

III. Notes

Performing Traditions. *Craii:* A Christian Custom from the Jiu Valley, Romania

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ABSTRACT

In the Jiu Valley, a region with a rich traditional culture situated in a depression in the Southern Carpathians, the Nativity of the Lord Jesus Christ on 25 December is one of the most important Christian holidays and its celebration, as in all regions where Romanians live, involves carolling. Here, however, carolling combines the performance of traditional songs with a popular religious play, created in the 19th century for the upper class, whose theme is the arrival of the Magi bearing gifts for the Infant Jesus. In the Jiu Valley, this religious spectacle, called *Craii* [The Kings], has become a feature of local identity. Although the original religious play followed the biblical narrative, it underwent changes in the course of its being performed in the local peasant communities. Masked characters who belonged to different forms of carolling were incorporated into the group of carollers. As well as giving an ethnographic description of this custom, we will examine the role and significance of the masked characters and of masks in this particular Christian-themed play.

KEYWORDS

Christmas carolling; religious folk theatre; mask; Magi; troupe of young men; community.

In Romania, where 85.3% of the 16,397,300 people who declared their religious affiliation in the 2021 Census self-identified as Orthodox Christians, according to the Press release giving the provisional data from the 2021 Census of Population and Dwellings,[1] the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ (25th December) is celebrated via numerous traditional practices that take place over several days, the most widespread being carol-singing. Carolling, which currently has a Christian significance, that of bringing the news of the Nativity to every house, has inherited practices and beliefs derived from the New Year customs of local populations in archaic times. These are based around three elements: the magic power of words, as wishes can influence how the next year will go; the permeability of this time at the turn of the year, which allows the entry into our world of evil spirits, which need to be banished by the use of apotropaic practices that involve making a noise; and the communion between the living and the dead (Bîrlea 1981, 267-70). So it was that the carollers who announced the Birth of God as Man came to be accompanied by masked characters, a reminder of a world in which people and the sacred communicated in ways different from those of today.

Carolling is ceremonial and performance-based in nature. While local diversity does exist, the main stages of preparation and performance involved in going carol singing are the same in most regions of Romania. The carollers meet during the Christmas fast [Advent] to prepare and rehearse. This is followed by the central part of the custom: for two or three days, starting on Christmas Eve, the groups of carollers go from house to house

singing carols, announcing the Birth of the Lord, and pronouncing ritual wishes for health and prosperity. The carols are old songs sung to tunes of their own and cover a range of subjects; more recently they have started to be accompanied by musical instruments. The carollers are rewarded with gifts of food (traditional ring-shaped bread rolls, roast meat, cakes), drink, and money. They express formal thanks for these gifts and dance with the girls of the family they are visiting (this is believed to help them to get married soon). At the end of the carolling period, the carollers hold a party for the young people, though the whole community takes part (Caraman 1983, 16-22). Village children too go carolling in a similar though simplified way. Although this has the same ritual function, it is the young people who are regarded as being the principal actors and as having the responsibility to bring the news of the Nativity. They do this in a variety of ways. For example, there are parts of Romania where carolling with masks is practised: one of the groups of costume-wearing carol singers conceals his identity by donning a decorated animal mask made of wood, with a movable jaw and horns. This masked character is called *the Stag, Turca, the Goat, Boriţa* or *Brezaia.* The young people sing ritual carols and *Turca* dances to the rhythm of the music; then the rest of the group dance as well. *Turca* acts out a little scene that is frightening and comical at the same time: he scares the spectators by rushing at them, but at the end he tries to get the money they have been given by the host using his animal mouth, which makes the audience laugh. Finally, *Turca* dies and rises again, and this feature of the drama is regarded as evidence of the original significance of the custom: it was a sacrifice to ensure that nature would come to life again (Bîrlea 1981, 271-75). However, this original meaning was lost long ago, with the tradition continuing to be practised for different purposes: the making of ritual wishes, celebration, social cohesion, etc.

The masked characters have a different role from that of the other members of the carolling party: they strike the men, tease the women, scare the children, and create disorder in the house. This is a form of transgressing social rules that is accepted by the community within the clearly delimited framework of the ritual: the rules are broken so that a new balance can be established. It is the mask itself that allows the characters to do this. While in custom-based societies all around the globe masks are a sign of connection with the other world, a representation of the presence of the dead at the rituals of the living in order to guarantee fertility and drive away evil, in traditional Romanian culture, in the custom of carolling, the only role the mask retains is that of placing its wearer outside the standard laws (Evseev 1999, 273), thus allowing him to act out a performance: "The winter traditions have lost their original magical character and have turned into a folk theatre performance" (Popescu 1990, 192).

During the nineteenth century, the practice of going carolling was in many parts of the country expanded and enriched by the introduction of a religious play called Irozii (*The Herods*, from the name of King Herod), *Vicleimul* or *Viflaimul* (from Bethlehem, the town where Jesus Christ was born), or, as is the case in the Jiu Valley, *Craii (The Kings*, from the Magi who came to the infant Jesus bringing gifts). The theme of the play is the episode in the Bible where the Magi arrive to visit Jesus with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. It was written for amateur actors belonging to the higher echelons of society (the *boieri*) in a period when there were no theatres. It was later taken up by humble townsfolk and by country people, who adapted it to their own cultural ideology (Meiu 2004, 107) and thus made it into a carolling tradition. The country people made simpler versions of the original text that contained the following elements: the Magi's arrival at Herod's palace to ask him where the king whose star had led them to Jerusalem had been born; an account of their names and of the gifts they had brought him; Herod's decision to kill the infants in order to



Image 1. The *Crai* of Taia (on the Eastern Jiu) at the *Crai* Festival, Lupeni, 2018, before the performance.
Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.

kill the Messiah among them; the angel telling some shepherds the news of the birth and they too bringing him gifts.

