

The Cincu Run of the *Lole* Ritual. Fieldwork Experiences

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Dumitru, Iuliana. 2026. "The Cincu Run of the *Lole* Ritual. Fieldwork Experiences." *Martor* 31, 249-57. [DOI: 10.57225/martor.2026.31.15]

ABSTRACT

This text explores the *Fuga Lolelor* [The Run of the *Lole*] custom of Cincu, Braşov county, from an ethnographic and auto-ethnographic (the relevant inserts are given in italics and in bold) perspective and seeks to understand the relationships between ritual, community, and processes of patrimonialisation. Springing from my experience of taking part in the ritual as a researcher and also from my discussions with the master mask-maker Uwe Constantin Boghian, it discusses how the tradition functions as a living social practice sustained not only by the relationships between the *Lole* and the hosts but also by the involvement of the local community and of those who come home from the diaspora to participate. My analysis of this fieldwork, which juxtaposes changes taking place in the ritual with the role of the Museum and with tensions between transmission, classification and living-out, demonstrates how *Fuga Lolelor* continues to function as a space in which the idea of belonging is practised and renegotiated.

KEYWORDS

Fuga Lolelor; ritual; patrimonialisation; autoethnography; community; masks.



The whips are like fireworks and crack at frequent intervals. The sound they make can always be heard close by, and the echo hangs in the air for a long time. My adrenaline level rises and my body cannot calm itself. I keep a slight distance from the centre of the crowd for fear of being caught by the end of a whip. All the same, I am smiling from ear to ear. The crowd gathers and gradually becomes a single body. We walk through the village together, caught up in the movement and keeping time with the bells. I am with the masked group. The noise, the motion, the closeness of the others keeps me in a constant state of alert. A doughnut, then a small glass of schnapps. It helps me to stay here, to be anchored.

Customs of a ritual nature were not one of my research interests, not until recently at any rate. Masks always struck me as grotesque and frightening, and this was principally because I did not know what they signified. My first encounter with a mask was in my childhood, when my cousin (through the family's in-laws), Nicoleta, moved into the house next to ours and hung a *brondoşi* mask on the wall.¹ I did not know what customs involving masks meant, and there was no way her explanations, despite her best efforts to adapt them to make them appropriate for a child of seven, could construct from zero in my mind a whole world of imagination. It was only at university that I grasped that the grotesqueness and exaggeration

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Image 2. Mask created by Uwe Constantin Boghian for his wife, October 2024.
Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru.

Image 1. Uwe Constantin Boghian in his workshop, October 2024. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru.

found in masks were not incidental, that the role of masks was to frighten away evil spirits, to overturn the established order so as to be able to recreate it, to bring into the world, via extravagant behaviour and noise, a temporary equilibrium.

Once I arrived at the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, I was gradually exposed to information, images and ideas that had not formed part of my initial universe.² The chaotic world of masks began to exert its attraction on me. Agitation, motion, the feeling of being together. The idea of gathering and of collective movement, of doing something in unison. Not long after this, the MASKS project³ became an option for me and despite knowing almost nothing, I said yes to it. So it was that I came to pose one of the most naive questions I have ever asked: “*Is Cincu a person, or a place?*” A month later I was in the car on my way to Cincu, a village in Braşov county, to meet a master mask-maker. The project included a research component in which team members had to meet master mask-makers and film the making of a mask. For me, this was the first piece of field work whose purpose was the making of a film.

After some short telephone conversations, I reach Uwe Constantin Boghian’s gate⁴ and enter a universe in which I immediately feel I belong. It is as if a different timeline opened up and I began to discover, step by step, *Fuga Lolelor*.⁵ Uwe becomes my insider, the person who takes me into the story at leisure, from the origins of the custom to how a mask is constructed and the performer enters into their role. In the workshop in his courtyard, among skins, belts and tools, I start to understand that a mask is not merely an object but the product of a slow accumulation of actions, rules and observations. From the faces and expressions which lodge

in his mind, drawn later on paper, to its final form worn in the ritual, each mask bears a story that precedes the moment when it is placed on someone's body and begins to move.

The term "*Lole*" does not have a universally accepted explanation; it is something borrowed from the Romanian Saxon tradition and is used principally as a name for masked characters, without any clearly established etymology. Local legends make reference both to medieval events, such as the story of Ursula who is supposed to have repelled attackers by means of noise and disguise,⁶ and to what the craft guilds used to do, when these masked figures accompanied processions and had the role of providing symbolic protection. In the Saxon communities, the *Lole*, also known as *Urzel*/*Urzellauf*, were associated with a universe in which order, discipline, and protecting shared goods were essential. They accompanied the guild chests that held their money, documents and trade secrets, and the role of the noise of the whips, the movement, and the vivid expressiveness of the masks was not a decorative one; rather, it had to do with intimidation and with marking out a safe space for the community.

