no revolution, the same phenomenon can be observed in Spain regarding Carnival and other festivals in the context of a "revivalist trend intensified by the advent of democracy and regional autonomy" (Alonso Ponga 2016, 218).

7. The term *quinto* refers to a young man from the moment he draws lots until he begins compulsory military service; that is, he is a youth approaching the age of majority. The *quintas* are the young women of the same age group as the *quintos*. Compulsory military service in Spain—commonly known as la *mili*—was suspended on 31st of December 2001. The presence of girls in all these activities is relatively recent. However, from the 1990s onwards, they have appeared in photographs published in the Zamora press, as have the *quintos*, who no longer wear the traditional cape but still weare the rosettes that distinguish them.

8. In general, in the contemporary masquerades of the province of Zamora and Trás-os-Montes, the secrecy surrounding the identities of the youths who embody the masked figures has been lost. As far as we know, this mystery is preserved only in the case of the *Chocalheiro* of Bemposta, who is selected for his two roles—on the feast day of Saint Stephen and on New Year's Day—through an auction held on the eve of each event. He wears a mask, and his identity is not revealed until he has completed the circuit through the village.

9. Bernardo Calvo records the accounts of elderly people who recall that the strongest young man was chosen through tests of running, jumping, and strength (2012, 444).

10. In other masked celebrations, this implement is used to symbolise the collection of products from the pig slaughter, when the youths taking part in these festivities extend Christmas greetings and receive their *aguinaldo* (gifts or Christmas gifts). For example, in the *Zangarrón* of Sanzoles, three young men take on the role of *asadores*, each armed with a sword. The *Asador Mayor* keeps this ancient custom alive, symbolically skewering bacon and chorizo on one of the swords. This masked figure in Sanzoles also carries a stick from which three pig bladders, which are used for striking, typically hang.

11. This route, which must be completed quickly because the rest of the village is waiting for him, has become more complicated in recent years, as he is frequently stopped and asked to pose by the multitude of onlookers and photographers. This situation has caused some frustration, and the young man is advised to ignore such distractions and carry out his task.

12. This has not prevented it from being partially assimilated over time to the figure of the Christian devil. Bernardo Calvo recorded that in Montamarta and in Ferreras de Arriba—where a character known as *Diablo* appears—there is the belief that, if the young man died while wearing the mask, he could not be buried in consecrated ground. Nevertheless, neither of the two figures, despite causing unease and even fear through their wild appearance, displays the traits associated with evil (2011, 63).



13. A traditional sponge cake made with refined flour, eggs, and sugar, containing neither fat nor yeast.

14. This study is based on fieldwork conducted on 25, 26 and 27th of December 2024.

15. At the Christmas festival in Pinela (Trás-os-Montes), where masked young people take centre stage, bread plays a key role. It is called *Charolo* and is a wooden structure, resembling a litter or platform with a pyramidal shape, densely covered with rings of sweet bread.

16. Don Julio had already gathered many of the notes that would later form *El Carnaval...* before the Civil War (1936-1939), and he revised these earlier writings between 1962 and 1964. If the author—who had access to a considerable body of information—included the account provided by Pedro Álvarez Gómez who was born in the region, we may reasonably assume that the parallel rite and false consecration described above did indeed take place, and that his informant, whom he trusted completely, had first-hand knowledge of it.

17. In the Eucharist, the consecration is the central moment of the Holy Mass. During the consecration, through the priest's prayer and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

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Mask Producers and Mask Bearers in the Galician *Entroido* of the 21st Century

Elena Freire Paz
University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain

Dr. Elena Freire Paz is a professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Santiago de Compostela (USC). Her research focuses on heritage-making processes and the transformation of traditional culture in rural European territories affected by deindustrialisation, globalisation, and demographic decline, as well as on the symbolic and cultural dimensions of food-related practices.

Marta Veiga Izaguirre
University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain

Dr. Marta Veiga Izaguirre is an adjunct professor at the Department of Communication Sciences at USC. Her research focuses on the transmission and survival of traditional peasant folk and oral storytelling, motifs, tropes, and artefacts within the major transmedia narrative phenomena of pop culture, and on the impact of cyberculture on minority cultures and languages such as Galician.

Correspondence author: martav.izaguirre@usc.es

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a selection of traditional masks present in Galicia, the paper focuses on the observation and analysis of the persistence and transformations of the Galician *Entroido*. The research is not concerned with bourgeois and urban Carnivals associated with modernity and contemporary society, but rather focuses on those manifestations typical of the rural world and linked to local peasant society. Over the last two decades, these *entroidos* have attracted the attention of public authorities and have become subject to processes of touristification. This research examines the know-how involved in producing the materiality of winter masks in the Galician *Entroido*: clothing, masks, and accessories, as well as how these objects adapt to the resources and time constraints allowed or imposed by the current post-industrial and hyper-connected society. The research also examines how the processes of knowledge transmission that arose in an oral culture, but continue to be reproduced in the 21st century, are being transformed.

KEYWORDS

Entroido; winter masquerades; Galicia; rural carnival; society of spectacle.

Ando rabudo como un peliqueiro.[1]
Traio a misión dun superguerreiro.
Mira, Marisé divorciou hai tres meses
e como lle prestou: está máis guapa ca nunca!
Baila tacón, despois a punta.
A festa rebenta cunha de Rocío Dúrcal;
quero Ana Kiro e ritmo de pandeiro
antes de que remate durmindo nun roleiro.

[I walk fiercely like a *peliqueiro*.
I bring the mission of a super-warrior.
Look, Marisé divorced three months ago
and how it suited her; she is prettier than ever!
Dance with the heel, then the toe.
The festival explodes with a Rocío Dúrcal song;
I want Ana Kiro and the rhythm of the tambourine
before I end up sleeping in a furrow.]

Bótalle caldo. Cumbia malandra. Malandrómeda.

Introduction. An approach to the rural Galician *Entroido*

> The Galician *Entroido* was threatening, with its texts of social criticism, the erotic swaying of its characters, encouraging enjoyment and an existence lived with pleasure, and its masks that laughed. Even before removing the day celebrating the Republic, the 14th of April, Franco banned the laughter of the *Entrudo* from the calendar. (Godinho 2023a)

The rural *Entroido* (Carnival) of Galicia forms one of the most fertile ethnographic settings for approaching the processes of patrimonialisation (heritagisation), touristification, and the appropriation of a ritual culture by communities and institutions. The Galician Carnival is part of a broad set of rural European carnivals characterised by winter masquerades, symbolic inversions, and rites of passage. Unlike the urban Galician carnivals, associated—though not exclusively—with the bourgeois culture of the 19th and 20th centuries at the dawn of modernity and with the emergence of a logic of spectacle and mediated aestheticisation, the rural Galician *entroidos* have been produced and reproduced within farming communities. In these communities, masks, clothing, and performative practices are socialised and transmitted intergenerationally through practical learning and oral tradition. This constitutes a form of community performativity inscribed in seasonal cycles and peasant sociability.

The scholarly literature agrees that these celebrations transcend mere fun and act as spaces of social cohesion, forming symbolic laboratories that function within a liminal time in which people reformulate and subvert social hierarchies (Godinho 2023a, Sotelino Losada et al. 2019). Federico Cocho (2008) highlights that the *Entroido* entails a genuine festive complex sustained by an active memory through which the participating community reproduces, reinvents, and negotiates meanings within the framework of rural life.

The transformations of the Galician rural world that occurred in the 20th century—including migration, de-agrarianisation, public education, the impact of the information society and mass communication, infrastructural development, political and administrative decentralisation, and digitalisation—in the context of the fascist *coup d'état* of 1936 and the ensuing National-Catholic dictatorship that lasted until 1975, profoundly affected the continuity of the *entroidos*. Some masks disappeared for decades, others survived with difficulty in the care of a few custodian families, and others experienced revitalisation processes driven by neighbourhood associations, town councils, and cultural agents, often in the wake of institutional heritage discourses. As Godinho (2023b) warns, these revitalisation processes must be understood not as mere nostalgic resurrections, but as reworkings emerging from the interaction between local memories, technical knowledge, and new political and cultural expectations.

In the 21st century, the rural *entroidos*[2] have experienced significant transformations resulting from processes of patrimonialisation, cultural institutionalisation,[3] and touristification. At the same time, the contemporary hyper-connected society has created new ways of making traditional masks visible, mediated, and interpreted. As Paula Godinho explains (2023b, 345-66), heritage policies in southern Europe tend to oscillate between institutional conservation and the risk of turning the living into a nostalgic object: a "heritage melancholy" that disconnects the practice from its social conditions. In this context, examining the current production and use of Galician *Entroido* masks aims to understand and interpret how rural communities negotiate their cultural continuity in a context shaped by tensions between tradition, market, and spectacle.

The reactivation of the so-called traditional *entroidos in Galicia* has been especially visible in the mass media since the 1990s, with the consolidation of inter-parish gatherings, municipal support networks, and growing media and tourist interest, culminating in 2025 with the declaration of the Galician *Entroido* as a *Ben de Interese Cultural* (Asset of Cultural Interest) by the Xunta de Galicia (Autonomous Government of Galicia). This institutionalisation, although significant for the preservation of these rituals, has also generated debates regarding the boundaries between conservation, spectacularisation, and commercial appropriation, as observed by Herrero Pérez (2021) and Marqués Valea, Castro Fernández, and López Facal (2020) in relation to the tension between the heritage community and the tourist community.

This work is based on ethnographic documentation of different Galician masks: *Volantes*[4] and *maragatos*[5] of the Ribeirao *Entroido*, *Oso*[6] (Bear) from Salcedo, *Vixigueiro*[7] from Samede, *Vello dos Cornos*[8] (Horned Old Man) from Merza, *Felo*[9] from Maceda and Esgos, *Boteiros*[10] from Vilariño de Conso and Viana do Bolo, *Vergalleiro*[11] from Sarreaus, *Mázcaras*[12] from Buxán, and *Pantallas*[13] from Xinzo. The production techniques and performative logics are described in detail in local sources, and inmaterials that have been provided by artisans, neighbourhood associations, and cultural entities. The article combines these descriptions with recent research on winter rituality, patrimonialisation, and rural carnival (Panero and Tiza 2023, Godinho 2023a and 2023b, Seixas 2022, Senén 2022, Vázquez Saavedra 2022, Cocho 2008, 2012, Rivas 1988, 2001), as well as with journalistic sources documenting the contemporary impact of the *Entroido* in the Galician public sphere.

It is fundamental to focus the analysis on both mask producers—artisans, apprentices, and bearers of technical knowledge—and mask bearers—guides, dancers, and performative mediators—as subjects who articulate, through their praxis, the continuity of a living heritage that cannot be reduced to its material appearance (Santoro 2025). The mask is not just an object: it is technique, gesture, bond, transmission, improvisation, and social imagination. Contemporary ethnographic observation shows that the same hybridisation processes affecting Galician society—hyperconnectivity, the global circulation of images, and digital cultural markets—are transforming both the production and the use of these masks, without erasing their territorial anchoring. The methodological approach combines textual analysis, literature review, comparative study, and an anthropological perspective focused on artisanal continuity and its place in the digital age.

A diatopic journey through a selection of Galician masks

The diversity of Galician *Entroido* masks reflects a profound diatopic variability. Rather than being minor variants of the same festive type, each mask constitutes a cultural unit with its own genealogy, material techniques, dramaturgy, and forms of community presence. Available ethnographic descriptions allow us to observe the hybrid interplay between continuity and change that characterises the 21st century.

Southern Lugo presents a diverse ritual landscape, where practices such as those of the *Entroido* Ribeirao (Chantada), namely *Volantes*, *Maragatos*, *Mecos*,[14] and zoomorphic rituals like the *Oso* of Salcedo (A Pobra do Brollón) persist. Both constitute paradigmatic examples of artisanal transmission based on bodily memory and learning by accompaniment, which Freire Paz (2004) conceptualizes as heritage trades of a domestic nature.

In the *Entroido* Ribeirao (Santiago da Riba, a parish in Chantada municipality), the *Volante* represents one of the most spectacular masks due to its elaborate construction: layers of paper and linen joined with paste, a *pucho* (hat) crowned by dolls and ribbons, and a brightly coloured suit that reproduces models documented by Rivas Quintas since the 1980s. The functions of the *Volante*, associated with processional dances and the staging of ancient manorial tax collectors, remain active. Its companion, the *Maragato*, described in the glossary *Frampas* (2001), combines furs,[15] a wineskin, and a wine flask, acting as an aggressive figure in charge of protecting the retinue. The *Meco*, protagonist of the evenings of *Entroido* Tuesday, embodies the ritual lament for the end of the festive cycle. Its contemporary mask, made of cardboard and plaster, is an example of artisanal creativity that adapts tradition to new demands.

The *Ribeirao* complex thus constitutes a microcosm in which several artisanal techniques coexist:

a) paper and paste masks made on a wooden mould (*Volantes*).

b) fur masks, animal skulls, and bone mounts (*Maragatos* / *Peliqueiros*).

c) masks combining different materials, including plaster, cardboard, and sheep's wool, for the *Meco* character.

The *Volantes* exhibit an impressive mastery of layered work (paper–fabric–paper) and the paste technique, which requires precise control of the drying process. These techniques, already documented by Rivas Quintas (1988), persist today thanks to direct transmission between artisans such as Juan Carlos González and young local apprentices. The production of the *puchos*, wire structures covered with ribbons and flowers, is an example of collective work involving women from the parish and highlights the community dimension of festive craftsmanship (Varela-Portela et al. 2019).

The *Maragatos*, for their part, show the survival of traditional tanning practices based on ash and the resignification of animal materials. This work corresponds to what Herrero Pérez calls "low-institutional-intensity heritage" (2021, 68), where the technique is sustained by family lineages without a formalised transmission process.

The *Meco* of the *Entroido* Ribeirao illustrates a recent phenomenon: the mask-making process we document uses a plaster mould and was learned from Marcelino de Santiago, from the Compostela puppet company *Os Monicreques de Kukas*. We observe how an extra-local artisanal circuit is thus consolidated, forming an informal network of *Entroido* experts who travel between municipalities and festivals, a phenomenon also observed by Godinho (2023b) in the Portuguese case.

Without leaving the south of the province of Lugo, the *Oso* (Bear) from Salcedo (A Pobra do Brollón) belongs to the category of zoomorphic masks, prominent figures within European winter carnivals, such as those portrayed by French photographer Charles Fréger in *Wilder Mann: The Image of the Savage* (2012).[16] The *Oso*, accompanied by *Mordomos* (Servants) who capture and release the animal, connects with well-documented Alpine and Pyrenean motifs. The physical interaction of the bear, which smudges those it meets with soot and mud, maintains a liminal logic linked to the end of hibernation and the beginning of the period of fertility.

The process of making the *Oso* mask involves a combination of rural leatherworking techniques (cowhide moulded over wood for the mask) and organic materials (tartar, soot, ash), and is the product of orally transmitted knowledge. The advice of artisans such as Ramón Lleó or Ramón Taboada demonstrates a shift in traditional knowledge—previously purely domestic—towards a mixed model involving experts recognised as holders of this knowledge, in line with the artisanal accreditation phenomena described by Freire Paz

(2022). The spectacular nature of the *Oso* lies less in the mask than in the performativity of the smudging, a gesture that remains one of the Galician carnival practices preserving traces of a ritual logic of impurity associated with symbolic inversion.[17]

In the Deza region (Pontevedra province), we find another zoomorphic figure, indeterminate in form, halfway between a bear and a bull, and also displaying demonic traits. In the parish of Merza, Vila de Cruces, in an area known for the Napoleonic-style *Entroido* of the *Xenerais da Ulla* ("Generals of the Ulla"), the mask of the *Vello dos Cornos* ("Horned Old Man") from Merza stands out. Its obscene aesthetic—including the rod topped with horns—and its provocative interaction with the public and with its partner, *A Fiadeira* ("The Spinner"), constitute typical elements of peasant masquerades: inversion, symbolic sexual transgression, and the staging of festive conflict.

This mask, typical of the first section of the Ulla River, is made of cork oak—*sobreira*, in Galician—with horns and a sheepskin coat. The techniques of extraction, drying, and carving the cork require skill and forestry knowledge, embedded in highly localised practices involving the use of *Quercus suber*, a species much less common in Galicia than its relative *Quercus robur* (oak or *carballo*). Contemporary artisan Ramón Molina is a living repository of this knowledge and integrates recent adaptations, such as the use of resistant glues and mechanical tools, into the traditional process, without abandoning the traditional logic of the manual assembly of parts.

Among the rural *entroidos* of the province of A Coruña, we highlight that of Samede (Paderne municipality). The *Vixigueiro* (*vexiga* means "bladder," as the *Vixigueiro* carries a cane with two pig bladders) or *Farandulo* shows how certain figures have recently been recovered from fragmentary testimonies. As with other carnivals, the recovery of lost masks usually implies a negotiation between community memory and contemporary creativity. The *Vixigueiro* constitutes a notable example of contemporary recovery based on ethnographic archaeology: reconstruction from local memory and experimentation with traditional wicker weaving techniques, transmitted by artisans such as Carlos Fontales or Óscar Prieto.

The use of natural materials (wicker, corn husks, oak galls) evokes a peasant aesthetic that, as Marqués Valea et al. (2020) point out, reinforces the construction of a heritage community as a response to global aesthetic homogenization. A crucial aspect is that this mask introduces a type of hybrid technique into the *Entroido*: basketry applied to carnival gestures, which enriches the Galician material repertoire. Current transmission combines training workshops, audiovisual documentation, and collaborative practice, forming a model of extended oral tradition (Mostacero 2004, Cordón-García, Muñoz-Rico 2024) or pop oral tradition (Veiga Izaguirre 2016) that integrates recordings and social networks as new forms of mediation and transmission of local knowledge.

The area of the Serra de San Mamede and eastern Ourense concentrates some of the most recognised masks of the Galician *Entroido*, characterised by their high degree of stylisation and the coexistence of professional artisans with local amateur makers.[18]

The *Felos* constitute a universe of their own. Those from Maceda show notable symbolic complexity: the birch wood mask, the painted mitre, the beard and moustache, the *chocas* (cowbells), and the crook form a set that fuses military, bucolic, and carnival elements. Cocho (2012) relates the *felos* to logics of festive power and ritual hierarchisation. In Esgos, the *Felo* has a less militarised appearance and is more closely related to livestock protection: its historical identity is associated with the practice of scaring away wolves around the Rocas monastery, and its painted iconography incorporates animal and magical symbols.

The masks of the Maceda *Felo* follow a highly codified technical process: birch carving, the application of acrylic paint, the incorporation of furs (rabbit, kid, fox), wool tassels,

and metal elements on the *mitra* (mitre). The existence of recognised artisans, such as the aforementioned Kukas or Manuel Fernández, introduces notions of authorship and aesthetic value. This distinction coincides with the trend noted by Godinho (2023a) regarding the conversion of certain rituals into objects of heritage desire. In Esgos, the technique of shaping cardboard over a cylindrical mould predominates Being less rigid and complex than wood carving, this technique would *a priori* facilitate the transmission of artisanal knowledge and enable a greater number of people to participate in the production of the mask. The adaptation of current motifs reveals the influence of contemporary visual culture.

The *Boteiros* constitute perhaps the most recognisable figures of eastern Ourense. In Vilariño de Conso, the cylindrical cardboard mask—with marked features, prominent eyebrows, and a raised moustache—is accompanied by a screen made of paper and fabric, as well as the *monca*, an essential stick for marking the rhythm of the *folión*.[19] In Viana do Bolo, the *Boteiros*, whose *carauta*[20] is carved from birch wood, show a different aesthetic, with marked teeth, dark skin, and a large screen. Their function of clearing the way for the *fulión*, composed of groups of people armed with bass drums, hoes, and other agricultural tools, creates an unmistakable sonic dimension in the Vianese imaginary.

The clothing of the *Boteiros* constitutes one of the most complex cases from a material point of view: a cylindrical cardboard mask, a rectangular screen decorated with paper, a handmade ribbon shirt, and *chocas* fastened in hybrid techniques. This mask rests on a deeply communal production model, where the clothing is made by several women in the village. The ribbon shirt, for example, represents countless hours of work, and its making constitutes a ritual process.[21]

The *Vergalleiro* of Sarreaus, recreated in the 1990s according to local documentation, combines a mask with a laughing expression, a screen crowned by a bull's head, and a whip (*vergallo*) whose sound marks the ritual dominance of the character. The reactivation of singular or disappeared characters usually responds to community desires for cohesion and territorial differentiation. In this case, it is the artisan América Soto who oversaw the revival at the request of the Sarreaus Town Council.

The *Vergalleiro* uses a mask of carved wood or hardened paste, with exaggerated features and vivid colours. Its most distinctive feature is, as mentioned, the *vergallo*, made from braided rods, whose technique—similar to that of traditional basketry—is transmitted between families in an almost initiatory way. The making of the mask usually includes carving, sanding, priming, painting, and final varnishing. The aesthetic resembles that of the *Felo* at times, although its bodily movements are more aggressive and its sound materiality, especially the cracking of the *vergallo*, constitutes the essence of its performativity.

The *Mázcaras* of Buxán (O Bolo municipality) stand out for their baroque and changing aesthetic. The conical *pucho* adorned with old postcards, dolls, flowers, and long ribbons, together with masks that change every year, gives these figures an especially dynamic character in the carnival *fuliones*. Their dance of continuous jumps, from the Saturday before Fat Sunday to *Entroido* Tuesday, is part of a singular movement pattern that differentiates them from other Ourense masks.

The *Mázcaras* of Buxán present a singular case due to their strong contemporary transformation: in recent decades, artisanal wicker masks have been replaced by industrial masks that are purchased by the community. Likewise, the shawls that came from Cuba until the early 20th century are now replaced by others made from flowered fabrics bought in local shops or online. However, the *puchos*—conical structures covered with old postcards, Christmas ornaments, and ribbons—maintain local creativity and the practice of community

customisation, showing how the *Entroido* can absorb elements of global material culture without losing its territorial identity.

In Xinzo de Limia, the *Pantalla*[22] constitutes the most emblematic figure. Its mask has a curved mitre decorated with astral or animal motifs and is accompanied by inflated bladders with which the *Pantallas* whip those who are not dressed in costume. The *Pantalla* goes out to *correr o Entroido* (run the Entroido) from *Domingo Fareleiro* to *Domingo de Piñata*, during the five weeks that the Limia Carnival lasts. This Carnival is one of the longest in Europe.

Carnival begins in some municipalities of the central massif of Ourense, such as Laza, with the chimes of New Year's Eve. In general, the cycle of the Galician *Entroido* is considered to begin with *Domingo Fareleiro* (Bran Sunday, traditionally involving the throwing of flour), followed by *Domingo Oleiro* (Pottery Sunday, marked by games involving clay pots), *Xoves de Compadres* (Men's Thursday, dedicated to playful rivalry in which women mock or symbolically challenge men), *Domingo Corredoiro* (Running Sunday, featuring parades and preliminary celebrations), *Xoves de Comadres* (Women's Thursday, the counterpart to *Compadres*, when men mock or symbolically challenge women), and then *Domingo*, *Luns* and *Martes de Entroido* (Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday of Carnival, the main Carnival days, with Tuesday also called *Martes Gordo— Fat Tuesday*; equivalent to Mardi Gras). This is followed by *Mércores de Cinza*[23] (*Enterro do Meco*) (Ash Wednesday, featuring the Burial of the *Meco*, a satirical effigy), and finally *Domingo de Piñata* (Piñata Sunday, which closes the festivities).

Recent news reports provide examples of *Pantallas* participating in art exhibitions, sporting events, and urban events (La Voz de Galicia 2025, La Región 2025), showing their growing media prominence. The *Pantallas* stand as one of the most photographed and reproduced icons of the Galician *Entroido*. Their masks, made of hardened cardboard, with a black moustache and eyebrows, and crowned by a large arch painted with figurative scenes, combine artisanal design with contemporary materials and techniques. The traditional technique consisted of successive layers of paper and paste over a mould. Today, synthetic glues, latex, and fibreglass reinforcements are used for a *carauta* that was traditionally carved from birch wood. The *Pantalla* must be light and durable, as it accompanies clothing designed for intense movement: the distinctive "cheche,"[24] produced by the inflated bladders that *Pantallas* carry in each hand requires rapid and constant movement. The making of the pictorial arch constitutes a local school of plastic arts: new motifs, reinterpretations, and visual dialogues appear every year, demonstrating the creative vitality of the system.

This journey shows that, far from uniformity, the masks of the rural Galician *Entroido* constitute a complex mosaic in which each territory articulates its own materiality, embodiment, and social dramaturgy.

A retelling of ancient traditions for contemporary times: impact of mass culture and digital culture

In the last two decades, the rural Galician *Entroido* and, particularly, its masks have undergone a profound transformation marked by artisanal continuity, symbolic reconfiguration, and growing public exposure. Institutional patrimonialisation, tourism development, aesthetic appropriation by mass culture, and the central role of cyberculture have placed these practices at the crossroads between community reproduction and global circuits of visibility. The triangulation of our fieldwork, recent academic studies, and contemporary

cases of appropriation allows us to observe both the opportunities and the risks associated with this expansion.

The first vector of analysis concerns the material and technical processes sustaining mask production. We have detailed a range of procedures that constitute living and highly specialised forms of technical knowledge. The *Volante* of *Entroido* Ribeirao is built with layers of brown paper and linen over a wooden form; *maragatos* use kid skins tanned with ash and ram skulls; the *Meco* combines a plaster mould, cardboard, and sheepskin eyebrows; the *Oso* from Salcedo uses hand-sewn cowhide over a wooden mould; the *Vixigueiro* from Samede is made with braided wicker, felted merino wool, and vegetal structure; the *carautas* of the Maceda *Felos* are carved from birch and decorated with acrylic paint and various furs, including rabbit, kid, fox tail; the Esgos *Felos* use cardboard on a cylindrical mould; the *Boteiros* of Vilariño de Conso and Viana do Bolo combine cardboard, crepe paper, fabrics, and wicker structures; the *Mázcaras* of Buxán are built with a wicker base, dyed natural wool, old postcards, and a cardboard mask; and the *Pantallas* from Xinzo are made with cardboard, plaster, newspaper, and astral or animal pictorial decoration. Recent photographic reports show that some of the motifs chosen to decorate the mitres of masks such as the *Cigarróns*[25] from Verín should be interpreted as expressions of contemporary identity rather than tradition: a portrait of Alfonso Daniel Rodríguez Castelao,[26] considered one of the patriarchs of the Galician nation; a reproduction of Galicia personified as a woman[27] from a poster by Camilo Díaz Baliño[28] calling for votes in favour of the 1936 Statute of Autonomy; or even an octopus that resembles a kraken[29] from Scandinavian mythology or speculative fiction rather than the octopus served with paprika and olive oil at Galician fairs.[30]

Our ethnographic fieldwork corroborates that this set of techniques reveals an intergenerational continuity that contradicts any simplistic reading of the *Entroido* as a static folkloric relic. Rather, it is a dynamic artisanal field, capable of integrating contemporary motifs and industrial materials, such as crepe paper, fibreglass, acrylic paints, and prefabricated parts, without abandoning the traditional logics that shape its cultural identity. However, the increase in demand from tourists, museums, and the media has favoured a certain professionalisation and standardisation: plaster moulds to produce a greater number of pieces, simplification of details for exhibition events, and the replacement of slow techniques with readily available materials. These transformations fit with the diagnoses of Santamarina and Del Mármol (2020), who describe the logic of the "heritage bubble" for other cultural manifestations such as tango or *fallas*:[31] by institutionalising local practices, incentives are introduced for their simplification, decontextualisation, or tourist aestheticisation.

The declaration of the *Entroido* as an Asset of Cultural Interest by the Xunta de Galicia in 2025 confirms this institutional movement but also amplifies the dilemmas. As Godinho (2023b) warns, patrimonialisation can become a "melancholic" gesture that tends to fix and musealise the living cultural practices, reducing the transformative capacity of rituals. Herrero Pérez (2021) warns that these policies can reproduce a frozen image of what is, by nature, changing and performative. In this context, the challenge is to ensure that protection, documentation, and cataloguing processes do not become mechanisms of external control, but rather instruments for community sustainability.

The second critical dimension is touristification. Eleven Galician carnivals have been designated as being of tourist interest. One of them is of international tourist interest (Xinzo de Limia), four are of national tourist interest (Verín, Manzaneda, Viana, and Vilariño de Conso), and another four are of regional tourist interest: Laza, Viana do Bolo, Cobres (Vilaboa), and the *Xenerais* da Ulla (Vila de Cruces, Silleda, Touro, A Estrada, Vedra, Boqueixón, Teo, and

Santiago de Compostela). The growing attention to the *Entroido*, especially in what has come to be called the "Magic Triangle of the Ourense *Entroido*," comprising the municipalities of Laza, Verín, and Xinzo, has generated a flow of visitors that drives rural economies, sustains artisanal workshops, and strengthens community networks (Varela-Portela, Sotelino-Losada, and Rodríguez-Fernández 2019). Recent research highlights that the festival can function as an axis of local development (Campos Álvarez and Sotelino Losada 2025), capable of strengthening the social fabric, generating temporary employment, and renewing community self-esteem.

However, tourist dynamics alter—sometimes profoundly—ritual temporality. The multiplication of parades, the scheduling of exhibitions outside the traditional period, and the creation of "shows" for visitors generate tensions affecting the lived authenticity of the festive cycle. A paradigmatic example is the effort made by the Xunta de Galicia, not without the collaboration of the bearer communities, to "de-seasonalise" the *Entroido*. Thus, to adapt to the rhythms and flows imposed by tourism in capitalist society, Galician and local authorities decontextualise a celebration embedded in the annual cycle of peasant society and move the rural winter masquerades to the end of summer and to Compostela's Praza do Obradoiro filled of *turigrinos* (pilgrim-tourists) and visitors. Prats (2019) indicates that the intangible heritage industry tends to reinforce stereotypes of authenticity and produce emblematic images that circulate more easily than the complexity of real practices. In Galicia, recent newspaper archives (La Región 2025) show how municipalities with a strong presence of masks have incorporated routes, exhibitions, and hybrid events that, although they increase income, risk turning the ritual into just another product of the cultural industries.

In this respect, we observe how the intangible benefits of the *Entroido* are also measured in quantitative terms and carry weight in municipal culture and tourism budgets. Thus, we know from the provincial press (La Región 2025)[32] that the Xinzo de Limia City Council invested 140,000 euros, 80,000 of them from its own funds, in a carnival programme that lasted for five weeks. Similarly, journalists report that in 2025 the province of Ourense recorded "its third-best *Entroido* for tourists,"[33] with 25,000 visitors and 45,000 overnight stays, a figure only surpassed by the pre-pandemic record of 51,000 nights in hospitality establishments in 2019. However, the report also notes that despite the growing appeal of Ourense's rural masquerades, the province ranks last in Galicia for visitor numbers and overnight stays, including during the *Entroido*.

The balance is delicate: touristification may contribute to revitalisation, but it also displaces community logics. These tensions are particularly visible in their impact on artisanal production: some artisans are pressured to accelerate processes, homogenise designs, or resort to faster techniques, with the risk of eroding the diatopic diversity that characterises the *Entroido*.

The third major element in the contemporary transformation of the *Entroido* is media circulation. The appearance of masks in music videos, documentaries, social networks, and advertising strategies has radically expanded their audience. A paradigmatic case is found in the work of Tanxugueiras, the tambourine group that spearheads a movement combining pop and folk revival and that, since 2019, has contributed to a golden age of Galician music drawing on oral tradition (Freire Paz & Veiga Izaguirre, in press). In the video[34] for the song *Averno* (*Diluvio* 2023), created in collaboration with Madrid rapper Rayden, the *Entroideira* aesthetic is reconfigured as a symbol of female strength, ritual transgression, and post-folk performativity, turning masks into symbolic resources capable of resonating in global circuits. This use raises two theoretical questions: on the one hand, the renewed visibility of the mask as an identity sign in mass cultural circuits; on the other, aesthetic appropriation,

through which traditional signs become stylistic resources in pop culture. Once again, the community cut these elements off from the broader cultural whole and detaches the family ties from their original functions. In the meantime, public interest in the original practices seems to grow.