In carolling, the exchanging of gifts is a key feature. After they have sung carols and wished their hosts health and wealth, the carollers are repaid with ritual gifts (food and money). In this way the hosts make offerings to God via the carollers and receive a divine blessing in return (Văduva 1997, 111-14). The Magi brought gifts to the Infant Jesus as a testimony to their faith. The importance of the presence of gifts both in the play and in carolling may go some way towards explaining how this religious play came to be integrated into the carolling tradition and the fact that it is still there after over a hundred years.

However, the *Craii* play is not only a carol but also a performance, as is the case with other Romanian traditions too: *călușarii* (Pentecost dancing), *cununa secerișului* (grain harvest festival), *malanca* (the masked New Year festival), etc. (Petcu-Pădurean 2018, 10-2). The costumes and props (the masks included) are visually impressive and add to the ceremonial value of the action. In the *Craii* play as performed in the Jiu Valley, the mask is preserved as a traditional element, but what it signifies has been gradually modified under pressure from the religious subject. When certain customs are no longer practised, the ones that survive often take over characters, actions, ritual behaviours, symbols, and images from those that have disappeared, but these are resemanticised and brought within the fold of the overall meaning of the tradition that has adopted them.

In the Jiu Valley *carolling with the Craii* custom, the young people are not restricted to singing carols but intercalate them between the lines of a play. While Romanian ethnologists regard *carols* ["colinde"] and *star songs* ["cântece de stea"] as two different species, the communities in the area think of all of them as carols. The story of the three Magi does not appear in the carols but only in the star songs, some of which were specially composed for the *Craii* play (Brătulescu 1981).

We will now analyse the Jiu Valley *Craii* from an interdisciplinary perspective that calls on ethnology, philology and literary history, interrogating the present-day meanings of the



Image 2. The *Crai* of Sohodol (Parașeni) carolling in the village, 2014. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.



Image 3. The *Crai* of Sohodol at the Parașeni parish church, 25 December 2014. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.

custom as understood by the performers and communities and paying particular attention to the props and costumes. The latter constitute essential elements of the theatrical performance, since not only behaviours but also objects can fulfil ritual or ceremonial functions; often, they operate together. Objects form part of ritual actions and share in the creation of meaning (Meiu 2004, 8-9), with the development of the use of masks in this tradition indicating changes that have taken place in the collective mentality.

"Three kings from the East"

It is hard to understand why the story of the three Magi does not appear in carols, given that country people in Romania knew not only the Biblical texts but also various apocryphal ones and other writings on Christian themes that were in circulation as early as the first centuries after Christ (Cartojan 1974, 81). The priests and the monks in Romanian monasteries, copyists and translators of Slavonic and Greek manuscripts obtained from the monks of the Byzantine Empire and of Mount Athos, used these kinds of stories in their sermons. Nicolae Cartojan, a specialist in early Romanian literature, found evidence of the circulation of the story of the three Magi in two ancient manuscripts in the library of the Romanian Academy: *The Story of Aphroditius the Persian* and *Exegetical sermon for the day after the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ for the killing of the young children of Vifleaim* [Bethlehem] *and the grieving of the mothers and then also how Herod perished* (Cartojan 1974, 103-106). It was also Cartojan who found the oldest form of the text of *Craii*, in manuscripts dating from the late eighteenth century, written by men of the Church who were also involved in educating children. The play was originally written and staged specifically for its educational value:

> Our teachers and learned men, just like *les clercs de la Basoche* in France, were instructors, were church painters, were singers, were even actors who performed the religious mystery plays that everywhere were the beginning of the modern theatre and remnants of which have been preserved for us to this day in our *Herod* and *Betleem...* (Kogălniceanu 1882, 33).

The original version of *Craii* became more widely known as a result of its publication in the collection of *Star Songs or verses that are sung at the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ* that Anton Pann issued in 1848 (Cartojan 1974, 231-33).

The majority of scholars believe that the authors of the *Craii* play modelled it on the medieval mysteries that appeared in Western countries such as France and Germany in the eleventh to twelfth centuries, an early form of popular theatre that drew its inspiration from episodes in the Bible. In the Romanian lands, the theatre was slower to develop. According to published historical records, plays in Romanian were first acted in 1816 in Iași and in 1818 in Bucharest (Petcu-Pădurean 2018, 17-22); however, as-yet-unpublished manuscripts show that *The Herods* was being acted considerably earlier in Moldova. This play, written for "the sons of the landowners" who wanted to act, had been integrated into the carolling tradition: "Dressed in garments made of cloth of gold, they would go to the ruler's court and to the houses of the most distinguished nobles" (Kogălniceanu 1882, 33). After the landowners it was the turn of the church teachers to take up the play and become *irodari* [Herod players]. In the early nineteenth century, they would ride in groups through the streets of towns shouting "Herod, Herod!" (just as the carollers announce their presence on the street through shouts, noise and music—our note) and would be paid in money and food for their performances (Burada 1915, 8-10). Around 1900 the play was adopted by village young people too.

