

A Stitch in Time:  
Searching for Authenticity through  
Shifting Regimes of Value in Romania

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I, Alexandra Urdea, confirm that work presented in this thesis is my own. The photographs used in this thesis are my own. I confirm that where the information has other sources, it has been indicated in the thesis.

# Abstract

This thesis deals with the role that material culture plays in the production of value and meaning through discourses of authenticity. It also follows how folk objects are mobilized in national ideologies, transmissions of personal and family memory, museological discourses and artistic acts. My research is centred around a collection of Romanian artefacts which travelled from Romania to the Horniman museum in London in 1956. The project that I undertook was devised as a collaborative research project between Goldsmiths College and the Horniman Museum, in which two PhD researchers carried out a recontextualization of this collection. The objects had been collected from villages and other sources in the 1950s (a context of political and social change in Romania), then assembled into a collection and sent over to the Horniman museum. My side of the project sought to bring out historical trajectories and the social life of material culture in the villages where the Horniman objects originated, and beyond. The objects on which my research focused, which I considered to be *the counterparts* of the ones stored at the Horniman, revealed a complex usage of the folk idiom and of material culture in Romania, expressed through debates around value, authenticity and history.

My thesis is firstly concerned with the movement of things between different regimes of value, mapping out a network of spaces of cultural production where the folk idiom is relevant in Romania. The people I involved in my research continuously pointed out that the truly valuable thing I was seeking – the ‘authentic’ object – was to be found elsewhere. This promise of an ‘elsewhere’ has kept pushing my research further along: from one village to

another; from village houses to the houses of culture, and then to museums; and from live folk performances to national television. The other concern of this thesis is with the places and moments where the circulation of objects is halted because their value is put into question. In the process, I reveal how people deal with the *absence* of what they define as ‘authentic’ objects. They either identify this absence as loss, and sometimes explain it through historical narratives and memories; at other times they alleviate it through performance. These different strategies entail different relationships with material culture, which I conceptualize as relationships between subject and object.

# Acknowledgements

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# Glossary

*Cămin cultural* – village hall

*Casă de cultură* – house of culture

*Chiabur* – wealthy peasant

*Cîntarea României* – name of the festival that dominated cultural life in Romania after 1976. Translated as either ‘Song to Romania’ or ‘Singing Romania’

*Colac* – ritual bread baked in a round shape. Used at weddings

*Comună* – form politico-geographical administration comprising of a few villages. One of the villages acts as the centre of the *comună* and hosts the village hall

*Doină* – lyrical and musical folklore genre, with an emphasis on suffering, used also by literary authors

*Fotă* – piece of traditional attire. Woollen overskirt

*Horă* – A folk dance performed in a circle, iconic for Romanian folklore. Also the name for the dance evening in the village. In a village, *a ieși la horă* means ‘to go dancing’

*House of Popular Creation / Centre for Popular Creation* – centralized state institutions set up in every county region in the mid 1950s in Romania, in charge of organizing the cultural life of people through the local houses of culture

*Ie* – traditional shirt, usually with fine smocking and embroidery. Considered to be the finest, most iconic Romanian folk object

*Județ* – political administrative delimitation, county

*Maramă* – headscarf made of silk, considered a precious Romanian folk object

*Obște* – the independent political organization of Vrancean villages, based on the common ownership of the forest

*Opinci* – traditional footwear, made of cow or pork skin

*Pomană* – ritual meal for the commemoration of the dead. Usually a large number of people take part

*Port / port național* – traditional attire

*Sat adunat* – village with houses grouped together, where the productive land is away from the houses

*Sat răsfirat* – village with houses spread apart. Each house is surrounded by the some of the productive land of the household

*School of Popular Arts* – Institution that was part of the *Centre of Popular Creation* and has continued its activity after the decentralization of the Centres, which runs classes of folklore music, dance and crafts

*Ștergar* – literally means ‘towel’. Used decoratively in traditional houses as wall hanging

*Straie* – regional expression for traditional attire

*Târlă* (sg.); *târle* (pl.) – a hut or fold

*Vatră* – hearth

*Vatră etnofolclorică* – a spatial delimitation used by Romanian ethnographers and museologists, designating a bounded cultural unit.

## Abbreviations

IRRCS – Romanian Institute for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries;

SCC – Study Collection Centre of the Horniman Museum.

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Plate 1

Literary: woollen stockings

Local: 'călțuni'

Origin: Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art, from Anghelina Tătaru, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, from the hamlet of Poiana, village of Vrîncioaia, District of Vrancea, Region of Galați.



# Introduction

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## A – THEORETICAL LANDMARKS

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### **The stories behind objects**

When I was first confronted with the list of heterogeneous objects that had arrived at the Horniman Museum from Romania in 1955, I attempted to disentangle what seemed like an overload of information by making myself a map. As I made my way through the column marking each piece's origin in the Excel document, I meticulously placed a dot on a map of Romania for each of the 550 objects on the list. My quest to reveal their biographies had begun. The place where these objects now found themselves, the Horniman Museum stores, identified the collection as 'ethnographic'. The documentation that had accompanied the collection from Romania deemed the objects 'folk'. My task was to 'recontextualize' the objects in the collection by revisiting the places where they originated, and, perhaps, reconnect them to the former owners, in an attempt to rectify any possible gaps or mistakes in the way these objects had been documented in museum's database. The 'context' of the objects, as I understood it, was outside the museum; the information that I was to gather was to be brought inside, and added to the collection. Confronted with such a great number of objects, it soon became clear that I would only be able return to the 'context' of a few during my fieldwork.

My attempt to put pins on the map was in order to help me choose a field site – ideally one with the largest concentration of objects. But once the dots were scattered on the map, it became apparent that what was binding the

collection together was an image of the nation. The objects came from all the regions of Romania, and represented, on a small scale, the large collections that the national folk museums in Romania have. Taken individually, the objects seemed to evoke either *i)* the domestic sphere, through pieces of pottery, interior textiles; *ii)* women's labour, through the embroidered shirts; or *iii)* fragments from the lives of shepherds, as expressed through carved wooden mugs or tools for working with milk. But put together, the 'context' was that of the nation-state. Tracking the entire collection back to its former owners or their families would be impossible. I had to make a choice. The objects I would choose had to be able to evoke both an intimate, personal engagement within the domestic sphere, and the 'context' of the nation-state. Contact with the items contributed to my decision to focus on folk dress.

In what follows I want to set the scene for the journey that I took through a variety of 'contexts' which reveal different ways in which the objects at the Horniman, and other similar ones, are engaged with in Romania. This introductory chapter has three aims, which I pursue in three separate sections. The first part lays out the theoretical tools and concepts which I have used to guide me. Part two situates my research project in the socio-historical context of socialism and post-socialism, through discussions of peasantry, gender and memory. Part three discusses methodological problems and draws a brief outline of the thesis.

Projects such as the one that I became part of are no longer unusual in museums, and can be seen as a product not only of the growth in anthropological interest in material culture, but also of a wider institutional critique that has come from this

direction. Literature that sees museums as remnants of a particular colonial gaze (which I comment on below) identifies isolated objects in western museums, and reconstructs their (often violent) histories. The process of ‘taking things back’ seems to invest the object with redemptive powers – as if mending this complicated past. The growing literature on material culture has coincided with an even more marked proliferation of academic interest in memory, which has challenged in the first instance official history, and is aimed at dispersing agency and giving a voice to alternative narratives. Objects, it has emerged, can retain memory (Miller 2008, Hirsch 1997, Hoskins 1998, Boym 2001), as they form a part of people’s *habitus*, or witness turning points in people’s lives. The relationship between subject (people) and object (things) has been complicated by anthropologists such as Strathern (1988) and, most notably, Gell (1998), who have opened a discussion on the agency of objects (see below). Furthermore, if people have biographies, things, therefore, are thought to have biographies too (Kopytoff 1986).

Biographies must surely have beginnings. In the case of the collection of Romanian objects at the Horniman, I entered a research project in which my task was to reconstruct their biography by visiting the source communities. I was not alone – there was another side to the project. My colleague Magda Buchczyk was to reconstruct the biography of the collection half way through its life: following its path from the institution that had collected the objects in Romania (partly the Museum of Popular Art, partly IRRCS<sup>1</sup>) to its arrival at the Horniman Museum. Meanwhile, I was tasked with taking the objects ‘home’ in the form of a set of photographs that I would show to people in the source villages. The life of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Buchczyk (2014)

objects in this collection had a turning point: the moment of the collection. This presumably traumatic extraction from their original environment was to be the boundary between the two research projects. If Magda Buchczyk's task was to look at how objects tell the story of the institutions they become part of, mine was to reveal their history through the memories of the people who made them or used them, before they were collected. But it was to turn out that just as the space that I was researching could not be represented by a map, biography and time could not be thought of as linear.

I set off to visit some of the villages where the objects now at the Horniman had been produced. I wanted to see what kind of memories people had of *those* objects, and how their *counterparts* had evolved in situ. Time and again people instantly recognized the objects in the photographs I showed them. This was no surprise: no doubt anyone in Romania would have recognized what they were. I had grown up in Romania, and before I began working on this project, I had strong associations with 'folklore': the school performances where we had to dress up and dance or sing 'folklore'; the TV and radio programmes that my grandmothers sometimes listened to; the 1 December celebrations,<sup>2</sup> when I would watch footage of a large *horă*<sup>3</sup> on television. 'Folklore' was also part of the school literature and language curricula, and as a child I had to learn by heart ballads and *doină*,<sup>4</sup> and, later on, analyse them as literature. 'Folklore' is as much a part of everyday life in Romania for someone brought up in a town in a socialist-era block as it is for people who grow up in the countryside. But I was

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<sup>2</sup> Romania's national day

<sup>3</sup> A folk dance performed in a circle, iconic for Romanian folklore. Also the name for the dance evening in the village. In a village, *a ieși la horă* means 'to go dancing'.

<sup>4</sup> A lyrical and musical folklore genre, with an emphasis on suffering, used also by literary authors. In schools, both folklore and so called 'cultivated' literature are taught.

hoping that the identification and stories about these objects by the people in the 'source communities' would differ. Yet what I discovered was that to most, the items of dress were viewed as 'national costumes', and not as personal items – the 'second skin' that anthropologists write about (Schneider and Weiner 1989). Women who had items of dress they considered valuable offered to sell them to me, assuring me they were 'authentic' by museum standards (I was, by now, associated with the museum abroad). They also warned me that most of the things that people had in their bottom drawers were not valuable. If I wanted to know more about the old customs (the 'authentic' ones), I was told to speak not to the elders of the village (who were too young to know about the old days), but to the folklorists from town, from the Centres of Popular Creation, or to the folklore performers that appeared on TV, who were known to acquire costumes from some of the villages, and who possessed knowledge about 'traditions'. For some reason or other, these people believed there was no longer 'folklore', 'culture', or 'tradition' in the village. The few people doing crafts in villages were not making them for their own use, but for the fairs organized by the Centre of Popular Creation (also called Schools of Popular Arts).

I did not really believe the local people who told me that their own possessions lacked value, and that they had no 'culture' or 'traditions'. But I did follow their suggestion to move on. I went out of the villages to the county Centre of Popular Creation, an institution with its roots in 1954 (around the time that the Horniman received the Romanian collection) and instrumental in setting up folklore performances up to the present day. There, people spoke about 'authenticity', about the dissolution of the traditional village, about craft fairs and folklore performances they put together to keep the tradition alive. I was told

that in order to find the truly valuable objects I would need to visit the large national ethnographic museums. The truly 'authentic' folk object was no longer to be found in the village.

In the mean time, I couldn't avoid the relentless beat of contemporary folklore music coming from people's car stereos, and the growing number of TV stations that broadcast this type of music. From the knowledge of folklore that I embodied, and from the repeated complaints of the folklore specialists, I knew that this was not 'authentic folklore'. The wide distribution of this type of performance made me think that it had a different character than the sought-after items deemed 'authentic'. It was so pervasive that it was part of the 'taken for granted' world (Bourdieu's definition of 'culture'), a kind of national *habitus* that is impossible to escape. I followed these fast beats to the studios of the TV stations called Etno TV, Horă TV and National TV.<sup>5</sup> Many of these performers had been trained at the Schools of Popular Arts, and were performing in the festivals that the institution organized. Others had less training, but had absorbed the music and performances that have been available through the mass media and on local stages for more than fifty years. Many of those I spoke to also sought 'authentic' costumes, trying to raise the value of their performance in that way. More than any other group, they told me about the value and authenticity of the Romanian village, and sent me right back to where I began. Alas, the authentic folk object kept slipping through my fingers, like a McGuffin<sup>6</sup> in a *film noir*. But in

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<sup>5</sup> All the names evoke national and folkloric motifs.

<sup>6</sup> Hitchcock used this term to name the object in the plot that everyone looks for, or that sets the action in motion. Sometimes the object disappears after a while and becomes irrelevant, but often it is shrouded in mystery, or turns out to be something different than was thought in the beginning. The main characters are sucked into the story, following the *uncanny* object, and find themselves entangled, trapped in the plot. *Noirs* are an illustration of Gell's theory of entrapment, when the agency of the object becomes visible. Perhaps this could explain the fact that in 2012

a similar way, it also kept pushing me forward and bringing me back to where I had started, to reassess the material I was confronted with and the way in which museums and anthropologists construct 'context'. What became clear was that objects deemed 'folk' (and which, to my eyes, looked fairly similar) belonged to different spheres of cultural production, which at times seemed to be linked, and at others excluded each other. The objects I was looking at, mostly items of dress, seemed to change their character so often that a linear biography of any one piece seemed practically impossible.

What the Romanian collection at the Horniman evoked was a notion of national heritage and value – and it was this notion that I wanted to investigate, without leaving aside differences of class, urban and rural divides and the question of history and generations. My work is not focused solely on finding the right 'context' and the right 'counterparts' *in situ*, but on bringing out the differences in the way similar objects are engaged with. In this sense, the museum is a 'context' too – the claim that it is an apolitical place that collects 'contexts' for objects that await in the stores in a state of limbo is challenged in the process. On the contrary, the museum (in this case, the Horniman) emerges as a particularly powerful 'context', one that framed my research through its particular treatment of the collection, and, in Romania, one that can validate particular objects. It was impossible to track the objects to their source, to the beginning of their biography, and in fact, the starting point of my work was the Horniman stores. Miles away from the Romanian villages, or from the TV studios, or the folklore institutions that I was to visit, the collection at the Horniman was

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the Maltese Falcon – the McGuffin in the film with the same name – was sold for four million dollars, even though, in the film, the object is exposed as a fake.

affecting all these places, contributing to the production of value and redefinitions of folk objects. Each of the places I visited revealed itself as a product of a particular reshuffling in recent history.

The concept of a biography allowed me to follow the changes that objects go through as they pass from one regime of value to another, according to the events or the *habitus* they become part of. But a linear narrative linked by cause and effect this was not. Although these regimes of value did not exist independent of each other, and often objects retained the traces of their past lives, at other times these past lives were obliterated. Wherever I went, objects were at the centre of discussions, and their value constantly debated. In the last few years these concerns have been expressed in research on material culture, and it is to these theoretical considerations that I want to turn to now.

### **Gift and commodity<sup>7</sup>**

The shifting value of things lies at the heart of the literature that deals with material culture. The concept of 'regimes of value' coined by Appadurai (1986), which is thought to 'account for the constant transcendence of cultural boundaries' (1986, 15), opened the door for the interrogation of the apparently objective and unchanging character of things. Appadurai's questioning of the character of commodities and gifts – with the express purpose of debunking that boundary – was followed by other questions with regards to objects: such as the

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<sup>7</sup> The concepts that I use in my analysis to express categories between which objects fluctuate are 'gift', 'commodity', 'art' and 'artefact'. An analysis of these concepts, which has also influenced my perspective, is carried out by Sansi-Roca (2014) in his volume *Art, Anthropology and the Gift* and explored in his course on *Anthropology of Art* at Goldsmiths College



difference between art and artefact and the relationship between subject and object.

Theoretical discussions around commodities and gifts assume the alienated character of the first, and the organic integration of the second into the fabric of social structures. For a commodity, the work that has gone into making the object is effaced, as the value of the object emerges through its exchange value. The worker can no longer see himself or herself in the object – and the object is thereby alienated. Objects of exchange have constituted an important focus for social anthropology; the works of Malinowski (1922) and Mauss (1925) are always discussed as an important part of the historical trajectory of material culture studies (Carrier 2006, Myers 2001, Miller 2001, etc.). The power of the gift resides in its ability to retain something of the person who offered it, beckoning its new owner to compensate for the loss. A different gift is returned, and a strong social bond is created in the process. Although many of the elements in this pattern of exchange have been subsequently criticised in the literature on material culture, the centrality of objects is what inspired the resurgence of material culture as an anthropological topic.

Mauss' theory of exchange has been reinterpreted in the work of Strathern (1988), Hart (1986), Parry (1986), and Gregory (1982). Strathern's reinterpretation departs in her analysis from the notion of *relations* that are embedded in the object. But to Graeber (2001, 49), it is Munn that points to the importance of labour in how we evaluate things. Work is defined in the broader sense as 'creative action' and produces 'value', whether it is put into making objects, or into creating and maintaining relationships. Where gifts and commodities differ, therefore, is in the particular kind of labour that produces

their value. Appadurai's 'regimes of value' therefore need to be re-thought in terms of labour.

One of the concepts central to thinking about regimes of value is that of 'inalienability', as opposed to 'alienable' things that circulate continuously. For Weiner (1992) 'inalienable possessions' are 'certain things [that] assume a subjective value that places them above exchange value' (1992, 6). Weiner's work focuses on the importance of objects *kept*, as opposed to objects exchanged, which have the power to trigger exchange and form a web of social relations. Materiality, therefore, needs to be taken into account, as some objects (such as food) are perishable, while others can last for longer, and this can affect the keeping of objects. The danger associated with an object's loss, however, is a measure of its inalienability. What gives an object its high value is its authenticity – which here refers to the contact of the object with the transcendental (ancestors or gods), and to what Benjamin termed the 'aura' of objects. The connection to the past is what provides objects with their aura, their uniqueness. Weiner's suggestion is that inalienable objects embody a human fascination with the past.

One of the tensions I explore in my work is that 'between inalienable possessions and the social and political (hierarchical) differences they are employed to define' (Myers 2001, 13). The objects that I follow move not only between the space of the museum and that of the village, but between spaces defined by gender and class, following social transformations such as the one from 'peasants' to 'peasant workers'. They also move in the context of the Cold War, establishing contact between the two parts of Europe that were declared

enemies, but which may in fact have shared a common view on what was defined as 'pre-modernity'<sup>8</sup>.

Shifts in the evaluation of objects become visible when we look at their materiality as they become part of different 'regimes of value' (Myers 2001) and as they flow through different 'scapes' (Appadurai 1986). Myers notes that some things might be inalienable but available for circulation, others might be alienable and circulating, and others are unavailable for circulation (2001). While focusing on the changing character of objects, Thomas (2009) attempts a re-writing of the first colonial encounter: by giving agency to the objects (their mesmerising effect for the first 'discoverers'), he gives agency to the peoples subsequently subject to colonialism. His strategy with regards to objects is to keep the boundaries of the categories open and fluid. In fact, his criticism of the work of Weiner, Miller and Appadurai is that they collapse the different types of objects into one (be that 'inalienability' or 'commodity'). Instead, he stresses 'the mutability of things in recontextualization' (1991, 28), but also 'the factors which mark the biographies of objects and sometimes break them apart through recontextualization and transgression' (1991, 29). It is the work of Thomas that inspired projects taken on by museums in Britain, of revisiting the places where objects first emerged. Thomas' objective was to show that...

creative re-contextualization and indeed re-authorship may thus follow on from taking, from purchase or theft; and since museums and exhibitions of history and culture are no less prominent now than in the epoch of world fairs, that is a sort of entanglement that most of us cannot step outside. (1991, 5).

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<sup>8</sup> Buchczyk's work shows that the meaning of the Romanian folk objects was open to debate during their exhibition at the Horniman. The act of establishing this contact, which would be renewed at different points, is, in my opinion, more important than the debates around the precise meaning of the objects.

Thomas understands 'alienation' not in the classical Marxian way but as 'dissociation from former producers, owners, users.' As the work of Appadurai, Thomas and Weiner shows, categories such as gift and commodities are not stable when it comes to objects. Keane's work shows that objects fluctuate between being part of a system of exchange (gift) and expressing abstract value (money). Writing about money and gifts in Indonesia Keane remarks on 'the rapid series of roles through which a piece of cloth moves', from being a conventional obligation, physical material, a metaphor, etc. (Keane 2001, 70). The distinction between gift and commodity is, in his case, purposefully maintained, even though the materiality of things determines the shifting of categories: 'the capacity of the prestation to stand for its owner over the course of its travels is not an inherent property of objects, but requires human efforts and interactions to sustain' (Keane 2001, 75).

The reconsideration of the boundary between commodity and gift, highlighted in material culture studies, intersects with another important discussion relevant for the present treatment of the Romanian collection at the Horniman: the distinction between art and artefact.

### **Art and artefact**

While in modern societies *commodities* circulate and *art* transcends the commodity character of the object, pre-modern societies are thought to be built upon gift-exchange, and instead have artefacts. This distinction is visible in the spaces ascribed to different kinds of objects: ethnographic museums for artefacts, and art museums or national museums for art, engendering a distinction between self (art, national museum) and other (artefact,

ethnographic museum). The politics of representation that determine this separation has been the topic of discussion for much of the literature on anthropology and art (Thomas 1999, Myers 2001, Coombes 1994, Marcus, Phillips and Steiner 1999, Gell 1992), raising questions about the appropriation of colonial objects. Certainly, apart from the category of *art*, modern societies also use the category of *craft*, and the hierarchy between the two has also been critiqued for its political implications: *crafts* being reserved for women (Parker 2010) or being undervalued as rural, backward, rustic (Williams 1983, Sennett 2008), or characterized as idiosyncratic expressions of a skill of sorts that constitute 'folklore'.

The way folk objects have been framed in Romania differs from these paradigms of *art*, *artefact* and *craft* as they are articulated in British museums (see Chapter One). These theoretical perspectives on material culture are largely focused on places that have a colonial history imprinted on the collected objects. My work follows artefacts that did not arrive in a museum in Britain by way of colonialism; they retain a different kind of history, connected to divisions between the east and west of Europe, which were expressed during the Cold War. The folk objects that I refer to borrow characteristics of all three categories, but their value and meanings are articulated in a specific ways. Unlike many of the objects in the Horniman stores, or in the British Museum for that matter, the objects that I have researched are not as isolated from their place of emergence as are some of the colonial objects. This matter changes the configuration of spheres and institutions that influence the value of the Romanian collection at the Horniman.

Alfred Gell's proposition that objects have agency inspired a reconsideration of material culture. Artworks and artefacts have everything in common, he posits, so long as they both act like traps, luring the viewer/victim in, and engendering a particular relationship between maker, viewer and object. Gell (1992) proposes a way of seeing art as a *technology of enchantment*: the power of art does not reside in the objects as such but 'in the *symbolic* processes they provoke in the beholder' – in the viewer's difficulty of figuring out how the object was made, for instance. Its power is, therefore, magical.

But Gell is not concerned with the moment when objects suddenly lose their power to enchant. Without the details of the particular set of relations that 'produce' the value of the object at a particular time, we might be left wondering how it is that some objects happen to have that lure, what happens around them, and how they fall out of favour. For this, we need to look at the politics of aesthetics, and more attentively at the context in which we find objects. Nevertheless, Gell's contribution is crucial for explaining why certain objects (in certain situations) are so compelling.

Myers (2001) notes that 'art' is a category that transcends utility, sitting 'in opposition to the corrosive effects of capitalism and money' (2001, 9). Indeed, since the Renaissance, art has formed a particular sphere of production (separate from craftsmanship), which necessitates knowledge and education. Art became an autonomous sphere, meant to engage an audience that has no direct material interest in the artistic object endowed with aesthetic qualities. It appears to have a 'redemptive autonomy' (Myers 2001, Coombes 1994), which glosses over the unstable character of objects. Revealing that art objects are ultimately commodities – and highly priced ones – is almost offensive to the

audience, because the sphere of art production is thought to be distinct from the market.

Aesthetics and the field of artistic production are considered to be fundamental to education: art cultivates good taste, it educates judgment, and stimulates *sensus communis* – what is common to all (Sansi-Roca 2014, 74). Bourdieu's notion of 'spheres of cultural production' explains the politics and economics behind the domain of art, helping to show why some aesthetic categories are used to exclude material culture and people from the public domain of 'art'. Aesthetic taste, according to Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, develops not so much through state education, as through the private sphere, through the material culture that the subject imbibes. This way, social differences are perpetuated, and the smallest of details can give away a person's belonging to one class or another. Moreover, although these fields of cultural production can overlap, the way things are evaluated in each of them is different. Cultural capital entails a disinterest in economic capital, and art is thought to transcend economic evaluations. Bourdieu explains why things and people are intimately connected to particular fields of production.

The present thesis is mainly concerned with these spheres of cultural production and how their reorganization is made visible through particular usage of the 'folk' idiom. The 'folk object' symbolizes a stable value that has been used to reify nationalism, and as a landmark in times of change or of crisis (see below). But the spheres of cultural production in which we find the 'folk' idiom are, as I will show, in a state of constant reorganization, taking into account the experience of socialism and post-socialism, and the reassessment of material culture in Romania.

Myers warns that the changes that occur through the movement and destabilization of objects 'cannot be studied simply as "breakdowns" – either from art into commodity or from "culturally authentic" to inauthentic – or as simple appropriations' (2001, 11). He reveals how the different institutional contexts in which we find objects can produce new dynamics, also determined by the tensions 'between inalienable possessions and the social and political (hierarchical) differences they are employed to define.' (2001, 11-12).

### **The meaning behind form**

The relationship people have with objects is one of the conundrums of material culture studies. If we focus on objects in and of themselves, do we risk falling back on a positivist perspective, in which we take things at face value? If we consider them as a platform for signs onto which people inscribe meaning, then can we concede that objects are but forms of media for meanings? Webb Keane (2001, 2005, 2006) searches for a way to talk about material culture that accounts for the materiality of the objects and for the social structures in which they are embedded. He proposes a semiotic rethinking of material culture based on objects' iconicity. Objects that resemble each other are placed in the same category, but because of the multitude of characteristics of an object, it contains the potential to be placed in other categories too. According to the context, certain characteristics become important, while others are neglected. The materiality of objects allows for a potential change in their regimentation into social structures and this includes the potential for future, unexpected uses and interpretations (2005, 189). These new possibilities depend on the dynamics of



social values and authority, but also on the subjects that come into contact with the objects, and on the material itself.

Iconicity is only a matter of potential. The realization or suppression of the potential cannot be ascribed simply to the qualities of the objects in themselves. There must be other social processes involved. These processes may involve varying degrees of self-consciousness and control. Semiotic analyses have tended to favour the more strictly regimented domains as royal or liturgical ritual, high fashion (Barthes 1983), or connoisseurship (Bourdieu 1983). But there are far less organized dimensions to social life (Keane 2005, 190).

Keane's discussion of the potentials of iconicity resonates with Bakhtin's notion of the *unfinalizability*, which he applies to Dostoevsky's modern characters, but also to words or 'forms' (Beasley-Murray 2007) whose meanings are permanently rearticulated. In my work I want to apply this notion to objects and the relationships they are part of. The 'strictly regimented domains' that Keane mentions could be thought of as Bakhtinian monologic discourses: authoritarian, allowing no argument. Dialogism is the opposite – the forms that allow constant debate.

There is something much more subtle to Bakhtin's philosophy than the multiculturalism and plurality of postmodernism. The dialogic process does not entail a dialogue between two distinct identities. Rather, identity is formed through the process of dialogue, through the encounter of alterity, through the relation that takes place *at the threshold*. Form (and he means language, but I extend his theory to objects) *is* the threshold, because form is social by nature: every word or every object which is recognizable in society is shared by everyone, and inhabits at the same time the self and the other. So dialogism is

not a plurality of finite identities, but identity and alterity in a continual (never-ending) process of formation.

Dialogism, through the constant negotiation of value and usage of objects, is at the core of this thesis. More than in the case of any other objects, however, folk dress, which I focus on, has also been claimed by the monologic discourse of the state, not once, but throughout the national history of Romania. At the same time these clothes have been subjected to rules of propriety in the villages where they were made. To this we can add the intimate processes of making and wearing the clothes, of transmitting and remembering the past through them. Here we should remember that objects, such as clothes, are not words, and that their concreteness can render semiotic ideologies feeble (Keane 2005, 194).

### **The aura of authenticity**

The angel of modernity is a rag picker, Benjamin tells us, picking up post-war detritus, the fragments of things and experiences that cannot be accounted for or recounted. Modernity produces a shock, changing everything 'but the clouds, and beneath those clouds, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body' (Benjamin 1968, 257-58). The angel picks up pieces left behind, which evoke the past, but cannot be mended back together, because 'a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.'

The objects and fragments are rendered useless (de-commodified), their association is happenstance. They do not tell a rounded narrative of the past, and

therefore a utopia of the past cannot be built on them. They stand in contradiction with the totality of the ideologies of the present (the *monologic discourse*, in Bakhtin's terms). The image of the present (and past) can only be fragmented, but our longing for a mended, coherent world (present and past) remains.

Authenticity becomes an anxiety in the context of 'modernity' (or, indeed, possibly a way to explain it) when, it is argued, the fragmentation of experienced reality made it increasingly difficult to believe in the sincerity and truthfulness of things (Jones 2013, Starn 2002). The notion denotes a particular relationship to the past, and to the author of the object, and helps establish truth. Authenticity is what confers value on works of art and artefacts in the ethnographic museum; this quality has been deconstructed as ideological, fixing objects in time and space instead of letting them be re-appropriated and alive (Clifford 1997). As we have seen, theories of material culture are trying to break away from the authenticity debate; to follow how objects acquire value from one context to another, as I do, entails a flexible understanding of authenticity, value and history.

On the other hand, Gell's notion of the agency of objects and Ingold's work on making things (2013) have brought back an interest in the notion of authenticity, insisting that truthfulness is a quality of some objects that can be perceived through our senses (Howes 2004/5). The work of Jones and Yarrow (2013) develops a notion of authenticity as a process of negotiation, between past and present, and between different actors involved with the object under scrutiny. My use of the term in this thesis is similar. In my own work 'authenticity' was the term most often used to describe the items of dress that I

was interested in. In order to unpick the term, I want to refer to Benjamin's theory of the aura.

Benjamin is not relentlessly melancholic about a bygone past of coherence and totality, of unbroken past and present. His discussions of 'the aura' of objects in two of his best-known essays – *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and *The Storyteller* – present us with different perspectives. In *The Work of Art in the Age Mechanical Reproduction* we read:

What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye – while resting on a summer afternoon – a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch. In the light of this description, we can readily grasp the social basis of the aura's present decay. It rests on two circumstances, both linked to the increasing emergence of the masses and the growing intensity of their movements. Namely: *the desire of the present-day masses to 'get closer' to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction.* (italics in the original; Benjamin 2006, 107).

'Uniqueness and permanence' are characteristics of the auratic object, while 'transitoriness and repeatability' characterise the reproductions that 'the masses' get hold of in their attempt to possess and destroy the aura of the object. The aura is revealed as the compelling quality in objects, and at the same time induces a distance between itself and the viewer, making the integration of the object impossible. This quality comes from the object's 'embeddedness in tradition, which, originally, found its expression in cult' (2006, 105). The power of the aura, therefore, is its proximity to the transcendental – and this is what defines authenticity. Mechanical reproducibility eliminates the criterion of authenticity and changes the social function of art. *'Instead of being founded on*

*ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics'* (italics in the original; 2006, 160). With modernity, the emphasis now shifts from the artwork's cult value onto its exhibition value. The difference between the two – the past, in which the artwork was connected to magical practice, and the present, exhibition value, characterized by reproducibility – is that the first 'made the maximum possible of human beings' (culminating in human sacrifice sometimes), whereas 'the latter reduces their use to the minimum' (people are turned into parts of machines in the factories they work in).

In *The Storyteller*, Benjamin's discussion of the aura entails a different relationship between subject and object. Aura and tradition appear positive, integrating the person (the maker, the storyteller) with the object. The object (the pot) is made with repetitive movements, and yet what is obtained is not the same object each time, but diversity. On the contrary, in *The Work of Art*, the destruction of the aura 'emancipates the work of art' from authority. And the authority comes from a manipulation of the 'exhibition value' of works of art. In other words, the danger of aestheticizing the work of art – making full use of their 'exhibition value' – is that of presenting the world as coherent, and closing up its future. Art for art's sake, the pinnacle of the object's exhibition value, is, to Benjamin, art in support of fascism. The aura, as we have seen, entails both distance between the object and viewer, and the desire to come closer. Mechanical reproducibility brings out the fact that experience is made up of parts, instead of being a coherent whole.

It is hard to bring together the two perspectives on the aura, tempting as it might be to consider the aura in *The Storyteller* as a pre-modern, ideal situation, and the destructive aura in *The Work of Art...* as characteristic of

modernity. Beasley-Murray (2007) suggests looking at the notion of *distraction*, which appears as a way to integrate the object and the subject in both essays. In *The Storyteller*, the maker and the object have an organic connection, the pot is made in a state of distraction through automatic bodily movements; in *The Work of Art*, the masses are distracted by film from their daily routine, where the machines have enslaved them. Here too, distraction allows the object or work of art to be integrated with the subject.

But what of Benjamin's 'rags', of rejected objects, the 'debris of the past'? Do these possess an aura, in the absence of an 'exhibition value' and of 'cult value'? His suggestion is that these objects that evoke yesterday's everyday life are charged with the close contact of people – in contrast to the aura that keeps the subject at distance. We integrate everyday objects into our lives by way of distraction. 'Art' that expresses 'exhibition value' entails distance, while everyday objects express intersubjectivity. The rags also have the capacity to bring flash-backs of memory at 'moments of danger', which occur when authority claims the past and constructs a holistic narrative of it.

The folk objects that I found in the stores of the Horniman have exhibition value. As I discuss throughout this thesis, they have constituted 'heritage', 'national art', and they have been called upon to reconstruct a totality, an unbound past linked to the present. The politics behind this claim is concealed by monologic discourses. The institutions that deal with the 'folk objects' are there to guarantee the 'authenticity' of the objects, rendering them out of reach. But their counterparts, the folk objects that I found in various other places in Romania and elsewhere, sometimes fall into the category of re-used 'rags', re-appropriated as fragments of the past.

The ambivalence of Benjamin's notion aura and authenticity is of particular interest for the present thesis, as it addresses the materiality of objects, as well as the ideology and politics with which they are inscribed in different contexts. The objects that I focus on have certain degrees of inalienability, and an ambiguous position between 'art' and 'artefact'. In each of the places where I find 'folk objects', a particular kind of labour changes their significance, and calls for a different kind of engagement with the object. The questions that the Horniman collection brings forth link materiality with history and politics.

What does it mean for folk objects to be considered folk art? What kind of labour, in the context of socialism, was necessary to produce such 'folk art', and what kind of a commodity was this? In what direction has the folk idiom evolved? While trying to answer these questions I look to Benjamin when I bring forth fragments of different engagements with dress and debates around value and authenticity, to 'make space' for new possibilities in the way institutions such as museums keep and use objects from the past.

## B – SITUATING TRADITIONAL CLOTHES

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Rebecca West's travel account through Yugoslavia, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), is set shortly before the outbreak of World War Two. As the character-narrator enters a region fraught with violent outbursts and murders (the gory details of which are described in detail in the novel-travelogue), she sees a world of Balkan traditions disappearing. One passage in her book finds the narrator in a hospital near Vienna, feverish after her journey. The nurses are told to wash her belongings and eliminate any germs. Unfortunately, they wash the elaborate traditional clothes that she has brought with her from a Bosnian village. When the heroine wakes up, she finds the garments damaged:

they were ruined. Dyes that had been fixed for twenty years had run and now defiled the good grain of the stuff; stitches that had made a clean-cut austere design were now sordid smears. Even if I could have gone back immediately and bought new ones, which in my weakness I wanted to do, I would have it on my conscience that I had not properly protected the work of these women which should have been kept as a testimony, which was a part of what the [recently assassinated Yugoslavian] King had known as he lay dying.<sup>9</sup> (West 1941, 22)

The narrator lies crying on her sick bed, as she realizes that she herself has contributed to the disintegration of the world she so wanted to keep whole, by dislocating the garments and by failing to protect them. The extract is riddled with metaphors of modernity's dislocating and corrosive effect. West's narrative brings out some themes familiar to the scholar of eastern Europe. As opposed to the barbaric image of the Balkans held by her compatriots, she presents the

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<sup>9</sup> West, who self-consciously reflects on the confines of Western women to the private sphere, breaks this gender divide and travels to the place thought of as inherently violent and Other. Once in the Balkans she shows a particular interest in the crafts of women. Her account reflects the interest in east European handicrafts after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



image of women renowned for their elaborate crafts, said to have ‘a captive devil in their flying fingers to work wonders for them’ (1941, 38). As opposed to the cold modernity of Vienna, there is the warmth of the folk attire with their natural dyes; as opposed to people wrongly believed to be inherently violent, there is violence of modernity. Clothes and objects made in the household were indeed still used in many east European countries, even in the years after World War Two, as the population remained largely made up of peasants. ‘The people who made these dresses looked as if they had nothing at all. But if these imbeciles here had not spoiled this embroidery you would see that whoever did it had more than we have’, says the heroine to her husband.<sup>10</sup> (1941, 23).

This brief passage gathers some of the themes that need to be explored in any discussion about folk objects in eastern Europe, and folk dress in particular. The theme of history, and the transformation and crises that characterize the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in eastern Europe, frame the heroine’s enchantment with folk attire. Peasants, at the moment of the modernization and industrialization of Europe, had become a ‘question’. Their position as people who ‘seem to have nothing’, but in fact have something that modernity lacks, is at the core of the antagonistic views on the peasantry as seen from the centre. And another important aspect is gender, with ‘traditional clothes’ evoking particular skills, practices and moralities. West introduces these themes from the assumed perspective of the privileged woman-traveller at that particular time. Such accounts have contributed to shaping a particular perspective on east European folk dress in Britain, and in that sense are not disconnected from the presence of

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<sup>10</sup> In West’s account, and that of other women travellers in particular, attention paid to objects made by women seems to entail a search for a model of womanhood different than the one in western, modern Europe. It is a way of bringing women’s crafts into the centre of attention and up to the hierarchical level of ‘art’.

the Romanian costumes at the Horniman. In the second part of this introductory chapter I want to develop some of the themes that West hinted at, by giving an historical outline and signposting some of discussions I will follow up in the subsequent chapters.

### **The first encounter: folk objects become national**

In what follows I outline a history of the ways in which folklore and peasant dress have been used by the overarching structure of the state in Romania: how folklore became so central for national identity, and how it kept its centrality while the politics of the state changed. More importantly, my aim is to show how peasant things became folkloric art and how that happened in parallel to a complicated history of the peasantry. Throughout the thesis fragments of this history reappear, illuminated by or narrated against the grain through particular items of dress. This history is not the 'context' that would explain folk dress in Romania. Rather, it is an outline that will help place the micro histories that the clothes evoke into a broader social and political context. This way, the connection between different spaces of cultural production, and the way these spheres change (or not) after 1989, will become clearer.

On 6 June 1906 King Carol of Romania, together with Queen Elisabeth, Prince Ferdinand and the Crown Princess Marie opened the Royal Jubilee Exhibition, celebrating 40 years of prosperous rule by the King. About 165 pavilions were set up to celebrate the country's economic evolution and culture, in an event of similar dimensions to other European international exhibitions of the time. An important part of the exhibition was the celebration of vernacular art and culture through the display of folkloric artefacts, many crafted in

workshops sponsored by Queen Elisabeth and the Crown Princess Marie. After the closing of the Royal Jubilee exhibition in 1906, the folkloric artefacts were used by Tzigara-Samurcas as the founding collection for the Ethnographic Museum of National, Decorative and Industrial Art, in a building typical of the neo-Romanian style of architecture. This would form the old collection of what is today The Peasant Museum. The moment was crucial: 'While until that moment the *good room*<sup>11</sup> of the peasant's household contained 'things' (chairs, tables, plates, mugs, icons), the peasants found themselves owners of popular art objects, or national art, and thus the creator of a world of objects' (Popescu 2002).

Only a year after the grand exhibition, one of the biggest peasant uprisings in Romanian history was brutally suppressed. It was said that thousands of peasants were killed in the course of the revolt<sup>12</sup>. The event was deemed to be of frightening significance for the leaders of the time (Roberts 1954). And yet this is the moment when peasant crafts begin to be truly appreciated and brought to the level of national art. How can we explain this paradox – of a peasant class that is at once mired in poverty, but also portrayed as the essence of Romanian identity?

At the heart of this ambivalent attitude of the elites towards the peasantry lie the political forces that led to the creation of the modern Romanian state in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and which helped to shape the ideology of the nation (Verdery 1983, 1991, Hitchins 1994). Folklore played an important role in negotiating suitable artistic representations of the ideal of the nation between 1866 and the

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<sup>11</sup> A traditional peasant house is made of a 'good room', also called 'clean room' or 'large room', and room for everyday use. See Kligman, Pine (1996)

<sup>12</sup> There are no reliable sources for the number of peasants killed. Reports vary between 5000 and 11000 dead.

end of the interwar period (Kallestrup 2006), elegantly illustrated by the adoption of peasant dress by the women of the Romanian royal family.

Presented with images of Queen Marie in peasant dress, languidly sitting on the porch of a peasant house or on a wooden carved chair, it is hard not to see in her the embodiment of Romanianness. Her English descent and connections, and her whimsical personality are concealed under an image of motherhood and national identity. The Crown Princess was strongly attracted to the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain, and to the Art Nouveau style in general. She expressed an interest in hand-crafted objects, and helped to set up women's groups designed to encourage peasant craft-making. Already there was a worry that, because of their contact with manufactured goods, people would lose the skills of making crafts. Once she became Queen of Romania, her style reached a maturity and consistency. Folklore became an expression of Romanian spirituality. Queen Marie's embracing of Romanian folklore was also a response to the necessity of building national consciousness, acted upon by the Romanian elites of the time.

But let us turn to the source of these clothes – the class identified as 'peasantry'.

### **The peasant question**

The second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century has been described as the period of 'the second serfdom'. When increasingly globalized markets and the constant demand for grain determined an intensification in peasants' labour dues, their treatment by the lords worsened, and they found themselves 'tied to the land' with no right to move from one landlord to another (Mitrany 1930, Roberts

1954). By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in a country made up mostly of peasants, the extreme concentration of land in large estates, and the constant fragmentation of the smallholders' estates characterize the turn of the century's 'unresolved agrarian question' (Roberts 1954, 6). Following World War One, the newly enlarged state embarked on a project of modernization, and began to implement radical reforms that aimed to distribute land to all peasant households (Roberts 1954). But to a large extent the reform was deemed unsuccessful: expropriation and redistribution proved to be difficult bureaucratic matters, while the social and economic pressures of interwar Romania made subsistence very difficult indeed (Verdery 2003).

Throughout the interwar period the entire country went through profound transformations, mostly determined by the political consolidation of a country twice as large as it had been before the war, which now included a large number of ethnic minorities. Unification entailed cultural programmes aimed at turning 'peasants into Romanians',<sup>13</sup> as national identity became the overarching trope of politics (Verdery 1991). Because the majority of the Romanian population were peasants, they 'became the common denominator of (ethnically) Romanian society' (Verdery 1991, 45), enfranchised by agrarian and political reforms, but reflecting 'an unsettled social order, which became the centre of attention for both intellectuals and the state' (Muşat 2011, 16).

In the midst of these transformations and modernizations, the Bucharest Sociological School set up by Dimitrie Gusti started an ambitious research project, with the full support of the state. The School's aim was 'a national sociology' whereby tens of researchers set out to understand the countryside

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<sup>13</sup> To paraphrase Weber's title (1976) 'Peasants into Frenchmen'.

with the precise purpose of providing the state with information that would help educate and modernize the peasants (Muşat 2011, see Golopenţea 2013). The School had a biopolitical function – to help the centralized modern state to know and handle its citizens. But the group of researchers was heterogeneous; they trained together and did collective fieldwork, but they also came from different disciplines or had developed different theoretical interests. The world of the peasant was researched from all possible angles – the study of material culture, of folk songs, of beliefs and of work were meant to paint a rounded picture of the village life. Importantly, during the 1930s the aim of the campaigns was no longer research, but active change of the peasants' archaic ways through education, on the basis of the research data previously gathered.

The Village Museum in Bucharest, which was the first Skansen-type (open air) museum in Romania, was put together by the researchers of the Sociological School, lead by Gusti. After World War Two the members of the Sociological School were forced to retreat from academic life, and their discipline was taken out of the curricula, accused of being a 'bourgeois' science. But many continued to be active in disciplines and practices connected to 'folklore'<sup>14</sup> – which remained an accepted idiom throughout the socialist period. The head of the Village Museum (Gheorghe Focşa) and of the Institute of Folklore (Mihai Pop) had both contributed to sociological monographs produced by the Sociological School. I will argue that the memory and intimate knowledge of the interwar research groups would sustain a sense of 'resistance' among some of the folklore specialists and the subsequent generations of students – an important aspect of how the folk idiom is articulated after 1989. But if the large population

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<sup>14</sup> According to Stahl, in Rostas (2003).

categorized as *peasantry* mobilized such intense projects, and the emergence of disciplines around it, then considerations must be given to how this peasantry can be defined.

### **From peasants to peasant-workers**

The relationship between the countryside and town, and the periphery and centre, is what defines peasant societies (Pine 1999, 1996, 2014, Kligman 1988, Kaneff 2004, Williams 1973, Shanin 1971). Indeed, 'the concept of peasantry derives its significance from an idea of development where urban and rural progress is defined against peasant stagnation' (Leonard and Kaneff 2002, 7). The idea that peasants are the antonym of progress is common to all classical Marxist and capitalist theories. From the classical Marxist perspective, the proletarianization of the peasantry is necessary for progress – the peasants are a social category that cannot mobilize themselves: because of their individualism and focus on subsistence, they are a class in themselves, but not for themselves. Within modern states, peasants are the objects of change through 'modernization', and at the same time objects of utopian bucolic imagination (Wolf 1956). Peasants emerge not only as a social class, but also as a political concept (Leonard and Kaneff 2002, Shanin 1971, 1990, Galeski 1972).

As in all socialist countries, the worker was the hero of the communist revolution in Romania, while the image of the peasant had to be changed into that of the peasant-worker. In practice, however, Romania continued to be an agrarian country, until Stalin's death when the nation's politics veered away from the USSR and the industrialization process became more intense.

In 1949 the Communist Party began to collectivize peasants' land. Officially, by 1960, 81,9% of the land belonged to the 5000 collective households, but the process continued until 1963, with repression used against those peasants who until then had refused to become part of the Collective. In many parts of the country the collective farms were inefficient, and people did not see them as beneficial (see Verdery 1983, 1996, 2003, Kligman and Verdery 2011, Dobrinicu and Iordachi 2009). After the events of 1989, the landscape of the countryside changed again.

A convoluted process of land restitution ensued, fuelled by an 'anticommunist' ideology that sought to bracket the post-war period and return to an idealized pre-communist Romania. This, however, ignored both the partial failure of the interwar agrarian reform, and the new economic, political and social realities of the 1990s (Verdery 1996). Although the villages where I conducted research had not been collectivised, my thesis demonstrates that the social, political and economic transformations throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century affect the way folk objects are interpreted and re-appropriated today.

### **The time of folklore**

In order to understand how 'folklore' is perceived today in Romania it is necessary to look at the way in which the concepts of 'peasantry' and 'folklore' related to the concept of time during socialism. As a witness of the ways in which 'folklore' was used in the 1970s Romania, Kligman notes:

For state-ideologues, peasant traditions are a corpus of cultural artefacts. They are not viewed as constitutive of present-day social relations; rather, their 'meaning-making' is attributed only a historical referentiality. In other words, peasant traditions have symbolic, but not instrumental,



value vis-à-vis the ongoing experience of social actors. By confining them to reflections about the past, the state misinterprets the nature of these symbolic expression. The new socialist traditions of cultural creativity, however, are regarded as both reflective and constitutive of socialist ideology and practice. (Kligman 1988, 256)

Kaneff (2004) notes that during the socialist period a 'politics of time' placed the peasants – with their set of beliefs, rituals, social relations and, most importantly, modes of productions – in the past. The seizure of their modes of production was meant to change the communities and the peasants structurally and culturally. In Chapter Three, I show how performances of folk songs and dances on stage inside the villages' houses of culture had the purpose of transforming the rituals and social structures behind these forms of folklore: from the *horă* that involved the community and played an important part in producing and reproducing its social relationships (Kligman 1988) to entertainment based on a clear division between performers and spectators (Mihăilescu 2008, Hedeşan 2008, Giurchescu 2001). Folk performances gained a spectacular side to them, as their aesthetic function came to elicit the interest of the audience. In the same way, the aesthetic function framed the understanding of folk objects exhibited in ethnographic museums (Popescu 2002).

Kaneff (2004) contends that during socialism in Bulgaria there was no one official narrative of the past, but 'a number of renditions which all occupied different "niches" within the broad lines of legitimate framework constituted by "history"' (2004, 9). In relation to the countryside, time can be said to have three trajectories: tradition, history and folklore. 'Each one of these pasts "spoke" to a particular domain of social relations: history was the embodiment of the political-economy; tradition a potentially oppositional way to conceptualize the

human order (primarily through religious/mystical practices); while folklore provided a state-sponsored notion of national identity' (2004, 10). This isolation of 'folklore' as distinct from 'history' or from present social relations characterizes the dominant usage of 'folklore' as part of the communist state in Romania. At the same time, attempts to bring this category closer to either one of the other categories, to 'tradition' or to 'history', could have been seen as undermining.

Tradition and modernity, therefore, constitute the key complementary ideological foundations of socialism. Action is claimed to lead towards modernity and progress, while 'tradition' transformed into 'folklore' legitimizes action. Kaneff (2004), Kligman (1988), Verdery (1991) and Mihăilescu (2008) show how this tension was alleviated through participation on stage, which in the case of Romania culminated in *Cîntarea României* in the last decades of socialist rule.

### **The Management of folklore after World War Two**

The control of time, central to the Marxist-Leninist ideology that guided economic and cultural central planning, was applied not only to economic production, but also to people's spare time, through cultural activities and entertainment set up by the centre (Kaneff 2004, Verdery 1996). The main institution through which cultural production among the masses was coordinated in post-war Romania was the Central House of Popular Creation. Established in 1953, this institution had branches in every county capital, ultimately connecting the countryside to the centre – the Ministry of Culture and Education. On the one hand, its responsibility was to implement the cultural

directives coming from the centre; on the other, they managed the festivals and exhibitions which brought the peasants onto regional and national stages.

Folklore occupied an important place in the institution's definition of 'culture'. Throughout its history it changed names (it was later called 'The Centre for Direction in Popular Creation and of the Amateur Artistic Movement'), and from 1979 it officially opened Schools of Popular Arts.<sup>15</sup> In effect, the institution always had a didactic function. After 1989, these institutions were decentralized, but have continued to organize regional folklore festivals and crafts workshops.

Taxonomies of the folk idiom mirror its different regimes of value. A clarification of these terms is necessary before I analyse the negotiations over its value: The term *artă populară* would translate as 'folk art', suggesting objects of patrimony, which are by nature 'authentic', and collected around the turn of the century. So *artă populară* comprises inalienable objects (as defined by Weiner, see above) collected from villages and assessed by specialists as being 'heritage'. But during the socialist period, competitions of *artă populară* were held, where new objects that people sent in received prizes or were exhibited as 'folklore today'. These also had to fulfil 'authenticity' requirements, usually by following the old patterns. The people who made these objects were called 'creatori populari' (popular creators) before 1989, and are now called 'meșteri populari' (craftspeople).<sup>16</sup> I discuss their works in Chapters Six and Seven.

Another category of folk objects is *artizanat*: objects produced mostly in factories and centralized cooperative workshops that might or might not have

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<sup>15</sup> Throughout this thesis I sometimes refer to this institution by the name of School of Popular Arts.

<sup>16</sup> The term *artisan* does not explain the specificity of 'mestieri populari'. These are 'creatori populari', renamed 'mestieri', *craftsmen*, after 1989.

some hand-made elements. The difference between *artă populară* and *artizanat* is sometimes hardly visible. *Artizanat* is, by nature, a commodity, sold in specific gift shops or in markets next to touristic sites (as opposed to crafts fairs). *Artizanat* objects have always had an awkward position within the folk idiom – it could hardly be said they benefited from the same moral value as *artă populară*. During the socialist period the value of these objects was constantly questioned; after 1989 the production of *artizanat* diminished drastically with de-industrialization.

The term *folclor* specifically defines artistic forms (music and literature) collected from the countryside. Just like other forms of cultural production, *folclor* was utilized for communist propaganda. *Folclor nou* (new folklore) is an idiom that referred to folk forms that were connected to the new communist order. These forms were allegedly circulated among the masses; in fact, they were mostly written by ideologues, to be performed on the stages of the houses of culture. Such poems or songs remained a compulsory point in the folklore performance/competitions, although by the 1980s the communist propaganda had been replaced by odes to Ceaușescu and the nation.

Another folklore category that this thesis explores is that of *muzică populară* (folklore music), with its dance counterpart, *dansuri populare* (folklore dances) – two genres performed on stage. *Muzică populară* was a genre recorded in studios, and remains very popular indeed. It could be said that, while *folclor* consisted of what we term immaterial heritage from the villages, *muzică populară* is a commodity. Ethnographers in Romania today always insist on distinguishing the category of *folclor* from that of *muzică populară*, just as they

separate *artă populară* from *artizanat*. My referring to everything as *folclor* usually led to endless explanations on why these terms are different.

For the people in the countryside who were engaged in directing the local folklore ensembles, or who assembled small folk collections – usually village school teachers in charge of the activities at the houses of culture – there is yet another word for activities connected to ‘folklore’: ‘cultural work’. For them, folklore activities of any sort were, in fact, ‘cultural’ activities, part of the programme distributed by the Ministry of Culture; placing ‘folklore’ in the category of ‘culture’ put these remote villages at the centre of the national discourse.

The name for folk objects held by The Peasant Museum is *obiecte țărănești* (peasant objects). The rejection of taxonomies such as *folclor* or *popular* is part of the museum’s attempt to redefine the relationship between the object and the category of peasantry, understood through its alleged ‘atemporal spirituality’.<sup>17</sup> In turn, the terms used in the past or by other museums are considered to be contaminated by the ideologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (mostly communism), for which the folk idiom has been put to work, but which are also responsible for the dissolution of the traditional man, in Bernea’s words (2001, 5). The renaming of the objects is part of a social debate that was carried out through the folk idiom during the socialist period, and afterwards through the Peasant Museum. I argue that by distinguishing peasant objects from the notions of *folclor*, *artizanat*, *muzică populară*, what the discourse creates is a utopian space of ‘the peasant world’ in isolation from overarching categories such as the

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/istoric.html> Accessed on 01.09.2014.

state. What it recreates is a space of 'peasant resistance' against communist rule, while denying people's sincere engagement with other folk idioms.