This phenomenon should not be understood solely as appropriation or aesthetic tribute, but also as an expansion of the field of signification of the *Entroido*. Following Godinho (2023a), ritual laughter opens a "field of possibilities" where the carnivalesque can be politicised, resignified, or hybridised without losing its community potential. In today's digital environment, this field expands.[35] Artisans document technical processes on TikTok and share performative choreographies of *Felos*, *Pantallas*, or *Boteiros*. On social networks such as BlueSky we find[36] the mask of the *Festa da Pita* (*pita* means "hen") from the *Entroido* of Eiroás (Cudeiro, a parish in the city of Ourense), built from LEGO bricks by Ourense mining engineer Pablo González, one of the 25 official designers accredited by the Danish brand worldwide.[37]

Pierre Lévy defines cyberculture as the "universal without totality" and the centre of gravity of the cultural galaxy of the 21st century (1997). It can be understood as a further stage in the development of mass communication and the information society, according to the definition of Horkheimer and Adorno (1944).[38] It refers to the characteristic culture of societies in which digital technologies act as some of the main means and channels for communication, access to knowledge, and entertainment. They also play a fundamental role in activism, artistic creation, administration, research, and forms of social organisation. This constant connection between people generates a specific lifestyle and a shared con(s)cience of the common (Veiga Izaguirre 2024).

In the society of mass communication, any cultural manifestation that does not fit within the logic of industrial processing is relegated to the margins. This is precisely what happens with the popular classes and geographical peripheries, whose artistic expressions, however, end up being appropriated and distorted: "What the culture industry extinguishes outside as truth, it can reproduce within itself at will as a lie" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1998, 180). In the era of mechanical reproduction, works of art lose "their aura and detach themselves from the realm of tradition" (Benjamin 1994, 22). In the narrative constructed around the *Entroido*, the media repeat *ad nauseam* the litany that the Galician rural *Entroido* is "the most ancestral in the Peninsula," as part of a strategy of exoticisation and an attempt to assert a cultural distinctiveness that, in the specific case of Galician winter masquerades, does not exist. On the contrary, the rites and performativity of the *Entroido* place Galicia within a tradition that is not only Iberian but also European and that wass shared across pre-modern peasant societies (González Reboredo and Mariño Ferro 1987).

The context of digital culture does not necessarily imply a loss of authenticity, but it does mean that we voluntarily hand over community memories—preserved at the local level and carefully guarded by a few families for generations—to the vastness of a global sphere, where it is impossible to control how and for what purpose the aesthetics of Galician masks and some of the most distinctive traits of the rites will be used. It is true that rural Galician communities possess the agency to select which elements circulate and how. In this sense, digital culture offers a space of symbolic autonomy that supplements, though also strains, traditional transmission. Masks thus become mobile icons, capable of moving between the local and the global, but can also end up emptied of meaning and reduced only to a shell of bright colours and showy clothes.[39] One example is the 2018 Dolce & Gabbana collection that was clearly inspired by the clothing of the *Boteiros* of Viana do Bolo and Vilariño de Conso (Faro de Vigo 2018).[40]

On the other hand, mass culture has integrated masks into unexpected contexts. As noted before, Compostela's Praza do Obradoiro receives the winter masks of the rural Galician *entroidos* to mark the end of summer. *Cigarróns*, *Felos*, and *Pantallas* have appeared in football stadiums, sporting events, and advertising campaigns for both institutions and food companies (Nós Diario 2025). These presences expand the visibility of the *Entroido* but can also decontextualise it, transforming symbols with specific ritual functions into mere aesthetic motifs with a high potential for circulation.

Among contemporary cases of appropriation by institutions or entities, *Raíces* (Roots), the communication strategy (2023-2025) of Real Club Celta de Vigo, the Galician football club in Spain's first division, stands out for incorporating identity elements—language, music, and imagery—into its transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2003).[41] Thanks to *Raíces*, Real Club Celta managed to go from 13 million views on X in the 2022-2023 season to more than 43 million in 2024-2025. The production in 2025 of the documentary *A cor do Entroido* (The Colour of *Entroido*),[42] covering the Ourense carnivals of Verín and Viana do Bolo, with images of *Cigarróns*, *Boteiros*, and *fulións*, and narrated by Hugo Álvarez, a Celta first-team player, constitutes a clear example of how a sports club can become a platform for cultural dissemination (Vázquez 2025). Both Gael García Cochón, head of communication for Celta de Vigo, and André Taboada, in charge of digital content, explain that the motivation behind this documentary is driven more by identity and emotion than by metrics:

> If we believe we have to tell a story and that story requires a slower form of storytelling that allows us to *go deep* on a specific topic, the fact that 1,000 people watch it will have much more value than another video watched by 100,000," he adds, citing the report on the Entroido in Verín and Viana as an example. "For us, it is an effort to mobilise teams, write scripts, and edit the material, and if someone judged this work solely based on metrics, they probably wouldn't do it, given all the hours involved. But for us, it is fundamental because we know that that audience, even if not very large, is a collective we have impacted emotionally in a very, very powerful way, unlike what a slightly more superficial communication on Instagram can be, which you see, give a like, and that's it. We value data a lot, but we are not slaves to it," assures [André Taboada] (Vázquez 2025).

This appropriation has ambivalent effects. On the one hand, it expands the media reach of the *Entroido*, introduces it to young and urban audiences, and legitimises the practice as a contemporary symbol of Galician identity. On the other, it poses risks of spectacularisation, symbolic simplification, or institutional instrumentalisation.

Triangulating these elements—field notes on artisanal production, cultural policies, tourism, and digital and institutional mediation—reveals several interpretative patterns:

1. Patrimonialisation must be questioned and negotiated. It provides resources, prestige, and continuity, but can introduce tensions between lived authenticity and regulated authenticity (Santamarina and Del Mármol 2020, Prats 2019).
2. Digital culture and mass culture expand the visibility of the *Entroido* but require mechanisms to ensure community agency.
3. Institutional and sports initiatives generate new opportunities but must avoid folklorisation or unilateral appropriation.
4. Technical transmission remains at the core of continuity. Fieldwork confirms that, without active artisans, patrimonialisation would be an empty shell.

Conclusions and new questions

The integrated analysis of patrimonialisation, touristification, media appropriation, and the digital culture environment reveals a rural Galician *Entroido* undergoing profound transformation, but sustained by the strength of its community practices. The masks—their making, their performativity, and their symbolic circulation—constitute a laboratory in which tradition and change, memory and experimentation, identity, and market intersect.

Artisanal techniques constitute the heart of the *Entroido***.** Carving in birch, tanning with ash, wicker basketry, and the construction of *puchos* and *Pantallas* are living practices whose continuity depends on intergenerational transmission and institutional recognition. The ethnographic material shows a remarkable technical diversity that resists standardisation. However, these processes of institutional recognition and patrimonialisation bring visibility but also entail risks. The institutionalisation of the *Entroido* generates legal protection and resources but can produce frozen images, induce aesthetic homogenisation, or displace local agency (Herrero Pérez 2021, Santamarina and Del Mármol 2020). Along the same lines, touristification alters the ritual calendar. Economic opportunities coexist with tensions arising from the transformation of ritual acts into shows scheduled for visitors, with risks of commodification (Prats 2019).

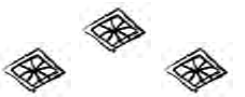
From the late 1990s onwards, cyberculture has opened up new forms of creativity and transmission. Masks now circulate globally, largely through community agency. The practices and techniques treasured for centuries at the micro level become diluted at the macro level. The local community gives the key to the chamber of our family secrets and rituals to a vast and largely anonymous audience. The central question is who controls the narrative and whether local communities can maintain the leading role. Appropriations by institutions and other entities**,** with the paradigmatic case of the Celta de Vigo football club, show the potential of cultural alliances, provided that the dissemination of these traditions is accompanied by mechanisms of community participation and reciprocity. Finally, the 21st century has brought internal transformations in the ritual, including greater female presence as mask bearers,[43] the incorporation of younger people, aesthetic re-readings, and material experimentation, showing that the *Entroido* is not preserved by freezing the ritual, but by updating it.

Looking ahead, the future of the rural Galician Entroido raises a series of interconnected challenges for research and action. One of the most pressing concerns is how to establish shared heritage management models capable of guaranteeing community control over mask production and the media use of *Entroideira* imagery. Equally important is the need to identify legal and pedagogical tools that can effectively integrate schools and artisan workshops into processes of intergenerational knowledge transmission, while avoiding processes of bringing the folklorisation of these traditions into educational settings. At the same time, it is necessary to develop tourism impact metrics that move beyond economic indicators to evaluate dimensions such as social sustainability, the availability of artisans, the continuity of ritual practices, and community perceptions of tourism.

Another significant challenge lies in defining protocols for the respectful circulation of *Entroido* imagery across documentaries, music videos, institutional campaigns, and other media formats, ensuring that these representations do not result in decontextualised appropriation. Future research should also examine the consequences of rural depopulation and migration on the availability of cultural bearers, artisans, and the community spaces that sustain these celebrations. Furthermore, the accelerating pace of digital communication

raises questions about the relationship between media temporality and ritual time, prompting reflection on whether it is possible to preserve the rhythm of traditional festivities within an ecosystem that demands continuous content production. In this context, digital culture may also offer new opportunities for safeguarding through the creation of community-based digital archives, tutorials, technical documentation, and collaborative learning platforms that strengthen the transmission of traditional knowledge.

These questions highlight that the *Entroido* remains a living system: a practice that is transforming because it continues to fulfil essential symbolic and community functions. Its vitality and vulnerability make it a privileged observatory for understanding how European festive cultures negotiate their place in a globalised, digital, and accelerated world, where the tension between memory and the present defines the prospects for their continuity.



NOTES

1. A *Peliqueiro* is a traditional masked character from the Carnival of Laza in Galicia. *Peliqueiro* comes from *pelica*, a Galician noun used to refer to the skin of an animal, especially when separated from the body and tanned. Dressed in an elaborate costume with a mask, bells, and a whip, *Peliqueiros* run through the streets during Carnival.

2. *Entroido* is a generic noun used to refer to Carnival in Galician.

3. In urban contexts, Rodríguez Campos has identified "the new local powers that emerged from democratic elections in the municipalities" as the makers of urban governance that encouraged "local associations and neighbourhood groups in each neighbourhood and village of the municipality, rural or urban, in the production of carnival shows, made up of troupes and neighbourhood entourages that filled the Galician cities" (Rodríguez Campos 2012, 114-5).

4. *Volantes* are elegant, masked figures from the Ribeirao Carnival (Chantada municipality) in Galicia. The noun *volante* in Galician refers to a piece of wrinkled or curled fabric that serves as an ornament for clothes. *Volantes* wear elaborate costumes with large, decorated hats, masks, ribbons, and bells, and perform ritual dances.

5. *Maragatos* are comic and grotesque characters of the Ribeirao Carnival. *Maragato* is the demonym for people from the Maragatería region in León. Dressed in worn or exaggerated clothing and with their faces covered, they parody everyday life and social roles.

6. The *Oso* ("Bear") is a wild and animal-like character from the Carnival of Salcedo in Galicia. Covered in animal skins and soot, the Bear runs through the streets chasing people.

7. The *Vixigueiro* is a masked figure from the Carnival of Samede in Galicia. *Vixigueiro* comes from *vexiga*, meaning "bladder." Wearing a distinctive costume and mask, *vixigueiros* move through the village making noise and interacting with the community, embodying vigilance and satire.

8. The *Vello dos Cornos* ("Horned Old Man") is a traditional Carnival character from Merza in Galicia. Wearing horns and rustic clothing, he represents ancestral and mythical elements of rural culture, blending humour, fear, and symbolic authority within the festivities.

9. *Felos* are traditional masked figures from the Carnival of Maceda and Esgos in Galicia. The noun *felo* in Galician can refer both to an object that represents a face, used to cover one's face and transform their appearance, and to a ridiculous facial gesture used to mock someone. Dressed in elaborate costumes with masks, bells, and whips, *Felos* run through the streets asserting symbolic authority.

10. *Boteiros* are dynamic masked figures from the Carnival of Vilariño de Conso and Viana do Bolo in Galicia. The term *boteiros* comes from the verb *botar* and the noun *bote*, which mean the jump made by an elastic object when it collides with a hard surface. Wearing tall, decorated headdresses, colourful costumes, and bells, these masked characters jump and dance energetically.

11. The *Vergalleiro* is a masked Carnival figure from Sarreaus in Galicia. The word *vergalleiro* is related to *verga* or *vergallo*, both nouns referring to a flexible stick or even the male sexual organ in mammals. Armed with a whip (*vergallo*), he chases and playfully strikes participants.

12. *Mázcaras* are masked figures from the Carnival of Buxán in Galicia. The word *mázcara* is a variant of *máscara*, one of the several Galician words for mask. Wearing handmade masks and rustic costumes, *Mázcaras* roam the village creating mischief and satire.

13. The *Pantallas* are iconic masked figures from the Carnival of Xinzo de Limia in Galicia. *Pantalla* is a noun that has several meanings in Galician. It can refer to a person who acts to hide another person, a cloth on which images or shapes are projected, or a device used to protect or shield against certain forms of radiation, such as the heat from a fire. Identified by their white costumes, masks, capes, and inflated bladders, they patrol the streets during the festival.

14. The Dictionary of the Royal Galician Academy (*Dicionario da Real Academia Galega*) provides several meanings for the noun *meco*. The first two refer to a lustful man and an anthropomorphic dummy that is burned at the end of Carnival.

15. The use of animal materials raises contemporary ethical debates, especially among young artisans, who in some cases opt for recycled or synthetic leathers.

16. https://www.charlesfreger.com/fr/portfolio/wildermann/.

17. The association between smudging, chaos, and liminality has been widely studied in European carnival anthropology since Caro Baroja (2006) and has recently been taken up by Panero García (2020) in her analysis of winter masquerades.



18. For a more detailed account of the *Entroido* in Ourense, see, among others, González Pérez (2009) and Fidalgo Santamarina (2009).

19. The Dictionary of the Royal Galician Academy (*Dicionario da Real Academia Galega*) defines *folión* or *fulión* as a group of young men and women who go out armed with drums, sacks, hoes, and other objects, making a lot of noise and animating the streets during the days of Carnival. https://academia.gal/dicionario/-/termo/foli%C3%B3n.

20. *Carauta* is one of the Galician words used to refer to a mask.

21. The ribbon shirt has been compared by anthropologist Miguel Losada (informal conversation) to a "community text" in which each ribbon functions as a mark of intergenerational female participation.

22. The *Pantallas* of Xinzo have one of the most stable artisan communities, but also one of the communities most influenced by media, given the enormous visibility of the Xinzo Carnival in the Galician press.

23. Although there is a certain popular consensus regarding the pagan—and even pre-Roman—origins of some rites associated with the rural Galician *Entroido*, the fact remains that its celebration is embedded within the Catholic calendar. The cycle of Galician winter masquerades takes place between the Advent, in the Christmas season, and Lent and Easter. The noun *Entroido* itself derives from the Latin *introitus*, meaning opening, entry, or introduction. *Introitus* stems from the supine of the verb *introire*, which translates as to enter or to gain access, as well as to invade. Thus, *Entroido* can be interpreted as an introduction to spring, but also to Lent, which begins with the observance of Ash Wednesday. Likewise, the semantic weight of *Entroido* also encompasses the notion of an invasion—a non-peaceful entry into public spaces.

24. Onomatopoeic name for the sound made by the inflated bladders.

25. The *Cigarrón* is a Carnival mask typical of Verín and Laza. The word *cigarrón* refers to *cigarro* (cigarette), a small portion of tobacco rolled in thin paper for smoking.

26. https://bsky.app/profile/das27.bsky.social/post/3lkaudfxei22z.

27. https://www.lavozdegalicia.es/noticia/gradario/2025/03/10/span-langglfoi-emocionante-levar-balaidos-nos-sentimos-pola-nosa-tradicion-entroidospan/00031741614782453139593.htm.

28. Galician visual artist and intellectual murdered by Falangist gunmen on 14 August 1936, in Palas de Rei.

29. https://www.facebook.com/asociacionocigarron/posts/se-buscan-cigarrones-para-desfilar-en-el-estadio-def%C3%BAtbol-del-celta-de-vigo-jun/941363588101835/.

30. One of Galicia's national dishes is *polbo á feira*, boiled octopus seasoned with salt, hot paprika, and olive oil and served on wooden plates.

31. *Fallas* is a pyrotechnic festival in Valencia, coinciding with the religious celebration of Saint Joseph on 19 March.

32. https://www.laregion.es/xinzo-de-limia/entroido-2025-costo-xinzo-140_1_20250507-3515947.html.

33. https://www.laregion.es/ourense/provincia-firma-tercer-mejor-entroido_1_20250424-3499492.html.

34. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xx7Tv_lga0.

35. This phenomenon can also be traced in the broader European context. One example can be found in the work of Stoicescu (2025).

36. https://bsky.app/profile/lscgz.bsky.social/post/3lo4pcvphb22d.

37. https://www.laregion.es/ourense/pieza-selecto-constructor-lego_1_20251030-4037013.html.

38. Horkheimer and Adorno understood mass culture as implying the collapse of culture itself under the conditions imposed by capitalism. From less pessimistic perspectives, Williams (1958), Hall (1973), and Umberto Eco (1985) argue that mass culture arises from tensions between emerging and hegemonic forms, and that consumption and cultural creation represent forms of negotiation rather than uncritical acceptance.

39. See the master's thesis of Álvaro Corral Cid (2023), titled *D.R.A.G. (Dressing Resembling A Galician): condiciones identitarias del traje regional en España a través de las prácticas artísticas de perfomatividad textil* ("Identity conditions of regional dress in Spain through artistic practices of textile performativity").

40. https://www.farodevigo.es/ourense/2018/07/09/dolce-gabbana-Boteiros-plagio-o-15948560.html.

41. Transmedia is a communication strategy specific to digital culture, in which different media—analogue and digital, print, and audiovisual—as well as platforms, social networks, and textual formats are used to develop a narrative. In contrast to crossmedia (Boumans 2004) or multiple platforms (Ytreberg 2009), transmedia necessarily implies that each medium is responsible for presenting the part of the narrative for which it is best suited.

42. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jalc_ZoaBxM&t=19s.

43. Understanding how women come to take on this role requires examining the political, economic, and social factors identified by Cabana and Freire (2016).

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Authenticity of the Masked Body—the Bear Dance in Present Day Digital Performance

Adrian Stoicescu
University of Bucharest, Romania
ORCID: 0000-0002-2828-5453

Adrian Stoicescu is an Associate Professor of Ethnology at the Department of Cultural Studies, University of Bucharest. He teaches and researches aspects of vernacular culture, included their digitally mediated forms.

Correspondence: adrian.stoicescu@litere.unibuc.ro

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the transformation of authenticity seen within the contemporary performance of the Romanian Bear Dance by focusing on the group *Ursul lui Gavrilă din Asău*, selected because of the unique features it has added to the performance. Exploring a corpus of 100 Facebook posts collected between 2023 and 2026, the approach combines digital ethnography with discourse analysis to explore how authenticity is constructed in mediated contexts. The analysis reveals the displacement of authenticity from material practice to discursive and relational processes. While the masked body remains visually central, it no longer functions as the primary source of authenticity. Instead, authenticity emerges through an intricate combination of audience engagement, narrative continuity, and affective investment. Comments, reactions, and patterns of circulation demonstrate that authenticity is co-produced through interaction and recognition rather than embedded in the inherited ritual form. By highlighting the role of digital mediation, the article argues that authenticity operates as a dynamic and distributed effect, shaped by visibility, participation, and the ongoing negotiation of meaning across diverse audiences whatever the degree of conformity or lack of to the ethnographically described form of the performance.

KEYWORDS

Digital authenticity; digital performance; Bear Dance; materiality; audience engagement.

Introduction

The end-of-year period represents one of the most concentrated seasons in the Romanian folk calendar, a period marked by a near-complete overlap between consumer culture and vernacular (ceremonial and ritual) practices. Surviving performative traditions, recently heritagized customs, officially organized winter festivals and fairs, and private initiatives promoting holiday tourism all combine to create a highly diverse and constantly evolving range of ways in which Christmastime can be experienced.

This diversity inevitably generates tensions—not only between the different models being promoted and those who provide them, but also among their audiences. As a result, implicit hierarchies and value judgments emerge between the various practices.

Of all the cultural forms that could be selected for analysis, this article opts for the ancient Bear Dance as performed in the eastern Romanian province of Moldova. This is for several reasons. The first and most important of these is that one of the groups who perform it,

Ursul lui Gavrilă din Asău [Gavrilă's Bear from Asău], has transformed the previously ritual dance into a form of personal brand, with a distinctive visual element that enables its digital identification. The second reason behind this choice stems from their decision to change the style of the dance by adding new elements that set it apart both from previous ethnographic descriptions and from other groups' performances of the Bear Dance. And, thirdly, this group has created and maintained by constant uploads a Facebook page which documents their performances and which attracts a degree of engagement on the part of the digital public, producing an interaction which demonstrates that the creation of a certain type of digital authenticity is relevant for the transformation of a cultural practice.

This article aims to examine how audiences respond to content produced by the group leaders, focusing on how digital publics interpret the meaning of these performances—whether as expressions of traditional culture that foster a sense of local belonging, or as theatrical displays perceived primarily as entertainment alongside other turn-of-the-year attractions.

The argument advanced by this paper does not imply that the material features of the Bear Dance do not matter in the digitally mediated performance. The masked and costumed body remains the main visual means through which the practice is distinguished as the Bear Dance. Conversely, the article distinguishes between this material recognizability and the processes through which authenticity is explicitly articulated and validated. As the analysis will show, the digital audience rarely evaluates authenticity in terms of conformity to costume, choreography, or other ethnographically documented features; rather, validation is predominantly articulated through narratives of continuity, lineage, affective attachment, locality, memory, and recognition. What is displaced, therefore, is not the material form itself, but its position as the principal explicit locus of authentication.

The Ethnography of the Bear Dance

Romanian ethnographic documentation provides a recognisable performative model onto which contemporary forms of the Bear Dance can be viewed, while simultaneously revealing considerable regional variation in the material and performative realisation of that model. Vasile Adăscăliței's study, based on 102 variants collected across Moldova during the 1960s, identifies predictable relations between the masked bear, the *ursar* [bear trainer], musical accompaniment, bodily performance, and interaction with spectators, but also considerable variation in costume, troupe composition, choreography, and dramatic structure (Adăscăliței 1970, 21-32). This combination of recognisability and variation is confirmed on a broader regional scale by the questionnaire responses found in the *Romanian Ethnographic Atlas*, covering 122 Moldavian villages (Ghinoiu 2004, 283-304). Rather than precluding comparison with contemporary performances, such variability establishes a documented range within which conformity and transformation can be assessed.

Variation is particularly visible in the construction of the masked body. Adăscăliței notes that genuine bearskin was in the 1960s already relatively rare, found predominantly in mountain communities, while performers elsewhere used sheepskin, cattle hide, or, particularly in lowland areas, reeds (Adăscăliței 1970, 24-5). The *Atlas* material confirms an even broader range, including genuine bearskins, reversed sheepskins, other animal hides, cloth or sackcloth covered with reeds, and composite costumes. Some accounts explicitly distinguish between

an earlier use of bearskin and its subsequent replacement by other materials (Ghinoiu 2004, 293-4). Material substitution, therefore, cannot in itself be taken as evidence of non-conformity with the ethnographically documented practice.

Variation also characterises the composition and performance of the groups. Alongside relatively simple formations centred on the bear, *ursar*, and musician, both sources document larger ensembles incorporating several bears and numerous additional masked characters. Adăscăliței records processions exceeding forty participants and relates the multiplication of bears to an increasingly spectacle-oriented conception of the performance (Adăscăliței 1970, 23-4). Choreography was similarly flexible. The *Atlas* documents circular movement, jumping, tricks, interaction between bear and *ursar*, the use of chains and the *hadarag*, and, in some but not all variants, episodes of collapse and revival (Ghinoiu 2004, 302-4). Adăscăliței likewise describes performers whose roles required sustained training and considerable bodily virtuosity, including the execution of sequences of regional dances while wearing the bear costume (Adăscăliței 1970, 25-6). Bodily virtuosity and spectacular display should consequently be regarded as elements already present within the documented repertoire rather than automatically as later departures from it.

More significantly, responsiveness to audiences was already intrinsic to the performance described by Adăscăliței. He argues that the earlier magical function had largely ceded its place to a "spectacular-distractive" one, accompanied by the increasing prominence of the *ursar* as an improviser, comic performer, and commentator on community life (Adăscăliței 1970, 22-3). He further identifies "localization" and "contemporization" as established strategies through which performers adapted the spectacle to its immediate audience (Adăscăliței 1970, 29-30). Spectacularisation, innovation, and audience-oriented adaptation therefore precede the contemporary transformations examined here.

Taken together, these sources provide a more precise baseline for assessing the Asău performance. They show that material substitution, spectacularisation, bodily virtuosity, and adaptation to audiences cannot by themselves be interpreted as constituting departures from tradition, since all are represented in the ethnographic record. At the same time, predictable relations between the recognisable masked body, the *ursar*, musical accompaniment, and particular modes of embodied performance make it possible to identify contemporary transformations that exceed or reconfigure this documented range. The significance of the Asău case therefore lies not simply in its departure from a supposedly invariant traditional form, but in the fact that non-conformity with elements of the ethnographically documented repertoire does not prevent audiences from recognising and authenticating the performance as tradition. Ethnographic conformity and vernacular authentication, in other words, need not coincide.

Performing authenticity—narrative, circulation and prestige

Over the past several decades, anthropology and folklore studies have undergone a significant transformation in terms of their assessment of what authenticity builds on and how it privileges some forms of aesthetics and cultural practices over others. Early attempts to find authenticity as a linchpin feature of cultural forms have largely given way to approaches that treat it as a historically contingent and socially produced value. Bendix's (1997) contribution to ideas of authenticity remains of paramount importance for her attempt to move away

from the orthodoxies of implicitness. Authenticity is not something that inheres in objects or practices, but rather something that is claimed, negotiated, and stabilized within particular contexts, namely a "commodification of authentic" (Bendix 1997, 4). What follows from this is not only a rejection of *essentialism*, stemming perhaps from archaic existence and performance which favours set patterns and dismisses variation of forms and content and meaning, but also a reorientation toward *the processes* through which authenticity is created as discourse and made meaningful. At the same time, this shift raises a profound question that has not always been tackled directly. How does authenticity operate when the material form of a practice remains visible, but its interpretive centrality (what it signifies) begins to erode or, on occasion, loses all resemblance to the earlier documented ethnographic meaning?

A similar tension was previously outlined in the critique of tradition advanced by Handler and Linnekin (1984). Focusing on the '70s and early '80s static nature of tradition, and despite not receiving as much traction as later approaches, their take argues, against the backdrop of a "naturalistic conception of tradition" (Handler and Linnekin 1984, 274), that tradition is never simply inherited but is continuously produced through acts of reinterpretation, thus opening a clear path towards dynamics as meaning production. Their analysis effectively dissolves the opposition between "genuine" and "invented" tradition, emphasizing instead the ongoing work involved in maintaining continuity. In other words, the reconstruction or the (re)invention of what is generally referred to as "tradition" forms a bridge to new modes of materialising identity and belonging.

At the same time, this interpretation also tends to assume that reinterpretation, namely performance outside the natural settings of customs, always takes shape in relation to relatively stable cultural forms. Even as meanings shift, depending on the period, with stronger or weaker tendencies towards recontextualization, the material and performative elements—costumes, gestures, ritual sequences—, the authors argue, tend to be portrayed as unalterable benchmarks or indexical signs of "tradition." What is missing from this clearly formulated critique is the possible understanding that these elements may become secondary, even as they continue to structure the visual field of performance, and this and this affects how we need to reappraise and reinterpret the purpose of the folk tradition concerned. Sceptical about the possibility of finding real tradition on the basis of empirical observation, the authors posit that such transformations are increasingly hard "to justify theoretically." (Handler and Linnekin 1984, 281)

The heritage turn, which foregrounds questions concerning authentic performance, has made a significant contribution to this debate by emphasizing the role of framing and exhibition in the production of cultural value, particularly in relation to the redefinition of the aims of cultural practices. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) contends that heritage is not merely inherited through a linear process of replication or descent, but is actively constituted through processes of recontextualization. Similarly, Valdimar Tr. Hafstein (2012; 2018) illustrates how institutional discourse delineates and regulates what is to be recognized as heritage.

This perspective demonstrates that, at least in part, the continuity of certain practices is shaped by external authoritative forces (state bodies) that maintain only a limited engagement with the indigenous contexts of those practices, but tend to act as their representatives. Such approaches are especially effective in revealing how authenticity is constructed through processes of representation, rather than through self-evident or direct genealogical connections.

At the same time, they tend to preserve an implicit assumption that the represented entity—whether object or performance—remains central to the production of meaning.

In this regard, heritage theory accounts for the ways in which authenticity is staged and authorized; however, it falls short of fully addressing contexts in which the referent of authenticity shifts away from material form toward narrative, circulation, or forms of mediated visibility.

Tourism studies, initially only distantly connected to the analysis of heritage, further complicate the chain of reciprocal determination between authenticity and performance by testing the assumption that authenticity is necessarily compromised through staging. Ultimately, such a treatment may not erode authenticity but rather place it in a new light, as suggested by Dean MacCannell (1976), who coined the concept of "staged authenticity." He argues that performances designed for external audiences may nonetheless be experienced as authentic. In a similar vein, Erik Cohen (1988) states that commercialization, the process by which performance is integrated into an economic value chain, does not simply erode authenticity but rather transforms it, as a result of the conversion of cultural practice or artefact beneficiaries into clients. The notion of "existential" authenticity employed by Ning Wang (1999) proposes a refocusing of the discussion. The author bases his theory on two pillars, the lived experience and the affective engagement, in order to construct the idea of objective authenticity. Although not directly linking his position to heritage, Wang pinpoints that authenticity stems from personal experience. Experience seekers are, in fact, searching for "their own authentic selves and intersubjective authenticity" (Wang 1999, 366-7), which develop irrespective of the cultural stimulus.

These perspectives open up important analytical pathways, particularly by displacing the object as the sole indicator of authenticity. However, they continue to rely, at least implicitly, on the persistence of a recognizable cultural form as the basis of authentic experience. This implies that response to familiarity leads to a higher rate of acceptance of diversity, transformation, adaptation or contamination in what people still perceive as an authentic end product. Thus authenticity appears to reside more in certain recognisable patterns than in conformity to the orthodoxy's prior validated models of the practice.

Narrowing down the scope of analysis to ethnographic studies of ritual and performance, authenticity is seen not as the main feature of cultural practices, but, conversely, as being produced through their performance. Yujie Zhu (2012), for instance, shows how ritual specialists establish authority through a combination of embodied performance and narrative positioning. Similarly, Pierre L. Van den Berghe and Jorge Flores Ochoa (2000) illustrate how performers negotiate authenticity within contexts shaped by tourism and national identity, while Dorothy Noyes (2003) and Deepak Chhabra, Robert Healy, and Erin Sills (2003) demonstrate that festival settings can sustain perceptions of authenticity even when performances are explicitly staged.

Based on such approaches, the performers' roles change. They transgress the original roles of mediating between ancestral knowledge and the beneficiaries and become active agents capable of redefining tradition. At the same time, the material elements that are part and parcel of the practice, the costumes, choreography, and ritual objects, remain largely unquestioned as main carriers of meaning, even as their contexts of use are subject to significant transformation.

Performance theory, on the other hand, offers a novel way of moving beyond this focus on objects. For these theorists, interactions, processes, and relationality become the centrepiece in defining authenticity. Richard Bauman (1977) sees performance as a communicative event in which meaning is co-produced, while Goffman (1959) highlights the ways in which identities are strategically constructed in social encounters against the backdrop of identity negotiated as stage performance. Turner's (1969) concept of

liminality, together with Taylor's (2003) distinction between archive and repertoire, further underscores the embodied and processual nature of cultural practice, while Jackson (2005) bases authenticity on lived experience and relational engagement. These approaches shift the focus to what people do, rather than what they possess as heritage. However, even in such contexts, embodiment tends to remain the centre of analysis and relatively little attention is paid to contexts in which embodied forms persist visually but no longer occupy the same interpretive position.