During the nineteenth century, religious dramas were performed in Italy, France, and Germany (Burada 1915, 7) and also among the Ruthenians, Saxons, Hungarians and Serbs of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to which the Romanian regions of Transylvania, Banat, and Bucovina also belonged until 1918 (Cartojan 1974, 246-47). For example, in *Herodes,* a *Vicleim* [Bethlehem] of the Saxons of Transylvania printed in Sibiu in 1859, there is a scene in which the shepherds are awoken by an angel and another in which Herod, after the visit of the Magi, asks a priest to search the Scriptures and tell him where the Messiah is to be born (Cartojan 1974, 247). These scenes are found again in two plays by Petru Băncilă published in Sibiu in 1875 (Cartojan 1974, 240), one in four acts and the other in two. The former contains a scene in which the three shepherds (called Coridon, Acteon and Miron) are roused by the Angel and commanded to go to "Vitfleemu." Coridon wakes first and has difficulty rousing Acteon "the sleepy one" and Miron. All three set off for the cave to worship the Child and take him gifts: one presents him with two lambs, another a ram, and the third a cheese (Cartojan 1974, 240-42).

Fragments of Petru Băncilă's plays can be found in the versions we meet in the Jiu Valley. The Magi introduce themselves in the same way: each one says his name and the others repeat it in chorus. The changes made are minimal, and interviewees in the Jiu Valley speak about the fact that they exchange lines among the characters and move carols to different places among the lines, so as to introduce something new without abandoning the theme (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroșeni, 2025). Băncilă's "Sleepy Antion" is mentioned here too. The locals say they know the text "from a church book", but no one has seen the book; the lines of the play are passed down from one generation of *Craii* actors to the next. The young people devise new, shorter versions by making compilations of older texts, because the time allocated for carolling at each family's home can be no longer than 15 minutes:

> They never acted this play, not even in the 1970s. They shortened it because it was too long. They found two, three, maybe four plays in the carol books. [...] They had one play, I transcribed it, and there I allowed myself to be influenced. They said: "We won't do the one those people from Dreghicioni do, we won't do the one we have corrected either, we'll combine them." (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroșeni, 2025)

Context of the research project

The Jiu Valley is a historical region, situated in a depression in the Southern Carpathians, that holds a special place in Romanian history. From a political point of view, although populated by Romanians, it belonged to Hungary from the twelfth century until 1918; it currently belongs to Romania. In terms of demographics, after 1860, when coal extraction began, miners were brought to the area from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They were settled in colonies, in settlements that later developed into towns. A distinction thus arose between Romanian shepherd villages with their traditional way of life and multi-ethnic mining towns inhabited by Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, and Romanians from other parts of the Empire. Disagreements between these two sets of communities (caused by the abuses of the State) deepened to the point where pejorative names arose that have persisted to this day: the townspeople called the country people *momârlani* [a term whose meaning is not well understood even by those who use it], while the latter in their turn called the townspeople *barabe* or *vinituri* (newcomers) (Stanca 1996, 56; Pascu 2019). Under the Communist regime, the industrialisation of the Jiu Valley gathered speed. The population of the towns increased as groups of Romanians from other parts of the country were forcibly relocated there to work in the mines. After 1990, the mines gradually closed under pressure from the market economy and as a consequence of "green" policies, which meant the region rapidly became poorer. Young people in the towns were forced to look for work abroad or in large cities in Romania. The country people had the advantage of their traditional way of life, with the income they obtained from rearing animals helping them to take the decision to stay in their homes. It is entirely natural that this category of people should be supportive of traditions and customs that involve large numbers of people and thus maintain community cohesion. *Carolling with Craii* is one of these.

The River Jiu is formed from two main rivers, the Eastern Jiu and the Western Jiu, which rise in different mountains and unite in the depression called the Jiu Valley. In the eastern part, the mining companies grouped the miners together in colonies that were separate from the villages. Not mingling with the newcomers, the country people continued to practise their customs in an older form. In the west, the mines and mining towns were constructed actually in the villages, some of which vanished while others became areas of towns, even though they retained their rural appearance to some extent (Dumitru Gălăţan-Jieţ, 85, Jieţ, 2025). Many country people moved to apartment blocks, largely giving up their traditional way of life, even though they affirm the same identity as before. The different social conditions created small differences in customs, including in the *colindatul cu Craii* [carolling with the Kings]. The young people of the Eastern Jiu are more conservative than those of the Western Jiu, but both categories attempt to bring novelty and spectacle to their performances, though in different ways. Consequently, we will speak below of "the Eastern Jiu communities" and "the Western Jiu communities" when highlighting the differences.

From a religious point of view, the Romanian country people of the Eastern Jiu were Orthodox. Between 1800 and 1835 the country people of the Western Jiu became Greco-Catholics (Stanca 1996 51-2).[2] Miners who belonged to different ethnic groups also belonged to different denominations and religions: Roman Catholics, Evangelicals, Reformed, Unitarians. etc. (Stanca 1996, 66-8). The *Craii* custom is practised by country and urban people who are Orthodox or Greco-Catholic. In Lupeni, on the Western Jiu, mixed teams of carollers with both country and urban members are also to be found.