The term I choose to use throughout my thesis is that of 'folklore', which, despite its vagueness, underlines the relationship of iconicity between objects included in the folk idiom. The similarity of these objects is intriguing, just as is my participants' efforts to place these objects in distinguished categories. All the objects that I call 'folklore' are both inalienable and alienable in some ways. They are all 'objectified', taxonomized, consciously thought about, and their value debated. None of the objects that I discuss are just 'things', everyday objects. Even in the past, when all the other folk objects were just things around the house, the clothes that I am talking about still had an element of performance and the spectacular, which placed them in a separate category and even in a separate room – *the good room*.

### **Among other objects**

Throughout this thesis folk objects appear engaged in a variety of social relationships beyond those with the peasantry. The period that I focus on mostly, from the 1960s to the present day, was one of intense modernization, followed by de-industrialization – social, political and economic shifts that also hide continuities. Folk objects find their place among a wealth of other objects available during the last three decades of socialism.

As Myers (2001) has noted, artefacts defined as 'folk' or 'national art', in the Romanian case, or as 'primitive art' when in Britain, often switch from one regime of inalienability to another. During the last decades of socialism folk objects were defined as 'heritage' and were often the objects of desire of

foreigners. But within Romania they seemed omnipresent in the context of the dire shortages of the 1980s. How can we, then, assess their ‘inalienability’?

Today people’s memories of the socialist period focus on objects that they had to struggle to get hold of, such as a pair of leather shoes, a coat made for ‘export’, or the Russian fur hats sold by Polish black-market merchants in *Gara de Nord* station in Bucharest. Then there were the western products, which often acquired abstract value, and were used as currency (in a way this brings them closer to some folk objects, used in the same way). Discussions of material culture and consumption during the socialist period (see Crowley and Reid 2000) are relevant if we are to understand the regimes of value in which we find folk objects at that time.

The purpose of my thesis is not necessarily to evoke the past through objects, but to show how they change from one regime of value to another, and the social context (which comprises other kinds of materials) is relevant in this respect. At the moment of my fieldwork, the social reality that came across most strikingly was that of migration, through the commodities and stories told.<sup>18</sup> People have been moving out of the villages on an unprecedented scale, and have gone abroad looking for work. I do not tackle this theme directly in my work, but this background frames the chapters set in the villages (Chapters Two to Five), and, to an extent, the chapters about folklore performers (Chapters Seven and Eight) so loved by the Romanians working abroad. Placing folk objects next to others that bring out these relationships with places afar reveal their particular

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<sup>18</sup> Pine (2000) discusses the reorientation of labour outside the household in Poland after 1989, when migration intensified. This reorientation was visible in the material culture used to perform and appropriate the new commodity culture.

material setting, the kinds of pasts they evoke and the reinterpretation of 'tradition'.

### **Gendered spaces**

So far I have shown how 'the peasant' and 'the countryside' have been constructed in two antagonistic ways throughout the modern history of Romania: either as backward and in need of modernization, or placed on the pedestal of national identity. Traditional dress emerges as the most relevant type of folk object able to reveal such constructions of the peasantry – it can be displayed, but also used for performances, not least because it is the peasant blouse which has become the iconic Romanian folk object.<sup>19</sup> But it can also reveal the intimate relationship between person and object, especially in terms of the making process. Alongside a wealth of other objects that form part of ethnographic collections such as the one at the Horniman, the makers of peasant dress were women. At the moment when these items became 'folk', what was made by women in the confines of the home was suddenly moved to the public arena of the state, placed in the museum of 'folk art', to be later moved to an ethnographic museum in Britain. What kind of image of femininity and domesticity emerges at the interplay between these spaces?

The association of feminine space with locality and with the private (in opposition to the masculine public) has been discussed by anthropologists (Goddard 2000, Pine 2000, Pearson 2004, Cole 1991), historians (Parker 1980, Berg 1988, Tilly and Scott 1987) and geographers such as Massey (1994) and

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<sup>19</sup> Famously depicted by Matisse, collected by foreign travellers, and considered the most valuable folk object by local ethnographers. In Romanian it is called *ie*.



MacDowell (1999, 2013). The house and the household are problematized as more than just the sphere of 'the private' by focusing on the different kinds of labour performed by women. At the same time these works question the notion of 'the public' as 'an emptiness which enables free and equal speech' (Massey 1994, 152). If we consider the space of the museum to be a 'public sphere' and the household where folk objects used to be made to be 'the private', then questioning these dichotomies is important.

The centrality of the household for the lives of women does not mean they do not participate in the politics and economic life of the communities or societies under scrutiny. The literature focusing on the relationship of the domestic sphere to domestic work has contributed much to nuancing the subject of gender. Berg (1988), and Tilly and Scott (1987) show that when industrialization began in England, the household was still the main unit of production, with women performing a wealth of activities. Cole (1991) demonstrates the centrality of the household for the community of Villa Che, with women occupying a central role in the economy of the family. Goddard's (2000) work shows that the household and family are not de-politicised areas, but 'can become the site [...] of the elaboration of parallel or counter-strategies as a counterpublic space'.

The distinction between productive and reproductive work as being located in the public and, respectively, in the private sphere is, therefore, inaccurate. The private and public are not fixed places, domains or even spheres of activities, but indexes that organize these categories and other social facts (Kligman 2000). Under socialism, women's work was directed towards the public, collective sphere, which also allowing social mobility by encouraging

education. But women remained extremely active in the private sphere (see discussions on 'the double burden' in Gal and Kligman 2000, Pine 1996), while they symbolically embodied the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997) – an ideology which, in Romania amounted to the strict control of women's bodies as a consequence of pro-natalist policies (Kligman 1998).

I am interested to see what kind of metaphors of kinship and gender come through the folk idiom, located at the centre of national ideology during the period of nationalist-communism, and what changes occurred in the period after 1989. How do contradictory images that associate women with 'tradition' (cultural reproduction; see Yuval-Davis 1997, Chatterjee 1993) coexist with the communist demands of taking women out of the private sphere? Conversely, how do these metaphors of womanhood and the nation, and the public display of things made by women in the past compare with women's subjective experience everyday life and work today? For the purpose of the present discussion, I am interested in how the people that participated in my research imagine womanhood in pre-modern Romania, and what social matters are articulated as debates around 'tradition'.

Weiner's discussion of inalienable things acknowledges that women's work and the objects they produce, especially cloth, are 'associated with magical potency, sacred prerogatives, political legitimacy and life-giving and life-taking social controls' (Weiner 1992, 3). Human reproduction and cloth reproduction are closely bound, and it is the domain where women have authority (1992, 92). This is what, we might think, makes many of the items of dress that I focus on inalienable: many are made around the moment of marriage, either as part of the trousseau, or to be given by the bride to certain members of the groom's family,

or godparents. Beautifully embroidered clothes along with a wealth of home-spun and home-woven linens, carpets, blankets and wall hangings were part of the obligatory trousseau that a young girl, together with her sisters and her mother, would prepare for the girl's wedding and married life. It would be safe to say that most of the objects held by ethnographic museums have been made with that purpose. A woman's dowry would be the proof not of wealth, and ownership of things, but of possessing the skill and ability to produce more of these things for the household, or for future generations (Kligman 1988, Pine 2000).

Today the dowry is not made of hand-crafted objects anywhere in Romania, but in mountain villages such as Vrâncioaia, this change only occurred a few generations before my visit, although commodities of sorts had made their way into the trousseau a long time ago (Kligman 1988 notes this during the 1970s). In Vrâncioaia changes in the way women were socialized and related to the world outside the village are visible in the shirts they now keep in their wardrobes. In Chapter Five, I discuss how changes in the materials available, and in women's activities and work encouraged them to choose the new, synthetic fabrics.

Together with the folk objects, metaphors of kinship and of the household are frequently used to create the imagined community of the nation-state (see Chapter Three). The word 'hearth' (*vatră*) in Romanian refers to the nation's spirituality. The objects that would have formed the dowry reify this metaphor, and link an eternalized image of the countryside to the modern state. In ethnographic museums these objects made by women in the past are rendered without history. As a social and historical category, 'the peasant' is a man (associated with violent uprisings, resisting collectivization or modernization of

any sort). As a cultural category, the peasant appears feminized (see Chapter Three). The countryside with its folk objects is articulated as the sphere of domesticity. Just like the objects, the women have no history when in the public sphere of the museum, and little in the way of agency. Their role is to repeat the same pattern over and over again. When they fail to do so, by incorporating other kinds of fabrics and patterns, the new objects are rejected.

In their homeland (nation-state), folk objects evoke a space of femininity and domesticity. Meanwhile, in Britain, 'primitive art' suggests a masculine space of the savage. The difference between 'folk art' in Romania (or elsewhere) and 'primitive art' at the centre of a former empire is that the first invests the object with a sense of identity (denying the difference of its social setting), whereas the latter creates a realm of alterity (mysterious and wild, but tamed while in the museum).

### **The vulnerable object**

Objects of 'heritage' are considered valuable yet vulnerable to the passage of time, and are treated with overwhelming care inside the museum stores, both in the UK and in Romania (see Chapter One for details on the storage of folk objects). Collected from villages at the moment when they threatened to 'disappear', the disintegration of the peasant clothes always seems imminent. Museologists who have witnessed dislocations of the Museum of Popular Art in Bucharest during the socialist period talk about 'rescuing' objects, or, conversely, about the great loss of the ones that could not be rescued from the elements.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Weiner remarked that the measure of the inalienability of an object is in the pain its loss produces.

But I want to argue that, from a semiotic perspective, these are the most enduring of folk objects. Their value and inalienability is unlikely to change within a short period of time.

The items of dress that women made in the villages in the 1960s and 1970s and which have now lost their value are, in that sense, much more vulnerable. So are the objects made by *creatori populari*, which used to have a larger degree of inalienability, but have now become simple commodities, appreciated for their decorative function (see above). De-industrialization has led to a halt in the production of *artizanat* – another kind of vulnerable object. All these folk items (and I want to include *muzică populară* here, because the performance requires folk dress) are susceptible to quick changes of value. One of the reasons for this change is historical: after 1989, the folk object did not occupy the same position vis-à-vis state narratives of culture and national identity. Some of the old conceptions of the folk object persist, but the hegemonic version of meanings attached to peasant dress, which now transpire from the Peasant Museum<sup>21</sup>, have dramatically changed the way other makers and performers relate to traditional dress.

The reason for this particular vulnerability is that the sphere of folk production (knowledge, objects and performances) expanded rapidly in the last decades before 1989, and crumbled even more quickly afterwards. Temporality also influences the objects made within the household, like the ones discussed above, where the last ‘traditional’, inalienable objects made in the 1960s and 1970s did not make it into the sphere of inalienability of the state or the space of

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<sup>21</sup> Nicolescu shows how the new generation of ethnographers and museographers in charge of the Peasant Museum are connected to political and cultural spheres that profess this hegemony. Earlier I remarked on the opening of the museum, which coincided with the land reforms.

high art and culture. The positive view of the feminine model of lore, making beautiful objects in the household combines appreciation for a generation that no longer actively influences affairs of the household, with the hegemonic view coming from the centre, that the 'authentic peasant' is gone. This is not to say that all reinterpretations of material culture depend on the 'centre'. While a hegemonic view of traditional dress can be picked up, different spheres of practice do not respond to such hierarchies. It is these semiotically vulnerable objects that I am particularly interested in.



Scrovistea Pallace, July 1924  
Queen Marie of Romania Postcard.

## C – METHODOLOGY

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### **Fieldwork at home**

To say that I conducted ‘anthropology at home’ is, really, only a manner of speaking. ‘Home’ meant a certain familiarity with the topic (including linguistic, political and economic knowledge), which shaped my research. To defamiliarize this ‘home’ was to open up the topic of ‘folklore’ to different spaces. This last part of the introductory chapter lays out methodologies and the position of the researcher vis-à-vis the ever reformulated and debated object of research.

When I was thirteen, our teacher considered the class old enough to go on a daytrip to Bucharest. The small town where we set off from on our journey, and where I had grown up, was populated largely by working-class people and technical intellectuals<sup>22</sup>, the first generation to have moved from the countryside to apartment blocks. As we set off on that bright early morning in the summer 1998, our spirits were high. We entered the capital late that morning via a wide boulevard flanked by socialist blocks, the scale of which seemed enormous. The grey, decaying blocks impressed a few of my classmates, fans of Bucharest rap music where such images often featured. But the outskirts of Bucharest weren’t on the list of sights to visit. The minibus carried on to the centre of the capital and after stopping for ten minutes in front of the Government building, where we had a group picture taken, it took us to the Village Museum where we spent most of our day. We roamed about through the large park, where, try as we might, there was no escape from the sharp, suspicious eye of our teacher. There was

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<sup>22</sup> See a discussion about the class of technical intellectuals (engineers, economists, managers) in Verdery (1991, 107).



something impressive about the museum, though not so spectacular; the fairytale houses and interiors looked almost nothing like what we knew the countryside to be. And we knew parts of the countryside all too well – without exception, all of us had spent our summer holidays in villages, where at least one pair of our grandparents lived.

Bucharest in the 1990s was a place of rapid change, more visible there than in the rest of the country. The village museum was a safe place to visit, our teacher must have thought. That day we all learned that at the core of the traffic-clogged capital, bustling with people and surrounded by enormous blocks, lay the serenity of a dream-like village that never changed and that had never existed in the real countryside. We ended the day having lunch at McDonalds, at the expressed request of the pupils.

‘Home’ captures, in many ways, the quest of my research, as it captures the gist of the notion of ‘folklore’ (or, in any case, my use of it), with its nostalgic reference to a past, deep in our imagination. This metaphor of the peasant home is at the heart of the nation I grew up in – a metaphor quite literally embodied in the spatiality of Romania’s capital. In that sense, through my research I was revisiting a most familiar ‘home’, indeed so intimate that it went unnoticed: the presence of ‘folklore’ in everyday life, and the place it occupies alongside other sites, such as the socialist blocks or an international fast-food chain. When I started my project, part of my plan was to revisit this ‘home’ and to denounce the ideology of the nation-state, and the abusive usage of folklore in reproducing power. Discourse analysis was to be my method. To some extent, the reader will not fail to find this vindictive endeavour in my thesis. But still, not everything was comfortable at ‘home’. I realized that ‘folklore’ was present not only in the

sanitized village museum at the heart of the capital, but also at the outskirts: between the grey blocks, near disused factories I found the TV studios which broadcast *muzică populară* on a continuous loop.

It took a different pair of eyes and some years to notice the omnipresence of these TV channels. I arrived in Bucharest with my fiancé Tom and I was preparing for my journeys to the villages, ready to elicit the personal histories embedded in dress, in the object's place of origin. As I was striving to explain to him the kind of work I was embarking on, he pointed to the TV screen: 'is this what you are going to be doing?' A long explanation ensued about how these people are the product of nationalist ideology, widespread during the last years of socialism. But said out loud, this explanation alone could not account for the energies invested by all the people appearing on all those channels. I decided to dedicate a few months of fieldwork to these TV studios. It turned out to be one of the most surreal experiences, as de-familiarizing as any kind of performance could be for a spectator like me. And being a spectator was indeed a form of 'participant observation': the performances beckon to be looked at, so I never felt an awkward intruder in the studios.

The minibuses driving school groups and folk ensembles from outside Bucharest to these studios in order to perform folkloric dances every evening reminded me of my own trip from the edge of the country to Bucharest when at school. Their journeys epitomized a centre and periphery relationship which could explain much more about 'folklore' than my initial de-constructive approach.

In parallel, I continued to pursue my historicised approach. One of my field-sites was the library. As I delved into publications available in the

countryside after World War Two, I was able to track the changes and continuities in the way 'culture' and 'folklore' were framed and attempted to form the new peasant-workers at different points in the history of socialism. Rather than bring out one ideological position, these publications pointed to power struggles which were played out using the vocabulary of 'authenticity' and 'folklore'. I realized these words did not mean the same thing every time they appeared in these publications. This diversity would match the present-day situation, where 'authenticity' and 'folklore' are used for different claims. Seeing a few hours of footage of the *Cîntarea României* festival from 1976 onwards, I began to pay attention to the visual economy of folklore performances.

I was not the only one that came to the field site with a presumption of familiarity. The same familiarity was assumed by the people among whom I conducted research. In all of the places that I visited as a researcher, the people I spoke to knew what an ethnographer was and what their job should be. 'Culture' and 'folklore' were all too familiar terms. Most of the people I spoke to believed that making Romanian folklore known abroad was essentially a good endeavour, so they were happy to provide their assistance. Some of the people I involved in my research were disappointed when they noticed that I 'did not know what I was doing', because I failed to tell them exactly what field of folklore I was preoccupied with: 'traditions', 'dance', 'song', or 'costume'. Eventually I tried to explain that my research is rather more 'sociological', and that was then accepted, at least in the village. Our relationship and the explanations of my focus became part of my fieldwork investigation. What was folklore? What categories did it encompass? What was authenticity? I often thought, however, that a lack of familiarity, or my being foreign might have opened up discussions

more easily. In my position, questioning the value of objects was sometimes inappropriate: that some things were considered valuable and others not was embodied knowledge, requiring no explanation and tolerated no questions from a Romanian.

Fragments of my journey 'home' appear here and there throughout this thesis through my own memories which, I hope, might explain some of the embodied knowledge of aesthetics, and some of the relationships between the different sites that I visited – either underlining connections, or establishing irreconcilable differences between types of objects. In writing, I tried to stay true to the 'voyage of subjective discovery', as Hart called it:

In order to understand the world, we must begin not with the empirical existence of objects, but with the reasoning embedded in our experience itself and in all the judgments we have made. The world is inside each of us as much as it is out there. Our task is to bring the two poles together as subjective individuals who share the object world in common with the rest of humanity. (Hart 2004<sup>23</sup>)

Earlier in this introduction I explained why multi-sited fieldwork suited the object of my research. My focus is not only on following how objects change meanings when passing from one site to another, but how the shared folk object connects these sites. Mine, in the end, was a subjective discovery of a 'home and hearth' which I found recognizable in some respects but different in many others.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://thememorybank.co.uk/papers/what-anthropologists-really-do/> Accessed 01.12.2011.

## **Memory elicitation**

From the point of view of the nation-state, the folk object is a way of remembering and at the same time of forgetting (see Nora (1992) for an extensive discussion on official memory), of reframing the past to legitimize the future. In anthropology and history, a 'memorial approach' to objects of heritage is meant to bring in alternative narratives on heritage, or, in fact, different objects which could be framed as 'heritage' (Butler 2006). Seeing objects as powerful retainers of memory entails a particular view on the object-subject relationship (Keane, see above). However, the opposition between 'official history' and collective or individual memory is problematic. In her work on Odessa, Richardson shows how personal stories are infused with official narratives in the process of drawing out a past for a group's identity (Richardson 2008, 23).

What I try to bring out in my work is not a 'history from below'. The objects that my research participants discuss do not provoke stories that contradict the official one. I do not see official history and lived history as necessarily in opposition – although I am concerned with the contestation of narratives of the past. Rather, by looking at different spaces which might be considered spaces of authority (such as the national ethnographic museums or the School of Popular Art) 'the centre' can also be revealed as an arena for debates, rather than a powerful source generating official narratives.

Some of the chapters show how objects work as retainers of moments from the past for some of the people engaged in my research. In those cases, I am interested in how objects embody different relationships, often of kinship, or how they bring out different ways of relating to the past. On a personal level, the

forgetting is conspicuous: with one exception I could not track down the individuals who made the objects at the Horniman in the first place. In addition, the people I spoke to have little knowledge of how such 'authentic' objects were made. This tension between the pasts performed and fragments of personal memories came through in people's interactions with clothes and images.

### **Visual methods**

In most of the field sites participant observation with the people who had 'folk' items entailed handling clothes: unwrapping them, laying them out on the bed, and trying them on. They did not talk much about them, as people thought the items just spoke for themselves; their striking and spectacular appearance needed no explanation. My camera was crucial in engaging with people, and having them display their folk costumes. Taking photographs of the clothes meant acknowledging the aesthetics of the items women kept at home. They were reluctant to have their own picture taken. Photographing the objects was a substitute for themselves: their skill or inheritance was embedded in those items, which showed more than their facial expressions could.

All the more telling was the fact that one day, the people from the village did want me to take their photograph, all dressed up in the clothes of lore. It was the day a television crew came to the village, and everyone performed peasantry together. I could understand that by performing together, people achieved something which individual performance did not. The act of taking the photographs that people wanted me to take explained a lot about how they used folk dress, and how their aesthetics is thought about. Images are collaboratively

produced during fieldwork, and this aspect of visual anthropology opens new paths in social research (Pinney 2008, Pink 2007).

The camera, usually thought of as a tool for observing, was the instrument that enabled me to do participant observation. My role in the television studios became that of the photographer – which I was glad to perform for the folklore stars who wanted their pictures taken.

Discussions about visual methods often revolve around ethical problems, derived from the fact that the photographer has more power than the person photographed. In my own research with folkloric stars, the purpose was capturing a performance, rather than individual identities. Rather than alienate my participants, my camera allowed for a mediation between me and them. By having the stars command certain angles and settings, by looking at the image together with them and by sending my participants the photographs, they had more control over the nature and quality of their performance and over our relation. The stars posed in a theatrical manner which convinced me that what they tried to perform was not being a peasant, but being an artist. The stars themselves embraced the theatricality and their distance from village life. In a different setting, when taking part in weddings or christenings, the photographer had an important role not only in capturing specific moments, rendering them important in that specific social context, but also in contributing to information about ‘traditions’, with his or her knowledge of what other people do. A dynamic between forgetting and remembering is played out.

In my own work, photography does not provide a window into a specific time and place, an index of reality. Instead, I capture performances: of the past or

of different possible alter egos (Pinney). 'Authentic folklore', in that sense, is something performed, rather than an essentialized identity.

### **Outline of the thesis**

The backbone of this thesis is constituted by a discussion of regimes of value. This term coined by Appadurai has been criticised for being rather vague (Graeber 2001), but precisely because of its openness, this formulation is particularly suitable in my case for thinking about how 'context' is constituted.

Locality emerges as an important factor that influences the evaluation of objects. At times, the physical locality corresponds to a sphere of cultural production. In other chapters, regimes of value are influenced by certain historical developments or events. Certain specific themes recur in more than one of these places around which this thesis is organized. I see *place* as an articulation of historic trajectories and materials, 'temporary constellations of trajectories' as Massey (2005, 154) calls them. Exploring these trajectories allows for alternative readings of some of the historical processes and concepts that I outlined in this introductory chapter.

**Chapter One** is set in the Horniman stores and archives, and looks at how the objects in the Romanian collection are made sense of alongside other objects in the stores, which arrived in the same place via different routes. I look at the 'documentation' of the collection, at how fragments of information make sense within the particular space of the museum stores, and at previous attempts to reconnect with the places where the objects were made. The way the collection is placed in the space of the Horniman reveals particular moments in Cold War history, seen from the perspective of a folk collection on the move.



In **Chapter Two** I move to the space of the village where the objects from the Horniman were collected, and which is defined by ethnographic museums as 'the context'. I complicate this concept, looking at local understandings of place, and definitions of place coming from folklore specialists.

**Chapter Three** looks at the modernization projects coming from the centre, in the interwar period and after World War Two. Focusing on the institution called the 'house of culture', I discuss the intentions of modernization and the incorporation of the peasant-workers into the project of the nation-state. **Chapter Four** investigates the process of making space today, by actively remembering and forgetting certain pasts. All these articulations of space and time, modernization projects and negotiations of the centre-village relationship are performed through local folklore.

In **Chapter Five** I focus on the way items of dress are kept in wardrobes and dowry chests, revealing different ways of engaging with the past and making sense of the present, as well as the semiotic fragility of the objects when kept in the wardrobe. By the way folk dress is stored, different regimes of value come through, and issues of gender and memory emerge as central in these evaluations and engagements.

**Chapter Six** is concerned with local displays, challenging the notion of the 'source community'. The displays reveal how different actors were or are involved with state institutions that manage folklore. Through the displays they negotiate their position, and that of their community, vis-à-vis the centre – be that the state or the city.

The theme of performance comes through in all chapters of the thesis, but **Chapters Seven and Eight** deal with stage performances in festivals such as

*Cîntarea României*. **Chapter Seven** looks at how these performances supported national-communist ideology, but also looks at these stages as sites of contestation. **Chapter Eight** looks at these performances today, in the context of niche TV stations, discussing the performers' personal engagement with folk dress and negotiations of authenticity.

The project that I entered was devised by anthropologists at Goldsmiths College (Frances Pine and Emma Tarlo) in collaboration with the Keeper of Anthropology at the Horniman Museum (Fiona Kerlogue). Initially, the focus of the research was to be on memory and objects, and I intended to follow the changing socio-political contexts of post-communism in Romania. My training as part of the Horniman museum, and most of all, my contact with the objects entailed particular assumptions and definitions of what the 'context' of the objects might be (I give details about this in Chapter One). Once I arrived in some of these villages, however, these assumptions proved false, as objects defined as 'authentic' in the logic of the museum disciplines were hardly anywhere to be found. At the same time, it proved impossible to restrict my study of 'memory' to the connections that people had with the specific objects in the Horniman collection: for a start, most of the former owners of these objects were no longer alive. More importantly, people did not have memories or maintain connections with those specific objects.

However, the photographs of the Horniman objects that I carried with me and showed to the people I engaged in my research did not fail to elicit connections and memories. A wealth of other kinds of materials my research brought to surface suggested different, unexpected ways in which people

engaged with the folk idiom. My own research influenced, if only a little, the way people evaluate objects called 'folk'. My journey has been a search for objects defined as 'authentic' (which people understood to be the *counterparts* of the artefacts in the Horniman collection), and which were nowhere to be found yet believed to exist somewhere, or to have existed at some point in the past. Mine was a discovery of how people deal with this absence.

# Chapter One

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## Unfolding the Past – The Context of the Archives

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I met Mrs Netcu, an ethnographer from Bucharest, at Bond Street tube station and together we made our way to the stores of the Horniman museum, at an anonymous location far from the bustling, up-market centre of London. She was 74 years old, and a retired specialist in folk costume from the Peasant Museum (formerly the Museum of Popular Art) in Bucharest. Although she had worked for the same institution all her life, she had worked in different museum stores, accompanying the Peasant Museum collections of folk dress as they changed home twice during her career. Many of her stories were accounts of losses: of folk objects or of archives improperly deposited in places that suffered from various calamities or a lack of interest from staff. Finally, at the end of her career she witnessed the collections of the Museum of Popular Art ‘come back home’ to their initial building in Bucharest.<sup>1</sup> The Museum of Popular Art, where Mrs Netcu had worked during the Socialist period, was also the institution where most of the objects in the 1957 Horniman collection came from. It became clear to me that the objects in that collection had not been the only ones to go travelling, and were by no means the only ones in search of a place of origin.

After a long journey by tube and then on foot alongside a dual carriageway, we came to the gates of the Study Collection Centre of the Horniman Museum (SCC from here on). We rang the doorbell by the metal gate,

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<sup>1</sup> To get the gist of this narrative, see the History section of The Peasant Museum website <http://www.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/history.html>. For an anthropological account of the Peasant Museum, see the work of Gabriela Nicolescu (2014).

and entered the yard of what appeared to be a disused school, with its tall windows all boarded up. As we went in, I wrote Mrs Netcu's name and my own on the board at the door, and Danny, one of the employees there, wrote our names in the guestbook. After introductions and a cup of tea, we were each given a set of white gloves, and walked downstairs into one of the storage halls, while Mrs Netcu was instructed on how to handle the objects she was going to work with. In contrast to the wide, empty space outside, the inside of the building was packed with bric-a-brac. Mrs Netcu was there to assess some items of costume from a different Horniman collection that was suspected of being Romanian. Smocks, aprons and headdresses like the ones we were about to see had been a part of her daily routine at the museum in Romania. As we walked through dimly lit corridors, ignoring the arrows on the floor that seemed to lead nowhere, and passed doors with various warning signs ('Attention Asbestos', 'No food or drink in the stores'). I noticed Mrs Netcu fidgeting, passing her white gloves from one hand to another: 'Do we really have to wear these all the time? How can I tell what the fabric of the costumes is with these on? I did wash my hands, you know'.

At this point I should warn – or perhaps disappoint – the reader by saying this is not a gothic tale (perhaps like something from *Murder at the Museum*, the book kept in the cosy kitchen at the SCC, next to the tin of biscuits). The people who work there have made the SCC into a comfortable work place, with the computer room and the kitchen resembling a living room more than an office. That said, while I was there I was always tempted to let my imagination wander and compare the museum stores with Chaucer's Tabard Inn – this was a place of rest and reflection where pilgrims tell stories within

stories. The objects stored here were always inspiring, and could each spin a good yarn if given the chance. If the story of the objects in the SCC does tend towards the gothic, it is because the stores, more than any usual archive, are full of prohibitions. Being inside the stores of a museum is a sensuous experience, and this seems to necessitate the need to tame the materiality of the objects with spurious rules and regulations.

Like any archive, the Horniman stores are an establishment of authority (Derrida 1996), in which the material itself matters less than the fact that it exists *there*, and this possession is enacted through rituals of sorts. These rituals of preservation (the politics of storage) contribute to making the objects inalienable, while inhibiting particular aspects of their history. Some of the objects' stories go back to their initial sites of collection (from the space outside the museum), and keep getting repeated on the servers and computers every time an exhibition is prepared. In the meantime, the objects themselves are meant to lie mute, dormant and untouched in the boxes at the SCC. But were they really asleep, I kept wondering all the while I was there unwrapping objects, taking their photograph and wrapping them back up, as the thick, quiet atmosphere was occasionally pierced by the humming of the humidifier machine?

In what follows, I shall discuss my first contact with the costumes in the 1957 Horniman collection, and the politics of what has been deemed the backstage of the museum: the storage and archives. In the second part, I will discuss the previous attempt to recontextualize these objects, and how the material gathered then marked another stage in the social life of the collection, revealing it to be an enclave of Romanian museological practice in Britain. The

purpose of this chapter is to reflect on museums stores as a site for the beginning of my own exploration of the objects, and the implications that this context (the stores) brings forth for my work of 'taking the objects back' to their place of origin. In the logic of the museum, of the collection and its documentation, the 'context' for the objects is to be searched in the villages. What I set out to demonstrate is that the museum stores are indeed a context in which the collection is emplaced: where the objects sit, the way they are cared for imbue them with meanings and conduce towards a particular perspective on their relationships outside the museum. I want to unsettle the idea that objects are in a state of limbo in the stores, while their 'real context' is outside the museum.

In this chapter I reveal some of the tensions at work in the meanings and value that objects are attributed in the stores. At the same time, I argue that a re-contextualization with the source communities is impossible if we ignore the workings and the politics of the museum institutions (both British and Romanian) towards both the objects or the notion of 'source communities' that they employ. Crucial to this discussion is the particular historical moment in which the Romanian collection was re-exhibited in 1984, almost three decades after it arrived in 1956 and 1957.

### **The rules of the Study Centre Collection**

Five months would pass from the moment I started to work on the 1957 Romanian collection at the Horniman, until I first got to see some of the costumes. The research project outlined the museum's intention to recontextualize the objects in the collection, not only in order to find out more

about the circumstances in which it came to stay in a British museum in the mid 1950s (a research task undertaken by Magda Buchczyk), but also to attempt a reconnection with the source communities. There was urgency in the intention of the project, and yet access to the objects themselves was forbidden for a long time. The first contact was a list and a set of files which were kept throughout the project in the office of the Deputy Keeper of Anthropology. I come back to these files further on, but for now, it will suffice to say that they contained varied material, and, most importantly, the objects' documentation written in English that had arrived from Romania with the objects in 1956. These tantalizing fragments of narrative, brief hints of the provenance of the collection preceded the contact with the objects.

For Magda Buchczyk and me, access to the Romanian collection had to be earned. The process was lengthy and required the following: meetings with the supervisor of the project at the Horniman museum; reading through the objects' documentation; an introductory meeting at the SCC, where we would meet the team, have a tour of the building, and learn about storage policies and health and safety regulations; training in object handling, object photography and the MIMSY (database); and obtaining a disclosure document from Scotland (this took more than a month).

When it comes to bringing order to the massive number of artefacts that museums store, the rules are strict and they reflect a particular ideology common to all museums. According to Carol Duncan (1995), it is an ideology established in the Enlightenment, whereby the museum stands for scientific truth, an ideology visible through its architecture, the display of objects, and the organization of its space. It is science that determines the rituals, organization,



and structure of the discourse in the institution of the museum. Fear of pollution, Mary Douglas tells us, is a fear of things that fall in between categories, emerging as 'matter out of place' (1966). In a secularized institution such as the museum and its stores, rituals of purification, of eliminating polluting elements are expressed through the establishment of hierarchies, indexes, clear-cut categories, and rules of behaviour in the proximity of objects.

In this way, the lengthy process of approaching the costumes in the Romanian collection, and the necessity of handling them in a particular manner are rituals meant to avoid pollution. The objects, in this process, are rendered mysterious and valuable, their aura entailing distance. The excess of material is tamed by the database and catalogues maintained by the management team at the Horniman stores. The objects at the SCC are broadly classified as: Archaeology, Anthropology, and Natural Science. Within Anthropology, the classification follows the criterion of 'function', and within 'function', objects are classified by 'ethnicity'. However, in practice things get more complicated, especially when it comes to objects with irregular shapes. In contrast to the neatness of the database, everything in the basement hall is arranged by size or simply by how things can fit together. For the visitor, the number of rules to obey when in the stores is indeed impressive, and once inside, the number of objects and their density is overwhelming. An inflation of materiality seems to defy the rules. While the database contains all the objects in order, their physicality cannot be contained in the taxonomies that the museum uses to function. This tension between rules and the unruly objects is what gives the place its sense of the gothic.

Once collected, the object is no longer part of the social life that created it. Although it has been argued that it remains, in some ways, entangled in a social life outside the museum (Thomas 2009), the museum's ideology of 'preserving heritage' also freezes the objects. The malady (fever) of the archive, associated by Derrida with the Freudian death drive has been interpreted by Steedman (2001) as being linked not only to psychoanalytical processes (the search for beginnings, the desire to possess the archive), but also with the physicality of being in the archive: the dust inhaled by the historian, the palpable remnants of the dead, who were once in contact with the objects stored away.<sup>2</sup>

Coming back to Mary Douglas, dead bodies are amongst the most puzzling things for human communities, because of the uncertainty of determining what a body actually is (something that used to be alive, but isn't anymore). In the same way, the objects in stores can be thought of as things that used to be alive, or used to be something that they no longer are, thus requesting a set of rituals of transformation through purification and classification.

For Foucault (1986), places of liminality such as the museum are explained through the secularism of modernity, which casts away anything that contradicts its rational principles. Madness, illness and death are cast into these

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<sup>2</sup> Steedman discusses Jules Michelet's musings on the historian's relationship to the manuscripts, through which he breathes life into the bodies of the past. Steedman notes: 'It cannot be determined whether it is the manuscripts or the dead, or both who come to life, and take shape and form. But we can be clearer than Michelet could be, about exactly what it was that he breathed in: the dust of the workers who made the papers and parchments; the dust of the animals who provided the skins for their leather bindings. He inhaled the by-product of all the filthy trades that have, by circuitous routes, deposited their end-products in the archives. And we are forced to consider whether it was not life that he breathed into "the souls who had suffered so long ago and who were smothered now in the past", but death, that he took into himself, with each lungful of dust' (2001, 27).

heterotopias, places which open and close at times, but are not public and free to use by everyone. The sense of the gothic conveyed by objects in the museum stores can also be explained as a form of resistance to the modern, scientific categories into which they are forced. As you pass by boxes marked with a skull warning they contain poisonous weapons, by stuffed animals and an old piano, by objects marked as fragile and a statue of a god tied against a heavy box in case it falls, the sense is that these objects are rejecting the categories they are assigned on the database, which attempt to silence their complexities. Rules are brought in to dominate the chaos of matter and time. The arbitrary order of the collections is brought in to replace the disorder of history (Stewart 1984). But the domination of rationality over matter is imperfect, and nowhere else is this more evident than in the museum stores (see images 1.1 to 1.5). This is demonstrated by the Romanian 1957 collection.

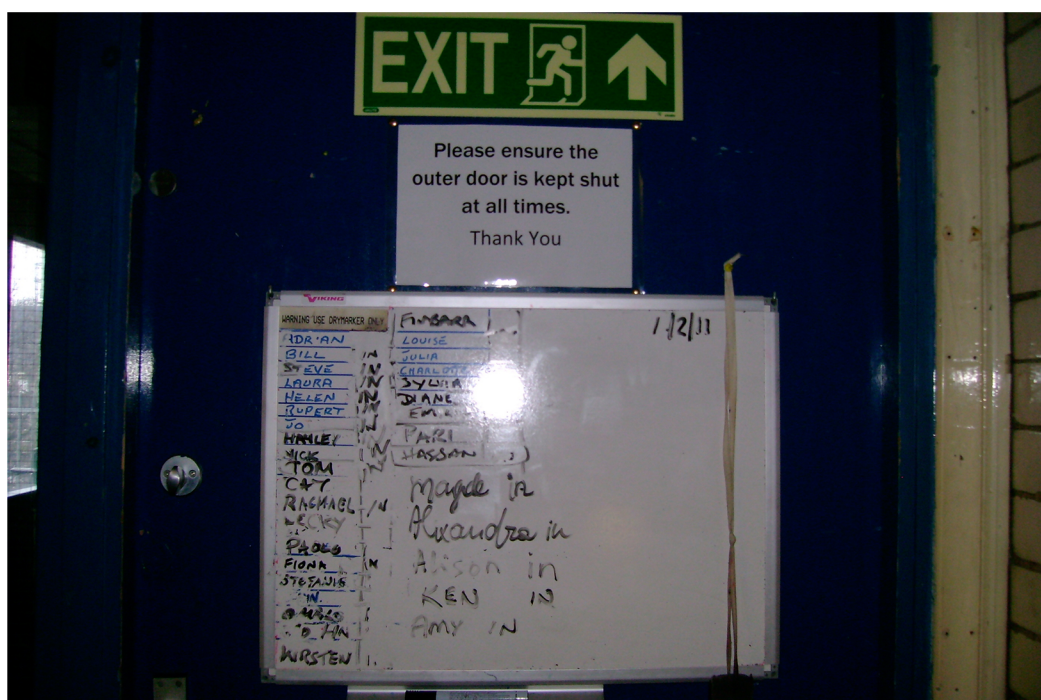
The Romanian objects are stored together in the basement of the Horniman stores, next to some of these large, oddly shaped objects that defy the taxonomies that otherwise organize the stores. In this case, the history of the collection – its arrival in the specific conditions of 1957 – has determined the physical organization and placing of the objects together, instead of isolating them according to Function, Material, and Ethnicity, like the rest of the objects. Two of the costumes in the 1957 collection I chose to work with (1957.256 and 1957.252) are marked with the date of their arrival. The date and circumstance of this arrival seem to be considered more important than the material from which they are made.

An aspect that defies the clear-cut taxonomies of the Horniman is the labelling that accumulates around objects (image 1.9). For instance, object

number 1957.252 XV, a coat from the Romanian collection, has no fewer than five labels. One of the labels that the coat carries is sewn onto it and has a different number. It informs us that the object once belonged to the Museum of Popular Art in Bucharest, the institution that sent the collection to the Horniman museum in the first place. This label points to different taxonomies from those at the Horniman, although similarities do exist. While the labels at the Horniman simply attach a number after the year of the arrival, the old label, usually sewn onto the fabric (a more violent intervention on the material) shows a T, for textiles, followed by a number – T6219 is object number 1957.252xii, a smock. It is a tangible marker that sets this collection apart, not allowing the objects to disperse amongst other examples of textile, pottery, furniture, looms, etc. The resistance of the collection to being integrated into the Horniman museum keeps these objects less isolated from their previous context than many of the others in the stores here. However, the history which marks these objects in the storage room is not the history of the ‘source communities’ (which is claimed to be represented in exhibitions), but the history of the previous museum in Romania. The Horniman seems to have swallowed this collection whole, without digesting it and absorbing its parts.

### **The Romanian context**

The displacement of the Romanian collection has determined its spatial position amongst the Horniman objects, and the collection’s previous status has remained imprinted – physically – on the objects. But once they become part of a collection, objects no longer maintain a direct connection to the place and



1.1 Inside the SCC, where the Romanian collection is stored.



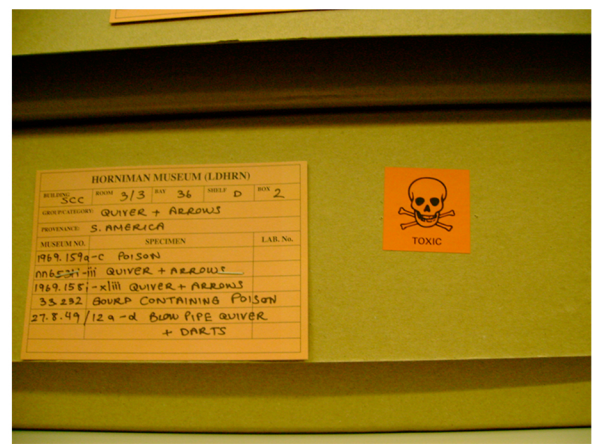






1.3 The boxes containing objects from the Romanian collection.







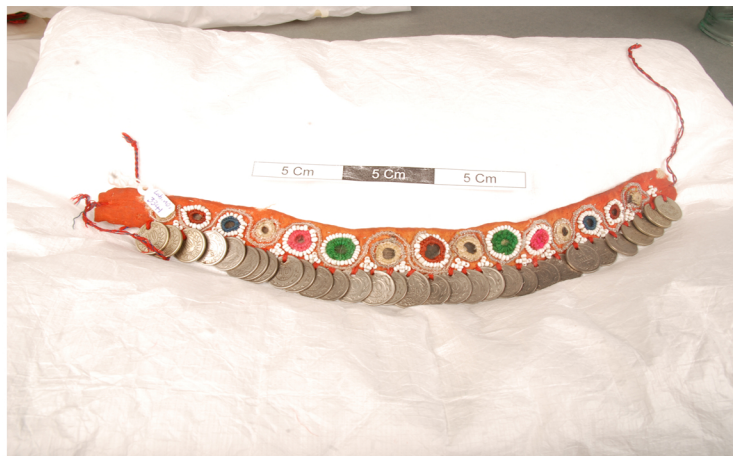




1.6.

1957.252 IV. Lambskin jacket. This object's photograph follows the SCC standards. The white background is overexposed, so that it might be eliminated in Photoshop. The ruler and the colour scheme are there as indicators of the object's characteristics. The object is part of the Pădureni costume, made of 22 pieces. This is one of the costumes that I decided to track back to the villages where it was collected.





1.7 The Pădureni costume is the only one that has jewellery. The documentation mentions a Roma woman as the artisan, who was 100 years old when the objects were collected.

1.8 Woman's shirt, part of the Pădureni costume.







1.9 The accruing labels at the SCC show turning points in the biographies of the objects. The label inscribed with T marked the 'Textile' category in the Romanian museum.



time of origin, in the way souvenirs do. Stewart's (1984) work on 'objects of desire' makes a distinction between the souvenir and the collection.

In contrast to the souvenir, the collection offers example rather than sample, metaphor rather than metonymy. The collection does not displace attention to the past; rather, the past is at the service of the collection, for whereas the souvenir lends authenticity to the past, the past lends authenticity to the collection. The collection seeks a form of self-enclosure which is possible because of its historicism. The collection replaces history with classification, with order beyond the realm of temporality. In the collection, time is not something to be restored to an origin; rather, all time is made simultaneous or synchronous within the collector's world (Stewart 1984, 151).

In the museum stores, the 'whole' formed by the collection supersedes the individual objects and their biographies. According to Stewart, souvenirs tend to end up in the attic or cellar – spaces designated to the past in which objects often sit randomly, where our memory rearranges them when we are there. Meanwhile, the museum creates places of classification and simultaneity. In the system of classification of the museum, the objects are rendered identical, and equally valuable. Their value is created and confirmed by the rules that are enforced on them by people who protect objects, and who can indeed become possessive of them. The work of conservation departments, photographers, keepers, and secretaries makes these objects inalienable.

I wanted to trace the history of two of the costumes to the source communities: object number 1957.252 and number 1957.256 – both considered typical for their regions (Vrancea and the Pădureni). As was the case with most of the objects, the documentation offered information on the villages and the names of the people who sold them to the Romanian museum collector.

The files that came with the objects contain strict categories (see Appendix), the first being the object's 'name' (both the regional Romanian term for it, and an English translation are given), which is then followed by its 'origin'. This states that the acquisition was made by the R.P.R Museum of Peasant Art<sup>3</sup> in 1955, and is then followed by the village and the name of the person who sold it (this section mentions that the seller was a 'peasant of Romanian nationality'). 'Origin' is the category in which the information occasionally varies: a few objects come from people of different ethnicities, others seem to have simply been part of the Museum of Popular Art stores (and therefore were not collected for the Horniman), while the provenance of others is 'from a private collection' in Bucharest.

The document continues with categories titled 'description', 'dimensions', 'use', 'typological classification', 'frequency', 'materials employed', 'technique and tools', 'time needed for making object', 'where was it made', 'place and date of confection', 'artisan', 'state of the object' and 'compiler of the file'. The focus of the documents is on the physicality of the objects, and not so much the ethnographic evidence they provide. The description of the composition and brief notes on technique and material (whether bought or made in the household) reveal a preoccupation with work, rather than meaning. Whether an object is typical or not is mentioned too; sometimes the age of the object is also noted. 'Place' is the other category with which the files are concerned.

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<sup>3</sup> The Romanian title of this museum at that moment was 'Muzeul de Arte Populare'. I translate it throughout as 'Museum of Popular Arts'.

As I read through the documentation of the costumes included in the collection, I placed a dot on a map for each village where items were acquired. The costumes mapped out the Subcarpathian region of Romania, an area which, in Romanian museology, is known to be the richest in traditions and epitomises the material proof of national identity.<sup>4</sup> Alongside other objects, the costumes map out and construct 'Romanian culture'. The relation of an object to the precise place where it comes from matters less – what matters is what they build together. Once collected, writes Stewart (1984), the object's context is rendered unimportant, as the object is made part of the context of the collection. Unlike the souvenir, which is metonymically related to the time and place from which the object was brought, and whose unique context matters most, the collection is only significant as a collective group. Only together can the objects stand metaphorically for the 'context' in the Horniman stores. Together they construct a particular notion of authentic culture.

The objects in the collection are considered authentic and valuable, even if for many of them the fields requesting 'origin', 'artisan', 'date and place of the confection' are filled with one line or with the word 'unknown'. Despite this absence, the object is still attributed with all the other characteristics: the time needed for making the object, the usage, the frequency, the material employed, etc. This information maintains vague connections to the people who made and sold the objects, but is part of a well-rehearsed narrative of national folk art. Even though the files show that each object is different, the people who sold the objects and the communities they were part of are rendered similar, indexing one identity.

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<sup>4</sup> This emerged from conversations with ethnographers and museum specialists in Romania.

Just as the more than 600 objects in the collection construct a context and an idea of authenticity, so too does each of the costumes. A costume is part of the collection, and, at some level, reproduces the principle of the entire collection. In the Horniman collection, each complete costume is accessioned as a single object. However, each costume is actually composed of a number of objects which were rarely procured from the same person, or even from the same village (in fact, as mentioned, some of the objects brought into the assemblage are marked 'unknown source' or 'private collection'). Choices were made, not only at the point when the objects were collected and decisions made as to what is representative, but also at the moment when different items were put together to form a whole. And yet the assemblage hides its author, and maintains a narrative of 'folk', indeed of an exponent of *culture*. Authorship for the assemblage (and, in museum exhibitions, of authorship of folk objects) is concealed underneath an illusion of collective authorship.

### **Photography as object documentation**

Once access to the objects was gained, restrictions on mine and Magda Buchczyk's activities continued. We were not allowed to touch the objects, except when wearing white gloves, which meant restricting contact with the fabric of the costumes that is so integral to the making and wearing of these items. Interaction with the objects took place in a hall arranged for taking photographs, where we proceeded to photograph each object, following our training in museum photography. Images 1.6. to 1.10. show some of the objects that my research focused on, photographed so that I might have them with me on my fieldwork.



Museums are visually centred, with knowledge gained through looking and photographing. Through banning touch the objects are fetishized. Museum photography was meant to mediate not only my own relationship to the objects, but ultimately the relationship between the objects and the 'source communities'. In this case, 'taking the objects home' meant that I would travel to the villages where the objects were made, together with photographs of the folk objects at the Horniman. Conversely, on my return from the field, I would bring back the new 'context' that would accumulate alongside the photographs and fragments of information on the MIMSY database. In the logic of the museum stores, database and setting of the collection, further research was not intended to produce a change in the way the objects are placed or handled, but to accumulate another well-framed 'context' alongside the others. For what shaped my quest was not only the current anthropological practice or the different intentions of the people involved in the collaborative research project (including my own), but, almost unavoidably, the setting up of the Romanian collection, with all that contributed to its arrival there, and its current place within the Horniman museum as well.

This act alone reinforces the power located in the archive (and the museum). While it promises to reveal things about the objects for future generations, it tells us about how the outside world – 'the context' – is imagined inside the stores and on MIMSY. That the way folk objects evolve is dependent on the way they are kept and handled in the museum stores is ignored. In the archive, Steedman warns, 'you cannot be shocked at its exclusions, its emptiness, at what *is not* catalogued (...), nor that it tells of the gentry and not of the poor stockinger. Its condition of being deflects outrage: its quiet folders

and bundles is the neatest demonstration of how state power had operated, through ledgers and lists and indictments, and through what is missing from them' (Steedman 2001, 68). It is a similar situation with my experiences of the Horniman archives, but unlike the material accumulated in other kinds of archives, the documents in the museum are directly linked to the objects in the stores, not necessarily to the past.

According to the museum photography training we received, the object needs to be placed on a white, black or grey sheet of paper, so as to obtain a strong contrast between the contours of the object and the background. Later, in the editing process, the background is removed, and the object floats abstractly on MIMSY, as if the picture hadn't been taken in an actual place. The aim is a scientific photograph, not an aesthetic one. Whether pieces or full sets, whether tools or items of dress, the photographs reduced the objects to the same framing, in a rhetoric of equivalence which annuls the materiality of the object, allowing comparisons between objects completely removed from any contextual understanding (Edwards 2001). The object's materiality is further reduced, as it is rendered pure and ordered.

Museum photography has its roots in scientific photography, writes Edwards, where 'the moral value of photographs was premised precisely on the self-restraint and intellectual asceticism that removed subjective desires and human agency' (2001, 72). This explains the silence around the photographs, the elimination of context, and the absence of any commitment of the photographer. The assumption behind the photographic standards is that the photograph possesses complete transparency, and can be unproblematically



1.10 Headscarf, smock and skirt – parts of the Vrancea costume, which I traced back to the place where the objects were acquired.

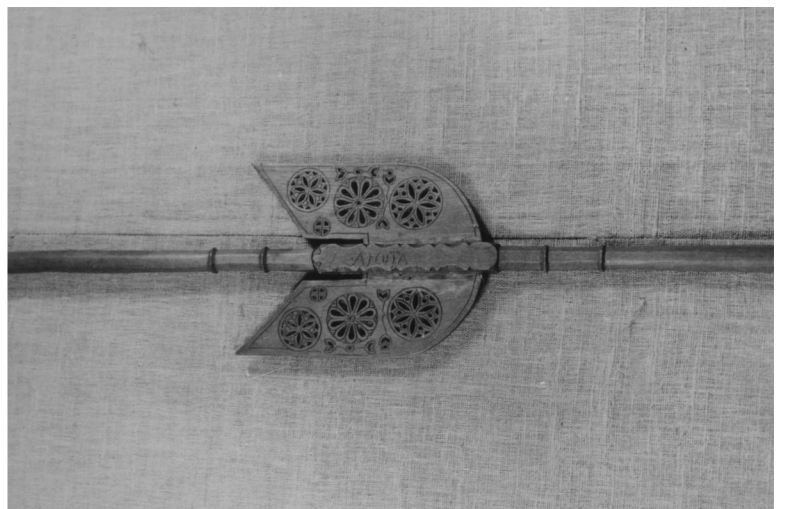


1.11 Photograph from the documentation file.



1.12 My photograph of the Horniman distaff. The inscription says 'lancu: 1909'. It is not the same as the object in the documentation.

1.13 Photograph from the documentation file.  
The inscription on the object reads 'Anuța'.





equated with the object – a slippage between object and its image. But, as Edwards notes, there is often a tension in museum photography between the scientific drive and the aesthetic, which, in this case, can also be explained through a tension between British and Romanian museological practices.

The 1957 collection is subjected to the regulations and discourse of the Horniman museum, but at the same time is special among the museum's collections, as shown above. The photographic material, including the museum photography, is indicative of this exceptional situation. According to Ken Teague, museum ethnographer at the Horniman, the distinct character of the Romanian collection is due to the particular relationship between Britain and the socialist countries during the Cold War, and precisely because of the agency that the governments of these countries had in the establishment of the collection and the display. Romania was not the only case. Exhibitions of Mongolian, Yugoslav and Albanian artefacts at the Horniman museum were accompanied by images provided by official government bodies, or by ethnographic museums in the respective countries (Teague 2004, 162).

To illustrate this, I turn to the archive of photography that accompanies the collection (image 1.11). Alongside the documentation, other files connected to the collection were kept in the office of the Deputy Keeper of Anthropology for the duration of our research project, lying in a state of limbo before they would be properly reintegrated into the museums' archives. One of the files contained items of museum photography from the Museum of Popular Art in Bucharest.

The objects in these photographs follow the rhetoric of museum photography in that the objects appear abstracted, against a white or grey

background. But the light does not flatten the object. At times it creates depths, and shadows are not always removed. Tools and folk smocks are made similar by the framing, but the composition is meant to reveal their aesthetic qualities, and not attract a scientific gaze. Photographed in black and white, the group of wooden carved mugs resembles art photography.

A closer look reveals that they are not pictures of the actual objects in the collection. For example, a photograph of a distaff from the area of Sibiu focuses on its highly decorated centre (image 1.12). The decoration is almost identical to the one in the Horniman collection. But one detail, the name inscribed on the objects, reveals that they are, in fact, different (image 1.13). The objects are positioned in a way that brings out their decorative motifs, augmented by the composition and light.

The photographs seem to extend the collection of Romanian objects rather than simply illustrate it. In this case, their role is not to archive and organize, but to create meanings and aesthetic regimes for the objects, bringing out their beauty and not their functions. The objects in the photographs and the ones in the stores are rendered identical – more of the same. What the photographs provided is a hint about how to understand the collection: as folk art. Popescu (2002, 17) comments on the obsessive attention of ethnographers and museum specialists to the decorative aspects of objects throughout the post-war period, and on the recurrence of a discourse around ‘beauty’.

In the case of the object photographs in the Horniman archive, meaning is generated by the institution that sent the objects and the photographs to London. Whether these meanings, somewhat at odds with the Horniman institution, are accepted and integrated is debatable. After all these images have

not been added to MIMSY – and neither has most of the documentation. In what follows, I turn to another set of photographs found in the Horniman archives, which refer to another attempt to make sense of the collection, 26 years after its arrival at the Horniman museum in 1956.