More recently, work on digital media is beginning to reorient this discussion towards a different path. Taylor (2022), focusing on social media practices, suggests that authenticity is best understood as a fleeting effect rather than a stable attribute—something that appears momentarily within acts of performance and recognition. From this perspective, authenticity does not reside in either subject or object, but emerges in the relation between them, and in the ways in which that relation is made visible and meaningful to others. This approach is particularly useful for understanding environments in which visibility, repetition, and interaction with an audience are central to how meaning is produced.

This shift is the central element of studies in digital self-presentation. Marwick and Boyd (2011) describe how online authenticity is carefully managed and performed strategically. Similarly, Banet-Weiser (2012) and Gaden and Dumitrica (2014) introduce authenticity within the much broader economies of visibility, branding, and recognition, while appearing to retain Appadurai's (1986) emphasis on circulation and Clifford's (1988) critique of cultural representation. To sum up, marrying performance studies with those centred upon the creation of the self in mediated contexts suggests that meaning is increasingly created through movement and recontextualization rather than by stable cultural forms. What emerges from this combination is an understanding of authenticity as less tied to what something is, and more to how it is seen, circulated, and taken up by different audiences.

Viewed at large, these mappings of authenticity appear to narrow down to a group of three main characteristics. Authenticity is *relational*, *performative*, and *historically contingent*, allowing for the retention of persistent assumptions that the material forms of cultural practice remain central to the production of authenticity, despite changes in meaning.

What has been less fully explored is the possibility that material elements may remain in place while becoming analytically secondary.

The analytical question is not whether materiality is disappearing from authentic performance of the Bear Dance, since analysis of the digitally co-generated content proves the contrary. The masked body in the Facebook-uploaded content remains constantly visually dominant and provides the recognizable form through which the performance is identified. The question is rather whether material recognizability and the discursive production of authenticity necessarily coincide. The case examined here suggests that not only do they not become secondary, but also that they do not need to. Material forms continue to anchor recognition, while the explicit work of authentication occurs elsewhere—in narratives of continuity, affective attachment, genealogy, visibility, and audience recognition. Our article therefore approaches digital mediation not as the replacement of material authenticity by a disembodied form, but as a redistribution of the processes through which authenticity is produced and validated.

Methodology

In order to examine audience responses to the performances of the group *Ursul lui Gavrilă din Asău*, as well as the forms of validation the group receives, its Facebook page was analysed as a site of tradition in performance. This study combines elements of digital ethnography with discourse analysis to explore how authenticity is constructed across different contexts of representation, with the posts representing instances of onsite performances the group makes and memorial posts.

The main empirical material consists of a corpus of 100 public posts from the Facebook page *Ursul lui Gavrilă din Asău*, collected for the period 2023-2026, which corresponds to a time of increased activity for the group as performer of the Bear Dance. The data were extracted through a scraping process carried out using the Apify platform, which allowed the structured collection of textual content, visual materials (photos and videos), and interaction indicators (reactions and shares). The content of the comments was not fully available, but the level of engagement was used as an indirect indicator of reception.

Analysis of the user-generated discourse was subsequently carried out by manually collecting the comments, the relatively small number of such interactions with content that would generate verbal cogeneration allowing for manual verification. Although quantitative research is not the main objective of the research, automatically retrieved data can be a useful tool in ranking the content.

The quantitative analysis of the 100 posts highlights a relatively high, but unevenly distributed, level of audience interaction. The distribution is not uniform: a small number of posts generated very high levels of interaction, while the majority registered moderate levels. The post with the highest impact garnered approximately 2,842 reactions, 212 comments and 234 shares, indicating the existence of visibility "peaks" associated with certain types of content. Of all the posts analysed, only three generated more than 1,000 likes, while another two came close to this level. These marked differences may indicate that engagement is not determined by frequency of posts alone but may be more closely connected to the nature of the content. Posts displaying an emotional charge—especially those related to *commemoration*, or those suggesting *continuity*, or *collective identity*—tend to generate the highest levels of user interaction, including content co-generation. At the other end of the spectrum, informative or neutral posts generally have a lower impact reflected in a limited content engagement at all three levels: likes, comments, and shares.

The posts selected for analysis are not intended to represent the full range of available content but rather to highlight the most salient patterns in both content production and user engagement. Posts related to festival participation, competitions, or national celebrations have deliberately been excluded, as these predominantly reflect staged or institutionalized contexts. Instead, the focus is placed on more spontaneous posts documenting specific performances or significant moments in the group's activity. This curated corpus offers a productive lens through which to examine how authenticity is represented in relation to the Bear Dance, a ritual embedded in end-of-year traditions.

Quantitative engagement was used to identify posts that generated particularly intense audience response, but qualitative selection was not based solely on popularity. Posts were also selected the comments on which articulated continuity, locality, lineage, religious controversy, innovation, or memorialization, since these exchanges made explicit the different registers through which authenticity was negotiated.

The group's Facebook page, *Ursul lui Gavrilă din Asău*, https://www.facebook.com/ursulluigavriladinasau, is discussed as a site of tradition in performance. In this sense, the platform is understood not merely as a space for documentation or as an accumulating repository of visual and textual content, but as a narrative environment in which "tradition" is continuously produced and reworked as a lived, embodied practice subject to ongoing processes of validation.

The making of digital performance authenticity

Among those from Asău tradition goes further
(2nd January 2025)

Under this heading, a post with a non-professionally recorded clip showing the group performing the Bear Dance, most probably in the mountain village of Asău, is the one which generated the highest level of content interaction with 2,842 likes, 64 comments and 168 shares, thus ranking first in the entire batch of posts in terms of likes and shares.

This very high level of interaction may be a consequence of the timing of the post, the very beginning of the year, when, because of the holiday, people may have more time for media-based social interaction. Additionally, the same time frame may experience higher interaction due to seasonal cultural expectations which may enable people to be more receptive to older or newer cultural frames that define the period.

The comments associated with this first post showcase a predominantly positive reception. The main features are intense affective involvement with and symbolic validation of the *Ursul lui Gavrilă din Asău* group. In terms of options, most of the interventions consist of short evaluative words or phrases ("Congratulations," "Bravo," "Very nice"), frequently accompanied by emojis, which indicates the existence of minimal but recurrent forms of participation. Without dismissing the idea that some post engagements are the result of an automatic interaction between page users and the created content, this analysis regards them as relevant because they correlate closely with the other elements of positive assessment of content: the number of likes and the sharing patterns.

While short textual validations preponderate, there are also some comments that provide a broader assessment of the post:

> Thank you for keeping our tradition alive and showing us what it truly means to be dedicated to our values and customs! You are an example of energy, passion, and authenticity. Please continue to carry the tradition forward with the same pride, because you are the best! Respect and admiration! (A. T.)

This commentary is equally relevant as an evaluation of the group's performance and for its implicit definition of authenticity. It functions as a site of authenticity validation and, simultaneously, as an interpretation of the performance in terms of value, dedication and continuity.

This snippet of audience endorsement, beyond its explicitly affective wording, hints at a form of moral authority the Bear Dance group is forging by displaying the lived continuity of heritage. The comment links the performance to a collectively framed vocabulary of "our



Screenshots from "Ursul lui Gavrilă din Asău" Facebook page, reel caption: "Among those from Asău tradition goes further," Facebook, January 2nd, 2025, https://www.facebook.com/reel/1705456183356978

tradition," "our values," and "our customs." Rather than demonstrating collective identity *per se*, it shows an individual audience member deploying a collective idiom to authenticate the group's performance.

In its turn, this commentary functions as a performative validation in its own right, in the sense that it creates by content co-creation the ground for producing authenticity.

What is significant here is not that ethnographic accuracy becomes irrelevant, but that it is not the criterion explicitly used by the commenter in authenticating the digitally presented performance. The masked body and the recognizable form of the Bear Dance remain present as main visual conditions of recognition. However, the comment validates the performance through another set of assessment criteria: narrative continuity, local attachment, and the relationship established between performers and audience.

Finally, what this commenter suggests with regard to collective identity creation is further reinforced by another comment, which reads:

> Bravo to you! I'm following you from Frankfurt, and I'm also from near your area, and I love the tradition... (I.C.)

Unlike the previous commentary, this example shifts the site where tradition is experienced. While it is unclear whether the earlier instance involved unmediated engagement with tradition, the second individual's experience occurs exclusively through the social media page, which facilitates a connection to their place of origin.

In this context, beyond the constant emotional engagement, the evaluation of tradition as a deterritorialized experience constructs authenticity through digital co-presence and mediated belonging. Distance does not appear to weaken ties to locality; rather, it extends and reconfigures them across physical space.



Screenshots from "Ursul lui Gavrilă din Asău" Facebook page, reel caption: "The ancestral staff will remain in good hands!!! Well done, juniors!!!" Facebook, December 15th, 2025, https://www.facebook.com/reel/885118497371280

The comments section, understood as a participatory space for the co-production of meaning, thus contributes to framing authenticity as a discursive reality, consolidated through collective resonance.

This second comment is particularly revealing because geographical distance does not lead the commenter to demand greater fidelity to the material form of the custom, perhaps in the way this was remembered from their youth. Instead, authenticity is articulated through biographical proximity—"I'm also from near your area"—and affective recognition—"I love the tradition." Locality thus continues to matter, but increasingly as a relationship that can be activated through mediated participation rather than exclusively through physical presence. The comment illustrates particularly clearly the distinction proposed here between the recognizable material form that enables identification of the custom and the relational discourse through which its authenticity is affirmed.

The ancestral staff will remain in good hands!!! Well done, juniors!!!
(15th of December 2025)

The second most popular post, accompanied by a caption that emphasizes continuity—as do many others—foregrounds visual elements as markers of the transgenerational transmission of cultural practices. The video presents a group of young drummers giving the beat for the dancing bears, this time performing at night around a burning wood fire. Although the fire is not even remotely connected to the dance itself, at best functioning as a background for the dance, it enhances the aesthetic dimension of the group's performance.

The reception of this post consists largely of positive assessments of the performance that in essence validate the dance, with many comments praising the participation of children as a strong reminder of the carrying forward of the ceremonial dance. Commentaries such as "Bravo, children" and "children carry on the traditions" suggest that authenticity is closely linked to transgenerational continuity.

This is analytically important. While the video is densely material and embodied, the audience does not primarily authenticate it by assessing costume, choreography, musical form, or ritual accuracy. Instead, the presence of children is interpreted temporally, with them being seen as proof this the tradition has a future. Material performance thus supplies the scene of recognition, while continuity becomes the dominant language through which authenticity is articulated.

Despite the predominantly positive reception, this set of comments also includes two notable interventions that illustrate how performative authenticity is actively constructed rather than simply assumed.

The first intervention, although extremely concise, advances a strongly articulated position: "A CIRCUS from the culture of DEATH, at the celebration of the BIRTH of the Lord Christ!!" The comment preserves its original capitalization for emphasis and is posted under the pseudonym Love and Truth, an account identified as belonging to a digital content creator. The output of this account is almost exclusively religious, with a marked emphasis on Orthodox content that promotes conservative interpretations of religious practice.

This commentary represents one of the few dissenting voices that contest the performance of the masked dance. Notably, the critique does not focus on the incorporation of the fire element—an arguably atypical feature of the performance—but rather on what is perceived as the broader incongruity of the practice itself. While dancing around a fire holds some ethnographic relevance within Romanian vernacular traditions, the commentator argues that such elements are incompatible with the ceremonial and religious framework associated with end-of-year customs. Consequently, the masked performance is constructed as non-authentic, since it conflicts with a religiously grounded imaginary.

The rejection of the performance as a legitimate tradition, based on its perceived non-alignment with a Christian understanding, also operates as a form of boundary-making. In this sense, authenticity is discursively defined through exclusion, a process that inevitably generates value-based tensions.

Finally, the use of the term "circus," besides its overtly derogatory connotations, contributes to a reframing of the practice as mere spectacle. This semantic shift implies a deprivation of cultural and symbolic meaning, thereby further reinforcing its delegitimization.

Significantly, negative authentication follows a similar logic to positive. The commenter does not reject the performance because the bear costume, choreography, or musical structure is ethnographically incorrect. The challenge is instead mounted from a competing moral and religious framework. This suggests that the displacement identified here is not simply a consequence of positive audience affect: both validation and rejection can operate through discursive registers external to the material accuracy of the performance.



Thank you to the hosts!!! Happy holidays!!! @top fans
(21st of December 2025)

This video post may be considered particularly significant in illustrating the dynamic construction of authenticity. Like the previous example, the reel captures the processes of adaptation which folk customs undergo. It features a scene in which one of the performers, dressed as a bear, executes an acrobatic movement atop a wooden club supported by other members of the group—arguably one of the most striking departures from conventional representations of the bear dance. Moreover, this acrobatic element has become a distinctive marker of the group's performance style, with the group leader being closely associated with this specific innovation.



Screenshot from "Ursul lui Gavrilă din Asău" Facebook page, video caption: "Thank you to the hosts!!! Happy holidays!!!" Facebook, December 21st, 2025, https://www.facebook.com/reel/9022005664525969

Although not necessarily intentional in its phrasing, the caption accompanying the reel is addressed to "top fans." This formulation nevertheless signals a shift in the dynamics of performance. The custom has been reconfigured from a marker of local identity into a form of theatrical display, reflecting a broader transformation from ritual practice—where performance historically contributed to the maintenance of social and cosmological order through repetition—into a context in which performers are increasingly oriented toward spectacle.

This gradual transition, situated within the broader framework of evolving cultural memory, is also reflected in the reception of the visual representation of the performance.

> When you say Gavrila's group, it means history, the present, and preparation for the future... from grandparents to parents to children and grandchildren... my father was from Leorda. But you have all my appreciation. Respect (A. A. R.)

The shift away from the materiality of performance that is evident in this commentary opens up the possibility of conceptualizing authenticity along three interrelated axes: lineage, memory, and future-oriented projection, all structured through representations of chronology, family, and continuity.

As in most of the posts, the masked body and specific performance techniques are not explicitly referenced; rather, they are implicitly incorporated into the reception of the visual material. This suggests a form of embodied lineage that is constituted through discursive practices rather than through material expression alone.

From this perspective, discursive constructions of authenticity foreground *temporal continuity*, whereby tradition is presented as temporal persistence; *genealogy*, through which authenticity is equated with inheritance; and the *personalisation of authenticity* through biographical connections to family and place. Finally, authenticity is further reinforced through acts of validation expressed in appreciation and respect.

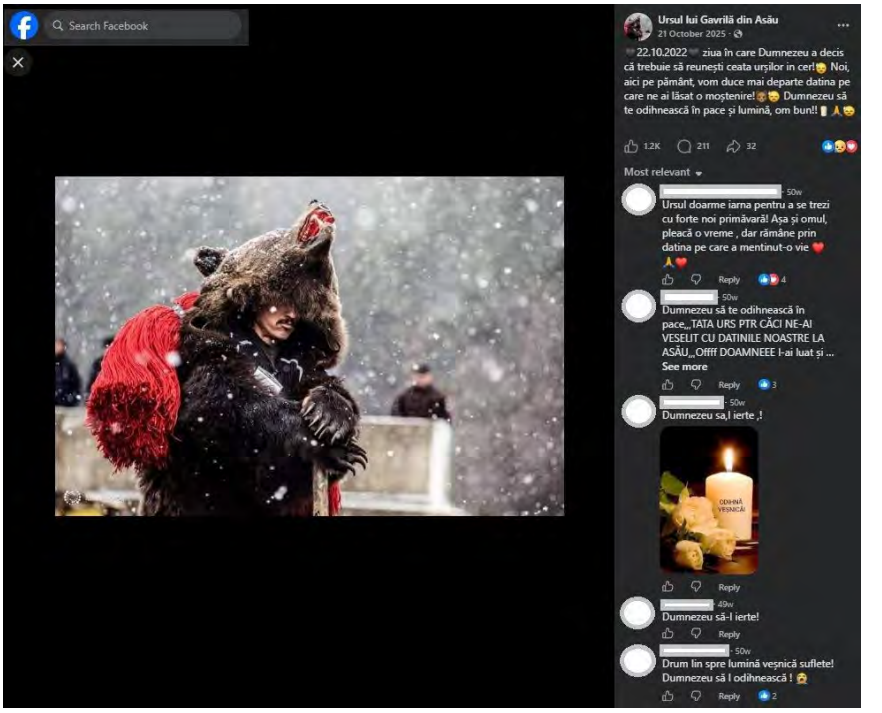
> 🖤 22.10.2022 🖤 The day God decided that you should gather the group of bears in heaven! 🐻 We, here on earth, will carry forward the tradition you left us as a legacy! 🐻🐻 May God rest you in peace and light, good soul!! 🙏🙏🐻

The post that generated the highest level of engagement within the batch of posts analysed, as measured by the volume of comments, is a memorial dedicated to the group's leader, Daniel Nicodim. This post, alongside another (excluded from the dataset) that appealed for financial support following his diagnosis with a severe medical condition, mobilized emotionally charged interactions calling for solidarity in the context of life-threatening illness.

However, these responses extend beyond expressions of empathy. They contribute to the discursive construction of authenticity through the articulation of a genealogy of tradition, while simultaneously constructing a moral figure of the tradition-bearer. Comments range from "Father Bear 🐻, eternal light among the angels 👼🙏" (R. T.) and "May God rest him in peace! The tradition lives on thanks to him!" (D. A.) to more worked-out reflections that metaphorically link natural bear behaviour to the passing of the group leader: "The bear sleeps in winter so it can awaken with renewed strength in spring! Likewise, a person departs for a time, but lives on through the tradition they kept alive 🖤🙏🖤" (O.-L. A.).

These forms of reception introduce an additional mode of constructing authenticity, characterized by a shift from an already established recognition of the leading performer's moral authority as a tradition-bearer to a broader wave of empathic appreciation of his condition. Furthermore, the group leader's death appears to have been interpreted as a process of sacralisation, whereby the performer has been transformed from a bearer of tradition into a quasi-spiritual figure whose presence extends beyond physical existence. In this sense, the leader not only bridges past and present but also symbolically mediates continuity.

The authority attributed to the group's late leader is therefore not derived from conformity to a particular performance model alone. It is biographically accumulated through his



Screenshot from "Ursul lui Gavrilă din Asău" Facebook page, photo caption: "🖤 22.10.2022 🖤 The day God decided that you should gather the group of bears in heaven! 😭 We, here on earth, will carry forward the tradition you left us as a legacy! 🐻😭 May God rest you in peace and light, good soul!! 🙏🙏😭." Facebook, October 22nd, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1440137874309661&set=pb.100049403865742.-2207520000&type=3

perceived commitment to ensuring continuity. The memorial comments retrospectively authenticate both the individual and the tradition by binding personal memory to collective transmission. Here the body disappears altogether from the immediate object of commentary, while the performer becomes a narrative guarantee of continuity.

Displacing the Locus of Authenticity in Digital Performance

Our analysis reveals a significant displacement of authenticity from the domain of practice to that of discourse. The masked and costumed body, although visually central, does not emerge as an explicit object of interpretation, but rather as an implicit marker of authenticity. While material elements of performance remain essential in shaping the visual form and maintaining continuity with recognizable models, they are largely absent from the discursive processes through which authenticity is constructed. In this sense, they function as primary visual nodes of recognition, yet their meaning is activated through narrative, affective investment, and collective validation.

Authenticity thus emerges as a performative and interactive effect, co-produced through the interplay between performers and audiences. Engagement—manifested through comments, reactions, and other forms of interaction—transforms reception into a process of validation. Authenticity becomes embedded in discourse. Under these conditions, emotional engagement becomes one of the principal explicit registers of authentication. This does not render material execution irrelevant: rather, material performance supplies the recognizable object around which affective and moral validation can accumulate.

At the same time, the masked body is increasingly reframed through affective and moral registers[1] rather than through its ritual or symbolic function. Audience responses emphasize continuity, commitment, and respect, positioning performers as carriers of collective values. In certain cases, this extends to forms of symbolic elevation, whereby performers are redefined through memory and reverence. Under these conditions, emotional engagement becomes a particularly visible discursive register through which audiences authenticate a materially recognizable performance.

Digital mediation further extends the scope of authenticity beyond its local context, allowing it to be constituted across dispersed audiences. Tradition is experienced through mediated forms of belonging, in which recognition and affect replace direct participation. The masked body becomes a circulating image, detached from its original ritual setting yet capable of generating authenticity through visibility. What is affirmed is not locality, but the capacity of the performance to resonate across contexts.

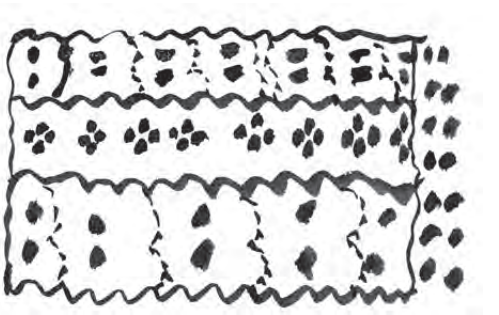
However, authenticity is not uniformly affirmed. It is also subject to contestation, when critical responses introduce competing moral and ideological frameworks. These interventions demonstrate that authenticity is negotiated through processes of inclusion and exclusion rather than determined by the material features of the performance. In this context, the masked body becomes a site of interpretation, where meaning is imposed, challenged, and reconfigured.

Overall, the analysis points to a broader transformation in which material elements remain visually salient but lose their central role in the production of authenticity. Instead, authenticity is articulated, validated and negotiated through narrative, affect, visibility, and interaction. The masked body persists as a crucial visual anchor, yet increasingly functions

as a precondition for recognition rather than as its source. Authenticity thus appears as a distributed and dynamic effect, continuously produced through processes of performance, mediation, and reception.

Bendix (1997) portrays authenticity as historically produced discourse; Wang (1999) shifts attention toward experience; performance approaches emphasise relational production. The case of the Bear Dance adds something slightly different: digital mediation can separate the *material conditions of recognizability* from the *discursive processes of authentication*. Materiality therefore neither disappears nor retains exclusive authority.

This case suggests that digital authenticity operates through three analytically distinct but interdependent processes. First, material and embodied forms enable recognition: the masked body makes the practice legible as the Bear Dance. Second, audiences perform authentication by relating that recognizable form to continuity, lineage, locality, memory, commitment, and affect. Third, comments enable negotiation, since these claims may be affirmed, contested, or reframed through the lens of competing moral and cultural frameworks. Digital mediation therefore does not replace material authenticity with discourse. Rather, it redistributes the work of authenticating across material recognition, narrative framing, affective investment, and audience interaction.



NOTE

1. Here, moral registers refer to evaluative vocabularies through which audiences associate authenticity with dedication, continuity, respect, religious legitimacy, and responsibility toward inherited tradition.

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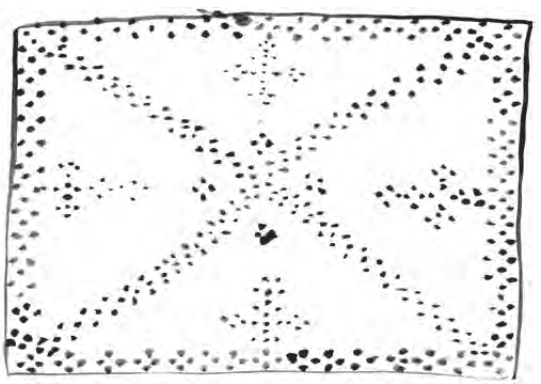
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III. Notes

Performing Traditions. *Craii:* A Christian Custom from the Jiu Valley, Romania

Ana Pascu
National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Romania

Ana Pascu, Ph.D., is a specialist in ethnology at the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant in Bucharest, Romania. She is currently studying intangible cultural heritage and local heritage actors in several regions, especially in Romania's Jiu Valley.

Correspondence: ana2ania@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

In the Jiu Valley, a region with a rich traditional culture situated in a depression in the Southern Carpathians, the Nativity of the Lord Jesus Christ on 25 December is one of the most important Christian holidays and its celebration, as in all regions where Romanians live, involves carolling. Here, however, carolling combines the performance of traditional songs with a popular religious play, created in the 19th century for the upper class, whose theme is the arrival of the Magi bearing gifts for the Infant Jesus. In the Jiu Valley, this religious spectacle, called *Craii* [The Kings], has become a feature of local identity. Although the original religious play followed the biblical narrative, it underwent changes in the course of its being performed in the local peasant communities. Masked characters who belonged to different forms of carolling were incorporated into the group of carollers. As well as giving an ethnographic description of this custom, we will examine the role and significance of the masked characters and of masks in this particular Christian-themed play.

KEYWORDS

Christmas carolling; religious folk theatre; mask; Magi; troupe of young men; community.

In Romania, where 85.3% of the 16,397,300 people who declared their religious affiliation in the 2021 Census self-identified as Orthodox Christians, according to the Press release giving the provisional data from the 2021 Census of Population and Dwellings,[1] the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ (25th December) is celebrated via numerous traditional practices that take place over several days, the most widespread being carol-singing. Carolling, which currently has a Christian significance, that of bringing the news of the Nativity to every house, has inherited practices and beliefs derived from the New Year customs of local populations in archaic times. These are based around three elements: the magic power of words, as wishes can influence how the next year will go; the permeability of this time at the turn of the year, which allows the entry into our world of evil spirits, which need to be banished by the use of apotropaic practices that involve making a noise; and the communion between the living and the dead (Bîrlea 1981, 267-70). So it was that the carollers who announced the Birth of God as Man came to be accompanied by masked characters, a reminder of a world in which people and the sacred communicated in ways different from those of today.

Carolling is ceremonial and performance-based in nature. While local diversity does exist, the main stages of preparation and performance involved in going carol singing are the same in most regions of Romania. The carollers meet during the Christmas fast [Advent] to prepare and rehearse. This is followed by the central part of the custom: for two or three days, starting on Christmas Eve, the groups of carollers go from house to house

singing carols, announcing the Birth of the Lord, and pronouncing ritual wishes for health and prosperity. The carols are old songs sung to tunes of their own and cover a range of subjects; more recently they have started to be accompanied by musical instruments. The carollers are rewarded with gifts of food (traditional ring-shaped bread rolls, roast meat, cakes), drink, and money. They express formal thanks for these gifts and dance with the girls of the family they are visiting (this is believed to help them to get married soon). At the end of the carolling period, the carollers hold a party for the young people, though the whole community takes part (Caraman 1983, 16-22). Village children too go carolling in a similar though simplified way. Although this has the same ritual function, it is the young people who are regarded as being the principal actors and as having the responsibility to bring the news of the Nativity. They do this in a variety of ways. For example, there are parts of Romania where carolling with masks is practised: one of the groups of costume-wearing carol singers conceals his identity by donning a decorated animal mask made of wood, with a movable jaw and horns. This masked character is called *the Stag, Turca, the Goat, Boriţa* or *Brezaia.* The young people sing ritual carols and *Turca* dances to the rhythm of the music; then the rest of the group dance as well. *Turca* acts out a little scene that is frightening and comical at the same time: he scares the spectators by rushing at them, but at the end he tries to get the money they have been given by the host using his animal mouth, which makes the audience laugh. Finally, *Turca* dies and rises again, and this feature of the drama is regarded as evidence of the original significance of the custom: it was a sacrifice to ensure that nature would come to life again (Bîrlea 1981, 271-75). However, this original meaning was lost long ago, with the tradition continuing to be practised for different purposes: the making of ritual wishes, celebration, social cohesion, etc.

The masked characters have a different role from that of the other members of the carolling party: they strike the men, tease the women, scare the children, and create disorder in the house. This is a form of transgressing social rules that is accepted by the community within the clearly delimited framework of the ritual: the rules are broken so that a new balance can be established. It is the mask itself that allows the characters to do this. While in custom-based societies all around the globe masks are a sign of connection with the other world, a representation of the presence of the dead at the rituals of the living in order to guarantee fertility and drive away evil, in traditional Romanian culture, in the custom of carolling, the only role the mask retains is that of placing its wearer outside the standard laws (Evseev 1999, 273), thus allowing him to act out a performance: "The winter traditions have lost their original magical character and have turned into a folk theatre performance" (Popescu 1990, 192).

During the nineteenth century, the practice of going carolling was in many parts of the country expanded and enriched by the introduction of a religious play called Irozii (*The Herods*, from the name of King Herod), *Vicleimul* or *Viflaimul* (from Bethlehem, the town where Jesus Christ was born), or, as is the case in the Jiu Valley, *Craii (The Kings*, from the Magi who came to the infant Jesus bringing gifts). The theme of the play is the episode in the Bible where the Magi arrive to visit Jesus with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. It was written for amateur actors belonging to the higher echelons of society (the *boieri*) in a period when there were no theatres. It was later taken up by humble townsfolk and by country people, who adapted it to their own cultural ideology (Meiu 2004, 107) and thus made it into a carolling tradition. The country people made simpler versions of the original text that contained the following elements: the Magi's arrival at Herod's palace to ask him where the king whose star had led them to Jerusalem had been born; an account of their names and of the gifts they had brought him; Herod's decision to kill the infants in order to



Image 1. The *Crai* of Taia (on the Eastern Jiu) at the *Crai* Festival, Lupeni, 2018, before the performance.
Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.

kill the Messiah among them; the angel telling some shepherds the news of the birth and they too bringing him gifts.

In carolling, the exchanging of gifts is a key feature. After they have sung carols and wished their hosts health and wealth, the carollers are repaid with ritual gifts (food and money). In this way the hosts make offerings to God via the carollers and receive a divine blessing in return (Văduva 1997, 111-14). The Magi brought gifts to the Infant Jesus as a testimony to their faith. The importance of the presence of gifts both in the play and in carolling may go some way towards explaining how this religious play came to be integrated into the carolling tradition and the fact that it is still there after over a hundred years.

However, the *Craii* play is not only a carol but also a performance, as is the case with other Romanian traditions too: *călușarii* (Pentecost dancing), *cununa secerișului* (grain harvest festival), *malanca* (the masked New Year festival), etc. (Petcu-Pădurean 2018, 10-2). The costumes and props (the masks included) are visually impressive and add to the ceremonial value of the action. In the *Craii* play as performed in the Jiu Valley, the mask is preserved as a traditional element, but what it signifies has been gradually modified under pressure from the religious subject. When certain customs are no longer practised, the ones that survive often take over characters, actions, ritual behaviours, symbols, and images from those that have disappeared, but these are resemanticised and brought within the fold of the overall meaning of the tradition that has adopted them.

In the Jiu Valley *carolling with the Craii* custom, the young people are not restricted to singing carols but intercalate them between the lines of a play. While Romanian ethnologists regard *carols* ["colinde"] and *star songs* ["cântece de stea"] as two different species, the communities in the area think of all of them as carols. The story of the three Magi does not appear in the carols but only in the star songs, some of which were specially composed for the *Craii* play (Brătulescu 1981).

We will now analyse the Jiu Valley *Craii* from an interdisciplinary perspective that calls on ethnology, philology and literary history, interrogating the present-day meanings of the



Image 2. The *Crai* of Sohodol (Paroșeni) carolling in the village, 2014. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.



Image 3. The *Crai* of Sohodol at the Paroșeni parish church, 25 December 2014. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.

custom as understood by the performers and communities and paying particular attention to the props and costumes. The latter constitute essential elements of the theatrical performance, since not only behaviours but also objects can fulfil ritual or ceremonial functions; often, they operate together. Objects form part of ritual actions and share in the creation of meaning (Meiu 2004, 8-9), with the development of the use of masks in this tradition indicating changes that have taken place in the collective mentality.

