

# 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](mailto:adrian.stoicescu@litere.unibuc.ro)

Stoicescu, Adrian. 2026. "Authenticity of the Masked Body—the Bear Dance in Present Day Digital Performance." *Martor* 31, 211-26. [DOI 10.57225/martor.2026.31.13]

## 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,

*Martor* 31/2026 – Mask-making and Mask-wearing: Shifting Im/materialities in Ritual and Performative Contexts

*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



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.

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.

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/ursulluigavriladinasaau>, 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*  
(2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup>, 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.

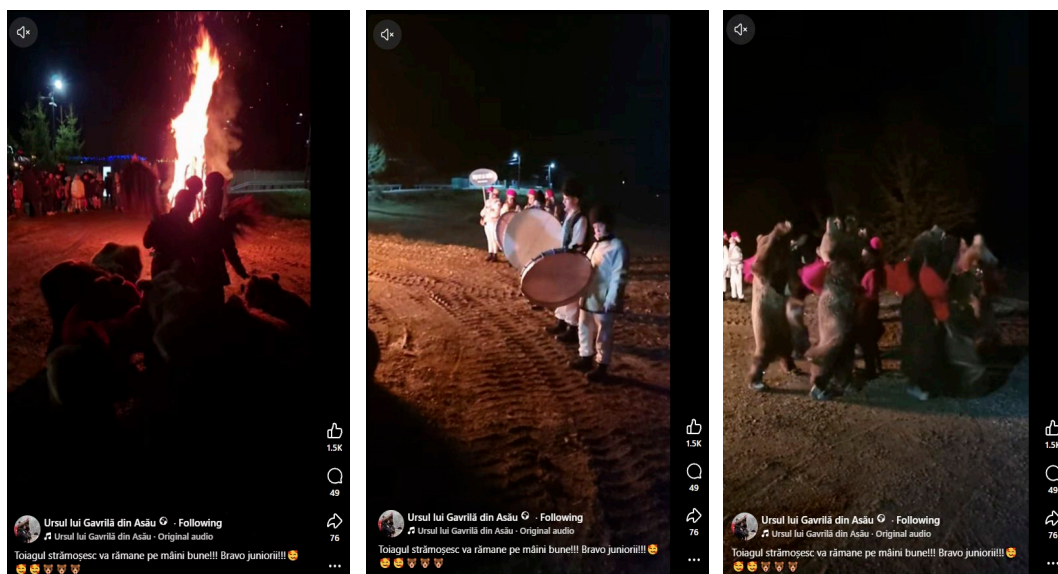
What is significant here is not that ethnographic accuracy becomes irrelevant, but that it is not the criterion explicitly used by the commenter in authenticating the digitally presented performance. The masked body and the recognizable form of the Bear Dance remain present as main visual conditions 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 15<sup>th</sup>, 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!!!*  
(15<sup>th</sup> 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*  
(21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup>, 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 Gavrilă'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.

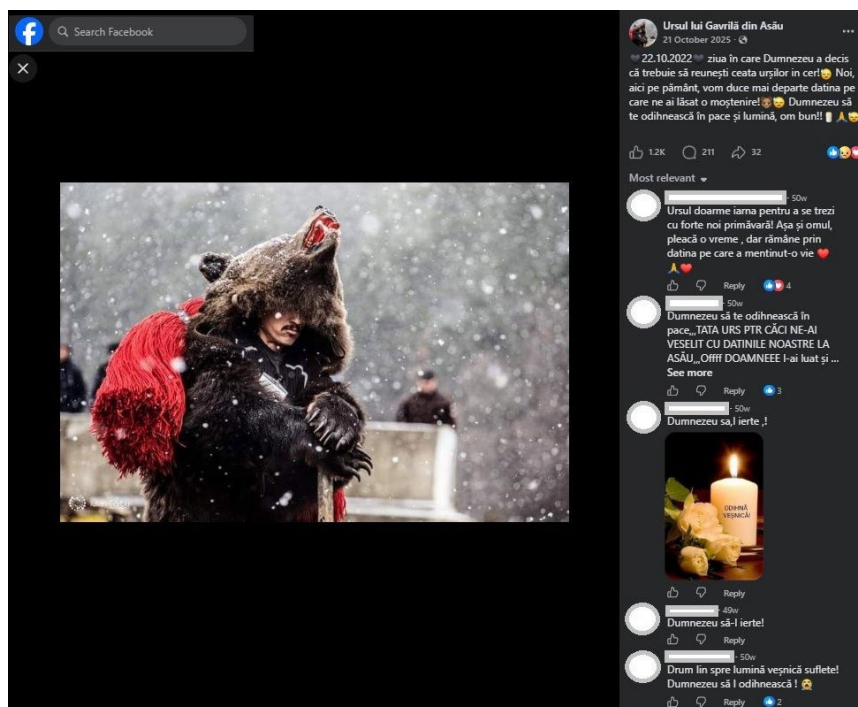
♥ 22.10.2022 ♥ The day God decided that you should gather the group of bears in heaven! 🐻  
We, here on earth, will carry forward the tradition you left us as a legacy! 🐻 May God rest you  
in peace and light, good soul!! 🙏🙏