### **A Romanian gaze**

Following the arrival (in 1956) and display of the collection at the Horniman museum in 1957, the objects were exhibited once more in 1984. All the boxes (containing objects, documentation and photographs) that Magda and I opened in 2011 had been in storage since this date. While some of the boxes that we found contained material directly connected to the objects in stores, the file of photographs that I discuss here looked more like a box of miscellanea. Inside rested a variety of images of people in peasant dress, but also postcards and ‘folkloric’ greeting cards, articles from museum publications in Romania, images of house details, or of a Transylvanian church with its narrow spire rising from the misty hills. The file of photographs seems to be a collection of all things folk, as though the person compiling it had thrown in everything they could get their hands on, without the scientific arrangements that one is prone to find in museum stores (see Edwards and Hart 2004).

Discussions of photography and museums often revolve around how the indexical function of photography provides the link between the object and the ‘context’. Images of people in a certain landscape, using the object on display (or in storage) assert a metonymical relation between one object and a community, clearly defined and bounded (in space) through material culture. In the museum exhibition, photography extends the relationship between viewer

and viewed from looking at objects to looking at people – with all the political imbalance this represents. But as Pinney (2003) points out, there is a certain randomness to the details captured by photography which makes it open to reinvestigations and reinterpretations.

The photographs in the Horniman archive do not form a cohesive narrative. In fact, they bring out fragments of the past that sit at odds with each other, as well as with the narrative constructed by the collection of objects. In the same way that the photographs of objects bear no direct relationship to the objects in the Horniman collection, the ones of people are also unrelated to these artefacts. What they bring out is a particular gaze, an attention to particular aspects that situate the viewer in relation to the objects of the photograph.

Most of the images correspond to the photographic styles that dominated the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a Romantic nationalist gaze and, to a smaller extent, a sociological documentary gaze (Popescu 2002, 138). While some of the images, like 1.16, provide a gaze more characteristic of the indexical “colonial” schemata [that] sought stable identities in place from which [the subjects of the photograph] could not escape’ (Pinney 2003, 203), others show a more performative engagement with the camera, like we see in 1.15. Images such as 1.14 do not seek to establish knowledge, but to reify a sense of communion between a people and a specific topography – a territory – in a romantic manner that served the national project.

The same photographs, most likely taken in the interwar period by the photographers of the Sociological School run by Dimitrie Gusti, can be found in



other collections in Britain.<sup>5</sup> A letter sent in 1956 by the director of the Museum of Folk Art, Tancred Bănăţeanu, contained a list of photographs which would accompany the Romanian collection in London. The photographs 'represent aspects from the folk creation of RPR<sup>6</sup>, which would make whole the collection of folk art, offered to the museum in London'<sup>7</sup> and came from the Institute of Folklore.<sup>8</sup> This confirms the fact that images of aestheticized peasants were seen as part of the same class as the objects – which were not so much ethnographic as 'folk art'. This is hinted at in the language used by Bănăţeanu: the photographs were going to be used not in lieu of explanations or ethnographic research, but 'to make the collection whole'. In the logic of Romanian diplomacy at that time, both the objects and the photographs were illustrations of Romanian patrimony, and the images acted as cultural currency. The relation between images and objects also shows that any investigative contact with the villages had stopped after the interwar period, when all the photographs were produced.

But there is another paradox at work. After World War Two, images of the peasantry and the countryside, and of people performing at folklore festivals wearing folk dress, were increasingly present in the Romanian mass media (see the following chapters). Nevertheless, the Horniman file of photographs for the most part contains reproductions of interwar material. In spite of all the transformations that the Romanian countryside was going

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<sup>5</sup> Similar images are present in the Lloyd collection in Goldsmiths Library Special Collections. According to Buchczyk they are also found in the archives of the Folklore Institute in Bucharest.

<sup>6</sup> Republica Populară România – the Romanian People's Republic.

<sup>7</sup> National Archives, IRRCS 1774, vol. 359, doc 89. Many thanks to Magda Buchczyk finding this document and sharing it with me.

<sup>8</sup> All the photographs were prepared at the 'Decorativa' centre (state company), which also had its own collection. The limited space of this chapter does not allow for elaborating on this aspect. For the purpose of this chapter, there is no distinction between the two sources of photographs.

through, the photographs of peasants wearing or using folk objects remained ahistorical. These omissions suggest that the museum specialists with whom the Horniman were in contact might not have accepted the narrative of peasantry and folk art pushed by the Party as a valuable one, and also that research endeavours in the countryside ended after World War Two.

### **1984 – Revisiting for the first time**

The images gathered in the Horniman file give no indication as to who their author is, when they were taken or even how they got there. A series of letters and travel diaries by the then head of the Horniman museum, David Boston, and the Assistant Keeper of European Ethnography, Marion Wood, speak about their contacts with Romanian institutions and of short trips to Romania before the 1984 exhibition. The letters give an indication that some of the visual material was, possibly, sent over by Romanian ethnographers and museum specialists, while others would have been collected by the two British ethnographers. The purpose was to document the collection, and to provide visual material for a booklet with information on the 1984 exhibition. Connections were established once more between the Horniman and the Romanian museum where the collection initially originated.

By now, however, that museum had changed its premises and name once more: it had merged with the Village Museum, and formed ‘Muzeul Satului și de Artă Populară’ (‘The Village and Popular Art Museum’). The translation of the name is important and misleading. In the files that came with the objects in 1956 ‘Muzeul de Artă Populară al Republicii Socialiste România’ is translated as ‘The R.P.R Museum of Peasant Art’. But in his correspondence, Boston calls it

‘The Museum of Folk Art’, and calls the new museum institution by the same name; the exhibition that opened in 1984 was also called ‘Folk Art of Romania’.

The file of photographs that I have been discussing in this chapter is an outcome of the first re-contextualization of the Horniman collection, which took place in view of the 1984 exhibition. But, as we have seen, some of the material and photographs there had arrived in 1957. With only a few exceptions it is impossible to know in which order the photographs arrived, because most of the photographic material was taken before World War Two.

As it turned out, the photographs were not the only outcome of this first reconsideration of the collection. Michael Hitchcock had just been appointed Assistant Keeper of Anthropology at the Horniman museum, and was put in charge of taking the exhibition down in 1984. But at that moment, he realized the collection had not yet been accessioned as part of the Horniman museum. Together with another colleague, Georgina Russell, he proceeded to give numbers to the objects and attach labels to them. Even though the accessioning took place in 1984, as the exhibition was coming down, the labels are marked with the year of the first exhibition in 1957, after the arrival of the objects in 1956.<sup>9</sup> According to Hitchcock, the Horniman did not have the resources and staff for a long time to incorporate the Romanian collection, and it was only after the first revisiting and re-exhibiting that the collection was labelled and stored in proper conditions, in the boxes that Magda and I would open twenty-eight years later. The process was, from Hitchcock’s perspective, one of ‘rescuing the collection’, but also one of recuperating the past.

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<sup>9</sup> See Buchczyk for an analysis of the 1957 exhibition and arrival of objects. Here I am only concerned with aspects from the preparation for the 1984 exhibition. I am not interested in the exhibition discourse, but only in the first visit of ‘re-contextualization’, which left behind boxes of miscellanea about folk art in Romania.

The separate journeys of Boston and Wood, both of which took place in 1981, lasted for over a week, and were taken in preparation for the 1984 exhibition. Boston's intention was, initially, to visit the villages where the objects came from, but their diaries confirm that the visits were almost exclusively restricted to museums (with the exception of one village in Maramureş). As they travelled from one museum to another, they took note of any 'living traditions' in their diaries, such as people ploughing with oxen, or a woman spinning wool on the station platform. Neither these, nor any other details of everyday life were photographed. The two gathered visual material only from the museums they visited: the Ethnographic Museum of Banat, the Ethnographic Museum of Transylvania, the Ethnographic Museum of Sighet, and The Village and Popular Art Museum in Bucharest.

It could be argued that the political system in Romania at that time played a part in limiting the journeys of the two. But I suggest that it was the ethnographic and museological practice in Romania that led Boston and Wood away from the villages they intended to visit initially. In the 1980s valuable material culture was thought to be absent from the modernized country, and to be present only in the museum in the form of 'folk art' (at that time many ethnographic museums were opening throughout the country). But from these visits, unexpected images were brought back to London; these would not make it into the exhibition catalogue.

The portrait of the man standing tall (image 1.17) was brought back from the Ethnographic Museum of Banat. The image is strikingly different from the interwar examples (1.15 and 1.16). It appears to have been taken in a photo



1.14 The bucolic-Romantic landscape.



1.15



1.16

Images received at the Horniman together with the 1957 Romanian collection.





1.17 Verso: Coste Alexandru, 1914



1.18 Verso: folk dress from Mocirla.



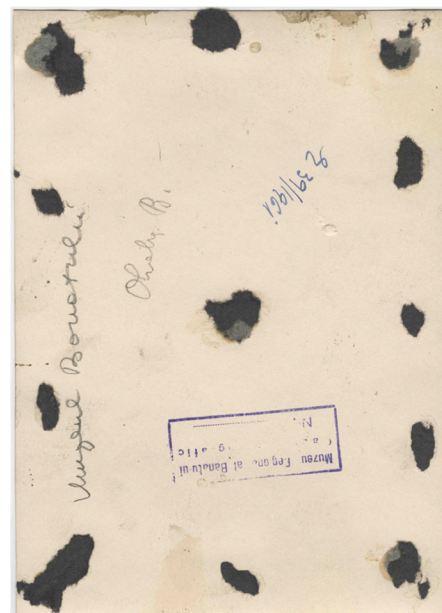
1.19



1.20 Verso: the area of Ceica.



1.21



1.22. Verso of 1.21





1.23 Photo most likely acquired by one of the Horniman anthropologists travelling to Romania in the 1980s.



1.24 Image used on the cover of the 1957 Romanian exhibition booklet.

studio. There is no attempt to naturalize the background: the man is looking straight ahead, with a frozen upright posture and serious face. Such an image subverts the museological discourse that identifies objects as 'peasant', supported by the rural or scientific imagery. It reveals a different setting for what is called 'folk dress': a photographic studio that shows little in the way of how 'tradition' is usually imagined. On the reverse of the photograph, we find the name of the person photographed hand written in pencil, Coste Alexandru, the year, 1914 and the village, Mocirla, now in western Romania, but at that time part of Austro-Hungary. Could it be that the young man had had his picture taken before he went to fight in the Great War, so that his family had an image and memory of him?

This photograph has little in common with the images that illustrated the exhibitions in 1956 and 1984 (images 1.14 and 1.23). For the purpose of the folk collection, the biography of individuals is unimportant. In fact other similar studio photographs do not record the name of the person on the back. What they record is the village, with a note: 'traditional dress from the village Mocirla'. Their purpose is to give an example of peasant dress. These images seem to have migrated from the private sphere to the archive and museum where our gaze should fix on not the person in the picture, but the clothes they wear.

Other similar images, some taken in studios, others outside, only have the name of the village on the back, or a brief note in Romanian: 'bărbat cu suman, Sîrbești' (man in felt coat from Sîrbești) or 'Carașova, Banat'. Even if the museological intention is clear (to illustrate traditional costumes 'in situ') the content as well as the materiality of the image subverts this intention. Many of



the subjects of these photographs indicate agency, through their expressions of boredom or discomfort (images 1.18 and 1.18). Although they are photographed in a village, the bodies are not confined to a natural setting. Instead, we have the profile of a young girl against what seems to be the wall of a house, playing the role of a proud peasant woman with her hand on her hip, but wearing white town shoes.

The box, therefore, contains a variety of visual regimes – from images that fix their subjects in time and place, to ones that construct an idealized landscape, to ones where the agency of the subjects is strikingly visible. These visual regimes sit at odds with the indexicality suggested by the objects in the collection, which link and fix objects with people and place. The fact that some of these images hint at a historical understanding of the collection is accidental (clearly the collector was interested in typologies of dress, not in the history of the peasantry). Nevertheless, for the researcher these accidents are the benefit of visual methodologies.

Museum practice and discourse of Romania in the 1980s separated those objects deemed folk art from the social realities of the countryside, as the many catalogues of folk art published in that period testify.<sup>10</sup> The country had been modernized, the former peasants had either been turned into agricultural workers or migrated to urban centres, and by the 1970s traditional dress was scarcely worn in villages. Ethnofolkloric maps, based on material collected before World War Two (which I will return to in subsequent chapters) ascribed each region a specific type of dress, a model that became ossified. From the

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<sup>10</sup> To document the Romanian collection at the Horniman, the library of the museum holds a great number of catalogues, books and articles. Bănăţeanu's *The ornament of the Rumanian folk art* (1963) or Formagiu's *Portul Popular din România* (1974) are only two examples.

webpage describing the history of the Village Museum, we find out that in the 1970s, much research was dedicated to classifying and understanding the objects according to: 'history, geography, artistic, authenticity and representative capacity'.<sup>11</sup> Presented with the photographs discussed here, the folklore specialists with whom I spoke were puzzled; they remarked only that the clothes were not typical of a particular region.

Other images and material in the 1984 photography box reinforce the strong links with Romanian institutions, as the Horniman ethnographers progressed on their journeys from one museum to another, making it impossible to construct a singular (monologic) discourse around peasantry in Romania; they reveal, even if by absence, the distance between folk art and peasant-workers.

As I have shown, the visual material gathered in this box defies the boundaries of ethnographic photography, while the absence of a clear narrative allows the voices of the photographs' subjects to come through. The social lives of these images are revealed through their content and their materiality, which allows them to 'move in and out of the ethnographic meaning, within a more fluid or expansive visual economy' (Morton and Edwards 2009, 6). Wood and Boston leave the story of the re-contextualization unfinished. The images that the British museum anthropologists brought or received from Romania provide disparate information about folk art, the peasantry or of their visit throughout the country; this might be the reason why the file of photos resembles a box of memorabilia more than a scientific documentation.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.muzeul-satului.ro/muzeul>, accessed 30.08.2014.

The absence of any visual material of the 1980s testifies to the fact that the two British anthropologists were diverted from their purpose. On the other hand, the startling image of a young man dressed in a peasant coat, taken on the verge of World War One in an area soon to become disputed territory breaks any attempt at a monologic discourse around folk dress. These images never made it into the exhibition catalogue, but I want to suggest that the box of photographs works as a Bakhtinian threshold: it presents us with unfinalized narratives and fragments of the voices of the subjects photographed, of the photographers and of the hands through which these images passed before they were placed there.

### **An enclave of 'folk art'**

In the report on his journey through Romania, David Boston stresses the successful connections made with Romanian museums, and he declares himself more than happy with the assistance he received from the Romanian side with the information and the mounting of the exhibition. The villages, though, were never revisited, and the collection was not re-interpreted through the looking-glass of British anthropology of the 1980s. However, this does not mean that the Horniman director was completely powerless in this relationship. For instance, the 1984 exhibition is focused around work and technique, presenting elements that would have been less typical for a display in Romania, such as fishing nets, or images of people working.

Ken Teague's rich account of his experience collecting objects in Mongolia also stresses his lack of control over which objects (and the photographs illustrating them) constituted the collection, and this seems

characteristic of the relationships between the Horniman and socialist countries. But, despite political pressures which come through from Boston's correspondence, it is the relationship with the Romanian specialists (not necessarily the authoritarian state institutions) that plays a central part in the revisiting and re-exhibiting the Romanian collection at the Horniman in 1984.

Michael Hitchcock, the person responsible for taking down the 1984 exhibition, was intrigued by the collection and paid a visit to Romania in 1987. His trip revealed to him some of the harsh realities of that era: empty shops, an atmosphere of surveillance, towns and villages being knocked down in order to be 'systematized'. But, to his surprise, the museum specialists he met did not support the political system and were resentful that they were forced to applaud it through their participation in grand folklore festivities. They thought Ceaușescu used folklore for propaganda, and pushed a discriminatory anti-minorities politics.<sup>12</sup> They welcomed him, and Michael Hitchcock spoke warmly to me about their sincere intentions to understand the folk objects they dealt with. Like his predecessors, he was taken to the Ethnographic Museum of Transylvania and the Ethnographic Museum of Banat. Unlike Boston and Wood, he visited more villages and spent a longer time visiting the museums, assisted by a specialist from the Museum of Popular Art in Bucharest. But all the information about the objects came from the museum, from their specialists and from the books published by these museums, many of which he brought back to the Horniman.

The villages he saw were not precisely the ones that appeared in the documents, and the purpose of the visits was not to reconnect with the families

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<sup>12</sup> Also remarked on by Teague (2004, 158).

whose objects were at the Horniman. Rather, the visits to the villages were 'to give an example' of what was in the museum, and, in some cases, to meet with craftspeople. Hitchcock tells me that while he walked about these villages with the Romanian ethnographers, he also found out about the dreadful politics of 1980s, such as the destruction of churches, but also about people's sorrow, their attempts to emigrate or even commit suicide. When he sat down with his Romanian colleagues for dinner in town, however, the conversation turned to culture and folk art. Once more, it seemed, the intention of the British anthropologist to connect to the villages where the objects in the collection emerged from has been bypassed. But while the villages were not places of research (rather of 'examples'), they were places where the ethnographers felt free to exercise their political resistance, by letting the foreign anthropologist in on the terrible consequences of Ceaușescu's politics.

Mrs Netcu, the ethnographer who came on a research visit to the Horniman in 2011, was from the generation of museum specialists that Michael Hitchcock met back in 1987. As her assistant in the stores, I noticed she described the clothes as objects of art, talking about chromatics, composition, material and technique. But she also talked about the intimate process of making them, and about the lives of the women she had met in the villages where she was collecting objects. She too had stories of the villages in the 1980s, where she once saw people dig up the graves of their parents to carry their remains from a graveyard that was going to be 'systematized', and she described the sorrowful state of those people. The clothes we were handling together elicited these narratives from her, but the discipline of folk art in

Romania would not accommodate them: such stories are never part of the material published by these ethnographic museums.<sup>13</sup>

In 1984, the Romanian collection at the Horniman seems to have been something like an enclave where contemporary Romanian museology and ethnography could be found in action. The presence of only particular photographs from the interwar period taken by members of the Bucharest Sociological School indicates that after World War Two the anthropological or sociological enquiry split from the museological practice, which focused on folk art alone.

Despite political pressures, it would be a mistake to think that the silence surrounding the social realities in Romania was only an outcome of censorship or of a specific Romanian museological practice. From a British, west European perspective, Romania was on the other side of the Iron Curtain, and was a political enemy. Maybe for Boston and Wood, this exhibition was a way to talk about something other than Cold War politics, such as the skills and crafts of people. And, despite the omissions and ideologies that come into play when these folk objects are displayed and stored, perhaps they also succeed in painting a dignified image of Romania and of the countryside.

## **Conclusion**

In Steedman's interpretation of Derrida's *Archive Fever*, the death drive of being in the archive, or of possessing it, is determined by a search for

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<sup>13</sup> The Peasant Museum is an exception that I do not discuss here. For a comprehensive ethnography of the Museum of Popular Art/The Peasant Museum, see Nicolescu 2014. Censorship played, perhaps, an important part in why such stories such as Mrs Netcu's were not part of how objects were narrated, but this is not the only factor that influenced the development of museological discipline.

beginnings, for the place or the event that started everything. In fact ‘nothing starts in the archive’, she warns, ‘nothing ever, at all, though things certainly end up there. You find nothing in the archive but stories caught half way through: the middle of things; discontinuities’ (Steedman 2001, 45). This certainly proved to be true of the material in the Horniman collection. Because this is an ethnographic museum, the narrative of the object collection suggests that the beginning is somewhere else: in the villages. The suggestion is that the stores host a mere representation of a people, and that indeed, the objects simply ended up there. Nevertheless, the beginning of my own research project was quite literally in the museum, and this beginning was *in medias res*, if anything. Not only was I picking up the biographies of these objects long after they had been made and collected, but it seemed also that I was not the first one to revisit. It was there that my project and my search was framed, together with notions of authenticity and of what kind of narrative I should bring back. Moreover, the objects turned out to be concrete things, not just representations, and the stores a real ‘context’, and not just a state of limbo.

Teague discusses at length the material from socialist countries stored and displayed at the Horniman throughout the Cold War. His conclusion was that although some of the Horniman collections are indeed linked to colonial practices, objects from socialist countries were never displayed as a primitive ‘other’, but as a powerful other. At a time when British ethnographic museums were being criticized for legitimating an imperialist ideology, Teague tried to show that the Horniman is not guilty of such a thing, not as far as the collections from socialist countries were concerned (2004, 164). His account underlines the power of the socialist governments, which would not allow the British

ethnographer much room for manoeuvre in the country of origin. I have shown that in the case of the Romanian collection the collaboration with the museum specialists was close, and I argue that it allowed these Romanian specialists a way to express their dissent with regards to state politics, even if in a discreet, almost invisible way. This is why I consider the collection as an enclave where Romanian museum practice has influenced the place that these objects occupy at the Horniman. It has also enabled contact for the Romanian specialists with their British peers.

Today, the Horniman objects remain not fully integrated into the rest of the museum collection, a large bundle of things swallowed whole by the museum. They continue to bear the mark imprinted on them by the Romanian Museum of Popular Arts and the national ideology to which folklore has been subjected in Romania. The history of the collection was recuperated in 1984, when the objects received their labels 'as they should have in 1957', to use Michael Hitchcock's words. This history continues to be relevant as anthropological and museological disciplines from Britain and Romania continue to meet each time the collection is 'reawakened' for yet another exhibition. The collection continues to be a political and diplomatic stake.<sup>14</sup>

It is clear by now that there is not just one story that can be told about the objects in the Horniman, and that attempting to retrieve the beginning of their biographies is futile. In fact Steedman too reminds us that the object we look for in the archive is irretrievable: it changed as the search for it began. The objects at the Horniman are entangled in many threads: they are, firstly, a product of the people who made them and used them until they were collected.

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<sup>14</sup> See concluding chapter for references to the 2014 exhibition.



They are the product of the setting they are in, the museum, with its history of colonialism and post-colonialism, and of the current projects to revisit sites, partly to redeem the initial colonial encounter, and partly to redeem the very establishment of the ethnographic museum itself. This collection is also the product of the political division of Europe, of the Cold War, of the Thaw, and of a meeting between Romanian and British museum practices. The museum today suggests that the beginning, the authenticity and liveliness of the objects lies in the village. But the fragmentary narratives coming from the file of photographs suggest otherwise.

I started the project of re-contextualization by choosing two costumes and learning about them from the existing material at the Horniman. The first step – the first ‘context’ in which the objects were enmeshed – was the archive. The journey back would have involved contacting the institution that sent the objects to Britain. But the next step was an impossible one: none of the files which document the Horniman collection could be found in Romania. It seems that the documentation received in 1957 from the Museum of Popular Art burned in a fire that destroyed many of the museum’s archives and objects too. Such accidents were due to the improper storage that the museum had to suffer after its initial building became the Museum of Communism in 1953. These stories are also part of the ethnographers’ memory of resistance that helped to justify the reclaiming of that building for the Museum of Popular Art, now called ‘The Peasant Museum’.<sup>15</sup> In this all too complex entanglement of threads and memories, the original documents written in Romanian when the objects at the Horniman were collected are nowhere to be found. When I got to Romania,

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<sup>15</sup> See Nicolescu 2014, and the Introduction chapter.

I headed straight to the villages, by definition the place of inception, and therefore 'the real context' of the folk objects.

# Chapter Two

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## Bringing It All Back Home

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My research into the Romanian collection at the Horniman (which was framed at the intersection between different intentionalities and agencies, institutional and disciplinary practices) directed me towards the villages where some of the objects had been collected. My research had two aims: firstly, I was to reconnect some of the objects to the families of their former owners, thus bringing to the surface some of their local histories and social entanglements, which had been so clearly omitted from the documentation at the museum. Secondly, I was to see what had happened *in situ* to the counterparts of the folk objects in the stores; in other words, I was to discover what the social life of the objects would have been, if they had not been collected by the museum. But was this reconnection to the moment and place when the objects were ‘extracted’ from the site possible?

To suggest so meant viewing objects’ path to the Horniman as an accident (which, as we have seen, is part of the ideology of museum collections), rather than as an outcome of specific structures which set the scene for such biographies of objects considered ‘folk’. While the research project that I had entered into sought to bring out the transformations in the way people relate to material culture, the setting in which the objects found themselves at the Horniman presumed a close connection between objects, place and people – therefore suggesting that the disconnection had never taken place.

The curators from the Horniman who had set off on this journey in 1984 and 1987 (see Chapter One), ended up in the ethnographic museums of Romania,

where, it seemed, they could learn more about folk objects than they could from villages. So what could a further revisiting of the villages reveal this time? In the logic of the collection at the Horniman, the villages were the site of continued crafts, which had been transmitted from one generation to the next. Conversations with the Keeper of Anthropology at the Horniman suggested that more than one village should be visited, until evidence of this connection between people and objects was revealed. But what about the silences, the absence or irrelevance of these items in the villages, which, it seemed to me, had pushed the Horniman curators towards the Romanian ethnographic museums as places where they could learn about the objects, in 1984?

The different ways in which the objects at the Horniman were framed, through Romanian and British, traditional or renewed ethnographic practices, entailed different relationships to the field site. Through the lenses of the re-contextualization project materiality was expected to mend moments of rupture in the history of the objects and of the villages: the displacement of the objects from their place of birth at a time (the mid 1950s) that coincided with dramatic changes to the countryside. But what I found was that, just as the archive and stores failed to offer a beginning, but brought to light fragments and discontinuities, so too was the 'journey back' impossible to achieve. 'Returns are always to a place that has moved on', Massey tells us (2005, 140). While it may seem coherent and unchanging, a place is constituted through multiple historical trajectories.

This chapter moves to the place ethnographic museums identify as the context of the folk artefacts – the village. The perception of the village as the locus of 'culture' (continuities in crafts and memories of traditions, in this case)

is common to an *anthropology of the dwelling*, in Clifford's words (1997), which defines places of research as stable and bounded entities. Clifford argued that through this practice, 'what is elided is the wider global world of intercultural import-export in which the ethnographic encounter is always already enmeshed' (1997, 100). He acknowledged that this limiting practice was changing at the time of his writing. But for me, the revisiting of the places where Horniman objects had been collected was framed by the logic of the collection (which I discussed in Chapter One), that had been put together by an ethnographic practice which regarded villages as distinct, culturally bounded, and fixed categories.

I want to show in this chapter that even the fundamental categories that define the place of folk objects – such as 'the village' or 'the house' – are fluid categories, and that the relationship between 'place' and 'culture' (here folklore) is problematic. I also want to suggest a dialogic perspective on space, constructed by the interplay between a multitude of voices and perspectives; the fixity of place, then, depends 'upon the strength of competing centripetal (monological) and centrifugal (dialogical) forces' (Holloway and Keale 2000, 82). I think of place through Hirsch's notion of 'landscape', which accounts for both the experience of lived space, and that of imagined, 'written', performed space. Landscape, in his view is a process that encapsulates an ideal image of life (representation), and a foreground of concrete actuality of everyday life, a relationship that is found cross-culturally (Hirsch 1995, 3). The two related poles to the notion of landscape – foreground actuality and background potentiality – can be found in the writings of the folklorists, as well as in the way local people talk about the place they inhabit. A series of related concepts used in thinking

about landscape – place and space, inside and outside, image and representation – can also be thought of in terms of the lived experience in the foreground, and the potentiality in the background. Contrary to the way place is imagined through the setting of the Romanian collection at the Horniman, the villages where I carried out most of my fieldwork, are not necessarily places where communities are engaged in de-alienated crafts that can be collected by ethnographic museums. Rather, not unlike the museum itself, it is also a place of representation and performance (see Chapters Three and Four).

My visit to the village of Vrâncioaia, in the region of Vrancea, revealed that there was no obvious home for the Horniman objects to return to, as the place and the people have moved on. But as I discovered, ‘folklore’ was by no means an irrelevant category, and ethnographic and folkloric practices have contributed to local understandings of place. In the first part of the chapter I want to unsettle conceptions of the rural as a static place of origin for the Horniman objects. I offer a view of the place as it was understood and practised by some of the people who lived there, at the moment of my fieldwork. Movement into and more often out of the village was one of the aspects that determined these local framings of space, as was kinship and memory.<sup>39</sup> Folk objects occupy a small part of this ‘context’, mostly by evoking place positively in ‘the days of lore’, as it was remembered by some of the people with whom I spoke.

In the second part of the chapter I discuss how Vrancea has been ‘written’ and discussed, what kind of landscape these writings depict, and where folklore, traditions, material culture, rural space and culture feature. These renditions have had an influence on museum representations, but also further afield, in the

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<sup>39</sup> As similarly argued by Pine (2007)

sphere of high culture and education. Ethnographers' depictions of place are often relevant in relation to the nation, to current politics and an idea of modernity. Even when not present explicitly, the 'foreground' in these texts is the urban space, the presence of mechanization and industrialization, and the promise (or rejection) of modernity offered by capitalism or communism. Meanwhile, an ideal rural space sits as the counterpart of the lived reality identified as 'modern' (Williams 1972). In the following chapters I show how these versions of the Vrancean landscape are actively used by the locals in certain situations, even if these renditions miss out some of the local processes of making place.

### **The boundaries of Vrancea**

The three villages where the Vrancean objects at the Horniman were collected, Muncei, Vrâncioaia and Poiana, are part of the same *comună*<sup>40</sup> with its political centre in Vrâncioaia. The 'Vrancean costume' at the Horniman museum is made up of pieces from all these villages, and has been catalogued as one object.

The current population in the *comună* of Vrâncioaia is about 2500, and has been in decline since the 1970s. With the industrialization of the country, the village saw people slowly moving to Focșani, the nearest town, or to other villages closer to that town. Migration on a large scale started in the 1990s, and peaked around the year 2000.<sup>41</sup> The bus station in Focșani, where I often found

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<sup>40</sup> A local form politico-geographical administration comprising of a few villages. One of the villages acts as the centre of the *comună* and hosts the village hall.

<sup>41</sup> I was not able to find data specifically for the village, but the situation in the county of Vrancea in 2011 was that, out of a total of 340,310, c. 3500 people lived abroad, some for short periods, others long-term migrants. The percentage is likely to be higher in the countryside, where practically every household had very close kin working abroad. Direcția Județeană de Statistică – Vrancea; available at <http://www.vrancea.insse.ro/main.php>, accessed on 01.10.2013.

myself, is a place where migrants from the Vrancean villages meet and catch up, and give each other tips or updates on the work situation in their respective places of migration, mostly in Italy.

The county of Vrancea is divided geographically into two parts: the plain to the east, and then the mountainous region known as Vrancea proper to the west. More than two thirds of the county's population lives in rural areas. One enters the mountainous part on the main road from Focșani; the way to Vrâncioaia turns onto a narrower road continuing along the valley, alongside abrupt cliffs where rocks occasionally fall into the middle of the road. The point of the road called the *grumaz* (neck) marks the entrance into the more mountainous Vrancea. Villages and hamlets are spread throughout the entire area, some more accessible from outside than others, although everyone acknowledges that today access to and from Vrancea county is better than it has ever been. The local people have a good knowledge of all the other villages as walking from one place to another or to the seasonal *târg*<sup>42</sup> is a necessity.

Vrâncioaia is situated on the left bank of the river Văsui, and until 1937 was itself also called Văsui. The central part of the village is *adunat* (houses built close to one another), and part of it is *răsfirat*, spread onto the hills, away from the main road. Vrâncioaia spills over into the next village, Muncei, and across the hills into yet other villages (Nistorești, Spinești and Păulești). The geography of the area and the historical developments are such that people have close ties only with particular villages. The political delimitations of the *comună* often fail to account for these connections, and superimpose a state mapping on the area.

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<sup>42</sup> Markets held on certain occasions (monthly or every other month) where people buy and sell livestock or household goods.



For example, this *comună* includes the village of Poiana, some 4 km away from Vrâncioaia. Although close when following the road, Poiana and Vrâncioaia do not share the same landscape and geographical units. While Vrâncioaia looks up onto the hills that offer grazing for their sheep and cattle, Poiana looks down onto the valley, where the inhabitants grow crops on what fertile land is available. Unlike that in Vrâncioaia, the land in Poiana was collectivized during the 1950s. Indeed, the inhabitants of the two villages do not consider themselves to be part of the same unit. Meanwhile, the Vrancean costume in the Horniman stores merges the two places into one unit.

### **Târle<sup>43</sup> – the huts on the hills**

Landscape is a cultural process (Hirsch 1995), but discerning whether our perception of place is constituted by cultural and social structures, or is constitutive of these structures is impossible: indeed ‘the dialectic of perception and place (and of both with meaning) is as intricate as it is profound, and it is never-ending’ (Casey 1996, 19). Casey argues that to any ‘corporeal intentionality’ of the person, there corresponds an ‘operative intentionality’ of the place, that elicits and responds to the corporeal intentionality (1996, 22). Similarly, Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* explains the relationship between body and place, and how they constitute each other reciprocally. ‘Through habit and inhabiting, each person builds up a practical mastery of the fundamental schemes of their culture’ (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995).

In Vrâncioaia, the most evident example of this interaction with the landscape are the *târle*, huts built on the family’s grazing land. They are usually

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<sup>43</sup> târlă (sg.); târle (pl.) – a hut or fold

simple constructions and their character seems prone to constant adjustment, in opposition to the houses in the village. In the summer the villagers move *en masse* to their huts, and only occasionally visit the proper house in the village (which may be left in the care of one person in the family). The hills are used throughout the summer for grazing and making haystacks for the winter, for growing small patches of vegetables and sometimes for orchards. Historically, some of the communities in Vrancea developed from *târle* into hamlets and then into fully fledged villages, like Vrâncioaia.<sup>44</sup>

Geography means that it is impossible to have *târle* on all of the hills, and so some of the villages do indeed form separate entities, according to how the



2.1 The *târle* of Vrâncioaia and neighbouring villages.

landscape lends itself to usage. Footpaths through the grazing hills dotted with *târle* shorten the distance between villages; while travelling on the modern road, they appear distant. In the management and use of space, therefore, we see a

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<sup>44</sup> Stahl (1936) discusses the temporary character of *târle*, and remarked on how many of the Vrancean villages grew out of these small houses, as do historians (Iliescu, 2006).

tension between the modern, official understanding and the way geography is understood locally.

When people talked about the good days that the village had seen, they referred not only to the village itself, but to the area of *târle* too. During socialism these areas were not collectivized; *târle* were places away from the state institutions where the hierarchies between state employees and peasants mattered less, and the structures of kinship, household and land prevailed. Kinship and landscape are mutually implicated here (Pine 1996).

These ways of engaging with space and building in the environment complicate the notion of 'village community'. Rather than taking the village as the unit of analysis, Pine (1996) takes the house as the locus of kinship, economy and ritual, and the place around which social relationships are created: 'While house membership and relations between houses form the fabric of intra-village social organization, the house also exists in relation to, and often in opposition to, extra-village institutions, particularly those of the state and the Catholic church' (1996, 445). Her account of the Polish Górale house brings to light divisions within the house and household space, between a 'dark room' – the place of labour and day-to-day life, and a 'white room' – the place of 'formality, ritual and time-out-of-time' (1996, 447). These divisions are maintained when the Górale built more modern, multi-storied houses, with more possessions on display, where family life continued to unfold around 'the dark room' and 'the white room'.

This division between a 'good room' and a dark space is common to most of the Romanian countryside, and it applies to the houses in Vrâncioaia as well, where strict rules of purity must be observed in one, while the process of

purification and labour take place in the 'dark room' or in other parts of the household.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the objects that ended up in ethnographic museums, as 'folk' formed part of this 'good room' – or, as it is called in Vrancea, 'the large room'. The Romanian museological practice showed little interest in the perishable, mundane everyday room. If anywhere, the good room is the place where the objects at the Horniman have departed from, and where their counterparts would have to be sought. But this space cannot be understood on its own, and must be seen through comparison with other spaces – this is indeed the greatest shortcoming of museological practices in Romanian ethnographic museums, which focus on the celebratory side of village culture (Popescu 2002).

Bourdieu's Berber house with its 'symmetrical and inverse spaces' which are hierarchized cannot find its equivalent in Vrancea, although there is a general association of the household, primarily the *large room*, with women. More appropriate is Kligman's discussion of ritual, in which women are associated with life-cycle rituals (1988, 71), and whose products of labour would, in the past, fill and decorate what she calls the 'show' room with objects now found in ethnographic museums. But in the 1980s, when she conducted research in Maramureş, things were changing:

New, shiny furniture is purchased gradually and fills [the 'show' room]. Wall rugs hug the walls, revealing the newest patterns – *la modă*, the mode. The colours have changed from subtle, natural hues to bright, shocking tones. All this reflects an ongoing reconstruction of status values and presentation of self. It is as if everyone must announce their modernity. Increasingly, identity seems to be defined dramatically through objects (Kligman 1988, 55).

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<sup>45</sup> Strict rules of purity, also to do with the management of space, are observed by the Hungarian Rom of Harangos (Stewart 1997).

An account of the changes that were taking place in the *large room* is refreshing, and her argument is that, in the absence of land possession (the land of Ieudeni had been collectivized), the people turned to commodities to confirm their status. But the richness of the *large room* of the past (as known from ethnographic museums) clearly shows the great investment of energy in material culture arranged in this space. And such changes to the *good rooms* (or *large rooms*) in the countryside were taking place everywhere, including in Vrâncioaia (where land had not been collectivized).

But I want to depart from the *large room* for now, and return to the area of the *târle*, to underline the fact that it constitutes an altogether separate landscape that entails a different arrangement of social relations. The huts themselves contain only the necessary things to live and work there, unlike the proper houses in the village, which also have the 'good room', the proper place for reproducing kinship through ritual (Pine 1996). When in the village proper, people talk about their *târlă* as a place of hard work, but it is also truly enjoyed and idealized, especially by the elderly. People described them to me as beautiful places high on the hills 'where the cuckoo sings'. I was told that one time an old couple moved to their *târlă* altogether, where they lived in just one room because they preferred that life, and only resettled to the village when one of them needed medical care.

It is significant that these inhabited hills are now increasingly being thought of as dangerous. Most of the villagers fear attacks by wild animals, which are said to be invading their gardens. They fear that 'nature is taking over again' in Vrâncioaia, in the absence of a younger generation to reinforce clear boundaries between the wilderness and the village.

## **A place called home**

Massey criticises static perspectives around the notion of 'home', seen as the place of nostalgia, the retreat from 'time-space'. According to her, nostalgia and place have constituted the articulation of the feminine space. 'Woman stands as metaphor for Nature (in another characteristic dualism), for what had been lost (left behind) and that place called home is frequently personified by, and partakes of the same characteristics as those assigned to Woman/Mother/lover.' (Massey 1994, 10). This can apply to the conceptualization of folk objects, their being made by women in a much more organic relationship to nature than we, in the 'modern world', can understand: everything from working the fabrics to sewing the pattern is meant to reflect intimate relationships with nature. It evokes a time impossible to recover in modernity, when the world was made up of 'localities' rather than interrelated spaces. Massey argues that the local is associated with the feminine also because it is considered that women have more local lives than men. 'To bring something home' is to evoke its essence, the truth about it (which is located in the place where it all begins). As for the folk objects in the Horniman collection, this 'home' would turn out to be elusive.

As I arrived in Vrâncioaia with a list of names and a file of photographs of folk objects and started to ask some of the villagers about them, people were able to identify the objects. The objects, of course, were recognizable as generic Vrancean old, 'authentic' things (see Chapter Five). But the people on my list were difficult to identify, not because nobody had heard of any Maria Țibrea or Anghelina Tătaru (two of the names I was looking for), but because too many of the families were called Țibrea or Tătaru. Officially, it seemed that the names I had on my list corresponded to the four most generic surnames in the area. As

for the women who had made most of the objects, there was no indication in the Horniman files as to what their maiden names were. The routes that ‘the counterparts’ of the Horniman objects might have taken inside the community would be almost impossible to trace.

Pine discusses the distinctive ways in which people in the Polish mountains name themselves and their household in relation to each other, and in relation to outsiders.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, I found that for an outsider, it is impossible to identify a villager if they use their official name, while within the community people identify each other by the father’s or husband’s or household name instead. The fact that I was looking to identify *women* by their official name in Vrâncioaia made matters utterly opaque. In the absence of an insider landmark of the family, house (or land), individuals were not remembered by the community, and even less so the women whose labour produced the objects at the Horniman. (In Chapter Five I reveal how they are remembered.)

### **The absent villagers**

While *târle* reproduce kinship relationships through labour, they also evoke narratives that temporarily transgress kinship. People who are now in their thirties and forties remember spending their summers together as children and teenagers, grazing cattle on the hills during the day, and getting together for a good time every evening. ‘No one was afraid to walk these hills at midnight in those days’, one person told me. It is constantly suggested to me that the present generation was witnessing a destruction of the social fabric of the place, and that

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<sup>46</sup> Pine (1999) goes on to argue that peasants subscribe to different standards of morality when they are inside the village (respectable peasant) from when they leave the village (trickster).

this was visible not only in the village proper, but also in the area of the *târle*. While the bright colourful past was there in the background of the Vrancean landscape, the foreground consisted of a derelict landscape, with huts that are falling down and land that is left unworked due to migration.

These absences were not only conspicuous in the descriptions of the Vrancean landscape, but also in the homes of people, where, displays of objects in the good room evoked far-away places. Images of the pope, postcards and calendars from Italy sit next to porcelain animals and toy animals, plastic flowers, woven rugs, embroidered cloths, the TV set (covered with a doily) or a stereo (bought by one of the children who had grown up and left the village), all contributing to an almost 'escapist' or fantastic aesthetic of souvenirs, linked to meaningful places and times. Boym calls this aesthetic display 'a story of what really matters, what "leaves traces" and survives the drudgery of dailyness', and which comprises 'travels, real or imaginary – [...] journeys to exotic places and escapes into wishful thinking' (Boym 1994, 285). Mass-reproduced objects (such as cups) are put on display and thus 'made useless, and therefore beautiful', and aesthetically commemorated (1994, 159).<sup>47</sup>

Boym argues that interior decorations similar to ones I encountered in Vrâncioaia unsettle the 'opposition between aesthetics and ethics, disinterestedness and empathy, elite and popular'; her description of Aunt Liuba's domestic objects, which pose a conundrum to most theoretical approaches to taste, could apply to the Apostolia Țibrea's good room (image 2.3) as well:

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<sup>47</sup> See Stewart (1997, 31) for a description of the good room of the Harangos Rom.





2.3 Corners of Apostolia's house. Three of her four daughters live with their families in Italy. The children spend part of their holidays in Vrâncioaia.

[the objects] are too useless for both use-value and exchange-value theories, not authentically primitive or exotic enough for 'transgressive' modern theories, too trivial and banal – in a nonfatal manner – to be turned into a simulacrum à la Baudrillard. The fetishistic aspect of these objects is not sufficiently perverse to make interesting psychoanalytical reading. In other words, these objects are impure and outmoded on all grounds.

At times objects from abroad enter everyday life, such as the presence of Italian coffee machines in the Vrâncioaia kitchens. In the *large room*, migration evokes possibilities and hope. Sometimes these places become real when the grandmothers embark on long bus journeys to Italy, carrying heavy bags containing cheese, lamb and other Vrancean produce. On their return they would baffle me with the nonchalance with which they would describe the different places they saw: they'd acknowledge that they were different in some ways, but not so different in others, or complain about Italian food being dull. Clearly these places in Italy were also made up of the routine of everyday life and monotony (people go to work, cook for the children, is how they described it). But this did not affect the display of imaginary journeys in the front room.

In other villages in Romania migrants tend to build large and often impressive modern houses in the villages they came from (Călinescu and Hodoiu 2011), but this rarely happens in Vrâncioaia. Remittances from people working abroad are important to the local economy, but the money earned rarely contributes to material changes in the village. Migrants from Vrancea do maintain contacts with Romania, but when they return they prefer to build their

impressive new houses near the county town of Focșani, performing modernity not only through material culture, but also through the choice of place to settle.<sup>48</sup>

If the *large room* of the elderly encompasses the sum total of their lives punctuated by events, comings and goings (an aestheticisation of everyday objects evoking imaginary journeys and an agglomeration of ‘still life’ depicting animals and flowers), then the few modern houses have *large rooms* cleansed of this clutter. Some may be austere, rather formal, often with office-like furniture, similar to the refurbished apartment blocks in towns (see Drazin 2002). But folk items do make their way in, even if via urban fashions:

Săndica’s two older sisters got married in the 1980s, and their mother, Apostolia Țibrea, had made them proper dowry. She did not make them folk costumes – those were not worn anymore – nor did she weave the old style decorative cloths (*stergar*), but instead made them each woollen blankets thickened in the water mill, bed sheets and pillows. When the first two girls got married and moved to the town, they had no need for the dowry – it was inappropriate to bring countryside things into new apartment blocks. The girls and their families eventually emigrated to Italy and the blankets stayed in Apostolia’s house. When Apostolia’s third daughter, Săndica, got married, the dowry was much smaller – Apostolia had long given up adding anything else to it. Her small dowry also stayed behind, until in 2009 Săndica and Dan, her husband, finally completed their modern house in the village, with new furniture, polished wooden floors and light, simple net curtains at the window. Săndica was

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<sup>48</sup> A whole new neighborhood of large houses built from expensive materials is rising near Focșani. The migrants from Vrâncioaia and neighboring mountain villages maintain close connections to each other when abroad, and also when they come back to Romania, by choosing to build their new houses around the same area. The ones who do not build houses there usually buy a flat in a block in Focșani.

then the first of her sisters to finally claim her blankets, but she cut them in two and made wonderful thick rugs, which give the house a modern, cosy feel. The other sisters are now claiming their dowry too, or at least some of the blankets, to take to Italy as rugs. Folk fashion has come around full circle.

In Vrancea, place is actively made and understood through a variety of practices to do with kinship, labour and memory. Showing people pictures of the costumes in the Horniman collection did not generate specific memories, but rather a general sense of 'the days of lore'. These good old days were when the village was fully inhabited, when the *horă* took place, and weddings lasted for three days. My questions about these 'days of lore' would receive answers not so much connected to the period when folk dress was still worn, but nonetheless about the village pre-1989.

In the rest of this chapter I discuss other ways in which Vrancea has been depicted, through folk legends collected from this area, or through sociological and folkloric analyses. All of these renditions of Vrancea contribute to the way place is actively made. These texts are active productions of place, but also 'attempts to institute horizons, to establish boundaries, to secure the identity of places', in fact '*attempts to stabilize the meaning of particular envelopes of time-space*' (Massey 2005, 5, italics in the original).

Some are historical accounts in which the area has played a role in the national history. I found that people here have an exceptional awareness of the way the area has been implicated in national history, from the medieval past to the precise battles fought by Vranceans in the two world wars. Both a history of bravery and an image of folk craft contribute to the sense of collective identity, and are appropriated through people's awareness of the region's place in

national history, or through the images that are displayed in the front rooms. Other renditions evoke an 'eternal past' (and not so much an 'ethnographic present'), an archaic life in which Vrancea, like other mountainous regions, seems to be caught. Not unlike the case of the Jina shepherds discussed by Stewart (1998), Vrancea is rendered as a space of shepherding and historical importance in the imagination of the locals.

### **Writing Vrancea – the mild people of the hills**

In the context of shifting boundaries and the changing landscapes in the interwar period, Lucian Blaga<sup>49</sup> emerged as one of the most prominent figures in Romanian philosophy and literature. He famously developed a theory of space and identity, coining the phrase 'mioritic spirituality' to describe the Romanians, presumably influenced by the 'mioritic space'. The folk ballad 'Miorița' (to which I shall return) was first collected in Vrancea, and describes the landscape of Romania as one dominated by mild rolling hills. Blaga uses Spengler's idea that each culture is defined by its specific spatial sentiment. Particular understandings of space are present in every morphological aspect of a culture, and influence its historical tendencies. Blaga reinterprets Spengler's theory and argues that space affects not only the surface, 'feeling of space' and the morphological aspects of a culture, but that space has a deeper effect on our subconscious. A people who share a landscape, therefore, share a similar subconscious and spirituality. Blaga writes:

The unconscious is organically and inseparably united with the spatial horizon, where it has become fixed as if in a shell; we do not find it in a

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<sup>49</sup> Blaga was a respected philosopher and writer from Transylvania, one of the most important figures of Romanian culture during the Interwar period.

lax and changing connection with this space, as a subject-object relationship, the way consciousness and landscape find each other. Under changing contingencies, consciousness betrays landscape at any moment. The unconscious does not betray. The spatial horizon of the unconscious is, therefore, a psycho-spiritual reality, deeper and more effective than any sentiment could ever be.<sup>50</sup> (Blaga 1936, 124)

Space has the power to determine collective identity, Blaga maintains. Every morphologic aspect of that particular culture – from folk songs and material culture to the political organization of communities – resonates with that particular space. Because the Romanians have inhabited a landscape of hills for many centuries, they have developed a mild character and spirituality (like the hills themselves), which they carry with them even when they move to inhabit the plains.

Space resides in the substrata of objects and songs; these not only depict the contingency of space (the elements that change), but something deeper and unchanging. ‘What resounds in the song is not the full and concrete landscape of soil and cliffs, of water and grass, but a space [...] somewhat schematically structured, in any case pulled out of the immediate natural contingencies; a space with joints and an axis articulating only its essential static and dynamic elements’ (Blaga 1936, 122). A sense of pre-destination can be derived from this philosophy, in which space is seen as abstracted to an essence. To Blaga, morphological aspects of culture, like all examples of material culture, contain this essence, and live in an organic relationship with space and the collective.

Blaga’s definition of space epitomizes the political claims of nationhood and spatial boundaries during the interwar period. Although excluded from the cultural life of Romania immediately after World War Two for his allegiance with

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<sup>50</sup> My own translation.

right-wing politics, his work was brought back into the public space, and became a prominent figure again in the 1970s (see Verdery 1991). He remains an important cultural figure in literature textbooks in Romania, and his philosophy about national spirituality is still held as valid.<sup>51</sup> Because of his prominence, Blaga's philosophical depiction of landscape is important for all the other ways in which landscape has been 'written' in Romanian ethnography and folklore studies. His most famous phrase, 'eternity was born in the village', is learned by pupils from early ages, and endlessly quoted in the compositions and essays that analyse literature about Romanian villages – of which there are a great deal. Through the near unanimous appreciation of his work, Vrancea has become closely linked to what is understood to be the essence of Romanian spirituality.

### **Mythologies of Vrancea**

One of the enduring ways in which Vrancea has been discussed in folklore and sociological writings is with reference to its history of political independence. During the Middle Ages the geographical isolation of the area fostered the development of a specific structure of political organization: a classless, independent people's republic. This has led folklorists to write that 'the specificity of Vrancea is neither in its folklore, nor in the beauty of its places, but in the determination of people to keep their own social structure, not only the mountains and the forests, but also the fundamental concepts of their internal political structure' (Pop in Bănăţeanu 1986, 7). Local legends collected in late 19<sup>th</sup> century have been interpreted as accounts of the fight against

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<sup>51</sup> Blaga is part of the literature and philosophy high-school curricula.



intruders. Once collected, most of these legends have become part of national myths.

One such modern mythology<sup>52</sup> is based on the legend of **Baba Tudora Vrâncioaia**, which is said to lie behind the birth of the communities in Vrancea. The legend tells of Ștefan the Great of Moldova (1457-1504) retreating after a lost battle, his armies dispersed. Wounded and hungry, having walked the paths of the Vrancean mountains, he reached the hut of old Baba Vrâncioaia, who gave him shelter and food. In the night she called out for her seven sons, who quickly gathered an army of local men, helping Ștefan to return to battle and win against the Ottoman armies. To reward Vrâncioaia and her sons, the king gave each of them one mountain in Vrancea. This legend is meant to account for the independence of the region, the genesis of the Vrancean villages, each bearing the name of one son (each of whom allegedly became the patriarch of their village), and the common maternal ancestor of Vrancea – in other words, of the collective identity, bound by blood.

The popularity of the legend, widely spread in Vrancea around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is surely connected to the project of building a sense of Romanian national identity, which stressed a historical continuity with privileged figures of the past, such as the medieval prince Ștefan the Great. In 1904, local schoolteachers in Vrancea gathered together to request the erection of a monument for the Moldovan prince (Iliescu 2006, 66), and used this folk legend, as well as some other folklore sources, as arguments for the close relation entertained by Ștefan with the Vrancean people. In this way, the

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<sup>52</sup> I use the notion theorized by Barthes (1957), and later used by Lucian Boia (1999, 2002) with examples from Romanian national history.



Vranceans were claiming a privileged symbolic position within the myth of the newly created nation-state by incorporating Vrancea into the medieval kingdom built by Ștefan, but also by suggesting that they, the Vranceans, remained untouched by subsequent historical events, such as the Ottoman occupation of the Romanian territories.

A clear example of how the legend of Baba Vrâncioaia was used politically is in the very name of the village where I did my research, which changed from Văsui (the name of the river) to Vrâncioaia (the character in the legend) in 1937, when the villagers were advocating that the administrative centre of the *comună* be located in their village (instead of Poiana village, where it was at the time). The image of the medieval leaders remained very much present in public discourse during Ceaușescu's leadership, and the legend continued to be actively used. Today it still features in history textbooks for younger students, and is often performed at folk festivals in Vrancea.

The popularity of the legend stirs even more interest, since historians, even in the interwar period, have been quick to acknowledge the lack of any documents to support it. It is likely, however, that the legend took shape during the trials against the **boyar Roznovanu**, a real historical character who, in 1801, was abusively given property rights over the area of Vrancea by the Moldovan prince at the time (Iliescu 2002). A long trial ensued, during which the Vranceans formed a solidary group. To win the trial, they had to prove the land belonged to them. Indeed, this was the moment when the question of property and ownership became important; and one way to demonstrate this was through the legend of Vrâncioaia and Ștefan the Great. In 1817, when it looked like the Vranceans had won the trial, the locals divided the mountains among the village

communities – as the legend of Baba Vrâncioaia claimed had happened during Ștefan's reign.

Prior to that there had been no official documents to certify the rights of each village. So we can see the legend being used symbolically against the greedy boyar, and to coalesce the inhabitants of the area (Iliescu 2002, 2006b, Stahl 1934).<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the story of the success against Roznovanu became a legend in itself, told and retold much like the one of Baba Vrâncioaia. In this way, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as we have seen, the legend of Vrâncioaia had helped to resolve claims of identity amongst Vranceans, embody collective identity in the figure of a common ancestor and make a claim for a central symbolic position as part of the newly created nation-state. After World War Two, the story of the boyar Roznovanu became an example of class struggle, and continued to be popularized, but more than that, it continues to be retold, as a narrative of local success against outsider intruders. In 2011, at the unveiling of a statue dedicated to a local politician, Vrancean children performed the legend of Baba Vrâncioaia and Ștefan the Great. Furthermore, imagining I was a folklorist of a sort, some of the people in Vrâncioaia were quick to tell me the old legend, and to entertain the hypothesis that the old lady possibly lived in the village Vrâncioaia.

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<sup>53</sup> The trial is an excellent display of the use of history, the manipulation of documents, and of the use of 'common sense' recognized as 'tradition'. This takes place at a historical moment of modernization, which corresponds to the Napoleonic wars, and in the Romanian principalities to the fight for dominance between the three empires of central and eastern Europe. The trial goes well beyond the borders of Moldova and Romania, and it would end with the victory of the Vranceans due to political unrest in the Russian and Ottoman empires around 1821. The fascinating story of the trial includes a very important aspect: money. The inhabitants of all the villages put great effort into raising funds for the trial, by selling produce, borrowing or selling small pieces of land. See Iliescu, 2002.