"Three kings from the East"

It is hard to understand why the story of the three Magi does not appear in carols, given that country people in Romania knew not only the Biblical texts but also various apocryphal ones and other writings on Christian themes that were in circulation as early as the first centuries after Christ (Cartojan 1974, 81). The priests and the monks in Romanian monasteries, copyists and translators of Slavonic and Greek manuscripts obtained from the monks of the Byzantine Empire and of Mount Athos, used these kinds of stories in their sermons. Nicolae Cartojan, a specialist in early Romanian literature, found evidence of the circulation of the story of the three Magi in two ancient manuscripts in the library of the Romanian Academy: *The Story of Aphroditius the Persian* and *Exegetical sermon for the day after the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ for the killing of the young children of Vifleaim* [Bethlehem] *and the grieving of the mothers and then also how Herod perished* (Cartojan 1974, 103-106). It was also Cartojan who found the oldest form of the text of *Craii*, in manuscripts dating from the late eighteenth century, written by men of the Church who were also involved in educating children. The play was originally written and staged specifically for its educational value:

> Our teachers and learned men, just like *les clercs de la Basoche* in France, were instructors, were church painters, were singers, were even actors who performed the religious mystery plays that everywhere were the beginning of the modern theatre and remnants of which have been preserved for us to this day in our *Herod* and *Betleem...* (Kogălniceanu 1882, 33).

The original version of *Craii* became more widely known as a result of its publication in the collection of *Star Songs or verses that are sung at the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ* that Anton Pann issued in 1848 (Cartojan 1974, 231-33).

The majority of scholars believe that the authors of the *Craii* play modelled it on the medieval mysteries that appeared in Western countries such as France and Germany in the eleventh to twelfth centuries, an early form of popular theatre that drew its inspiration from episodes in the Bible. In the Romanian lands, the theatre was slower to develop. According to published historical records, plays in Romanian were first acted in 1816 in Iași and in 1818 in Bucharest (Petcu-Pădurean 2018, 17-22); however, as-yet-unpublished manuscripts show that *The Herods* was being acted considerably earlier in Moldova. This play, written for "the sons of the landowners" who wanted to act, had been integrated into the carolling tradition: "Dressed in garments made of cloth of gold, they would go to the ruler's court and to the houses of the most distinguished nobles" (Kogălniceanu 1882, 33). After the landowners it was the turn of the church teachers to take up the play and become *irodari* [Herod players]. In the early nineteenth century, they would ride in groups through the streets of towns shouting "Herod, Herod!" (just as the carollers announce their presence on the street through shouts, noise and music—our note) and would be paid in money and food for their performances (Burada 1915, 8-10). Around 1900 the play was adopted by village young people too.

During the nineteenth century, religious dramas were performed in Italy, France, and Germany (Burada 1915, 7) and also among the Ruthenians, Saxons, Hungarians and Serbs of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to which the Romanian regions of Transylvania, Banat, and Bucovina also belonged until 1918 (Cartojan 1974, 246-47). For example, in *Herodes,* a *Vicleim* [Bethlehem] of the Saxons of Transylvania printed in Sibiu in 1859, there is a scene in which the shepherds are awoken by an angel and another in which Herod, after the visit of the Magi, asks a priest to search the Scriptures and tell him where the Messiah is to be born (Cartojan 1974, 247). These scenes are found again in two plays by Petru Băncilă published in Sibiu in 1875 (Cartojan 1974, 240), one in four acts and the other in two. The former contains a scene in which the three shepherds (called Coridon, Acteon and Miron) are roused by the Angel and commanded to go to "Vitfleemu." Coridon wakes first and has difficulty rousing Acteon "the sleepy one" and Miron. All three set off for the cave to worship the Child and take him gifts: one presents him with two lambs, another a ram, and the third a cheese (Cartojan 1974, 240-42).

Fragments of Petru Băncilă's plays can be found in the versions we meet in the Jiu Valley. The Magi introduce themselves in the same way: each one says his name and the others repeat it in chorus. The changes made are minimal, and interviewees in the Jiu Valley speak about the fact that they exchange lines among the characters and move carols to different places among the lines, so as to introduce something new without abandoning the theme (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroșeni, 2025). Băncilă's "Sleepy Antion" is mentioned here too. The locals say they know the text "from a church book", but no one has seen the book; the lines of the play are passed down from one generation of *Craii* actors to the next. The young people devise new, shorter versions by making compilations of older texts, because the time allocated for carolling at each family's home can be no longer than 15 minutes:

> They never acted this play, not even in the 1970s. They shortened it because it was too long. They found two, three, maybe four plays in the carol books. [...] They had one play, I transcribed it, and there I allowed myself to be influenced. They said: "We won't do the one those people from Dreghicioni do, we won't do the one we have corrected either, we'll combine them." (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroșeni, 2025)

Context of the research project

The Jiu Valley is a historical region, situated in a depression in the Southern Carpathians, that holds a special place in Romanian history. From a political point of view, although populated by Romanians, it belonged to Hungary from the twelfth century until 1918; it currently belongs to Romania. In terms of demographics, after 1860, when coal extraction began, miners were brought to the area from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They were settled in colonies, in settlements that later developed into towns. A distinction thus arose between Romanian shepherd villages with their traditional way of life and multi-ethnic mining towns inhabited by Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, and Romanians from other parts of the Empire. Disagreements between these two sets of communities (caused by the abuses of the State) deepened to the point where pejorative names arose that have persisted to this day: the townspeople called the country people *momârlani* [a term whose meaning is not well understood even by those who use it], while the latter in their turn called the townspeople *barabe* or *vinituri* (newcomers) (Stanca 1996, 56; Pascu 2019). Under the Communist regime, the industrialisation of the Jiu Valley gathered speed. The population of the towns increased as groups of Romanians from other parts of the country were forcibly relocated there to work in the mines. After 1990, the mines gradually closed under pressure from the market economy and as a consequence of "green" policies, which meant the region rapidly became poorer. Young people in the towns were forced to look for work abroad or in large cities in Romania. The country people had the advantage of their traditional way of life, with the income they obtained from rearing animals helping them to take the decision to stay in their homes. It is entirely natural that this category of people should be supportive of traditions and customs that involve large numbers of people and thus maintain community cohesion. *Carolling with Craii* is one of these.

The River Jiu is formed from two main rivers, the Eastern Jiu and the Western Jiu, which rise in different mountains and unite in the depression called the Jiu Valley. In the eastern part, the mining companies grouped the miners together in colonies that were separate from the villages. Not mingling with the newcomers, the country people continued to practise their customs in an older form. In the west, the mines and mining towns were constructed actually in the villages, some of which vanished while others became areas of towns, even though they retained their rural appearance to some extent (Dumitru Gălățan-Jieț, 85, Jieț, 2025). Many country people moved to apartment blocks, largely giving up their traditional way of life, even though they affirm the same identity as before. The different social conditions created small differences in customs, including in the *colindatul cu Craii* [carolling with the Kings]. The young people of the Eastern Jiu are more conservative than those of the Western Jiu, but both categories attempt to bring novelty and spectacle to their performances, though in different ways. Consequently, we will speak below of "the Eastern Jiu communities" and "the Western Jiu communities" when highlighting the differences.

From a religious point of view, the Romanian country people of the Eastern Jiu were Orthodox. Between 1800 and 1835 the country people of the Western Jiu became Greco-Catholics (Stanca 1996 51-2).[2] Miners who belonged to different ethnic groups also belonged to different denominations and religions: Roman Catholics, Evangelicals, Reformed, Unitarians. etc. (Stanca 1996, 66-8). The *Craii* custom is practised by country and urban people who are Orthodox or Greco-Catholic. In Lupeni, on the Western Jiu, mixed teams of carollers with both country and urban members are also to be found.



Image 4. The *Crai* of Sohodol (Paroșeni), 2014. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.



Image 5. The *Crai* of Taia and the *Crai* of Jieț, in front of the Lupeni Cultural Centre, where the *Crai* Festival takes place, Lupeni, 2022. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.

Research methodology

My study of the traditional peasant culture of the Jiu Valley involved successive periods of field research from 2008 to 2025. The participative observations I carried out in 2012 and 2014 allowed me the opportunity to experience first-hand the joyful and effervescent atmosphere associated with carolling, to be struck by the serious involvement of the young people, and to observe the community reaction live. I carried out approximately 20 semi-structured interviews with *Craii* performers aged from 20 to 85. A guiding principle for my research was George-Paul Meiu's position regarding the importance of assessing the *feelings* experienced during performing, since it is these that determine the keeping of some meanings of traditions and the giving-up of others (Meiu 2004, 11). Emotions, feelings, mentalities, knowledge, and above all what the performers regard as having *value* determine how the tradition will evolve.

The *Craii* troupe

Country people's religious holiday traditions combine ceremonial elements with performance-related ones, adornment, singing and dancing, thus bringing together partying with a degree of solemnity and attention to detail (Moise 1999, 154). In recent years, however, few young people have still wanted to go carolling with the *Craii*. In 2024, one of the most traditional villages, Jieț, had no *Craii* team (Dumitru Gălățan-Jieț, 85, Jieț, 2025). From several troupes in every village in 2008, their number has decreased in recent years to the point at which just one team, involving young people from a number of villages, has sometimes been formed.

In southern Transylvania, the region to which the Jiu Valley belongs, the young people's troupe or *ceată* is made up of unmarried boys (not girls) aged from 15-16 up to marriage. In the Jiu Valley, the *ceată* is not organised in a formal way, but the carollers obeyed this rule for a long time: "At that time there were no carollers as old as 25. At 22, 23 the young men were already married. Because anyone who got to 25 still unmarried was already kind of old" (Nicolae Cic, 57, Jieț, 2025). But real life necessitates changes to the rules, changes that put the practising of the custom in peril. Those interviewed frequently talk about an *ideal* picture, but *real* circumstances (Meiu 2004, 18) demonstrate which elements are irreplaceable and which can be modified at need. Because of a lack of new performers, in order for the carolling not to be interrupted, young people have ended up staying in the team for more years than the rules would have allowed (Alin Ciurea, 32, Jieț, 2025).

In the Western Jiu, in recent years, motivated by the desire to win the Lupeni *Craii Festival*, the young people have been asking experienced former *Crai* to help them. As a result, mature married men have joined the troupes, but only in the role of *Brunduși* (i.e. *Shepherds*) (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroșeni, 2025). Their strong voices, gestures and costumes create a more impressive spectacle. The number of characters, originally between nine and eleven, has grown, so that we now have an *Angel*, a *Soldier* or two, the three *Crai*, *Herod*, four *Shepherds*, the *Minister*, and the mature *Brunduși*.

The inhabitants of the Eastern Jiu have not accepted any enlargement of the troupe. Their characters have continued to be the *Angel*, *Herod*, the three *Crai* (Valtezar, Melfior and Gașpar—in English: Balthasar, Melchior and Gaspard), a *Soldier*, two *Shepherds*, and the

Minister (they avoid the name *Priest* out of respect for the clergy; Alin Ciurea, 32, Jieț, 2025). Their manner of acting is more conservative, more sober, and they prefer age-old local carols, which they perform in the traditional unaccompanied fashion. The *Shepherds* (here they are not called *Brunduși*) wear traditional dress. However, they too have found ways of improving the visual aspect of their performance: they make themselves *Crai headgear* modelled on (imaginary) Roman helmets that are more impressively decorated with every passing year.



Preparations

At the beginning of the Christmas fast [Advent], the young people form themselves into a team, prepare their costumes and props, learn their parts, and organise the *Craii Party* that ends the celebration. All this implies major resources of money, time, artistic talent, knowledge, the psychological skills needed to communicate and relate, physical strength and health. An actor starts at the bottom: he joins the troupe aged six to 11 as an *Angel*, then becomes a *Soldier*, until he finally reaches the most important role, that of *Herod* (Ionel Dănescu, 52, Paroșeni, 2014). But this is the *ideal* situation. *In reality*, the young people who join the team take whatever roles are free. For example, Alin Ciurea began to go carolling in 2009, aged 15-16, as Melfior: "I was never an Angel, after that I didn't want to go as a *Shepherd*, because it would have been pretty tough, you would have needed to keep wearing our traditional costume for three days non-stop" (Alin Ciurea, 32, Jieț, 2025).

If the young people have been carolling together in other years, it is easier, as the troupe has experience, communicates well, and needs fewer rehearsals. With new actors it is more difficult. Roles are allocated strictly on the basis of talent. What is hardest is when the tradition is resumed after an interruption. Rehearsals are held two or three times a week and take place in the homes of each member of the team on a rota basis, as all the families enjoy peeping in on them when they are practising and helping them. *Herod* is the leader. The largest number of rehearsals are held at his home, they set out from there on their carolling, and those who live at a distance sleep at his home. In teams with mature *Brunduși,* the one with the most experience is the leader (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroșeni, 2025).

The headdresses and costumes of the *Crai* and of *Herod* are the most expensive. The community helps, and those who have kept theirs from the past lend them willingly:

> No, in my case it was easier. I used to wear old traditional Jiu Valley clothes—at that time, they were easy to find. Naturally, we used to help our fellow team members as well, my sister, if she had pearls, necklaces (for decorating the headdresses—our note), she'd contribute them. (Nicolae Cic, 57, Jieț, 2025, former *Shepherd*)

But for those who made their own headdresses it was extremely difficult:

> I knew there were none left (headdresses—our note). There were three lads who had had them, one of the lads had moved to Cimpa and had taken his headdress with him. [...] In 2009, get your act together and make a headdress! And I thought: "Do I get my family to do it?" I mean, I was a kid, I was at high school. [...] I asked them, they said they'd help me, well! It wasn't exactly easy, I had to make a trip to Bucharest, [...] there weren't that many (goods for sale), so you couldn't find everything in Petroșani or Târgu Jiu. You could find beads but you couldn't find wreaths, necklaces,



Image 6. The *Crai* Festival, Lupeni, 2022, the *Crai* of Paroșeni (Drăghicioni area), who arrived in carts, the distance being a short one. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.

> trimmings. [...] I went to a mall, I can't remember which mall, [...] I think it was in AFI Cotroceni (shopping centre in Bucharest), but I think I spent 1,000 euros on that occasion. (Alin Ciurea, 32, Jieț, 2025)

Sometimes several young people desperately want the same headdress and arguments result:

> Because they were all coming to me with money: "Hey, don't give it to him, 'cos I'll pay you this much!". And what comeback! What rows I had with them, 'cos why won't you give it to me, why are you giving it to that other guy instead? [...] "Don't give it to *him*!" "Maybe I'm giving it to him because you can afford to make your own, but he can't." As was the case with my neighbour. His father had died when he was little, he was five or six months old. How can I give it to that other guy when my neighbour right here has absolutely no way he can make one of his own? You can take your complaints to whoever you like! (Mitu Șchiopoiu, 50, Jieț, 2025)

But why are the *Crai* headdresses of the Eastern Jiu so expensive to make? There is a great difference between Eastern Jiu and Western Jiu headdresses. The shapes and materials have changed over time. In photographs from the 1950s, the headdresses are smaller, made of cardboard and covered with ribbons and beads, with a token that looks like an anchor on the front (Dumitru Gălățan-Jieț, 85, Jieț, 2025). For many generations now, up to the present day, the headdresses have been made from strong cardboard, satinised insulating board or smooth painting board, so that they could stand up to rain or snow. From the end of the 1990s onwards, in the Eastern Jiu, especially in Cimpa, headdresses have been becoming taller and taller. First, they make a cylinder that will be placed on the head, to which are attached, at the sides, two trapezoid pieces of cardboard that are joined together by other pieces in front, at the back and on top, on the *crest*. The cardboard structure is wrapped in white cloth which is then entirely covered in Christmas tree baubles and other silver-coloured decorations so that

the cloth cannot be seen at all. Two long decorated straps are hooked on at the corners and allowed to hang down. At the top of the headdress, on the *crest*, small mirrors are placed, and then, every 10 centimetres, circlets with *strasuri* (fake precious stones)[3] in them and with the side parts, those that go into the hair, cut off, so that only the decorated part is left. But what attracts all eyes are the sets of jewellery—necklace, bracelet and earrings—set with *strasuri* that appeared on the market in the 1960s and 1970s. The young people would borrow or buy them from those who had bought them in those years, or even buy them from the shops that sold them, and would hook them on to their headdresses all round and in front. Nowadays, dozens of necklace strings are attached horizontally, each one below the one above, and over the face there are so many that the wearer can no longer see out properly. The headdresses also have a peak.

In recent years, since the teams started entering for the *Crai Festival* and wanting both to win first prize and also to impress the public at the competition held at the church on the first day of the festival, some *Crai* have made themselves headdresses that are so tall and heavy that they cannot even enter a house with them on their heads. In Cimpa there are headdresses that are 1.98 metres tall, weigh over 30 kg, and cost 4,500 euros each (Alin Ciurea, 32, Jieț, 2025). It is my view that the young people have begun to rethink *Craii* in terms of a theatre performance and to relegate the original purpose of the tradition, namely carolling, to second place. Seeing that people take notice of the headdresses, they have converted them from a token particular to the role into a point of attraction. However, it is only the young people who admire these headdresses, while the old people are more critical: the actors cannot see out, the headdresses are too heavy, they do not fit [because of their excessive height] either into the church or into anyone's house, the young people's faces are not visible (which is inconsistent with their roles; traditionally, it is only the



Image 7. The Momârlani *Crai* of Lupeni and the *Crai* of the Ștefan area of Lupeni, at the church, 2022. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.

masked characters whose faces cannot be seen, and the *Crai* and *Herod* do not wear masks, so their faces ought to be seen—our note), and so they cannot play their parts properly (Dumitru Gălățan-Jieț, 85, Jieț, 2025). These reactions demonstrate that the older people regard the *Craii* tradition as carolling whereas for the young people it has become more of a performance.

The *Crai* invest a great deal of money in necklaces of imitation precious stones (called *horseshoes* by some interviewees) but are not happy with their quality, as they are imported from China, do not stand up well to bad weather and go black quickly. By contrast, the sets of jewellery bought during the Communist period, made of good quality materials, have come to have particular *value*. Former carollers, now adults aged 50, make up a group of "cognoscenti" who appreciate their quality:

> Look, I've got two of them, these are well mounted. It's not for us I'm keeping them but for our children. [...] Let me show you a Chinese one, there's no comparison with one of these. What workmanship, what a shine! Romanian work. [...] Worlds apart from that Chinese stuff! After two or three years you can see how they change, they go dark. And this one, after all those years—see how it shines. (Mitu Șchiopoiu, 50, Jieț, 2025)

While the carolling is taking place, the "cognoscenti" of the *value* of the old jewellery direct part of their attention to the decorative material on the headdresses in order to see how many of the necklaces are Communist period ones. They themselves try to buy them, even for large sums: "Well, for these I paid 25 million (500 euros—our note). These old *horseshoes* (necklaces—our note). 25 million for all four. To have them myself. They were the most famous ones of all, they were the most cleverly made" (Mitu Șchiopoiu, 50, Jieț, 2025).

A hierarchy of headdresses even came into existence, based on how many old necklaces they incorporated, the most valuable headdress having six:

> Wow, when they saw I had four, I was that pleased with myself! [...] That's to say, someone who has four *horseshoes* is the best! When I made a headdress for a neighbour of mine, it had six, it was the best headdress! It was those *horseshoes* that gave a headdress its *value*!—'cos that was a lot of money in Ceaușescu's time. (Mitu Șchiopoiu, 50, Jieț, 2025; during the 1970s they cost 700 lei each, roughly half a month's wages—our note.)

Turning now to the *Crai headgear* found in the Western Jiu, these items are made of inexpensive materials and have zoomorphic symbols that distinguish them from each other: Valtezar has a chicken's head on his hat, Melfior a pigeon's head, Gașpar a half-moon like a crest, and Herod a cockerel's head. At the back they have tails, also made of strong satinised cardboard. The bird silhouettes are mounted sideways, joined at the top, and are supplemented by other pieces of cardboard in the front, at the back, and over the top. During the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the necessary materials, though inexpensive, were hard to find. Strong satinised cardboard had to be begged (with the help of a bottle of *tuica* if needed) from people who worked at engine bobbin winding plants, as it was used as insulating material in the electrotechnical industry. The framework was covered with white cloth and decorated with shiny coloured paper or tinfoil. The sheet of shiny coloured paper, or of tinfoil taken from chocolate wrappings, would be folded like a fan and finger-width pieces would be cut at a 45 degree angle. These pieces would be removed and stuck alongside each other on the cylinder, with different colours alternating: red, yellow, blue, green, etc. A crest was made to go on the front. Beads were put round the neck. The eyes were made from beads, and



Image 8. The *Crai* Parade that opens the *Crai* Festival, Lupeni, 2024: the Lupeni *Vestitorii Domnului* [Messengers of the Lord] team. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.



Image 9. The *Crai* Festival, 2024, the *Crai* of Bărbăteni. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.



Image 10. The *Crai* of Dealu Babii (on the Western Jiu) at the *Crai* Festival, Lupeni, 2024. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.



Image 11. The *Crai* of Taia (on the Eastern Jiu) at the *Crai* Festival, Lupeni, 2024. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.



Image 12. The *Crai* of Taia (on the Eastern Jiu) at the *Crai* Festival, Lupeni, 2024. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.

a little Christmas tree bauble was suspended from each beak and tail. These days tinsel and baubles, which look more impressive and are easier to work with, are used instead of shiny coloured paper (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroşeni, 2025). This headgear is not regarded as having the same *value* as the headdresses used on the Eastern Jiu, but it does identify the character. The locals do not know what the symbols signify.

The *Soldier* wears an officer's (never a soldier's) uniform. During the Communist period he had to ask the *Militia* (the communist police) for permission to wear it. However, wearing a uniform bandolier was forbidden, so the young people used to replace it with a *lătiţar* (a narrow strip of handwoven cloth). The *Angel* is clothed in white and has a white helmet with a cross on it. In the villages of the Eastern Jiu, the costumes worn by the *Crai* are made of shiny materials (silk, thick satin). *Herod* has a purple or red (a regal colour) garment made of velvet. The clothes are embroidered with plant-based designs worked in silk and beads, and the trousers, which are black, are decorated with silver braid. Valtezar wears a yellow tunic as his costume, Melfior a red one, and Gaşpar a blue one, but the troupes feel free to vary the colours. The costumes have epaulettes decorated with pieces of mirror tile, tassels, circlets and beads. On the Western Jiu, the *Crai* of some troupes wear traditional costume, as silk costumes do not last long.

Swords play an important role, contributing a rhythmic element to the actions of the drama: when he speaks his line, each character (*Crai, Herod, Soldier*) swiftly draws his sword and replaces it in its sheath, stamping his right foot on the ground at the same time. These rhythmical and resounding movements are something unique to the play. Although they become exhausting after multiple performances, the actors execute them with pride; they have great *value* in their eyes. The swords are produced in local workshops. The shape does not matter, only the characteristic clang.

On the Western Jiu, the *Brunduşi* wear traditional dress and over it long heavy shepherds' cloaks with the wool side outside, decorated with 20 mm long red tassels that are attached to them at the shoulders, at the back, on the chest and at the waist. They attach sheep bells round their middles. They are a sight to watch: on the road and while carolling, the *Shepherds* all leap in the air simultaneously from time to time to make their bells ring. Their role in the play is supplemented with features that are specific to masked dancing: they wore masks until the 1980s, and they still make a noise with their bells and formerly also did so with their maces (which disappeared at that point). The maces were made from the trunks of pine trees and had pieces of metal fixed to the lower end to make a sound. The racket would let the owners of the house know the band was approaching. It was the shepherds, too, who carried out the *ţic* or *burduşală* (thrashing): two *Brunduşi* from different troupes would strike each other hard shoulder to shoulder to decide who was the stronger.

The masks worn by the *Brunduşi* are made of black sheepskin, with beans for teeth, long red noses, and beards made from hemp or from fleeces. The mask is sewn to the *Brunduş*'s sheepskin hat or even made from the unstitched lining of his hat (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroşeni, 2025). The role of the masks was to frighten the spectators and thus heighten the dramatic tension.

On the Eastern Jiu, the *Shepherds* dress in traditional peasant costume and over it wear *bituşti* (thick sheepskin jackets with the white skin on the outside and the wool side inside). They take pride in their role in the play, that of bringing gifts to the Christ Child, and behave with due solemnity. For this reason, they have given up the masks worn for many generations and speak with reserve about the *Brunduşi*, regarding them as something "ugly" that is incompatible with the importance of their role (Alin Ciurea, 32, Jieţ, 2025).

The task of creating disorder by means of deviant behaviour is carried out not by the *Brunduși* but by a different masked character, the *Popa* (Minister). However, these reminiscences of the past have taken on a new meaning, that of performance. The *Popa*'s costume is similar to the robes of Orthodox priests. Although people knew that it was an Old Testament priest in the story, they cannot conceive of a priest without a cross and so the *Popa* carries a wooden cross. Because he plays the part of an "animator" (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroșeni, 2025), by doing crazy things, the *Popa* does not go into the church. In the play, the *Popa* has lines: he tells Herod where Christ has been born. The "book" in which he looks for the answer is one he manufactures himself and contains "indecent" drawings designed to make people laugh:

> The best books were those made in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, hand-drawn (...) in coloured crayons and after that in felt-tip pen. And they also contained verses that were like that too (indecent—our note). For example, they would have a drawing of a church, but the cross on the tower was bent and the rendering at the back of the building had started falling off. And he would place the book like this, closed, and say: "Give me money, because I need to repair the church!" Often you couldn't shake him off if you didn't give him money. But he would beg in the street as well. (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroșeni, 2025)

The tricks the *Popa* played were actually pretty inoffensive, because he didn't want to annoy those who hosted the players: he would hide house shoes, or steal sweets off the Christmas tree or a piece of smoked sausage from the smokehouse. The *Popa* too wore a mask, made of cardboard or bought, but he particularly wore glasses, which were employed for longer than the mask was:

> They wore glasses. And they used to smear their faces with soot. [...] But what I liked best was that they wore glasses with one pane broken. They would break it themselves, on purpose. Or there would be a pane missing. Sunglasses, welding glasses, aviator's glasses, all kinds! [...] Masks were worn up until the 1980s and a bit after that. After that they didn't wear them anymore. (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroșeni, 2025)

The broken lens symbolised lack of conformity with the rules of society, transgressing order.

The *Crai* and the community

Despite all this, the young people do not think of the *Craii* as a theatre play. They do not speak of it as a "performance" but as a "demonstration"; they "go carolling," "sing carols," they do not "act a play." And they enjoy singing carols, presenting their "demonstration", and having people admire their costumes.

The connection with the community is a very close one. Relatives and friends involve themselves in the preparations and then look forward to the *Crai* coming to carol for them, and the *Crai* in their turn know that they are going to be assessed. Everything is extremely important: the costumes, the acting, the voices. People concentrate, praise or criticise,

congratulate themselves on the fact that the carollers are their friends or workmates or that they have a romantic attachment to one of them (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroşeni, 2025).

The culminating point is the contest at the church. After the Holy Liturgy, the parish teams come and present their plays inside the church, before the whole community, and then outside, each team having its supporters. After they finish, they set off carolling through the village.

When they reach a house, the *Angel* asks whether the owners will let them come and carol, and then they all go in. They arrange themselves in a layout that has to do with the staging of the old walking theatre (not facing the audience as in the modern theatre), with the *Brunduşi* at the back, the *Crai* at the front, facing *Herod*, the *Angel* and the *Soldier.* The *Soldier* is on *Herod*'s right and the *Angel* on his left. The *Popa* is at the back, in the middle. The *Crai* speak in a threatening tone, but Herod is the most aggressive (to speak of impressive features in terms of spectacle). The dramatic verbal duel between the *Crai*, *Herod* and ultimately the *Soldier* is an absolute *sine qua non* in every version (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroşeni, 2025). Local people who have emigrated follow the play on Zoom or Meet at the same time as their relatives back home are watching it (Ionel Dănescu, 52, Paroşeni, 2014).

The meaning of the carolling is shaped by the idea of performance in the awareness of the hosts too: they do not let the troupe perform the whole 40-50 minute play, only a 15 minute excerpt from it, knowing that they need to continue with their carolling. The young people choose certain essential elements: the carol about the Birth of the Lord, then the verbal duel between *Herod* and the *Crai,* as this is "the most dramatic part" (Alin Ciurea, 32, Jieţ, 2025). Some days after the carolling comes to an end, the *Crai Party* takes place, with the young people, their parents, their friends, and other teams involved. The organisers perform the "demonstration" one more time, in its entirety, thus bringing to a close the performance and the carolling.

The *Crai* Festival

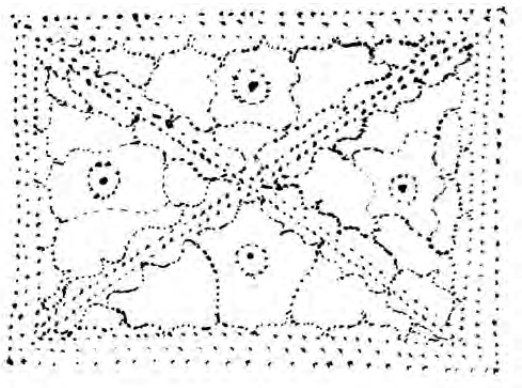
The changes that have taken place in recent times are partly a result of the Crai Festival competition, which was started in Lupeni in 1998 by a local investor, Emil Părău.

> And the best troupes in the Jiu Valley would gather, between 10 and 13 of them. There was often a preselection process, because 30 or so teams would gather. [...] And then from 1998 onwards competitions with prizes were held every year and there every team prepared itself better and better so as to win first prize. This was a good thing in terms of keeping the tradition going and it reinvigorated it. (Ionel Dănescu, 52, Paroşeni, 2014)

The Festival, now under the auspices of Lupeni Town Hall, is still held today. The Crai Festival opens with the teams parading through the town of Lupeni, weather permitting, and lasts a day. The teams draw lots to determine the order of their entry on the stage. They are promoted by local TV stations and post films on YouTube[4] etc., which stimulates the tradition being kept up. However, many teams stick to the carolling format, even when on the Crai Festival stage, rather than switching to a performance style; failing to adapt to the layout of the stage, the actors perform the play facing each other, as they do in people's houses, which makes it hard for the public to follow them.

Conclusion

On the verge of extinction in the 1980s because of the attitude of the Communist authorities, who discouraged young people from taking part in it (school teachers would forbid their pupils to go carolling, their props were confiscated by the militia, etc.—according to Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroșeni, 2025), *carolling with the Crai* experienced a rebirth in the Jiu Valley after the 1990s that was due to a partial shift in the understanding of this tradition. For the older generation, *the Crai* meant *carolling*, which implied a Christian message connected with the festival of the Birth of the Lord, a sober play, unaccompanied singing, and relatively simple costumes whose symbolism was strictly linked to the character in question. For the younger generations, the meaning shifted towards the idea of spectacle and costume styles became extravagant, musical instruments were introduced, and the number of voices was greatly increased. The masks worn by the *Brunduși* and the *Popa* were employed specifically for their ability to create spectacle. Community encouragement and the competitive spirit engendered by the *Crai* Festival facilitated this shift in meaning, which might in fact have taken place anyway, given that festivals and spectacles are expanding all over the world. What remains unchanged is the Christian kernel of the tradition, and this will always guarantee the play its place among the customs associated with Christmas.



NOTES

1. See: https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com_presa/com_pdf/rpl2021_date_provizorii_profil_teritorial_ian_2023.pdf, last accessed on 9/09/2026

2. The Uniate initiative of 1698-1701 was a move to attach the Orthodox believers of Transylvania to Roman Catholicism. It took place under pressure from the rulers of the Habsburg Empire, who wished to strengthen the position of Catholicism by making the Orthodox convert. The Romanians insisted on keeping their services in line with the Orthodox rite and preserving the cult of the Orthodox saints, since the Orthodox religion, which they viewed as "ancestral," was closely connected to their ethnic identity. The resulting compromise was named "Greco-Catholicism."

3. Imitation precious stones made of glass.

4. https://youtu.be/_42dX58OlgU, https://youtu.be/azjZFJCfqkc, https://youtu.be/2Jd7Yl0kxnM, https://youtu.be/NYhsbz2-DbE, https://youtu.be/-ZteYWvGfGY etc.



LIST OF INTERLOCUTORS

Nicolae Cic, 57, Jieț, interviewed in 2025, a former Shepherd.

Alin Ciurea, 32, Jieț, interviewed in 2025.

Ionel Dănescu, born in 1962, Paroșeni, interviewed in 2014 and 2025.

Dumitru Gălățan-Jieț, 85, Jieț, interviewed in 2025.