Image 4. The *Crai* of Sohodol (Paroșeni), 2014. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.



Image 5. The *Crai* of Taia and the *Crai* of Jieț, in front of the Lupeni Cultural Centre, where the *Crai* Festival takes place, Lupeni, 2022. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.

Research methodology

My study of the traditional peasant culture of the Jiu Valley involved successive periods of field research from 2008 to 2025. The participative observations I carried out in 2012 and 2014 allowed me the opportunity to experience first-hand the joyful and effervescent atmosphere associated with carolling, to be struck by the serious involvement of the young people, and to observe the community reaction live. I carried out approximately 20 semi-structured interviews with *Craii* performers aged from 20 to 85. A guiding principle for my research was George-Paul Meiu's position regarding the importance of assessing the *feelings* experienced during performing, since it is these that determine the keeping of some meanings of traditions and the giving-up of others (Meiu 2004, 11). Emotions, feelings, mentalities, knowledge, and above all what the performers regard as having *value* determine how the tradition will evolve.

The *Craii* troupe

Country people's religious holiday traditions combine ceremonial elements with performance-related ones, adornment, singing and dancing, thus bringing together partying with a degree of solemnity and attention to detail (Moise 1999, 154). In recent years, however, few young people have still wanted to go carolling with the *Craii*. In 2024, one of the most traditional villages, Jieț, had no *Craii* team (Dumitru Gălățan-Jieț, 85, Jieț, 2025). From several troupes in every village in 2008, their number has decreased in recent years to the point at which just one team, involving young people from a number of villages, has sometimes been formed.

In southern Transylvania, the region to which the Jiu Valley belongs, the young people's troupe or *ceată* is made up of unmarried boys (not girls) aged from 15-16 up to marriage. In the Jiu Valley, the *ceată* is not organised in a formal way, but the carollers obeyed this rule for a long time: "At that time there were no carollers as old as 25. At 22, 23 the young men were already married. Because anyone who got to 25 still unmarried was already kind of old" (Nicolae Cic, 57, Jieț, 2025). But real life necessitates changes to the rules, changes that put the practising of the custom in peril. Those interviewed frequently talk about an *ideal* picture, but *real* circumstances (Meiu 2004, 18) demonstrate which elements are irreplaceable and which can be modified at need. Because of a lack of new performers, in order for the carolling not to be interrupted, young people have ended up staying in the team for more years than the rules would have allowed (Alin Ciurea, 32, Jieț, 2025).

In the Western Jiu, in recent years, motivated by the desire to win the Lupeni *Craii Festival*, the young people have been asking experienced former *Crai* to help them. As a result, mature married men have joined the troupes, but only in the role of *Brunduși* (i.e. *Shepherds*) (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroșeni, 2025). Their strong voices, gestures and costumes create a more impressive spectacle. The number of characters, originally between nine and eleven, has grown, so that we now have an *Angel*, a *Soldier* or two, the three *Crai*, *Herod*, four *Shepherds*, the *Minister*, and the mature *Brunduși*.

The inhabitants of the Eastern Jiu have not accepted any enlargement of the troupe. Their characters have continued to be the *Angel*, *Herod*, the three *Crai* (Valtezar, Melfior and Gașpar—in English: Balthasar, Melchior and Gaspard), a *Soldier*, two *Shepherds*, and the

Minister (they avoid the name *Priest* out of respect for the clergy; Alin Ciurea, 32, Jieț, 2025). Their manner of acting is more conservative, more sober, and they prefer age-old local carols, which they perform in the traditional unaccompanied fashion. The *Shepherds* (here they are not called *Brunduși*) wear traditional dress. However, they too have found ways of improving the visual aspect of their performance: they make themselves *Crai headgear* modelled on (imaginary) Roman helmets that are more impressively decorated with every passing year.

Preparations

At the beginning of the Christmas fast [Advent], the young people form themselves into a team, prepare their costumes and props, learn their parts, and organise the *Craii Party* that ends the celebration. All this implies major resources of money, time, artistic talent, knowledge, the psychological skills needed to communicate and relate, physical strength and health. An actor starts at the bottom: he joins the troupe aged six to 11 as an *Angel*, then becomes a *Soldier*, until he finally reaches the most important role, that of *Herod* (Ionel Dănescu, 52, Paroșeni, 2014). But this is the *ideal* situation. *In reality*, the young people who join the team take whatever roles are free. For example, Alin Ciurea began to go carolling in 2009, aged 15-16, as Melfior: "I was never an Angel, after that I didn't want to go as a *Shepherd*, because it would have been pretty tough, you would have needed to keep wearing our traditional costume for three days non-stop" (Alin Ciurea, 32, Jieț, 2025).

If the young people have been carolling together in other years, it is easier, as the troupe has experience, communicates well, and needs fewer rehearsals. With new actors it is more difficult. Roles are allocated strictly on the basis of talent. What is hardest is when the tradition is resumed after an interruption. Rehearsals are held two or three times a week and take place in the homes of each member of the team on a rota basis, as all the families enjoy peeping in on them when they are practising and helping them. *Herod* is the leader. The largest number of rehearsals are held at his home, they set out from there on their carolling, and those who live at a distance sleep at his home. In teams with mature *Brunduși,* the one with the most experience is the leader (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroșeni, 2025).