## **Traditional Vrancea – a part of Grand Romania<sup>54</sup>**

‘Whoever endeavours to study the history of Vrancea, will find out about the history of Romania, on a small scale’. This is a quote from the interwar historian Nicolae Iorga, which appears as a motto on much of the material about Vrancea today.<sup>55</sup> The quote places the communities of Romanian free peasants at the centre of the mythology of the Romanian nation-state in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For sociologist Henri Stahl<sup>56</sup> the autonomy of the Vranceans and its history of independence were demonstrated by the current ‘archaic’ societal structures which were the object of his sociological enquiry. This inspired him to call Vrancea ‘an autonomous peasant state’. In a poetical rendition of the region, he described it as superior to all other regions, because of the economic and political freedoms that the people had always possessed, and which remained imprinted in people’s minds (Stahl 1934).

Stahl (1939) identified pastoral life as essential for the maintenance of freedom: ‘a population of shepherds cannot be tied to the land as a population of workers. Their geographic horizons are much wider, their life is one of transhumance and travelling’ (Stahl 1939, 228). But unlike shepherds from other regions of Romania, the Vranceans tended not to leave the ‘impenetrable citadel’ created by the specific mountainous geography.

The routes people used through the village and through the region were meticulously noted by Stahl: paths leading livestock to pastures or to water; the trails to the field where they worked; and ultimately the roads and tracks the

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<sup>54</sup> Grand Romania refers to the borders of the country between the two World Wars.

<sup>55</sup> See the official websites of the Vrancea Museum <http://muzeulvrancei.ro> (accessed on 12.10.14), but also travelling websites, Facebook pages and other materials related to the area.

<sup>56</sup> Member of the Bucharest Sociology School.

carts took as they carried the wood out of the region. The time it takes the villagers to travel within Vrancea and to the nearest towns illustrates a particular understanding of space, and a much slower pace of life.<sup>57</sup> The ‘ancestral isolation’, due to the geography, was augmented by the lack of modern means of transport’, as the amount of time it takes to get from Nerej (the village of his fieldwork) to a local fair is enough to get someone from there to Budapest by car, Stahl remarks.

The slow but constant walking over the hills, mountains and valleys of Vrancea creates a specific synergy between people and place, and this relation is key for the maintenance of what Stahl calls the ancestral character of the communities. But this relationship is not how Blaga envisaged it, as related to a mysterious spirituality, or the ‘unconscious’, but to work. Stahl believed that Blaga was wrong to connect Romanian spirituality exclusively to folklore (in Verdery 1991, 67).

The remnants of the political structures that functioned amongst the Vranceans constituted in Stahl’s view an example of the ways in which indigenous communities were organized prior to the development of the structures that had reduced their agency – such as feudalism, modern state structures, and, most importantly, capitalism.<sup>58</sup> The communities were based on the common indivisible ownership of land,<sup>59</sup> and the democratic political

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<sup>57</sup> Stahl documents that it took three days from Nerej (the village where he did most of his research) to get to one of the towns, four days to another, one day and one night to the local fair at Vidra (the ‘gate’ into Vrancea), where they travelled with cattle, sheep, timber, wool, coming back with clothes, iron tools, shoes and livestock.

<sup>58</sup> Stahl contributed invaluable to the historical study of Vrancea, especially the case of the trials against boyar Roznovanu, and previous acts of social solidarity and defense against outsiders. He saw in these acts the proof that the ‘ancestral ways’ helped the locals resist the intrusion of other political structures.

<sup>59</sup> At the moment of his research, the forest and the pastures were collectively owned and run through *obște*, while the land for crops was owned by households.

institution of the village *obşte*<sup>60</sup> – where every member of the village took part in all decision making that concerned the community. Possession of the pastures and forests was not the stake, but only what they yield. According to Stahl, the social organization of the communities is inseparable from this collective management of land.

But Stahl's account was by no means optimistic. While he considered that the traditional ways had helped the locals fend off all sorts of intrusions up until that point, they were rendered useless in the face of capitalism. Through the insidious infiltration of the Anonymous Societies,<sup>61</sup> which sought to make a profit out of logging, Stahl saw how the political institution of the *obşte* was rendered powerless; the peasants were left in a bleak state of poverty and the unity of their community disintegrated. He argues that the moment wood became a commodity, the forest turned from being a shelter for the locals into being their enemy, their labour – chopping wood – became harder, and this labour turned the villagers against each other instead of creating solidarity. (Image 2.2 points to what Stahl was concerned with when he looked at the Vrancean landscape.)

‘Nerej is a village where most of the facts of everyday life are not a new creation of present generations, but they are traditions, the laws of the villages of other times. For the ones who do not know the Nerej of the past, the present seems absurd, without sense. In the 20th century, in the full reign of capitalist exploitation, the village of Nerej knows the archaic laws of social life, which is leading them to destruction, on account of their archaism’ (Stahl 1939, 226).

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<sup>60</sup> *Obşte* is the independent political organization of Vrancean villages, based on the common ownership of land and forest.

<sup>61</sup> This was the name of the logging companies; it is not only a metaphor for the disintegration of face-to-face communities.



Fig. 11 — La colline de « Poenile Sării », formée de couches qui glissent. L'on peut observer que les déplacements des couches sont plus grands sur les points déboisés.



Fig. 12 — Les défrichements de la Vrance. La vue est prise du Dealul Negru, vers le Nord. Au premier plan, des arbres broutés par le bétail et qui ne poussent plus.

2.2 Plate from *Nerej, Un village d'une region archaïque* by H. H. Stahl (vol. I, after p. 48). His interest is not in folklore, this is not the idyllic-bucolic landscape that produced by the folklore discipline, with a stress in its unchanging character. These images bring out elements of human geography, and ask how landscape and human society transform each other

From something positive that ensured the survival of the community, this 'archaism' was turned into a burden. In other publications Stahl (2002) gives a bitter account of the violence amongst the peasants, determined by the intrusion of the Anonymous Society into the village of Nerej. For him, the only solution for Vrancea was an adequate modernization, through which 'a new cosmological equilibrium' would be met (1939, 103), allowing the communities to maintain solidarity in a modern world in which the yield of the forest and pastures had become commodities to be used outside the region.

Stahl's writings on Vrancea represent one of the most important bodies of work produced by the Bucharest Sociology School of Gusti. After World War Two, sociology as a discipline disappeared. Some of the researchers who took part in the sociological campaigns became part of the existing (or newly opened) institutions that focused on the study of folklore – which was perceived as being less politically dangerous than sociology. The apparent political neutrality of folklore, and its ability to be incorporated into state ideologies – communism and, later on, nationalist communism, would allow it to thrive throughout the socialist period. However, the importance of the *obște* structure which Stahl brings out in his work is recognized today throughout Vrancea. Having been dismantled by the communist regime, the Vranceans have brought this institution back in recent years.

### **Villages of folklore**

Under the umbrella-term of 'folklore', research in the villages was not concerned with the social structures of the community, but rather with morphological aspects of material culture, music, literary forms and dance. Importantly, the

best-known folklorists of Vrancea, Ion Diaconu and Ion Cherciu, were born in local villages. Their endeavour, I argue, was to make Vrancea both visible and significant within the national discourse on 'folklore', which became a way in which to bring cultural capital to the villages. The folklorists (and also the villagers who performed the dances and songs on stage) made 'folklore' into a currency that could be capitalized. Their texts oscillate between an insider perspective of collective identity and the claim of objectivity and alterity. Because of their intimate knowledge of the region, their published work also includes sociological and historical details, as well as memories of lived life in Vrancea.

Born in 1906 in the village of Spinești, close to Vrâncioaia, **Ion Diaconu** shared with (or borrowed from) Blaga the belief that landscape and folklore were deeply connected, and held the ballad *Miorița* as proof. In this ballad, three shepherds graze their sheep together, travelling across the mountains. One night two of them decide to murder the third and steal his sheep. But one of the sheep (*Miorița*) hears the plot, and being gifted with the ability to speak the human language warns her master of the danger. The shepherd decides not to take action, but rather await his own death in the midst of nature. The ballad turns into an elegy where death is interpreted as an immersion into the landscape. It is considered the epiphany of the Romanian folkloric genius.<sup>62</sup> Diaconu dismisses any sociological writings on Vrancea that fail to note the presence and importance of '*Miorița*'; to him, the importance of shepherding resided not in the labour, but in the folk art it bred. Shepherding was first and foremost 'an activity

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<sup>62</sup> The ballad was first collected in Vrancea, by Alecu Russo. Many versions have subsequently been collected from the entire Romanian Carpathian area.



which has kept tradition, has unified the language and has continued, from one region to another, our ethnic unity' (Diaconu 1969, 265). Vrancea emerges as a source of Romanian spirituality and identity:

Miorița, only these backward Vranceans, far away from modernity, can play it with such great art with their flutes and voices! Shepherds from any other regions could not overtake the Vranceans – neither a hundred years ago, nor today – in the artistry of this incomparable song, designated as such by all the ethnographies, folklore, dialectal and musicological monographs. (1969, 270)

Diaconu's versions of the Miorița and other ballads would be taken up and used in regional and national folklore competitions by the villagers (see Chapter Three), while Diaconu himself became one of the best known folklorists in the region.

In 1986, **Tancred Bănățeanu's** study on the folklore of Vrancea appeared posthumously;<sup>63</sup> what stands out in his rendition of Vrancea is the frequency of the word 'authenticity'. By then, authenticity and autochthonism had become key words to be used in the public space, brought to define the nation (see Verdery 1996 and Introduction).

In his text, folk objects, and most of all costume, contributed to defining the place that Vrancea occupies within the national landscape. To Bănățeanu, dress constituted an 'authentic witness' of ethnic stability, it helped to explain ethno-genesis, autochthony and continuity, representing 'a perfect integration in the cultural and stylistic ensemble of the unity of our people'. Bănățeanu's discussion of the Romanian blouse, for instance, revolves around place, drawing boundaries between 'Slav' and 'Carpathian' or 'Romanian' territory. He writes

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<sup>63</sup> Bănățeanu was not from Vrancea. He was the director of the Museum of Folk Arts between 1953 and 1978, including at the moment when the Romanian collection was sent to Britain (1957)

dismissively about the present-day state of 'folklore', signalling the loss of 'authenticity'. This line of arguments places him in the protochronist group of intellectuals, who dominated the cultural sphere during the 1970s and 1980s (Verdery 1991). But I want to argue that his focus on 'authenticity' was not a way to legitimize communist rule in these decades – as protochronists often did. On the contrary, it was a way to criticise the forced modernization of the countryside during communism. Folklore and authenticity were territories on which political debates became concentrated, as I demonstrate in subsequent chapters.<sup>64</sup>

After 1989, when conflicting discourses around folklore escalated in the public space (Nicolescu 2014) **Ion Cherciu's** work (2011) rehearsed some of Bănăţeanu's descriptions. His rendition places Vrancea within the great world cultures of antiquity (Byzantium) and within Europe – a cultural argument in tandem with current political shifts.

Cherciu also dedicates a chapter to folklore in modern times, lamenting the peasants' loss of skills and desire to make valuable folk art. He dismisses the clothes made by women in their households, noting that ever since the interwar period the peasants' tastes have been 'corrupted' (2011, 165) by modern fabrics and techniques. After the 1960s, he writes, true traditional art was no longer living, but merely surviving – and only with the help of state institutions. Cherciu sees the destruction of folklore as a consequence of the communist regime, and its impact on the peasants' economic, cultural, religious and political life. But, at

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<sup>64</sup> It is important here to remember that Bănăţeanu's book was published posthumously, and that the change in cultural politics in the 1970s and 1980s did not allow him to finish his career as the director of the Museum of Popular Art. In line with my argument, in Chapter One I talk about how Michael Hitchcock's journey through Romania alongside museologists from the same generation and group as Bănăţeanu were vocal against the country's politics, because it destroyed national patrimony.

the same time, he stresses the extraordinary development of ethnographic museums, and specialized institutions, research centres during the communist period – indeed the institutions through which folklore ‘survived’ (Cherciu 2011, 116). For Cherciu, the concomitant destruction of structures that kept ‘authentic’ folklore alive, and the institutional support for the ‘survival’ of authentic folklore is a paradox of the communist history. In this, his definition of ‘folklore’ refuses local aesthetics regimes or social practices connected to material culture. Folklore remains something that has ‘standards’ and that needs to be learned. Seen this way, the ‘destruction’ and the ‘survival’ are both processes through which material culture called ‘folklore’ is rendered a discrete, alienated, category, while the notion of ‘folk’, along with the objects, belong more to these institutions than to the villagers. What I am interested in next is how this category is re-appropriated by people in the villages.

## **Conclusion**

Places gather things, experiences, histories and thoughts, which are configured into landscapes, argues Hirsch. They give a sense of stability, but at times discontinuities become clear and reconfigurations take place. The present chapter stresses these discontinuities in definitions of space, or of time-space.

On one occasion I visited the regional fair in the village of Bârsești, where everyone comes to buy or sell things. Some of the women told me that in the past they would buy beautiful *maramă* (handmade headscarves) or *catrință* (overskirts) from these fairs. None of that was on sale now – as the women had warned me, the time of folk things had passed. But as I was walking around taking snapshots of things exotic on a rainy day, a man asked me to take a picture



2.4 On the morning of a rainy day at the fair near Vrâncioaia. I went to see if anybody was buying or selling peasant costumes. But nobody there had any interest in 'costum național'. The man here saw that I had a camera, and he led me over to see his cow. He explained that she was so beautiful, I just had to take a picture of her. So I did, and I can say for certain that this is the picture of a proud man.

of him and his cow – image 2.4. I liked this picture of two proud men and their cow, and decided to include it in this thesis, but I did not know how. Perhaps its place is not here, but this inadvertence sums up the tensions at the heart of how Vrancea is (and has been) defined from the outside: as a place that retains traditions and folklore which, when absent, signal loss and corruption.

I travelled to Vrancea to reconnect the objects at the Horniman with their source communities, in order to fulfill one of the objectives of the research project. This reconnection was not so readily possible, as ‘folklore’ seemed absent from the villages at first glance. But the man with the ‘Tide’ jacket I photographed at the *târg* pointed it out to me clearly: if I was looking for ‘culture’ which was alive, I was looking in the wrong direction focusing on objects collected from Vrancea in the 1950s. Although people did not use objects identified as ‘authentic’ by the standards of museologists, they did carry out material practices, develop certain aesthetics, and value particular things – all of which interact with and constitute Vrancea as a particular place. However, the file of photographs of the Horniman objects that I carried with me directed my gaze (and camera) away from all these.

My other task, set out by the research project that I entered, was to study the social life of the Horniman objects’ *counterparts* in situ. But what were these counterparts, what were the ‘like’ objects in Vrancea? I had wanted to let the people in Vrancea identify these counterparts. Indeed, this became the research question that pushed me further along – where to find objects ‘like’ the ones at the Horniman, and what might these objects be? In the process, I began to investigate the relationship that people had with the notion of ‘folklore’ – however that might be defined or performed. Massey suggests imagining space

as ‘a simultaneity of stories-so-far’ (2005, 9). And an important part of these ‘stories-so-far’ was also ‘folklore’ – reclaimed, mobilized towards particular ends, and sometimes absent.

An aspect that emerged as crucial in people’s understanding of the landscape in Vrancea was movement and the fluid character of the communities. Folk items such as the ones in the Horniman collection are not to be found so readily inside the *large room* – the place to which they are assigned by ethnographic studies and museums. This space of display does, however, accommodate a particular aesthetic, in which modernity is displayed (through commodities of sorts, or through a choice of furniture), but also domesticated (with flowers and animal figurines, or wall carpets with exotic scenes), and where the imaginary journeys find their place. It relates to the space of the village and of the *târle*, to the urban space, and further afield, to Italy. In this way, the most obvious ‘context’ for the objects in the Horniman collection is destabilized.

While the Horniman collection fails to find its home in the *large room* – the most obvious of the places where it could be re-contextualized<sup>65</sup> – it is much more at home in the imagined space of the folklorists. Stahl, Diaconu, Bănăţeanu and Cherciu are examples of the different strands of disciplines that have engaged with the Vrancean landscape, framing fieldwork and the peasant in slightly different ways. Stahl’s detailed anthropological study remains one of the most important works of the Bucharest Sociological School, which sought to understand local landscape in its changing complexity.

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<sup>65</sup> In her work, Magda Buchczyk also ‘takes objects back’ to a good room, in the region of Făgăraş.

Massey argues that 'place' is assumed to be bounded, closed, coherent, authentic, 'home', 'originally regionalized, always-already divided up' while 'its symbolic value is endlessly mobilized in political argument' (2005, 6) – precisely how Vrancea appears in the renditions of folklorists. Diaconu, Cherciu and Bănăţeanu represent a genealogy of folklorists who contributed to what Verdery discusses as Romanian protochronism – 'an intensified resuscitation of interwar indigenist arguments about the national essence' during the communist period (1991, 168). Their texts reveal something of the struggle over the power to define the region as part of the nation through folklore and authenticity during the nationalist communist period. These excursions into the field site and framings of place became more and more remote from the social realities of the place, with Bănăţeanu and Cherciu practically dismissing the current folk practices in the village, and writing only about their ideal 'folklore' of the past. The other purpose was didactic: through their works Vranceans were to *learn* about the valuable folklore, how to perform and safeguard it. And one particular place in the village would bring together local practices and understandings of place and folklore, with the views of the folklorists: the house of culture. To this I turn now.

# Chapter Three

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## Houses of modernity

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My journey to Vrâncioaia, the place of origin of some of the folk objects I had chosen to recontextualize, did not readily reveal what ‘the counterparts’ to the objects at the Horniman might be. Neither was I able to reconnect the objects with the families that had given them away to the museum collectors in 1955 (with one exception, as the reader will see in Chapter Five). But the people in the village immediately recognized what my images showed, and without hesitation named them ‘folklore’ and more frequently ‘costum național’. They persistently discouraged me from pursuing my quest, because ‘nobody wears these anymore’. But as we carried on talking about the times when people did wear what they called ‘costum național’, the image of the *cămin cultural* (house of culture) appeared again and again. As well as on Easter Sunday, folk dress was worn at the Sunday *horă*, and for ‘cultural activities’ – both of which took place at the *cămin cultural*. But alas, the local house of culture was now locked and unused, and as many of the villagers repeatedly pointed out, a sign that the village was no longer the vibrant place it had once been.

The photographs I brought with me of the Horniman objects may not have stirred up memories of the times when folk things were part of the everyday. But they did bring out memories, albeit of a different, more recent time than I had expected. The objects in my photographs – mostly ‘costum național’ – reminded people of the time when folklore brought the village onto the national stage, through the institution called *cămin cultural*.



Place and time are thought to be the coordinates that describe a 'context'. For the Horniman collection, the *place* of origin, as we have seen has turned out to be elusive. The *time* coordinate, as I intend to demonstrate, is elusive too: the objects did not evoke memories of a pre-modern past, but were at the heart of modernizing institutions in the village.

This chapter further deconstructs the idea of the museum as the space of representation, versus the field site (the village) as the place where objects live in a natural state, and brings to the fore that, through the house of culture, the village is also a space of representation. A focus on the *cămin cultural* brings out the history of the folk idiom for the people in the village, and its relation to notions of peasantry and culture, especially during the socialist period. I reconstruct this history through the memories of the people from Vrâncioaia, most notably of the village intellectuals and teachers who were at the heart of this institution's life. I also look at magazines and archives, which reveal the local house of culture as a vibrant space of education and entertainment, but often also of the carnivalesque (with intellectuals performing on stage for peasants). The house of culture could at one moment be dominated by the authoritarian voice of the Communist Party, and at the next be filled with music, alcohol and joy. Moreover, it is also the institution through which folk things were collected, in a strikingly similar way to the Romanian objects at the Horniman.

I aim to explain how the folk idiom evolved throughout the socialist period; why people call folk objects 'costum național', how ideas of peasantry were framed through the use of folk attire, and how folklorists' collecting practices affected local ideas about 'folklore'. If anywhere, it is here that a historical reconsideration of the Horniman objects needs to take place.

## Houses of the nation

The metaphor of kinship has been persistently used by modern states setting out to instil change, create unity, or redefine boundaries through arguments of shared blood that support ideas of national identity (Yuval-Davis 1997, Carsten 2004, Kligman 1998). Pine (2014) points out that both the state and kinship 'draw on the same very powerful, highly evocative images – shared blood and substance, roots in the soil and the land, common heritage, history and memory, shared labour'.<sup>66</sup> State and kinship, therefore, do not sit in opposition, but are 'intertwined in complicated ways' in the process of making the nation-state concrete or evoking concepts 'as abstract as morality, discipline, hierarchy and entitlement'. It is this metaphor that informs the systematic construction of houses of culture across Romania, to which I refer in this chapter. I argue that these institutions that were built in the countryside are part of the profound changes brought about by modernity, beginning in the interwar years, but most intensively throughout the socialist period.

Houses of culture are public spaces in villages and towns, specifically built for education and entertainment events, which were meant to be central to the community life. Although they are ubiquitous in former socialist countries, houses of culture are by no means restricted to these spaces (see Burchardt 1999, Muşat 2011). With a few notable exceptions (Kaneff 2004, Yurchak 2005, Grant 1995, Donahoe and Habeck 2011) ethnographies of eastern Europe and the (former) USSR tend to ignore these places, focusing either on the private

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<sup>66</sup> Paper read for 'Doing politics, Making kinship' conference, Berlin, 2014, 'Inside and outside the Language of Kinship...'

space of the home, or on what seem to be the centres of the state apparatus.<sup>67</sup> These perspectives correspond largely to the dichotomised manner in which culture under socialism was thought of – either as ‘official’ or as ‘resistance’ (Yurchak 2003). Grant (1995) uses the house of culture as a metaphor and as a metonym for the changes inspired by the USSR. He tracks a history of the Nivkhi community, and shows how people strive to negotiate an identity defined on the one hand as timeless (denying change), and on the other as being backward, a blank slate onto which the state could inscribe modernity. Following the collapse of the USSR, the house of culture epitomized the visible ruins of what ‘our culture was like in the past’ (at one moment or another). Here Grant outlines the main themes that I want to follow in the context of Romania throughout this chapter: I look at the transformation of the community in Vrâncioaia, of the relationship between the state and the villages, and how the folk idiom was used to define these relationships. Later (in Chapter Four), I will turn to the new social configurations of the village during post-socialism, also brought to the fore by the social life of the local house of culture.

In Vrâncioaia, the history of this institution begins during the interwar period. My focus, however, is on the socialist period, when the house of culture was indeed in its prime, and of great significance to village life because of its material presence, meant to embody ‘culture’ in the new socialist age. What took place inside I argue, was a constant re-enactment and performance through which social relations in the village were redefined.

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<sup>67</sup> The common belief among ethnographers was that during the communist period the houses of culture were the places where the state disseminated ideology, and where fake folklore was performed. It was this accusation of fakeness that first drew my interest in them.

A study of the house of culture, Grant argues, needs to go beyond the emphasis on the artificiality of state-sponsored activities, divorced from genuine participation, and acknowledge the impact that these places had on so many lives. Like the Soviet bus stops in Christopher Herwig's catalogue <sup>68</sup>, houses of culture were present everywhere, no matter how humble or grand: material presences that, at least to some extent, glued together the people of the Soviet Union and beyond, and represent a shared memory for people from former socialist countries.

### **Vrâncioaia House of Culture –beginnings**

The emergence of the house of culture during the interwar period is closely connected to school-building programmes, and both were intended to bring high culture and education to all parts of the country. In the context of the consolidation of the Romanian state, and the centrality of the national question in this period (Verdery 1996, Livezeanu 2000), the houses of culture built in the countryside were meant to determine an enhanced enculturation process whereby the countryside was made part of the Romanian nation-state. Gellner (1991) argues that acquiring 'culture' in the context of the modern state (which is, by definition, a Protector of Culture) guarantees a person's citizenship, employability and dignity: citizenship depends 'on mastery of an ethnicity-defining High (that is, codified, script-endowed, education-transmitted) Culture' and on how that culture defines its members (1991, 230). While Gellner's paradigm explains the role of these institutions in forging a sense of national

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<sup>68</sup> <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/sovietbusstops/soviet-bus-stops-limited-edition-photo-book> Accessed on 26.03.2014.

identity and of turning peasants into Romanians, the specificity of this institution, and of the 'culture' inside it, reveals the particular kind of citizens that the peasants were expected to be, and how their relationship with the state was shaped.

In Vrancea, as in many other parts of the Romanian countryside, the building of houses of culture is connected to the *sociologia militans* practiced in the mid-1930s by Gusti's Royal Student Teams<sup>69</sup>, which were aimed at determining the transformation of everyday life in the countryside (see Introduction). National economic and political changes aside, it was through the house of culture that people's everyday life was meant to be altered: people were taught about sanitation, about what was considered a proper diet, or about appropriate gender divides. The Royal Student Teams proceeded to work at changing the Romanian peasant's body, mind and soul, and the way he or she worked (Muşat 2011). In Vrancea, these teams were present for long periods of time in the village of Nerej (some 20 km from Vrâncioaia), where elderly people can remember the cooking lessons, sanitation campaigns and attempts to introduce mountain peasants to vegetables or to keep them from drinking too much (all of which took place in the newly build houses of culture). Their presence reverberated in all the villages of Vrancea.

The sociologists and ethnographers involved in Gusti's project believed the building of houses of culture in the area was of great importance. Stahl<sup>70</sup> saw the dissolution of the Vrancean communities as imminent, if the peasants did not

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<sup>69</sup> These were teams of sociologists and volunteers who travelled to villages with a civilizing mission to modernize aspects of peasant life. Often these educational practices took place in the houses of culture. They were called 'Royal' because they were funded by the King. See Muşat 2011 for an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon.

<sup>70</sup> Member of the Bucharest Sociological School. See Introduction and Chapter Two.

start cooperating with each other and change the way they related to the outside world. In a letter he sent to Ștefan Pâslaru, the priest of Vrâncioaia, in 1938, Stahl informed him of a new law about to be passed, whereby the state would support the building of one house of culture in each village<sup>71</sup>. But Stahl asked the priest<sup>72</sup> to organize the community and proceed with the construction of the local house of culture before the state did it for them:

I would be very happy if, in Vrancea, these houses were raised, not because of the law, but [from your own initiative]. I plead with you: can we let Vrancea die? Should the action of awakening the Vranceans and attract them to cultural work not begin as soon as possible? Have the courage to do it, despite the hardships, which we all know how overwhelming they are! Consolidate the house of culture, if you have one; create one, if you are lacking in one! (Stahl, in Țibrea 2011)

The building of the house of culture in Vrâncioaia went ahead, alongside a new school, church, road, bridge, headquarters for the local cooperative, a public bath and a health house (the last two as part of the house of culture). Neculai Jechianu, an influential political character who was a former schoolteacher, and later became an MP, oversaw the modernization of the village. Jechianu founded a local cooperative through which to sell wood from the forest, so as to push out the private companies that had become notorious for exploiting the locals (see Stahl's work in Vrancea, in Chapter Two). The money obtained from selling the wood, which belonged to the villagers, was used to build the school and modern institutions, to fund education projects, to build an important road, but also to buy goods for the peasants who needed them (shoes and coats for the children

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<sup>71</sup> This was not to happen after all, because of political turmoil and, eventually, the outbreak of World War II. But it is remarkable that such an initiative existed in Romania, no less invested with political idealism and drive than during the communist period.

<sup>72</sup> Husband of Emilia Pâslaru. Some of her household items are in the Horniman collection. See Appendix.

who attended school, for instance), and was distributed through the house of culture. Jechianu's important role in interwar political life suggests the initiatives he implemented in Vrâncioaia were not exceptions, but part of wider national politics towards the countryside.

The house of culture in Vrâncioaia was officially established in 1938, but, in the absence of an actual building, its activities took place in the school building until 1941.<sup>73</sup> This points to the close connection between the school and the house of culture. In 1941 a proper house of culture was built, inaugurated on the same date as the other aforementioned institutions.<sup>74</sup> The executive board included Jechianu himself, the priest and school teachers, who would maintain their positions as the local elite after World War Two. Having started as *The House of Culture Carol II*, the institution changed its name after the king's abdication to *Mitropolitul Veniamin Costache*.<sup>75</sup> In 1948 its name was again changed, this time to *Friedrich Engels*, but by the mid 1960s, the title lost this communist addition, as a result of a new turn towards 'national culture', associated with the rise of Ceaușescu. From then on, it has remained *Căminul Cultural Vrâncioaia*.

In terms of the broader themes dealt with in this thesis, the house of culture was the place where we see folklore performed and ideas of peasantry enacted, playing an integral part of how the villagers defined themselves as

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<sup>73</sup> This is documented by Teodor Țibrea (2011), based on the archives of the Vrâncioaia house of culture. When I found them in 2012, the archives had still not been registered.

<sup>74</sup> These achievements were announced by Jechianu in a letter to Dimitrie Gusti's foundation. The money came from selling 524 ha of wood that belonged to the Vrâncioaia *obște* – in other words, the modern buildings were funded by the community, not by the state. The work was managed by the village elite (the secretary, the mayor the priest and a teacher). The villagers did the physical work.

<sup>75</sup> A historical character who played an important part in the trials against the greedy boyar Roznovanu. It is important that, when national politics collapses, as it did prior to and during World War II, the local officials reverted to a local historical figure. See Chapter Two.

citizens of the nation-state in the interwar period (but also afterwards). In close association with the house of culture, an institution for youth and adult education was established, called *Școala Superioară Țărănească*<sup>76</sup> (1941-1946). The model of the school, as well as the name, was based on the institution created by Gusti's Student Teams around that period, with the purpose of continuing the peasants' formal education after seven years of schooling, and of forming the future 'peasant elite'. Although it was short lived, and, arguably, did not have that deep an impact on the life of the community, the school was an important initiative that reflected precisely the transformation planned for the Romanian countryside: a form of modernization that would be suitable for the peasants. A place to learn traditional crafts where the mandatory uniform was peasant dress, *Școala Superioară Țărănească* was aimed at forming the new peasants into 'good Christians, with sound morality, [who would be] hard working, and knowledgeable of their duties as citizens' (Țibrea 2011). Gender roles in the household were taught through this school, including tailoring and crafts for women – in view of perhaps selling their produce for extra cash. Today in Vrâncioaia few people are old enough to remember this school. But on the object documentation at the Horniman, some of the craftswomen who were recorded as 'qualified seamstress' would have learned their craft through this institution.

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<sup>76</sup> Vasile Țibrea's volume lists the names of the students that took part in these workshops, as well as the names of the school staff. While the teachers came from outside the village, the names of the participant students are, to me, recognizably local. Most of the family names coincide with the names of the current schoolteachers.



## The hearth and home

A discussion of the village house of culture is necessary in order to appreciate quite how people's understandings and usage of peasant clothes were transformed – turning them into 'national costume' or 'folk costume'. In the same way that printing tackled the problem of 'the fatality of human linguistic diversity' (Anderson 1983, 45), the house of culture became the place that accommodated, changed and centralized a variety of performances and rituals through which the community defined itself in relation to the nation-state. By the 1970s, when village dance and performance ensembles were travelling extensively outside the village to participate in national competitions, this transformation was very clear: the clothes had become 'costumes', and differed from the clothes used by the villagers on a daily basis; folklore had become something to be learned (from schoolteachers, if there was no choreographer or specialist) and something of a currency that brought the villagers to the centre of the nation-state, at least while they were on stage. But focusing on the demands placed on the villagers from the centre tells only half of the story. Anderson's theory opens a path to understanding how the demands of citizenship and nationhood are experienced by people, and how a particular discourse on 'culture' frames (by limiting, shaping, directing behaviour) the ways of identifying oneself as part of a community – be that the 'imagined' one of the nation, or the concrete one of the village.

To understand the particular project of modernization as seen through the house of culture, we need to unpick the term 'house' and its content – 'culture'. The term used in Romanian for houses of culture located in the countryside is *cămin cultural*. *Cămin* is the Romanian for 'hearth', and so a word-

for-word translation would therefore be 'hearth of culture'. Meanwhile, their name in towns is *casă de cultură* (house of culture). To all intents and purposes, the institution is the same, consisting of a hall where most public gatherings are held, and where a variety of entertainment, educational and political activities take place. But although the same kinds of activities took place both inside the *cămin cultural* and *casă de cultură*, the distinction between them was and still is maintained. According to the 'Regulament de Organizare' issued by the Ministry of Education in 1960<sup>77</sup>, institutions called *cămin cultural* are restricted to villages and the far outskirts of towns. *Cămin cultural*, therefore, belongs to spaces defined as peripheral.

The most obvious difference between the *casă de cultură* and *cămin cultural* would be its size, as the first is a larger, more complex version of the latter, and designed for a bigger crowd. Although the purpose of building this institution was to achieve a unified 'culture' for all the citizens, the hierarchical relationship between the countryside and town was engendered through slight differences, such as the name. The village is seen as special category, its cultural aspiration more humble. On the other hand, the notion of a 'hearth' declares the centrality of this institution in village life. There can be more than one 'house' in a community, but, to quote Carsten, there cannot be more than one hearth in a household (2004, pp. 38-40). To some extent, *cămin* also situates the village in relation to the nation-state as the locus where folk culture is expressed and represented.

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<sup>77</sup> The distinction between *cămin cultural* and *casă de cultură* was established long before this date. This document merely states this difference again.

Unable to impose the same authority and grandeur as the houses of culture in towns, the *cămin cultural* seems to have been, from the outset, more open to syncretism. The very name carries associations of humbleness, but also retains something of the vision of a modern utopia of peasant communities, centred around a deep, organic core. On the national scale, the peasantry itself was considered to be the hearth of the nation. Indeed, the *cămin cultural* carries these ambiguities concerning the relation between the centre and the countryside in its very name.

The social history of the *cămin cultural* reveals the effort put into transforming this space into a kind of peasant house that would be open to the entire community. The private sphere of the house in the countryside is constituted by kinship relationships, even when it opens and becomes a public space (Pine 1996b, 2000). By contrast, the *cămin cultural* is open for everyone at all times, sees the villagers as equal, and engenders an individual relationship between each of them and the state.

One example that illustrates this is the *șezătoare* activities. *Șezătoare* were ‘bees’<sup>78</sup> organized by women in periods when there was a large amount of work to do, such as spinning thread, preparing wool or weaving. Often taking place in wintertime, the *șezătoare* involved tens of women gathering at the home of one person where they would work. The gatherings often extended into the wee hours of the morning, and were moments when stories or poems were told or sang. At some point in the night, young men would barge in bringing musicians with them, and turn the night into a party – the elderly women remained on the sides, spinning their thread, while young ones would be courted

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<sup>78</sup> Work parties, similar to *vechornytsi* in Ukraine or *sedianka* in Bulgaria.

and danced with. Almost all of the material encompassed by 'folk art' was performed and made there (from material culture to a variety of folk performances including song and dance), and indeed folklorists made sure to be present at such gatherings.

Gusti's research teams often recorded these important social gatherings. They offered an image of the sexual economy in the village (as well as the forging of other social relations), expressed through the making of cloth and display of artistry (which helped to establish oneself as a proper woman). But from the 1930s, when the sociological research of Gusti's teams was underpinned by social transformation, their visits to the *șezătoare* would be motivated not only by the collection of material from the peasants, but also by the dissemination of information they considered important. The Royal Student Teams began to organize *șezătoare* in the house of culture, where they would insert information sessions into the activities of the evening aimed at modernizing the peasants' lives. Increasingly the name *șezătoare* came to mean gatherings organized at the *cămin cultural*. The audience for these events was not only made up of women, but also of men, and the topics of discussion ranged from the spiritual to agriculture.

After 1945 the Communist Party demanded a very particular kind of culture be disseminated through the *cămin cultural*, and the importance of the institution for state politics increased. *Șezătoare*, with the sense acquired in Gusti's time, became the most important event through which information was disseminated in the *cămin cultural*. Another survivor from the activity of the Student Teams is the notion of *muncă culturală*, cultural work – which identified

the activity of the people who directed and put into practice activities in the village house of culture.

In parallel, however, the *șezătoare* continued to be practised as a traditional work 'bee' for a long time, especially in mountain communities which had not been collectivised, and where part of the labour that people did remained the same after World War Two. Today these events no longer take place, except in ethnographic museums, where they designate folklore performances that are claimed to be 'authentic'. This brief exploration of this notion gives a sense of how 'things folkloric' and traditional were taken over and put to work in modern institutions, while being carried out in parallel, by the villagers, later to become staged events that represent the pristine village life in ethnographic museums.

### **The Cultural Pathfinder – the shape of culture in Socialist Romania**

A decade after World War Two almost every *comună* had its own *cămin cultural*, and there were almost three times as many of these institutions in the countryside as there had been in the interwar period.<sup>79</sup> Their fast pace of construction gave a sense of the urgent necessity to 'change culture'. Schoolteachers remained in charge of the houses of culture in the countryside, while inspectors from the county headquarters, Party officials, would often visit to check on the cultural work carried out.

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<sup>79</sup> I do not have an exact source on how many *cămin cultural* were built. One source found in the Lloyds special collection (box 2.1.6, *Romanian Cultural Participation – Institutii muzicale*) among other documents connected to folklore and cultural activity in Romania indicates that in 1938 there were 3500 houses of culture in villages, compared to 11500 in 1950 and 12038 in 1963.



3.1 The cover of the first issue of *Îndrumătorul Cultural*, from February 1948. The peasants, on the right side, and the workers, on the left, forge 'culture' itself with their tools. As they read from the book, they also make it. 'Culture' becomes tangible.



3.2 The cover of the April 1948 issue. This time the three men symbolize the intellectual, the worker and the peasant. The relationship between them is hierarchical. No longer forging culture, but receiving it from the book. The peasant looks not at the book, but at the other two.



3.3 October 1948. During the first years of socialism, the magazine is filled with images of celebration; folk dress identifies the characters as peasants, and does not primarily express national identity.



3.4 June 1949. An illustration of mother and son, both wearing working clothes – she in peasant dress, and he in modern garb. He shows her the riches of the land. Her clothes indicate her class, and the family's past.



3.5 Cover of *Îndrumătorul Cultural*, July 1949. This cover shows the woman as an embodiment of the nation's cornucopia. Her headscarf, if we follow Bonnell's argument, indicates that she is no longer a peasant, but a peasant-worker.





3.6 April 1949. Propaganda for a literacy campaign. The woman is at the forefront of change, the best in her class. She wears folk attire, while the teacher, in modern attire, is the one who activates the change, the embodiment of *Îndrumătorul*, the pathfinder.



3.7 August 1949. Propaganda for collectivization. This time we have a photograph, illustrating a reality, not an ideal situation that the reader should aim for. The woman is at the forefront of change, but the character in shadow, the clerk, is the one who determines change. Bonnell remarks that collectivization in the USSR 'is presented visually in the feminine idiom' (1997:9) to counter women's resistance to the process.



3.8 One of the regular features in *Îndrumătorul* is the comic page. Humour is intended to correct subversive behaviour. Here we see the librarian, dressed in folk attire, carrying heavy books, while the village intellectuals sit around and look. It admonishes the resistance of village teachers (all men here) to becoming involved in forging communism through propaganda and culture. Once more, the peasant woman sets the example.





3.9



3.10



3.11

Covers of the monthly supplement to *Îndrumătorul Cultural* called *Cultura Poporului* (The People's Culture), issued between 1951 and 1957. Unlike the previous images, these ones are of people who perform folklore. They are not peasants or peasant-workers.





3.12 May 1962. Back cover. A slicker design marks the break from socialist-realism.



3.15 April 1964. An advert for theatre make up.

From the 1960s onwards *Îndrumătorul* begins to address a countryside population that is no longer backward and in acute need of being educated towards the goals of communism. Although propaganda pages are part of the magazine, it no longer permeates all activities. Folklore remains something to be performed. It is also something to be learned.



3.13 April 1958. Detailed presentation of the Argeș folk costume. Folk attire becomes something to learn about.



3.14 November 1967. Advert for ordering books and records. A regular feature in the magazine introduces the readers to classical music.



3.16 An advert for the village Cooperative shop from 1965. The villagers wear modern clothes. Little gives them away as being from the countryside.

If the history of the institution in the interwar period is short and closely connected to the Bucharest Sociological School, the social life of this institution after World War Two remains vivid in people's memories. But perhaps the most interesting document connected to the Romanian houses of culture is the Ministry of Culture's official publication, *Îndrumătorul Cultural* ('The Cultural Direction' or 'The Cultural Pathfinder'<sup>80</sup>), which contained precise details about the management of the house of culture during the first years of its publication. Effectively a textbook for the 'cultural activist', *Îndrumătorul Cultural* also contained informative and entertainment features. After 1980 the magazine changed its name to *Cîntarea Romaniei*, although, technically, it remained the same publication. It was published without interruption from January 1946 until November 1989.

Delving into the issues of this publication gave me a visual sense of how the centre spoke to the peasants, how the necessity of societal change was represented. Images 3.1 to 3.16 illustrate aspects of these visual representations. The following analysis of the house of culture as an institution in the communist period relies mainly on this publication, for which the Vrâncioaia library, like most houses of cultures and local libraries, had a subscription. The local school teachers in charge of organizing the events at the house of culture have positive memories of the publication in the 1960s and 1970s, as having an educational, rather than propagandistic, content. We must consider that the trained eye of a citizen of socialist countries could easily navigate through such publications, blocking out the irrelevant information, and focusing on the relevant content – a skill which I myself developed temporarily, after weeks of reading issues of this

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<sup>80</sup> The word *îndrumător*, means pathfinder, something or someone who needs to be followed.

magazine. But propaganda aside, what is more important for the present discussion is how the term 'culture' was itself defined through *Îndrumătorul Cultural*.

The organization of the publication itself, as well as its evolution, constituted a blueprint for a concrete form of 'culture', practised inside the house of culture. In itself, *Îndrumătorul Cultural* acted as a medium, transmitting from the centre what had been decided that Culture should mean. Seen through *Îndrumătorul*, the house of culture itself was also a medium: through its concrete existence it was meant to change or influence the everyday life of the people.

For the Communist Party of the Romanian Socialist Republic, culture was described in material terms. A textbook published by the Ministry of Culture in 1963 and sent to the house of culture in Vrâncioaia for the purpose of public reading was called 'Cultura, Un Bun Colectiv'. The title could best be translated as 'Culture, A Collective Good', or 'A Collective Commodity'. The text attempts to convince the audience that during the socialist period the level of 'culture' has increased, the proof being the great number of classic Romanian and foreign texts published, as well as the increased number of cultural activities taking place in the houses of culture.

The use of the term 'commodity' (bun), characteristic of the capitalist system should not surprise.<sup>81</sup> 'Culture' may not be a commodity to be bought and sold, but it certainly entails the notion of alienation, in the sense that it is not naturalized, but identified as a discrete category. Moreover, it is something measurable, just like industrial production; the incredible amount of paperwork

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<sup>81</sup> In fact, the word 'to capitalize' (*valorificare*) is very often used with regards to folk culture, meaning to bring out its value and use it.

that went into recording activities in the house of culture was meant to be a tangible proof of the existence of 'culture'. 'Culture' is something to possess. This material, discrete presence of 'culture' inside the house of culture in the Soviet Union was noted by Grant: 'alongside a myriad of texts and practices, the message is, in effect, 'Here is our culture, come and get it'. That is to say, the Soviet cultural project was unabashedly public, reified, intended for mass consumption and intended most importantly to be widely shared (Grant 2011, 265).

During its first ten years, *Îndrumător Cultural* condensed as much advice as possible on the transformation and enactment of 'culture' through the house of culture. The purpose of the magazine was not to convince the reader (who was already attracted to the communist regime), but to be read out loud to an audience in the house of culture (during *șezătoare*), or to be glued onto the local Wall Magazine.<sup>82</sup> 'Communist Culture' was to be achieved through 'cultural work', and it could only become effective when materialized. Articles explain exactly how the *cămin* has to be decorated with communist slogans (including exact measurements for them), and portraits of the Party leaders abound. The audience was not supposed to be the mere receiver of the message of communism, but to participate in its creation – images 3.1 and 3.2 illustrate this.

Much like factories, mines and dams, 'culture' was to be actively forged by the people and for the people. This active process of making ideology concrete and tangible was meant to 'provide sensory experience' (Buck-Morss 2002) and change lives. 'The manipulative strategy of bringing art into life relied on the

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<sup>82</sup> A monthly journal made up of articles stuck on a panel placed in the centre of the village. It was an attempt of bringing mass media (and propaganda) to the attention of the villagers.

mimetic principle of aesthetic analogy rather than instrumental domination or military command', contends Buck-Morss (2002, 66).

The issues of *Îndrumător* between 1948 and mid 1950s are dominated by images of joyful peasants celebrating the new regime. Dress identifies the characters in these illustrations as peasants, people from the countryside. Often when the images suggest change, the character in folk dress is a woman, at the forefront of the transformation, while the agent of this change is a young man dressed in modern clothes – the intellectual (see images 3.4 to 3.8). Later, after the reorientation towards national iconography in the mid 1950s, the people in folk dress are performers, no longer actual peasants, as is visible in images 3.9, 3.10 and 3.11. The details on their costumes makes them identifiable by region – in other words, by place, by ethnicity (see image 3.9) and not as a class. In the 1960s the visual sensibility changes – from a socialist realist one to a slicker, more modernist design. Peasants are no longer addressed as if different from the urban population, they are no longer seen as backward and in need to reform. Folk dress becomes not something by which peasants are identified; it becomes a costume for performance, and more than that, it becomes something to learn about (image 3.13).

It is difficult to assess how these images would have been read at the time, but what they certainly do is construct a cultural repertoire, together with the texts that addressed the peasants (or peasant-workers), and the activities that were taking place inside and around the house of culture. While the dynamism and urgency of change instilled in these images tends to wither by the 1960s (in Romania as in the USSR – according to Buck-Morss, 2002 and Bonnell, 1999), the iconicity and importance of the visual remains in place, and is evident

in the wealth of imagery produced for *Cîntarea României*, which I discuss in subsequent chapters.

### **Activities performed**

Folklore was included in the activities of the house of culture from the very beginning. But during the first years, the purpose of folklore dances and ensembles was purely as entertainment: on a weekly basis, the *horă* and folklore performances on stage were meant to lure the villagers in, who would also attend educational lectures (on politics, but also about working the land, as well as more general topics) before the party began. It has been argued (Giurchescu 1987) that folklore was promoted by the cultural activists in order to attract people to communism and justify communist rule through familiar cultural activities. I would suggest though that the motivation was perhaps less cynical and the activities were simply part of an education project, and not so different in structure to the ones initiated in the interwar period. What I am interested in is the place of folklore among other activities inside *cămin cultural*. Together, all these activities signalled modernity and being cultured.

Leaving the propaganda and informative ‘conferences’ aside, the most important entertainment activity in the house was performance – starting with theatre. This too was politically driven: performing was not an activity in which the actors pretended to be someone else, but one that was actively meant to change the individual and the mass society (see Chapter Seven of this thesis, and Bishop 2012). Stories meant to be read out loud or performed used *mise-en-abyme* techniques to show that engaging in the performance of communism equated with being active in the construction of communism.



One such story called 'Grandpa's Clothes'<sup>83</sup> (*Straiele Bunicului*) is centred around a performance in which a school boy takes the lead role. For this, he needs his grandpa's traditional clothing. The kind, but strict grandpa tells him that these are things of great value, that the clothes are in fact for his burial and he cannot lend them. Torn between his grandpa's wish and the excitement of the school play, the boy decides to steal grandpa's clothes. Grandpa goes to the house of culture to see his grandson in the school play, and gets angry when he realizes what has happened to his *straie* (traditional folk attire). But when he sees the boy's talent, he is impressed to the point of tears and forgives him. The grandpa realizes his grandson is indeed the future, the 'sunrise', while he himself is 'the sun going down'. In this story the modern institutions (the school, the house of culture) cut across kinship ties, and dismantle the old relations, replacing them with something new. The grandson might not use the *straie* in the village *horă*, but the clothes remain in use, on stage, in the house of culture.

This is how folklore becomes something to perform rather than a social activity among the villagers regulated by courtship and kinship connections (Kligman 1988). When performed on stage, folk choreographies enhanced the aesthetic qualities of the dances. The choreographies no longer brought the villagers in as participants, but rather produced a divide between spectators and performers. Folklore, therefore, became a part of 'culture' in the house of culture. The structure and motivations behind the dance and the music changed.

During the first years of socialism, all kinds of folklore dances could be taught for stage representations. The choreography pages in *Îndrumător* explain

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<sup>83</sup> The story is published under the name of Ilie Andrică, peasant-worker in *Cultura Poporului*, no 12/1954, published by the Ministry of Culture (Supplement to *Îndrumător Cultural* which contained the suggester performance repertoire).

the steps for dances from all over the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc. After the mid 1950s, these choreographies are replaced by Romanian folklore dances, and, from the 1960s until the mid 1970s, by foreign modern dances too (tango, rock'n'roll, etc.). An important institution that regulated the activity of the houses of culture, the House of Popular Creation, was established in 1953; its focus was propaganda and entertainment, but right from the start it was very much centred on folklore performances and, later, on the making of folk objects.

During the 1960s a wider range of activities were learnt in the house of culture, and although all of them had an educational element, communist propaganda was no longer one of its main purposes. In fact, many were urban, middle class activities: playing chess, learning to ski or do sports activities of sorts, photography, classical music and fine arts. One of the most popular activities – present in the *cămin cultural* throughout the socialist period – was the cinema. With the collectivization process finished, and the country on course for industrialization, 'culture' resembled the hobbies and activities that people were likely to take up in western Europe too. Leisure and tourism gained importance as activities that the country's citizens should all be able to afford, whether they lived urban or rural areas. The *cămin cultural* was also included in this: tourists were encouraged to visit the house of culture wherever they were visiting and check out the local entertainment scene.

In the 1960s, *Îndrumător* spoke to people about folklore with more than one voice. On the one hand, there were the activities directed by the Houses of Popular Creation, focused on set, spectacular, aestheticized choreographies. But there was also a resurgence of the Gusti sociologists, and former members such



as Stahl and Pop began to have regular columns on social and folklore topics.<sup>84</sup> As the old peasant clothes disappeared from the villages, *Îndrumător* explained the costumes of each ethno-folkloric area in detail, offering a cultured perspective on folklore. 'Folklore' equalled 'culture', and folklore needed to be *learned* about, studied, carefully preserved.

Throughout the socialist period *Îndrumător Cultural* and the *cămin cultural* acted, from the point of view of state ideologues, as mass media (although the latter had much more complex social functions as well), and both were subject to the state's control of communication. *Îndrumător* was not addressed directly at the masses, but firstly to the local intellectuals and the managers of the houses of culture. This is why the articles often tackle theoretical problems, of sociology, of folklore, and even of media studies in the late 1960s. The audience of the magazine is the intelligent, instructed audience, which the magazine could teach how to instruct others. This hierarchy, I argue, between intellectuals and peasant-workers was engendered by the modern socialist system through various institutions, including the house of culture. Indeed, the house of culture brought people together, as much as it divided them (into those who were in charge of activities and education, and those who were subject to education).

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<sup>84</sup> As a former member of the Gusti school, Stahl disappeared from publications throughout the 1950s. In that period the magazine was not preoccupied with the peasantry in the ethnographic sense. The interest of the magazine in ethnography signals a shift in intellectual debates after the mid 1960s (see Verdery 1991) and different concerns of the state towards the countryside.

## From Friedrich Engels to Cântarea României

*Îndrumător Cultural* tells us what was meant to happen inside the houses of culture. The information that the magazine offers about what was really happening in these places is only partly reliable: occasionally it published the negative reports, of the cultural inspectors who travelled to the villages, who admonished the local intellectuals that there was too much entertainment and too little propaganda content. To understand what activities took place and how people were engaged in them in Vrâncioaia, I refer in the following section to the archives of the Vrâncioaia house of culture, and to people's life histories. This is a history recovered from archives thought lost or unimportant – a consequence of the relocation of memory and archive practices which I discuss in the following chapter. Many of the people I spoke to were actively engaged in the performances and educational activities at the house of culture; most of the villagers, however, remember the weddings and parties, the films screenings and the traditional bands, rather than the educational or political events.

Amongst the activities that took place in the *cămin cultural*, and which passed unremarked in *Îndrumător*, were the social gatherings and parties – ranging from wedding celebrations, baptisms, to school celebrations, the Sunday *horă* and balls. These took place throughout the country's *cămin cultural* during the period after World War Two (Ștefănescu 2010, 10). In fact, one of the distinctions between the urban houses of culture and the *cămin cultural* was that, in the former, the performance hall and the dance hall were distinct, whereas the latter brought all social activities to the same place.

Most of these social gatherings appear in the reports and official diary of the Vrâncioaia *cămin* from its very beginning in 1938. Weddings and baptisms

were not mentioned, but the Sunday and Easter *horă*, New Year parties or (later on) carol singing – activities that were organized by the head of the house of culture – were mentioned, and a special budget allocated for them.

After the war, detailed instructions<sup>85</sup> specified that the board running the *cămin cultural*, comprising 10-15 people, needed to include: one representative of the village council, one member of the *comună* worker's union, the secretary of UTM, one representative of the Women's Committee, the head of the school, one member from the collective farm council, the head of the ARLUS<sup>86</sup> committee, the president of the Sportive Association of the *comună*, the village librarian, teachers, engineers, doctors and working peasants who exceeded their planned work. It would be too much to expect a small mountain village like Vrâncioaia to produce so many committees. In actual fact, the institution was run by Teodor (Dorel) Țibrea, a schoolteacher with a real passion for 'cultural work' – as described by the villagers. The other members of the council were the schoolteachers, the medical staff, and all the state employees who were part of the state apparatus (the accountant of the village hall and of the cooperative, and the person responsible for collecting quotas from the peasants). The relation between cultural work and actual work was meant to be close, with the state taking charge not only of people's working time, but also of their free time.

Activities reported included listening to the radio, rehearsals with various artistic teams, public readings from literary texts, and conferences on agricultural matters. The activities that went on were highly organized, with members forming specialized teams: one team for the wall magazine; one for the

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<sup>85</sup> This instruction booklet was published by the Ministry of Culture in 1960.

<sup>86</sup> The USSR-Romania friendship association. They maintained influence until mid 1960s.

humoristic brigade (*brigada de agitație*); one team for theatre performances and one for dance. The house of culture also had a choir, a propaganda team, and a team of lecturers, meant to read scientific, agricultural and political lectures to the peasants.

Even though the language of the reports pays lip service to the Communist Party, which presumably directed the cultural development of the citizens, the content of performances tended to be from classic texts that had been accepted as Romanian high culture since the interwar period (writers such as Rebreanu, Alecsandri, Caragiale). This continuity in the content of what was understood to be Romanian culture, along with the elevation of folklore to the pedestal of 'culture' (in Herzfeld's terms, 2004), legitimated the house of culture among the village intellectuals (the same people as before the war) and its educational project.