Mitu Șchiopoiu, 50, Jieț, interviewed in 2025

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The Cincu Run of the *Lole* Ritual. Fieldwork Experiences

Iuliana Dumitru
National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Romania

Dr. Iuliana Dumitru is a museographer at the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant (Bucharest, Romania) and a researcher interested in memory, patrimony, and the symbolic geographies of spaces.

Correspondence: iulianadumitrumtr@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This text explores the *Fuga Lolelor* [The Run of the *Lole*] custom of Cincu, Brașov county, from an ethnographic and auto-ethnographic (the relevant inserts are given in italics and in bold) perspective and seeks to understand the relationships between ritual, community, and processes of patrimonialisation. Springing from my experience of taking part in the ritual as a researcher and also from my discussions with the master mask-maker Uwe Constantin Boghian, it discusses how the tradition functions as a living social practice sustained not only by the relationships between the *Lole* and the hosts but also by the involvement of the local community and of those who come home from the diaspora to participate. My analysis of this fieldwork, which juxtaposes changes taking place in the ritual with the role of the Museum and with tensions between transmission, classification and living-out, demonstrates how *Fuga Lolelor* continues to function as a space in which the idea of belonging is practised and renegotiated.

KEYWORDS

Fuga Lolelor; ritual; patrimonialisation; autoethnography; community; masks.

> *The whips are like fireworks and crack at frequent intervals. The sound they make can always be heard close by, and the echo hangs in the air for a long time. My adrenaline level rises and my body cannot calm itself. I keep a slight distance from the centre of the crowd for fear of being caught by the end of a whip. All the same, I am smiling from ear to ear. The crowd gathers and gradually becomes a single body. We walk through the village together, caught up in the movement and keeping time with the bells. I am with the masked group. The noise, the motion, the closeness of the others keeps me in a constant state of alert. A doughnut, then a small glass of schnapps. It helps me to stay here, to be anchored.*

Customs of a ritual nature were not one of my research interests, not until recently at any rate. Masks always struck me as grotesque and frightening, and this was principally because I did not know what they signified. My first encounter with a mask was in my childhood, when my cousin (through the family's in-laws), Nicoleta, moved into the house next to ours and hung a *brondoși* mask on the wall.[1] I did not know what customs involving masks meant, and there was no way her explanations, despite her best efforts to adapt them to make them appropriate for a child of seven, could construct from zero in my mind a whole world of imagination. It was only at university that I grasped that the grotesqueness and exaggeration





Image 2. Mask created by Uwe Constantin Boghian for his wife, October 2024.
Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru.

Image 1. Uwe Constantin Boghian in his workshop, October 2024. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru.

found in masks were not incidental, that the role of masks was to frighten away evil spirits, to overturn the established order so as to be able to recreate it, to bring into the world, via extravagant behaviour and noise, a temporary equilibrium.

Once I arrived at the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, I was gradually exposed to information, images and ideas that had not formed part of my initial universe.[2] The chaotic world of masks began to exert its attraction on me. Agitation, motion, the feeling of being together. The idea of gathering and of collective movement, of doing something in unison. Not long after this, the MASKS project[3] became an option for me and despite knowing almost nothing, I said yes to it. So it was that I came to pose one of the most naive questions I have ever asked: "*Is Cincu a person, or a place?*" A month later I was in the car on my way to Cincu, a village in Brașov county, to meet a master mask-maker. The project included a research component in which team members had to meet master mask-makers and film the making of a mask. For me, this was the first piece of field work whose purpose was the making of a film.

After some short telephone conversations, I reach Uwe Constantin Boghian's gate[4] and enter a universe in which I immediately feel I belong. It is as if a different timeline opened up and I began to discover, step by step, *Fuga Lolelor*.[5] Uwe becomes my insider, the person who takes me into the story at leisure, from the origins of the custom to how a mask is constructed and the performer enters into their role. In the workshop in his courtyard, among skins, belts and tools, I start to understand that a mask is not merely an object but the product of a slow accumulation of actions, rules and observations. From the faces and expressions which lodge

in his mind, drawn later on paper, to its final form worn in the ritual, each mask bears a story that precedes the moment when it is placed on someone's body and begins to move.

The term "Lole" does not have a universally accepted explanation; it is something borrowed from the Romanian Saxon tradition and is used principally as a name for masked characters, without any clearly established etymology. Local legends make reference both to medieval events, such as the story of Ursula who is supposed to have repelled attackers by means of noise and disguise,[6] and to what the craft guilds used to do, when these masked figures accompanied processions and had the role of providing symbolic protection. In the Saxon communities, the *Lole*, also known as *Urzeln/ Urzellauf*, were associated with a universe in which order, discipline, and protecting shared goods were essential. They accompanied the guild chests that held their money, documents and trade secrets, and the role of the noise of the whips, the movement, and the vivid expressiveness of the masks was not a decorative one; rather, it had to do with intimidation and with marking out a safe space for the community.

Over time, this safeguarding function changed into a rite de passage. The *Lole* no longer accompany chests and goods but mark the beginning of the year, drive winter away and announce the coming of spring. The whips, bells and masks have kept their role of disturbing and scaring, but the meaning has shifted from economic protection to the maintaining of a symbolic equilibrium within the community. Nothing is peaceful or harmonious here; exaggeration, noise and movement have actually become the mechanisms by means of which order is restored.

Nowadays, the costume completes the effect produced by the mask and transforms its wearer into a barely recognisable presence. Onto a base of white cloth are sewn narrow strips of black material, made in the past from leftovers of textile materials, which, by the way they move, create the impression of a living, vibrating fleece, which accompanies every gesture. The mask is constructed on a structure of wire and fine chicken wire, then moulded and painted to accentuate its expressiveness. Depending on the skill of the person making it, the face may be carefully shaped or more simple, almost flat. It is fixed in place by a piece of material that covers the back of the head, to which is tied a plaited tail held together by a red bow. When combined with the leather whips and the cowbells worn round the waist, the costume in ensemble produces not only a powerful visual impact but also a musical soundtrack that marks the passing of the *Lole* through the village.

Uwe tells me about the way the tradition was interrupted in the years after 1990, when the departure of a large part of the Saxon community led to the collapse of many community structures, since there was no one left to keep them going. The revival of the *Fuga Lolelor* tradition, which began in 2017, involved not a simple resumption but a process of careful negotiation between what was known, what could still be done, and who was still there. For those involved in the revival, members of both communities, that of the Saxon and that of the Romanians, what mattered was not to recreate an idealised past but to give the ritual back the ability to function in the present. Listening to him, I grasped that the *Lole* are tied to the calendar, taking place on the last Sunday in January or the first in February, that they have a set form, and that they draw on people who choose, year after year, to step into role. The ritual will continue to exist for as long as there is someone prepared to wear a mask, to crack a whip, to go from door to door and to be welcomed in. Without this tacit agreement between those who come and those who wait for them, the ritual would exist only as a story told in the past tense.

The reactivation and continued practising of the *Fuga Lolelor* are not the result of an isolated effort. Over time, the local authorities have become part of this process, supporting the organising and infrastructure needed for the ritual to take place. However, a vital part is played by Marlene Herberth and her husband Alex Herberth, who are involved both in coordinating



Image 3. *Lolă* cracking a whip in front of the church in Cincu, February 2025. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru



Image 4. The trailer from which the *Judgment of the Fools* takes place, February 2025. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru.

the event and in developing the *Lole* Museum and the cultural programmes linked with it.[7] Their constant work means that the ritual is not only maintained but also interacts with other forms of cultural expression, with artists invited to work together with the community, and with networks beyond the village. This twofold involvement, both institutional and personal, enables the ritual to function in a present that no longer belongs to the guilds but is in search of its own forms of cohesion.

The ritual takes place in accordance with a clear structure, even if it feels from the inside like an intense overlapping of sounds, bodies and gestures. The procession sets off from a house in the village, where the participants costume, put on their masks and are given a number. The numbering is not random; even though people's faces are hidden by their masks, everyone's identity is known, and responsibility does not disappear with the covering of the face. From there, the group moves to a point in front of the Town Hall, and here the *Judgment of the Fools* takes place. Verses spoken aloud in public recount minor misdemeanours, ridiculous situations, and things that have happened in the life of the community. A villager can be summoned out "to the blackboard" for a few minutes, but this serves not as a sanction but as a symbolic setting-right of relationships. Laughter draws the community together rather than dividing it, and irony does not exclude people but brings them back in. The time spent in this way functions as a form of collective reflection in which tensions are acknowledged and integrated. The ritual thus begins from within the village before opening up towards the gateways and the road.

After the judgment, the route leads on to the Museum of the *Lole*, where the opening of that year's exhibition takes place. The museum is a natural stage in the ritual, not a break from it. Only after this stop does the group set off through the village streets, following an established route so that the hosts who have undertaken to receive the group can be ready. Gates open, improvised tables are set up, hot doughnuts, schnapps, soft drinks and slices of bread spread with pork dripping or zacusca [homemade savoury vegetable spread] make their appearance. Every stop reactivates the relationship between those who come wearing masks and those who await them, and the way the procession continues from one year to the next shows that the ritual draws its strength from acknowledgment and participation.

> *We continue to go from gate to gate, my body can still keep up. A small glass of schnapps, a doughnut, then we move on again. One person spreads the bread with pork dripping, someone else uses zacusca. I choose zacusca. I have lost count of the doughnuts I have eaten. Bells and the cracking of the whips can be heard from all directions, and the sickly-sweet smell of vanilla sugar hovers over the village. The faces at the gates await us with broad smiles. The welcoming is not an isolated gesture but a constant flux that keeps us moving. I begin to feel queasy. I have overdone it with the doughnut eating or, to be more honest, possibly with the schnapps. I stop and allow the procession to pass me, ask for a glass of water, and stay chatting with my hosts. The quiet does me good. After I recover, I go up the street at right angles and succeed in catching them up.*

It is precisely this relationship that makes the ritual one of a kind. It is not merely a trip through the village or a greeting spoken into the void. The *Lole* come, and the hosts await them. Without this element of welcome, without the open doors, the improvised tables and the act of offering, *Fuga Lolelor* would be no more than people donning masks and going for a walk. Here, however, the ritual functions as a social bond. The *Lole* are guests, and the



Image 5. Eggs received as a gift by *Lole*, February 2025. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru.



Image 6. Doughnuts left over from the *Lole*, February 2025. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru.

hosts are not spectators but an active part of what happens. The welcoming is not a secondary act but a condition of the ritual's existence. Offering food and drink means confirming belonging, acknowledging a greeting and returning it. In this exchange, the roles are clear, but mobile: he who receives guests today received them last year as well, and next year he will be awaiting them again. The ritual is based on this regular interchange, on the continuing of the act of opening the gate and laying the table.

Viewed from this perspective, the relationship between *Lole* and hosts is what rescues the ritual from the potential danger of being a performance or all about consumption. The food, drink, masks, and acts of welcoming function not as goods that can be exchanged but as things linked to a time and to a relationship. In the sense suggested by the anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (1986), they emerge for a short time from the limitations of exchange and acquire a cultural biography of their own. The schnapps is not "a strong drink," the doughnuts are not "an edible product," and the mask is not "an object." Their value cannot be separated from the context within which they are offered and accepted. It is precisely this suspension of the law of exchange that makes the ritual distinct. Without hosts, without this circuit of welcoming, the *Lole* would become a repeatable formula, easy to recognise and, ultimately, to consume. Relationships are what stop this happening.

On the day of the ritual, I spent much of my time in the company of a lass of eleven, Marlene, who has come



Image 7. Young *Lolă* resting, February 2025. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru.

from Germany with her father specifically to take part in the *Fuga Lolelor*. They are not the only ones to have made this journey. A proportion of the Saxons who left Romania in the '90s, or their children, return for the ritual year by year. Some of them are even involved in organising it. For some, it is one of the few occasions on which the village becomes once again a place they have lived in and not only visited. This coming back is not something declarative or nostalgic but something practised: going through the village, wearing a mask, entering into the shared rhythm, being welcomed at the gates. *Fuga Lolelor* thus becomes a tradition of returning, a repeated way of reactivating an "at home" which, for the rest of the year, stays vague or distant.



Image 8. The researcher together with a *Lolă* and with icing sugar round her mouth, February 2025. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru.

At the ball that takes place in the evening, masks are laid aside. Although they have been walking through the village all day, some of the participants still have the energy to dance. Soup and other good things are consumed, and tiredness seems to be suspended for a few hours. The doughnut makes its reappearance as queen of the evening. There is nothing demonstrative about the dancing; it is not a spectacle for outsiders but a natural continuation of the day. Here, the ritual comes to an end not through some solemn act but through a way of staying together. Without a mask, without the sound of the whip, but with the same need for community that has kept the whole day in motion.

The *Lole* Museum introduces a note of selection, order, comparison. If the ritual brings together and overlays, the museum separates out and explains. It does not destroy the chaos but fixes it, temporarily, in an intelligible form. The objects are extracted from the flow of a day and placed so as to facilitate viewing, classification, narration. In the terms proposed by Kopytoff (1986), this is the point at which things are in danger of slipping into a state of homogenisation, in which differences are made visible precisely through being put in a framework and being compared. Culture produces order, but this order needs to be measured out with care so as not to destroy the unique nature of the experience from which it originates.

Between the chaos of the ritual and the order of the museum a fragile equilibrium therefore needs to be constructed. If the *Lole* were to remain merely an intense experience lived out once a year, they would be hard to pass on and to share. If they were to become no more than classified objects, permanently separated from bodies and from relationships, they would lose the energy that makes them active today. Between these two forms of existence, the ritual continues to function as a social bond and the museum as organised memory, without either obliterating the other. Rather, they appear to give each other mutual support, each with its own kind of order and its own kind of time: one closely packed, lived out, the other settled, explanatory.

The more I think about this experience, the clearer the difference between festival and ritual becomes. At Cincu, *Fuga Lolelor* is still, first and foremost, a community ritual, precisely

because people participate both as *Lole* and as hosts. Relationships are not put on hold during the performance but reactivated through each stop, each serve-yourself table, each return. Here, patrimonialisation is not simply a label but a process that has made possible the revival of the tradition and its transformation into an occasion that continues to be lived out.

However, the idea of "romantic capitalisation upon folklore," that is, the idealising exploitation of folklore, as evoked by the ethnologist Bogdan Neagota (Rus and Neagota 2017), is still something to be careful about. Any kind of visibility given to traditions runs the risk of simplifying or aestheticising what from within is far more complex. At the same time, my experience from this fieldwork confirms the observation that to work in community and to work for community cannot easily be separated. Involvement becomes inevitable, while the boundary between research and participation is subject to constant negotiation. It may be precisely this tension that causes *Fuga Lolelor* to stay alive. Between returning and transforming, between memory and the present, the ritual continues to provide a space in which the idea of "at home" is not only recalled but practised.



Image 9. The cup saying Cincu Town Hall on it, the evening of the ball, February 2025. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru.

In the evening, at the ball, things feel different. The outsiders with their anthropological angle on events are given seats at the tables on the stage. What an honour! Everything can be seen better from here. How those taking part are dressed: some are in Saxon folk costume, while others are wearing evening-out-in-town clothes. We watch them dancing, how they pair up, then join the "hora" round dance. The mask has disappeared but the body of the ritual is still there. I fall in love with a cup that says Cincu Town Hall on it. I think of taking it with me as a little souvenir but don't do so. I know that one of the organisers would have to pay for it, someone would take responsibility. I am tired, but happy. I set off for my lodgings, at peace. What a privilege to be able to take part in a ritual of this kind. How "native to the village" I have felt, for the space of a day.

NOTES

1. *Brondoșii* are the masked characters found in the winter rituals of the Cavnic area of Maramureș. They have an apotropaic function and are connected with caroling and with practices performed to drive away evil spirits. Their masks are made of lambskin, fleece, red tassels around the ears and a long red tongue. Their costumes are white but around their middles they wear a belt with many bells hanging from it.

2. For my initiation into the world of rituals involving masks I am indebted to the ethnologist Dr. Anamaria Iuga, who as a first step introduced me to the *Carnival King of Europe* (www.carnivalkingofeurope.it) platform, a large-scale video storehouse of European carnival-type customs and rituals. At that point I did not fully understand the material I viewed, but I spent a considerable amount of time studying it. It was also Anamaria Iuga who subsequently involved me in the MASKS project, masks and performative rituals being among her areas of research interest. For this I owe her my gratitude.

3. "Unveiling the Arts and Works Behind the Masks," acronym MASKS, is an Erasmus+ project being undertaken as a collaboration between 12 partners from Spain, Italy, Romania and Portugal and is coordinated by the University of Valladolid. The National Museum of the Romanian Peasant is a project partner. More details of the project may be found at: https://unveilingthemasks.uva.es/project/.

4. Uwe Constantin Boghian (b. 19th of April 1974) is a Cincu master craftsman who specialises in making masks and costumes for the *Fuga Lolelor* ritual. Having grown up in direct contact with this tradition, Boghian is not only an artisan but also an active participant in it. Besides making masks he also works in leather, so his workshop is a workspace in which masks, costumes, belts and other handmade items coexist. His ongoing involvement in passing on his craft and in practising the ritual contributes to its continuation and to its being handed down from each generation to the next.

5. A project carried out by the Großschenker Urzellauf Association //Fuga Lolelor Cincu and the SOXEN Association in partnership with Cincu Town Hall and the Cincu Lutheran Parish.

6. In the historic context, the guild was a way of organising craftsmen who worked in the same trade. Its role was to protect their professional interests and to ensure the passing-on of regulations and of specific knowledge.

7. More information about the SOXEN Association and the KraftMade programme may be found here: https://www.facebook.com/kraftmade/?locale=ro_RO; and here: https://romaniandesignweek.ro/portofoliu/kraftmade-povestea, accessed on 15 January 2026.

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http://www.sibiu-turism.ro/Ce-facem-Evenimente-Traditii-si-obiceiuri-Fuga-lolelor.aspx, accessed on 15 January 2026.

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The Reinterpretation of Folk Traditions of Christmas Masks in Parajanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* and Mykolaichuk's *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn*

Kira Sadoja
Friedrich Schiller University, Jena, Germany
ORCID: 0009-0002-3697-4619

Kira Sadoja is a researcher in folklore studies, ethnolinguistics, and the anthropology of ritual culture. Her work focuses on East European ritual traditions, with a particular focus on the Ukrainian Carpathians, mythological concepts, winter calendar and wedding rituals (especially the Yuletide cycle), charms, and verbal folklore within traditional belief systems.

Correspondence: kira.sadoja@hotmail.de

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the cinematic treatment of Carpathian winter masquerade rituals in Sergei Parajanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1965) and Ivan Mykolaichuk's *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn* (1981). Rather than functioning as ethnographic illustration or decorative folklore, the ritual mask operates as a dynamic cinematic instrument mediating crises, transitions, and the articulation of otherwise inexpressible experiences. In Parajanov, masquerade is embedded within a cosmological logic that overrides individual agency: masks visually dissolve subjectivity, and liminal moments—Christmas and death—activate forces beyond human control. Here, masks do not facilitate communication or action but manifest existential threshold states, ultimately marking exclusion from the cycles of life. By contrast, Mykolaichuk repurposes the same ritual complex to emphasize personal and social communication. Temporal compression, the layering of historical strata, and the coexistence of archaic and Soviet-era masquerade figures render the ritual a space for overcoming social and personal muteness. Masks function both as protective shells and as enablers of speech, allowing characters to express emotions, assert agency, and negotiate relational dynamics otherwise constrained by social norms. Comparative analysis reveals how a single ritual form can be adapted in cinema to produce radically different effects on how subjectivity is made visible and expressed. The study demonstrates that cinematic engagement with traditional masquerade does not merely reproduce folk practice but creatively translates its internal logic into narrative, symbolic, and aesthetic terms, producing layered meanings accessible to both initiated and general audiences.

KEYWORDS

Carpathian Folklore; Ritual Mask; Parajanov; Mykolaichuk; Cinematic Anthropology.



Introduction

This article examines the cinematic rethinking of traditional Ukrainian winter masks in two landmark films of the late Soviet period—*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1965), directed by Sergei Parajanov, and *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn* (1981), directed by Ivan Mykolaichuk. Despite the sixteen-year gap between them, these films engage in a profound artistic dialogue. What unites them is not merely their shared setting

in the southeastern Ukrainian Carpathians[1] and the folkloric motif of Christmas masking by ritual maskers, but also a specific use of the mask as a medium. In both cases, masks are neither a decorative element nor an ethnographic illustration; rather, they function as a complex artistic device that allows the characters to articulate what, under conditions of rigid social or personal constraints, remains unsayable.

The aim of this article is to trace the changing functions of masking practices within the winter calendrical cycle in poetic cinema[2] and to show how cinematic space becomes a site of artistic rethinking of ritual. At the centre of the analysis is the question of how and why in these films the mask ceases to be merely an ethnographic attribute and turns into a tool of psychological and narrative release, activating within the language of cinema those emotional states that remain blocked in everyday social communication.

The proposed comparison is not accidental. The connection between the two directors is not only aesthetic but also deeply biographical. Ivan Mykolaichuk, whose artistic career began with the leading role in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, in effect grew up within Parajanov's artistic system of coordinates. In a world where ritual, music, and visual symbolism replaced verbal text and became the language of emotional experience, Mykolaichuk organically mastered the idiom of visual metaphor. Years later, in his final directorial work, *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn*, he—like Parajanov in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*—turns to the image of the ritual maskers, yet transforms its function in accordance with a different internal vector of narration.

Ethnographic research,[3] including my own over many years of field observations in Ukrainian villages in the Carpathian region, shows that in traditional rural life the direct expression of strong emotions—love, jealousy, desire, fear—is often tabooed or strictly constrained by norms of behaviour. Ritual practices associated with wearing masks temporarily suspend these restrictions, granting the individual the right to anonymity and a kind of ritual alibi. In this space, the tradition of ritual masking becomes a legitimate channel of ritual communication.[4]

The role of the mask in the two films has not yet been examined in detail as an independent instrument of communication. There exists a substantial body of scholarship on Parajanov's poetics;[5] however, the mask as a language of the unsayable—a device that took shape in his cinema and was further developed in Mykolaichuk's later work—has so far remained on the periphery of scholarly attention.

I proceed from the premise that both films translate the anthropological function of ritual into the very fabric of cinematic language. The arrival of the ritual maskers here constitutes a narrative threshold, a moment of truth, a point of extreme semantic tension beyond which the familiar order of life becomes untenable. Yet the vector of this ritual intervention in the characters' destinies is fundamentally different in each film. In *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, the coming of the ritual maskers appears as a destructive force: it does not merely reveal a hidden fracture in human relationships, but definitively shatters the illusion of family well-being, laying bare the protagonists' insurmountable loneliness and propelling them toward a tragic finale. In *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn*, the semantic function of the mask changes: it becomes a bridge over the abyss of muteness and cultural alienation. Here, the ritual alibi does not destroy but rather creates, granting the characters the right to a degree of sincerity and intimacy that in everyday life seems unattainable.

Summaries of the films

Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors (1965, dir. Sergei Parajanov)

Parajanov's film is based on the eponymous novella by Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky (Kotsiubynsky 1912), a classic of Ukrainian literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the screenplay was written by Parajanov in collaboration with Ivan Chendei, a writer from the Ukrainian Carpathians.

The action of the film unfolds in a Hutsul village in the Carpathians. At the centre of the narrative is the tragic story of Ivan Paliychuk and Marichka Hutenyuk, whose love proves doomed because of the longstanding feud between their families. After his beloved's death, Ivan remains trapped in despair for a long time, unable to return to ordinary life.

In an attempt to reintegrate himself into the customary rhythms of community, Ivan eventually marries another woman, Palahna, yet this marriage brings him neither happiness nor inner balance. In the end, Palahna begins an affair with the village *molfar*[6] and makes no effort to conceal this relationship either from her husband or from fellow villagers. Tensions between the characters intensify, and the emotional distance between Ivan and the world around him becomes increasingly pronounced.

The climactic events of the film are linked to the arrival of the ritual maskers at Ivan's house at Christmas. This ritual intrusion sets in motion processes that make the collapse of his marriage inevitable, drive the protagonist irrevocably into a world of spectral visions, and culminate in his death.

Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn (1981, dir. Ivan Mykolaichuk)

The screenplay was written by I. Mykolaichuk in collaboration with V. Korotych.[7] The film centres on Mykhailo Rusnak, an elderly émigré who returns from Canada to his native Bukovynian village with his granddaughter Orysia.

Rusnak is gravely ill and almost blind; his journey is a farewell to the homeland and to the people he left many years earlier. This story of return is interwoven with a love story between Orysia and a local dissident, Hryhir Korchak (played by I. Mykolaichuk himself), a man whose life has taken a difficult course. Yet the mutual attraction between the characters runs up against a wall of external awkwardness and the impossibility of open dialogue.

In the film's climactic scene, which depicts the arrival of the ritual maskers in the village, Hryhir, concealed behind a mask, finally confesses his love to Orysia, thus giving both himself and his beloved a chance for hope and renewal, while Rusnak recognises and accepts that the life he has lived can no longer be changed. In the film's finale, Mykhailo Rusnak returns to Canada alone.

Folkloric and ethnographic context

Ritual maskers in the winter calendar of the Ukrainian Carpathians

In the winter calendar of the Ukrainian Carpathians, masks are used in various forms of ritual house-to-house rounds and are not rigidly tied to a single holiday. Depending on local

tradition, they may appear in Christmas carolling processions (*koliadnyky*[8] in Boykivshchyna, Zakarpattia, etc.) or in *Malanka*[9] ritual house-to-house rounds (Bukovyna, most Hutsul regions), held on 13-14 January—the feast days of St. Basil and St. Melania.

Both Parajanov and Mykolaichuk employ masks associated with the *Malanka* ritual[10] in the climactic scenes of their films. *Malanka*, as a ritual round, allows the mask to exercise its communicative and transgressive functions most fully. Scholars of Carpathian Yuletide traditions note that *Malanka* creates a model of "inverted reality," in which participants, hidden behind masks, are able to speak and act in ways that would not be permissible in everyday life (Kylymnyk 1993; Kurochkin 1995). In this way, the *Malanka* ritual most completely realises the function of carnival inversion, enabling laughter, parody, critique, and frankness that are tabooed in ordinary social interaction.





The dual nature of the traditional mask

Masking practices in the winter calendar combine ancient conceptions of the year's cycle, elements of Christian ritual, and local social functions of the holiday. The social function of ritual masquerading—the temporary suspension of hierarchies, the permission to parody, criticize, and speak frankly—constitutes only one layer of its significance. Equally important is the sacred-cosmological aspect of the Christmas season processions, linked to the perception of the Yuletide period as a turning point in the year, a time of instability and transition, when the boundaries between worlds become permeable.

Folkloristic and mythological studies have repeatedly emphasized that it is precisely during this winter calendrical turning point that a kind of corridor opens up between the world of the living and the otherworldly realm. Vladimir Propp connected Yuletide rounds with beliefs in the temporary return of foreign or other beings—the souls of the dead, ancestors, or inhabitants of the other world—whose incursion into human space becomes possible only at moments of calendrical transition. In his observations, the winter solstice is conceived as a time when chthonic forces and the spirits of ancestors are activated (Propp 1963).

In Carpathian tradition, this conception finds expression in the imagery of ritual maskers. Figures of demons, wild men, and animals personify the intrusion of the otherworld, which simultaneously requires ritual appeasement and subsequent expulsion. As Oleksandr Kurochkin (1995) notes, such figures embody the ambivalent power of the other world, both dangerous and necessary at the same time.

The social dimension of masking practices manifests in the creation of a distinct ritual space, in which it becomes possible to articulate what remains suppressed in ordinary communication. These rituals temporarily suspend social prohibitions and allow latent tensions within the community to surface. Scholars emphasize that in this space, speech and action that would be impossible in everyday life are permitted—including confessions, mockery, critique, and the expression of desires (Kligman 1988; Creed 2011).

This logic aligns closely with Victor Turner's (1969) concept of liminality, used to describe transitional states in which familiar social structures are temporarily dissolved and participants find themselves between stable social orders (Turner 1969). In the masking practices of the winter calendar, this liminal situation is ritualized and collective: the breaking of norms is not perceived as deviance but as an expected element of the transitional time. It is precisely in this way that social inversion and temporary freedom of expression do not destroy order but rather create the conditions for its subsequent restoration.

Thus, the Christmas season processions of ritual maskers in Carpathian tradition should be understood as a multilayered phenomenon, in which social inversion is combined with

the sacred logic of passage between worlds. Within this complex, the mask functions both as a means of temporary social transformation and as a sign of otherness, linked to the liminal state of time and space. It is precisely this dual—social and cosmological—nature of the Yuletide masquerade that proves crucial for its later cinematic reinterpretation.

The mask simultaneously conceals and reveals. By depriving a person of individual recognizability, it creates conditions for the articulation of that which remains unspoken in everyday communication. In traditional rural culture, where the direct expression of strong emotions—love, jealousy, erotic desire, resentment—is often socially restricted, the mask provides a sanctioned channel for expressing these tensions. It is precisely this duality—the interplay of freedom and regulation—that makes the mask a stable cultural mechanism rather than a chaotic expression of "folk carnival" (Bakhtin 1984).

At the same time, the mask does not abolish the social norm but temporarily suspends its operation, turning transgression into an expected and even obligatory element of ritual behaviour. Importantly, the mask does not erase the acting subject entirely; rather, it shifts agency from the individual person to the ritual character. As an embodied ritual figure, the mask allows the participant to distance themselves from their words and actions, perform them within the ritual framework, and then return to normative social conduct. It is precisely this mechanism of mediated expression—the combination of anonymity, ritual role, and temporary freedom—that proves crucial for the subsequent cinematic reinterpretation of the mask in the films of Parajanov and Mykolaichuk.

Ritual Masks as a Destructive Catalyst in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*

Masks appear in Parajanov's film in the seventh segment—*Christmas*. Most of the scenes played out in this segment are absent from Kotsiubynsky's story (Kotsiubynsky 1912). What the viewer sees in this cinematic chapter, from beginning to end, is almost entirely the invention of the screenwriters of *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*—Parajanov and Chendei—including the scenes featuring ritual maskers. So why did Parajanov employ masks, and what cinematic functions does he achieve through them?

The Mask of Death and the Experience of Liminality

The "Christmas" segment opens with ritual maskers passing before us, one by one. Strictly speaking, these are not masked carollers (*koliadnyky*) but *malankari*.[11] The camera sequentially presents close-ups of the masks: gendarmes, a bear, a devil, a Roma woman, a Hutsul, a Turk, a goat, *Dido* (Old Man, Grandpa), *Baba* (Old Woman, Grandma), *Malanka*, and finally, Death with a scythe. On the final mask, the camera lingers for a particularly long time: the viewer has time to examine the eye holes and notice the glimmer of a living gaze behind the mask of Death. This optical gap between the mask and the human eye immediately establishes the key theme of the episode, the theme of liminal existence.

In the next moment, the camera shows what the gaze of the person wearing the Death mask has been fixed upon: it is the grave of Marichka and a roe deer standing by the grave. The image of the animal, which had accompanied the love scenes between Ivan and Marichka as a symbol of purity and natural wholeness, here returns in a different capacity. After Marichka's death, the roe deer appears at her grave immediately following the funeral—as if the soul of

the young woman, who died an unnatural, "unclean" death, has materialized in the form of the animal. Shocked by what he sees, the ritual masker removes the mask, and the viewer realizes that Ivan himself is behind the mask of Death. The protagonist's reaction reveals the profound effect of the vision: the event confronts him with the reality he had tried to distance himself from after Marichka's death, placing him at a point of radical existential instability.

The choice of mask here is not accidental. Death has accompanied Ivan since childhood: the death of his brother and the murder of his father, which occur at the very beginning of the film, and especially the loss of Marichka, shape his fate as a continuous experience of grief. After the death of his beloved, he can no longer fully belong to this world or actively participate in communal life but behaves in many ways like a holy fool: he endures hardship patiently, earns his living without refusing any kind of work, cares for animals, finds consolation in the inanimate, and gradually withdraws from people. He seems to be already partially located in non-being, from which he is temporarily pulled back by his marriage to Palahna. Yet this marriage is not an act of new love but a social necessity ("Ivan must marry… After all, one has to manage the household"[12]), because this is what is expected in the society to which he still formally belongs.