The headdresses and costumes of the *Crai* and of *Herod* are the most expensive. The community helps, and those who have kept theirs from the past lend them willingly:

> No, in my case it was easier. I used to wear old traditional Jiu Valley clothes—at that time, they were easy to find. Naturally, we used to help our fellow team members as well, my sister, if she had pearls, necklaces (for decorating the headdresses—our note), she'd contribute them. (Nicolae Cic, 57, Jieț, 2025, former *Shepherd*)

But for those who made their own headdresses it was extremely difficult:

> I knew there were none left (headdresses—our note). There were three lads who had had them, one of the lads had moved to Cimpa and had taken his headdress with him. [...] In 2009, get your act together and make a headdress! And I thought: "Do I get my family to do it?" I mean, I was a kid, I was at high school. [...] I asked them, they said they'd help me, well! It wasn't exactly easy, I had to make a trip to Bucharest, [...] there weren't that many (goods for sale), so you couldn't find everything in Petroșani or Târgu Jiu. You could find beads but you couldn't find wreaths, necklaces,



Image 6. The *Crai* Festival, Lupeni, 2022, the *Crai* of Paroșeni (Drăghicioni area), who arrived in carts, the distance being a short one. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.

> trimmings. [...] I went to a mall, I can't remember which mall, [...] I think it was in AFI Cotroceni (shopping centre in Bucharest), but I think I spent 1,000 euros on that occasion. (Alin Ciurea, 32, Jieț, 2025)

Sometimes several young people desperately want the same headdress and arguments result:

> Because they were all coming to me with money: "Hey, don't give it to him, 'cos I'll pay you this much!". And what comeback! What rows I had with them, 'cos why won't you give it to me, why are you giving it to that other guy instead? [...] "Don't give it to *him*!" "Maybe I'm giving it to him because you can afford to make your own, but he can't." As was the case with my neighbour. His father had died when he was little, he was five or six months old. How can I give it to that other guy when my neighbour right here has absolutely no way he can make one of his own? You can take your complaints to whoever you like! (Mitu Șchiopoiu, 50, Jieț, 2025)

But why are the *Crai* headdresses of the Eastern Jiu so expensive to make? There is a great difference between Eastern Jiu and Western Jiu headdresses. The shapes and materials have changed over time. In photographs from the 1950s, the headdresses are smaller, made of cardboard and covered with ribbons and beads, with a token that looks like an anchor on the front (Dumitru Gălățan-Jieț, 85, Jieț, 2025). For many generations now, up to the present day, the headdresses have been made from strong cardboard, satinised insulating board or smooth painting board, so that they could stand up to rain or snow. From the end of the 1990s onwards, in the Eastern Jiu, especially in Cimpa, headdresses have been becoming taller and taller. First, they make a cylinder that will be placed on the head, to which are attached, at the sides, two trapezoid pieces of cardboard that are joined together by other pieces in front, at the back and on top, on the *crest*. The cardboard structure is wrapped in white cloth which is then entirely covered in Christmas tree baubles and other silver-coloured decorations so that

the cloth cannot be seen at all. Two long decorated straps are hooked on at the corners and allowed to hang down. At the top of the headdress, on the *crest*, small mirrors are placed, and then, every 10 centimetres, circlets with *strasuri* (fake precious stones)[3] in them and with the side parts, those that go into the hair, cut off, so that only the decorated part is left. But what attracts all eyes are the sets of jewellery—necklace, bracelet and earrings—set with *strasuri* that appeared on the market in the 1960s and 1970s. The young people would borrow or buy them from those who had bought them in those years, or even buy them from the shops that sold them, and would hook them on to their headdresses all round and in front. Nowadays, dozens of necklace strings are attached horizontally, each one below the one above, and over the face there are so many that the wearer can no longer see out properly. The headdresses also have a peak.

In recent years, since the teams started entering for the *Crai Festival* and wanting both to win first prize and also to impress the public at the competition held at the church on the first day of the festival, some *Crai* have made themselves headdresses that are so tall and heavy that they cannot even enter a house with them on their heads. In Cimpa there are headdresses that are 1.98 metres tall, weigh over 30 kg, and cost 4,500 euros each (Alin Ciurea, 32, Jieț, 2025). It is my view that the young people have begun to rethink *Craii* in terms of a theatre performance and to relegate the original purpose of the tradition, namely carolling, to second place. Seeing that people take notice of the headdresses, they have converted them from a token particular to the role into a point of attraction. However, it is only the young people who admire these headdresses, while the old people are more critical: the actors cannot see out, the headdresses are too heavy, they do not fit [because of their excessive height] either into the church or into anyone's house, the young people's faces are not visible (which is inconsistent with their roles; traditionally, it is only the



Image 7. The Momârlani *Crai* of Lupeni and the *Crai* of the Ștefan area of Lupeni, at the church, 2022. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.

masked characters whose faces cannot be seen, and the *Crai* and *Herod* do not wear masks, so their faces ought to be seen—our note), and so they cannot play their parts properly (Dumitru Gălățan-Jieț, 85, Jieț, 2025). These reactions demonstrate that the older people regard the *Craii* tradition as carolling whereas for the young people it has become more of a performance.

