

V. Visual Micro-essay

Engulfed by Leaves: A Short Account of a *Sângiorz* and the Friendships it Forged

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ABSTRACT

Thought as a visual essay, using photographs taken during the field research dedicated to documenting a Green Man (*Sângiorz*) ritual in a village in Transylvania (Romania) in 2023, this text is, in fact, a work of love and gratitude we feel towards the friendships that were forged during fieldworks, and towards the communities that welcomed us with open arms.

KEYWORDS

Green Man; *Sângiorz*; spring ritual; friendship; visual essay.

Celebrating the rebirth of nature, the custom of the Green Man (locally called: *Paparudă, Băbăludă, Păpălugără, Sângiorz*), takes place in spring in some villages in Central and Northern Transylvania (Romania), and is still very much a living custom, continuing an old intergenerational practice. It has important ritual and social meanings for the community, such as: the initiation for the participating young men, protection, prosperity and fertility for animals and households (see Neagota and Benga 2009; Neagota 2010; Neagota 2011; Benga 2025), as well as providing a setting for *collective effervescence* (see Durkheim 1995). Even until today, it keeps meeting the needs of the communities where it is performed, existing not only in the institutional memory of Archives (see Cuceu and Cuceu 1988), as we would be tempted to believe, especially about rituals that have survived since "time immemorial."

Twenty-one years ago, in 2005, I (Anamaria) saw for the first time a ritual involving the use and performance of a vegetal mask, a *Sângiorz*, as it was locally called in the village I was invited to attend, by my friends and colleagues, Bogdan Neagota and Ileana Benga. It was their traditional spring campaign that they would take every year, for several years already, in the informal at the time *ORMA. Sodalitas Anthropologica group*. I was delighted to be invited to join, as I had just recently finished my Masters studies in Anthropology in Cluj-

Napoca, and was eager to do fieldwork of any kind. Rituals, however, were not my cup of tea, but I was curious nevertheless. I joined their fieldwork that year, and then in several other years, documenting, in total, six villages where the Green Man was a living tradition.

The first Green Man I ever saw remains the closest to my heart and the dearest to my memories. Seeing how the young man was being prepared to be masked, how the mask itself emerged from a tree bark, how his branch-costume started taking him over little by little, from his legs, to his arms and then his whole body, covered in green leaves—I felt truly privileged to be able to witness this. I remember finally understanding why people from the old days were so equally amazed and frightened by a Forest God.

In 2023, together with Georgiana, we took a trip to the same village, for her to witness, for her first time, a *Sângiorz*. A long-promised journey, postponed time and again, yet never forgotten. It was a journey of friendship, as our friendship was growing stronger during our common fieldwork to document living rituals: spring, summer, or winter customs, all over Romania. This time, the Green Man not only managed to amaze and excite us with its raw green beauty, but we felt humbled by how generously the community received us in their homes, sharing their intimate stories and in the middle of a celebration event, even! It was our lady host's anniversary, on Saint George's day, coinciding with Georgiana's both name and birthday. There was cake and there were whole families and generations of Green Men gathered around it in the courtyard to sing to both of them as they were blowing each one's number-candles. And all of it happened in just three days: enough for the borders of strangeness to fade. This is but one more reminder of the power of ritual to glue people together.

This visual essay, Georgiana's work of love, is inviting you, our reader, to perceive not what we witnessed as the ritual was being enacted, but what slips from the classic ethnographic gaze: the interrupted gestures, the uncertainty, what is left unsaid, the time in-between "strong" ritual sequences, the human becoming *something else*. Moreover, this joint work is our way to express gratitude to friendship: first, to Bogdan and to Ileana, who introduced us to these communities, but also to the communities themselves, to our dear hosts, local guides and custodians of the customs.

Note: All the photographies are part of Georgiana Vlahbei and Anamaria Iuga´s personal archive.

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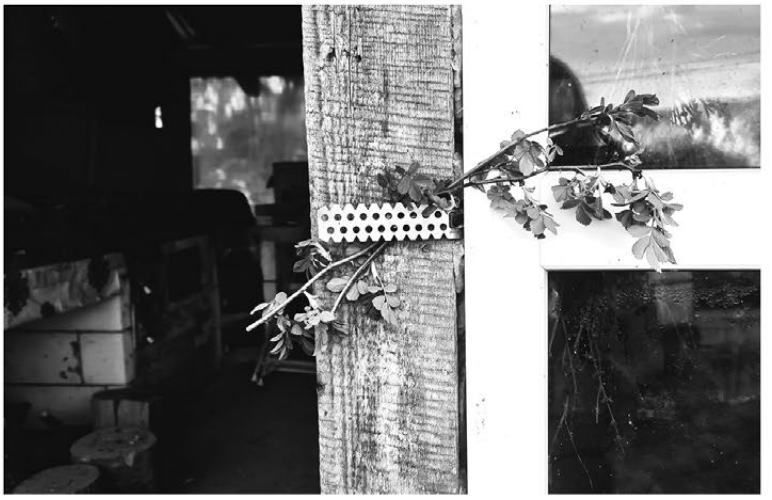
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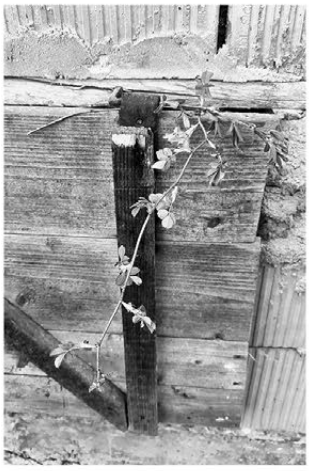
GREEN GEORGE (BE)COMING