By donning the mask of Death, Ivan does not play at death nor assume a ritual role but simply visually externalizes his inner state: he already half-belongs to another world.

Malanka *Mask as an Instrument of Inversion: From Ritual Blessing to Temptation*

The next scene involving the ritual maskers moves us to the yard of the house where Ivan and Palahna live. The *mise-en-scène* is constructed so that the *malankari*, after performing a ritual dance in the yard, leave the space, while Palahna, having first come out of the house to reward them for their performance, lingers to gather apples scattered in the snow. The unexpected return of one of the ritual maskers, wearing the *Malanka* mask, disrupts the ritual order. He throws onto the snow a bundle representing a swaddled infant, a common attribute of the *Malanka* character, and begins to make advances to Palahna.

Initially, Palahna resists, attempting to free herself from the unwanted embrace. The camera records the struggle and her fall into the snow, but then deliberately breaks the causal chain; the viewer is not shown how the scene concludes.

At the same time, Parajanov introduces a second plane: Ivan stands behind the high snow-covered fence of his house, unmasked but holding a scythe. He may be witnessing the events—or he may see nothing, absorbed in his own thoughts provoked by the vision of the roe deer. The director deliberately leaves this ambiguous, presenting the two spaces simultaneously and placing the responsibility for interpretation on the viewer.

By using the mask as part of a broader system of directorial techniques—parallel editing, separate spatial representation, and the absence of explanatory sound cues—Parajanov creates a situation in which any unambiguous interpretation of the events is undermined: it remains unclear what actually occurred (the viewer does not know what ultimately happened between the masked Yura and Palahna, since the editing deliberately interrupts the scene and provides neither visual nor verbal confirmation); it is unclear what Ivan actually saw; and it is not obvious how to interpret Palahna's reaction, which shows neither terror nor remorse—only bewilderment. In this context, the mask conceals the acting subject: the person behind the mask is temporarily suspended, and responsibility appears to dissolve into the ritual. Ultimately, the marriage bond fractures not because of any factual act of betrayal but because the truth cannot be established; doubt proves more destructive than knowledge.

The symbolism of details underscores this process: in the following shot, the camera lingers on the swaddled doll left on the snow by the *Malanka* character, with a red apple lying beside it. Together, these form a clear metaphor for temptation. In the next shot, Palahna appears, holding the apple, seemingly contemplating something as she watches the ritual masker. The event has become a temptation for Palahna, revealing for the first time the full depth of her inner dissatisfaction in her marriage. When Ivan appears, Palahna instantly resumes her role as a loving wife, but the viewer understands that the seed of doubt has already fallen on fertile ground, and the first step toward infidelity has been taken.



Khymka as a Structural Mediator: Grotesque as Psychological Mask

At this moment, Khymka—an eccentric old woman with a reputation for uncanny wisdom—enters the episode, her grotesque laughter disrupting the illusion of familial harmony. Although this character does not literally use carnival attributes, Khymka operates within the logic of masked behaviour: her grotesque laughter and eccentric conduct constitute a mode of communication distinct from the everyday. She does not require an artificial mask, since she herself embodies otherness—a mask that is never removed.

Comparison with Kotsiubynsky's (1912) novella allows us to see more clearly how radically Parajanov reconceives this character. In Kotsiubynsky's text, Khymka is a neighbor regarded in the village as a witch and primarily associated with harm to livestock (1912). In the film, however, Khymka becomes a structural through-line, appearing three times (Parajanov 1964, 3, 7-8)—in each instance at a crucial point in the characters' fates, where matters of life's continuation, fertility, and the boundaries between worlds are at stake.

Khymka's first appearance is connected with Marichka: the old woman, while praising the girl, unexpectedly grips her stomach, perceiving a pregnancy. Here, Khymka functions as a bearer of hidden knowledge and as a harbinger of the continuation of the lineage—the possibility of the future, which seems both natural and promised.

Her second appearance occurs in the film section "Christmas": taking in her arms the baby doll discarded by the *Malanka*, Khymka positions herself between Ivan and Palahna and asks them each in turn where their child is. Receiving no answer, she takes the doll with her. The masquerade prop transforms into a prophetic sign: the "future" (the child) is presented—and immediately withdrawn. In the next moment, the camera shows a close-up of the *Malanka* mask. The masked figure slowly removes the mask, revealing the village sorcerer (*molfar*) Yura. He is the person who accosted Palahna, and he is ultimately the one with whom Palahna will betray her husband.

The third and final appearance of Khymka relates to St. George's Day. In the film section "Tomorrow is Spring," which follows "Christmas," Palahna secretly performs a divination ritual to ask God for children with Ivan, but the ritual fails due to another attempt by the *molfar* Yura; at the same time, Ivan, in his yard, is futilely trying to save a dying sheep. It is precisely after this that Khymka appears on the doorstep, and the informed viewer understands that Khymka is not merely a wise woman but a witch, since according to Carpathian beliefs, only witches can violate the boundaries of someone else's household on St. George's Day, causing harm to livestock and taking away fertility.

Khymka utters a short prayer and immediately bursts into grotesque laughter. Her sudden appearance on the doorstep after Palahna's failed ritual and the drama with the dying sheep underscores the gap between human hopes (the desire for the continuation of the lineage and the preservation of life) and the will of the cosmic order: the sacred (prayer) and the "wild" (laughter) merge into a single moment, declaring the futility of struggling against fate. The

bitter irony is reinforced by her name (Khymka is a diminutive of *Yukhimiya*, derived from the Greek *Εὐφήμια*, "pious"): the "pious" wise woman laughs while the characters attempt to hold life together.

Thus, Khymka in Parajanov is neither a villain nor a folkloric "type" but a trickster-figure and resonator, a mediator between worlds and an irrational catalyst of fate. The three appearances of Khymka establish a clear dramaturgical arc: from the promise of continuation (Marichka's pregnancy)—through the demonstration of the absence of the future (the baby doll, first discarded and then taken away in "Christmas")—to the ultimate confirmation of infertility and rupture with the life cycle (St. George's Day, the disrupted ritual, and the dying animal).

The Molfar *under the Mask: The Sacralization of Betrayal*

Particular attention should be paid to the figure of the *molfar* Yura, on whom Parajanov "places" the *Malanka* mask. In Kotsiubynsky's (1912) story, there is no such conflation: Yura is limited to domestic and ethical struggles. In the film, however, he is incorporated into the ritual structure of the winter masquerade and aligned with an archaic mythological layer. As a *molfar*, Yura is connected to the natural elements and forces beyond ordinary human control; as the bearer of the *Malanka* mask—one of the most ambivalent masks of the ritual—he embodies a destructive yet simultaneously vital principle, sanctioned by the ritual. It is precisely this power that ultimately destroys the marriage of Ivan and Palahna.

Funeral Games: The Mask as Enactment and Sign of Final Exclusion

The arrival of the ritual maskers at Christmas in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* is not a self-contained episode. Its logic continues and reaches completion in the scene of Ivan's funeral, where Parajanov again introduces masks—this time the masks of *Dido* and *Baba*. It is important to stress that these are no longer *Malanka* masks: they are of a different type and serve a different purpose. In Carpathian tradition, they belong to the funeral games[13]—a ritual accompanying the death of a community member, intended to restore fertility and life energy after loss.

From an ethnographic perspective, this is entirely legitimate: erotic scenes involving the *Dido* and *Baba* masks in the deceased's home served an apotropaic purpose—to ensure that death would not interrupt the life cycle either in the deceased's household or in the village where he lived. This makes the question of why Parajanov introduces these masks in this particular way and how their function changes in the cinematic context all the more significant.

The *Dido* and *Baba* masks do not immediately enter the foreground. At first, they are in the background, seemingly "mourning" the deceased, while Ivan's mute friend measures his body with an axe so that he can fashion a coffin. This gesture radically depersonalizes death: Ivan ceases to be a person and becomes an object, measured by the length of the body. The axe—a universal instrument in the film—cuts wood, participates in fights, and now becomes the measure of a person's final resting place. It is not merely a domestic detail but a visual formula of fate, subordinating human life to the mechanics of necessity.

Afterward, the masks come into the foreground. *Baba* holds a candle—a symbol of ritual light and sacred accompaniment for the soul. *Dido* carries a wooden *kotsyuba*—a tool used for removing ashes, moving pots, and retrieving bread from the oven. This object is of fundamental significance. In the context of Carpathian funeral games, the *kotsyuba* was

used to remove soot, which was applied to participants' faces—that is, to create a primal, archaic mask. Soot transformed the living face into one from the shadow world, temporarily removing a person from death's reach.

Nevertheless, although the scene preserves traditional elements of funeral games, their function in the frame changes. The *kotsyuba* in the hands of the *Dido* mask ceases to be a tool for protection from death or part of the playful bodily dynamic; it becomes a sign of Ivan's definitive "sweeping out" from the household space. The object associated with the stove—the heart of the household, the place of warmth, bread, and continuity of life—lies beside the deceased's body and loses its life-giving purpose. There is an inversion of domestic comfort: that which traditionally supports life now accompanies death.

The passage of the masks past Ivan's body, as it lies on the bench, completes this process. The masks do not enliven the space with laughter or erotic play, as tradition prescribes; instead, they participate in a restrained, almost mechanical ritual of farewell. As a result, the mask ceases to function as a protective or neutralizing agent against death and begins to mark its presence. The life-affirming ambivalence of the ritual, characteristic of post-mortem gatherings, is minimized in the cinematic space: the ritual no longer opposes death but accompanies it.

Thus, if in the "Christmas" chapter the masks of the ritual maskers trigger a process of disintegration—further distancing Ivan from the living world, the seduction of Palahna, and the loss of future prospects—then in the funeral episode this process reaches logical completion. The ritual dressing up, which began as a temporary and ritually sanctioned disruption of order, concludes with the hero's definitive exclusion from the life of the community.

In conclusion, the arrival of the ritual maskers in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* is neither an ethnographic illustration nor a decorative folkloric element. Parajanov deliberately departs from ethnographic accuracy, combining *Malanka* with a Christmas context to emphasize its symbolic function. The mask becomes a visual instrument of depersonalization, substituting the mechanics of ritual for individual fate. At moments of existential transition—Christmas and death—the ritual masquerade acts as a destructive catalyst, initiating irreversible disintegration: the human being becomes an object of forces beyond their control, and the ritual no longer performs a protective function but merely records the tragic outcome.

Masks as a Means of Communication and Overcoming Silence in *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn*

In contrast to *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, where the arrival of the ritual maskers operates as a destructive force, revealing the breakdown of human bonds, in Ivan Mykolaichuk's film the ritual energy of *Malanka* performs the opposite task. Here the mask becomes a medium not only for overcoming personal "silence" and gaining individual freedom, but for establishing a profound emotional communication and restoring social bonds.

The Phenomenon of "Compressed Time" and the Organization of Ritual Space

The scene of the ritual maskers' arrival in *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn* is introduced by Mykolaichuk with a deliberate disruption of chronological logic. Mykhailo Rusnak and his

granddaughter Orysia arrive in Bukovyna in the autumn, traveling via the Intourist agency (the Soviet "Foreign Tourist" service). As Canadian citizens, whose movement within the USSR was strictly regulated by the duration of their visas, the length of their stay in the country was closely monitored. The Soviet visa regime would hardly have allowed them to remain until January 13—the day of St. Melania, the traditional date for *Malanka*. However, for the director, this anachronism is not a narrative mistake. Mykolaichuk is not concerned with the external logic of daily life or administrative constraints; what matters to him is the logic of fate. The sacred point at which all the film's narrative threads converge can only be reached within "collapsed" time, where the everyday yields to the purifying ritual.

The disruption of temporal logic also relates to Rusnak himself. For this terminally ill character, returning to his homeland to bid it farewell, linear time loses its determinative role. Within this context, the appearance of *Malanka* at a calendrically impossible moment ceases to be perceived as a breach of plausibility and instead corresponds to a special mode of perception in which past and present coexist.

The visual design of the scene emphasizes the scale of the event: immediately following shots of the first snowfall, the figures of the ritual maskers gradually emerge from the horizon, as if growing out of the earth. They fill the frame entirely, creating the impression of an invasion by otherworldly spirits and transforming the Yuletide event from a local occurrence into a pervasive elemental force. The procession is led by maskers wielding whips, whose sharp, deafening cracks across the silent snowfield fulfil the traditional function of "clearing the way" while, in the cinematic context, producing a tense, almost infernal atmosphere. The maskers do not merely enter the village: they literally seize reality, imposing their own rhythm and logic of presence on the film's protagonists.

The composition of the procession emphasizes the heterogeneous nature of this intrusion. The frame contains archaic zoomorphic and anthropomorphic masks, characters referencing the contemporary world (such as firefighters), and figures reminiscent of the official Soviet holiday canon, such as Ded Moroz (the Soviet Santa Claus) and Snegurochka (his granddaughter helper). These elements do not form a coherent hierarchy or a unified stylistic whole. Their simultaneous presence demonstrates that in this film *Malanka* is being presented not as a reconstruction of a stable traditional form but as a practice shaped by historical accretions and encompassing heterogeneous elements.

Thus, the anachronism in the *Malanka* scene functions as a narrative device. The compression of time and the occupation of the screen create conditions in which the ritual becomes the dominant mode of reality.

Mixing Eras: Living Tradition under the Grip of Soviet Ideology

Unlike *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, where the director relies on archaic masks, in *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn* the masquerade is deliberately eclectic. It incorporates everything: the archaic heritage alongside the official Soviet present.[14]

A deeply ironic detail is the presence among the *malankari* of Ded Moroz and Snegurochka. These figures, introduced into Ukrainian culture during the Soviet period and imposed by the state as a substitute for traditional Christmastime masked figures, appear in Mykolaichuk's frame as foreign elements that the tradition is trying to "digest." Mykolaichuk emphasizes this intrusion visually:

- Ded Moroz's hat bears the year 1981. This detail reads as deliberately absurd and conspicuously modern: it shifts the scene from its ritual context into the realm of contemporary time, referencing the visual language of late-Soviet mass culture rather than

the ritual logic of *Malanka*, which relies on temporal inversion and sacramental anonymity. Ded Moroz looks directly at the camera, offering New Year's greetings to the audience as if performing a formal gesture with no connection to the sacredness of the rite.

• Snegurochka, meanwhile, wears a Hutsul *keptar* (vest) over her standard costume. Here there is no irony—rather, it is a visual testament to how tradition attempts to accommodate externally imposed forms. Tradition does not always resist authority; to survive, it usually absorbs the markers of the new political era, becoming a complex, sometimes awkward, but living conglomerate of meanings.

• In the same sequence, there is a scene in which Orysia's aunt is congratulated on receiving a state award (with Ded Moroz performing the ritual alongside the *malankari*). Considering Mykolaichuk's pro-Ukrainian stance and his complicated relationship with the Soviet system, this episode reads as a necessary gesture toward authority, likely intended to manoeuvre around censorship. Yet the presence of archaic masks—bears, goats, devils, and the like—alongside the bureaucratic Ded Moroz creates an effect of surreal absurdity.

As a result, the official gesture is absorbed into the ritual context. *Malanka* does not collapse under ideological pressure; rather, it transforms ideology itself into a component of the ceremonial performance.

The Mask as the Right to Speak

After the scene introducing the *malankari*, a series of shots follows, depicting the masked figures and their ritual transgressions: they jump into the ice-hole, douse people with cold water, and accost women with kisses, including Orysia. The *malankari* are so numerous, and the masks change so rapidly on screen, that at some point the viewer ceases to distinguish individual figures. The effect is less that of a celebration than of an overwhelming environment in which individuality dissolves into the collective.[15] At the same time, the corporeality of the rite is emphasised, along with its sanctioned license to breach physical distance and social norms. Here, masks do more than conceal faces—they legitimise actions that would otherwise be impossible.

Against this backdrop unfolds a key moment in the film: Orysia encounters a masked figure dressed as a bear, led on a chain by another traditional *Malanka* character, the Gypsy. The Bear moves across the snow on its knees, wearing a shaggy black sheepskin coat turned inside out and tied with straw ropes, and its face is hidden behind what appears to be a boar's muzzle.

In the Carpathian tradition, the bear embodies chthonic power, wild nature, and fertility.[16] During village processions, the bear typically demonstrates aggression, invading spectators' space and "attacking" them. Yet in this scene we see a tamed creature, on a leash and stripped of its usual ritual aggressiveness. The Bear kneels submissively before Orysia and, for the first time, speaks: "I love you!" It then rises and exits the frame. Orysia watches in bewilderment.

The action then shifts to the interior of Orysia's aunt's house, into which she invites Ded Moroz and the accompanying *malankari*. Orysia enters, clearly searching among the masked figures for Hryhir. Yet the abundance of masked individuals complicates recognition. She relies on external cues—height, body build, anthropomorphism of the mask, and the "age" of the character depicted—and confidently removes the mask from a man dressed as the Jew, believing him to be Hryhir. Behind the mask, however, is a completely unfamiliar man.

At that moment, she hears again the phrase "I love you!" and realises that Hryhir is nearby, now wearing a different, zoomorphic mask—the bear mask. Orysia is stunned, and her exclamation— "God! Did you really need a mask to say those three words?!"—summarises

the situation. She perceives the paradox: a confession of deep feeling from the protagonist is only possible within the ritual space, under the cover of a mask. In everyday reality, with its social hierarchies, fears, conventions, and prejudices, these words remain unspoken.

It is significant that female characters respond differently within the masquerade. While Orysia, unmasked, immerses herself in the carnival—first as a curious observer, then attempting to locate Hryhir amid the ritual chaos—her rival remains at a distance, almost hiding behind the *malankari*. The rival avoids direct contact with the masked figures, remaining a passive, wary witness. She refuses to enter Orysia's aunt's house, where the climax of the rite unfolds, which underlines her exclusion from the ritual process already initiating changes in the protagonists' fates.

To judge by Orysia's reaction, she is surprised by the mask Hryhir has chosen. But why does Mykolaichuk place the bear mask on his hero? In the chaos of *Malanka*, there are characters far more talkative, ironic, and elaborately dressed (and Hryhir himself is ironic and fashionably attired). Yet the director's intent is deeper: in the *Malanka* ritual, the bear embodies primal power; it is a chthonic being endowed with immense strength. For Hryhir, this power translates above all into impenetrability. This *Malanka* character lacks human facial expression; his form is entirely concealed beneath thick animal pelts, and his voice, according to tradition, should be replaced by a bestial roar. By selecting the Bear, Mykolaichuk imposes a "seal of muteness" on the character, creating a maximal physical barrier around him.

We know little about Hryhir—only the sparse words of Orysia's rival, noting that he "twisted but did not break, strained but did not snap."[17] In this context, the mask is less an attribute of strength than a means of protecting his wounded soul from potential rejection or new pain. Until this moment, despite his evident affection for Orysia, Hryhir suffers from painful indecision, hiding his feelings behind jokes and irony. This unspoken tension and his inability to act openly wound Orysia so deeply that, in the scene preceding the *malankari's* appearance, she confesses in despair to her grandfather that she wishes to return home as soon as possible.

Hryhir appears before Orysia in two distinct variations of the same persona. In the first episode, outdoors, he is the "tamed bear": not only is he on a leash, but thick straw ropes, traditionally used to bind sheaves of grain, are wrapped around his torso, running from his back underneath his belly and across his shoulders. In the Carpathian tradition, the use of such straw ropes is deeply symbolic. On the one hand, straw is an archaic emblem of fertility and the future harvest,[18] which the bear, as a chthonic creature, must "sanctify" with its power. On the other hand, the ropes serve as a sign of ritual taming of wild force, restraining the beast. For Hryhir, this dual significance is crucial: the mask and the ropes allow him to perform a gesture of humility and acknowledgment while remaining protected within his defensive shell.

However, in the scene set inside the house, Mykolaichuk employs a different version of the bear mask—more archaic and intimidating. It is now a rough, chthonic visage made of sheepskin, with grotesquely exaggerated animal features and red markings around the mouth. Unlike the outdoor version, there are no straw ropes here: the bear is no longer tamed, but a figure of raw, unformed power. The archaic quality of this portrayal is evident primarily in the mask's form and the material from which it is made. The sheepskin and the deliberately distorted, unrealistic muzzle are intended not to mimic a particular animal but to create a generalized image of a "beyond-this-worldly" being—an ancestral spirit entering the world of the living at a liminal calendar moment.

The paradox is that Hryhir chooses the "mute" role in the *Malanka* precisely in order to

speak. Yet the form of the confession itself is transformed. In the first case, as the "tamed" bear, the confession is made from a position of kneeling and is almost immediately curtailed by his leaving the frame: the hero speaks and disappears, leaving no opportunity for a response. In the second case, in the more archaic mask without straw ropes, Hryhir stands at full height, face-to-face with Orysia. Here, the protection is purely symbolic: the more intimidating the exterior, the safer the vulnerable person inside feels. But the key difference lies in the ending: whereas the outdoor bear-Hryhir escapes, inside the house he remains in the space of dialogue and ultimately removes the mask. Only by transforming into a wild creature within the ritual can the hero summon the courage to overcome his hesitation and finally articulate his feelings in words.

It is the voice, emanating from beneath this layer of material, that becomes the bridge connecting the beast and the human. The voice is the only marker of individuality that cannot be entirely silenced by skins. Recognition occurs at the moment when the archaic form (the mask) collides with intensely personal content (speech): Hryhir's voice disavows his disguise even before the mask is removed.

The switching of masks within a single ritual act contradicts actual practice, where a reveller maintains the costume of the chosen character throughout the entire ritual round from house to house. In the logic of the film, however, this device emphasizes the character's inner movement: Hryhir's identity is not fixed to a single visual form, and the search for a way to confess becomes part of his internal journey. In the world of masks, outward signs are unreliable, and only the voice remains a part of the subject that cannot be fully concealed.

The Mask as a Marker of Farewell

A special place in the scenes involving the ritual maskers is occupied by the figure of Mykhailo Rusnak. Whereas for Hryhir the mask serves as an instrument that opens up a new stage of his life course, for Rusnak, by contrast, it marks its completion. Rusnak is present within the ritual, yet remains outside its existential logic: *Malanka* does not return him to the flow of life but instead operates as a point of final farewell before his return to the solitude of emigration.

The symbolism of this exclusion reaches its peak in the scene with the masked revellers inside the house, when two *Malanka* characters—the Doctor and the *Dido*—sit beside the nearly blind Mykhailo Rusnak. The director's decision to place these particular figures next to the dying hero is deliberate: the Doctor establishes the line of fate, while the *Dido* refers to roots—the world of ancestors. The episode in which the Doctor removes his mask and hands it to Rusnak is entirely devoid of playful spontaneity. Rusnak does not choose this object—he accepts it, and in this gesture one can read a silent acknowledgment of illness and of the proximity of death.

The mask in Rusnak's hands ceases to be a prop of play and becomes an artifact—a material witness to a world he once knew but has since lost. A telling parallel with Parajanov emerges here: if in *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* Ivan dons the mask of Death and is consumed by it, the hero of Mykolaichuk's film remains fully a subject of the unfolding events. Rusnak does not put on the mask; he contemplates it from the side—like a spectator whose own performance has already concluded. The presence of the *Dido* only intensifies the sense of liminality in which the hero exists.

Rusnak's blessing to the masked revellers— "long life and happiness"[19]—does not function as part of a ritual formula, but as a patriarchal benediction for a world in which he himself no longer has a place. He sees his homeland alive and bustling, yet the current passes him by. In

this sense, the *Malanka* becomes for Rusnak not a space for overcoming muteness or a chance of a new beginning, but a curtain separating a life fully lived from the inevitable departure.

Ultimately, within the artistic universe of *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn*, the arrival of the *Malanka* revellers becomes a moment of truth, distributing the characters into different existential niches. Mykolaichuk constructs a symmetry of three behavioural strategies within the ritual.

For Hryhir and Orysia, ritual dress offers the possibility of overcoming hesitation and unspoken feelings: words are spoken, distance is reduced, and protective shells are no longer necessary. It is no coincidence that the carnival ends with a shot of masks strewn on the snow—the ritual has fulfilled its purpose. Against this backdrop, Orysia's rival, who distances herself from the ritual and does not enter the house—the space of recognition—emphasizes her exclusion from the process of transformation: she remains in the old temporal order.

For Mykhailo Rusnak, by contrast, the mask becomes a marker of final distance. He neither dons it nor discards it, but holds it in his hands as an artifact symbolizing his departure. If for the younger characters the mask functions as a means of transition into the future, for Mykhailo Rusnak it fixes the rupture with the flow of life: the acquisition of a voice at the beginning of the journey meets, here, the acceptance of silence at its conclusion.

Thus, the behaviour of these characters reveals three strategies of interacting with the carnival. While Hryhir and Orysia participate in the ritual and thereby grow closer to one another, Orysia's rival remains outside the ritual space, and Mykhailo remains within the ritual space without participating in the ritual itself. For him, the masquerade is only a memory.

Conclusion

A comparison of Sergei Parajanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* and Ivan Mykolaichuk's *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn* allows us to consider Christmas-season mask traditions not as ethnographic markers or decorative elements, but as a cinematic mechanism for reinterpreting tradition and as an artistic device. Here, the mask functions as a medium of extreme states—a tool through which crisis, transition, and the impossibility of direct speech are articulated in the screen space. The use of the *Malanka* ritual is not only a gesture of stylization, but also a method of translating the anthropological logic of the ritual into the structure of cinematic narration, turning film into a space of ritual translation. Crucially, this is not about illustrating tradition, but about embedding its functional mechanisms—ritual alibis, inversion, redistribution of agency, and the limits of permissible expression—into the language of visual dramaturgy and narrative. Yet the similarity of the forms employed highlights a fundamental divergence of function: the ritual, transposed into cinema, is realized along opposite vectors in each film.

In Parajanov's artistic world, Christmas masquerade is integrated into the logic of a cosmological order that surpasses individual will. The mask does not open up the possibility of action or speech; on the contrary, it sets the dissolution of the subject within the automatism of ritual performance. Threshold moments—Christmas and death—trigger ritual renewal of the communal life cycle, yet for Ivan they do not provide the possibility of transition: the ritual functions while excluding him from the renewing world. In this context, the mask does not operate as a ritual alibi but merely visualizes the hero's existential state—from the Mask

of Death, which fixes his liminality, to the *Dido* and *Baba* masks, marking his final rupture with the world of the living. For Ivan, the ritual loses its protective and life-generating ambivalence and becomes a visual language of fate, leaving no space for choice.

In Mykolaichuk's film, the same ritual complex acquires a different significance. Mask and ritual action here constitute a space of communication, allowing the overcoming of social and personal muteness. Temporal anomalies, the eclectic nature of the ritual performance, and the inclusion of heterogeneous historical layers emphasize that tradition is not being presented as a frozen form, but as a living practice capable of absorbing external influences and transforming them into its own ritual language, while the use of masks also acquires a political dimension, signalling resistance to Soviet homogenizing pressures. In the screen space, archaic masked characters coexist with figures referencing modernity and elements of the official Soviet festive canon, without forming a coherent hierarchy. Yet this heterogeneity does not disrupt the ritual logic; on the contrary, it highlights its dynamic character and the ritual's ability to integrate ideologically marked elements. The inclusion of such figures does not displace the archaic layer; they are absorbed into the ritual context, so that the official discourse loses its autonomy and becomes one element among others in the ritual act. In this configuration, ritual dress does not reduce individuality to collective anonymity; rather, it protects its vulnerability, transforming the ritual into a space of personal transition. Within this space, the mask functions as a ritual alibi, temporarily suspending the operation of social sanctions and allowing the utterance of words that would otherwise be impossible, thereby restoring voice and agency to the subject.

Comparison of the two films reveals that cinematic engagement with the same ritual complex can produce radically different patterns of the subject's visibility and expression. The impossibility of linking a mask to a specific subject—a basic condition of masquerade—is preserved in both cases, but in the screen space it functions differently. In Parajanov, this impossibility does not transform into a resource for expression but fixes the distance between ritual order and individual fate. In Mykolaichuk, by contrast, the same impossibility is incorporated into the cinematic logic as a condition enabling the transition from silence to speech. From this perspective, the difference between the films is not at the level of ritual form, but in how cinema distributes the possibility of subject presence within the ritual.

Thus, cinematic reinterpretation of Christmas mask traditions in the films under analysis demonstrates how the same ritual complex can be embedded into fundamentally different artistic frameworks. The director does not slavishly reproduce tradition but creatively uses it as artistic material while preserving its deep ritual logic. At the same time, the traditional mask becomes an instrument defining the limits and possibilities of action at moments of maximum tension: it can fix a boundary beyond which the individual loses the possibility of choice, or, conversely, create conditions for the transition from muteness to speech and from lack of choice to its possibility. Cinematic engagement with the ritual allows for multiple levels of interpretation: a viewer familiar with the tradition reads a significantly more complex and nuanced layer of meaning in these scenes, whereas for the uninitiated, the ritual remains primarily an expressive artistic form. In this sense, poetic cinema emerges as a space for translating tradition into the language of film, preserving its semantic complexity and permitting multiple readings within the framework of ritual logic.



NOTES

1. *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* is set in the Hutsul region while *Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn* takes place in Bukovyna.

2. The term *poetic cinema* is used here in the sense of an artistic movement in Soviet cinema of the 1960s–70s, primarily associated with the names of Sergei Parajanov, Yurii Illienko, Leonid Osyka, and Ivan Mykolaichuk. It is characterised by the predominance of a visual–metaphorical language over plot-driven narration and by the active use of folkloric and mythological imagery (see, for example, Briukhovetska 1989; 2001; Pashchenko 2010).

3. See, for example, Verdery (1988, 53, 78-9 n. 42, Romania); Fél and Hofer (1969, 114-5, Hungary).

4. This dynamic of a ritual alibi and the temporary suspension of norms through masking directly aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) foundational theory of carnival and social inversion.

5. See, for example, Kalantar (1998); Steffen (2013); Briukhovetska (2014); First (2015); Jayamanne (2021).

6. A *molfar*, in Hutsul popular beliefs, is a healer and sorcerer endowed with supernatural abilities. He is believed to be capable of influencing natural elements (for example, controlling storms), as well as performing both healing and protective practices (e.g., curing illnesses, protecting fields from hail) and harmful actions (casting spells). For more detail, see Khobzei (2002, 128-30).

7. The involvement of Vitalii Korotych (editor-in-chief of the journal *Vsesvit* and later of *Ogoniok*) as co-author was a forced strategic move: his status in the official Soviet hierarchy served as a necessary "censorship shield" that made it possible to launch the film into production after many years of prohibition and numerous revisions of the screenplay (Briukhovetska 2004, 152-3, 185-6; Harmash 2023, 6:15–6:56).

8. The term *koliadnyky* refers to the participants in Christmas carolling rituals. These rituals involve ceremonial visits to households with songs and ritual wishes for prosperity, which, in some local traditions, also incorporate ritual masking and disguising. The songs performed during these rounds are known as *koliadky* (Christmas carols).

9. *Malanka* is the name of ritual New Year house-to-house rounds associated with the feast of St. Melania; the term also refers to a central ritual character, while participants are called *malankari*. The ritual involves masking and performances marking the transition between the old and new year. The songs performed during these rounds, known as *shchedrivky* (New Year ritual songs), differ from *koliadky* (Christmas carols).

10. According to my field data (Archive of the German Center for Slavic Studies, Düsseldorf), the Malanka processions in the Ukrainian Carpathians are found primarily in Bukovyna, where there are no masked processions on Christmas; in Christmas processions in Bukovyna, participants wear national clothing, not masks and costumes.

11. Parajanov explicitly acknowledged the deliberate nature of such changes, noting that he might "be reproached for certain deviations from ethnographic accuracy," since the Hutsuls do not wear *malanky* (masks) at Christmas (Parajanov 1966, 63).

12. Sergei Parajanov, dir., *Тіні забутих предків* [*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*] (Ukrainian SSR: Dovzhenko Film Studio, 1965), on-screen title, 00:54:14; author's translation.

