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

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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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