Over time, this safeguarding function changed into a rite de passage. The *Lole* no longer accompany chests and goods but mark the beginning of the year, drive winter away and announce the coming of spring. The whips, bells and masks have kept their role of disturbing and scaring, but the meaning has shifted from economic protection to the maintaining of a symbolic equilibrium within the community. Nothing is peaceful or harmonious here; exaggeration, noise and movement have actually become the mechanisms by means of which order is restored.

Nowadays, the costume completes the effect produced by the mask and transforms its wearer into a barely recognisable presence. Onto a base of white cloth are sewn narrow strips of black material, made in the past from leftovers of textile materials, which, by the way they move, create the impression of a living, vibrating fleece, which accompanies every gesture. The mask is constructed on a structure of wire and fine chicken wire, then moulded and painted to accentuate its expressiveness. Depending on the skill of the person making it, the face may be carefully shaped or more simple, almost flat. It is fixed in place by a piece of material that covers the back of the head, to which is tied a plaited tail held together by a red bow. When combined with the leather whips and the cowbells worn round the waist, the costume in ensemble produces not only a powerful visual impact but also a musical soundtrack that marks the passing of the *Lole* through the village.

Uwe tells me about the way the tradition was interrupted in the years after 1990, when the departure of a large part of the Saxon community led to the collapse of many community structures, since there was no one left to keep them going. The revival of the *Fuga Lolelor* tradition, which began in 2017, involved not a simple resumption but a process of careful negotiation between what was known, what could still be done, and who was still there. For those involved in the revival, members of both communities, that of the Saxon and that of the Romanians, what mattered was not to recreate an idealised past but to give the ritual back the ability to function in the present. Listening to him, I grasped that the *Lole* are tied to the calendar, taking place on the last Sunday in January or the first in February, that they have a set form, and that they draw on people who choose, year after year, to step into role. The ritual will continue to exist for as long as there is someone prepared to wear a mask, to crack a whip, to go from door to door and to be welcomed in. Without this tacit agreement between those who come and those who wait for them, the ritual would exist only as a story told in the past tense.

The reactivation and continued practising of the *Fuga Lolelor* are not the result of an isolated effort. Over time, the local authorities have become part of this process, supporting the organising and infrastructure needed for the ritual to take place. However, a vital part is played by Marlene Herberth and her husband Alex Herberth, who are involved both in coordinating





Image 3. *Lolă* cracking a whip in front of the church in Cincu, February 2025. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru



Image 4. The trailer from which the *Judgment of the Fools* takes place, February 2025. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru.

the event and in developing the *Lole* Museum and the cultural programmes linked with it.⁷ Their constant work means that the ritual is not only maintained but also interacts with other forms of cultural expression, with artists invited to work together with the community, and with networks beyond the village. This twofold involvement, both institutional and personal, enables the ritual to function in a present that no longer belongs to the guilds but is in search of its own forms of cohesion.

The ritual takes place in accordance with a clear structure, even if it feels from the inside like an intense overlapping of sounds, bodies and gestures. The procession sets off from a house in the village, where the participants costume, put on their masks and are given a number. The numbering is not random; even though people's faces are hidden by their masks, everyone's identity is known, and responsibility does not disappear with the covering of the face. From there, the group moves to a point in front of the Town Hall, and here the *Judgment of the Fools* takes place. Verses spoken aloud in public recount minor misdemeanours, ridiculous situations, and things that have happened in the life of the community. A villager can be summoned out "to the blackboard" for a few minutes, but this serves not as a sanction but as a symbolic setting-right of relationships. Laughter draws the community together rather than dividing it, and irony does not exclude people but brings them back in. The time spent in this way functions as a form of collective reflection in which tensions are acknowledged and integrated. The ritual thus begins from within the village before opening up towards the gateways and the road.

After the judgment, the route leads on to the Museum of the *Lole*, where the opening of that year's exhibition takes place. The museum is a natural stage in the ritual, not a break from it. Only after this stop does the group set off through the village streets, following an established route so that the hosts who have undertaken to receive the group can be ready. Gates open, improvised tables are set up, hot doughnuts, schnapps, soft drinks and slices of bread spread with pork dripping or *zacusca* [homemade savoury vegetable spread] make their appearance. Every stop reactivates the relationship between those who come wearing masks and those who await them, and the way the procession continues from one year to the next shows that the ritual draws its strength from acknowledgment and participation.