13. On funeral games in the Carpathian region, see Bogatyrev 1998 for further detail.

14. Regarding the Soviet attitude toward Christmas–New Year processions: "During the Soviet period, when atheism was actively promoted, all forms of Yuletide visiting with explicitly religious themes (such as carrying the *vertep* [portable nativity theatre], going with the star, or the visits of carollers) were prohibited. On the one hand, this led to the decline of the tradition in its original form, as carolling largely disappeared from village streets and moved into private homes, where people, unwilling to abandon a centuries-old custom, continued to carol within the family circle. … On the other hand, carolling came to be perceived as a form of protest against the Soviet regime" (Sadoja 2014, 135). On the ideological pressures surrounding Mykolaichuk's work and the censorship-related difficulties he faced, see, e.g., Briukhovetska 2001; First 2015, 160-201; Yamborko 2023.

15. See above, the section "Malanka Mask as an Instrument of Inversion (p. 168), about an analogous phenomenon in Parajanov's film.

16. Cf. Tolstoy (2004, 3:212-5), also Gura (1997, 159-77).

17. In the figurative idiom of late-Soviet cinema, this can be read as a euphemism for political persecution.

18. Cf. Tolstoy (2012, 5:107-13).

19. Ivan Mykolaichuk, dir., *Така пізня, така тепла осінь* [*Such a Late, Such a Warm Autumn*] (Ukrainian SSR: Dovzhenko Film Studio, 1981), 01:15:41; author's translation.

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IV. Dialogues

Masking Emotions. Fostering Connection Through Performative Art in the Digital Space. An Interview with Yuliya Tsukerman, Puppeteer and Mask Maker

Irina Apan
Reduta *Cultural Centre, Brașov, Romania*

Irina Apan is an anthropologist and a cultural consultant at Reduta Cultural Centre, Brașov. As an anthropologist, her work focuses on the transmission of traditions in rural communities, and as a cultural consultant, she explores ways to bring young people closer to traditional art and knowledge.

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ABSTRACT

This interview focuses on the work of Yuliya Tsukerman, a puppeteer and mask maker working in theatre and film, and based in Brooklyn, New York. Her project, *Transmissions from the Ancient Forest*, is a series of video poems in which a community of lesser gods tries to make sense of human suffering. We discuss the mask-making process, the characters' emotions, and how these are perceived by online audiences. Her work has been supported by the Jim Henson Foundation, St. Ann's Warehouse, Franklin Furnace, the Jerome Foundation, Clubbed Thumb, Folly Tree Arboretum, the NYFA Playwriting/ Screenwriting Grant, Loghaven, Mana Contemporary, and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council.

KEYWORDS

Mask maker; digital performance; ancient forest; spirituality; human connection.

Masks have occupied an important place in ritual, theatrical, and performative traditions across cultures. Whether used in seasonal customs, religious ceremonies, or contemporary artistic performances, masks mediate the relationship between identity and alterity, concealment and revelation, and the human and the non-human. While ethnographic scholarship has largely examined masks within traditional ritual contexts, contemporary artists continue to reimagine the mask as a medium for exploring questions of identity, emotion, spirituality, and community.

Rather than recreating existing folk traditions, Yuliya Tsukerman constructs an original cosmology populated by fictional "lesser gods" who communicate reflections on loneliness, grief, and compassion through short video performances shared on social media. Her work sits at the intersection of puppet theatre, mask performance, poetry, and digital storytelling, offering an opportunity to explore how contemporary artists reinterpret one of humanity's oldest performative devices: the mask. This interview does not seek to analyze a traditional mask ritual but rather examines how one contemporary artist understands the creative, emotional, and symbolic potential of masks. The discussion addresses questions of transformation, spirituality, artistic identity, digital community, and other themes that resonate with broader anthropological debates concerning performance, embodiment, and the cultural meanings attached to masking practices.

The interview was conducted online in 2025 as part of a broader research interest in contemporary mask-making practices and their relationship to performance, identity, and cultural transmission. The initial premise was to understand whether contemporary artistic uses of masks retain functions traditionally associated with masking practices, such as transformation, mediation between the human and the non-human, or the expression of emotions that are difficult to communicate through ordinary social interaction. A semi-structured interview format allowed the conversation to develop organically, while also following thematic directions related to artistic practice, symbolism, spirituality, and digital audiences.

Irina Apan: *When did you begin working with puppets, costumes, and masks?*

Yuliya Tsukerman: I found puppetry in 2012 through a residency here in Brooklyn, NY, called the St. Ann's Warehouse Puppet Lab, where a cohort of artists meets every week to develop new works of puppet theater. I was struck by how expansive and inventive the form was, and by the incredible ingenuity, playfulness, and creative rigor of the puppetry artists I met. I worked on my own small puppetry projects over the following years, but it took me a long time to make the connection to working with masks.

I started experimenting with mask-making a few years ago when I was feeling particularly creatively scattered. I had the sense for many, many years in my creative practice that I was being pulled in a million directions by my interests and dabblings, but that I didn't know what the center was. I made a mask on a whim, and when I filmed it to see what it looked like, I was surprised to see something more-than-me staring back. I had no idea what the project would be, but I sensed that the being I had created knew more than I did, and that it might be able to help me out of my state of creative and existential confusion. I had already tried everything, so giving myself over to the wisdom of a papier-mâché mask didn't seem that strange!

The following questions explore how Tsukerman conceptualizes the fictional cosmology that emerges through her masks. Rather than representing fixed characters, the masks become vehicles through which broader existential reflections are articulated.

I.A.: *Your characters are very spiritual and very encouraging with the public. How and why did you choose to make them this way?*

Y.T.: When I started making the masks, I had no idea who they represented. I experimented for a while with them being some kind of folk art from the future, but it didn't feel right, and there was maybe a year-long period of frustration where nothing stuck. I think I was looking for a way for my artistic practice to be connected to something larger—a cultural or spiritual identity, some lost sense of place. Somehow, again, in a state of resignation, I gave myself over to the sense of naive wisdom that seemed to be present in the faces I was making—there was a kind of compassion in their expressions that was maybe a happy accident of my limited technique as an artist. Whatever it was, when I saw them looking back at me, I realized I had a longing to be seen by a being like that, and that maybe there was something divine in the gaze they met me with. I sensed that the longing I felt—for compassion, belonging, understanding—was probably shared by a lot of folks like me who don't feel particularly at home in the world. I became interested in creating work that would be an outlet both for the understanding I needed for myself, and for the compassion I felt for others but couldn't quite express in my real life.



"The Sun," character from the *Ancient Forest*, a series of video poems in which a community of lesser gods tries to make sense of human suffering. Photo credit: Yuliya Tsukerman.



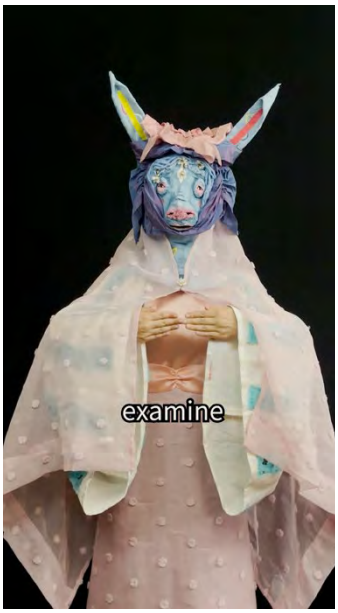
"Nostrils," character from the *Ancient Forest* series of video poems. Photo credit: Yuliya Tsukerman.



"Your prayer," character from the *Ancient Forest* series of video poems. Photo credit: Yuliya Tsukerman.



"We always imagined," character from the *Ancient Forest* series of video poems. Photo credit: Yuliya Tsukerman



Character from the *Ancient Forest* series of video poems. Photo credit: Yuliya Tsukerman.



"Frog," character from the *Ancient Forest* series of video poems. Photo credit: Yuliya Tsukerman.



"The rabbit," character from the *Ancient Forest* series of video poems. Photo credit: Yuliya Tsukerman.

I.A.: *Where do you find inspiration for your poems? What are your roots that emerge in your work?*

Y.T.: I spent many years trying to write plays and stories and novels and always felt profoundly overwhelmed and stuck trying to figure out plot and characters and all that. When I started writing the Ancient Forest poems, I felt immense relief that I could write simply, and that the words wouldn't have to stand on their own—they'd have the masks and costumes to help carry them. I usually write poems on my walk to my studio, when some bit of suffering has overtaken me and I'm trying to sort it out. They all roughly take the form of: what if this fear/heartbreak/longing/anxiety was part of the design of life—what if instead of being a personal anomaly or failing, it carries some universal truth that could help us all? I find this thought experiment incredibly helpful in times of duress, and I always hope that whatever small insight finds me might resonate with someone else.

I.A.: *What exactly are the spirits of the Ancient Forest? What did you have in mind when you brought them to life?*

Y.T.: This is a good question! I think of the animal forms they take as a kind of hologram for human convenience—when there's a transmission to send, the lesser gods of the Ancient Forest do their best to make themselves present in a way that's legible to us. To me, they have something to do with the divine fumbling of creation—a way of understanding the universe as equal parts compassionate and flawed, misguided, absurd.

I.A.: *In Romania and other European countries, there are winter traditions in which people dress up in real bearskin, goat skin, and fur to scare away evil spirits and to*

make room for the good to come. Even nowadays. people keep these traditions alive, and participants say that the spirit of the bear possesses the person while they wear its skin and they feel the power of the animal. Do you ever have this feeling of strength, energy, or force that you might draw from your characters?

Y.T.: I would love to see this sometime! I don't personally have any connection to a folk tradition—I was born in the Soviet Union but left as a small child and have always felt disconnected from any sense of cultural rootedness. But I do think masks have an innate and universal power that accounts for their importance in folk traditions across human cultures. And I find it interesting to attempt to access this power outside of a folk tradition or a specific cultural context—at times I wonder if the attempt is hollow, or appropriative, grasping at something that doesn't belong to me.

At the same time, I'm grateful I have access to a form that creates little opportunities for transformation and play, and I think these opportunities should be available to all of us who don't have the good fortune of keeping our traditions of origin. I wonder if playing with masks can access something in the subconscious that we share with our ancestors, if it's a form of knowing that can transcend the formal passing-down of traditions and fill a gap in what's been lost or erased.

The primary feeling I have in my masks is that my face is very sweaty (laughs)—but alongside that, I do feel transformed in them, like a little bit of wisdom or insight becomes available to me when I put them on and take in my new reflection. They also engender a kind of confidence through anonymity—when my identifiable self dissolves, I'm no longer stuck in what "I" would do. I also experience the expression on the mask's face becoming my internal experience—and because most of the masks are sculpted with expressions of compassion and concern, they have a way of transporting me into this consciousness.



Yuliya Tsukerman in the studio. Photo credit: Shawn Poynter.



Yuliya Tsukerman in a suit.
Photo credit: Yuliya Tsukerman.

I.A.: *Which is your favorite character, and why?*

Y.T.: I see the "characters" more as avatars that the gods take on for human legibility—as if, when we aren't watching, the gods become utterly shapeless, incomprehensible, mysterious. There's also a bit of a joke in one of my poems that the gods wore themselves out naming everything, so they didn't get a chance to name themselves. As a result of these two elements, I don't really see the "characters" as disparate or unique, having distinct voices and personalities. They have an interchangeable quality. I often have a sense of who might be the best channel for a particular story, but beyond that, their individuality is vague.

I.A.: *How do you choose which character comes to life and which one doesn't?*

Y.T.: I've made a handful of masks that didn't feel right for various reasons, in terms of being part of the Ancient Forest community. I find that, [for a mask] to feel right, there needs to be a sense of openness and compassion in their expression, which can be hard to capture with the quick papier-mâché process I use. I also like it when the character's animal identity is a little open to interpretation, blended with the right amount of human anatomy to allow for a more spacious experience. There's one that some people see as a donkey, others see as a pig, and still others see as a rabbit—I really like that.

I.A.: *Was there ever a character you wanted to bring to life, but you couldn't?*

Y.T.: I've come to this project with a really improvisational approach, so I don't have a lot of top-down ideas that I hope to realize. Instead, I make something with my hands and play with it until I get a deeper sense of what I've made and its narrative possibilities. I do think there's an emotional range missing from this world that I'd like to get closer to expressing—there's no anger here, and the playfulness and humor are somewhat boundaries. I think this mirrors my own discomfort with anger, as well as my own self-consciousness, so there's a lot of room to grow and expand once I'm ready.

I.A.: *Do you think you would be able to make your poems public if it weren't for the masks?*

Y.T.: I sometimes see the videos as a way of making poems more digestible in our distracted world. I often find it hard to read on a screen and feel pulled in a million directions, so feeding the text line-by-line makes sense to me. I think the videos also help establish a tone that's not always present in the text, and I like experimenting with the interplay of gesture, mask, costume, language, and music. I find that in layering these elements, I get closer to whatever ineffable thing I'm always circling. Sometimes the poems feel a little sterile on their own. Other times, I end up preferring the text by itself, without the distraction of the video!

Conclusion

Although detached from any inherited mask tradition, Tsukerman's work demonstrates that masks continue to function as powerful cultural technologies through which individuals negotiate identity, vulnerability, and belonging. As Anthony Giddens argues (1991, 75), "the self is seen as a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible." Although Tsukerman does not feel that she belongs to a particular tradition, she consciously constructs a symbolic world through her artistic practice. The interview suggests that contemporary digital performance does not replace older symbolic practices but rather reconfigures them within new environments where ritual, storytelling, and community are mediated through online platforms. The idea of creating "folk art from the future" reflects her search for cultural rootedness, while her creation of the Ancient Forest shows how new symbolic worlds can emerge outside inherited frameworks. She develops an original cosmology that performs functions commonly associated with masks across cultures, such as transformation, mediation, and the exploration of human experience. Rather than recovering a lost tradition, her work illustrates what Hall (1990, 222-37) describes as the continuous production of cultural identity and creative practice.

Tsukerman's project generates meaningful social connections without claiming authenticity through tradition. Masks continue to function as powerful cultural mediators even when detached from their historical ritual contexts. As Ingold (2013, 21) argues, making is not merely the production of objects but a process of growth through which people establish relationships with the world around them. In increasingly mobile and globalized societies, many artists no longer inherit cohesive ritual traditions or stable cultural frameworks. Instead, they construct new symbolic worlds by drawing on elements of mythology, nature, and spirituality. These creations respond to contemporary experiences of loneliness, uncertainty, and fragmented identity.

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Portals to Symbiofutures.
A Mask-Wearer and Mask-Maker Dialogue on Becoming *Other*

Georgiana Vlahbei
Plastic Art Performance collective, National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Romania
ORCID: 0009-0005-1419-0188

Georgiana Vlahbei (GCV) is an intermedia creator and researcher with a background in ethnology, cultural anthropology, and folklore studies. Her research engages with heritage-making processes, ritual expressions in traditional societies and contemporary creations, and the dynamics of customs with a focus on mask heritage. She is also co-founder, visual creator, and maker with the Plastic Art Performance collective.

Correspondence: georgianavlahbeimtr@gmail.com

Alina Tofan
Plastic Art Performance collective, National University of Arts Bucharest

Alina Tofan is a multidisciplinary artist working across acting, performance art, visual arts, and a PhD candidate at the National University of Arts Bucharest. Her practice explores performance as ritual and rebellion, positioning the body as a site of resistance, memory, and ecological entanglement. She investigates more-than-human perspectives through ecoperformance.

Correspondence: alinaa_tofan@yahoo.com

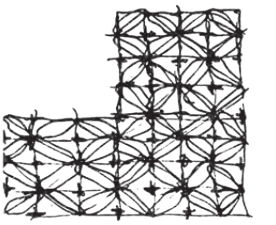
Vlahbei, Georgiana, Alina Tofan. 2026. "Portals to Symbiofutures. A Mask-Wearer and Mask-Maker Dialogue on Becoming *Other*." *Martor* 31, 287-306. [DOI 10.57225/martor.2026.31.18]

ABSTRACT

Using a double-voiced narration as self-ethnography, the paper draws on our individual practices across the fields of performance, craft, and ethnology, as well as on territories where they overlap: on one side, mask-making, and on the other, mask-wearing. We reflect on how masks (face-masks and mask-costumes) have found their way into our work as the duo behind "Plastic Art Performance collective," an (eco)art group that emerged in 2020 within the Bucharest performance art scene which works to connect body practices to ecological consciousness. We explore, on the one hand, performative processes of *becoming Other*: the means of transformation that masks have enabled in our practice and what happens to the body as it undergoes these masked transformations. We consider the relationship between performativity and agency and reflect on the processes and methods of embodiment we have experimented with and their relationship to masking. On the other hand, we delve into the raw matter of the mask-making process: resources, materials, and circularity. This piece offers insight into a particular use of masks as both narrative devices and political objects that signal larger-scale issues such as overconsumption, waste, pollution, deforestation, and abusive human interventions in the ecosphere. In doing so, we ask what happens to masks as they become vehicles not only for becoming *another* body, but also tools for larger social transformations.

KEYWORDS

Performance art; environmental art; shapeshifting embodiment; symbiofuture; more-than-human.



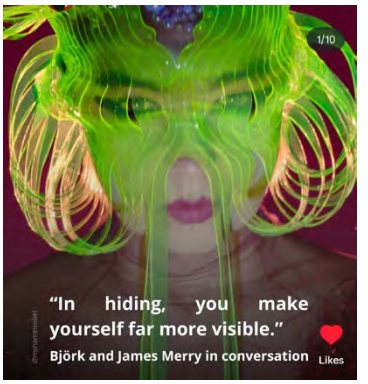
Much like their traditional or ritual counterparts, contemporary mask creations that form part of art productions today, particularly in contemporary performance art, are expressively rooted in and emerge from their local ecologies. Responding to the globally accelerated polycrisis and the intensification of local economic, social, cultural, and environmental concerns, masks are now being reclaimed in new performative contexts by heterogeneous groups across multiple cultural contexts,[1] as political objects signalling social inequalities and, for our purpose here, the deepening of the human-nature divide. Drawing on multiple disciplines, these new works and the renewed presence of mask engage with different lineages, philosophies, and ontologies: multispecies studies, indigenous knowledge, traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), posthumanism, new materialism, neo-animism, and the anthropology of ritual and liminality. They revisit folklore texts, engage with ancestrality and the study of mythology, borrow from ecological principles, including movements such as deep ecology, and draw on developments in neuroscience and cognitive sciences. Other works are deeply embedded in critical theory, feminism, activism, and struggles for social justice.

This reclaiming in contemporary performance and visual arts, whether niche or mainstream, is, nevertheless, not a reclaiming of masks as relics of a "ritual past," but of masks as mobile technologies of transformation. Masks redistribute agency between different bodies carrying different memories and cultural lineages, and costumes, objects, camera and audiences, making the inner workings of identity, history, and specifically power more visible. Contemporary manifestations range from dance performance, choreography, multi-media installations, exhibitions and live art to protest, drag, queer nightlife, digital creations and environmental works. Among these contemporary uses of masks, the ones drawing from ecology and other-than-human ontologies are enacted by individual artists, companies, collectives, and networks of creators operating internationally to articulate aspirations towards environmental regeneration through speculative futures that imagine greater coexistence with the more-than-human world. At the same time, these works (video, performance, installations and various experiments across media) remember, reference, reactivate, and propose a continuation of the role of masks as communal world-shifters.

In this paper, we focus on one such performative context, in which masks emerge from and around a collective within the local art scene in Bucharest. We are the Plastic Art Performance collective, active under the Macaia Association since early 2020. Our work engages with various forms of artistic expressions as vehicles for fostering ecological consciousness. In this piece, we reflect on the way masks have gradually found their way into our works in the past six years, from the raw and messy processes of making to the ideas and worldviews behind the masks.

[@alinaa_tofan DMs @___gcv___]

GV: Well, this feels synchronic. As with most things that happen to/with us...
So, where should we start our mask stories?
AT: From the beginning, no? From our collective's name.
GV: True. I remember transcribing one of your insights while you were under that plastic foil: "How does plastic breathe? How does it feel, how does it move?" you asked. I realize now that even then, our very first project secretly conveyed and foresaw all our future masking practices...



Instagram post featuring an article based on an interview-discussion between Björk and artist mask-maker James Merry. Original photography by Warren Du Preez & Nick Thornton Jones. Screenshot taken in August 2026 from Instagram account @mynameisobelpage.

But let's provide some context. Our first endeavour that brought us together and kicked off this collective was called *Plastic—affective memory and waste* and it was our attempt to tackle the insufferable ubiquity, complex materiality, and social lives of plastics in our modern society. Instead of placing the blame on a material that had been supporting our modern endeavours for so long, from advances in medicine and space exploration to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, and into our own bloodstream, we proposed to investigate performatively the inner world of this "scapegoat." *What does it feel like to be the most hated material on the planet, the source of constant threats to our ocean life and of our planet suffocating*?

AT: We started from my own memories from the 90's, soaked in plastic objects that marked my childhood, then youth, and my entire generations'. Then we collected other people's memories of plastic objects...

But for the video-performance, *Asphyxia*, I had this large, three-by-three-metre sheet of semi-transparent plastic foil that I would wrap myself in, at times getting completely sucked in behind the texture and letting myself be engulfed by it, breathing through it...

GV: It may sound odd, being empathetic towards inanimate matter...

AT: A non-living entity made up of buried, decomposed remains of ancient plants, animals, and microscopic organisms that lived millions of years ago, nevertheless. Let's not forget...

GV: Ultimately, I think the questions that sprang up in those moments, like "What is it like to be x?" are central to the theme of masking, and to any kind of identity transformation, for that matter: knowing through wondering what it is like for something else to exist or experience the reality of being itself. You know I always have to quote Prof. Vervaeke.[2] His framework for different ways of knowing[3] is one of my guidelines. Within it, there's this *participatory knowing*, the kind of knowing that can happen exclusively when you become part of something or participate in something else's ways of being. It involves being in a deep, transformative relationship with that thing, participating fully in something that is wider than oneself. Masks enable this relationship so beautifully, and I think that's a much-needed antidote to our current late-stage capitalist, neo-liberal, and neo-colonizing Western divided society...

AT: ...where identity is centred on the individual.

But that's exactly what a performative mask-costume does: it suspends this individuality, proposing a fluid identity instead, one loaded with symbols, which becomes archetypal. The perception of time changes, allowing you as a performer to experience a continuous present, a fluid time, which I call, in my practice, *shapeshifting reality*.

GV: Let's get into that. I've been curious about what actually triggers this shape-shifting. Does the *shifter* appear in any way before the mask? Is it/she/he/they built through stages of preparation and protocols, or does the mask-object simply draw in or call inside the *shifted* meant to come forward, through its raw materiality alone? How much of it is mimesis and, if so, of what kind? Could you describe how this transformation takes place for you, in you, as a performer?

AT: In a few words, *shapeshifting reality* is my body entering a state of becoming, where it is not simply representing another being, but allowing itself to be transformed by it. In this space, the boundaries between human and non-human, self and other, begin to dissolve.







Stills from Asphyxia, a short video ecoperformance.
Performer: Alina Tofan. Cinematography: Alexandru Claudiu Maxim. Bucharest, Romania, 2020.



Images from photo-performative exercises for the Plastic. Intimate. Collective photo series. Performer: Alina Tofan. Photography: GCV. Brașov, Romania, 2020.



So, what I do in my performative process is try to establish a connection with the mask: I'll draw on a *butoh*[4] exercise, which I adapt to the mask-costume that encompasses me. In *butoh*, the body is often viewed as an empty vessel/empty space or as a corpse haunted by a human or non-human force. Thus, during the *butoh* exercise, the mask appears to me, and I allow my body to capture and embody it. Through the form my body takes and the specific type of movement that emerges, I allow myself to be moved by the mask rather than setting out to move it myself.

Consequently, the process of embodiment operates both psychologically and concretely, biologically, through the contractions, tension, and effort my body expends to incorporate the mask. The movement reflected externally becomes the only possible option in this context. The resonance is unique to each individual's performative process. This process often begins with the idea that decelerating movement, action, and reaction can allow the body to merge with the landscape, dissolve into it, and expand the boundaries of performative perception and sensoriality. My methodology is one of *embodiment*; rather than simply aiming to "become" something, I engage both corporeally and imaginatively with the energy of the mask itself.

While traditional theatre speaks of *catharsis* as the ultimate form of emotion and transformation, the practice I propose finds its power elsewhere. Here, a body that is relaxed yet grounded in reality, with sharpened senses and fully engaged in performativity, becomes the vessel through which a state of trance is achieved. During this bodily manifestation, the self-awareness burdened by social constructs fades away. The body becomes a conduit for a message that emerges at the intersection of the self, the realities of others, the environment, and the immediate context.

I begin with breathing, active meditation, and stripping the body of preconceived information, using physical and mindfulness exercises to heighten presence and sensitivity. This mirrors a specific exercise in *butoh* dance, where one sustains a "physical mask," a specific facial expression, for an extended period. Through this prolonged engagement, the mask is incorporated; it is no longer perceived as something external, but as an integral part of the self. This same integration occurs throughout the entire creative process: that foreign body ceases to exist; it is merely an energy acting upon you. Each mask brings with it a particular kind of movement and energy. This act of becoming the mask can be seen as an act of complete empathy, of dissolving the individual self into a composite self.

GV: How does this relate to "embodying" masks in classical physical theatre?

AT: If you look at Jacques Lecoq's[5] vision, for instance, the mask highlights the character's physical and psychological traits while incorporating the performer's personality. In classical theatrical technique, the actor "plays" the mask, activating it through acquired technical skills. In my creative process, however, the performer becomes a medium of *resonance*. In performance art, as I practice it, the mask is not merely an aesthetic object to be worn on the face; it represents a space of becoming, a site of shifting identity. The performer's will becomes an agency shaped by the mask. While for Lecoq the mask allows the performer to reflect on the life around them, in performance art, the mask shifts, borrows from, and feeds upon the performer's own identity.

What happens when the mask expands into a costume, into a liminal space that overlaps with topography, becoming a "time without time?" In its deepest sense, I believe the mask is an instrument of disidentification. When it extends to the level of costume and space, it ceases to be a tool for characterization and becomes a state of existence. This transforms the stage from a geographical location into a metaphysical *topos*, and the performer into an inhabitant of "timeless time," a liminal space where the body becomes the mediator of the creative act.

In my work, the mask represents an ecological and political membrane. When working with a mask-costume, I use *resonance* as a performative methodology, integrating various practices and working techniques (*Qi-gong*,[6] *Taiji*,[7] and *butoh*, active meditation, real-time composition, and emptying the body of information). The performative imagination is constantly at work, reconfiguring reality. In working with the body, in the attempt at embodiment, to incorporate the proposed working concepts, anything is possible. The performative reality of the body between worlds represents a realm of exploration in which reality can change with every thought. I act and construct performative reality through a process of active listening, to which I respond. The present body, trained within a specific physical and psychological temporality, makes active listening possible. This active listening dissolves the subject-object duality between myself and the mask. I can say that the mask becomes an external sense, an outside eye, located outside the body, which allows the material to be moved.

In performance art, the artist decides what to make visible to the audience and what to conceal. During the performance, the body becomes a source of information, with every gesture being legitimised and interpreted within the conceptual framework of the work.

Talking about mimesis, the transition from *mimesis* to *metaxis*[8] leads me, as a performer, into a personal process of performative possession of the mask. In *butoh*, for instance, the face is the mask itself and represents liminality. The face, most often marked by an expression of the self-caught between worlds, is sometimes, though not necessarily, painted white, dissolving individual identity into a shared condition of collective historical trauma and suffering. Through *butoh*, artists seek to reclaim a non-human, or, more precisely, pre-human connection, allowing the body to shed the boundaries of the individual self and enter a more primordial state of becoming.

GV: I love how this minimal yet complex gesture in *butoh,* of smearing one's face with bare, often white paint can convey so much representational power. It reminds me of an attempt I had made a long time ago to reconstitute the material components through which a ritual group had sustained its use of masks across generations. I'd been trying to piece together almost 60 years of intermittent performance of *Julamila*, a masked ritual[9] from my Aromanian community, through the dynamics of its masked characters. And guess who had been the only constant actants across generations all along? The *thieves*, the only characters who had never worn any masks, but instead smeared their faces with black pitch or ash. Other masks—the bride, groom, captain, elders, all shifted, transformed and were eventually replaced by their modern plastic Halloween counterparts. But the enduring characters were the smeared ones. Suggestion rather than depiction has always seemed to me to be the most refined form of masking.

But coming back: is the world more or less permeable while wearing the mask? Is the flow of the inner process aided or interrupted by masking? Is the mask a mediator or a disruptor?

AT: What I find most compelling is how masks, whether they are made from natural or synthetic materials, act upon the physical senses, grounding or even suppressing them in order to awaken other dimensions: the energetic and the political, mediating past and future through the body. A vital aspect of this process is the suspension of self-consciousness in which the mask dissolves the mundane concern with one's appearance. Yet, as this self-directed attention fades, the focus on the body's expressive qualities is profoundly amplified. The face is traditionally the primary conveyor of performative information. When it is replaced by a mask, a new performative logic emerges: the entire energy of the body must work in unison to animate the mask, to feel its presence in every fibre. The body no longer merely carries the mask; it becomes the resonant force that brings it to life.

GV: And what happens once you "come back" to yourself?

AT: Once the mask is shed, the body is never entirely the same again. It carries the residue of other ways of being, of forms that were once foreign but have now taken up residence within it. The performer can no longer be certain where their own body ends and where these other presences begin, nor whether the body they return to can still be called entirely their own.

GV: Let's move forward with our own history. After *Plastic* came *Yagoria.*[10]

AT: Yes. 2022. In *Yagoria*, we reimagined the figure of Baba Yaga,[11] fragmented into three women of varying ages and forms. Adorned with masks of branches, ferns, and lichen-covered wood, they stood as embodiments of a deep symbiosis with the forest. However, this old connection was severed by the encroachment of plastic, a suffocating human intervention. As their faces were swallowed by synthetic waste and their silence was broken by the abrasive sound of chainsaws, they became witnesses to the slow dissolution of a world they were losing in real time. It turned out to be a sort of eco-political ritual.

GV: What did wearing a vegetal mask and those props feel like? Did it influence movement, body posture, or gestures? Did it bring the body into another type of relationship with the earth?

AT: Wearing a vegetal mask on your face and body, you learn to smell and breathe differently. Every mask-costume possesses an inherent form, whether natural or otherwise. As a performer, you surrender your body to that form and embody it. Fundamentally, my focus lies more on the shape and energy than on the materials themselves. However, it is preferable to use breathable materials that do not stifle the performer. The scent of decay or fresh sap forces you to inhabit the biological presence of nature rather than a narrative one.

What is remarkable about these vegetal mask-costumes is how their materiality shifts one's center of gravity. Verticality is often replaced by other bodily forms found in nature, which possess a different kind of weight, one that roots you to the ground. You may find yourself contorted like a root, your arms moving with the fluid continuity of tendrils, or engaging in the micro-movements of breathing, akin to "plant muscle." The perception of temperature and light is heightened by the natural masks, intensifying this primal force of nature. This observation raises a fundamental question: are we truly creating within the parameters of contemporary conceptual art, or are we, in fact, returning to an ancestral intelligence through the mask? I am particularly interested in the symbiosis between performer and mask, through which symbolic and physical expression takes shape, challenging the distinction between "human" and "nature."

What was it like for you, designing and creating those costumes?

GV: The experiential process of building those vegetal masks was obviously highly sensory. The imprints of mud under my nails, the tickling moss, the smell of bark, the shapes of the ferns, the geometry of the acorns, the texture of the mushrooms, the fragility of the willow branches—all became imprinted on my skin during those days of work. I remember cleaning myself after hours of work, and my fingers still smelling of herbs when I went to bed. Not the type of scent you could scrub off… but I loved being surrounded by all those smells all the time. My small attic had become wild.

One thing I didn't notice at the time was that these types of materials also imposed a kind of body posture, a particular way of working with them. I had to work very fast to assemble them because of the ephemerality of some of the greenery that would wilt within hours. Some pieces of mask or costume I had to redo every morning or on the spot, during or between shoots for the videoperformance. So, working with these living materials, fragile



Images taken during filming for Yagoria videoperformance.
Performers: Aigül Cheosep, Maria Mora, Alina Tofan. Photography: GCV.
Cinematography: Gabriel Durlan.
Snagov Forest, Romania. 2022.