The interviews with people in the village revealed that what went on inside the house of culture was not considered coercive, but rather, as Habeck and Donahoe (2011) suggest, it was seen as a place where through 'technologies of the self' the participants came to improve themselves. The need to better oneself was considered legitimate in a context in which the villagers acknowledged the benefits of education in general. Within just one generation after World War Two the school teachers in Vrâncioaia came from local peasant families. The house of culture was also held to be important because it hosted the social gatherings which confirmed and created kinship ties in the village.

The people in Vrâncioaia remember the house of culture as being always full and active. It was the task of the committee – mainly the school staff – to constantly convince people to participate, each having 'their own area of

influence in the village', according to one of the schoolteachers. Apart from their school activity, the schoolteachers needed to fulfil their hours of 'cultural work', by coordinating activities at the house of culture. But most of it was done through the charisma of Teodor Țibrea, the head of the house of culture, who used to 'tell jokes, dance, sing, and could do everything'. People were very fond of him, according to my interviewees, and he was famous for attending every party and drinking opportunity. Even though the Communist Party cadres had certain expectations of 'cultural work', Țibrea responded firstly to what the villagers wanted or what he and the school teachers thought to be good activities. At the end of the day, it was not the state-imposed 'culture' and rituals that helped constitute the social relations in the village, and the imposition of a 'culture' disconnected from the existing social relations and practices was impossible.

One of the most popular activities throughout the life of the *cămin cultural* after the war was screening films (also see Ștefănescu 2010, 14). One person recalls: 'the machines and the speakers had an engine, because there was no electricity. For one hour before the start of the film, [Teodor] Țibrea put the speakers outside the *cămin cultural* on really loud volume, so that people could hear from across the hills and come to the screenings.' The artistic teams – choir, recital, folklore and the 'humoristic brigade' – provided just as many opportunities for people's hidden talents to come out, according to a former schoolteacher and organizer of events.

### **Folklore reframed**

Folklore performances took place inside the house of culture from its establishment in 1938, but it was only after the war that a (more or less)

permanent ensemble was established at the request of superior cadres. In mountain villages such as Vrâncioaia (not unlike the Maramureş village described by Kligman 1988) folklore became a resource. Theatre, singing or fine arts were perhaps harder to perform at a competitive level in the absence of proper instructors, but a folkloric dance ensemble was much easier to set up (and might become successful in the competitions organized by the Houses of Popular Creation). Within the community, the Sunday *horă* was a major source of entertainment, but it was outside the village that the dance ensemble could be appreciated for its choreography, costumes and regional identity (as a part of the national identity). Unlike the Sunday *horă*, where people wore their Sunday best – either traditional attire in the 1950s or fashionable urban clothes from the 1960s on – on stage folklore attire was necessary.

During the first years of socialism, folklore choreographies (together with the newspaper articles read during ‘conferences’) placed Vrâncioaia within the space of the communist bloc, by teaching the standardized cultural forms of other peoples from the same space. From the mid 1950s on, this understanding and usage of ‘folklore’ was maintained, but with the state ideologues turning their attention to national values. This perspective comes through from the activity of the Houses of Popular Creation and from the festival *Cîntarea României*.

According to the ‘Rules and Regulations’ of the houses of culture, printed by the Ministry of Culture in 1960,<sup>87</sup> folklore was to be constantly ‘renewed’ in content, to reflect the realizations of socialism. According to this book, the intellectuals had to ‘keep and enrich the cultural, progressive traditions of the

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<sup>87</sup> Source: archive of the Vrâncioaia house of culture.

Romanian people and the national minorities, through the collection of folkloric creations (songs, dances, costumes, paintings, sculptures etc.), stimulate and capitalize the contemporary folklore creation, put together monographs and chronicles on the history, economic and socio-cultural life of the village, to be used in the mass cultural-educative activities.' The stress here is on the new, 'progressive' forms of folklore, although it remains an elusive category. There was no contradiction with the way folklore was made a part of systematized, standardized cultural forms in the USSR, fostering national identities (Slezkine 2000), which were 'displayed and taught to the "titular groups" involved, as well as to other nationalities' (Pelkmans and McBrien 2008, 90) through folkloric festivals of sorts (Cash 2011).

To a large extent, as has been argued (Giurchescu 1988, Mihăilescu 2008), this Soviet model of folklore display was to be found on the stage of the *Cîntarea României* festival (discussed more in depth in Chapter Seven), and in the activity of the Houses of Popular Creation. The difference between folklore in Ceaușescu's Romania and in the previous period (inspired by the Soviet example) is the orientation towards national values, which, in fact, opened up discussions about the authenticity of folklore – which did not appear as relevant in the Soviet Union (Cash 2011).

A folklore ensemble formed of 16 members was set up in 1959, instructed by the head of the house of culture, Teodor Țibrea, who also managed the theatre and the choir teams. At the national round of *Cîntarea României* in 1976, it would be the theatre team that would win second place, but with a truly folkloric and national subject: the staging of the *Miorița* ballad, with actors dressed in the most authentic costumes they could find reciting and singing. The team was

made up of the village intellectuals, interpreting a poem through which they claimed to represent their regional identity as a core of national identity (see Chapter Two for a discussion on the ballad *Miorița*). 'The only reason they did not give us first prize is because we did not praise the Communist Party and Ceaușescu, but we were happy with second place', says the Romanian school teacher, who interpreted the part of the old lady, the shepherd's mother. The shepherd was played by the village doctor. The participation and success obtained at *Cîntarea României* by the village intellectuals with the ballad *Miorița* brings out specific understandings of folklore underpinned by the festival's framing of 'folklore'.

*Cîntarea României* was a festival organized through the House of Popular Creation from 1976 onwards. The festival was set up to express and define national identity in communist Romania as theorized by the state ideologues, who merged communist and nationalist ideologies (Verdery 1991). One of its characteristics is the way in which space and culture are defined as bounded, within the setting of the state. The stage of the house of culture became the stage of the nation-state, where each region was represented by particular dances – in this respect, not different from the Soviet examples. The festival engaged the entire country, with the teams set up by factory unions competing on the same level as ones from the countryside, by performing dances or traditions characteristic of their county.

This had specific consequences for the way folklore and traditions were thought about at a local level. A sanitized version of some of the disappearing regional customs would be transformed into choreographies or staged expressions of folklore. Each village in Vrancea had to have its own distinct,



discrete characteristic ‘folklore’ by which it defined itself on the stage of the nation-state. The village of Nerej had ‘Chipăruşul’, the wake dance of the village elderly, turned into a stage performance, devoid of its ritual and social significance; Năruja had a famous dance ensemble; Nistoreşti had bagpipers; in Paltin they had Alpine horns and flutes – and these associations between villages and particular forms of folk performance continue today, as their reputation led to further institutional support from the Houses of Popular Creation (see Mihăilescu 2008 and Chapter Seven for details on the economy of participation in folklore festivals). The development of this division of folk art by village came partly out of the research of local intellectuals into the ‘folk’ forms of their village (as instructed by the *Îndrumător*), but mostly out of the textbooks and the training received via the Houses of Popular Creation, who provided them with something of a folklore repertoire.

The *Miorița* performance brought out other features that ‘folklore’ gained during this period: it became incorporated into modern art, and theatre; and it linked Vrâncioaia to the national narrative, to Romanian high culture through the choice of the poem (see discussion in Chapter Two). These modern features did not prevent it from winning plaudits from the jury for its authenticity and the costumes used.

So why was the Vrâncioaia theatre team able to accommodate so many definitions of folklore? My argument is that it was not only the voice of the state ideologues mobilizing a communist-nationalist version of ‘folklore’ that made itself heard through the village houses of culture. Other voices included that of the ethnographic museums, and that of the Institute of Folklore (institutions that had also managed to influence the Houses of Popular Creation after 1960).

One document in the archive of the Vrâncioaia house of culture records a request from the Initiative Committee of the Regional Museum in Putna to the village intellectuals to collect objects from the village for a regional county museum in Focșani (the centre of the county), 'which would represent the life, cultural patterns and labour of the people of the past and of today, who lived and continue to live in our region'. The staff were given clear instructions on what to collect, but mostly on how to conduct the research: they were to take as many photographs as possible of houses (both inside and outside), and of all the places in the landscape where humans have left an imprint (shepherds' retreats, huts, farms, villages). All aspects of everyday life were to be recorded: beds, pots, cupboards, chests, tools of different sorts, in order for the museum to put together scenes that would reconstruct everyday life 'from the past and present'. For costumes, the instruction was to collect the 'old and rare ones'. 'Costumes will be collected according to village, sex and age, with details of names for each part of the costume', demanded the document. Special attention was to be given to shepherd *port* (clothes). 'Folkloric art and general cultural manifestations' constitute a special section, encompassing sculpture, engravings, musical instruments, 'folklore medicine', 'primitive signs of any sort', 'primitive calendars', as well as possible historical materials. Each object needs to be accompanied by a file containing 1) the folk name of the object; 2) the place where it was collected, and the nationality of the people who used it, 3) explanations about the usage of the object, 4) the name of the community and of the donor. The date at which the document was sent is uncertain (possibly 1949), but the details requested differed little from the ones found in the Horniman collection files. It is possible that a similar process took place with

items from the Horniman collection. This shows a clear connection between the different disciplines of 'folklore', which took place in the *cămin cultural*. On the one hand there was the collecting process (of material and 'immaterial' culture) whereby objects from people's houses possibly arrived as far as the Horniman museum; on the other, 'folklore' is disseminated to the villagers in specific forms suitable for stage performance. The local intellectuals, mediated the circulation of things cultural, and implicitly, of things 'folkloric'. It is inside the *cămin cultural* that we realize just how connected museological practices were with the performance of folklore.<sup>88</sup>

Another, more recent document, issued in 1968 by the director of the House of Popular Creation in Focșani, announced a project to write a regional monograph. It demanded from the people in charge of the house of culture a piece of ethnographic research, detailing the music and dances of the village that accompany rituals and local customs. They were to pay special attention to old forms of folklore, which were considered more valuable.

These very detailed pieces of information were to be collected by the village intellectuals active in the house of culture. These kinds of projects, on the one hand isolate 'peasant culture' as exotic, different and bounded, in the way classical ethnography did in the past. However, the peasants were subject to yet another demand: that of modernization, also enabled by the village intellectuals. In both processes, a distance was created and reinforced between the village intellectuals and the peasants, irrespective of other kinds of social relations that might bind them to the community (such as kinship). As folklore was filtered by

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<sup>88</sup> In 1921, in a speech about the history of Vrancea, Iorga was calling out to the appointed teachers in the countryside to also act as folklore collectors, and be aware of the historical and ethnographic richness of the region. This double task of the educator is a feature of the Romanian process of modernization.

these intellectuals, they learnt that there *was* such a thing as bad folklore, not representative, or unsuitable for the museum or for research. In other words, they learned to evaluate the ‘authenticity’ of the material.

One of the main distinctions engendered through the house of culture, which comes through from all the sources that I have considered, is that between a class of intellectuals, who were to instruct the villagers and direct their cultural activity. But they were also the ones who actually ended up representing their village on the regional and national stages. It was through them that particular ways of evaluating ‘folklore’ as a discrete category were disseminated among the villagers. Their understanding of the folk idiom was influenced by *Îndrumător Cultural*, where we find expressions of the state ideology, but also the voices of museum specialists and of the Institute of Folklore (as well as from the Houses of Popular Creation, and the museums). All these sources identify the intellectuals as a distinct category – not unlike researchers – who frame peasants as the retainers of ‘folklore’. Importantly, these institutions pressure the intellectuals into teaching the peasants what truly valuable ‘folklore’ is, and as we shall see in subsequent chapters, all use the idiom of ‘authenticity’ to define ‘value’.

## **Conclusion**

The social life of the Vrâncioaia *cămin cultural* illustrates the way in which the folk idiom changed during the post-war period. Indeed, this is the place that brought together the contradictory demands that the state placed on the peasants. The house of culture was the place where a discrete notion of ‘our culture’ was located, it labelled the community as ‘modern’ (incorporating high

culture and folklore), but it was paradoxically the place where those community practices not sanctified by the state, and labelled as backward, took place as well.

Kligman remarks that through folklore performances, the ideologies of nationalism and communism accommodated to some extent the realities of the mountain villages where old customs were indeed strong: 'these vestiges of the past – peasants and their lifestyles – have been redefined as dynamic testimonials of the socialist present' (Kligman 1988, 260). This placed people such as the Moroşeni from Maramureş or the Vranceans in the position of 'living guardians of a Romanian cultural heritage', while debates around national identity and authenticity took place in the public space after Ceauşescu's advent to power.

Three perspectives on folklore have already been identified: one that placed the Vranceans as part of the communist bloc (especially in the first decade of communist rule), one that placed them within the nation-state and away from 'internationalism' and Soviet influence (from the mid 1950s), and one which identifies itself as 'resistant'. The last of these perspectives was articulated by some of the specialists at the Institute of Folklore, lead by Mihai Pop, who claimed the legacy of the Bucharest Sociological School. Ideas of value and authenticity of folklore were important for all these perspectives.

There is yet another presence of 'folklore' – that performed at weddings, christenings or Sunday *horă*, which we encounter most often in the house of culture throughout its existence (and perhaps the most relevant of all for the local community). At these moments, 'authenticity' or representing one's village were irrelevant aspects, and the clothes that people wore had to stand out and be spectacular. From the point of view of the folklorists (see Chapter Two), the

folk costumes worn by peasants after the 1960s contain modern elements which, as we have seen, folklorists such as Cherciu frown upon (along with the jury members of *Cîntarea României* festival – see Chapter Seven). What the specialists called ‘authentic’ folk dress was dismissed in the village as being old fashioned, as new materials were being incorporated into folk dress.

In this chapter I tried to further identify what the ‘context’ of the Horniman artefacts might be. I have given a historical account of the activities that went on inside the house of culture, including details that the people in Vrâncioaia (or some of them) might not remember so accurately. But for sure I delved into this building’s past tracing what they can remember: the intense folklore activity, the figure of the director, the films, the festivals, the books, and sometimes their disobeying the Party line.

By entering this social history, I discovered that the *cămin cultural* also mediated practices of collecting artefacts, akin to that which brought the Romanian objects to the Horniman museum in 1956. Altogether, I argue that this institution was instrumental in the framing of ‘folklore’ as a discrete activity, able to represent ‘our culture’ and ‘our memory’. Today the building is closed, and little happens inside. In fact, whenever people told me there is no longer any ‘folklore’ or ‘culture’ in the village, they pointed out the locked door of the *cămin cultural*. In the next chapter I discuss new public places where ‘culture’, and ‘folklore’ are performed in Vrâncioaia.

# Chapter Four

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## Reconfigurations of the Public Space

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4. 1 Inside the house of culture of Vrâncioaia, for a baptism party.

The first time I found the house of culture in Vrâncioaia open, it was for the christening of a new baby in the *comună*.<sup>89</sup> The main hall was ready: the table arrangement, covered with white table cloths, formed a horseshoe along the walls of the room; balloons hung from the ceiling and from the uneven whitewashed walls; and fir branches delimited and embellished the stage at the back of the hall. Due to the scarcity of space, a large table had been set up on the stage at the back with speakers on each side. In front of it stood two keyboard players, while the singer and master of ceremony moved around the

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<sup>89</sup> While the house of culture had been widely accessible during socialist times, by the time of my fieldwork it was rarely open. See below.

crowd with a microphone. The keyboards were the only instruments that the band used, replacing the old trumpet, the accordion and the drum.

The guests arrived, most of them by car, dressed in their best evening attire. They were offered a glass of wine, and proceeded to take their places at the table. The style of clothes differed amongst the guests: the elderly women wore rather sombre mid-calf skirts with a shirt and jacket, the younger ones wore cocktail dresses of various sizes, colours and fabrics, while the men wore either dark suits, dark trousers with a jumper, or a shirt and a black leather jacket. The only person in the room to wear anything resembling peasant dress was the lead singer of the band. I could see him in the midst of the party, moving amongst the dancing couples or standing in the middle of the *horă*, controlling the pace of the party with his music, oscillating between *muzică ușoară*<sup>90</sup> and *muzică populară*<sup>91</sup>. Within half an hour most of the guests had arrived, and without further ado they all got up to dance, filling the wide space between the rows of tables arranged against the walls.

This was what I imagined the place had been like in its prime. But those days were gone and the padlock on the door that was there most of my time in Vrâncioaia was testimony to the passing of time. The christening was a colourful gathering. The party moved to the rhythms coming from the keyboards, coordinated by the lead singer in his folksy waistcoat, who played a little music that catered for every taste (while Grandma held the six-month-old baby, who seemed to quite enjoy it all). Christening parties are really the only celebrations that take place in the *cămin cultural* now, as there is not the same social pressure

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<sup>90</sup> Equivalent to pop music, literally translated as 'light music'.

<sup>91</sup> Set genre referring to traditional Romanian music. See Chapters Seven and Eight.



to put on an extravagant party, or to invite the extended family as there is with other family celebrations. So for a more humble party, this space will do. But as there are so many kin connections to town, and so much pressure to demonstrate status, most wedding parties now take place in restaurants in town. The *cămin cultural* no longer connects the village to the nation, constituting the hub of the community, but has gained a demeaning connotation of backwardness.

This loss of prestige is not only connected to the diminishing population (there are fewer weddings and baptisms) and to people's changing aspirations towards the world outside – in Focșani or further afield, in Italy. The institution has ceased to mediate the connection between the village and the wider world, and no longer are activities, educational or entertainment, organized there. The village house of culture has lost its power to bring the community together and to constitute the place where social relations are created and confirmed – be that within the village, with kin living outside the village or with the state.

For the people in the village, the sight of folk costumes in my photographs – *costum național* as they call it – referenced the house of culture of the past. The change from *clothes* to *costum* mirrors a colonization of the private and public space of the village by the ideology of the nation. As the *cămin cultural* (alongside the school, the roads and other institutions) placed the village within the space of the modern nation-state, peasant clothes became 'national costume' – and I have illustrated that path through the discussion of the house of culture in chapter three. But today the *cămin* is no longer the locus of statements about identity, of relating to the state, or of rituals confirming the community. Instead, it stays locked most of the times, and only becomes active every now and then, bringing

out elements of a disjointed past. The importance of the building for the community in the past is demonstrated by the present-day significance of its being closed. The *cămin* evokes at once subjective memories, sensory processes to do with performing on stage or participating in village rituals together, but also memories of its formal connection to education, and the incentive to better oneself.

I met Mrs O., one of my main interviewees, because the other villagers identified her as being knowledgeable in all things folkloric. This was not due to her age or her impressive handy work, however, but because she has been one of the people in charge of *muncă culturală* (cultural work). Not once did I listen to her lament the loss of 'culture', illustrated so clearly by the padlock on the door of the *cămin cultural*. 'Culture' here also meant 'folklore', as the *cămin cultural* was seen as the one place where the 'continuation of traditions' could have been insured, a place that was able to conjure up all that was 'good folklore' in the village and put it on display (through dances or other activities), while at the same time contributing towards people's education. The loss of 'culture' also meant the closure the library, and 'leaving the keys in the hands of someone who's never read one book', as Mrs O. bluntly put it, referring to the clerk at the village hall who was officially in charge of the house of culture, but did little else apart from locking and unlocking the building from time to time. This claim of being 'cultureless', which suggested both the failure of the modernising socialist project and the loss of the 'authentic traditions' and 'folklore' because of modernization, was, as I discovered, not so much an absence as a relocation and redefinition of this objectified 'culture'. This relocation and redefinition of the present came with a reinterpretation of the past.

The rich body of literature around 'memory' places it in opposition to official history (Nora 1989). This distinction is sustained by the different places where these two perspectives on the past are located, and the different strategies that they utilize. Connerton posits that totalitarian regimes and their 'obsessive and total war on memory' (which extends beyond official documents and into people's private lives) caused 'every act of recollection, every attempt to disinter and reconstitute the past' to be considered an act of opposition to state power, thus escalating the importance of memory, during and especially after these regimes' demise (2006, 316). During my fieldwork in Vrâncioaia I witnessed a period when memories of the pre-communist past were surfacing and were being transformed into official 'history'. Most strikingly, asserting the religiosity of the community throughout the communist period (even of the Communist Party members), and bringing back memories of the religious aspects from before the socialist period were ways of inserting Vrâncioaia into post-communist reinterpretations of national history. In the process of asserting this past through official commemorations and retellings, memories of everyday life during the communist era remain in the realm of the unofficial. They, too, surface when people perform identity in their folk attire, which reminds most people of the colourful performances inside the house of culture.

In order to better understand the reconfiguration of space and the public sphere of the village in the year 2011, I paid attention to how locality is produced here through the activation of certain places as hubs of 'culture', while leaving others to fall into a state of decay. At stake is how and when the past is remembered and re-enacted, but also how it is managed and who gains prestige out of it. The redefining of identity and alterity, of social structures that

constitute the community of Vrâncioaia, is played out through materiality, through buildings and landscape, through memorial practices in the public sphere, through an active 'digging out' and forgetting about certain materials (such as archives and buildings). At times, folk attire comes out of the private space of wardrobes and family memorabilia, and is brought out in public, where it works to perform a collective identity, but also, at a subtle level, to mark distinctions of class and education between the members of the community. Being able to recognize a valuable costume and perform traditions correctly still distinguishes the 'cultured' inhabitants of Vrâncioaia from the peasants, although the configurations of this performance are different from those before 1989. A class of local intellectuals, formed during (and by) the socialist regime continues to maintain a position of elite, and even mobilize the relocation of power and 'culture' in the public space.

### **The space of the church**

On my first brief visit to Vrâncioaia, the few people I had contact with understood that my work was connected with what they would term 'culture'. The people I spoke to persuaded me that the next village had more 'culture': a functioning house of culture with folk crafts, dance and singing activities. Because she wanted to make our visit more fruitful (mine and my fiancé's), before we departed the priest's wife took us into the church, which had just been refurbished. If we were going to see anything, and have some contact with that which materializes the value of the village, it was going to be that. After giving me a minute to bless myself at the iconostasis, she drew my attention to the painting of a young boy in military uniform at the entrance to the church. She

explained it was King Michael, a portrait that had been discovered only a few months before, when the church was being refurbished. It had been there all those years – right from when the church was completed in 1945, when he was briefly king, but was then quickly covered by a different portrait when Michael was forced to abdicate after the socialist government came to power. Everyone in the village had forgotten about it, and the younger generations, including her husband, knew nothing about it. At the moment of my visit, the painting had become a witness of the repression of the church during the communist period<sup>92</sup>; and mentioning the community's forgetfulness was a way for the priest's wife to say that people were fickle while the objects endured. Unlike people, the painting had 'resisted'. Its revealing and celebration marked the movement of religion from a space of privacy during the communist period – when going to church could run risks – to the present, when religion moved 'back' into the public sphere, and the communist past was denounced not only through the icons, but through the portrait of the king.

The trope of the 'return' often occurs with redefinitions of culture in post-communist Romania (Verdery 1996). The quest for 'authentic folklore' is another manifestation of this 'return'. After the end of the communist period, ethnographers from the Folklore Institute in Bucharest 'returned to the field site'<sup>93</sup> to see which of the old traditions had survived. Their search for the 'old people of the village' who could act as witnesses of that 'authenticity' of the past was assiduous, but most of the researchers concluded that very little of the true peasant culture had survived (see the analysis of Cherciu in Chapter Two). More

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<sup>92</sup> Whether such repression took place in Vrâncioaia during Romanian Socialist Republic is uncertain, as was the role of the Orthodox Church in Romania during that period. .

<sup>93</sup> According to the former head of the School of Popular Arts.

important than the actual findings, though, was the decision to carry out the research; the moment of the 'return' was also the moment when 'folklore' as a category of Romanian 'culture' changed its meaning, simply through the fact that the ethnographers were framing their research in terms of 'return', 'loss' or 'survival'. No longer were they interested in what the people performed on the stage at the houses of culture, but instead their attention turned exclusively to the old 'traditional' forms that had (not) have 'survived' communism. Seen from the point of view of 'returnees' to the field site after the fall of socialism, any trace of 'traditions' or authentic peasant customs (especially to do with beliefs), was perceived as 'resistance'. The findings – that true peasant culture had 'disappeared' – implied the agent of destruction was the former socialist state.<sup>94</sup>

Through their contact with the county folklore institutions, the village intellectuals were sensitive to this ideological shift and to the language and practices of 'returning'.<sup>95</sup> At the same time, other cultural institutions, such as the Vrancea Cultural Centre, a part of the Ministry of Culture which is in charge of local heritage, funded the restoration of churches, disseminated materials which located heritage and 'culture' in churches, and also contributed to a redefinition of folklore and authenticity<sup>96</sup>. The importance of the church came through other channels as well, and its centrality in Vrâncioaia in 2011 was undeniable. The Orthodox Church plays an important role in redefining national identity in Romania today, which is why other categories that make up national identity, such as folk art, have come to sit so comfortably alongside religion. In the post-

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<sup>94</sup> This was the discourse of the folklore specialists I spoke to in Bucharest, but also in Focșani and Deva.

<sup>95</sup> Anticommunism and the search for an unaltered, authentic 'peasant' to reframe national identity are hegemonic ideas in Romania, available through mass media and the attitudes of a 'cultured' class, and also through church.

<sup>96</sup> See Chapter Six.

socialist context religion is ‘a major force fuelling social transformation’ (Naumescu 2007, 1).

This aspect attracted the production of material culture for and around religion in Vrâncioaia. The church is the only construction in the village that gets constantly extended, and therefore employs workers amongst the local youth who would otherwise most likely leave the village. When I arrived there in 2011, they had just finished building an annexe to the church, which consisted of a very large dining room, kitchen and bedrooms for guests of the church – priests or monks, or even sometimes a TV crew (see below). The dining hall hosts *pomană*<sup>97</sup> and other church-related events based around the sharing of food. Such events no longer had to take place inside the house of culture, which was in a state of decay. Religious rituals which, in the past, took place at home, and more recently, in the house of culture, has been moved in close proximity to the church, in what is now one of the largest buildings in the village. Although this construction, too, is often empty, its function is similar to that of the ‘good room’, but with further restrictions on the kind of ritual performed. The mere fact of a new public building rising in the village is reason for optimism in the post-socialist economic and cultural system which appears to privilege the church. In 2013 the church annexes extended to include the construction of a grand bell tower. In addition, Vrâncioaia has an old wooden church (from around 1800) that has been declared a heritage building and has received money for refurbishment.

The church is the place where women prove their abilities and worth by elaborating and displaying specific food and *ștergare* (cloths) offered at celebrations that include prayers for the dead. As my presence there had stirred

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<sup>97</sup> Commemorations for the dead which take place at set intervals.

an interest in old folk objects, women started to bring old folk cloths (which have recently been replaced by small towels) and were keen to display them for my photographs. Other examples of folk work, such as traditional eggs dyed for Easter, were taken to church and displayed on the blessing table, before the priest and the other churchgoers.<sup>98</sup>

It is inside the church that the hierarchies in the village are enacted through a very specific way of occupying space (see also Kligman 1988). Women sit on one side of the church, and the young ones kiss the hand of the older women. Few men usually go to church, and from the 'intellectual' class, churchgoers are almost exclusively women. The priest and the villagers know that some of the elite did not go to church during the communist period, as many were obliged to be members of the Communist Party. Some of them practiced religion in privacy, or attended mass in more remote monasteries. They now occupy their place in church as village elites. Although there is a tacit rivalry between the priest and some of the former socialist cadres, the church is a space where the social relations in the village are made visible, and where distinctions on the lines of 'communism', 'anti-communism', 'resistance' do not seem always to be relevant. These notions may sometimes be expressed in the rivalry between the village elites, but in the context of the whole community, an intellectual will be granted a place at the front. Their presence in church, especially of the women, further legitimizes their role as elites, but also their position as proper women.

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<sup>98</sup> At the end of the service, the priest keeps all the goods, which then get sent to monasteries or children's homes.



The local priest is also a craftsman. He is a carpenter, specializing in church furniture, which he distributes himself around the country in his car. This



4. 2 The workshop of the priest, on the day when a television crew came to Vrâncioaia to make a feature about him. The oldest man in the village (pictured) put on his old peasant attire and was invited to be filmed, to give the feature a more traditional feel.

small business offers employment to three or four young men in the village, who are also spiritually close to the church. Two of them were the boys that the priest's family had taken into care when they

were little, and later adopted. Making them properly part of the family involved giving them tasks around the house, around the church and in the workshop. All the young men learn the craft from the priest, who is a self-taught craftsman. In addition, he has also managed to gain access to EU funds to start bee-keeping, and other funds for local development<sup>99</sup>. The priest is indeed recognized as a *gospodar*, a hard working man, able to spot opportunities and to constantly gain moral but also economic capital, which is then reinvested in the community. The church is not only the place where rituals are enacted, but also where social relations in the village are confirmed; in the post-socialist context, it has developed an economic importance in the village. The fact that it is the place where 'culture' is located should come as no surprise. The mountain location of Vrâncioaia, and its proximity to several monasteries, contributes to its

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<sup>99</sup> The project was quite ambitious, involving lamb breeding. It seems to not have been very successful.

identification (by urbanites) as being holy, while the presence of an old church that needs refurbishing encourages the flow of capital from the centre (the government) towards religion. All of these reinforce the central position that the church has in Vrâncioaia.

### **Locating 'culture' outside the church**

The active process of remembering and forgetting that takes place during the relocation of 'culture', value and identity becomes clear in the treatment of different archives. On my first visit to Vrâncioaia, Petre, whose parents were part of the official elite of the village, was very keen to talk to me about the long history of the place, upon which its value rested. His knowledge of national and local history, from the Middle Ages to World War Two, was exceptional. Of great importance for the identity of the region was the institution of *obște* (see Chapter Two), which, he explained with enthusiasm, has been reinstituted, after the communists disbanded it. In his hands he had the material proof: he had found documents in the town hall from 1900 to the interwar period with all the names of the *obște* members. Since he believed people didn't care about it (thinking that nobody in the village hall was cultured enough to acknowledge the value of these 'found' documents), and he thought it might get lost among unimportant documents in the town hall, he kept the file at home. Not only did the document prove (to the outsider) where memory and identity are situated, but his act of temporary theft (he was going to take it back, as he was, after all, a village hall official) also expressed something of his lack of trust in the state system, which he was actively subverting. In other words, it was not with the mayor that 'culture' and 'memory' should reside, but with the village intellectuals.

Seeing Petre with the precious documents close by his side, I asked if he knew anything about the archives of the house of culture. There was no trace of them, Petre assured me, the archives were lost when interest in the place declined. Mrs O. interrupted at this point, explaining that the state hadn't paid money towards the library since 1974 ('a terrible lack of care!'), and the interest for 'culture' had gradually been lost too, together with the books. During my fieldwork period in Vrâncioaia, Mrs O. still had the key to the library, which she refused to pass on to the person who had been given the task to administrate the *cămin cultural* for the last 10 years, because she did not judge that person to be 'cultured' enough to merit this key.

I went back to Vrâncioaia after a one year absence. By chance I had met the village monograph writer, Vasile Țibrea, who currently lives in Focșani. It was from him that I learned about the existence of the house of culture archive, and how to track it down through the post-communist directors of the institution (all of them tragically uninterested in the institution, in his opinion). After a long day of knocking from door to door, the lock of the *cămin cultural* finally came off. Alas, there was no light, and the sun had long set on that December day. Maria, the village hall part-time employee who had the key to the house of culture, led me to a corner where we made our way through stacks of crockery and cutlery from the previous party to a crooked cupboard which could neither be properly opened nor closed. Beneath some clutter, Maria dug out the archive files. We laid them on the table in three huge stacks, the mayor, myself and Maria staring at them in bewilderment. The mayor was the first one to speak. As if in an official press interview, he talked about the great shame upon himself and the village hall in not knowing that the archive was there, rotting away, but also of how

grateful he was that I had managed to find it. I started flicking through a random file that proclaimed the change of the institution's name to 'Casa de Cultura Friedrich Engels'. The mayor spelled the name out loud in surprise, adding that he never knew their *cămin cultural* had ever had a name. What was the name of the building now, I asked. 'No name, just Cămin Cultural', he replied. 'But now that we know it once had a name, after we refurbish it next year, we should give it the name it had historically: Frederick Engels'. The mayor knew that the rhetoric of 'history', 'memory' and of 'renovation' brought him capital, especially when talking to an outsider interested in such things; he was already in the business of recovering 'memory' (see below). That he got the wrong historic address – suggesting the rescuing of a communist name, instead of a pre-communist one – was his honest mistake. It only proves how little of the iconic figures of communism a pupil learned about in the 1980s.

While the archive of the local house of culture mattered little to the mayor and staff of the village hall, it mattered greatly for the author of the village monograph: but not the entire archive, only the register from the time the house of culture was founded, in the interwar period. For him, as for Petre, culture had to be recuperated from that period alone. Although he had been active in organizing events at the house of culture for over twenty years, he did not value that experience, which could not contribute to fashioning Vrancean identity as part of the national hegemonic discourse in 2011. The 'memory' from before his time deserved to be rescued, while the memories of the village during the socialist period occupied the ambiguous space of lived history.

The 'evocative transcripts' (Humphrey 1994, 25) in this situation are the texts that reiterate a particular (pre-communist) past, eliciting narratives which

locate 'culture' in the past, omitting the transformations that took place in the socialist period. One event that I did not attend, but had been publicized in the county newspaper, was the erecting of a statue to Neculai Jechianu (see Chapter Three). The mayor told me about this local personality in one breath: that he was a great historical character who built the modern centre of Vrâncioaia, he was repressed by the communists, and we must now acknowledge him. The unveiling of the statue, funded by the EU, together with the park in front of the school, was not without ceremony. The photographs show a small crowd including Mr Țibrea, author of a biography of Neculai Jechianu, Părintele Dănilă, political officials, and children dressed in folklore attire. The unveiling was accompanied by a blessing by the priest, with *colivă* and *colac*<sup>100</sup>, practically sacralising the statue through a ritual for the dead. The ritual seemed elaborate – there was enough food for the whole audience to share, just like at a proper memorial service. The photographs also show the pupils dressed up in *costum popular*, performing dances and a short play, based around Baba Vrâncioaia pulling thread from her distaff. The event clearly demonstrates a concentration of symbols and materials, claimed by official politics. But it also shows that 'official politics' does not go unchallenged, but is in a constant tug of war over symbols with the members of the local intellectuals and the church.

For a long time, Jechianu only lived in the memory of some of the villagers. His removal from the government, and temporary imprisonment made him, after 1989, a figure through which the past could be recuperated and the communist period can be publically denounced. His statue is not only there to remember a pre-communist elite figure, but also to forget the complicated local

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<sup>100</sup> Specific types of food used in rituals for the commemoration of the dead.

history of the interwar period, and to redeem the elite families and the village community.

### **Buildings of the past**

The centre of Vrâncioaia demonstrates the modernizing efforts that the village has seen throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One enters the area of the *comună* a good few kilometres on from *the neck* ('grumaz' see Chapter Two), reaching a large, slightly decentred wooden gate, with a small wooden bus shelter and kiosk at the side; all of them based on folk patterns but built in 1988. Inscribed onto the folk gate are the words *Bine ați Venit* (Welcome), on one pillar and *Vrâncioaia*, on the other. Surprisingly, the road continues, and a few kilometres later we enter the village of Vrâncioaia and almost immediately find ourselves in the centre. As we enter, to the left there is a path that leads to the house of the mayor, his shop and pub – clearly marked as new and modern by the shiny brown tiles and smoky-coloured double-glazed windows. In front of it, is a cooperative institution founded by Jechianu in the interwar period, and across the street the house of Jechianu himself, empty and not standing out in any way. A few meters further is a block that still carries the sign 'Cooperative shop'. Through the window, you can see large boxes stacked one on top of the other with 'Ajutoare' ('foreign aid') written on them, left there for what looks like years, in the midst of a empty room. No one seems to be living upstairs. Next to this is a recently built house, with modern garden furniture and, unlike all other gardens, a large fence and lawn in front of the houses. A few meters further down we find two apartment blocs with a small garden in front, and a few people hanging around the garden, self-consciously different from the old couples resting on benches outside their

houses. At the ground floor, the window sign announces: *Dispensary – Humans and Animals*.

A few more buildings follow on both sides, one of which is the priest's workshop, guarded by a relatively high fence, then within 20 meters we are at the midpoint of the village, with the town hall, the school and a park, and then the seismic station on the left hand side. Almost directly opposite, is the church, with a large churchyard and a cemetery further up the hill to the back. Right next to it, is the house of culture, while across the road is the priest's house with a shop right next to it. Most of the schoolteachers live in this area or very near it.

Small as it is, the village centre shows many traces of the past: some buildings have been left to decay, a few new houses have been built, while a few others refurbished. Processes of relocating, redefining or negating 'culture' are visible, and are connected to 'broader structuring relationships through which places are historically produced' (Richardson 2008, 21). The different historical trajectories of these buildings constitute Vrâncioaia as a place as Massey (2005, 140) would argue. A palimpsest might suggest that each layer of history is a unit, integrating a historical moment in time with a particular set of beliefs and values and the material manifestations. But because space is not synchronic, neither can history be seen as a succession of synchronic tableaux, into which one building or another is integrated. Rather, space is made up of traces, of trajectories that sometime run parallel, at other times they intersect, some are buried and forgotten only to be rediscovered and claimed later on. For instance, when the co-operative was built, the church was still to some extent relevant to all the people in the community – even through the two buildings came out of different political regimes which were in conflict at the time. Paradigms of thought and

cultural practices do not overwrite each other completely from one historical period to the other, they maintain relevance, compete with each other or run parallel for a while, and join up at times.

Twenty-five years after the end of communism, the material aspects of life under socialism stand out, as they are no longer relevant in people's everyday lives. The cooperative, most of all, was central in engendering the particular relationship between the space of the household and the overarching structure of the state, and also the place where distinctions between households were made visible. It was the place everyone in the village had to pay their quota in produce, and the employees of this institution would chase peasants, enter their yards and search their households to make sure they declared the right amount of things they have, which would determine the calculation of the quota. It also made salient the distinction between classes in the village: the state employees had more currency than the peasants. Săndica has distinct memories from her childhood of the time when she saw the shiny jars of golden peach compote in the window of the Cooperative shop, and desperately wanted one. Her mother had no money, but after pleading and begging, Săndica received a big bag of walnuts to take to the Cooperative to pay for the compote. She remembers the embarrassment of walking up there with walnuts instead of money, and imagined everyone's laughter or pity at the sight of this clear sign of being a poor peasant, bringing produce for currency. But no matter, the compote tasted great in the end! These are sensuous memories connected to the materiality of space, and of the different 'everyday'.

Unlike the blocks, the cooperative or the school (all of which stand for authority), the house of culture evokes warmer feelings, the good side of a



bygone era. When Săndica married Dan at the end of the 1990s, the village house of culture was falling apart. In their teenage years, they knew it to be at the heart of all kinds of activities, especially the great number of weddings they both remember taking place there. They decided to refurbish it themselves, with the help of some friends in the village, to make it fit for their own wedding reception. Their story sounded like an attempt to save what belonged to them – for Dan and Săndica, as well as the people attending the wedding – from the rejected memory of communism. The workload was tremendous, and though they had some regrets about taking it on, they fully enjoyed their wedding there. And for a few years after, before all the young people left for Italy or started to have their weddings at fancy restaurants in town, many other weddings followed. People used to have a great time, I was told.<sup>101</sup>

In one of our many discussions about the local school and the community, Săndica, who is a biology teacher in the village, told me about the previous year when she decided to involve the children in a performance at the end of the school year at the *cămin cultural*. They learned some *muzică populară* songs from a CD with Maria Murgoci (a Vrancean folkloric star), studied a few folk dance steps, recited poems and performed funny sketches. Săndica did all the work together with the young English teacher, rehearsing twice a week with pupils who were not always enthusiastic, while having to overcome the pessimism of the older teachers at school. All she wanted was to make the house of culture feel and look like it once had when she was a pupil. She wanted to see it full of people, of parents, all proud of the performance their children had put

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<sup>101</sup> Dan and Săndica's memories are vivid. As soon as the guests arrived, they would quickly eat through their traditional four wedding courses, so that afterwards they would take all the tables outside and just danced. In this area people are extremely keen dancers.

on. Having managed to get a sound system, she got everything ready and on the day of the grand event it all went as planned – and even better than Sândica had expected. So many people came that there was no more room for them, they cheered, they interacted with each other, they had a good time and talked about it for weeks afterwards.

What seemed clear from my interviews with the people of Vrâncioaia is that the absence of activities and performances at the *cămin cultural* mirrors the lack of perspectives in the community and the emptying of the village. As for Sândica, the cultural activities did not retain the meanings once associated with communist propaganda. They came to mean something else, a reason for people to come together, or a way to signify the identity and strength of the community. Even though the folkloric dances were not the same as the ones that their grandparents used to dance at the *horă*, being in the ensemble still offered the opportunity and pleasure of dancing, and of getting the steps right. Mourning the absence of culture was a lament for the dissolution of the community – as if investing time and energy in performing folklore dances on stage was a recuperation of ‘tradition’ that activated the community.

### **Constituting locality through mass media**

I had only been in Vrâncioaia for a couple of weeks when my host mentioned in passing that some people from national television would be coming to film. They had contacted the village priest who then asked all the congregation, if they had ‘national costume’ at home to wear it the following Sunday, for the television recording.

As Sunday approached, the women of the village (the main members of the congregation) were fretting, exchanging pieces of costume, borrowing and lending parts, so that in the end everyone was well matched. The shoes posed problems, as *opinci*<sup>102</sup> hadn't been worn in the village for a long time. This peasant footwear is characteristic of Vrancea, and is made out of pig skin, which is widely accessible (every family kills at least one pig a year at Christmas). Nobody seemed to have thought of *opinci* as something valuable, so very few old pairs were kept. Despite the fact that nobody makes *opinci* nowadays, though, Mrs O. had the ambition to wear a full costume, and nothing would stand in her way. A neighbour gave her a couple of square pieces of pigskin that her husband found in the attic. The next day, the neighbours appeared in church each wearing a pair of their best shoes. Mrs O., meanwhile, had spent the evening making her brand-new footwear, reminiscing about how skilled her own father used to be at making them.

The other person in the congregation who was going to wear traditional shoes was Loredana, a French teacher, and daughter of a family of teachers in the village. Although the shoes were a good couple of sizes too big, they handsomely completed the costume, and once she was dressed up, one could not imagine her without them. The men of the village were the only ones unconcerned about the costumes.

The next morning there was commotion everywhere – outside the house of culture, the church and the priest's house. As all three places are right next to one another (two houses away from Mrs O.'s residence) it was difficult at first to distinguish the groups. At closer inspection, though, it became clear that the

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<sup>102</sup> The old footwear in the region.

people outside the house of culture, most of whom were men, had no intention of going to church that morning. They looked agitated, they had politics and business on their minds. Next door, the bells were ringing and the cameras were getting ready. Mrs O. put her costume on, dressed up the children, and was walking to and fro, uncertain about how to arrange her silk, hand-woven headscarf. She was soon ready, dissatisfied in her usual way, urging the children and myself to get going. I put my camera into my bag, where it was going to stay until it was safe to get it out, put a scarf over my head, and joined them in church.

Mrs O. was wearing her beautiful old costume. It was, she explained to me, one of the finest overskirts in the village, at least 100 years old, while the blouse was almost as old. Both were embroidered with metallic thread, the kind that women used to save up for and use their skills to sew it through the fine fabric of a shirt or a thick woollen overskirt. The pattern on the shirt was characteristic of the village, beautiful diamond shapes sown with yellow silk thread, with black geometrical figures in the middle. The black overskirt shimmered with golden metallic thread, and red and green woollen thread. The socks hadn't been knitted, but crocheted, beautiful lace models made out of thick woollen fabric. The fine silk headscarf was loosely wrapped around her head, allowing her white hair to show. The outfit underlined her sombre demeanour, her sceptical frown. As she proudly walked to church, the old school teacher, librarian and leader of the women's Communist Party organization was saluted by the villagers. To them she did not seem to inspire awe. One older lady who was used to wearing her black hand-woven skirt all the time, asked her jokingly: how come your skirt is embellished with such cheerful colours? You know, you are an old lady now, like us. You ought to wear black at your age! Mrs O. did not

waste time with chatter, but answered sharply, as she was walking by: 'what do you know about it? This is 100 years old – it's very valuable!' And hurried on.

The church was full of people, almost as I had seen it on Easter night. Most of the women were dressed up in their costumes. It was the only time I ever saw the church like that. Most of the congregation consisted of women, although there were some young men, who come regularly. They usually have some close connection with the priest, either working with him in church or in the woodcraft workshop. They wore beautiful shirts – made for a bridegroom, as the ladies said – though not all of them wore the white woollen trousers, to make a full costume.

The TV crew entered the church half way through the mass and filmed part of the service. The shots they were going to use eventually in the documentary were close-ups of the younger women taking communion. The television crew and I were wary of each other, so I avoided taking photographs while they were at work.

Once the service was over and the congregation went outside, the film crew left. There was excitement and chatter about those old clothes that no one had thought about in a long time. Everyone wanted their picture taken. Outside the church it was now *my* photo territory. My presence in the village and my questions about old costumes, coupled with the wish of the TV crew to see people dressed up, may have stirred up this enthusiasm. It looked like people had been waiting for just the right occasion to put the costumes on. Someone had brought a table runner with beautiful lace work for me to see. It soon drew the attention of a few ladies present there, and the critical eye of Mrs O.

People were aware that I was not going to leave the village thinking that this is how people dress on a regular basis. My friend Ionela asked me, 'What did you think of the performance we put on today?', as if to let me in on their trick. I felt everyone was excited all of a sudden, as if hoping to convince me and themselves that this village wasn't in such a decayed state, that there was still some value to it as long as these performances of the past found a place that allowed the community to assemble and articulate a form of 'self'. It proved that folk attire plays an important part in the village.

I was told that in the past women used to weave and embroider all winter, often behind locked doors so that the other girls and women in the village couldn't steal their patterns. It was on Easter Sunday that everyone wore their new shirt or overskirt, in order to impress, confirm their status or increase their chances of a good marriage. What everyone wore was a topic of intense discussion. The discussion and hierarchies now, however, were assessed differently. It was no longer a question of who can make the most complicated costume, with a pattern that no one else had seen before. Rather, it was a question of who possesses 'heritage', valuable and authentic things kept in their dowry chests. The beauty of the clothes was a measurement of the worth and artistry of the old women who had made them. 'They couldn't even read and write...' was what I would often hear from knowledgeable schoolteachers, suggesting respect for the women who had the knowledge to make wonderful things. But the suggestion also reaffirmed the distance from 'those women', and the modernity of today's women.

In the evening Mrs T., the former Romanian language teacher of the village, paid a visit to my host. The excitement hadn't worn off, and they were

both eager to see the pictures I had taken outside church that morning. As I was going through them, Mrs T.'s comments pointed out that the girls who were so proudly wearing the old costumes were indeed ladies, not peasants. They were the daughters of the village elites, teachers, clerks and the other educated people of the village, who did not live off the land and animal farming. Meanwhile, the real peasants showed stern, upright postures. They were impossible to mistake for anyone else, even if their shirts were mostly 'inauthentic' (see Chapter Five). As in the old days, the costume did not fail to affirm hierarchies in the village.<sup>103</sup>

Two weeks later, the priest announced to the congregation the time and channel on which the programme about Vrâncioaia was going to be shown. Everyone was eager to see it. The 30-minute programme entitled 'Craftsman of Souls' (*Cioplitor de Suflete*) was focused on the wood-crafting workshop of priest Dănilă, where he made church furniture. The rhetoric of the programme followed a well-known pattern, which associates religion with tradition, and regards the people of villages as simple, isolated but spiritual. The landscape and women in old folk dress shown in the footage contributed to building the same image of spirituality coming from time immemorial. The voiceover made references to old legends and talked about the discovery of true Romanianness. This image of the village strongly contrasted with another one, present almost as often in the media: the one of a God-forsaken village, taken over by flood or buried under snow. The only faces we see on TV then are those of men sitting passively in the pub. Little in between or outside these images of the countryside appears in mass media.

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<sup>103</sup> I was told of other times when people put on folk dress is when televisions come to do some filming of the seismic station.





4.3 Sunday's best. Dressed up for the TVR camera. And for my camera too.





4.4. Dressed up to perform being Vrancean.

## Conclusion

The space in which the dressed-up community was brought together to confirm their collective identity through the re-enactment of collective memory was not only the church, but also the mass media. Both these institutions link Vrâncioaia to places further afield, although the church only occasionally becomes active as the kind of a medium where identity and 'culture' are performed. Together, mass media and the church have taken on the main function of the house of culture, as the place where value is established, where claims to history and to the future of the community are made, where hierarchies of prestige and distinction are recognized. Some of these are expressions of hegemonic views on the countryside and redefinitions of the nation, whereby religion *must* imbue material culture, if the folk object is to be considered authentic and valuable. In this rhetoric, the true value of 'isolated' places such as Vrancea resides in their spirituality, and through their proximity to monasteries (yet another space of anti-communist resistance).

The people of Vrâncioaia drew attention to themselves as a community that possessed a 'culture' that was relevant nationally. But the display of traditional dress in church did much more than bring out commonalities among the villagers: it also pointed out differences in understandings of value and in possessions. Such items of dress were rarely worn, but once they were out in public, everyone used them to measure each other's worth by evaluating the costumes. The intellectuals possessed valuable, 'authentic' things, even though they had not made the costumes they were wearing. Their merit was to have sourced the valuable items, and to have chosen them from among the

‘inauthentic’ ones (made of synthetics or embellished with too baroque a pattern (see Chapter Five)).

In this chapter I have placed folk objects (more specifically costumes) in the context of other kinds of material traces through which space is constituted in the village of Vrâncioaia. An active process of forgetting and remembering, interacting with the changing official narrative, alters the setting for ‘authentic folk objects’, confirming village hierarchies and establishing what is and is not valuable material culture. At work here are different kinds of material, among which ‘folk’ is only one category. As I have shown, ‘folklore’ is not a category that constitutes what we would call everyday material culture, but a specific kind, where ‘culture’ and collective identity are meant to be located. The spaces left unused are markers of everyday life during socialism. All of these materials bring to mind gestures, tastes, senses and impressions from the past. They also contribute to reconfigurations of social relations at the present moment.

While ‘folklore’ is a category that at some level unites the community, at another it brings out divisions, and elements of a disjointed past, of out-of-date ideologies which are difficult to reconcile with present everyday life, but remain a collective resource. Folk items are powerful and evocative for personal and collective memory. For women, their link to the private sphere, makes them difficult to imbibe with the ideologies that dominate the public space, although they are used over and over again to gain access to that public space. Even though the space of performance, the house of culture, is in disuse, folk items have been recuperated for performance elsewhere. It is a category in which a great amount of energy was invested in the past. Brief revivals and glimpses of that energy come through in moments of re-enactment for TV cameras and in particular

places (church, but also at the commemoration of the local inter-war politician) which form the right context for folk performance. In the following chapter I turn to the place where folk objects sit and wait for such moments of activity: women's wardrobes.

# Chapter Five

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## Out of the Wardrobes

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My journey to Vrâncioaia, the source of some of the Horniman objects, had aimed to reconnect these objects with what was seen as their natural ‘context’. But as we have already seen, finding the link between the objects in the museum and the place where they emerged proved not to be so straightforward. In the previous three chapters I have shown how complex the ‘context’ of the objects can be, and how folklore occupies a specific place in this context (although it is by no means visible all the time in the villages of today).

Whilst in the Horniman stores, I had chosen the costume of Vrancea (images 1.10 and 5.14) and the costume of Pădureni (image 1.17), mainly because their documentation gave more details than was the case with other objects, which seemed to make tracking their path back to the households where they were initially made and used possible. As it was set out in the initial research project, my aim in the villages where I travelled was to find members of the families related to the names on my list for the two costumes, gather family histories, and see how the skills necessary for making such things had been transmitted from one generation to another. The smocks, skirts, girdles, woollen stockings, headscarves, and rawhide moccasins which made up these costumes had been made by women identified by name who were described as being ‘a housewife of Romanian nationality’ from Vrâncioaia and Cerbăl (the village in Pădureni) respectively, with details about the particular materials, labour hours and usage of the items. In this chapter I talk about the moments when I came as close as I ever did during my fieldwork to reconnecting an

object from the Horniman with its former owner, and of identifying the counterparts of it in situ. And yet, their biographies remain fragmentary, and the value of these objects is permanently questioned.

I have shown how place is *made* a part of the nation and the state through the active use of folklore in Romania, and also the role of folk dress in re-articulations of the public places in the village of Vrâncioaia. In this chapter I turn to more intimate, private places where folk items are kept: the wardrobes. In the two villages I visited, Cerbăl, in the Pădureni region near Hunedoara, and Vrâncioaia, in Vrancea, the women I spoke to have a small part of their wardrobe dedicated to embroidered blouses, hand-woven skirts and wall hangings, reminiscent of the contents of the old dowry chest. These drawers, which, from what I was told, stay closed most of the time, were unlocked when I started enquiring about the past and old crafts and skills. In the two villages where I did fieldwork, women were eager to open these drawers for me. But the wardrobes did not only reveal clothes; memories, relationships and old ways of establishing hierarchies re-emerged too.

The opening of the wardrobes, the unfolding of the clothes and their impromptu display revealed how items can change their meaning very suddenly. They passed from being fragile items that needed protection from moths and passage of time, to being things that embody memories of kinship, work and gender. Their materiality allows them to *bundle* characteristics that can be articulated into many possible meanings, as Keane discusses (2003, 2005). Meaning is undoubtedly elusive and changing, but what is significant, according to Keane, is that people insist on pulling objects in specific directions, towards particular semiotic ideologies.

The movement of items of dress from the domestic sphere to the public sphere of national museums is accompanied by the construction of particular notions of gender and peasantry, embodied in the museum items. Ideas of authenticity and value help to maintain a particular image of the feminine domestic sphere and of tradition, characterized firstly by the absence of history and a sense of permanence (see Introduction). This image does not find a correspondent in today's villages. However, notions of authenticity and tradition find their way into the wardrobes too, through the ways in which value and inalienability are conferred on items by the women who either made them in the past, or inherited them. Generations of museum specialists collecting objects, evaluating them against the ones that stayed behind in the village have also had an impact on the way things are kept in the village, and their role as a commodity or inalienable object.

### **From cloth to heritage**

The scholarship around dress often points to the variety of meanings that clothes can acquire, whether they are worn frequently or just kept in the wardrobe. Miller (2008) shows how objects that are kept, displayed or hidden inside people's homes stand for a rich network of relations that these objects imbibe. Scholarship that looks for meanings and practices generated around dress points to the uses of clothes to establish identity, and to be able 'to reproduce habitus and subvert it' at the same time (Guy, Green, Manim eds 2001). Tarlo's work (1996) points to the complexity of dress in a Gujarati village, revealing how making, wearing and keeping dress is fraught with dilemmas around these practices. Research into dress reveals that 'clothes are central to a person's

identity, but not in any rigid and deterministic way' (Tarlo 1996, 8). Schneider (2006) speaks about 'the capacity of cloth to enhance who we are and deepen our social relationships', but also about value and politics imbedded in clothes. The literature related to clothes reveals something which we know intuitively: of all the things that people make and use, clothes have a very intimate relationship to the body, and have indeed been referred to as a second skin (Tarlo 1996, Guy, Green and Manim 2011).