We continue to go from gate to gate, my body can still keep up. A small glass of schnapps, a doughnut, then we move on again. One person spreads the bread with pork dripping, someone else uses zacusca. I choose zacusca. I have lost count of the doughnuts I have eaten. Bells and the cracking of the whips can be heard from all directions, and the sickly-sweet smell of vanilla sugar hovers over the village. The faces at the gates await us with broad smiles. The welcoming is not an isolated gesture but a constant flux that keeps us moving. I begin to feel queasy. I have overdone it with the doughnut eating or, to be more honest, possibly with the schnapps. I stop and allow the procession to pass me, ask for a glass of water, and stay chatting with my hosts. The quiet does me good. After I recover, I go up the street at right angles and succeed in catching them up.

It is precisely this relationship that makes the ritual one of a kind. It is not merely a trip through the village or a greeting spoken into the void. The *Lole* come, and the hosts await them. Without this element of welcome, without the open doors, the improvised tables and the act of offering, *Fuga Lolelor* would be no more than people donning masks and going for a walk. Here, however, the ritual functions as a social bond. The *Lole* are guests, and the





Image 5. Eggs received as a gift by *Lole*, February 2025. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru.



Image 6. Doughnuts left over from the *Lole*, February 2025. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru.

hosts are not spectators but an active part of what happens. The welcoming is not a secondary act but a condition of the ritual's existence. Offering food and drink means confirming belonging, acknowledging a greeting and returning it. In this exchange, the roles are clear, but mobile: he who receives guests today received them last year as well, and next year he will be awaiting them again. The ritual is based on this regular interchange, on the continuing of the act of opening the gate and laying the table.

Viewed from this perspective, the relationship between *Lole* and hosts is what rescues the ritual from the potential danger of being a performance or all about consumption. The food, drink, masks, and acts of welcoming function not as goods that can be exchanged but as things linked to a time and to a relationship. In the sense suggested by the anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (1986), they emerge for a short time from the limitations of exchange and acquire a cultural biography of their own. The schnapps is not "a strong drink," the doughnuts are not "an edible product," and the mask is not "an object." Their value cannot be separated from the context within which they are offered and accepted. It is precisely this suspension of the law of exchange that makes the ritual distinct. Without hosts, without this circuit of welcoming, the *Lole* would become a repeatable formula, easy to recognise and, ultimately, to consume. Relationships are what stop this happening.

On the day of the ritual, I spent much of my time in the company of a lass of eleven, Marlene, who has come



Image 7. Young *Lolă* resting, February 2025. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru.

from Germany with her father specifically to take part in the *Fuga Lolelor*. They are not the only ones to have made this journey. A proportion of the Saxons who left Romania in the '90s, or their children, return for the ritual year by year. Some of them are even involved in organising it. For some, it is one of the few occasions on which the village becomes once again a place they have lived in and not only visited. This coming back is not something declarative or nostalgic but something practised: going through the village, wearing a mask, entering into the shared rhythm, being welcomed at the gates. *Fuga Lolelor* thus becomes a tradition of returning, a repeated way of reactivating an “at home” which, for the rest of the year, stays vague or distant.



Image 8. The researcher together with a *Lolă* and with icing sugar round her mouth, February 2025. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru.

At the ball that takes place in the evening, masks are laid aside. Although they have been walking through the village all day, some of the participants still have the energy to dance. Soup and other good things are consumed, and tiredness seems to be suspended for a few hours. The doughnut makes its reappearance as queen of the evening. There is nothing demonstrative about the dancing; it is not a spectacle for outsiders but a natural continuation of the day. Here, the ritual comes to an end not through some solemn act but through a way of staying together. Without a mask, without the sound of the whip, but with the same need for community that has kept the whole day in motion.

The *Lole* Museum introduces a note of selection, order, comparison. If the ritual brings together and overlays, the museum separates out and explains. It does not destroy the chaos but fixes it, temporarily, in an intelligible form. The objects are extracted from the flow of a day and placed so as to facilitate viewing, classification, narration. In the terms proposed by Kopytoff (1986), this is the point at which things are in danger of slipping into a state of homogenisation, in which differences are made visible precisely through being put in a framework and being compared. Culture produces order, but this order needs to be measured out with care so as not to destroy the unique nature of the experience from which it originates.