Images taken during filming for Yagoria videoperformance.
Performer: Alina Tofan. Photography: GCV.
Ulmet Sandstone concretions, Buzău, Romania, 2022.



Image from a live performance of Yagoria. Performer: Alina Tofan.
Photography: GCV. Văcărești Natural Park, Bucharest, Romania, 2022.



Photograph taken during a pop-up performance. Performer: Alina Tofan. Photography: GCV. Ostrov Island, Călărași, Romania, 2022.

and delicate, within such a short period of time, required a calm posture and very steady yet flexible arms, with gentle touches and careful handling despite the fast pace required for the work. I remember it being my first time attempting to work with an all-natural glue. I didn't want to use harmful or non-degradable options. I had tried to stick the moss patches together onto their bases and join them together to create those longer pieces hanging from your costume. It probably cost me two white nights of despair as they kept stubbornly coming unstuck, until I finally decided to sew them on the costume. It was a lot of trial, but most of all, a lot of error.

Some of the inner processes that emerged during those nights were leading me to different places, though. I began pondering a lot the very idea of patching together "fragments" of nature in the service of these masks and costumes, and how I was decontextualizing the various plants from their native environments and then recontextualizing them as performative agents meant to speak about their world to our audiences. It strongly resembled museum work: how we deracinate objects from their networks of meaning and reintegrate them into strange, unfamiliar places to make them subjects to our human-centric philosophies and to narrate *our* views of the world. Was I really honouring them? What was I giving back? Was this relation reciprocal in any way? I was realising then and there something quite awful: that I was replicating the same gesture of power enacted by centuries of extraction—taking simply because something was available, taking because I could. And that there was always going to be a violence embedded in this imbalance of power. Then there was the issue of how all of these different living elements would fit together into a mask: how would they even share the same space? Would moss and mushrooms ever communicate in this way? Are the different types of foliage sensitive to one another? Does it make sense to actually place them together like this? Who am I to decide such an assemblage? It was my first rough realization that I was not at all creating together with nature, but rather creating from her. It took some courage to admit this, and I still have those masks in my workshop to this day. They look as fresh as ever, probably to keep reminding me of this first attempt...

AT: But what about *Holobionts*?[12]

GV: Even though there were no masks involved *per se*, the experiment in this project involved a lot of mask-like transformations. This time, the costumes were grown from various seedlings, including radishes, tomatoes, and pumpkins, into "sprouting skins." On an eclipse day, I planted them in a DIY hydroponic installation, together with my mother—a genuine green thumb. We watched them grow in thin layers of gauze into micro-plants, gently and diligently spraying them twice a day, until they were enough to cover large parts of the performers' bodies. Is the skin the end of the individual? We set out to find out.

The living, sprouting mini-bodies on the surface of the performers' skin were intended to make them more conscious of the never-ending exchange between human bodies and other living bodies. How do these tiny bodies inform human movement? I got really excited going through this process of watching these small creatures (mainly radishes because they were the fastest to sprout) with their moist, green, tingly presence, configure movements between species as part of the chimeric dance assemblages created by you and the team.

With *Yagoria* and with *Holobionts*, we drew from some of our favourite references: Baba Yaga, of course, read as forest protectress, but also masked characters connected to Spring Carnivals in European pre-Christian cultures and beyond, characterized by their entirely vegetal appearance,[13] which I had witnessed during fieldwork in a village in Central Romania. Seeing the tall green creature slowly emerge in the forest as the young human was gradually engulfed by leaves and branches carefully placed on him by his fellow lads, and seeing him disappear under the cylindrical bark headpiece, were profoundly inspiring for the crafting

holobionts / symbiont costumes concept





Conceptual frame: SYMBIOGENESIS = growing from eachother
- the skin as a host for other species (the body)
- inter-connectedness of all living beings
- the mega-corpus (the body of nature) weaving / weaving
- moving together / from / along with another form of life
- germination: sprouting one from the other within us
- growing from the body, absorbed back into the environment

- becoming symbiont -

holobionts / symbiont costumes process / III

Phase II: Testing sprout-material on body & movement









wool + gauze / wool / gauze

Sketches from the Holobiont costume-making process.
GCV, personal notes, 2024.

of the *Yagoria* entities. But we must admit we took liberties: the "Green Man" became the "Green Women" in two ways: first, as a means to re-establish the woman-nature connection and to honour women's legacies of tending to the earth; second, in order to pluralize, because living matter always expresses itself in multiples…

AT: …never from just one atomic self-contained unit.

GV: And I would add here that even though our masks do not come from a codified, traditional context, at least one of their roles ends up being similar: protection. We never intended to mimic ritual gestures or to use mask-wearing as a substitute for customary mumming, but rather as a response to today's disconnection from nature, or, more precisely, from the "symbiotic real"[14] to use one of our favourite references. Our masks are political in a very feral way, as tingly, coarse, biodegradable reminders of our collective need to rekindle a connection that has been lost not metaphorically or poetically, but organically, with the larger living, growing, interconnected world.

How would you describe our other masked/ costumed experiments that bring back folk stories and characters as cautionary tales? What kinds of affordances did they bring?

AT: In these cases, the performative costume becomes an instrument of resistance. Politically, the mask serves as a silent alarm amid the multiple crises we face. It can be considered a site of protest through live storytelling. For instance, in our *Eco-Goat* performances and public interventions, the mask-costume no longer serves as protection. Instead, it becomes a mirror reflecting human extractive practices and the systemic oppression of both women and nature.

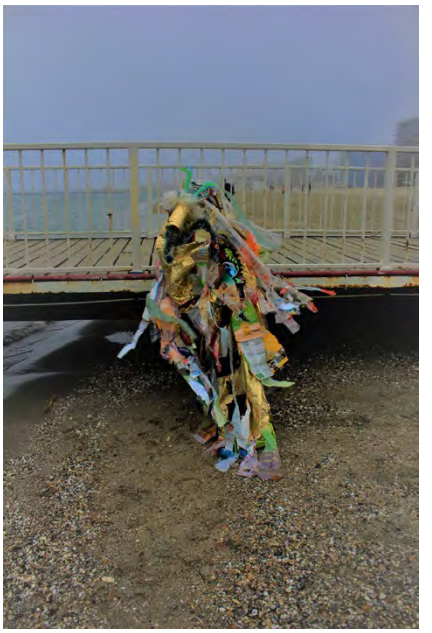
The *Eco-Goat* series addresses this deep societal wound from ecological and feminist perspectives. In 2025, I conceived this performance in response to the growing rates of femicide in Romania, reconfiguring a cultural archetype through a contemporary human rights lens, confronting cycles of violence, and reclaiming the figure of the Goat as protector, witness, and a force of resurrection. The goat was present not as folklore or as an exotic object, but as a woman-mask, a borderline being, a mytho-ecology of trauma, and a silent witness to femicide.

GV: On the other hand, *Dochia*,[15] as she has appeared to me, is a human-size pile of textiles compulsively stacked one on top of the other, warning us about cluttering, about stagnation, about all the things we no longer need but cannot leave behind and so drag along with. Ecopoet Theis Ørntoft[16] put it beautifully in his "hyperAbject."[17] After all, she can only turn into stone after getting rid of all her jackets. Her mask-costume, made up of fast-fashion polyesters, extends to the entire landscape she traverses, metaphorical and literal, which she colonizes through these non-degradable jackets she leaves behind in piles. As these piles keep accumulating, they become mountains of textile waste for which one half of the globe becomes responsible …

AT: How about your process there?

GV: Patching together *Dochia*'s mask and jackets was actually one of the easiest crafting jobs, especially because I love working with discarded items and giving them new lives. We put out an open call among friends and our close community for unwanted, old pieces of clothing, which I then assembled by cutting and patching. Of course, I started with my own pile and then yours. They came together very quickly, since I stopped at nine, trying to stay close to the number referenced in most folk collections.[18] The real challenge, though, was actually moving through the mountains of donated textiles piling up in my living room, and then transporting and installing them in the museum gallery for the live event.

The mask-costume was intended to become this giant pile of stacked polyesters that you would try to drag around the space, with the mountains becoming an extension of your



Eco-Goat public intervention performance.
Performer: Alina Tofan. Costume: Alina Tofan and GCV.
Photography: GCV. Constanța, Romania, 2020.

Eco-Goat public intervention performance.
Performer: Alina Tofan. Costume: Ecaterina Colasîz.
Photography: Diana Elena Păun.
Obor Market, Bucharest, Romania, 2021.





Eco-Goat public intervention performance. Performer: Alina Tofan. Costume: Ecaterina Colasîz. Photography: Diana Elena Păun.
Obor Market, Bucharest, Romania, 2021.



Eco-Goat live performance. Performer: Alina Tofan. Costume: GCV.
Photography: Driss Barahmoun. Morocco, 2024.



Eco-Goat live performance. Performer: Alina Tofan.
Photography: Mihaela Lungu. Bucharest, Romania, 2025.

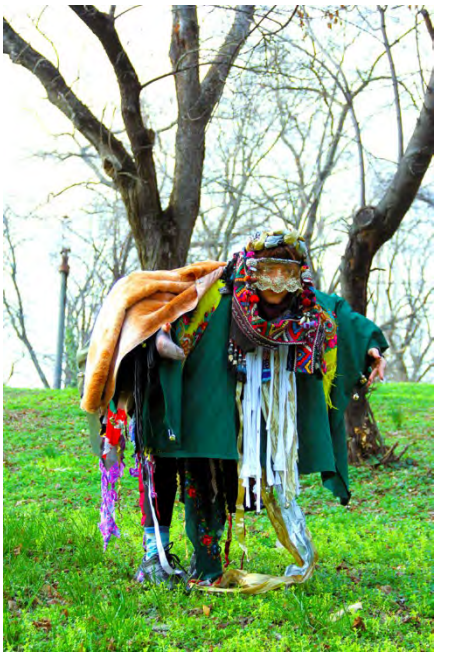
body. It had to make movement hard and heavy, pulling the body down, almost crushing it under their weight. But working with masks and mask-costumes, one quickly realizes that they have their own ways of behaving. In my mind, they were always moving in certain ways, always trying to accentuate some type of movement for you. But once activated in performance, you always surprise me, you always come up with movements I never thought the costumes would be able to sustain. My work is only partially done in this sense, because when a costume comes alive, the ways in which it manifests go beyond what I intended. It becomes *your* skin and it expresses its own agency.

AT: So, is the mask a "future fossil"?

GV: I like how that sounds. Though what our masks channel is not fossilized remains of a certain age and worldview, but living potencies meant to produce meaning in today's world. And of course with us, most, if not all of them, are feminine archetypes, alluding to the exploitation of women and land extractivism as two sides of the same coin. Yaga and Dochia, are matriarchal figures embedded in the land: for Yaga, the forest acts as an extension of herself—it is not just a home, she is the forest, in a very literal way. And for Dochia, it could hardly be more literal as she becomes rock in the end. They become one with their queendoms. And so, they invite us to connect and wonder at the natural, symbiotic world in all its vegetal, mineral, animal, and queer forms.

When we activate these mask-costumes, as they are being performed, they are meant to bring these forces at play into the world. So, I think of them as technologies that I wish would act upon this divided society in ecological collapse. But I cannot speak of their efficacy—that is something for witnesses to assess. I can only speak of my and our intention.





Photographs taken during photo-performance practice of Dochia, Oracle of Textile Waste.
Performer: Alina Tofan. Costume and photography: GCV. Bucharest, Romania, 2025.



Dochia, Oracle of Textile Waste during live performance. Performer: Alina Tofan.
Costume: GCV. Sibiu, Romania, 2026. Alina Tofan personal archive.

NOTES

1. The larger contexts of this reappearance can constitute a distinct chapter. We name only some of the places where it occurs: digital and activist culture, pop music and fashion, Latin American, African and African-diasporic (sub)culture forms, and new material practices among Indigenous and First Nations. A few examples are particularly illustrative. The singer/ artist Björk is one obvious case, and her long collaboration with artist James Merry is particularly rich. Their masks move between concert performance, music video, fashion, digital fabrication, and museum exhibition. For *The Guerrilla Girls*, an anonymous feminist activist and artist group whose members wear gorilla masks during public performances, protests and lectures, masks become tools for critiquing systemic sexism and racism in the art world. Another example is Nigerian-British artist Zina Saro-Wiwa, who explores masquerade, performance, food, oil extraction, and the ecology of Niger Delta, placing embodied cultural practice within contemporary systems of extraction, postcolonial governance, environmental damage, Christianization, global media and diasporic spectatorship.

2. John Vervaeke is a cognitive scientist, award-winning educator, professor of psychology, cognitive science, and Buddhist psychology at the University of Toronto. He is known for his many academic contributions in the field, but also for his 50-part YouTube lecture series, *Awakening from the Meaning Crisis*.

3. The framework is known as "4P/3R Metatheory of Cognition," and the ways of knowing referred to are propositional, procedural, perspectival and participatory. The theoretical framework can be found here: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/220387969_Relevance_Realization_and_the_Emerging_Framework_in_Cognitive_Science.

4. Avant-garde Japanese dance-theatre practice shaped by Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno that explores the body through slow, transformative, and often surreal movement. The practice emerged in Japan in the late 1950s, growing as a radical response to conventional dance forms and to the social and psychic upheavals of post-war Japan. It challenged conventional ideas of beauty, dance, and identity. *Butoh* often uses imagery, improvisation, and deep attention to inner sensation. Its practice often asks the dancer to let the body become something other than itself: an animal, a plant, an aging person, wind, soil, grief, or a remembered place. Performers may use white body paint or extreme slowness, but these are possible aesthetic choices, not rules that define every *butoh* work. Today, *butoh* has many international lineages and interpretations, while remaining closely connected to its Japanese historical and artistic origins.

5. French stage actor and movement trainer. He was best known for his teaching methods in physical theatre, movement, and mime which he taught at the school he founded in Paris, known as *École internationale de théâtre Jacques Lecoq*.

6. A traditional Chinese practice rooted in ancient Chinese medicine, philosophy, and martial arts that combines gentle movement, breathing, and focused awareness. Its name indicates the main goal of the practice: "to work with vital energy" or "to cultivate life force."

7. A traditional Chinese movement practice that draws on Chinese philosophical ideas of harmony, including the complementary forces of yin and yang. It combines slow, flowing sequences with breath and attention. The practice originated as a martial art, often known as *Tai Chi Chuan* or "supreme ultimate boxing." Over centuries, it developed into a widely practised method for cultivating balance, coordination, and calm.

8. A philosophical and theatrical term that describes the state of being in-between two different worlds or realities at the same time, from the ancient Greek word *μεταξύ*, meaning "middle" or "between."

9. *Julamila* or *Julamina* of the Plisot community of Aromanians in Romania (originally from Pleasa, or Plasë in Albanian, Korçë County, in Albania), is an Epiphany masquerade involving a mock wedding in which an all-male ritual group visits households to announce the Baptism of Christ. The masked characters include the newlyweds, the leader of the group, the old woman, the old man, the doctor, and several thieves who would "steal" provisions from each household they visit to use for the final banquet. The ritual is a living tradition even today in northeastern Bucharest, particularly in Voluntari city—Pipera neighbourhood, as well as in the town of Palazu Mare, near Constanţa city.

10. *Yagoria* was a dance project that involved a team of dancers, performers and cinematographers in which we developed choreographic languages rooted in performance art at the intersection with ecological concerns. There were several live acts in venues across Bucharest, as well as a video-performance that became our manifesto against illegal deforestation and abusive interventions in natural habitats, which has since toured internationally.

11. Baba Yaga is a complex figure in Slavic folklore, often portrayed as an old woman who lives in a hut standing on chicken legs, surrounded by a fence made of human bones with skulls atop the posts, and who can act as either a dangerous witch or a crucial helper who provides gifts, knowledge, or access to the hero or heroine. Her defining characteristic is this ambiguity: she is neither simply a villain nor simply a benefactor, but a threshold guardian. Encounters with Baba Yaga can be read as rites of passage: the protagonist must cross a boundary, survive her tests, and undergo transformation. In terms of her role in folktales, she is portrayed / can function as either a donor or an antagonist. From the feminist perspective adopted in the present work, Baba Yaga can be understood as a figure of power, autonomy, and refusal of domestic norms, an archetype of female knowledge outside patriarchal control. For further interpretations and analyses see Propp (1958), Ivanits (1989), Warner (1994), Forrester, Goscilo, and Skoro (2013), and Kwaschik (2023).

12. A cultural project developed by the collective in 2024, involving a team of invited artists from international *butoh* and from classical and experimental music scenes. The key concept, *holobiont*, draws from biology and was first

introduced by German biologist Adolf Meyer-Abich, and later popularized and redefined by American biologist Lynn Margulis in her 1991 seminal book—*Symbiosis as a Source of Evolutionary Innovation: Speciation and Morphogenesis.* In our practice, the concept is translated into ecopoetic and performative expressions of the assemblages of species/symbionts that we often mistake for biological units. A *holobiont* is any host organism, such as an animal, plant, fungus, or even human, together with all the other forms of life that co-constitute it. For example, the human body hosts a variety of microbiota.

13. The ritual referred to here is practiced in Transylvania, specifically in rural areas of Cluj County. Known locally under names as *Păpălugără*, *Băbăludă*, *Păpărugă*, *Mătăhulă*, *Dodoloaie*, and others, it is similar to rituals in other parts of Europe associated with the "Green Man" held in some villages on St George's Day; in others on Pentecost, and elsewhere in connection with the "milk measuring" at sheepfolds. It has been interpreted (Neagota and Benga 2009) as a complex customary manifestation: a spring ceremony intended to ensure fertility, exhibiting carnivalesque features, but also functioning as an initiation rite. As in the case mentioned here, the ritual involves a group consisting exclusively of young men of marriageable age, following a set of ritual actions over the course of a few days, during which one or more of them are chosen to become the central green figure. At a pre-arranged spot in the woods, the vegetal costume is carefully constructed on top of their body until they are completely unrecognizable. This is followed by a procession/carolling from household to household in the village, sometimes the hosts throwing water at the Green Man and receiving a twig from the costume in return, as well as an oration delivered by the young men to the families, and often culminating in a final moment connected to a body of water. For more ethnographic accounts and in-depth analyses see Neagota and Benga (2009), Neagota (2010a, 2010b), Benga (2018).

14. The term belongs to Timothy Morton, a British philosopher, literary theorist, and professor at Rice University known for developing the ecological concepts of "hyperobjects" and "dark ecology," as well as for his contributions to object-oriented ontology (OOO). The "symbiotic real" is a philosophical concept that Morton proposes as an alternative to "nature," a notion which he argues reinforces the illusory separation of humans from the living entangled world they belong to.

15. "Dochia, the oracle of textile waste" was a project (2024-2025) intended as a manifesto against the fast-fashion industry. Drawing from the mythical persona of Baba Dochia, figure in Romanian folk culture, we reimagined a contemporary Dochia who would warn against the overconsumption and abandonment of textiles that pollute the environment and contribute to many labour inequalities in many parts of the world. The project resulted in several live acts, a video performance, and an oracle deck.

16. Danish poet and novelist often described as an ecopoet. His work links the environmental crisis to consumer capitalism, masculinity, alienation, desire, and the uneasy entanglement of human and more-than-human worlds.

17. The term was coined by Mikkel Krause Frantzen and Jens Bjering in a 2020 paper, and stands as a synthesis of Timothy Morton's concept of *hyperobjects* and Julia Kristeva's theory of *abjection*.

18. According to several accounts published by Romanian ethnologists and folklorists (Vulcănescu, Pamfile, Florea Marian, Ghinoiu, Olteanu, Olinescu, among others), the legend goes like this: she begins her early ascent into the mountains, thinking that the bad weather is finally over. She starts with nine (sometimes twelve) woollen or sheepskin coats and takes them off one by one as the days get warmer. Upon reaching the top, March's capricious weather suddenly shifts, and storms and blizzards turn her and her sheep to stone.

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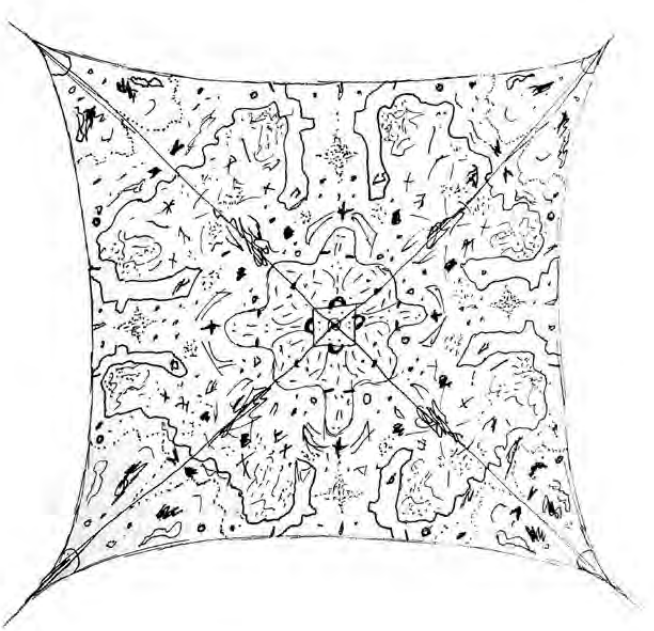
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V. Visual Micro-essay

Engulfed by Leaves: A Short Account of a *Sângiorz* and the Friendships it Forged

Georgiana Vlahbei
Plastic Art Performance collective, and National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Romania
ORCID: 0009-0005-1419-0188

Georgiana Vlahbei is an inter-media creator/researcher engaging with heritage-making processes, ritual expressions in traditional societies and contemporary creations, dynamics of customs with a focus on mask heritage.

Correspondence: georgianavlahbeimtr@gmail.com

Anamaria Iuga
National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Romania
ORCID: 0000-0002-9516-2672

Anamaria Iuga (Dr.) is a researcher in ethnology, working on the dynamics of material culture and intangible heritage, along with traditional ecological knowledge.

Correspondence: anaiuga@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Thought as a visual essay, using photographs taken during the field research dedicated to documenting a Green Man (*Sângiorz*) ritual in a village in Transylvania (Romania) in 2023, this text is, in fact, a work of love and gratitude we feel towards the friendships that were forged during fieldworks, and towards the communities that welcomed us with open arms.

KEYWORDS

Green Man; *Sângiorz*; spring ritual; friendship; visual essay.

Celebrating the rebirth of nature, the custom of the Green Man (locally called: *Paparudă, Băbăludă, Păpălugără, Sângiorz*), takes place in spring in some villages in Central and Northern Transylvania (Romania), and is still very much a living custom, continuing an old intergenerational practice. It has important ritual and social meanings for the community, such as: the initiation for the participating young men, protection, prosperity and fertility for animals and households (see Neagota and Benga 2009; Neagota 2010; Neagota 2011; Benga 2025), as well as providing a setting for *collective effervescence* (see Durkheim 1995). Even until today, it keeps meeting the needs of the communities where it is performed, existing not only in the institutional memory of Archives (see Cuceu and Cuceu 1988), as we would be tempted to believe, especially about rituals that have survived since "time immemorial."

Twenty-one years ago, in 2005, I (Anamaria) saw for the first time a ritual involving the use and performance of a vegetal mask, a *Sângiorz*, as it was locally called in the village I was invited to attend, by my friends and colleagues, Bogdan Neagota and Ileana Benga. It was their traditional spring campaign that they would take every year, for several years already, in the informal at the time *ORMA. Sodalitas Anthropologica group*. I was delighted to be invited to join, as I had just recently finished my Masters studies in Anthropology in Cluj-

Napoca, and was eager to do fieldwork of any kind. Rituals, however, were not my cup of tea, but I was curious nevertheless. I joined their fieldwork that year, and then in several other years, documenting, in total, six villages where the Green Man was a living tradition.

The first Green Man I ever saw remains the closest to my heart and the dearest to my memories. Seeing how the young man was being prepared to be masked, how the mask itself emerged from a tree bark, how his branch-costume started taking him over little by little, from his legs, to his arms and then his whole body, covered in green leaves—I felt truly privileged to be able to witness this. I remember finally understanding why people from the old days were so equally amazed and frightened by a Forest God.

In 2023, together with Georgiana, we took a trip to the same village, for her to witness, for her first time, a *Sângiorz*. A long-promised journey, postponed time and again, yet never forgotten. It was a journey of friendship, as our friendship was growing stronger during our common fieldwork to document living rituals: spring, summer, or winter customs, all over Romania. This time, the Green Man not only managed to amaze and excite us with its raw green beauty, but we felt humbled by how generously the community received us in their homes, sharing their intimate stories and in the middle of a celebration event, even! It was our lady host's anniversary, on Saint George's day, coinciding with Georgiana's both name and birthday. There was cake and there were whole families and generations of Green Men gathered around it in the courtyard to sing to both of them as they were blowing each one's number-candles. And all of it happened in just three days: enough for the borders of strangeness to fade. This is but one more reminder of the power of ritual to glue people together.

This visual essay, Georgiana's work of love, is inviting you, our reader, to perceive not what we witnessed as the ritual was being enacted, but what slips from the classic ethnographic gaze: the interrupted gestures, the uncertainty, what is left unsaid, the time in-between "strong" ritual sequences, the human becoming *something else*. Moreover, this joint work is our way to express gratitude to friendship: first, to Bogdan and to Ileana, who introduced us to these communities, but also to the communities themselves, to our dear hosts, local guides and custodians of the customs.

Note: All the photographies are part of Georgiana Vlahbei and Anamaria Iuga´s personal archive.

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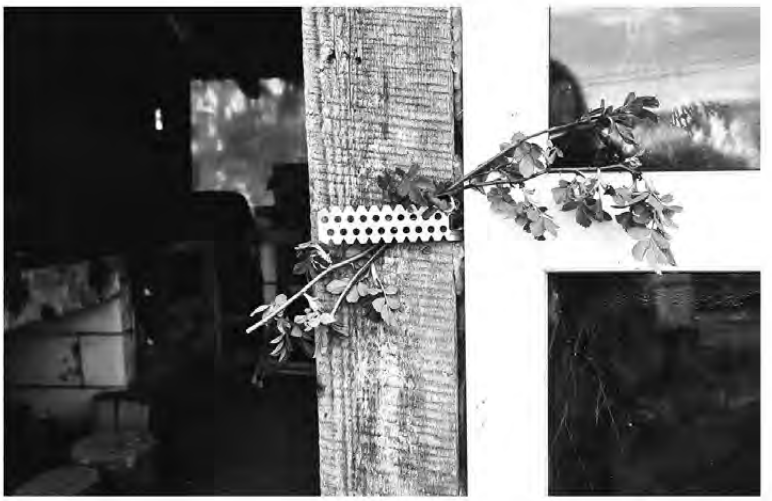
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GREEN GEORGE (BE)COMING



TWENTY THIRD OF APRIL



ANNOUNCING HIS COMING



AWAITING

ANTICIPATION





PROTECTION FROM STRIGOI

FINDING THE RIGHT SPOT IN THE FOREST







FINDING THE RIGHT TREE







INTIMATE GATHERING





FELLOWSHIP

SECRECY













GESTURES OF CARE · BROTHERHOOD · COM
OLDER GENERATIONS



BECOMING

STRENGTH AND VULNERABILITY .

~~MEADERY~~
OF GREENMEN

REMOVED FROM ORDINARY SOCIAL IDENTITY

ABSORBED INTO VEGETAL ORDER

SUSPENDED IN GREEN LIMINALITY

FOREST









ENGULFED BY TWIGS. DISAPPEARING INTO FOLIAGE.

SKIN BECOMING BARK. RECLAIMED BY FOREST. GERMINATIVE VEILING.

RITUAL AS GRAMMAR OF CYCLES: GROWTH AND DECAY.

BOYHOOD DISSOLVING INTO LEAVES. NEITHER ERRASED NOR ADORNED.





MATERIAL TRANSFORMATION --- SOCIAL EXCHANGE --- RITUAL DISSOLUTION

WRAPPING THE VILLAGE IN A PROTECTIVE LAYER



AUTHORITY AND GUARDIANSHIP OF THE RITUAL GROUP

WATER EXCHANGES
AT THRESHOLDS
GATES
WELLS
ON THE ALLEYS

WATER AS MEDIATOR



+ GENERAL WATER FIGHT DRENCHING FRENZY
CLIMAXES WITH GREEN MAN SOAKED BY EVERYONE



PROCESSION / PROTECTION



CINE NU UDĂ SÂNGIORZU...

EVERY SPLASH IS A NEGOTIATION FOR FERTILITY AND ABUNDANCE





MASK AND BRANCH COSTUME THROWN IN THE NEAREST WATERWAY IN THE END

As part of an interdisciplinary project running from 2014 to 2019, nine researchers in ethnology from the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant explored the Buzău region (Romania).

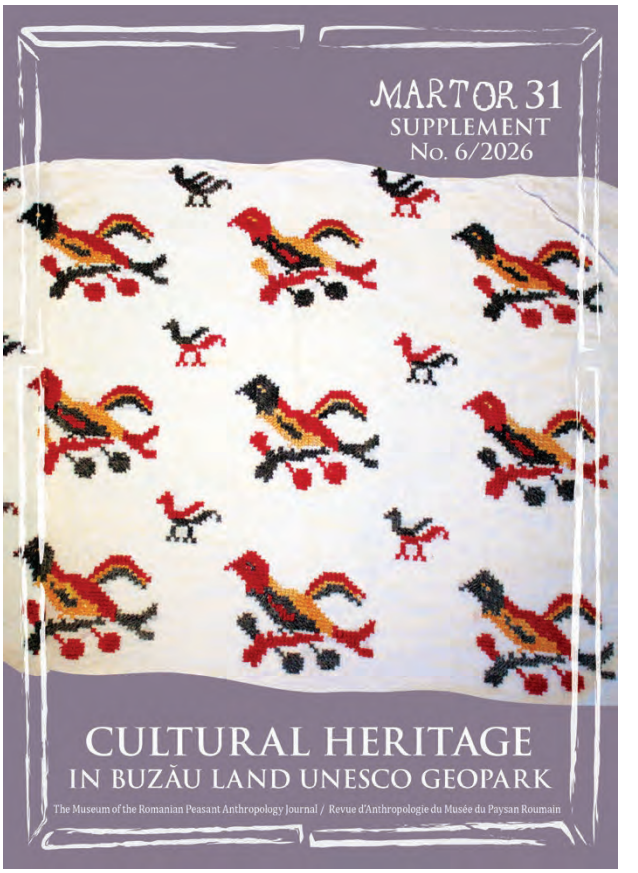
We invite you to discover the stories told by the people of Buzău, those told by the objects and buildings their skilful hands have created, as well as the stories told by the landscapes that define the region as an UNESCO Geopark.

All these can be found in the

supplement to issue no. 31/2026 of MARTOR Journal,

the sixth supplement of the Journal, at:

https://doi.org/10.57225/martor.2026.31.supl6



Let us celebrate together the fact that there is a region where, amidst the turmoil of modern life, traditions are still cherished and kept alive.

With this volume, we bring an interdisciplinary convergence of anthropology, ethnology, heritage studies, material culture, creative ethnographies as well as accounts from visual and performance arts, in order to provide insights into worlds of ritual mask makers, wearers and receivers. We follow their trajectories through diverse analytical and creative formats: anthropological text, observational notes, dialogues, understanding how masks continue to actively participate in producing identities and social worlds, rather than merely representing them. We see masking as a process of representation, identification, othering, and ontological transformation, emphasizing the conditions through which identities, social relations, and forms of belonging are temporarily suspended, negotiated, or reconfigured. Mask-making is presented as an embodied form of technical and cultural knowledge that articulates craftsmanship, local economies, professionalisation, and intergenerational transmission. Further, we explore the heritage-making processes through which masks and associated knowledge are selected, authorized, transmitted, commodified, and re-signified by a wide range of actors. Masks emerge as objects of tension, used to mediate relationships between bodies, objects, communities, different orders of reality but also - moments of crisis. Thus, there is no better time for them than the present.

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