In her discussion focused on debates around clothes in India, Tarlo (1996) argues her preference for the term 'dress' instead the term 'costume', as the first entails a closer relationship between body and cloth, and is thus more faithful to the idea that dress and identity are closely interlinked. 'Costume', on the other hand, comes with a process of 'othering' the wearer: if we don't refer to the clothes in our wardrobe as 'costume', why should we use the term when talking about what people wear in India? Indeed, when we think of costume, we think of performance (a 'costume drama', for instance), or of putting on clothes that make us feel we are someone else, like when we put on a different persona for specific public places (for sports or for special occasions). So what does it mean that some of my interviewees refer to the clothes they have in their wardrobe as 'costume'?

Certainly, in the wardrobes of the women I spoke to, old peasant dress belongs to a different register of clothes, occupies a separate space and is treated completely differently than any of the other things kept there. Although a certain distance from these clothes might be implied by the term 'costume', I will show that in some instances, these clothes represent very intimate memories and webs of relations.



Here I would like to draw a parallel between the backstage of the museum (the stores) and the wardrobes of the women I spoke to. Both places store objects and memory; every so often objects are brought out to perform. In the museum stores, even though we may experience objects as carrying the weight of time, we never know how to connect them with places and moments in the past. In the wardrobe, objects are linked to subjective experiences, to specific moments in time and circumstances of their making. Clothes, therefore, are more than simply a way of fashioning the self, but a way of establishing and maintaining connections.

Aside from looking at the way in which clothes articulate identities and constitute a second skin, I am concerned here with the myriad of relations – often with absent people (clothes without bodies) – that are maintained and attended to through the clothes kept in the wardrobe. Empson (2007) sees embroidery made by Mongolian women as ‘biographical objects’, working as ‘vehicles through which women can narrate stories of themselves’. More than being a way of asserting identity, they stand for other possible selves: ‘Pieces kept inside the chest draw attention to alternative relations that facilitate movement and transformation,’ (Empson 2007, 77). At the same time, Empson shows how this kind of memory, along with ones elicited by other kinds of objects that women carry with them, constitute a political act, as they ‘run counter to secular memories that have been preserved by the state’ and help women ‘claim authority over their own past’.

For the women of Cerbăl and Vrâncioaia, two villages at opposite ends of the Carpathian mountains, storing things in their wardrobes also marks connections to the past and to the people who are absent from the village. Their

storage is relevant on different levels, placing these women at the centre of a national discourse on folklore, and at the same time evoking personal stories and connections.

This chapter is structured in three parts, each revealing a different aspect of the peasant dress kept in wardrobes. The first discusses the quick shift of costumes between two regimes of value: on the one hand, they are commodities, as costumes become a kind of prized currency that allows women to 'own culture', and on the other hand, these costumes are valued as inalienable. The second part of the chapter is concerned with the problematic history of one particular object now in the stores of the Horniman museum. The third part deals with issues of value and hierarchy that come through the different types of folk costumes kept in wardrobes.

### **The bottom drawer**

In **Cerbăl**, one of the functions of these costumes is the ownership of 'heritage'. For the villagers, the presumed relationship between me and the village was one of museum collector. The objects are inalienable from the point of view of the state museums and are expensive assets from the point of view of the villagers.

As soon as I arrived in the village and began showing people images of the costumes at the Horniman museum, I was offered items of costume to buy, most of them similar to what my pictures showed. Considering nobody was wearing anything like that in the village, I was immediately struck by the large amount of clothes the women still kept in their bottom drawer. They were disappointed when I said that I wasn't there to buy anything and one of them refused to speak to me afterwards. In fact she refused to believe that all I wanted to do was to

speak to the women in the village, and assured me (like most of the others) that there was nothing any of them can tell me: they know little, but they *have* things. The woman in question happened to be the daughter-in-law of the person who had sold one item – a bag – to the museum in 1955 (image 5.1), so I insisted on talking to her. After I came back to her the next day, I realized what a tough negotiator she was, and I ended up buying a bag almost identical to the one her mother-in-law had made, and was now at the Horniman. All in order to obtain an interview.

After the transaction, I found myself entangled in an intricate web of intrigue, whereby I was not to mention to anybody that Mrs Maria had sold me something, and on no account was I to say how much I had paid. This was a hard thing to do, given that everyone else in the village was asking me about what the others had shown me, and whether I had bought anything. It was as if the village was temporarily transformed into a grand bazaar with concealed boutiques in every house. But I soon realized that Mrs Maria herself was not going to keep the transaction a secret: she told everyone a story that made her bottom drawer the most valuable in the village, manipulating the transaction to state her worth within the community.

In Cerbăl, many of the women realize they are in the possession of something important, and while these costumes are unwanted inside the community, they are highly prized commodities for certain outsiders. At times, they treat the costumes as they would a piece of land that they might sell when in need of a larger sum of money. That these clothes are unwanted and redundant inside the community is crucial. The reasons why they are kept like that, in the bottom drawer are complex. One of them, I believe, is to do with possessing

something that places these old women from remote villages at the centre of public discourse, a place which otherwise excludes them. But this is not to say that women only think of these objects as commodities, or vehicles for the national public sphere. Once the costumes are revealed, they instantly become a marker of a woman's status in the community (even though nobody would wear them), bringing back the old system of judging who is skilled and proper. They are commodities and inalienable goods at the same time. The items quickly change meanings and regimes of value: from a family treasure, an object that reminds women of their youth and assiduous labour, to a valuable commodity.

Even though buyers (who are often from ethnographic museums, or are folklore song performers) do not come by every day, the prices of the items continue to be high: a full women's costume consisting of a skirt, two aprons, two or three braids and an embroidered waistcoat costs around £1000. The women had no intention of bringing their costumes to an open market: to take them to town would have been belittling for them. During her tough negotiation, Mrs Maria lead me to believe that selling things 'from the house' (*din casa*) is humiliating as it is, and one cannot do it for a meagre price.

Among the interested buyers of authentic costumes are folklore performers from town, who occasionally venture into the villages to do so. When asked about their outfits, the performers talk sentimentally about 'old women's dowry chests'. A common narrative is that these elderly women were unaware of the value of the items they were selling, and that in the 1990s they sold them for very little money, to rid themselves of old clothes. Another common story is that of Roma women walking through villages across the country, buying costumes



5.1

1957.245. Bag. Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Valeria Oneșan, a peasant woman of Romanian nationality, from the village of Cerbăl, District of Hunedoara. (object documentation). I went to Cerbăl in search for Valeria Oneșan and her family.

5.2.

Valeria Oneșan's daughter-in-law. Valeria had died long before I got to Cerbăl. Her daughter-in-law lived alone. She carried a bag similar to the one at the Horniman.



5.3.

Valeria Oneșan as a young mother (right) and in her old age (left). Her daughter-in-law told me she was famous for her handicrafts.





5.4  
Domnica Lăscuș opened her drawer of traditional attire. She displayed it on the bed, so that I could photograph it: women's smocks and jackets, and a costume for men.





5.5. Details of Domnica's patterns on smocks, and of her jewellery. Cerbăl.



5.6 Doll dressed up in Pădureni costume. Clothes embroidered by Domnica. Cerbăl.



5.7. Domnica's smock and a photo of her grandson.



5.8. Photographs come to out of drawers too, as well as with old clothes. Domnica showed me pictures of her family, most of them living in town.





5.9. When I went to Cerbăl, I was looking for the Lăscuș family. I was very happy when I found them, but it did not take long to realize many families here were called Lăscuș. But I stayed close to the first ones I found, even though they had little to do with the objects that I was enquiring about. Mădălin is the youngest of the family. He was 12 and was part of a local folklore ensemble. My quest for things traditional and old intrigued him. He was fascinated by the family jewellery case. He took me to meet a few of his aunts who were knowledgeable of all things old and asked them questions about the days of lore.





5.10.

Mădălin was fascinated not only by old folk things, but also by my camera. I lent it to him on a few occasions. He took pictures of animals, his family members, and of the one occasion when the family persuaded me to try on the Pădureni folk attire.



for low prices, and selling them to customers in town or at the market (see Chapter Eight). This might explain Mrs Maria's eagerness to prove to their neighbours that she had not been tricked.

All the while, I felt that the act of making me want to buy was important to the women in Cerbăl, like a measurement of my appreciation for the items. The women I spoke to had no intention of continuing to embroider, and neither did they want to bring the prices down and trying to attract more buyers. When asked why, the answer would come: they are old women and there's no point making a fortune now, and in any case, it takes a lot of effort and time to embroider, and they can't take time off their daily duties. Furthermore, their daughters and granddaughters refuse to learn embroidery, or even wear a costume. The only costumes to be sold were the old ones that they had made in their youth. It became clear that these clothes were valorised for different things, as well as their ability to attract the occasional buyer.

The very fact of possessing elaborate costumes is still a marker of a woman's worth and wealth inside the community (see images 5.4, 5.5). Each piece took a long time to make, and handling them, unfolding them and displaying them for me reconnected the women to various times of their lives, and with different versions of their selves: with their youth, when they would gather together and sew all night by candle light, or after they started a family, when they were preparing clothes for their children, eager to leave them some important asset, even as they realized that they would not wear these costumes.

When talking about clothes that women keep in their wardrobes without expecting to be worn again, Banim and Guy (2001) look at their importance 'in reflecting the wider context of an individual's construction of her clothing set

and her identity'. They discover dynamic processes through which clothes pass from their 'no-longer-worn' position to 'suitable for specific occasions', and through this women keep an active and evolving relationship with different periods of their lives and different versions of their selves. In many ways, this is the case here: the clothes kept in the wardrobe remind women of different times in their lives. Yet the process is much more complex, as these items of clothing make them part of a wider narrative, in which they are evaluated as folklore; they are also part of the historical process of the modernization of the village, which takes these clothes out of their day to day usage, and makes them occupy a special place in the wardrobe. But as long as they are in the wardrobe (and not in the museum stores), these clothes also stand for a set of relations that the women have with people who no longer live in the village. They are charged with different kinds of memories, about the times when the embroidery was sewn, about the times when the village was full of young people, and girls got together and stayed up until the early hours of the morning to learn to make embroidery.

The things that women made as part of the dowry played an important role in bringing prestige to a family. The bride's dowry consisted not only of the objects themselves, but the skills that the bride possessed (and that might be used for making other things for the household once married). Kligman (1998) discusses how the departure of the bride from the home became a characteristic of womanhood: being or becoming a 'stranger' one day is thought of as intrinsic to being a woman. Mothers are to separate from their daughters, and, instead, take on daughters-in-law, with whom the relationship is meant to be harsh. Women are socialized as competitors, Kligman shows, and their lives are characterized by estrangement. The things made for the dowry are made at

home, many of them by the mother or together with her. The items kept in the wardrobes by the women in Cerbăl often elicit memories about youth and pre-marital life, proving that 'it is hard to keep concepts of kinship and memory away from each other' (Empson 2007, 59). But aside from the departure of the bride from her parental home, the clothes kept in the wardrobes in Cerbăl evoke yet another departure: that of the next generation of children, who moved to the town or abroad, rendering the old folk clothes redundant.

This inflation of costumes was also something I came across in Vrâncioaia. Here, the distinction between an old costume and a more recent one is very striking, as the fashion for embroidery changed drastically in the 1960s. Of the wardrobes I saw, very few contained things that the women considered they could sell for a lot of money. So I was intrigued by the fact that all these things were kept there, despite their presumed lack of value. As the wardrobes opened, value became elusive, and difficult to disentangle from memory. It became clear that each of those pieces had been made specifically for someone, or had a relation to someone else who was no longer living in the village. These included godparents who had died and godsons and daughters who were working in Italy or in Bucharest, children who had left the village as soon as they got old enough, and kerchiefs from when a son was best man at a wedding. The nurse in the village told me how she once helped a woman give birth, and as a present, the woman gave the nurse a beautiful old costume, which the nurse then passed on to her goddaughter who lives in town and who was still too young to appreciate it. In the same way, many mothers had woven blankets for their children who then grew up and left the village to work abroad. In this way, the costumes build

the biographies of the missing bodies in the village, but mostly they reconstruct webs of relations from the past.

These stories reveal the objects to be in a kind of suspension, and point out ways in which they are evaluated, while the bodies inhabiting the village (who were initially meant to use the costume) are now absent. They also bring out narratives of traditional gender divides in the countryside, labour and performance. In Cerbăl the relationship to that past (of 'tradition') is felt with ambivalence: there is always pride in the trajectory of the next generation that has moved from the village to town, and an understanding of the next generation of women who are not pressured to perform gender through traditional clothes. At the same time, the grandchildren who live in town are encouraged to take part in folklore ensembles, and wear the clothes made by their grandmother, bringing a fragment of that sphere of domesticity onto the stage. So for the grandchildren and the people who have moved away, the clothes provide a means of connecting to place and people.

### **Three things brought home**

The cloak (5.11), the foot wraps (5.13) and the trousers (5.12) belonged to a man called Vasile Ghinea. I found his name and age in the documentation for the Horniman 1957 collection.

Vasile Ghinea's daughter was quite shaken when I appeared on her doorstep with a list of the Vrancean objects at the Horniman that contained the name of her father. I had come to this village intending to record memories evoked by the images of the Horniman objects, and had arrived at her house purely by chance (it was simply the first door I knocked on). But I was surprised

at how touched she was to see me there, a person she had never met before. Then, I found out that her mother had died two years ago, and her husband's mother had died that year – she and her husband, the village priest, were still coming to terms with the absence of their parents. Although the objects had been worn and ultimately sold by her father, they had been made by her mother. For her, those pieces of clothes were all about family, parenthood and perhaps being a child again. After that first encounter, I thought that if I stayed in that village for a few months I would be able to reconnect all the objects with the families of their owners. But the cloak, the trousers and the foot wraps remain the only objects that found their home.

The priest's wife did not want me to take pictures of her, and she didn't think that her old peasant clothes were particularly valuable. She told me that she and her family used to live in a house at the edge of the village, which is now derelict, and there was in her voice a clear intention to rescue the old home. We spent hours talking about family, about her life now, her two daughters and the other children she and her husband were fostering from the children's home. Then she took the old peasant clothes she had from her bottom drawer and told me how she came to have each of them: this one, made by her mother; that one, a gift from the time she and her husband were godparents; another one, a wedding kerchief. She showed me the oldest shirt she had and told me it belonged to her mother, who had made it as a young woman. She felt ashamed that the metal embroidery was falling apart, but I told her not to worry – it was perfect as it was. She offered it to me and urged me to accept it so that the soul of her mother might rest in peace. Her parents are now together, she said. How wonderful, I



5.11.

1957.292.V. Hood. Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Vasile Ghinea, peasant of Romanian nationality from the hamlet of Muncei, village of Vrâncioaia. Artisan Maria Ghinea.



5.12.

1957.292.VII. Trousers. Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Vasile Ghinea, peasant of Romanian nationality from the hamlet of Muncei, village of Vrâncioaia.



5.13.

1957. 292II. Foot Wraps. Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Vasile Ghinea, peasant of Romanian nationality from the hamlet of Muncei, village of Vrâncioaia. Artisan: Maria Ghinea, born in 1916.



thought, the story was now complete, materialized in items of clothing, one of them, her mother's blouse, more worn than the others.

But when I got back afterwards, I realized that the story was not complete at all. I learned that around the time when these objects were collected, her family was going through great hardship caused by the change of the regime to communism. The priest's wife told me how in the 1950s, her family members were the victims of *deschiaburire* – the Romanian equivalent of dekulakization – the campaign of political repression whereby the party state persecuted the better-off peasants. For the family of Vasile Ghinea, being recorded as a *chiabur* (kulak) meant being obliged to give almost everything they had to the state in the form of quotas. This might be done on a whim, as a small act of revenge by a neighbour, or simply through the necessity for the local bureaucrat to choose someone to write down on the list of *chiaburi*<sup>104</sup> and thereby confirm their loyalty. The story revealed unforgotten conflicts. One day her father was away and she was at home with her mother, who was pregnant, when the Party official came to take the quota. Her mother had nothing to give, and by now the family was living in poverty, barely managing to feed themselves. But the village Party official was unrelenting. In a desperate act of begging him to be taken off the *chiaburi* list, her mother smashed the oven they had in their yard, the last concrete object that could allow the family to be described as 'wealthy' in the official papers. But despite this, the papers remained unchanged for as long as the village Party official had things under his control.

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<sup>104</sup> The enactment of the Soviet requirements for collectivization and taking revenge on peasants who were presumably richer was often simply a way to create communist cadres who might assert their authority in the village through acts of violence (Kligman and Verdery 2011).

When faced with raw history, a lived history that even now cannot be told in whole for complex reasons, one realizes the weight of significances that objects can carry, and their capacity to bring those moments from the past into the present day. How odd it must have been that, at a time when all one could think about was how to make ends meet, somebody from a museum might come and offer money for a piece of clothing. Even more so if, at that moment in time, having concrete objects – such as an outdoor oven – could make one the target of political attack or revenge. It is almost as strange as my own arrival out of the blue on this woman's doorstep to bring back the memories of her parents. How then should we think of a group of disparate objects collected from various Romanian villages around this critical moment, the mid 1950s, which was then turned into a 'collection', and sent over to London, where it served as a tool of communist propaganda?<sup>105</sup>

The three objects that belonged to Vasile Ghinea can be seen as contact points (Feldman 2006), things that once touched a body and then ended up safely packed away in the stores of a museum. Museums are 'contact zones' (Clifford 1997), where 'cultural appropriations are always political and contestable, cross-cut by other appropriations, actual or potential'. Indeed, by looking at no more than foot wraps, a cloak and a pair of trousers, we already find layers of appropriation and of hierarchy, of imposition and dismantling: the village Party official and the family of *chiaburi*, the peasant subjected to modernity, the relationship between Romania and the USSR, and that of Romania and Great Britain. But what is more striking is not how heavily the object is

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<sup>105</sup> Magda Buchczyk (2014) makes this argument in her discussion of the 1957 Romanian display at the Horniman.

charged with all these relations, but how easy it is to keep its story silent in the museum. If the imbalances in the 'contact zones' are in danger of remaining invisible, then what about 'contact points', whose complexity 'unfolds at the intersection of what is present and what is absent in them – between the haptic contexts of their production and the circumstances of their display' (Feldman 2006: 246)? The way in which the museum handles the object divorces it from the body. Feldman's critique of the way in which Clifford's notion of 'contact' has been appropriated is that the museum space is reduced to 'a site where words – in addition to things – are presented, exchanged (...) ' but at the same time overlooks 'the possibility of the body as material discourse' (Feldman 2006: 255). Feldman's argument makes sense: the focus on the bodily engagement with the clothes I talk about is able to reveal parts of the raw history (Edwards 2001) otherwise left out.

But what of the story? Feldman critiques the turning of the museum into 'a space of negotiation' if we limit ourselves to only discussing 'contact zones', and he argues for the acknowledgement of the materiality of the body and object. But in his critique, 'a site of words' means a site where an abstract exchange of thoughts takes place – thus 'words' are a manifestation of abstract thought. My journey to Vrâncioaia brought me to a story that belongs not to the man who sold his clothes to the museum, but to his daughter, who so wonderfully articulated (and indeed materialized) her memories in the story that she recounted. It was her narrative that brought the clothes of the father – long absent from the proximity of his body – to the shirt of the mother, who had died not so long before. Certainly, stories are not material in the way clothes are. But they are sensuous, and their complicated relationship to the object should not be

overlooked. Neither history as a discipline, nor museums as spaces of certain practices, must take flight from the sensuous.

The disparate pieces of clothes belonging to Vasile Ghinea and his wife that the museum and I now have cannot reconstruct a perfect costume, just like the stories cannot be pieced together to form one complete narrative. This story is about memory and materiality, about the raw nature of the lived history made concrete by the object, and about the impossibility of wrapping the object into one, complete narrative.

### **Synthetic garments**

This third part of the chapter draws mainly on my experience in the village of Vrâncioaia, and is concerned with ways of evaluating the objects, with hierarchies of knowledge and possession.

When I showed the people of Vrâncioaia images of the objects in the Horniman collection, they immediately recognized them as being Vrancean, but noted that they were old and valuable. A handful of women told me that the pieces of costume in the museum look beautiful, but that in their wardrobes I would be able to find even more valuable, and *older* things! Some of these were village school teachers, educated people who were born in the village, whose knowledge of folkloric things had come been influenced by their contact with ethnographers and folklore specialists. Other women who showed me their bottom drawers full of peasant textiles, were always quick to take out the ones which could be identified as old, made entirely by hand and 'authentic'. But all of the bottom drawers also contained clothes deemed worthless – which had been considered good at the time they were made, but which were now hidden at the

back of the drawer. Even for those, the handwork had taken a long time and a lot of effort.

It was curious for me to hear people from the village talking about authenticity as often as they did. I had thought authenticity was a notion only employed by the people who study and collect folkloric objects, and that it shouldn't mean anything to the village community: of course anything made by the villagers of Vrâncioaia should be Vrancean! Indeed, the term had permeated the evaluation criteria of clothes in the village, and, furthermore, was being actively used to confirm hierarchies in the community (as I show in Chapter Four) – even though nobody was wearing peasant dress anymore.

One of the school teachers I interviewed told me the history of folkloric decay in the village: she said that when she arrived there in the 1960s, many villagers were wearing peasant dress of sorts, although some of them had gone astray from what specialists considered to be the old pattern. Because the women wanted to distinguish themselves from the others, they started following all kinds of patterns they came across, either from different regions, or, for example, from the magazine *Săteanca*<sup>106</sup>. At the local fairs people from outside the region came over into Vrancea to sell pieces of costume from the south of the Carpathians, such as skirts or headscarves. The more wealthy villagers started to buy 'skirts off the fence' – meaning from the fair, where garments for sale were displayed on a fence. Slowly, the whole village was 'contaminated' with a variety of foreign models. By the end of the 1970s, everybody had given up wearing peasant dress, even at church.

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<sup>106</sup> According to Jinga (2011, 45) it had a circulation of 11,000 copies in 1949.

Another school teacher explained that the inauthentic models were a result of the fact that women started buying cheap fabric from the shop. They replaced the expensive and often unavailable metal thread with cheap gold- and silver-effect threads, and instead of painstakingly sewing the embroidery, they now preferred to weave the pattern of the shirt. When they did sew the embroidery, they preferred to use representational, floral patterns. For this teacher, now aged 73, who herself hadn't worn peasant costume since she was a child, the decay was connected with women becoming lazy – it was a decay in what it meant to be a proper woman. Quite soon, she thought, nobody would know what was valuable anymore.

During my stay in Vrâncioaia, I visited a variety of wardrobes and saw many clothes unfolded, while the women would tell me about the value of each of them, usually in connection to its age: 'this overskirt is truly valuable, it's at least 100 years old. I got it from an aunt who thought I should keep something of value in my bottom drawer'. Some of them were considered less valuable: 'it's just something I made for my daughter, for when she had to go to school celebrations in the house of culture, but it's not that valuable, look, it's made of this synthetic thing'.

In the evenings, when I came home to my host, one of the former schoolteachers in Vrâncioaia, she would ask me what I'd done that day, where I'd been and what had I found out. As soon as I mentioned the name of a neighbour I had visited that day, my host would not wait long to pass her judgement: 'You went to that one? And what did you stay so long for? Didn't you realize everything she has is made of nylon?' My eagerness to talk about folk things of all sorts, be they 'valuable' or 'worthless', was understood by my host as an inability

to distinguish objects and to properly evaluate true folk art. These clear-cut ways of evaluating objects by the school teachers and knowledgeable intellectuals were very similar to some of the folklorists' interpretations (see Cherciu in Chapter Two). Their knowledge of 'authenticity' came, I argue, from the practices engendered through the house of culture of seeing 'folklore' and 'culture' as discrete categories that need to be kept under control, as they represent regional and national identity.

The synthetic folk garments are a reminder of a time when mass consumption brought on by modernization made a variety of fabrics available to the masses. Women used these fabrics to make not 'folk costumes' as such, but special garments for the Sunday *horă* or other celebrations. Those clothes were entangled in the courtship events. The synthetic fabrics allowed new patterns and new techniques to develop. Unlike the old, heavy garments – made even heavier by the metallic thread – the synthetic ones present a rich pattern, but have a light, hieratic feel. There would be fierce competition with developing new patterns, and in the logic of this practice, the adoption of new fabrics made perfect sense.

Inside the community, each woman wished to stand out by having different embroidery on their blouses from the other women. Unlike the women in Cerbăl, who remembered working together to do their embroidery, in Vrâncioaia the tendency was to work individually, in a permanent state of competition similar to what Kligman describes in Maramureș (see above). People I spoke to told me that, when they were young, they used to lock the door of the room where they sewed, and later hid the blouse, so that nobody would steal the model. Before Easter Sunday, when all the women and young girls came



out with their latest embroidered blouses, nobody knew what the other one was up to. Any new and interesting influence was welcome. For something to be exceptionally beautiful, it needed to be new and unexpected, and at the same time retain old structures, so that it might be comprehended. A new blouse that looked exactly like last year's blouse had little to offer. A general presence of folk things in urban fashion in the 1970s contributed to exacerbating patterns, and offering women new ideas and materials to work with. Craft textbooks that featured folk patterns were becoming increasingly popular (Passima 2009), and even if their circulation was not as large as in urban areas, patterns nonetheless circulated in the countryside very quickly, according to the women I spoke to, as everyone always had their eye out for a new pattern to *steal*, or get inspiration from. It can be argued that an interest in folk emerged as a reaction to the abundance of mass produced goods and the easy availability of synthetics. This modernization touched the production of 'traditional' attire, opening up the crafts to a new aesthetics. But the countryside, as we have seen so far, is only valued in opposition to the modernity of the city (Williams 1973). Peasants with synthetics or with technology make an inadvertent image for museum specialists.

The women who own these clothes continue to keep them in their bottom drawers. They are aware that they are deemed inauthentic, but most of the time when asked about them, they say they are proud of them, that these shirts and skirts look different because that was the fashion in the 1960s and 1970s. What was made then is now simply out of fashion, while the old costumes are now back *in*. Some women even admit they used the sewing machine for some of the



5.14. Woman's costume from Vrancea. The pieces come from different people. I took this photo in the Horniman stores, assembling the pieces by my own intuition. I then showed it to some of the people in Vrâncioaia, who offered to help me with my research.



5.15. Maria Ochian, displaying her old, valuable costume on the floor. She is showing me the correct way to assemble a costume. Vrâncioaia.



5.16. This shirt was made by Maria Ochian for her daughter's school activities with the folk ensemble. From the 1970s onwards shirts were very heavily embroidered using synthetic fibres. She now considers it inauthentic.



5.17. As a young man, Maria Ochian's son was the best man at many village weddings, receiving traditional kerchiefs from bridesmaids. Such ornate kerchiefs were made in Vrâncioaia throughout the 1970s, 1980s and into the 1990s.





5.18. Necula Ilie displayed her godmother's kerchief, her authentic blouses, her daughter's tapestry (a more modern practice in Vrâncioaia), her son's best-man kerchiefs, and other hand-made things, some of which she considered more traditional than others.





5.19. The wardrobe where Mrs Cârneleagă (Vrâncioaia) keeps her folk attire. She used to be part of the local folklore ensemble, so she has collected quite a few costumes. She is the local nurse.



5.20. A piece of fabric with a woven pattern. Traditionally, the pattern on the shirts had to be sewn by hand, but women found it easier to weave it. New fabrics also contributed to that change.



5.21. Sleeve of a folk shirt, embellished with beads and sequins in floral pattern. Not too valuable.



5.22. Embroidery made with pre-World War Two metal thread, on home woven cloth; considered valuable and authentic.





5.23. Embroidery on shirt sleeves (called 'rivers') and woven patterns, made with different materials by Mrs Cârneleagă. The older, 'authentic' items have been acquired from various sources.



shirts, because it was a better, quicker way to make clothes. Somebody told me in secret that she had a knitting machine as well, and she used to knit many complicated patterns for jumpers she sold at local fairs.

The shirts that the young women in Vrâncioaia embroidered looked less and less like the standard 'Vrancean' model that folklorists had found there in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Initially placed on the sleeve and modestly on the front part in straight lines called 'rivers', the embroidery of the last few decades has invaded almost the entire sleeve and the whole chest with a variety of brightly coloured floral models, and looks nothing like the geometric designs of the past. At one time, what is now seen as 'authentic' and valuable, would have then been considered old and uninteresting. Homemade cloth, which required both the painstaking work of turning the wool or the hemp into thread and then the equally hard work of weaving white cloth, would have been considered backward in comparison with the shiny new synthetic materials you could buy from the Cooperative shops<sup>107</sup> that had opened throughout the eastern bloc (Reid 2000).

There is no market nowadays for the synthetic clothes of the 1980s, and the women were always reluctant to show them to me. Today, in the village it is only the very old ladies who still wear them, but they usually choose less richly embroidered blouses, often made of cotton (also available in the shop) to be in tune with the age requirements (older women are meant to wear less bright colours). While some women would say they do not wear these items because

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<sup>107</sup> These shops started opening in the first decade of communism. The cooperative sold industrial goods from town for money, but also on the basis of produce exchange. For instance, each family from Vrâncioaia had a particular quota of produce to give to the state, and some of it would be considered payment at the shop.

they gave up traditional clothes altogether, others would say they are too youthful (*tinerești*), and therefore inappropriate for them.

The 'knowledge' that these shirts are 'wrong' came from the interaction of the schoolteachers with local cultural activists who were participating in festivals in the local house of culture. Because the schoolteachers were also the village cultural activists<sup>108</sup>, as we have seen, they took part in *Cîntarea României* performances, where they were taught strict requirements of evaluation (see Chapter Three). A sanitized form of folklore that was part of 'national culture' was promoted through the houses of culture. It was the educated, intellectual class that was most receptive of this 'folklore', and eager to perform it on the national stage. For them, folklore had to be cleansed of synthetic materials and 'inauthentic' patterns. Having a knowledge of the 'good' folklore gained the schoolteachers the role of gatekeepers between the 'producers of folklore' and the state institutions interested in folklore and authenticity.

Synthetic folk came to characterize a generation of women who lived through a time of modernization, but did not themselves thoroughly modernize. This generation cannot be associated with the gender model that produced 'authentic folklore'. The criticism of the synthetic clothes in Vrâncioaia is also an invocation of traditional feminine roles, whose work and energies used to be directed towards the household, in contrast to the women who leave Vrâncioaia to become migrant workers (see also Pine 2000). The elaborate craft of women in the past is constantly praised.

Objects take on value unexpectedly here: while the old objects, considered heritage are valued commodities, people who sell them have less

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<sup>108</sup> See Chapter Three.



direct connections to the women who made them; meanwhile, the synthetic shirts that have no 'heritage' value are kept inside the wardrobes as 'invaluable' in the private sphere of transmission of memory.

As we can see, peasant dress is a territory of debate around what is valuable and representative. In a similar way to the cases Tarlo (1996) describes, synthetic fabric can mean different things, beyond its affordability and flexibility. Owning things deemed inauthentic in the village of Vrâncioaia – such as a peasant dress made with new, synthetic fabrics and different technology – is, for the schoolteachers, a testimony that one had only recently given up peasant dress. Possessing old objects, wearing them as part of the performance of peasantry and assessing them as 'authentic', entailed a certain distance from them. But modernity of any sort – be that of the synthetic fabric – pollutes the peasant in the view of the folklore specialists. For the schoolteachers, synthetic fabric makes the peasant backward, unable to understand what heritage is, and what their role is in producing or retaining 'valuable' things.

Talking about inauthenticity entails lamenting the disappearance of a particular kind of village. It signals a specific type of impurity: the mixture of modernity and peasantry. Unwanted by collectors, museums or the sons and daughters of Vrancea, these objects without value wait suspended in the bottom drawers, perhaps for a 1960s or 1970s peasant fashion revival. The unwanted peasant clothes in the wardrobe help us understand what value means and how it is created, and help point out the hierarchies in the village, based on the knowledge of 'good' folklore.

## Conclusion

By looking at women's wardrobes, I have presented a variety of contexts and meanings attached to clothes, and the different ways in which they are evaluated. Value emerges as something elusive, objects are at once commodities and inalienable goods. From one moment to the next they pass through different spheres of value: they can be assets treated almost like a piece of land, but also things that retain memory (value over time) because they are the products of labour that cannot be alienated (Strathern 1988).

Only one of the Horniman objects was successfully 'recontextualized' in the terms of the project I had set out to do, and its story reveals best the complex memories entangled in the object. It also hints at the problems of representing this complexity in a museum display (which I come back to in the Conclusions of this thesis). It presents us with a past different from that recorded by the object documentation. How can this 'contact point' be incorporated into the museum display, and, most of all, into the museum stores, where the object spends most of its life? Not only is the story of the object too complex to be contained, but the history of the ethnographic museum as an institution is such that it cannot easily accommodate it (see Chapter One). In the end, we must ask what the purpose of the ethnographic museum is today, given the kind of objects it hosts. Perhaps the question is this: how can we make the museum store items more like a wardrobe?

The things kept in the women's wardrobes revealed multiple meanings and purposes: to establish a relationship with the outsider; to gain agency by positioning themselves inside the public discourse of heritage and value (national, and of the craft); to maintain contact with times gone by and the

absent bodies from the village; but also to assert their own worthiness in the village, as the person who has the richest and most valuable trousseau. At the same time, the things kept in the bottom drawers sometimes reveal conflicting views about what value is (or was) at the time the clothes were made: the requirements of authenticity from the folklore specialists, placing strict aesthetical demands on the peasants' clothes, village girls choosing fabrics that are easier to work with, cheap to buy and allow more elaborate models. Looking at what kind of clothes are kept, how they are kept and for whom, I could understand what they allow the people in Vrâncioaia and Cerbăl to remember and to forget.

The setting in which these wardrobes open is that of the house, and in Chapter Two I briefly described the aesthetic of the interior arrangement: a mesh of things hand made, porcelain and toy animals, modern and old things, souvenirs displayed in a pattern-loaded fashion that invite thoughts of escape and daydreams. The question of 'authenticity' is irrelevant for this aesthetic, only the arrangement, the pattern and the link to a certain person. Everything is authentic. It is only when things become commodities, or when they make an appearance (potentially) in the public sphere that authenticity (whatever it may mean) is important. Both the wardrobes and the house interiors are part of a private space, but both contain objects that, at times, perform in the public sphere.

In the following chapter I look at the circumstances in which some of these objects remain in the public sphere for longer, and at what ideas of authenticity, locality and value they construct inside local museums.

# Chapter Six

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## Folk Displays in the Village

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The biographies of the objects that could be considered the counterparts of the ones at the Horniman stores are interlinked with stories of kinship, as well as with changing hegemonic formulations of culture and history, visible at the point when folk dress is brought out into the public sphere (see Chapters Four and Five). Even though folk dress is kept most of the time inside wardrobes, occasionally we have seen glimpses of it in public spaces, where it is used to perform identity and history, and to reinsert the community into current national narratives. Some of the locals in Vrâncioaia often talked about setting up a permanent folk exhibition in the village, seen as having the potential to bring cultural capital into the village and represent local 'culture'. Not far from Vrâncioaia many of the local villages can boast these local folk museums. Visiting them shed more light on the way the counterparts of the Horniman collection evolved in situ. What these museums further demonstrate is that the village is not (necessarily) the space where the objects are made or where they are part of everyday life in an organic relationship with people and the landscape. Villages are also places of representation, where people indeed experience a distance from these objects deemed 'folk'. The museums are also the places where people try to make sense of the objects, and of their own place within history and the overarching structures of kinship, the nation, and the world.

This complexity of place is misrepresented in national museums in Romania and Britain. I have discussed the way recent projects of

'recontextualization' try to correct the asymmetry between the power of the national museum and communities represented as 'other' (see Introduction, Chapter One). An engagement with the 'source communities' (Peers 2003) and an attempt to bring out the 'indigenous agency' (Harrison 2013) have been the declared intentions of ethnographic museums in Britain, but it has also been acknowledged that some of these projects have shown only 'superficial involvement' (Peers 2003, 2). Peers argues for a more honest engagement of museums with 'source communities', and that 'relationships of respect and trust must develop between museum staff and community members' (2003, 8). Such a perspective on the possibility of this engagement seems optimistic, especially since Peers herself reminds us that 'a museum's obligations to its publics, to its governance structure, and to the museum profession may be quite different to the community, kinship, and cultural obligations felt very keenly by source community consultants' (2003, 8). Yet this way of framing the problem also presents us with a skewed image of what 'source community', indigeneity and 'context' are. For a start, members of these communities are not disconnected from the 'governance structures' mentioned by Peers.

In an attempt to theorize 'indigenous agency', Harrison tries to put forward a definition that would allow for constant 're-assemblings': 'indigeneity needs to be perceived as a status that is subject to various models of adjudication and different forms of authority'. He attempts to move away from an organic model of culture to one where changing traditions are not seen as a cultural decline, 'but as necessary moments of uncoupling and rearticulation' (Harrison 2013, 10). A move away from discussions of 'authenticity' could turn the 'invention of tradition' into a claim to cultural persistence and continuity. Such a

proposition touches on the problematic framing of 'source communities' as it is done in museums (bounded in time and space), and allows room for claims by groups that define themselves as 'indigenous'. But how is this lax definition of 'source communities' to work concretely? How do these museological practices interact with local definitions of identity? Exploring local museums – displays through which ideas of locality and identity are articulated through material culture – might begin to answer these questions.

In this chapter I look at how folk objects define identity and locality through displays in the countryside and through claims of authenticity. Most of the local museums discussed are in Vrancea, and one is in a different region, Făgăraş. Much like the present thesis, these displays bring out objects that form parts of different regimes of value, despite their iconicity and their proximity. What I will be looking at are once more the counterparts of the collection at the Horniman museum. But unlike the objects in the previous chapter, whose value was constantly questioned by their owners, the folk objects present in this chapter are (or have been) considered valuable and meaningful enough to be publicly exhibited. I explore this material by looking at who puts the display on, who the audience might be, what are the actual objects. Following Harrison, I want to suggest these displays are part of a 'meshwork' (Ingold, cf Harrison 2013, 22-24) – media that contain hegemonic (re)definitions of 'folklore', but also encompass survivors of a different everyday from the past, and which construct a specific aesthetic. Questions of taste, and the semiotic fragility of objects come through in the displays in local museums – these common places which, in Boym's terms, threaten to become commonplace and kitsch (Boym 1994, 11-20), or are indeed rescued from that class of objects.

I start with some of the local museums that were opened through initiatives that had their roots in institutions outside the village: the Houses of Popular Creation and the regional museums during the socialist period, and the Peasant Museum after 1989. I then turn to the displays of the *creatori populari* (see Introduction), who had a very important role in the *Cîntarea Romaniei* performances, but who no longer find themselves central to the national discourse. I then give two examples of displays that explicitly incorporate ideas of memory and aura. Some of the museums are state-run, but most of them are individual collections. Some of the displays are more like collages or idiosyncratic agglomerations, while others have been arranged to tell a coherent narrative through 'folklore'. To some extent, they have all absorbed the ideas about evaluating and interpreting folklore that came through state museums and other such institutions, framing folk objects either as craft, art, or memorabilia. Alignment to such interpretations from the centre was a strategy for the authors of these displays to gain legitimacy, although I never want to suggest that this is done cynically and with the intention of material gain, but rather as a struggle for social confirmation, and to a large extent, as any artistic act, as part of a search for truth and value.

### **The House-Museum**

When the village elites of Vrâncioaia that I spoke to mourned the absence of 'local culture' in the village, they were referring not only to the fact that nobody wore folk dress or observed customs, but also to the absence of an institutionalised management of culture and folklore. The establishment of a local folk display was the responsibility of the local elites from the 1970s



onwards (together with all the cultural activities they had to organize at the local house of culture). It formed a part of the 'cultural work' of the schoolteachers and local intellectuals to gather folk items and organize displays in the school hall or small museums.

The decision to build local museums in each county came from the State Committee for Culture and Art (CSCA) in 1963. According to the CSCA, these museums were to 'reflect the state of backwardness in the village of yesterday'. They would be called 'house-museums', because they consisted of one completely equipped peasant household.<sup>109</sup> The local people's contribution would be their objects. The display and its meanings for the community and visitors, had to be decided at the top, among the folklore and museum specialists, before the members of the Regional Culture and Art Committees began to coordinate the implementation of the projects.

A discussion between museum specialists and state ideologues published by *Revista Muzeelor* in 1965, was meant to explain the purpose of the museums and how to proceed with their opening.<sup>110</sup> Tancred Bănăţeanu<sup>111</sup> director of the Museum of Popular Art, along with other museum specialists, representatives of the CSCA and political activists expressed their opinions, which were sometimes antagonistic (although the tone of the meeting did not open the discussion to arguments or opposing points of view). Particular museological practices were

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<sup>109</sup> A 'village museum' (*muzeu al satului*) meant something different from a house-museum. The first would have hosted everything valuable and collectable in that village or area, including natural science, history or art collections. House-museums, however, purposefully excluded any other elements that interfered with the recreation of an 'authentic' peasant household.

<sup>110</sup> See *Revista Muzeelor*, 1965, p. 353.

<sup>111</sup> Bănăţeanu was head of the Museum of Popular Art when the Romanian collection was assembled and sent to London (1955-1957). See Chapter Two, on Bănăţeanu's writing on the ethnofolkloric area of Vrancea.

negotiated against the nationalist-communist ideology, in a struggle for legitimacy.

One of the recurrent questions in this debate is whether museums should represent a historical perspective on folklore or not. The political activists demanded that the house-museum should be 'a witness to the social situations from the past', which should point out the lives of peasant-workers have changed for the better. This perspective was countered by the museum specialists at the meeting, most notably by Tancred Bănăţeanu. The difference between past and present would be clearly evident, he argued, through a comparison between the house-museum and the actual houses of the villagers and the visitors. Some historical information might be placed outside, on a panel, but nothing should interfere with the display. House-museums needed to give an immersive impression of authenticity, and the absence of incongruous objects within the display – such as a historical narrative – was crucial. An agreement was reached among all present that the museums should not display objects from different periods; they should represent peasant life as it was before World War Two.

The arguments brought by museologists epitomize the way in which communist party language was used to advocate a type of display that opposed communist ideology on many levels, such as the preference for an aesthetic display which praised the pre-communist peasant. For example, Lucian Roşu, editor for *Revista Muzeelor*, contended during the meeting that:

We need to counter the thesis of the foreign bourgeoisie, according to which we are backward, without our own culture. Despite the hardships from the past, of the ruthless feudal and capitalist exploitation from the past, our people, through its talent and creative power, has forged one of the most original cultures, whose specific values are appreciated and admired throughout the world.

His comment resonates with protochronism – a form of discourse focused on the national essence held by a section of the Romanian intellectuals, but also by many Party ideologues (Verdery 1991, pp.167-214). Similar debates that took place in other spheres of cultural production – historical, philosophical and literary – have been identified by Verdery (1991) as a symptom of the failure of the Marxist-Leninist paradigm, and the increased stress on nationalism in Romania after the 1970s. Arguments against a historicised perspective, and in favour of a display that emphasized the beauty of the objects (their inherent *value*) were strategies through which the specialists were able to argue against mobilizing ‘folklore’ towards communist ideology.

The local communities themselves were to receive directives from the Museums Council as to how to collect and proceed with opening of the museums. The local house-museums were to look like the respective exhibits in the national village museums. Their purpose was not to gain knowledge from the local people about folk objects, but to bring museum expertise to the countryside, and make these remote parts of the country more connected to the centre. Although tourism was one of the arguments brought in favour of these museums, for the most part they did not seem to address an audience, other than the nation-state as an entity. The local intellectuals were the ones who collected the objects, in the same way as they mediated other cultural activities.<sup>112</sup> The specialists from regional museums selected the material (followed by conservation and sometimes restoration), helped with the display and explained the necessary steps for establishing a house-museum.

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<sup>112</sup> See Chapter Three on how local intellectuals were occasionally given ethnographic tasks, such as collecting objects and folklore information.



6.1 The museum of Paltin. Photography source:  
<http://www.viatainroma.ro/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/DSC07015.jpg>

Venera Arvinte, former director of the Museum of Vrancea, spoke highly of these initiatives to rescue folk materials and share the museum's expertise. In Vrancea in the 1980s, 11 *comune* had established ethnographic collections, two of which had fully fledged house-museums. One of them, the museum of Paltin (image 6.1), was the most developed: it had a 'scientifically reorganized' collection, the 'conservation of its patrimony was assured' and it numbered 634 pieces.<sup>113</sup> To establish it, objects were collected from nearby villages, including some from Vrâncioaia. People remember giving objects to the newly established museum, although some were disgruntled because they were not paid – it had been yet another act of 'volunteering' on their part for the benefit of the village elites. In fact, as I was constantly looking for the people whose objects had ended up in the stores of the Horniman, some would claim that they, too, had given objects to that collection, although they were referring to other subsequent collecting initiatives in the village. This demonstrates that, from these people's perspective, the relationship of the collectors to the field site was no different in the case of the Horniman collection than in the case of the local museum in Paltin.

However, there was a consensus among the people I spoke to about the value of the museum in Paltin, and about the fact that it represented the folklore of Vrancea. Like some of the other places where folk displays or small museums are still open (to which I will turn next), the village of Paltin also boasts folk performance ensembles, and sporadic crafts workshops, all coordinated by the School of Popular Arts in Focșani. This is not because in any one of these villages people have more folk things at home, or because 'traditions were kept', as the

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<sup>113</sup> Documents from Venera Arvinte's personal archive.

specialists from the School of Popular Arts might argue, but because institutional support determines an awareness that folk things are valuable, and can be capitalized.<sup>114</sup>

### **Slaves to Beauty**

Between 2008 and 2013 the Peasant Museum in Bucharest, supported by national funding bodies, led a programme to encourage some of the local museums that had been set up independently throughout the country in the past ten years. The programme established a Network of Private Collections and Village Museums in Romania (RECOMESPAR), which involved local and regional authorities and villagers, and ran workshops, training courses and summer schools with collectors, who were taught how to evaluate and preserve objects, and how to begin to improve their displays, without damaging 'their ingenuity and originality which make them unique' (Mihalache 2012, 8). Furthermore, the museums were promoted in a book called *Robii Frumosului* ('Slaves to Beauty') and a special issue of *Martor* – both publications of the Peasant Museum – as well as in other material meant to raise awareness about these museums.

For the curators from the Peasant Museum, the local museums encountered throughout the country could not easily be considered as proper 'museums'. Rather, these museums appeared to them as heterogeneous. More than anything these museums are described as 'small author-museums' and at the same time 'accumulations of patrimony and cultural memory' which could be considered 'identity landmarks' (Mihalache, 2012, 11-16). These museums were understood by the curators not so much as 'ethnographic', but as idiosyncrasies,

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<sup>114</sup> The term 'valorizare' which translates as 'capitalize' is the one most often used about folklore.

as ‘unsystematic and altogether incoherent [attempts] to delay the disappearance [...] of objects, crafts, traditions and ways of living’ (2012, 11).

My interest here is in how these collections differ from the house-museums opened during the 1970s and 1980s, and how they are viewed and managed through the Peasant Museum – an institution that defines itself in opposition to the folklore museums of the socialist era (see Nicolescu 2014). The distinction between the Peasant Museum and the other ethnographic museums in Romania resided firstly in the definitions of the object. While the ethnographic museums that I will call ‘classic’ value the folk objects for their appearance and aesthetic qualities, the Peasant Museum wishes to engage in a more ethnographic exploration of the object, seen as a retainer of beliefs, and a gateway into the world of the Peasant. The curators of the Peasant Museum denounce the ‘classic’ museums for abstracting the objects from their relationship with the people and the village. Moreover, they argue that this ‘aesthetic’ perspective on the object (Popescu 2002) was part and parcel of the communist period, and it served communist propaganda by concealing the truth about the ‘peasant world’, which was being destroyed. In any case, this ‘classic’ approach to folk objects is accused of concealing truths, of being at best not engaging, and at worse plain manipulative.

In the case of the local ‘author’ museums, the curators of the Peasant Museum are dealing with the remnants of this ‘classic’ perspective on folklore, perpetuated *in situ*. My findings show that the traces of the ‘classic’ museological discipline are visible in these local museums. The high level of engagement in folklore – through performances in festivals but also opening local museums



throughout the country suddenly stopped in the 1990.<sup>115</sup> Ten years later these local personal museums started to open. The 'classic' approach to folklore before 1990s was conducive of a positive evaluation of folk objects among villagers, and was, therefore conducive to such personal local museums. Moreover, I argue that the way for the Peasant Museum specialists to deal with the evidence of the 'classic' folk discipline *in situ* is by framing these museums as 'idiosyncratic'.

The emergence of these (to some extent) heterogeneous museums from personal initiatives, is proof that, despite the ideology denounced by the Peasant Museum, people engaged in their own particular ways with the folk idiom. But at the same time, I argue that the curators from the Peasant Museum exaggerate the uniqueness of each of these museums, whose owners know all too well how to speak the language of 'authenticity' and to apply rhetorical strategies that gain them legitimacy, resorting to either protochronist (inward looking, autochthonist) or synchronist (outward looking) arguments, to use Verdery's terms. The Peasant Museum was itself set up by a strong, charismatic curator who promoted his own individual perspective on folk items. At a different level, the same kind of interaction with the objects is claimed to take place between the authors (strong personalities) of the local museums and their collection.

The commitment of the curators at the Peasant Museum to reinterpreting the folk idiom by focusing on the object as ethnographic landmark, can explain why words 'folklore' and 'popular' are absent from the material about local museums (and in general from materials published by the Peasant Museum. See

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<sup>115</sup> According to the former head of the Centre of Popular Creation, this engagement in folklore continued for a few years after the fall of communism, at a more intense level than even before, as everyone felt 'freed' from political pressures. Folklore ensembles were travelling abroad, collections were being established, and ethnographers were 'returning' to the villages to look for what was left of authentic customs (see Chapter Four). Soon, however, the government funding was cut dramatically.

Introduction). Some of these museum owners themselves occasionally employ this vocabulary of the folklore discipline as developed before 1989 – even though the Peasant Museum curators stress the individualism of these displays that are meant to tell the authors’ stories. A recurrent term in the rhetoric of the Peasant Museum is ‘memory’ – an umbrella term that seems to index different things, and which grants value to the exhibits. The power of the objects to retain ‘memory’ is meant to explain the aesthetic heterogeneity of the displays and the individuality of the collector’s biographies.

Not far from Vrâncioaia, two local collections have been included in the programme run by the Peasant Museum. One of them, **Rădăcina Vrancei** (Roots of Vrancea) in the village of Bârsești is the museum of Costica Beșa (see image 6.2). The display is a miscellany of things folkloric and historic, gathered in one large room, a hallway and a few annex shacks. The names of these parts – ‘The Root of Vrancea’, ‘Grandparents’ Museum’ and ‘Reunification of the People’ – lend a nationalist tone to the whole setting. Mr Beșa himself is a folklore performer, and repeatedly participated to *Cîntarea României* festival during the 1980s. Unlike the museum in Paltin, which is the outcome of the classic museological discipline dominant in the 1980s, Mr Beșa’s museums brings out traces of a different relation to the folk idiom in the same period.

The ensemble looks unstable, but the dust that the objects outside have collected, and visible traces of the elements on some of the costumes show that it hasn’t been moved in a while. There is no consensus in the village as to the representativeness of the museum for the community. For instance, one respected schoolteacher gave Beșa a very precious shirt inherited from her mother, and was disappointed that it was not exhibited. Other villagers

complained that the items were not kept in a good condition. Many of them donated their objects to Mr Beşa, encouraged by the involvement of the Peasant Museum, thinking that this would be a collective effort, and would attract prestige to the community. On the contrary, Mr Beşa's narrative is that of a keeper of things that people offered to him to 'rescue', and of a keeper of 'memories'. In *Robii Frumosului*, we read: 'he believes that all the objects he has salvaged from imminent destruction deserve to be kept as landmarks of collective memory'. (Manoliu 299). In fact, most of his collection is kept at his house, and only a small proportion fits in the small museum. While the museum in Paltin established in the 1970s is considered by all the villagers to be valuable, Mr Beşa's display, an individual project, supported by the Peasant Museum and using some of the villagers' objects, does not enjoy a peaceful existence and unanimous appreciation.

**Zestrea** (The Dowry Chest, images 6.3 to 6.7), the Chiriţă family's house-museum in Soveja, displays similar folk objects in a slightly different manner than **The Roots of Vrancea**. It is set apart by a distinction of class, and by a connoisseurship of the ethnographic discipline. The display is thoughtfully arranged, most notably in areas that distinguish feminine from masculine spheres and materials. The museum does not claim to be of Vrancea, but rather a miniature museum of the peasant or of the countryside (a similarity with the Peasant Museum, where '*ethnofolkloric* regions' are disregarded). 'Memory', once more, also provides a frame for part of the display. The name of the museum, **Zestrea**, is a gendered metaphor for nationhood as expressed through patrimony – things are transmitted from the past to be kept and passed on. A large Romanian flag flies from the balcony of the house.





6.2 Parts of the museum  
Radacina Vrancei





6.3



6.4



6.5



6.6

Parts of the Zestrea Museum.



6.7



Mariana Chiriță had already collected many objects when they bought the traditional house in the village of Soveja, where they had been coming for thirty years as tourists. It is an old house, typical of a middle-class peasant, and had belonged to a fighter in the anti-communist resistance. On the hot summer day when I visited, I found the members of the family resting in their hammocks. The 'world of the peasants' was not one with which the family identified, but rather one through which they transgressed their own, as the 'world of the peasant' was an inherently poetic world in their narrative. They note what they describe as the strong rules of the rural society without feeling compelled to observe them (Eliza, for example, drives a motorbike and wears a peasant blouse in a rock'n'roll style). The narrative told by the authors of **Zestrea** evoked an organic world where everyone's place was made clear through the clothes they wore, and where patterns fitted each occasion. The authors of the museum also engage in a sort of fieldwork through the museum, as they welcome locals who come and tell them about the objects.

An important part of the exhibition is the intellectual's room (image 6.4), a small display that reconstructs the aesthetic of the priest's or teacher's house in the countryside. If the other parts of the museum construct a world of the peasant, this room is where history is on display. Medals from wars hide in drawers, alongside stamps, writing tools and other objects bought in antique shops. The room of the village intellectual tells the story of Mariana's own family. Her father came from a family of village priests, while her mother came from a family of peasants. The appreciation of the folk object as ethnographic object, immersed in a peasant world of customs and beliefs (evident in how the village is framed as 'alterity'), as well as the presence of the intellectual's room – both

point out to a synchronic perspective on folk objects, partly shared by the Peasant Museum, whereby national essence (without being challenged) is placed within a cultural universal context (Verdery 1991, 52).

Like most of the local museums coordinated by the Peasant Museum, **Zestrea** also manages to make use of a wide spectrum of semiotic interpretations available to the authors through various media. The decision to define the object as 'ethnographic' and not (necessarily) as 'spectacular' is forgotten when various exciting objects are jumbled up – for example, a room of dolls dressed up in folk costumes of each of the country's region (6.6), reminiscent of *Cîntarea României*. **Zestrea** and **Rădăcina Vrancei**, two museums constructed in collaboration with the Peasant Museum, differ in the degree to which they incorporate the new museological practices, and, most importantly, in the way they relate to place and represent locality: **Rădăcina Vrancei**, presenting a perspective more akin to protochronism, and claiming to represent Vrancean identity, while **Zestrea**, claims that folk things have universal value.