The *Crai* invest a great deal of money in necklaces of imitation precious stones (called *horseshoes* by some interviewees) but are not happy with their quality, as they are imported from China, do not stand up well to bad weather and go black quickly. By contrast, the sets of jewellery bought during the Communist period, made of good quality materials, have come to have particular *value*. Former carollers, now adults aged 50, make up a group of "cognoscenti" who appreciate their quality:

> Look, I've got two of them, these are well mounted. It's not for us I'm keeping them but for our children. [...] Let me show you a Chinese one, there's no comparison with one of these. What workmanship, what a shine! Romanian work. [...] Worlds apart from that Chinese stuff! After two or three years you can see how they change, they go dark. And this one, after all those years—see how it shines. (Mitu Șchiopoiu, 50, Jieț, 2025)

While the carolling is taking place, the "cognoscenti" of the *value* of the old jewellery direct part of their attention to the decorative material on the headdresses in order to see how many of the necklaces are Communist period ones. They themselves try to buy them, even for large sums: "Well, for these I paid 25 million (500 euros—our note). These old *horseshoes* (necklaces—our note). 25 million for all four. To have them myself. They were the most famous ones of all, they were the most cleverly made" (Mitu Șchiopoiu, 50, Jieț, 2025).

A hierarchy of headdresses even came into existence, based on how many old necklaces they incorporated, the most valuable headdress having six:

> Wow, when they saw I had four, I was that pleased with myself! [...] That's to say, someone who has four *horseshoes* is the best! When I made a headdress for a neighbour of mine, it had six, it was the best headdress! It was those *horseshoes* that gave a headdress its *value*!—'cos that was a lot of money in Ceaușescu's time. (Mitu Șchiopoiu, 50, Jieț, 2025; during the 1970s they cost 700 lei each, roughly half a month's wages—our note.)

Turning now to the *Crai headgear* found in the Western Jiu, these items are made of inexpensive materials and have zoomorphic symbols that distinguish them from each other: Valtezar has a chicken's head on his hat, Melfior a pigeon's head, Gașpar a half-moon like a crest, and Herod a cockerel's head. At the back they have tails, also made of strong satinised cardboard. The bird silhouettes are mounted sideways, joined at the top, and are supplemented by other pieces of cardboard in the front, at the back, and over the top. During the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the necessary materials, though inexpensive, were hard to find. Strong satinised cardboard had to be begged (with the help of a bottle of *tuica* if needed) from people who worked at engine bobbin winding plants, as it was used as insulating material in the electrotechnical industry. The framework was covered with white cloth and decorated with shiny coloured paper or tinfoil. The sheet of shiny coloured paper, or of tinfoil taken from chocolate wrappings, would be folded like a fan and finger-width pieces would be cut at a 45 degree angle. These pieces would be removed and stuck alongside each other on the cylinder, with different colours alternating: red, yellow, blue, green, etc. A crest was made to go on the front. Beads were put round the neck. The eyes were made from beads, and



Image 8. The *Crai* Parade that opens the *Crai* Festival, Lupeni, 2024: the Lupeni *Vestitorii Domnului* [Messengers of the Lord] team. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.



Image 9. The *Crai* Festival, 2024, the *Crai* of Bărbăteni. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.



Image 10. The *Crai* of Dealu Babii (on the Western Jiu) at the *Crai* Festival, Lupeni, 2024. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.



Image 11. The *Crai* of Taia (on the Eastern Jiu) at the *Crai* Festival, Lupeni, 2024. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.



Image 12. The *Crai* of Taia (on the Eastern Jiu) at the *Crai* Festival, Lupeni, 2024. Photo credit: Ionel Anastasescu.

a little Christmas tree bauble was suspended from each beak and tail. These days tinsel and baubles, which look more impressive and are easier to work with, are used instead of shiny coloured paper (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroşeni, 2025). This headgear is not regarded as having the same *value* as the headdresses used on the Eastern Jiu, but it does identify the character. The locals do not know what the symbols signify.

The *Soldier* wears an officer's (never a soldier's) uniform. During the Communist period he had to ask the *Militia* (the communist police) for permission to wear it. However, wearing a uniform bandolier was forbidden, so the young people used to replace it with a *lătiţar* (a narrow strip of handwoven cloth). The *Angel* is clothed in white and has a white helmet with a cross on it. In the villages of the Eastern Jiu, the costumes worn by the *Crai* are made of shiny materials (silk, thick satin). *Herod* has a purple or red (a regal colour) garment made of velvet. The clothes are embroidered with plant-based designs worked in silk and beads, and the trousers, which are black, are decorated with silver braid. Valtezar wears a yellow tunic as his costume, Melfior a red one, and Gaşpar a blue one, but the troupes feel free to vary the colours. The costumes have epaulettes decorated with pieces of mirror tile, tassels, circlets and beads. On the Western Jiu, the *Crai* of some troupes wear traditional costume, as silk costumes do not last long.