TWENTY THIRD OF APRIL



ANNOUNCING HIS COMING



AWAITING

ANTICIPATION





PROTECTION FROM STRIGOI

FINDING THE RIGHT SPOT IN THE FOREST







FINDING THE RIGHT TREE







INTIMATE GATHERING





FELLOWSHIP

SECRECY













GESTURES OF CARE · BROTHERHOOD · CO
OLDER GENERATIONS



BECOMING

STRENGTH AND VULNERABILITY .

MASTERY OF GREENMEN

REMOVED FROM ORDINARY SOCIAL IDENTITY

ABSORBED INTO VEGETAL ORDER

SUSPENDED IN GREEN LIMINALITY

FOREST









ENGULFED BY TWIGS. DISAPPEARING INTO FOLIAGE.

BOYHOOD DISSOLVING INTO LEAVES. NEITHER ERRASED NOR ADORNED.

SKIN BECOMING BARK. RECLAIMED BY FOREST. GERMINATIVE VEILING.

RITUAL AS GRAMMAR OF CYCLES: GROWTH AND DECAY.





MATERIAL TRANSFORMATION --- SOCIAL EXCHANGE --- RITUAL DISSOLUTION

WRAPPING THE VILLAGE IN A PROTECTIVE LAYER



AUTHORITY AND GUARDIANSHIP OF THE RITUAL GROUP

WATER EXCHANGES
AT THRESHOLDS
GATES
WELLS
ON THE ALLEYS

WATER AS MEDIATOR



+ GENERAL WATER FIGHT DRENCHING FRENZY
CLIMAXES WITH GREEN MAN SOAKED BY EVERYONE



PROCESSION / PROTECTION



CINE NU UDĂ SÂNGIORZU...

EVERY SPLASH IS A NEGOTIATION FOR FERTILITY AND ABUNDANCE





MASK AND BRANCH COSTUME THROWN IN THE NEAREST WATERWAY IN THE END

As part of an interdisciplinary project running from 2014 to 2019, nine researchers in ethnology from the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant explored the Buzău region (Romania).

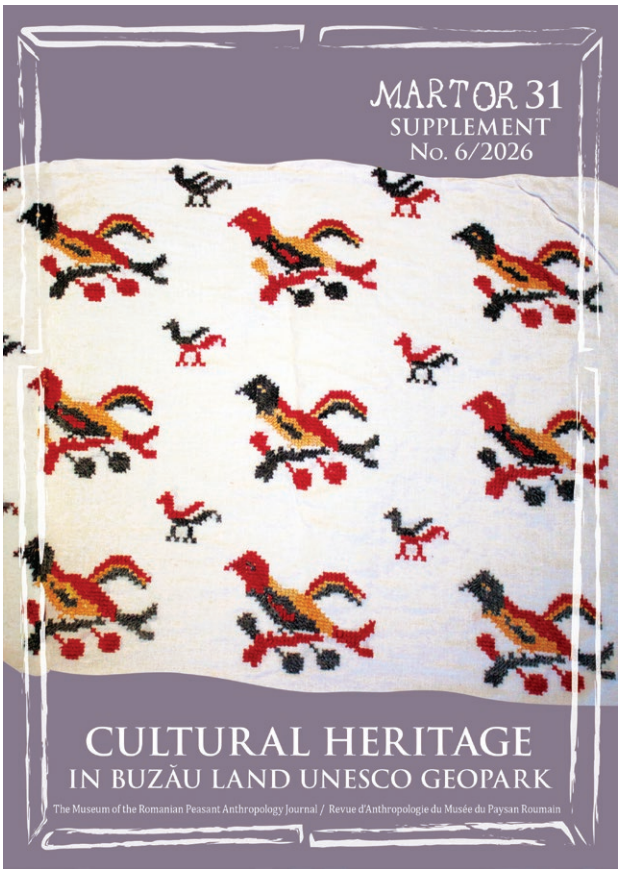
We invite you to discover the stories told by the people of Buzău, those told by the objects and buildings their skilful hands have created, as well as the stories told by the landscapes that define the region as an UNESCO Geopark.

All these can be found in the

supplement to issue no. 31/2026 of MARTOR Journal,

the sixth supplement of the Journal, at:

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Let us celebrate together the fact that there is a region where, amidst the turmoil of modern life, traditions are still cherished and kept alive.