Between the chaos of the ritual and the order of the museum a fragile equilibrium therefore needs to be constructed. If the *Lole* were to remain merely an intense experience lived out once a year, they would be hard to pass on and to share. If they were to become no more than classified objects, permanently separated from bodies and from relationships, they would lose the energy that makes them active today. Between these two forms of existence, the ritual continues to function as a social bond and the museum as organised memory, without either obliterating the other. Rather, they appear to give each other mutual support, each with its own kind of order and its own kind of time: one closely packed, lived out, the other settled, explanatory.

The more I think about this experience, the clearer the difference between festival and ritual becomes. At Cincu, *Fuga Lolelor* is still, first and foremost, a community ritual, precisely



because people participate both as *Lole* and as hosts. Relationships are not put on hold during the performance but reactivated through each stop, each serve-yourself table, each return. Here, patrimonialisation is not simply a label but a process that has made possible the revival of the tradition and its transformation into an occasion that continues to be lived out.

However, the idea of “romantic capitalisation upon folklore,” that is, the idealising exploitation of folklore, as evoked by the ethnologist Bogdan Neagota (Rus and Neagota 2017), is still something to be careful about. Any kind of visibility given to traditions runs the risk of simplifying or aestheticising what from within is far more complex. At the same time, my experience from this fieldwork confirms the observation that to work in community and to work for community cannot easily be separated. Involvement becomes inevitable, while the boundary between research and participation is subject to constant negotiation. It may be precisely this tension that causes *Fuga Lolelor* to stay alive. Between returning and transforming, between memory and the present, the ritual continues to provide a space in which the idea of “at home” is not only recalled but practised.



Image 9. The cup saying Cincu Town Hall on it, the evening of the ball, February 2025. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru.

In the evening, at the ball, things feel different. The outsiders with their anthropological angle on events are given seats at the tables on the stage. What an honour! Everything can be seen better from here. How those taking part are dressed: some are in Saxon folk costume, while others are wearing evening-out-in-town clothes. We watch them dancing, how they pair up, then join the “hora” round dance. The mask has disappeared but the body of the ritual is still there. I fall in love with a cup that says Cincu Town Hall on it. I think of taking it with me as a little souvenir but don’t do so. I know that one of the organisers would have to pay for it, someone would take responsibility. I am tired, but happy. I set off for my lodgings, at peace. What a privilege to be able to take part in a ritual of this kind. How “native to the village” I have felt, for the space of a day.

NOTES

1. *Brondoșii* are the masked characters found in the winter rituals of the Cavnic area of Maramureș. They have an apotropaic function and are connected with caroling and with practices performed to drive away evil spirits. Their masks are made of lambskin, fleece, red tassels around the ears and a long red tongue. Their costumes are white but around their middles they wear a belt with many bells hanging from it.

2. For my initiation into the world of rituals involving masks I am indebted to the ethnologist Dr. Anamaria Iuga, who as a first step introduced me to the *Carnival King of Europe* (www.carnivalkingofeurope.it) platform, a large-scale video storehouse of European carnival-type customs and rituals. At that point I did not fully understand the material I viewed, but I spent a considerable amount of time studying it. It was also Anamaria Iuga who subsequently involved me in the MASKS project, masks and performative rituals being among her areas of research interest. For this I owe her my gratitude.

3. "Unveiling the Arts and Works Behind the Masks," acronym MASKS, is an Erasmus+ project being undertaken as a collaboration between 12 partners from Spain, Italy, Romania and Portugal and is coordinated by the University of Valladolid. The National Museum of the Romanian Peasant is a project partner. More details of the project may be found at: <https://unveilingthemasks.uva.es/project/>.

4. Uwe Constantin Boghian (b. 19th of April 1974) is a Cincu master craftsman who specialises in making masks and costumes for the *Fuga Lolelor* ritual. Having grown up in direct contact with this tradition, Boghian is not only an artisan but also an active participant in it. Besides making masks he also works in leather, so his workshop is a workspace in which masks, costumes, belts and other handmade items coexist. His ongoing involvement in passing on his craft and in practising the ritual contributes to its continuation and to its being handed down from each generation to the next.

5. A project carried out by the Großschenker Urzellauf Association //Fuga Lolelor Cincu and the SOXEN Association in partnership with Cincu Town Hall and the Cincu Lutheran Parish.

6. In the historic context, the guild was a way of organising craftsmen who worked in the same trade. Its role was to protect their professional interests and to ensure the passing-on of regulations and of specific knowledge.

7. More information about the SOXEN Association and the KraftMade programme may be found here: https://www.facebook.com/kraftmade/?locale=ro_RO; and here: <https://romaniandesignweek.ro/portofoliu/kraftmade-povestea>, accessed on 15 January 2026.



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