Swords play an important role, contributing a rhythmic element to the actions of the drama: when he speaks his line, each character (*Crai, Herod, Soldier*) swiftly draws his sword and replaces it in its sheath, stamping his right foot on the ground at the same time. These rhythmical and resounding movements are something unique to the play. Although they become exhausting after multiple performances, the actors execute them with pride; they have great *value* in their eyes. The swords are produced in local workshops. The shape does not matter, only the characteristic clang.

On the Western Jiu, the *Brunduşi* wear traditional dress and over it long heavy shepherds' cloaks with the wool side outside, decorated with 20 mm long red tassels that are attached to them at the shoulders, at the back, on the chest and at the waist. They attach sheep bells round their middles. They are a sight to watch: on the road and while carolling, the *Shepherds* all leap in the air simultaneously from time to time to make their bells ring. Their role in the play is supplemented with features that are specific to masked dancing: they wore masks until the 1980s, and they still make a noise with their bells and formerly also did so with their maces (which disappeared at that point). The maces were made from the trunks of pine trees and had pieces of metal fixed to the lower end to make a sound. The racket would let the owners of the house know the band was approaching. It was the shepherds, too, who carried out the *ţic* or *burduşală* (thrashing): two *Brunduşi* from different troupes would strike each other hard shoulder to shoulder to decide who was the stronger.

The masks worn by the *Brunduşi* are made of black sheepskin, with beans for teeth, long red noses, and beards made from hemp or from fleeces. The mask is sewn to the *Brunduş*'s sheepskin hat or even made from the unstitched lining of his hat (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroşeni, 2025). The role of the masks was to frighten the spectators and thus heighten the dramatic tension.

On the Eastern Jiu, the *Shepherds* dress in traditional peasant costume and over it wear *bituşti* (thick sheepskin jackets with the white skin on the outside and the wool side inside). They take pride in their role in the play, that of bringing gifts to the Christ Child, and behave with due solemnity. For this reason, they have given up the masks worn for many generations and speak with reserve about the *Brunduşi*, regarding them as something "ugly" that is incompatible with the importance of their role (Alin Ciurea, 32, Jieţ, 2025).

The task of creating disorder by means of deviant behaviour is carried out not by the *Brunduși* but by a different masked character, the *Popa* (Minister). However, these reminiscences of the past have taken on a new meaning, that of performance. The *Popa*'s costume is similar to the robes of Orthodox priests. Although people knew that it was an Old Testament priest in the story, they cannot conceive of a priest without a cross and so the *Popa* carries a wooden cross. Because he plays the part of an "animator" (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroșeni, 2025), by doing crazy things, the *Popa* does not go into the church. In the play, the *Popa* has lines: he tells Herod where Christ has been born. The "book" in which he looks for the answer is one he manufactures himself and contains "indecent" drawings designed to make people laugh:

> The best books were those made in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, hand-drawn (...) in coloured crayons and after that in felt-tip pen. And they also contained verses that were like that too (indecent—our note). For example, they would have a drawing of a church, but the cross on the tower was bent and the rendering at the back of the building had started falling off. And he would place the book like this, closed, and say: "Give me money, because I need to repair the church!" Often you couldn't shake him off if you didn't give him money. But he would beg in the street as well. (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroșeni, 2025)

The tricks the *Popa* played were actually pretty inoffensive, because he didn't want to annoy those who hosted the players: he would hide house shoes, or steal sweets off the Christmas tree or a piece of smoked sausage from the smokehouse. The *Popa* too wore a mask, made of cardboard or bought, but he particularly wore glasses, which were employed for longer than the mask was:

> They wore glasses. And they used to smear their faces with soot. [...] But what I liked best was that they wore glasses with one pane broken. They would break it themselves, on purpose. Or there would be a pane missing. Sunglasses, welding glasses, aviator's glasses, all kinds! [...] Masks were worn up until the 1980s and a bit after that. After that they didn't wear them anymore. (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroșeni, 2025)

The broken lens symbolised lack of conformity with the rules of society, transgressing order.

The *Crai* and the community

Despite all this, the young people do not think of the *Craii* as a theatre play. They do not speak of it as a "performance" but as a "demonstration"; they "go carolling," "sing carols," they do not "act a play." And they enjoy singing carols, presenting their "demonstration", and having people admire their costumes.

The connection with the community is a very close one. Relatives and friends involve themselves in the preparations and then look forward to the *Crai* coming to carol for them, and the *Crai* in their turn know that they are going to be assessed. Everything is extremely important: the costumes, the acting, the voices. People concentrate, praise or criticise,

congratulate themselves on the fact that the carollers are their friends or workmates or that they have a romantic attachment to one of them (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroşeni, 2025).

The culminating point is the contest at the church. After the Holy Liturgy, the parish teams come and present their plays inside the church, before the whole community, and then outside, each team having its supporters. After they finish, they set off carolling through the village.

When they reach a house, the *Angel* asks whether the owners will let them come and carol, and then they all go in. They arrange themselves in a layout that has to do with the staging of the old walking theatre (not facing the audience as in the modern theatre), with the *Brunduşi* at the back, the *Crai* at the front, facing *Herod*, the *Angel* and the *Soldier*. The *Soldier* is on *Herod*'s right and the *Angel* on his left. The *Popa* is at the back, in the middle. The *Crai* speak in a threatening tone, but Herod is the most aggressive (to speak of impressive features in terms of spectacle). The dramatic verbal duel between the *Crai*, *Herod* and ultimately the *Soldier* is an absolute *sine qua non* in every version (Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroşeni, 2025). Local people who have emigrated follow the play on Zoom or Meet at the same time as their relatives back home are watching it (Ionel Dănescu, 52, Paroşeni, 2014).