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 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022, [https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1440137874309661&set=pb.100049403865742\\_-2207520000&type=3](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<sup>1</sup> 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.

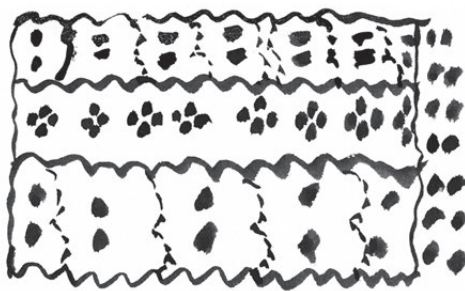
Overall, the analysis points to a broader transformation in which material elements remain visually salient but lose their central role in the production of authenticity. Instead, authenticity is articulated, validated and negotiated through narrative, affect, visibility, and interaction. The masked 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.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adăscăliței, Vasile. 1970. "Jocul ursului, de Anul Nou, în Moldova" [The Bear Dance at New Year in Moldavia]. *Analele Științifice ale Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” din Iași* [Scientific Annals of the "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași], s.n., *Literatură* 16, 21-32.
- Appadurai Arjun, ed. 1986. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CB09780511819582> (ed. from 2014).
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. 2012. *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bauman, Richard. 1977. *Verbal Art as Performance*. Prospect Heights: Waveland Press.
- Bendix, Regina. 1997. *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

- Chhabra, Deepak, Robert Healy, and Erin Sills. 2003. "Staged Authenticity and Heritage Tourism." *Annals of Tourism Research* 30 (3), 702-19. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(03\)00044-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(03)00044-6)
- Clifford, James. 1988. *The Predicament of Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cohen, Erik. 1988. "Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism." *Annals of Tourism Research* 15 (3), 371-86. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(88\)90028-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(88)90028-X)
- Gaden, Georgia, and Delia Dumitrica. 2014. "The 'Real Deal': Strategic Authenticity, Politics and Social Media." *First Monday* 19 (1). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v20i1.4985>
- Ghinoiu, Ion, coord. 2004. *Sărbători și obiceiuri: Răspunsuri la chestionarele Atlasului Etnografic Român. Vol. IV: Moldova* [Holidays and Customs: Responses to the Questionnaires of the Romanian Ethnographic Atlas. Vol. IV: Moldavia]. Eds. Cornelia Pleșca and Emil Țîrcomnicu]. Bucharest: Enciclopedică.
- Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Handler, Richard, and Jocelyn Linnekin. 1984. "Tradition, Genuine or Spurious." *Journal of American Folklore* 97 (385), 273-90.
- Hafstein, Valdimar Tr. 2012. "Cultural Heritage." In *A Companion to Folklore*, eds. Regina Bendix, Galit Hasan-Rokem, 500-19. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hafstein, Valdimar Tr. 2018. *Making Intangible Heritage: El Condor Pasa and Other Stories from UNESCO*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Jackson, Michael. 2005. *Existential Anthropology: Events, Exigencies and Effects*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1998. *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- MacCannell, Dean. 1976. *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Marwick, Alice, and Danah Boyd. 2011. "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately." *New Media & Society* 13 (1), 114-33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313>
- Noyes, Dorothy. 2003. *Fire in the Plaza: Catalan Festival Politics after Franco*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Taylor, Allan S. 2022. *Authenticity as Performativity on Social Media*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Turner, Victor. 1969. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Van den Berghe, Pierre L., and Jorge Flores Ochoa. 2000. "Tourism and Nativistic Ideology in Cuzco, Peru." *Annals of Tourism Research* 27 (1), 7-26. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(99\)00043-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(99)00043-2)
- Wang, Ning. 1999. "Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience." *Annals of Tourism Research* 26 (2), 349-70. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(98\)00103-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(98)00103-0)
- Zhu, Yujie. 2012. "Performing Heritage: Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism." *Annals of Tourism Research* 39 (3), 1495-513. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2012.04.003>

