



II. Embodying the Mask: Ritual, Performance, Community

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

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Alexa, Cătălin. 2026. "The Masks of Silence. A Brief History of the Ritual Mask in *Căluș*." *Martor* 31, 129-38.
[DOI: 10.57225/martor.2026.31.08]

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 *Călușar* 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 *Călușar* 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 *Călușar* 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 *Călușar* 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 *Călușar* 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 *călușari* groups in Wallachia during the same historical period is confirmed by the brief mention made by Anton-Maria del Chiaro in *Revoluțiile 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 *călușari* 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 *Căluș* 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 *Căluș* 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 *căluș* 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 *călușari*, 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 *călușari* 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 *călușari* 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 *Căluș* 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 *Căluș*, 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 lordache 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 lordache 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 lordache 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 *borăcenii*, 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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