The meaning of the carolling is shaped by the idea of performance in the awareness of the hosts too: they do not let the troupe perform the whole 40-50 minute play, only a 15 minute excerpt from it, knowing that they need to continue with their carolling. The young people choose certain essential elements: the carol about the Birth of the Lord, then the verbal duel between *Herod* and the *Crai,* as this is "the most dramatic part" (Alin Ciurea, 32, Jieţ, 2025). Some days after the carolling comes to an end, the *Crai Party* takes place, with the young people, their parents, their friends, and other teams involved. The organisers perform the "demonstration" one more time, in its entirety, thus bringing to a close the performance and the carolling.

The *Crai* Festival

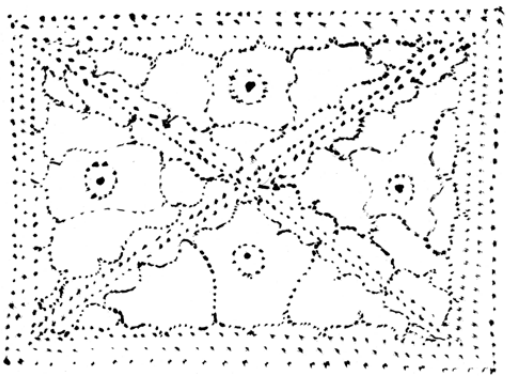
The changes that have taken place in recent times are partly a result of the Crai Festival competition, which was started in Lupeni in 1998 by a local investor, Emil Părău.

> And the best troupes in the Jiu Valley would gather, between 10 and 13 of them. There was often a preselection process, because 30 or so teams would gather. [...] And then from 1998 onwards competitions with prizes were held every year and there every team prepared itself better and better so as to win first prize. This was a good thing in terms of keeping the tradition going and it reinvigorated it. (Ionel Dănescu, 52, Paroşeni, 2014)

The Festival, now under the auspices of Lupeni Town Hall, is still held today. The Crai Festival opens with the teams parading through the town of Lupeni, weather permitting, and lasts a day. The teams draw lots to determine the order of their entry on the stage. They are promoted by local TV stations and post films on YouTube[4] etc., which stimulates the tradition being kept up. However, many teams stick to the carolling format, even when on the Crai Festival stage, rather than switching to a performance style; failing to adapt to the layout of the stage, the actors perform the play facing each other, as they do in people's houses, which makes it hard for the public to follow them.

Conclusion

On the verge of extinction in the 1980s because of the attitude of the Communist authorities, who discouraged young people from taking part in it (school teachers would forbid their pupils to go carolling, their props were confiscated by the militia, etc.—according to Ionel Dănescu, 63, Paroșeni, 2025), *carolling with the Crai* experienced a rebirth in the Jiu Valley after the 1990s that was due to a partial shift in the understanding of this tradition. For the older generation, *the Crai* meant *carolling*, which implied a Christian message connected with the festival of the Birth of the Lord, a sober play, unaccompanied singing, and relatively simple costumes whose symbolism was strictly linked to the character in question. For the younger generations, the meaning shifted towards the idea of spectacle and costume styles became extravagant, musical instruments were introduced, and the number of voices was greatly increased. The masks worn by the *Brunduși* and the *Popa* were employed specifically for their ability to create spectacle. Community encouragement and the competitive spirit engendered by the *Crai* Festival facilitated this shift in meaning, which might in fact have taken place anyway, given that festivals and spectacles are expanding all over the world. What remains unchanged is the Christian kernel of the tradition, and this will always guarantee the play its place among the customs associated with Christmas.



NOTES

1. See: https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com_presa/com_pdf/rpl2021_date_provizorii_profil_teritorial_ian_2023.pdf, last accessed on 9/09/2026

2. The Uniate initiative of 1698-1701 was a move to attach the Orthodox believers of Transylvania to Roman Catholicism. It took place under pressure from the rulers of the Habsburg Empire, who wished to strengthen the position of Catholicism by making the Orthodox convert. The Romanians insisted on keeping their services in line with the Orthodox rite and preserving the cult of the Orthodox saints, since the Orthodox religion, which they viewed as "ancestral," was closely connected to their ethnic identity. The resulting compromise was named "Greco-Catholicism."

3. Imitation precious stones made of glass.

4. https://youtu.be/_42dX58OlgU, https://youtu.be/azjZFJCfqkc, https://youtu.be/2Jd7Yl0kxnM, https://youtu.be/NYhsbz2-DbE, https://youtu.be/-ZteYWvGfGY etc.



LIST OF INTERLOCUTORS

Nicolae Cic, 57, Jieț, interviewed in 2025, a former Shepherd.

Alin Ciurea, 32, Jieț, interviewed in 2025.

Ionel Dănescu, born in 1962, Paroșeni, interviewed in 2014 and 2025.

Dumitru Gălățan-Jieț, 85, Jieț, interviewed in 2025.

Mitu Șchiopoiu, 50, Jieț, interviewed in 2025

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