There are other local museum and displays which have not been incorporated into the programme of the Peasant Museum, inclusive as it may be, and these are the displays of the people that were central to the performances at *Cîntarea României*, and in close contact with the regional School of Popular Art.

### **Folklore Creators**

The local museums discussed so far are made up of objects that belong to collectors, and not to people who also make crafts. Some of the objects they display or keep were inherited, but most are objects that the collectors find in other places. Yet in Vrancea some of the people who were identified in the past



as *creatori populari* (now called *meșteri populari*) have also set up small display rooms with the things they collected or made. Before 1989 *creatori* were the people who made folk or folk-inspired objects, under the direction of the Schools of Popular Arts. Their works participated in the *Cîntarea României* festival, where they had their own competing section. Many of them had learned how to make objects for a peasant household, but with time, these objects became more or less redundant inside the community in their old form – like the costumes or textiles woven and embroidered with old patterns. Participation in folklore competitions where objects were identified as ‘folk’ changed these people’s relationship to objects and their aesthetics.

‘Authenticity’ was meant to lend value to the objects they made within the framework of these competition, but what this ‘authenticity’ meant was never fully clear (see a more elaborate discussion in Chapter Seven). At any rate, as part of *Cîntarea României*, these *creatori* were short of being considered fully fledged artists, as they were encouraged to make objects *in the vein* of old folk items, but with their own creative imprint. They were embodiments of the genius of the folk. These new creations were also exhibited in museums, as examples of ‘folk art today’, in a museologic discourse which collapsed social and historical differences, stressed national continuity through folk art, and defined objects exclusively by their shape and pattern, rather than by their relationship with maker or user (the critique brought by the Peasant Museum ethnographers today). Their work was not so much *artizanat* (commodities) but was seen as artistic. These creations demonstrated that the creativity of the folk, of the people had not been halted, but was helped to flourish by socialism. The objects were meant to bridge the contradictions of nationalist-communism, and merge

‘folklore’ with ‘present-day transformations’; they often included propaganda symbols (white doves or furnaces, the hammer and sickle), although in the 1980s the symbols signalled nationalism more than communism. *Creatori* therefore performed their position as transmitters of tradition and national spirituality.

After 1989 the reformed Schools of Popular Arts rescued *creatori* from their connection with communist propaganda, and refashioned them as *meșteri*, craftsmen who made objects with use value. The value and inalienability of their objects, now came from *authenticity*, demonstrated by the input of traditional skills and materials, not by the aspect of the object. Today the School of Popular Arts from Focșani employs some of these craftspeople to teach their skills to others in the village ensuring the survival of these crafts. The increased pressures of authenticity, but also their partial elimination from the national narrative make them an awkward group. While they are invited to crafts fairs organized by museums, where they can sell their products, their objects are ultimately commodities, not the inalienable objects that retain *memory* displayed in the local museums which received the support of the Peasant Museum.

Not far from the **Zestrea** museum, for instance, lives Domnica Gheț, a *creatoare populară*. When I visited her she shared with me her disgruntlement and perplexity with the way she was ignored by the institutions that managed folklore (the School of Popular Arts), after she had been praised as a valuable *creator* all of her life. She had never been inside the **Zestrea** museum (only five minutes walk from her), nor had the owners of the museum ever heard of her.

Not all *creatori* find themselves rejected from the public sphere like Domnica Gheț is. When I telephoned the village hall of Nistorești to enquire about the folk ensemble in the village, my visit there was immediately arranged



6.9. Mr Manu posing for the camera in complete attire.



6.8. One of Mr Manu's creations.



6.10. Inside the museum/house of Mr Manu





6.11. Aneta Hușcă, employed by the school of Popular Arts to give weaving classes in Bârsești. She organized her workshop into a little display, with some of the authentic things she could find. All of them had been forgotten – no such objects are displayed in the good room, inside the proper house.



6.12. A demonstration of weaving lesson.

by local officials, which went on to include visits to the craftspeople in the village. I was greeted by each of them dressed in folk attire, spinning wool, or playing a traditional instrument. But no performance was quite as convincing as that of Mihai Manu (see images 6.8, 6.9 and 6.10). The handsome old man met me and the vice-mayor dressed in traditional woollen clothes, his white curls coming out of his black woollen hat on that hot summer day. He moved sprightly with his carved shepherd's stick, and insisted on doing a whole photo shoot. He had prepared stories about the village of lore, describing how everyone used to wear traditional attire and attended the *horă* on Sunday and at Easter. He also told me how he had brought the last TV producer to tears, and showed me the message that she had left in his visitors' book about the beauty and purity of the true peasant she had met. He was used to being called 'a living tradition'.

Although he was no longer invited to sell the objects he made, he was always present at festivals as a performer in the Nistorești flute ensemble. He is appreciated for his performance, but Mr Manu managed to make his museum part of that performance too. His display is made up of objects that he or his wife have made, but also of oddly shaped objects or things folkloric that he has come across. He invokes authenticity constantly to say that he did not copy the patterns on his crafts from anywhere, he *created* them all. Most of the objects he makes are decorative, without a practical function. Mr Manu is indeed a *creator popular* for whom objects are valuable as *art*, and not so much as ethnographic evidence. As we rummaged through the things he has on display, he would pick up heart-shaped embroidered pieces of leather, pieces of wood hand carved into the shapes of snakes or dragons, or other curious objects with names inscribed upon them. 'This one', he says, pointing to a contorted snake-like figure, 'was a

piece of wood that I picked up and was about to throw on the fire, when suddenly I realized it looks like something quite artistic'. His is the story of the uncultivated artistic genius inspired by nature and what he sees around him.

The displays of the folklore creators differ from both the local museums established during the 1970s, and from the recent ones that the Peasant Museum has helped to set up. Peasantry and locality are defined not through memory and the pressure of historical 'authenticity', but through their 'creative genius', a frequent trope in the performances and exhibitions of 'new folklore' during *Cîntarea României* (see Chapter Seven). The decorative objects made by *creatori* no longer occupy the central place in the frameworks through which folklore is managed and understood today. When it comes to folklore, it is memory and the objects from the past that define authenticity.

### **The Museum of Cloth and Stories**

In contrast to the shiny silver threads and 'butterflies' on the shirts hidden in the wardrobes of the women (Chapter Five), the shirts presented on the website of **Muzeul de Pânze și Povești** (*Museum of Cloth and Stories*) in Mândra<sup>116</sup> are decorated with more sombre patterns. No reference is made to 'folklore', but instead the material – *cloth*. The objects that the introductory text talks about are defined as inalienable:

Our intention is to celebrate in an urban and contemporary manner the old, authentic, Romanian cloth, to transmit it further through time and throughout the world, adapted to our times. The correct cloth, filled with all

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<sup>116</sup> This is the only museum that I discuss which is not located in Vrancea. It is an important initiative, that I did not want to leave unexplored, and which shares elements with some of the other museums. Its story of success is remarkable.



6.13

Examples of imagery and rhetoric on the websites of Muzeul de Pânze și Povești – an on-line museum.  
<http://muzeuldepanzesipovesti.blogspot.co.uk>



6.14

6.15. One of the recent 'exhibition projects' that explores cloth and memory, family history and 'generations of women'.



6.16 On the website, the caption underneath this photograph reads: 'Around here, all [the cloths we have] have a lace finish. Our women are proper, they treat every object they touch with care and respect. Around here we fight a great battle against plastic lace, which has invaded the comfort zone of authentic traditions. Around here we found a little bundle of lace, 100 years old, which sat silently in an old drawer, waiting for their turn (...) and glory. Source <http://muzeuldepanzesipovesti.blogspot.co.uk/search/label/pânze%20și%20povești>, accessed on 02.12.2014.





6.17. Badges that use the 'layering of wool, lace and leather, manually inscribed with Romanian words'.  
<http://mandrachic.blogspot.co.uk>



6.18. Mândra Chic T-shirt. The inscription reads: 'God-help' (often used as greeting in parts of the countryside). <http://mandrachic.blogspot.ro/-search/label/despre%20proiectul%20Tricoul%20Fain>

its messages. To wear it with style and dignity until it's completely torn apart... And with the hope that, at some point, someone will learn again how to sew this whole story, with their hand and their soul. So that it stays in their hearts for a lifetime, not just for one season. It's like an immortality accessible via the *handmade*.<sup>117</sup>

**Muzeul de Pânze și Povești** exists mainly online, in the form of one of the blogs run by Alina Zară about the crafts and places of Făgăraș (see images 6.13, 6.14, 6.15, 6.16). Făgăraș county, but also Romanianness – are defined through objects, crafts, skills, memories and landscape. On these blogs Zară, rediscovers all of these (which she may call 'traditions', but never 'folk') through her own biography: she was born in the village of Mândra, moved to Bucharest to study PR and acting (two forms of performance) but found the world outside the village empty and uncreative. When she returned, she reimmersed herself into the pace and life of the *old* village, remembering the stories of her grandmother and all the other old women of the village, who allowed her to rediscover the place anew. Inalienability and depth characterize the objects that she finds and puts to use, which she recuperates through claims to individual and collective memory.

Central to the virtual museum is the project called Mândră Chic<sup>118</sup> which involves making modern clothes with fragments of traditional crafts sewn onto them (images 6.17, 6.18). Pieces of the fabric that Zară finds in old chests and boxes in the houses she visits are sewn onto white T-shirts. 'Through this project we bring a "Romanian" alternative to those who want to wear a T-shirt with a simple, positive message' says Zară. The idea behind these objects on sale revolves around value: the realization that the clothes we wear every day are

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<sup>117</sup> The word 'handmade' was in English in the original script.

<sup>118</sup> The word 'mândră' means proud, but is also a regional word for a 'beautiful young lady'. It is a play on words.

*meaningless*, unlike the clothes that our grandmothers made in the past. She recuperates not only old pieces of embroidery or fabric, but also language: some of the T-Shirts have everyday expressions written on them, recognized as being from the Făgăraș region. Behind these discreet signs of regionalism, and behind the invisible work of the women in the past (now forgotten, or in pieces) she sets out to rescue profound meanings. While memory makes the fragments inalienable, imbining them with the specificity of the time and place when the object was made, the things designed by Zară are commodities, albeit ones meant to be worn in much the same manner as the peasant shirts were once: with great awareness of what they *mean*. This constant reference to the profound meanings beneath folk items echoes Blaga's philosophy (see Chapter Two) and is shared by the Peasant Museum. The recuperated fragments are meant to give meaning to the empty signifier which is the T-shirt.

Photographs that accumulate on the blogs and websites connected to **Muzeul de Pânze și Povești** sensuously reveal a great number of objects and landscapes.<sup>119</sup> There are also references to an actual museum, an old house in the village which contains some of the bits and pieces Zară has found in dowry chests, and which is also the place for crafts and story-telling summer schools designed for children.

The T-shirt project, in which old fabric and fragments of speech ('texts and textures') are reused, provides 'a window into another world, that of the past', when everything was done properly. Mândra is 'the village of hand-made cloth, onions and stories', an unspoiled village, where the everyday is meaningful

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<sup>119</sup> Once the design project and one of the blogs proved successful, artists, photographers and a few ethnographers temporarily joined in.

and spiritual. 'Everyone knows their purpose', she writes on her blog of a Făgăraș village she travels to. The fragment is seen as a path, a way to access a world of meanings which is whole (not fragmented) and *can* be recuperated. In state folk museums, costumes are presented as one piece, as they stand for the absent body of the peasant in perfectly reconstructed interiors, miniatures of peasant rooms, themselves inside miniature villages. Zară does not give us the whole object, because wholeness is not visible and available to her. The object appears as a fragment, but links to a world beyond materiality. Although the stress is always on 'fragment', the stories that these bring out are not heterogeneous. On the contrary, they seem to be 'fragments' that index the same whole. Unlike Benjamin's celebration of rags, Zară's project aims at recuperating a place at a particular moment, as a landmark for the present and future. Spiritual aspects and anti-communist resistance are central to her virtual museum, where old photographs are published, alongside these stories of resistance (occasionally, one of her Facebook personas is openly nationalist).

The project shares many of the perspectives on objects conveyed by the Peasant Museum. 'The appearance of the [peasant] object in the world is more like a birth. The object contains the sound of nature, not the noise of cars. It reflects the world in its wholeness, lived, felt, emerged from real need and from love' writes Bernea (in Passima 2009, 56). Like the project of the Peasant Museum, which aimed at reinserting objects into a world of the peasant that has disappeared (because of communist modernization), Zară's blog talks about the simplicity of the village and of the pattern.

These fragments are not only mnemonic; their simplicity and restraint are meant to reveal the values behind the object. These narratives around fragments

are meant to counter not only the failed grand narrative of socialism, but also consumerism. It is a denouncement of alienated commodities. What Zară offers are also commodities, but made up of fragments claimed to be part of the 'collective memory' and to have a universal value.

Value comes from this simplicity, as well as from the discretion and invisibility of the work that produced them, brought to light by Zară's designs. Moderation is ethical and tasteful, in addition to signalling profundity. It is also in line with the middle-class audience she enjoys. The T-shirts have proved very successful indeed at bringing about an elitist reframing of history (similar to that of the Peasant museum), and at targeting a market of middle-class young people (the T-shirts sell for at least £25). This aesthetic is clearly not addressed to the uneducated working class. It was a local entrepreneurial success:

In the area there are a lot of women who still weave, sew, invent patterns, reinvent and customize outfits in the most authentic and interesting fashions, in no way less valuable than famous brand 'pretensions'. Simple, correct, wholehearted and full of imagination. Nowadays these women read 'specialists' literature', they consult magazines for the latest fashions, study patterns with their grandchildren on the internet, take advice from people who deal in fashion, with ethnologists, folklorists, architects... they have practically started a campaign of recycling and reinterpreting 'in style' all they see around them, in their wardrobes, in their dowries, workshops, attics and old trunks. [...] Our intention, without any exhaustive pretensions, is to transform our space into one of creation, where modern art and contemporary design can come together harmoniously with authentic, traditional elements, as they bring out the best in each other, sometimes even in contrast.<sup>120</sup>

The entrepreneurial project that the museum proposes through the crafts classes that take place there, and through the tangible objects it sells, is presented as a solution for the future of the countryside. This entrepreneurial myth comes out

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<sup>120</sup> Source: <http://mandrachic.blogspot.ro>, accessed on 01.11.2014.

as the only alternative for the future – for a generation of young people without jobs, strong values or ‘culture’. The ‘Museum’ comes as a solution for a marginalized countryside where the citizens are constantly encouraged by the Romanian government (through EU sponsored awareness campaigns) to become entrepreneurs, and take advantage of a post-industrial landscape full of touristic opportunities.<sup>121</sup> Zară also responds to one of the current national obsessions: an excessive belief in branding (and the promotion of the country abroad) as a way to post-communist salvation.

On my visit to Mândra, I found a village different from what Zară’s diary suggested. The landscape was indeed breath taking, as it is in many of the mountain villages. But as in the other villages, remnants of the recent past were immediately visible, such as the empty, weather-beaten 1970s shop and pub complex. Most of the people in the village had worked in factories in Făgăraș, some of which had closed down, leading to increased emigration. The villagers had no time for Alina Zară’s museum, and were, if anything, suspicious of her. To their minds, her project was all talk, a waste of time and of EU funds. Her assiduous attempts to reveal local things as valuable, and help build dignity and pride did not seem to resonate at all with some of the locals. The actual **Muzeul de Pânze și Povești** was closed when I visited, and the locals assured me that it stays like that most of the times. Nowhere was class distinction more evident than in the way Zară’s brand commodified memory and the village for the benefit of middle-class youth in Bucharest.

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<sup>121</sup> In the areas hardest hit by unemployment due to mine closures (imposed by the EU), the EU funds awareness campaigns for job conversion where people are invariably proposed tourism. Becoming an entrepreneur is seen as a salvation.



## The Large Room

In her essay on memory and materiality, Seremekatis contrasts a phenomenological way of referring to the past as embodied in the relationship between grandmother and child, against the encapsulation of objects in museums, where the past is 'devoid of semantic mobility, because its meanings have been completely exhausted, totalized and consumed' (Seremetakis 1994, 36) and where things are kept at a distance. In contrast, in the relationship between grandmother and child 'sensory acculturation and the materialization of historical consciousness occurred through the sharing of food, saliva and body parts' (1994, 37). It allows for modern things to be appropriated, made part of an intimate space, and 'ingested'. This corresponds to the different ways in which Benjamin conceives auratic objects: one that keeps us desiring the inaccessible object, against one that is fulfilling, and shows traces of an intimate relation with the object.<sup>122</sup>

But what happens when one tries to capture these grandmother and child memories in a museum made up of meaningful things from the past? The museum of Mândra claims to represent this sensuous history, but it ignores the generation of mothers who grew up during socialism (and might have different memories) and latches on to that of the pre-modern grandmothers.

By contrast, the display of **Joița Maftei** from Nerej succeeds in capturing a great amount of layers in just one room (images 6.19 to 6.27). *Cea mare*, the large room, is what in other parts of the Romanian countryside is called 'the good room'<sup>123</sup>: the room in which valuable belongings are kept (many of them on

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<sup>122</sup> See Introduction for a discussion on auratic objects.

<sup>123</sup> The nearest equivalent in an English Victorian house would be the front room.

display) which are not for daily use but for particular rituals and events (as opposed to those in the working room). It is not actually large, but in comparison with the cluttered working room, it certainly seems so. In Joița's house, this room was roughly in the same place as it was when she was a child, despite all the adjustments and extensions made to the house throughout those eighty years. The rugs that covered the walls, and some of the pillows that decorated it, were also there when she was a young girl. But all the other things that had accumulated or disappeared over the years made it a place of the present.

It was not first and foremost a museum, but a display of sorts. Exactly what drove Joița Maței to put it all there was not quite clear, and there seemed to be more than one reason for it. By way of an explanation she told me a story: When she was little, Gusti's student teams came to Nereju, together with Stahl.<sup>124</sup> Mr Gusti himself stayed with her family, and her mother would prepare food for him and his students, who all met up everyday at the house of culture. Among many other details, she remembered that at that time Gusti's Royal Student Teams had been trying to change the diet of the peasants and introduce vegetables. Her mother grew the best tomatoes, and Gusti told the other villagers they should follow her model. Some forty years later, the ethnographer Nicolae Dunăre and his wife paid her a visit to interview Joița's mother about Gusti: what he did everyday, what his interests were, how he ran the research. Mrs Dunăre, who came with him, was a folklorist and noticed some of the beautiful woven wall carpets that her mother kept. This encouraged Joița's mother to show Mrs Dunăre more of the things she had made as a young girl, and those eventually also ended up being displayed. Mrs Dunăre and Joița developed a close

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<sup>124</sup> See Introduction, Chapters Two and Three.

relationship. Joița remembers how her mum cooked green plums for Mrs Dunăre once, but then realized that she needed to eat meat with every meal, so she pulled out a jar of meat preserved in fat, and Mrs Dunăre liked it very much, though she was quite surprised at what one could do with green prunes. Throughout the shortages of the 1980s Joița and Mrs Dunăre kept a close correspondence and sent each other food: Joița would send honey, cheese or meat over to Bucharest, and Mrs Dunăre would send back oil, sugar, lemons and things that one could not buy in the shops easily. She used to tell Joița what beautiful handwriting she had; funnily enough, Joița thought Mrs Dunăre's handwriting was dreadful. At one point the letters stopped coming from Bucharest, so Joița spoke on the phone to Mrs Dunăre's son, who told her that his mother had passed away. Not long after, Mr Dunăre died as well.

And somehow the wall carpets and wedding portrait of Joița's mum and dad never came down. But the large room also began to accrue details about the Gusti research teams that Joița's mother kept finding when rummaging through her old stuff; and then some of the older embroidered things came out as well, though no other new ones were made. Bits and bobs continued to appear or replace others (such as photographs, Easter eggs, distaffs and spindles – some older, some newer – an old oil lamp, a metal napkin holder, a glass bowl, and so on). The correspondence from Mrs Dunăre was kept in a drawer in this room, too. Then, one or two years before I got to meet Joița Maftai, an anthropologist from Manchester University visited her as well to enquire once more about Gusti's research teams. The postcard from her was there on the dresser, as were some of the photographs of the carpets on the walls of her room, taken recently by the photographers of the School of Popular Art.

But this is not to say that the objects in the room were there only because of the generations of ethnographers seeking something from Joița or her mother. It is true that she had discovered the value of some of the objects while the ethnographers were looking for them, and decided to keep them on display. But most of the things there had little to do with the visits of the specialists. In other words, the ethnographers who had made their way to her house remained present through the objects kept in the room not through their expertise, but through the personal connection they established with Joița, and their place in her biography. Unlike the objects that instil a distant appreciation that Benjamin talked about, this room seemed to absorb experiences and people. Joița had a particular affinity for arranging objects, and to her the room looked like that simply because it was beautiful, and created a comfortable environment (Miller 2008).

The old carpets enveloped the room in layers with the warmth of their woollen textures and the depth of their colours. The stories about the encounters with the strangers who come to enquire about the 'folk objects' are filled with details of the food they share with Joița and her family, which made the relationship possible. It is not a relationship where the ethnographic practice and visits add value to the objects, and bring the display room to the centre of the national discourse. Rather, the people who come from outside are made a part of the space, through shared substance. But how did she end up staying in her parents' house anyway? Normally the custom requires that the bride move into the house of her husband.

Joița was the youngest in the family, and when she was little was a very thin child. Her father took her to the doctor, who told him he should feed her and

give her honey in order to strengthen her. Her father started keeping bees, and Joița became stronger. During the war, the German and Russian armies passed by and took their food, and they had to bury a lot of their belongings so that they were not stolen. Right after the war she got married, but her husband fought in the resistance against the Russians, and was found in the woods and sent to the most terrible prison. Her brother came back from the war too and came to live with them. He was shell shocked, and would wake up in the middle of the night from a fit, shouting or crying. She would travel far with her father to see her husband in prison, and would take cheese, honey, brandy or wine to bribe the guards – but even so, the guards would sometimes send them home without Joița seeing him at all. Her husband was moved three times before he was released in 1968, and she went everywhere to see him and bring him food from home, and take their boy to see his father. But when he was finally released, he didn't come straight home. Instead, he stopped in town, in Focșani, and got involved in a relationship with a woman there. So Joița and her child stayed at her parents' (though she did take her revenge in the end for her husband's betrayal, and remarried and lived a happy life, until her second husband died). Then her son got married, had children who then grew up, got married, had children and so on. They still keep bees in the garden to this day.

The large room crowded with the material she had acquired seemed to act as her own memoir, her attempt to make sense of the past. The story and the room talked about how indebted she was to her parents for giving her strength and protection, through the honey and all the woollen carpets around the house. Among the things cherished in this room were a few history and literature books (some published in the 1930s), textbooks and old magazines sent to Joița's

mother by Gusti. Literacy had also been absorbed into the aesthetics of the room by Joița's mother's embroidery. Her name, Măriuță Dobrițoiu, was stitched onto a pillowcase in two different colours, in a way that made sense visually: MĂ RIUȚ A DOB RIT OIU. On another pillow the writing frames the central flower motif: DACĂ NUȚ PLAC, CU BINI. What the embroidery transmits is beyond written language, through the local accent and the sounds, but mostly the aesthetics of the letters. The message says 'if you don't like it, farewell', making a clear stance that her needlework is first and foremost about pleasure, but also the confidence in her skill through which she built up the value of the household. Semeretakis writes about how women embroider themselves and their aspirations only in the 'resting moment': 'after ordering her immediate world, her household, her fields, she will halt, step back and begin to weave dreams, desires, musings into cloth'. Embroidery is therefore transformative, a way to transcend the everyday. But despite this demonstration of womanhood through words, Joița's parents did not know how to read and write. Her mother put the pattern together with the help of a neighbour.

Joița's appreciation for literacy was evident in the presence of all the Romanian language textbooks in her display room. The textbook from when Joița was a pupil herself, with a romantic illustration of the countryside on the front cover, and dense texts, many of them patriotic or infused with Orthodoxy. The ones that her son and grandchildren received from school were there too. I recognized the one published in the 1980s, the same one I learned by. I spent a long time going through the chapters of my old textbook, recognizing each text that we all had to stand up and read a few phrases of out loud in front of the class, or the photographs of children doing volunteer work by planting trees in



front of modern blocs. I was absorbed by this object that had once been such an intimate part of my everyday life, remembering the frustration of going through each text that did not resonate with reality as I knew it, that would then be mocked with cruelty and vengeance by my classmates in the school yard during the break. This object had been rescued not only from the past and from the everyday, where it had been the object of transformation and of creativity and resistance. It brought home a view of the everyday inspired by Benjamin: 'Everyday life is mythicized as atopic and as the repository of passivity precisely because it harbours the most elusive depths, obscure corners, transient corridors that evade political grids and controls. Yet everyday life is also the zone of lost glances, oblique views and angles where micro-practices leak through the crevices and cracks of official cultures and memories' (Semeretakakis 1996, 13).

The textbook was not the only object that I recognized in Joița Maței's room (images 6.20-6.23). Flicking through the August 1938 issue of the magazine *Romania Ilustrata* ('Illustrated Romania') I recalled some of the photographs that I had found among the photographic documentation at the Horniman museum, which appeared in the booklet of the 1957 exhibition. Portraits of peasants in Romantic settings, atemporal profiles of old people suggesting primordial essence and spirituality, and ones of young maidens in the fields. There were images of the dramatic Vrancean landscape, one of peasant tools, and even one of the good room as Joița's mother had arranged it. These photographs appeared in the issue meant to celebrate the nation under the dictatorship of King Carol II. The images had been taken during one of Gusti's research campaigns with the student teams. Joița went through the images and told me who the people were – those that she could remember – and that the

image of the maiden in the field was actually one of the students dressed up, who was otherwise in charge of informing women about sanitation and managing their household. Joița had written on the sides of the pages who the people in the photographs were. Otherwise, the usual captions were vague, such as ‘a peasant from Vrancea logging’ above the photograph of Joița’s own house interior. When printed for the Horniman exhibition in 1957, they become examples of the ‘Romanian peasant’.

Not all of the objects in Joița’s large room were displayed. Some of them were hidden in drawers or a cupboard. Many were neatly arranged inside cardboard boxes. On top of them rested a box with a novelty lamp, folded plastic tablecloths with plastic imitation lace, and a pile of white plates. Behind the table, right in the corner was a plastic wash bowl with towels. The large cardboard boxes sat by the door on a large wooden chest, and matches and plastic bowls were placed on top of them. Inside the red chest and the boxes there were all the things needed for Joița’s funeral. ‘I have forks, knives, spoons, matches, I can’t remember... glasses, forks, everything they need. If I’m dead, how would they know what to get and where from?’ Glasses, plastic and ceramic plates, towels, candles, enough for more than one year’s *pomană*<sup>125</sup> – things to consume food in and things to give away as charity. Inside the chest are the clothes she would be dressed in when she dies, with the shirt she wore as a bride, long sleeved, embroidered with grey and with yellow beads, and the overskirt embroidered with metal thread.

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<sup>125</sup> The family of the deceased must set up ritual dinners at regular intervals after the person’s death for seven years. The entire extended family and neighbours are invited, and objects (often bowls and towels) are given as charity.

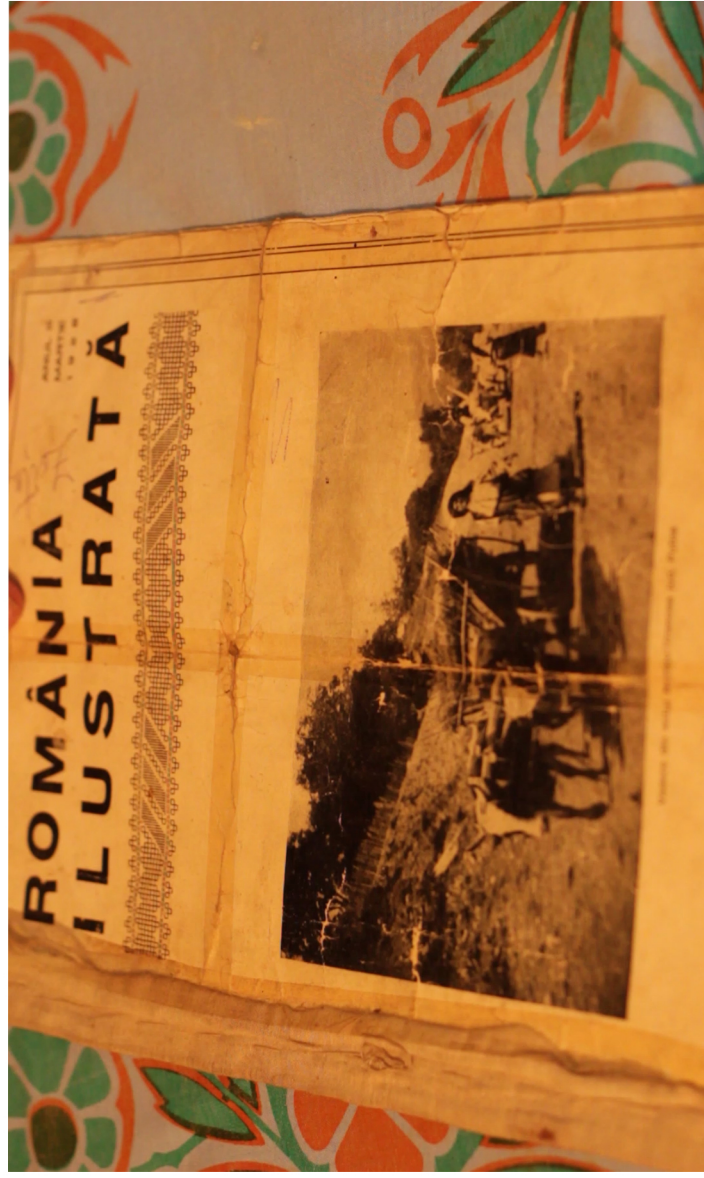
It is not hard to see the room with the wall carpets that cover it, one layer extending over the other as an expression of Joița's life story, where pieces from a past disrupted by war, a broken marriage or death seem easily mended, or where gaps are filled by yet another layer or photograph. At the same time this room brings together fragments from the state modernizing processes and from ethnographic endeavours, as well as some common places to which I found personal connections. Things are not displayed in a totalizing manner that exhausts possibilities through narrative, and narrative itself does not explain, but expands the room. The things found inside offered the chance to make connections to common places, to the aspirations of Joița and of her mother and their efforts to make sense of life.

Not only the past, but the future as well finds its place in the room that Joița set up, where everyday things that we might find 'in the lost, negated, de-commodified attics and basements of everyday life' (Semeretakis 1996, 10) become devices for transcendence from the flow of the present, either through aesthetics, ritual or memory. The objects in this 'large room', have been rescued not only from the past, but from everydayness, and have become transcendental and inspiring as they tell us about life, the passing of time, beauty, death, the past, parents and children. From the illiterate mother who embroidered the words 'if you don't like it, farewell' on a pillow case, to the preparations that Joița had made on behalf of her children and grandchildren for when her death arrived, the things inside the large room seemed to encompass all things made inalienable. In a note Joița explained: 'in this box there are 12 packs of paper napkins, you need to know about them, they are here. Today, 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2012'.



6.19. Joița Maței talking about her house and her life story. The portrait above is of her parents, and the one in the middle is of her father.





6.20. The magazine România Ilustrată (Romania in illustrations) sent to Joița's mother by Dimitrie Gusti.



6.21. The interior of Joița's house, the way her mother had arranged it.



6.22. The magazine features photographs with neighbours and relatives of Joița's family.

6.23. Throughout the years, Joița has tried to remember who the characters in the pictures were. On some of them she has written her own captions. The ones in the magazine tell nothing about who the people were. The two at the bottom of the page featured in the booklet published by the Horniman, for the 1957 Romanian exhibition. Then, the captions read: 'Romanian peasant women'.

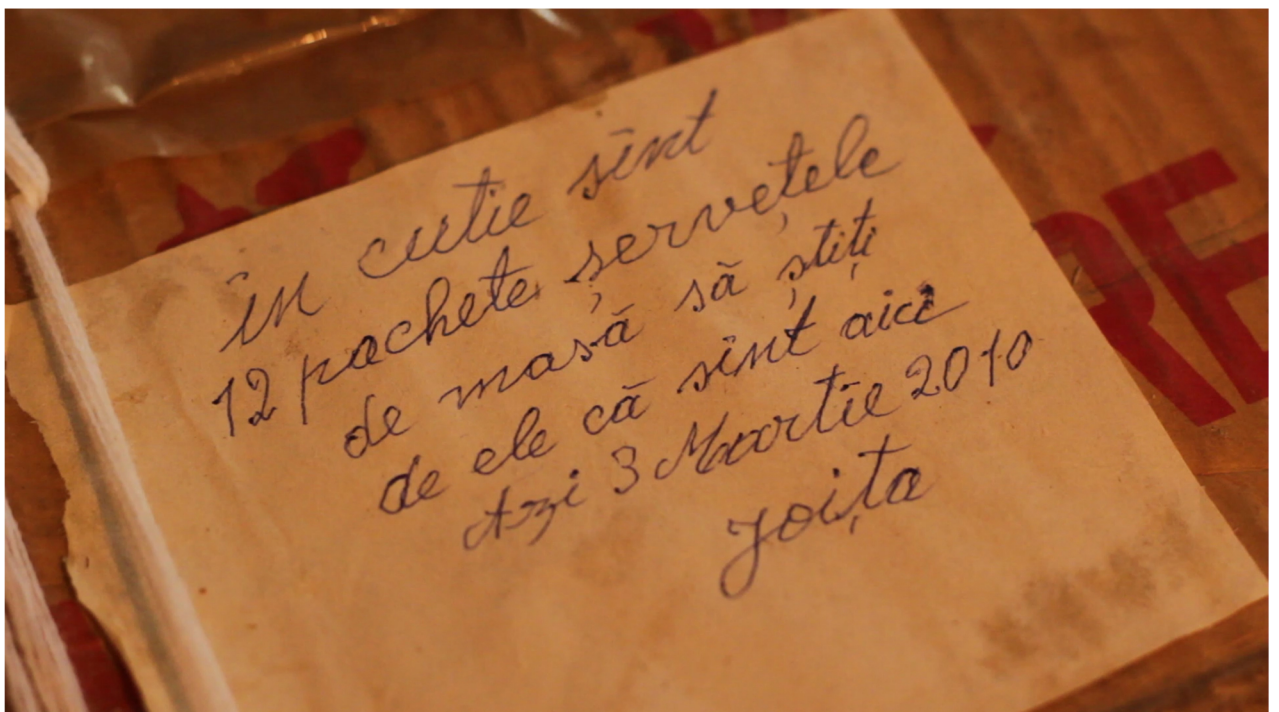




6.25



6.26



6.27



A phrase with no pretensions of 'traditions' or 'heritage', but which discreetly brings home what needs to be known about objects and the past in order to continue with life.

## Conclusion

The local museums that I present in this chapter complicate the idea of indigeneity and source communities, given the variety of ways in which identity is claimed and locality is constructed, the different positions of the people who set it up, and the audiences they may have on their minds at the moment of my fieldwork. Their engagement with objects and with the folk idiom in particular is different: they are makers, keepers, collectors or entrepreneurs.

'Memory' comes through as a central trope, one that sets apart the recent initiatives from the local museums opened throughout the country in the 1970s and 1980s. This brings out particular framings of the past through ancestry and kinship ideology, which suggest a historical consciousness and possibilities of a solidarity different than that of the nation which prevails in the pre-1989 ethnographic museums.<sup>126</sup> But 'memory' is also selective, and, as I have shown, in the case of folk museums it usually latches on to pre-World War Two connections. In some of the cases, like the **Zestrea** or Mândră museums these claims to memory and the past are attached to the narrative put forward by the Peasant Museum, which excludes particular frameworks through which folklore was interpreted during the socialist period. In fact, the word 'folklore' is absent

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<sup>126</sup> This change in historical consciousness is noted by Verdery (1996) in the problem of land ownership evident through post-1989 claims of land.

from these museums altogether; instead, they claim an authentication through 'real objects', unmediated by ideology and filled with meanings.

The local museums set up before 1989 were not the only ways of understanding folklore and authenticity. Some of the folklore creators, whose role was prominent in the *Cîntarea României* performances, claim the value of their work and of themselves through small displays. In the current setting the objects they make become less inalienable, and more commodity-like. The one successful example, the museum of Mr Manu, does have the support of the local government. Its place in the mass media shows that not one paradigm of understanding folk objects is able to completely annihilate the others, and that new framings co-exist with old ones.

So who are these museums for? The ones opened during the 1970s and 1980s have no particular audience – or rather, their audience from the point of view of the local government was the state. At the centre, their purpose was debated, but ultimately it was concerned with safeguarding national heritage. They were set up 'for the nation', but also made claims of the universal value of the artefacts.

During the socialist period, folklore was a way for villages to become part of the national narrative, and present themselves on the national stage. After the 1990s the state ceased to be the audience of folklore performances and museums, the countryside became politically and economically marginalized, while many villages were emptying out. No doubt, the people who set up local museums in some of these villages tried to draw public attention in their direction, and some of them have succeeded – the involvement of the Peasant Museum is the admirable proof. They also try to make sense of these changes

through their displays and claims of the past. None of them invoke grand historical periods. Instead they focus on everyday life, on a certain place located vaguely *înainte* – before.

I do not argue that the displays and the narratives are contaminated by pre- and post-1989 ideologies, but rather that competing paradigms of interpreting objects allow for particular articulations of materiality, locality, identity, by pinpointing the objects or their characteristics that are important. In many of these museums the engagement with objects and materials is transgressive and transformative, it involves the artistry of the person who makes the display and engages the imagination of the visitor, or invites the viewer to make personal connections with the common places found here. I felt that none of the local museums I saw drew me in, in the way that ‘the large room’ (in the absence of an official name) of Joița Maftai did. This place did not claim a particular position vis-à-vis the centre or an alterity, but had the capacity to absorb things, biographies, aspirations, memories, modern utopias and strangers.

# Chapter Seven

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## The Boundaries of *Folclor*

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In the previous chapters I discussed how notions such as ‘context’ and ‘source communities’ should not be considered fixed entities, but rather as unstable categories that maintain connections beyond the local. I have already shown how different factors change the way objects are evaluated, when displayed in local museums. The shifts in value attributed to folk objects, or to the folk idiom in general, depend on these unstable contexts, which emerge as an interplay between class distinctions, ideological engagements, and history. In what follows, I show how the engagement with the folk idiom extends far beyond the local and the space of the museum into pop culture and urban spaces. Debates around authenticity are not left behind in the museum, either. I explore how other kinds of media – TV stations and festivals – framed ‘folklore’ as a genre during the last decades of the socialist period and afterwards. Rather than dividing my analysis too clearly into before and after 1989, this chapter focuses on how particular media construct ‘folklore’.

These controversies surrounding authenticity and value focus on material which has been termed by UNESCO as ‘intangible heritage’,<sup>1</sup> namely the performance of folk songs and dances. The bureaucratization of folk performances in Romania started long before the UNESCO list of intangible heritage was commenced in 2001. And although folk performances can be seen

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<sup>1</sup> A wide range of practices can be entered as ‘intangible heritage’ in UNESCO, but here I only refer to music and dance. At the moment there are four Romanian examples of intangible heritage listed with UNESCO: men’s groups of carol singing (*colindat*); the craftsmanship of Horezu ceramics; the *Doina*; and the *Căluș* ritual. Three of these are examples of song and dance.

and heard everywhere in Romania today, only a few of these are considered valuable by specialists, and only three have made it to the UNESCO list. In this chapter I want to focus in particular on the dynamics that have placed the majority of folk performances outside the sphere of ‘outstanding national value’, and to look at the places where these different performances of folklore take shape and are categorized. How is it that the folk idiom persists in maintaining its power in the popular collective imagination of Romanian identity, despite the fact that folk dress is no longer used anywhere in everyday life? And how do debates around authenticity magnify the significance of the folk idiom, keeping it in the public eye and imagination?

In Chapter Three, I discussed the journey taken by folk dress from the home and the village *horă* to the house of culture, showing how two idioms – folklore and culture – were expressed through each other during the socialist period. In this chapter I trace the strategic uses of folklore performances during the socialist period. I will look not only at the way folklore became part of the propaganda apparatus, but also at how through the negotiations of value and authenticity at the level of festivals, folklore specialists and the jury became part of a struggle to redefine the nation and the past. This chapter will look at the frames that allowed contradictory definitions of value and authenticity during the 1970s and 1980s, and at the boundaries established between folk genres in the post-socialist period. But beyond the *meanings* associated with folklore, what has been stressed less is the pleasure of performance and of engaging with materials and costumes. The enthusiasm with which folklore is embraced today cannot only be explained through ideological engagement. ‘Folklore’, in its various forms, is part of the *habitus* of the performers and the audiences, as well

as being a form of artistic engagement. I write about the way performers engage with their costumes and their art in Chapter Eight.

### **Engaged in performance**

When I talked to the folklore specialists from the School of Popular Arts in Focșani, they complained about the disappearance of traditions in villages, but expressed their belief that where organized folklore ensembles were active, 'folklore' and traditions could be perpetuated. Meanwhile, many of the people in the village that I spoke to pointed to the omnipresent TV programmes showing *muzică populară* (see Introduction and below) whenever I asked them about local dress and folk objects. When one of the old school teachers in Vrâncioaia (who is also a writer) asked me what I thought the village needed to become more alive again, and I had to shrug and say I did not know, he declared: 'I think we should bring back the *horă mare*. People would rediscover the beauty of folklore.' More than a nostalgic remembering of his youth, his suggestion was that the gathering of people and the performance of the dances could induce a clear change in the village, and enable people to rediscover their local identity. It seemed that everywhere I went, the definition of 'culture' and 'folklore' was closely related to performance, to the enactment of 'folklore' – which made discussion of 'authenticity' all the more complicated.

The notion of performance, in Mitchell's opinion, entails not 'the fixity of structure and system but [...] the fluidity of process, practice, performance which in turn emphasises transformation – of object and, reciprocally, persons' (Mitchell 2006, 358). These transformations (of the body, of objects and of places) have been discussed with a focus on ritual performance, in which the



subject is confronted with transcendence. Material things suffer transformations at the moment of performance which are then carried into everyday life. While some performances form part of rituals through which the individual is incorporated into the community (albeit in a different position), others are thought to have the power to engender deeper societal changes.

Bishop (2012) argues that the art of performance was important to the political movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Within Italian Futurism and Soviet art, performance was to stir, provoke, and empower the audience by reducing the boundary between author and spectator. For the early Bolsheviks, performance was considered crucial for the dramatic change that communism sought to instil in both the public and private sphere. Through specially created institutions, such as the Proletkult and the houses of culture, performance was to drive changes in labour (by merging the production of art with other forms of labour), in everyday life (production time as well as leisure time ) and in feeling and sentiment (creating revolutionary self-consciousness). Following Marxist-Leninist critique, art was not to be an autonomous domain, while the hierarchy between artistic and all other kinds of performance was to be debunked (Bishop 2012, 50; see Buck-Morss 2002). But performance, it turned out, also worked to attract individuals to support the authoritarian Stalinist regime, by embodying the state ideology (Lane 1981).

This double edge to performance (the ability to engender social and political change, but also to reinforce political structures) is at the heart of the uses to which folklore was put in post-war Romanian. I want to show that the genre of *muzică populară* itself (a very popular one today), evolved in a particular way because of the specific articulations of folklore with high culture,

performance and the nation in the context of the socialist state. I also argue, in line with Mitchell, that the act of performing has a transgressive capacity, because of the artistry involved and the collective character of the experience, even when it is applied to particular political ideologies.

### **Folklore as a genre**

Folklore performance permeates many corners of everyday life in Romania: it can be found on TV shows such as *Romania's Got Talent*; in school celebrations where children dress up and prepare choreographed dances or short dramas about the village of lore; and at dance classes in Bucharest, targeting the young middle class<sup>2</sup>. This is not to say, however, that everyone likes folklore genres – in fact many make a point of avoiding them.

This widespread presence of folklore performance via modern media, in the village as well as in urban environment, should not surprise. The concept of 'folklore' is defined through the relationship between the centre and the countryside, the rural and urban. In fact, popular forms of folk music – such as *Rebetiko*<sup>3</sup> in Greece, or *muzică lăutărească* (discussed further below), and indeed *muzică populară* – took shape at the outskirts of towns, or at fairs and markets (*târg*), where they were performed by musicians from the countryside at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>2</sup> The so called 'Corporate Dance Classes', offer services to multinational companies in Bucharest. Folklore dances are taught alongside other ballroom dances. I attended some of these classes in Bucharest during my fieldwork. Most of the participants are people with middle-class jobs who want to be able to dance at the wedding parties of their relatives.

<sup>3</sup> A Greek music genre that mixes folk elements with urban sounds, popular in the interwar period at the outskirts of Greek towns, such as Salonika.

In Romania, *muzică populară* was an outcome of the ethnomusicological explorations of Constantin Brăiloiu and Harry Brauner<sup>4</sup> in the interwar period. Popular singers like Maria Tănase or Maria Lătăreţu were ‘discovered’ in this way. Many of the songs recorded by Tănase between 1930 and 1960 were collected by the two folklorists. At that point, however, the performers were not required to wear folkloric attire – and there was no authenticity anxiety.

*Muzică populară* (and *folclor*) as a genre continued to evolve during the socialist period, when it was performed by a large number of people at festivals. It was regulated by institutions such as the Centre of Popular Creation (which included the School of Popular Arts); specialists from various institutions assessed it; it was a popular television genre; and it was consumed by both the rural and the new urban working-class population that was migrating from the countryside. The evolution of the genre was connected to the development of recording and disseminating technologies and the spread of mass media, as well as to the state management of cultural activities and folklore.

The Regional Houses of Popular Creation, which were established in the 1950s, managed all amateur ensembles through the unions and houses of culture in each region (see Chapter Three), offering practical and theoretical direction. Folklore was only one of the activities they coordinated, but a particularly popular one, as much of the urban working-class population between the 1950s and the 1980s came from the countryside or had a close connection to village life.<sup>5</sup> Once more, folklore was articulated through performances in which a migrant rural-to-urban population was very much engaged, and had capital to offer.

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<sup>4</sup> Both of them collaborated with the Bucharest School of Sociology.

<sup>5</sup> This is based on the insight of folklore specialists who worked for the Regional Houses of Popular Creation in the 1960s, and from the biographies of many folklore performers.

Folklore performance was not assessed in the same manner throughout the socialist period. In the 1960s the specialists involved in training and judging the participants in competitions started to talk more and more intensely about 'authenticity'. This change is connected to what Verdery identified as a resurgence of nationalist themes in the public sphere and within the Communist Party, after 1968. However, this different way of evaluating the folk idiom spread unevenly among the folklore specialists. A struggle over the moral dimension of the performance began to take place.

This situation is similar to what Cash (2011) identifies in post-Soviet Moldova where folklore performances are divided into *popular* and *folcloric*



7. 1 Folklore ensemble performing on stage. Source: Lloyd Collection, file 2.1.5

genres. While *popular* is seen as stylized, composed and designed specially for the stage, the *folcloric* is seen as a more 'authentic' performance, based on what was considered to be accurate ethnographic material. While *popular* was a remnant from the Soviet management of folklore, *folcloric* developed in opposition to it. Cash explains *folcloric* as the re-articulation of national identity

in post-Soviet Moldova located in an imagined village culture, visible in the way the performers were trained and taught the dances.

The assessment of folklore performances in communist Romania by a particular group of ethnologists is summed up by I. Popescu ethnologist at the Peasant Museum: 'stage folklore was the only form declared authentic, and therefore [accepted] and broadcast by all means of mass communication'. Popescu draws an outline of the progressive corruption of 'folklore' as a consequence of the state management: from the 'early' moment, where 'the peasant was left uninstructed and brought on stage to manifest himself spontaneously', passing through a middle stage, when ensembles of 'peasant-artists' received instruction in order to perform to high exigencies, to 'the mammoth music and dance formations, performing songs with very short stanzas and frequent refrains, and with texts glorifying the golden age and its accomplishments'<sup>6</sup> (Popescu 2002). The dichotomy between an official 'folklore' and unofficial song and dance practices – the latter constantly in danger of being contaminated by the former – is also a trope in the work of ethnomusicologist Speranța Rădulescu (2002). To her, the notion of 'folklore' was itself discredited by the institutionalization of national folklore ensembles, which affected the orality and spontaneity of the musical phenomenon (Rădulescu 1998, 84).

Ethnologists trained at the Folklore Institute (led by Mihai Pop) generally regard the activity of the Houses of Popular Creation at worse as an attempt to Sovietize the nation, and at best as misguided attempts to aid the survival of

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<sup>6</sup> See definition of 'Folklore' in *Martor* 2002 (an issue of the magazine based on the memories of some of the ethnographers at the Peasant Museum).

folklore – either way, as fully supporting the state ideology.<sup>7</sup> But interestingly, the folklore specialists from these Houses of Popular Creation also see themselves as ‘resistant’, because during the socialist period they did their best to promote ‘authentic’ culture.

This discourse of ‘resistance’ (and also ‘resistance through culture’) characterizes the way people perceived public space during socialism, as the space of ‘official’ politics, which everyone was trying to subvert through unofficial practices. This discourse morally divided society into ‘us’ (private) and ‘them’ (the state), although, to some extent, everyone was both (Kligman 1998, Gal and Kligman 2000). Gal and Kligman (2000) argue that people believed in the separation of these two spheres, and misrecognized their interdependence in everyday life.

The work of the Houses of Creation was more ‘public’, and therefore more prone to accusations of siding with power, which became vocal especially after 1989. On the other hand, the work of the researchers from the Institute of Folklore unfolded in more ‘private’ corners: for a while they carried out collective fieldwork in remote villages, where they shared memories and practices of the Gustian explorations with the younger members of the Institute, but published relatively little (Hedeşan 2008). They were only forced into a more public sphere when the Institute of Folklore was merged with the Central House of Popular Creation, in an institute (ICED) that combined research and ideological responsibilities, and which was to be in charge of organizing the *Cîntarea României* festival-competition. Indeed, this forced cohabitation of the

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Hedeşan (2008), or the historical timeline of anthropology in Romania in the appendix of *Studying people in people's democracies II* Mihăilescu, Iliev, Naumovic (ed)(2008).



two institutes with the festival as a permanent background brought to the fore intense arguments around what folklore is and how to define ‘authenticity’.

Today, when talking about the festival, the only ones that cannot claim to have ‘resisted’ are the participants themselves, who are also the ones who regret it the most. Their stories of the performances are not about a corrupted form of folklore, but about observing high standards of artistry, and about being given the chance of time off work, and travelling throughout the country.

Some of the folklore specialists and ethnologists that I spoke to interpret the festival as an extreme outcome of nationalist-communist propaganda that characterized the Ceaușescu period. I want to argue, however, that the festival was in fact an arena of debate over value and authenticity, a debate in which performers and folklore specialists were very much invested.

### **Song to Romania<sup>8</sup>**

*Cîntarea României* was a festival-like competition that took place in Romania between 1976 and 1989. The context in which the festival occurred is that of communist nationalism, characterized by political isolation from the influence of the USSR, as well as from western Europe, and by the resurgence of interwar themes and cultural elites in public life. The 1980s are characterized by economic decline and the impoverishment of the population due to Ceaușescu’s political decision to repay the national IMF debt – in stark contrast to the enormous outpouring of resources (work and money) in the *Cîntarea României* festival.

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<sup>8</sup> This is Kligman’s translation of the *Cîntarea României*, used also by Mihăilescu (2008).

*Cîntarea României* encompassed many forms of art, of which folklore occupied a central place. Practically, the festival extended to the entire cultural production of the country, and absorbed almost all other festivals. It reproduced



7. 1 Folklore ensemble participating in the *Cîntarea României* festival, 1977.

on a grand scale the cultural activities institutionalized in the houses of culture throughout the country, seeking to stimulate those activities through the frame of a competition. Participation was obligatory for all houses of culture and *cămine culturale*, with each institution having to enter a certain percentage of their employees into the competition (Mihăilescu 2008). The sections of the festival, which also encompassed technological inventions of sorts, mirrored a modern scientific understanding of human activities inspired by Marxist-Leninism, which was meant to annihilate the hierarchy between labour and art, but without blurring the boundary between the two.

The artistic sections of the festival were largely divided into subdivisions based around 'creation' and 'interpretation'. The field of creation encompassed all literary genres (including folklore literature and journalism), music (light entertainment, choir and brass), choreography and fine arts. Interpretation included folklore performances, music, dance, satire and comedy, theatre and poetry recital (see Mihăilescu 2008).<sup>9</sup> Although 'folklore' constituted a separate section, performances of folklore could be found in other sections of the festival as well, as either dramatizations and choreographies based on folk tales or customs, folklore choirs, individual singers, folklore bands, ensembles of pipes, bagpipes and panpipes – all of which were reduced to stage and competition conventions. In terms of organization, all possible cultural institutions were involved, while the festival was largely controlled by 'the Propaganda section of the Central Committee and the Committee of Culture and Socialist Education with their departmental and local branches.' (Mihăilescu 2008, 65).<sup>10</sup>

The festival developed in several stages, starting with *etapa de masă*, a general round that involved all institutions, to the *etapa republicană*, the national competition. Initially it took place over the course of a year, although later on the festival unfolded over the course of two years. There was almost no time of the year when at least one competition of *Cîntarea României* was not taking place somewhere in the country. For the folklore performance sections no distinction was made between participants from rural or urban areas: everyone was

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<sup>9</sup> My main source for this part of the chapter are publications, such as *Cîntarea României* (called *Îndrumătorul Cultural* before 1980), archives of the House of Popular Creation in Focșani, which have not yet been registered into the National Archive, and the archives found in Vrâncioaia, also unregistered.

<sup>10</sup> Mihăilescu enumerates Socialist Culture and Education Assembly, Ministry of Education and Instruction, Central Council of the Romanian Syndicates Union, Women's National Union, Central Board of Communist Youth Union, The Council of Romanian Communist Students Association Union, The National Council of Pioneers Organization, The Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Interior, The Romanian Radio-Television, The Creation Unions.

expected to have the same relationship to the material performed, and to wear folk attire according to their region, including urban areas or places where it had not been available for decades. In the mass competition, each team and competitor represented their factory or institution, while in the regional and national stages, they represented their political-administrative units. Kligman (1998) argues that this structure of the festival mirrored the political aims of the Party at homogenizing the territory and destroying rural culture.

This 'multilaterally developed' project assumed the production of identical conditions of life for all citizens. An ideal form of social organisation would be achieved through the advancements that the *sistematizare* (systematisation) of rural and urban settlements would bring. Rural and urban communities would be homogenised, eradicating the glaring differences in living conditions. (Kligman 1998).

But, as Mihăilescu (2008) points out, the scale of the festival made it impossible to regulate all performances. Often the actual material brought into the festival and the ways in which it was evaluated did not comply with a coherent state ideology. The manner in which the specialists evaluated the performances reveal debates and contestations among them over the definition of valuable 'folklore'.

### **Defining authenticity**

The works of fine art and photography sent into the *Cîntarea României* competition by amateur artists provide interesting examples of how the folk idiom was used and interpreted at the time. In these works, topics inspired by pre-modern rural life and peasantry are more widespread than images of the heroic working class and those of a triumphant modernity, even though many of these amateur artists were working-class people. This sits at odds with the



7. 2 Painting by Romeo Calancea, clerk from Suceava. The piece is called *Tîrg*, painted oil on glass. Fine art brought to the festival took inspiration from folklore or idyllic rural life.

homogenizing intentions of the authoritarian state that Kligman discusses. Apart from art dedicated to the cult of personality (the image of Ceaușescu sculpted, woven or painted into various forms), most of the works depict the countryside. Symbolic images of peasant spirituality that seem to be borrowed from Lucian Blaga include fairs, weddings, a grandmother waiting at the gate, and the *căluș* ritual.<sup>11</sup> The 1907 peasant uprising is also a popular theme. Pieces entitled ‘maternity’, ‘cart and oxen’, ‘dressing the bride’, ‘harvesting’, ‘the oak of the polenta’, ‘dancing with the bride’, ‘outside the gate’ – are only a few of those which feature peasants wearing folk dress, using a ‘naïve’ aesthetic familiar from old peasant icons. Others use folk techniques or more modernist styles – though almost none of them use the socialist-realist aesthetic. In them, the peasants

<sup>11</sup> A widespread dance with a sacred character that was performed on stage, and that became a favourite of choreographers, because of its acrobatic, spectacular moves.



always wear traditional folk attire. In the photography section landscapes of hills dotted with haystacks, and portraits of young mothers, dressed in traditional clothes, depict a bucolic peasantry, with no trace of modernity. All this was produced and displayed in addition to the actual ‘folklore creation’ category, which featured objects similar to those found in ethnographic museums.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the structure of the festival, which promoted the Soviet understanding of culture that I discussed earlier, the content of the works was very much focused on a pre-modern imagination of the rural world. These works do not present the modern countryside that the Party tried to forge (see Chapter Three). The contradictory aims of *Cîntarea României* come through in publications aimed at helping the participants increase the quality of the performances.<sup>13</sup> Some of the innovative, altered forms of ‘folklore’ receive awards at the festival (see image 7.4, 7.5). But many of the articles written by specialists in the



**7.4 Rug, detail, made by Anghelina Micu, from Galați. The motifs and technique resemble those of a folk rug, but the details of the pattern are 'stylized' to use the specialists' vocabulary. The rug was awarded at the *Cîntarea României*.**

official publication of *Cîntarea României* warn against too much innovation in folklore, and demand that the works follow ‘a philosophy of folklore’.<sup>14</sup> The titles of these articles run along the lines of ‘Ban the path of falsity in folk art’ or ‘Stop

<sup>12</sup> The examples are taken from 1981 and 1983 catalogues of *Cîntarea României*. See bibliography.

<sup>13</sup> These were all published *Îndrumător Cultural* (see Chapter Three), which slowly became the official publication of *Cîntarea României* festival. This gives a scale of how the event swallowed up the all cultural manifestations in Romania. From 1980 the magazine changes its name to *Cîntarea României*.

<sup>14</sup> *Îndrumător Cultural*, no 4, 1976, p. 32. Article by Ion Lazăr, folklore specialist in Vâlcea county.



polluting good taste’ or ‘Let us take charge through our whole educational system’.<sup>15</sup> *Îndrumătorul Cultural* hosted a column entitled ‘Authenticity’ hosted articles that educated the minds of the readers towards good folklore. Frequently the arts section of this magazine showed the readers examples of ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ patterns, ensuring the distinction is properly learned.<sup>16</sup>

Against the structure of the festival, whereby art and politics were tied together, some of these authors argued for an autonomous domain of art and in favour of an aesthetic (and, the author hints, not political!) education of the participants, that was thought to liberate the spirit.<sup>17</sup>

‘Innovation within the spirit of tradition, not by betraying it or falsifying



**7. 5 These objects connect rituals with decorative art, awarded at the *Cîntarea României* festival-competition. They are made by hand, using traditional materials, but they are quintessentially modern.**

it’ is the phrase that epitomizes the ambiguity of the performance assessment and the contradictory demands upon folklore performances in the last decades of communism in Romania. The author continues by criticising the ‘leading and specialized cadres’ (from the Houses of Popular Creation) who impose standards that lead to ‘quality compromises, degradation, the prevalence of cheap formulas, of improvisations and variety show-like performances’<sup>18</sup>. Similar criticisms were made

about the quality of the songs inspired by the ‘new life’ – a reference to the

<sup>15</sup> *Îndrumător Cultural*, no 7/1975, p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> *Îndrumător Cultural*, no 2/1977, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> *Îndrumător Cultural*, no 10/1975, p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> *Îndrumător Cultural*, no 10/1975, p. 33.

propaganda verses praising socialist realities, which had to be inserted into folklore performances. The demand for 'authenticity' and artistic quality became a way to articulate opposition against the Propaganda Section. 'Authenticity' remained to a great extent an ambiguous term.

In the decades after 1968, Communist Party discourse was no longer centred around the working class, but rather saw the nation as the collective entity that drove the force of communism (Verdery 1991), and this incorporation of folklore and the nation's history into an 'indigenous Marxism' is visible in the structure of *Cîntarea României*. According to Verdery, nationalism was

inscribed in and emanating from many quarters of Romanian society. Because of its force in other quarters, because others used it in their own battles and sought to impose their own meanings on it, the Party had to strive as well to control the image of Romanian identity and to defend this image as adequately representing and protecting the Nation's interests (Verdery 1991, 132).

The Party's incorporation of the language of nationalism meant that symbolic battles between sections or spheres of cultural production were fought over the definition of the nation, and *Cîntarea României* can be seen as an attempt to incorporate and control these spheres. But precisely because of its scale, it was impossible to do so. As groups with divergent interests were brought together in *Cîntarea României*, they gave the festival a chaotic aspect – and many participants remember it that way. This is one of the reasons why the performers often received contradictory and vague advice, the most frequent of which was the necessity to 'diversify the repertoire' (so creativity) and that of the 'authenticity' of the performance, spelled out in the same phrase.

The context in which these struggles developed, Verdery argues, is one of economical shortage, which determined a constant climate of competition

between institutions over the resources that came from the centre. This way, the debates over 'authenticity' illustrate the competition between intellectuals and their cultural practices, each claiming their own position as truthful and valuable. Most visibly, Verdery argues, this competition activated arguments from the 'protochronists' and from the 'synchronists'.

Yet perhaps not all of this can be explained by looking inwards at the uses of history and folklore, as part of a struggle for power fuelled by political isolation and a climate of internal competition. The mid 1960s, the point when authenticity became a widespread idiom in publications connected to folklore performances in Romania, coincided with the liberation from colonial rule of African countries, and with an international political interest in safeguarding heritage, defended by UNESCO. Outside the borders of Romania there was a great deal of interest in the cultural forms of the newly independent nations, and debates around authenticity often arose (Rossler 2008). Even those intellectuals who were looking outside the borders of the nation for their models (the synchronists – in this case, the ethnologists from the Folklore Institute), also found the idiom of authenticity was widespread, as far as material and intangible culture was concerned.

But a level of ambiguity in the definition of 'authenticity' was maintained by all sides. Broadly speaking, some of the articles in *Cîntarea României*'s official publication proclaim an inclusion of political messages in the form of 'new folklore' (this was identified with the Party requirements); the most widespread opinion defined 'authenticity' as the integrity of the form of the folkloric material (generally held by museum specialists but also many of the specialists from the Houses of Popular Creation); yet others denied that 'authenticity' and true value

were possible on stage, where the spontaneity and force of the artistic act were impossible to achieve – a position firmly held by many ethnologists at the Institute of Folklore, although not always fully and bluntly articulated in the public sphere before 1989 (but very much afterwards).

Most of the time, however, the performers did not sense these differences between the different members of the jury and specialists. They did not perceive a contradiction between demands of ‘authenticity’, ‘creativity’ and the accuracy of the performance act. They thought they were part of a professional endeavour (although these memories are articulated in this way in the present-day context – see below). The requirements they heard most explicitly from the jury demanded the accuracy and purification of the folklore material. Most of the performers I spoke to were not deliberately performing *identity*, but an artistic act which they strived to do well, and which had certain standards of quality – a particular kind of dress, of song and of interpretation. They accepted that they had to also include material that pleased the Party ideologues (for song, they would have stanzas about the Ceaușescu family, or the nation, and the new life brought by the Communist Party). Neither their artistic creativity, nor the comments of the jury concentrated on that side of the performance, but on the artistic performance of the old folklore, seen by the specialists as ‘authentic’.<sup>19</sup>

Rădulescu, who was obliged to judge *Cîntarea României* performances on a few occasions, talked about the lack of spontaneity and the poor quality of the sanitized performances of folklore on stage. But she also remembered that, in the long hours of waiting for their turn, the participants who came from all over the

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<sup>19</sup> Yurchak (2003) speaks about the same phenomenon in the USSR, where people paid lip service to the Party, and carried out their cultural activities in the Komsomol without being necessarily ‘resistant’ or ‘compliant’ with the regime, but simply using these forms to carry out engaging activities. See also Chapter Three of this thesis.

country would start a spontaneous *horă* outside the performance hall, and would make the best of their exciting journey to the town where the festival was held. A wider variety of songs were played and danced this way – and to her, that was indeed spontaneous, ‘authentic folklore’. All the same, it was on the stage of *Cîntarea României* that she discovered Gypsy *taraf* bands (see below), forced to perform ‘authentic’ – that is to say, ‘pure Romanian’ music. But to the performers, the stage performance was no more or less ‘authentic’ than the spontaneous one outside the house of culture – there were simply different registers of performance. The stage was one particular medium, with its specific rules, in which the performers strived their best to do well and come back to their village or their work unit with prizes and some good stories to tell.

### **The fight against kitsch**

The impressions of the jury were crucial to the entire setting of the festival. Most of the folkloric stars I interviewed have clear memories about the emotions they experienced going on stage to perform for *Cîntarea României*, caused not so much by the audience, but by the awe at performing in front of ‘the jury’. The folklore specialists were indeed the main audience of the performance, and the ‘interpreter’ (*interpret* or *artist popular*) had to demonstrate a high standard and accuracy of dress, song and dance (see Chapter Eight for more detail on these standards with regards to dress).

Bodily movements and dress were regulated by the folklore specialists, as the performers were considered to be in constant need of education. The popularity of folklore, which the state actively endorsed, had unleashed forms of

folklore performance considered improper and polluting by ‘authenticity’ standards. These criticisms referred to aesthetic aspects – most often focused on



7.6. This cartoon appeared in *Îndrumătorul Cultural*, 7/1976. The caption translates: “Fashion”? ... At the *horă* in one manner/ They wanted to be admired/ Her, with a “mini-catrință”/ Him, with his flared ȧari. (*catrință* and *ȧari*, are both traditional attire. Incorporating modern elements in countryside activities is an aesthetic and moral offence.

costume. The moral pressures of ‘authenticity’, and aesthetics demanded simple, geometrical patterns. Very often criticisms against ‘kitsch’ and anxieties about taste were voiced through the *Cîntarea României* publications, and also in the interviews with ethnographers and folklore specialists that I conducted in 2011. Unexpectedly, taste, in Bourdieu’s understanding (1986)

emerges as a classifier in *Cîntarea României*, a setting in which the national, and not class identity were at the core. Through this stress on the nation, class distinction was effaced, but I argue, very much present.

I interpreted these admonishments not as debates with the Party over symbolic meanings, but rather as a middle-class cohort of specialists regulating the behaviour of a working-class population rooted in the countryside. The jury perceived them as always in danger of falling prey to glitter and consumption brought on by modernization (see Greenough 1996 for similar dilemmas in a craft museum in Delhi).

Examples of cautions against copying the stage behaviour of professional folklore singers (who, in their own turn, had borrowed too much from ‘light entertainment’) include ‘glances, excited smiles with all their teeth, ostentatious walks on stage, inappropriate dialogues with the orchestra, fickle play with the



headscarf<sup>20</sup> The author gives the example of Maria Ciobanu, a popular folklore singer whose costume was covered with inauthentic, glamorous motifs (see also Chapter Seven).

Since the career of the professional performers usually started at the level of 'amateur', it was crucial that the education process at this level deterred the performers from kitsch – seen not only as an aesthetic *faux-pas*, but as a moral violation. The professional performers were accused of providing the wrong role model for the audience and the succeeding generation of performers, which also needed to be educated.<sup>21</sup> While it was understandable that the audience wanted entertainment and variety, the 'diversification of the programme' needed to be done within the framework offered by authentic folklore. For example, an artistic secretary (folklore specialist) wrote:

there are so many traditions and folklore fairs, customs all year round, of which we read about in the press, but we do not see them on stage; we have the material to refresh this festival. We need to make sure that the performance of the professional ensembles does not trouble this festival; this way, we can educate the taste of that side of the audience which receives uncritically the performances of the 'stars'.<sup>22</sup>

Many of the folklore specialists involved in *Cîntarea României* that I spoke to complained about the low quality of the performances, especially with regards to costume. The problem, most of them thought, was that performers from across the country made contact with one another, and influenced each other's choice of dances and costume patterns, and this meant that they broke with the

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<sup>20</sup> From the article 'Respect pentru creația populară, pentru reprezentanții ei autentici! In *Îndrumător Cultural*, no 10/1976, p.36.

<sup>21</sup> These particular criticisms were brought in the context of another folklore festival that took place at the seaside, during summer holidays, where many 'professional performers' were doing shows for money. The danger, therefore, was commercialism. These criticisms are very similar to concerns expressed by the jury of *Cîntarea României*.

<sup>22</sup> *Idem*, p.17.

‘authentic’ forms from their regions. Indeed, many folklore specialists believe that the biggest fault of the festival was allowing regional forms to mix. It is as if folklore forms – song, dance, dress – were inherently enticing, making the other performers want to poses and ‘steal’ them. Consumption, possessing a bit of the other region’s ‘folklore’ was the main threat to ‘authentic folklore’.

Even among those ethnographers who consider *Cîntarea României* to be a ‘communist plague’ from which folklore has not yet recovered, many believe that to some extent the aesthetic standards of the competitors’ costume improved from one edition to the next. Some of them also acknowledge that the festival succeeded in engaging people in folk activities, encouraging them to dig out forgotten forms and crafts, even if, ultimately, they were put to work for the propaganda machine (as far as they are concerned).<sup>23</sup>

### **Televised folklore**

Among the institutions involved in *Cîntarea României*, TVR (the public television broadcaster) was one of the most important. Various editions and competition rounds of *Cîntarea României* were fully recorded, as well as many other programmes documenting the behind-the-scenes preparations for the performance, which were broadcast together with song and dance performances. Later on, almost all programmes related to folklore produced and broadcast by the TVR were brought under the umbrella of *Cîntarea României*. Because of this continuous broadcast, *Cîntarea României* can be considered a media ritual, in Couldry’s terms.

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<sup>23</sup> This came out of my own discussions with folklore specialists.

Media rituals are ‘formalized actions organized around key media-related categories and boundaries, whose performance frames, or suggests, a connection to wider media-related values’ (Couldry 2012, 29). His understanding of ‘media rituals’ is based on Durkheim’s notion of ritual as a means to confirm the social relations in a society. Rather than discussing the meaning of the media text, Couldry focuses on the capacity of the mass media to offer normative representations of reality.

Turning *Cîntarea României* into a ritual that confirmed the nation was also possible through television, but in a manner different than what Couldry describes. The purpose of *Cîntarea României* was not to address an audience, but to engage the participants. Few of the people I interviewed remember sitting in front of their television sets for hours to watch the unfolding of *Cîntarea României*. What they do remember is its presence: it was constantly taking place. By contrast, a lot more people remember taking part in the event. The number of participants in the festival reached into the millions with each edition. Mircea, one of the cameramen for *Cîntarea României*, described to me the complete change that a town would undergo every time the festival took place. The streets would swarm with folklore performers, everyone had to stand around for hours as performances were delayed, and toilets were rarely available in towns that were unprepared for such invasion. There was no room for an audience in the halls, he recounted. Each member of the audience would, in their own turn, perform at some point in the festival. ‘We would be filming from early morning until late into the night, and nobody was invited as an audience’, Mircea remembers. Television was, therefore, recognized as a grand stage for mass participation, where the meaningful state ritual took place. The ritual engaged

the population, and the abstract state, embodied in the expertise of the folklore specialists, who performed the role of the audience.

But this was not the only way in which folklore was imbibed with meaning through television. In parallel to *Cîntarea României*, TVR broadcast a well-known show called *Tezaur folcloric* (translated as ‘Folkloric Treasures’), which ‘made’ the interpreters into stars by glamorizing them. ‘They were the glory of their time’, recounted Marioara Murărescu, presenter of the show, referring to the ‘interpreters’; ‘and they are glorious today, too’.<sup>24</sup>

The presenter of *Tezaur folcloric* was aware of both the role that the show had in constructing celebrity folk performers, and of the appeal they had to the



7. 7 The first edition of *Tezaur Folcloric*, 1982.

audience. The show was very popular, and a testimony to this is its long life on television, lasting until shortly before presenter Marioara Murărescu’s death in 2014. But despite the glamour and appeal created around the folklore performers, folklore was associated with a strong sense of ethics that placed the performance beyond the judgement of the audience. The folklore stars acknowledge that ‘kitsch’ – the constant menace when the masses take to the

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.tvrplus.ro/emisiune-tezaur-folcloric-42> Accessed on 01.08.2014.

stage – was always avoided, through the expertise and high standards of the programme presenter.<sup>25</sup>

The distinction between *folcloric* and *popular* ensembles that Cash identified in Moldova was evident in *Tezaur Folcloric* too: the programme declared it showed not so much *muzică populară*, as *folclor*. The programme favoured performers who came from villages, more than the ones that had become known through the factory unions. The distinction between *folclor* and *muzică populară* remained subtle in the show: *muzică populară* (a popular genre) was of value when it made full use of the authentic *folclor* (which is to say ‘village culture’). For political reasons, *Cîntarea României* was broadcast more than *Tezaur Folcloric* during the 1980s (see Urdea 2014). For this reason, Murărescu saw herself as ‘resisting the system’.<sup>26</sup> But in fact, Rădulescu remembers that her show was declared to be a landmark of expertise in folklore by the specialists at the Houses of Popular Creation, and also by many at the Institute of Folklore – so from her point of view, *Tezaur* was the officially accepted folklore.

The two ways in which *muzică populară* was broadcast on television entail different relationships with the folklore idiom. With *Cîntarea României* ‘folklore’ was seen as belonging to everyone, from villages or towns, and the citizens had a duty to learn about it and perform it. *Tezaur Folcloric*<sup>27</sup> held ‘folklore’ as something rare, with ‘authenticity’ being located only in specific performances, usually the ones which evoked pre-modernity. At the same time

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<sup>25</sup> For a more developed argument on the transformation of folklore from *Tezaur Folcloric* to televised folklore performances in present-day Romania see Urdea 2014.

<sup>26</sup>Source: In Memoriam Marioara Murărescu, TVR1 31.01.2014.

<sup>27</sup>Opening credits for *Tezaur Folcloric*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZgB\\_UF177Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZgB_UF177Y)

both programmes made folklore central to the national discourse, and made the question of 'authenticity' crucial.

The sense of morality with *muzică populară* and of doing something beautiful, educational and altogether positive by perpetuating traditions continues to be an important feature of the performance, and, in some respects, of the audience as well. The oscillation between forms of 'folklore' that are popular and forms that are 'proper' continues to be an important marker of class distinction today (an aspect treated in the following chapter). After 1989 *Tezaur Folcloric* became a folklore festival as well as a weekly programme.<sup>28</sup> The language of 'authenticity' continued to be relevant – no longer to fend off the intrusion of the Party and the 'new folklore' (propaganda lyrics), but to stand against the perils of consumerism and western aspirations.

The language of protochronism combined with the rhythms of *muzică populară* was a relevant trope in the post-communist period, especially for the social categories that lost out after the fall of the communist regime and the subsequent orientation of politics towards western Europe. This wide section of society included middle-aged and elderly people, working-class and (lower) middle-class people, some of whom may have been engaged in folklore performances through their workers unions. They found themselves in an unstable society, where they lost the chance to engage in artistic endeavours, often together with their work places. They were receptive to an updated nationalist discourse that involved folklore, with a religious element attached as well. Members of this audience regard this sanitized, 'authentic' form of folklore as ethical in a public space dominated by sexualized images, money and the drive

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<sup>28</sup> See <http://www.tvrplus.ro/emisiune-tezaur-folcloric-42>.



to consume. I turn to one of the folklore festivals which I attended, connected to a TV station called Etno TV, and which brought back memories of *Cîntarea României* for the participants and the audience, and partly reproduced *Tezaur Folcloric*.

### **Folklore and ritual on Etno TV**

It was a Thursday afternoon, April 2012, four days before Easter Sunday, and a grand show was about to take place in the largest performance hall in the centre of Bucharest. The foyer of Palace Hall was swarming with fans of *muzică populară*. For over a month, Etno TV had been advertising the grand performance they were putting on, where they were going to showcase nearly all of the great Romanian folklore stars. Cameras were going to film the whole event and broadcast it as part of the Etno TV Easter programme at various times of the day, from the Saturday before Easter to the Wednesday after, when the celebration would officially end. Easter is the most



**7.8 Folklore performers at the backstage entrance, waiting to be picked up by limousines**



**7.9 Two presenters from Etno TV, dressed up in Maramureș costume, receive the folklore celebrities at the entrance of the Palace Hall.**

important celebration for Orthodox Christians, and Etno TV, like all other television stations, makes the most of it. The festival footage was not the only programme they had planned for the long Easter weekend. The studios had been

busy all week, as the crew recorded tens of hours of footage for a long edition of their programme *Bună Seara, Dragi Români* ('Good Evening, Dear Romanians').

A couple of hours before the Palace Hall performance was supposed to begin, the employees of Etno TV were rolling out the carpet that would take the stars of the show from the steps outside into the foyer and then onto the stage. As shimmering limousines released groups of folkloric stars dressed up in folk attire, the flashes of the cameras brought out details of the women's costumes: the high heels and extravagant make up, the glitter on their peasant blouses. Climbing a few steps on the red carpet, they would be officially greeted by two Etno TV programme hosts with the traditional Romanian round bread (*colac*) which they were to tear a piece from and dip into the small mound of salt resting on top of the oversized loaf.

The large crowd of spectators in the Palace Hall almost matched the numbers of folklore performers backstage. All regions of Romania were to be represented on stage that evening in front of the audience. The participants were very happy to be finally acknowledged again and be asked to take part in an event as *grand* as the festivals of the past. Just like in *Cîntarea României*, it was impossible to accommodate all the performers' individual acts on the stage of the Palace Hall, even though the show went on for well over six hours. On stage, they were gathered into regional 'ethnofolkloric' groups and asked to perform 'region songs.' Once more, the music mattered less than the actual participation of as many 'interpreters' as possible; it was their impressive number that made the performance into an event. The performance in the Palace Hall equated Etno TV with the nation-state. Here, as in all media rituals, television acquired a central position in the social life of the nation.

The highlight in the Palace Hall performance was the orchestrated Easter blessing that took place at midnight. As in a church service, the lights went dim and there was a long moment of silence followed by the rattling sound of the



**7.10 TV host presenter Roxana Vaşniuc on the stage of the Palace Hall.**

smoking censer. Soon the smell of incense in the dark was followed by the usual Easter Orthodox call: 'come and take light.' Someone lit candles, and the call of the priest and the

smell and rattle of the censer on

the grand stage transformed the setting. The priest was a well-known folklore music performer. Once this was over, he proceeded to sing a song from his region, Maramureş.<sup>29</sup> More than the metonymic representation of the nation, the spirituality of the nation was addressed too. Television demonstrated its power not only to de-territorialize, but to de-temporalize events. It mattered less that Easter had not arrived yet for the performers and the audience. For that moment, everyone became an extra in the orchestration of the Easter night mass – which is not to say that the moment was not lived with intensity.

The event lasted from 6pm to 1am, and during this time I moved between the backstage and the audience, collecting impressions from the participants and recording the fantastic display of glamour, folk and effusion of sentiment on stage and in the audience. The event organized by Etno TV can be read through a Durkheimian perspective of 'collective effervescence' – a performance that

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<sup>29</sup> This is an important region in the construction of the national identity through museums and folklore expertise. See Hereşan 2008 and Iosif 2008.

engaged a large crowd of people, both on stage and in the audience. But it can also be understood as a ritual whereby categories are engendered, which 'captures the pervasiveness of the structural links between media rituals and social life' (Couldry 2012, 11). Referring to Durkheim's claim that societies exist in so much as they act together, Couldry comments that 'in contemporary societies almost all possibilities of 'acting in common' must pass through social forms (media forms) that are themselves inseparable from highly uneven effects of power' (Couldry 2012, 20).

The event brought together many of the features that have defined the folk idiom in recent years: the morality of the genre; the grand scale of cultural production; the glamour and consumerist aspirations of the setting; the religious aspect of Easter mass being performed by a folklore singer who is at the same time a priest. This media ritual was connected in this way to the most important religious ritual of the year of the Romanian Orthodox population.<sup>30</sup> The feeling in the audience, and among the performers, was that of being implicated in something altogether positive, especially because of the religious and national legitimization of the artistic act.

### ***Muzică populară – redefining the boundaries***

There are many TV stations devoted to folklore music in Romania. These channels are usually considered to be expressions of inauthentic folklore by many folklore specialists and even by performers, who still hold TVR's *Tezaur Folcloric* as the only show not to be compromised by commercialism. But folklore, as I mentioned earlier, forms part of a variety of performances, inspired

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<sup>30</sup> Heintz 2003 on the importance of religion in post-socialist Romania

by a range of popular genres, from pop, to rock and jazz. The most popular genres in the countryside and working-class areas tend to be *muzică populară* and *manele*, the latter of which has raised much debate since the 1990s. *Manele*, a hybrid of western beats and Turkish sounds identified as ‘Balkan’, is associated in the mass-media with Roma communities. *Manele* gained visibility during the 1990s and provoked controversies (see Rădulescu 2012, Beissinger 2007, Schiop 2011) leading to the rejection of the genre from national television channels, despite its popularity with many working-class Romanian people.

In certain settings, most commonly at weddings, the distinction between genres matters less. A good wedding band anywhere in Romania should be equipped to perform a bit of everything: some *muzică populară*, some pop hits, perhaps classic ballads for the elderly, and often a few *manele* for the young ones who stay up until the morning. A wealthier couple could afford to have more than one performer: perhaps a generic band, but also a singer of *muzică populară*, so that as many styles as possible are covered. By contrast, it is on television that genres become divisive, especially given the centrality of television in Romania after 1989 and the more recent development of niche television. In addition, certain places, such as museums, influence the boundaries of folklore music genres.

One of the genres rooted in folklore promoted by the Peasant Museum is *muzică lăutărească*, such as the music of the Taraf de Haidouks, discovered by ethnomusicologist Speranța Rădulescu. Some of the performers of this Roma genre have entered the circuit of world music, and have featured on the grand stages of the world. The ethnomusicologist describes them as a treasure that she found in a forgotten Roma village where the music they play with traditional

instruments was vanishing in the 1990s, as the market was invaded by new sounds coming from electronic keyboards.<sup>31</sup>

The sound of the dulcimer in the music of *lăutari* is sometimes haunting, while at other times their music is vibrant and their lyrics refreshingly honest. In contrast with the performers in *Cîntarea României* (who dressed in folkloric costumes) Rădulescu saw in the *lăutari*, with their modern clothes, rough voices and spontaneity, more authenticity than anywhere else. The exclusion of their music from *Cîntarea României* illustrated the narrowness of the festival, and its nationalist communist politics that excluded Roma music. *Lăutari* are listened to by the educated intellectuals, attuned to jazz, who frequent the Peasant Museum and reject other forms of folk music, such as *muzică populară*, or in particular *manele*.

Performers of *muzică populară* almost never come to the Peasant Museum. They are instead invited to perform at open-air ethnographic museums such as the Village Museum. The two styles of traditional music mirror the distinct ways of exhibiting and authenticating material culture by these two museums – the first more preoccupied with the core values and spirituality<sup>32</sup> of the peasant world that might be found in the old-fashioned *lăutari* spontaneity, while the latter attempting a morphological mimicry of the olden days. *Manele* performers are excluded from both these spaces, as neither their audience, nor the performers anchor their music in a sense of ‘tradition’.<sup>33</sup> The museums are indeed media which influence the genres, because of the social life that clusters

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<sup>31</sup> The Peasant Museum have produced recordings of folk they consider valuable and rare. Speranța Rădulescu is one of the ethnomusicologists that has worked in finding these performers, and signed the introductory texts of their CDs.

<sup>32</sup> See Nicolescu about different generations of museums specialists at the Peasant Museum.

<sup>33</sup> At the end of my fieldwork, however, groups of young educated people started to defend *manele* publically..



around them, through the specialists and audiences. But a more important medium in the definition of genres is television.

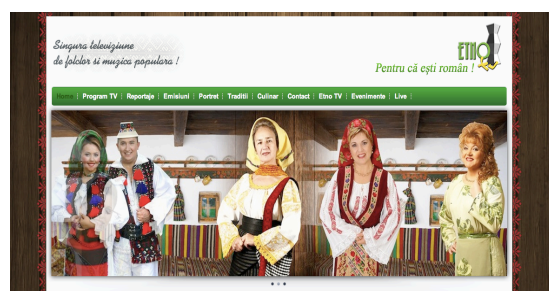
Genres are subject to definitions of taste, and are influenced by the 'discursive clusters' that gather around the artistic text (Mittell 2001). Through its omnipresence, *muzică populară* has become part of the Romanian environment, but how one feels about it, and whether that constitutes one's *habitus* remains a question of class and, to some extent, one of generation. While *muzică populară* is no doubt a popular genre, part of a young urban working class reject the music genre altogether, in favour of other popular genres.

### ***Etno TV and Taraf TV***

Upon the rise of cable television in the early 1990s, the supremacy of TVR was challenged by a number of private television channels, and from the 2000s, the



<http://www.taraftv.ro>



<http://www.etno.ro/live.html>

7.11 The two web pages and TV channels look different, although they share the same studio and crew.

spread of niche television (see Papathanassopoulos, 2002, Iosifidis, Steemers, and Wheeler, 2005). Businessman and politician Silviu Prigoană was one of the first to understand that television in Romania no longer addressed 'the masses', but rather a 'target audience' with specific tastes. He is the owner of *Etno TV* and

*Taraf TV*, with audiences amongst the rural and urban working-class populations. The two channels share the same management and to a large extent, the same studio and staff.

Despite the elements that bring the *Etno* and *Taraf* together, the music they broadcast is kept strictly separate. *Taraf TV* is mainly focused on



7.12 *Taraf TV* studio. Members of a Moldovan dance ensemble resting between performances in the *Etno TV* studio for a special Easter programme. The two studios share the same large hall.

broadcasting *manele* with a glamorous type of performance and an audience made largely of working class or lower-class urban Roma and Romanian young people (Schiop 2011, Bessinger 2007, Rădulescu 2012). The exclusion of the

genre from mainstream mass media mirrors also the partial social exclusion of working classes and Roma ethnicity from public spaces.

*Etno TV* positions itself as a folklore channel not only in contrast with the *manele* performances on *Taraf TV*, but also with *muzică populară* and *folclor* as broadcast on the public channel TVR, described as accurate folklore (see Urdea 2014 for more details). While *manele* has been considered a genre contaminated by ethnic associations, consumerism and unleashed capitalism, *muzică populară* – at least in the form broadcast on TVR – is considered ethical and intrinsically good. According to the folklore stars,<sup>34</sup> *Etno TV* does not benefit from the ‘purity’ of the TVR standards. When dressing up to appear on *Etno*, the performers

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<sup>34</sup> Based on interviews with folkloric stars, but also leaders of ensembles, occasionally invited to perform for *Etno TV*. These performers were constantly telling me that the standards of *Etno* are low, that the presenters know little about ‘folklore’ and that all they do is for the rating.

tended to break the rules of 'authenticity' in favour of glamour, by using 'stage costumes' (see Chapter Eight).

A certain level of competition is allowed and encouraged on Etno TV, as the stars make an effort to be considered not so much representatives of the villages and rural areas where their songs allegedly come from, but rather as modern-day performers. They are aware, however, that they are breaching the specialists' demands of authenticity. 'Etno TV asked me to come to work for them as a specialist', said museum costume curator M. Popescu. 'I said to them: I'll come to work for you when you take those girls [i.e. performers] off those high heels, when you strip all that glitz off their costumes and they wipe off their make-up.' The 'commercialization of folklore', M. Popescu believes, has nothing to do with the 'authentic folklore' that one is occasionally able to see on TVR. The 'degradation' is blamed on the folklore stars themselves, who want to stand out, but also on the TV station that wants to please the audience rather than educate people.

This attempt to position Etno TV (and the *muzică populară* genre) between the glamour of commercial television and the particular demands of authenticity that characterized the genre before 1989, is illustrated by the festival organized by Etno TV for the Easter celebration (see above). Although it may seem that the performers are only there to fill in a place in a grand orchestrated national event, my ethnographic findings show that they have agency with regards to their television appearance. More than a relationship with their audience, the folklore stars longed for a past when their performance transcended the taste of the audience, and directly addressed transcendent national values. 'All everyone cares about these days is money,' many of them

complained. 'It's people who have money that appear on TV, not the ones who have talent,' is one of the most common things I heard during my fieldwork. It is an open secret that, apart from the well-established folkloric stars, most performers are required by Etno TV to pay for their appearances on television. The stars are ambivalent to the question of money: to an extent, they feel they are entering in the artistic world through the back door, and are complying to the low-quality standards at Etno. Paying for their appearances also empowers them to some extent, but most of them feel that performing in the public sphere should only be reserved for the artistic acts with 'real value'.

The ambivalent reactions from the TV stars who emerged as performers during the last decades of communism is telling for the manifold implications of a niche channel that broadcasts folklore. Unlike *manele*, this genre is both popular, and accepted as part of a national narrative – through museums, academic practice and television. The performers, who support the television station by paying, prefer that some standards of the genre be maintained outside consumer demand, and that some standard of 'authenticity' be followed.<sup>35</sup> But they also like to step onto the red carpet, get out of a limousine, and take part, in this way, in a global image of wealth and success. These ambivalent attitudes are embodied in the permanent negotiation of the costume which I discuss in the following chapter.

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<sup>35</sup> In the following chapter I discuss more about the way performers engage with the notion of 'authenticity'.

## Conclusion

I started this chapter by discussing the important role played by performance in the education and cultural projects in the socialist countries. *Muzică populară* is rooted in these performances, which claimed to be inspired by peasant forms, but engendered different kinds of relationships between performer and audience. When a new generation of folklore specialists began to request a more 'authentic' performance – a more truthful link to the fabric of the peasant life in the past – 'folklore' became an idiom through which the 'culture' brought to the masses by the socialist state could be critiqued by ethnographers, together with the relationship between the state and the countryside.

During the post-socialist era, 'folklore' has been articulated in particular spaces (museums, television) not as an idiom of the collective, but through distinctions defined through the category of taste. Performance is key to understanding the meanings and uses of 'folklore', both in museums, where objects 'perform' when they are on display, in wardrobes, in houses of culture and public spaces in the countryside, and on television. Having mapped out the specific media in which folklore is produced in particular ways, in the following chapter I focus on performers who strive to exercise control over the performance in various ways, not least through paying for their appearances, as we have seen.

# Chapter Eight

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## Folklore stars

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After a long wait I was received into the Focșani House of Culture by Mrs Maria Murgoci, one of the best-known folklore stars in Vrancea County. Without her folk attire, she was almost unrecognizable. She kindly excused herself for running late and having let her meetings overlap, and as she welcomed me into her personal office (she was the leader of the town's folklore ensemble) I realized I was not the only one wanting to speak to her. A woman was sitting in the office – she was overwhelmed with enthusiasm, throwing loving looks at her son, who, I soon found out, was going to be three in a months' time. The woman proceeded with her proposition: she wanted to invite Mrs Murgoci to perform for her son's birthday party. She began by saying that after careful consideration, she had dismissed ideas such as commissioning clowns or arranging activities at a funfair. The mother's desire was to have an 'authentic' theme for the event, something that involved some child-related traditions. She confessed she did not know the customs that well, and this is where she needed the help of Mrs Murgoci. It seemed only suitable for someone putting on a party so grand to know so little about the actual costumes – not only knowledge, but ignorance too are embodied markers of social superiority. Not once had the people I'd spoken to during my research prided themselves on not knowing much about the village ways.

Mrs Murgoci was a little puzzled: the boy was too old for the traditional ‘cutting of the hair’, the only custom she knew about<sup>162</sup> (and which had already been organized in style for the child the previous year). The two of them were trying to come up with something suitable. Eyes turned to me – I was briefly perceived as some kind of specialist in traditions and customs, but they soon realized I could not help. ‘Anything involving fates or fairies wishing things for the child...?’ tried the lady. She wanted something theatrical and entertaining, but at the same time with substance. All kinds of other props in the form of objects and food would be brought in to authenticate the experience, such as *colac* (a ritual loaf), cloths (*ștergar*), folk attire and so on. Mrs Murgoci proposed a line of events which would very quickly lead up to her performing songs, and to her professional ensemble doing a folklore choreography, and it would all culminate with the *horă mare*, when the guests would be invited to join in the dancing. It seemed a mere variation to the weddings and christenings that she was used to. But it didn’t seem to be quite enough for her client.

The birthday-show was going to take place at the newly reopened *Laguna* restaurant, suitable for weddings and large ceremonies, and able to accommodate the 150 guests that the family were expecting. The party was going to be a demonstration of the family’s status – folklore here was neither a form of entertainment, nor was it meant to bring people together by joining in well-known customs. It was to create a spectacle everyone would be impressed by.

Bourdieu says that the field of economy and that of culture are distinct and presuppose different ways of relating to objects and people. If objects are

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<sup>162</sup> This is done when the child turns one, and they have their first haircut. A tray with various kinds of objects is set, and the baby chooses one or two, which are said to predict what they will do in the future (scissors, for a hairdresser, pen for a writer or accountant, etc.).



commodities (alienable) in the first field, they are imbibed with ethics and spiritual qualities in the second – we might say they are inalienable. Cultural capital is sought by subjects who are successful in the economic sphere as it confers higher social status. In this instance the way to access the cultural field is via folklore – defined as ‘customs’ and displayed as a spectacle. This meeting said something about a particular kind of usage of folklore, seeking its capacity to bring people together, but also to mark a level of moral distinction.

But how is it that the performer of *muzică populară* has come to be considered the retainer of lost traditions and all things ‘forgotten’, a person that mediates access to the morality sought after by this audience? In the previous chapter I demonstrated how this ambiguous genre emerged after 1989, as the notion of ‘folklore’ was reinterpreted within the elite sphere of cultural production epitomized by the Peasant Museum. But these reinterpretations often fail to permeate other spheres of cultural production, such as television and, to some extent, other institutions that work with the folk idiom. In this, the performers sometimes inhabit the middle ground between the countryside and the city: they enable access to something that is deep and possesses an aura, but only reproduce the surface aesthetic of it (its ‘exhibition value’ in Benjamin’s terms, see Introduction); they are in contact with ‘traditions’, but are also estranged. And in order to be able to consciously pick and choose what is suitable to transfer to an aspirational, middle-class environment, these tensions were condensed in that brief meeting. The present chapter explores some of these tensions, and the way the performers deal with them.

## **From ‘amateur’ to ‘professional’ career**

The prevalence in recent years of TV networks broadcasting folklore is, no doubt, an consequence of the cohorts of performers that resulted from the intense investment in ‘folklore’ during the last decades of socialism (see Chapter Seven). In the previous chapter I discussed the definitions of folklore performance and the pressures to fulfil certain demands of authenticity, but I have referred less to the lived experience of the performance.

It has been argued that, having been at the centre of the nation, and made to believe their endeavour was important, the performers were disappointed when that suddenly was no longer the case (see Mihăilescu 2008). I support this idea, but aside from this central role in the national narrative, there were other things that motivated the performers and compensated for the pressures of the competition: the respect received at the workplace, time off work, being a representative of one’s work unit on stage, the pleasure of dancing, learning and engaging with the folk material, and the joy of being successful at it.

One of the ways to categorize folklore during the socialist period was by distinguishing ‘professional’ from ‘amateur’ performers and ensembles. The difference was determined by whether the performers were paid for their performance or whether they engaged in it as a hobby. Today this distinction is only relevant in folklore competitions organized by the School of Popular Arts, which are usually formed of ‘amateur’ performers. Before 1989 amateur ensembles were prevalent – cultural engagement was based on volunteering (see Chapters Three and Seven) – and *Cîntarea României* was a festival for the ‘amateurs’.

Travelling outside one’s village or work unit and meeting people from other parts of the country was another important aspect. After 1989 amateur teams

continued their activity for a while without the pressures of *Cîntarea României*. Many describe this as a glorious time when they travelled abroad to international folklore festivals, where they could represent Romania with any dance or song from the country. The ensembles from Vrancea came home with many prizes after performing the *căluș*, a dance from a different region the country.

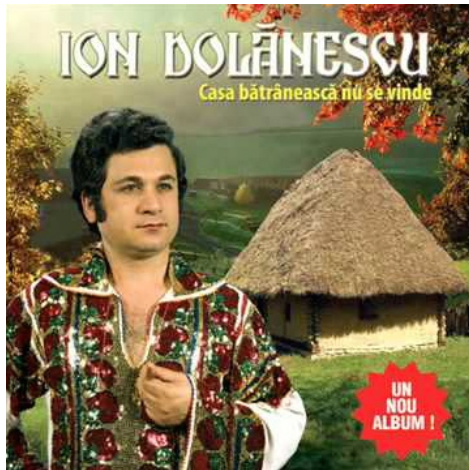
It wasn't long, however, before the majority of the amateur ensembles disappeared together with their workplaces in the centralized economy, which had conditioned their participation in cultural activities. And without the benefits of the hierarchical relationship to the centralized state, many village amateur ensembles like the ones in Vrâncioaia broke up too. Today, 'amateur' ensembles tend to be organized through schools or by passionate local teachers. Travelling outside the village and dancing in folk festivals, or appearing on television – the ultimate goal for these ensembles – is conditioned by the participants' (or their parents') modest financial contribution and, occasionally, the support of the village hall.<sup>163</sup>

The people who were most dedicated organized themselves around the Schools of Popular Arts into 'professional' ensembles. The singers are considered 'professional', mostly because they try to make a living out of it. Most of the performers that I engaged in my research, who appeared on niche television channels, were categorized as 'professional'. In this chapter I show how these performers engage with the material side of the folk idiom, through costume and how they appropriate 'folklore' through their personal narratives.

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<sup>163</sup> The ensembles that travelled to Etno TV, and the few ones I met in the villages of Vrancea had developed in this way. Often the presenter at Etno TV would give thanks to mayors of various villages or small towns in the country for their support towards folklore.

The references to kitsch and inauthenticity that I discussed in the previous chapter were directed towards professional performers responding to the popular taste of their audience. The most remarkable example is that of Ion Dolănescu,



8. 1 The cover of an album by Ion Dolănescu, called *The Old Family Home Must Not Be Sold*. Although released in 2008, the cover has a young Dolănescu dressed in his glittering shirt.

whose songs were, without doubt ‘folklore’, but whose garb presented him as a local Elvis. The audience’s preference for stars like Dolănescu, or his female correspondent (and wife) Maria Ciobanu, revealed that there was indeed a working-class folklore aesthetic in popular culture. The institutions that regulated the production of folklore tried to infuse it with a sense of morality through their demand for

geographical authenticity, in accordance with the regulations that dealt with folklore. The cultural item performed had to accord with the *ethnofolkloric region* that the performer was claiming to represent. This way of thinking about folklore is still prevalent in most of the ethnographic museums across Romania, and widely accepted by ethnographers, and only partly rejected by the Peasant Museum. The regions are thought to have a strong nucleus called a *vatră etnofolclorica*, a cluster of villages where the cultural features attributed to the whole region are considered ‘pure’; meanwhile, the areas at the periphery of the *vatră* demonstrate a diluted expression of that particular culture. For *Cântarea României* the geography of folklore overlapped with the country’s geo-political unit of the *județ*. To affirm the authenticity of one’s garb, one had to demonstrate how it fitted into their ethnofolkloric region. It is to these demands of authenticity and place that I now turn.

## Where the costumes come from

Romanian folkloric music cannot be performed without a costume. Since many of the stars come from either urban areas or from the plains, where traditional dress disappeared before they were born, they usually have to be resourceful. Maria Murgoci, a folklore star who represents the Vrancea area, sources her costumes in the mountainous area of the county, where typical peasant blouses can still be bought from peasants. The village in the plains where she was born (she now lives in Focșani) is part of the same *județ* as the mountainous Vrancea (Vrancea proper), so wearing mountain costumes is accepted as authentic. In previous chapters I have shown that the discursive geography of folklore favours the mountains as areas that retain authenticity – a mode of folklore evaluation that Maria Murgoci had become acquainted with in her many years of participating in festivals and competitions. In her songs, she also refers mainly to the mountainous region. These references to places well known as carriers of ‘authentic folklore’ increase the cultural capital of the performance.

Other stars, however, did not have the luck to have been born in counties that include these sources of folklore attire and culture. Mariana Birică is from Buzău, south of Vrancea, also from a village in the plains. While she was taking part in competitions, she was compelled to ‘represent her region’ – otherwise the jury would have deducted points for her performance. At first she didn’t have a costume, and it was another folklore performer who helped her out by offering her one. Now she tries to be as generous with young, talented artists who need her help.

When you go into competition, it is a positive thing when you represent the area you come from. But Buzău was not a very rich area... Look, this is the

costume. Well, I couldn't have worn this one costume all my life, this red embroidery with a line... the actual Buzau.<sup>164</sup> But my actual area is Focșani-Brăila, which is slightly different. Even though my village is part of the county of Buzău, and Buzău has that costume, in my sub-area people used to wear another costume. Look at this one, it is from my village. I have it from a teacher who inherited it, not even from her mother, but from her grandmother!

It often happens that the few items of dress that the stars are able to dig out from the old dowry chests look different from the standard:

This *fotă* [overskirt] is from my grandmother's grandmother. It was so well preserved in that chest. I was thinking this looks like a *ie* [blouse] from Argeș<sup>165</sup>. But I found it in my grandmother's chest, next to some woollen rugs. Of course, I had to make it longer, so I added this lower border here, which I took from another *fotă*. But, do you realize, it's one hundred years old.

Mariana's description of her costumes and where they come from is similar to those of other performers, who usually try to accommodate themselves to the rigorous costume geography learned from folklore. The understanding of place that comes through the costume found in the dowry chest, from 'one hundred years ago' defies the boundaries established by a discipline of 'folklore' which otherwise seem unbreakable. Using the language of this discipline, many folklore stars describe their villages as belonging to 'regions of interference' – that is to say, regions outside the *vatră etnofolclorică*, where one region meets the other. This notion allows for flexibility.

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<sup>164</sup> She is talking about the Buzau costume. On stage, the costume is used metonymically to mean the political-administrative *județ*. In Mariana's speech (and that of other folklore stars) the word for the *județ* comes to mean 'costume' (i.e. from that area).

<sup>165</sup> This area is notorious for exquisite blouses.

With time, Mariana became very fond of folk costumes, and began to buy more and more of them. She now has around three hundred, collected over ten years. 'I don't think there is an area or a sub-area that is not represented in my collection'. She bought many of them from a Roma woman who travelled from one



8.2 Mariana Birică presenting her collection.



8.2 A corner of Mariana's attic.

village to another in search of such costumes, and sells them at a good price. Others she bought from fellow performers, friends who know of her passion. In her collection, she tries to be as diverse as possible.



Listening to Mariana talking about her collection as she picks up the costumes one by one, I see how her thoughts move between a materialized national geography of the country – with costumes from farther regions – to a more flexible geography, which can accommodate both wider regions and very specific places at once, when she talks about parts of the country she knows. The costumes from regions she knows least about are the most exciting for her, although she cannot wear them. ‘Now that I am a little older and I no longer take part in competitions, I figured I can present a wider selection of costumes, not only *mine*. Why go on saying that only my own region is the most beautiful?’<sup>166</sup> While the songs and dress from the north of the country are visibly different from the ones in the south, Mariana thinks that the costumes and songs from the whole of the southern and eastern sides of the country have a similar aspect, and she can therefore use them for her performance. This allows her some variety of costume and song.

### **The orchard of their childhood**

When performing on TV, at festivals and in competitions, the connection to place is mandatory, at least in a declarative way. A performer declares that they ‘sing’ a region, for example: ‘I sing Vrancea’ or ‘I sing Vlașca’ etc. The expression, unnatural in Romanian, means that one sings about a region, or sings in praise of a region.<sup>167</sup> I asked Paulina, a folklore performer who was also a TV presenter for a folklore show on TVRM (TV Romania Mare), what happens when a performer becomes fond of a region they do not come from. ‘Only with great difficulty can a performer

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<sup>166</sup> In these competitions, the performer had to describe the costume before they start performing the song, with all its different parts.

<sup>167</sup> The expression resonates with *Cîntarea României*, an untranslatable expression which could mean ‘Song about Romania’ or ‘Song in praise of Romania’, or ‘Singing Romania’.

change their region. Only if they are extremely passionate about that particular type of song. And even then, they would have to relocate altogether to that particular region, and live there', explains Paulina. In practice, this almost never happens. Usually folklore stars who may come from a particular region or village tend to move to town (many of them live in Bucharest). The stars often adopt a generic kind of song that cannot be identified with one particular region.

Mariana represents the region of Buzau. Her best friend, Veronica, represents the region of Vlaşca. They both live in Bucharest, because 'this is where everything happens'. Paulina, meanwhile, came to Bucharest from Romanaţi in Oltenia. They all belong to a generation born between the 1950s and 1960s, who took on jobs in town during the period of industrialization and modernization. In their songs and stories, the villages of the past are idealized. The village is always set out in the style of the past – of the nation, but also of their own biographies. Having absorbed the identity of the region of birth is enough to justify a choice of dress and music. Performers are expected to learn ethnographic and folkloric facts about their region, and knowledge about other regions is also seen as positive. But their status is that of *artists*, not peasants on stage.

Folklore stars often transgress the requirements of regional dress. Most stars, like Mariana, want a greater choice of costume, but at the same time prefer a valuable costume that is hand made, from the countryside, and described as 'authentic' (meaning old, in this case). Being able to combine shirts with a *fotă* and *catrinţă* from various regions helps them to obtain some diversity. When sourcing their costumes in the countryside, performers need to be careful. If the objects are not pre-war, then the star might end up buying a 'kitsch' item. The older a costume is, the less likely it is to be kitsch. Time, in that sense, is thought of in terms of

geography as well. 'One hundred years ago' becomes the space of authenticity. On one of my visits to Mariana, she had just bought a costume from a friend who had been over to the Banat, in the west of the country, for a performance:

I told her to bring me a Banat costume. And she has brought me this one, which was from her mother, who had it from her own mother. So it is over 150 years old. I've whitened the shirt, and the *catrință*, and I've ironed them. Even the scarf is from her grandmother, at least 100 years old.

The biographies of folklore stars, as recounted to me or for TV programmes, often start in a village. Petrică came from an isolated village in the heart of the Mehedinți region. Throughout the show *Povești de Viață* ('Life stories') on Etno TV he recounted the peacefulness and beauty of the hills, the wonderful life he had as a child. His career however, started when he ran away from home to go to high-school evening classes, while he worked in the steel factory in Hunedoara during the day.

Petrică's life would have been very different had he not longed to get away from home. As the youngest son, he would have inherited the house and most of the land and livestock, reproducing the household where he was born (and the one he now 'sings'). But the prospect of moving to the city, of travelling and living a different life were more appealing – and he did not regret the choice.

While a steel worker, Petrică began to be trained in folklore singing. Later, 500 km away from home, his talent for singing helped him to have an easier time during his national service, as he was part of the folklore ensemble in the army. He developed his singing technique there, with the help of a good instructor. As we hear the story of his rise, Petrică and the host of the Etno TV show roam around his large, modern house, with rustic elements displayed here and there in wide spaces

furnished with oak. Through this setting, Petrică performs modernity and affluence, and shows an affinity for the 'rustic' (a commodified version of the rural).

The eulogistic way in which Petrică, like most other performers, 'sings' his home village responds to a sense of nostalgia described by Boym as 'a sentiment of loss and displacement, but also a romance with one's own fantasy'. There is no intention of going back to the old ways in Petrică's biography; he feels altogether very content where we find him. Trying to relieve a sense of longing with one of belonging is, in fact, less tempting than we might think. What the folklore stars perform is this kind of nostalgia – dressed up in folk attire, singing songs that feature mothers waiting on the porch of a wooden house. In fact they rehearse a narrative of parting with the real countryside, replaced by the village of our fantasy (ours – the listeners' and the performers').

Petrică became successful when he was 'discovered' by Marioara Murărescu, the presenter of *Tezaur Folcloric* on TVR. She wanted to hear something authentic and truthful, that came right from his heart. He sang a *doină* called *I Used to Climb the Hill with my Four Sheep*, about being young and poor, and having nothing but his four sheep to tend after. It is a song about the loss of happy youth:

As I climbed the hill with my sheep  
The old women asked me  
Whose son are you?  
Oh, time passed and I grew up,  
I've built a house of my own  
But I can't climb the hill anymore.

Murărescu was happy with this old, authentic song, as well as with his singing. But the story he told to the talk show host gives a different understanding of the song: His father, a hard man, really would send him up the hill with four sheep every day,

right after he got back from school, until late in the evening – even on a Sunday. He confesses that he hated those four sheep more than anything. Everyone else would be going to a *horă* at the House of Culture, sometimes musicians from far away would come to the village, while he would have to look after those sheep. He was glad when he got rid of them, when he ran away from home.<sup>168</sup> The intense emotions that he had about the village of his birth won him a second audition with Murărescu and, eventually, his own recorded album.

Folklore stars use memories of childhood in key, dramatic moments when they appropriate the song. The metaphors used to describe the place of birth are reminiscent of Romantic patriotic poetry: ‘It was the orchard of my childhood; it is where I first felt the coolness of the earth of my birth, the smell of fresh hay, the murmur of the Siret and Putna rivers. That is where I went to school and where I first ever sang, on the stage of the *cămin cultural*’ – Maria Murgoci describing the village where she was born in 1956.

Like dress, folkloric songs are expected to follow rules of authenticity, and in these key moments, the performers choose to sing an old *doină*, the type of song recognized as being truly Romanian and of great value. But this is more than the body politic. Music and song relate to sensuous experiences of place, which encourage the performers to transgress the boundaries of the designated areas of their regions. Performances allow at once for standardized cultural forms to be embodied, but, in a dialogic way, it allows these forms to be filled with intimate memories which reveal ambiguous or conflicting attitudes towards the place of birth, or towards kinship.

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<sup>168</sup> This story resonates with that of many people born in the countryside, having to contribute their labour towards the household. Herding the sheep is the usual task given to children, and this is why songs and memories about youth in the countryside are about that.

## **Stories of intermediaries**

The narrative of ‘the origin of the shirt’ that I encountered most often expresses precisely some of the ambiguities with regards to the performers’ place within the wider national narrative of identity and folklore. Although Mariana was one of the few to confess to this, many performers get their clothes from Roma women or other traders who spend a long time sourcing folk attire in the countryside. Sourcing one’s costume in this way has several implications: there are many stories of Roma women buying clothes for very little money, and tricking (old) people in the countryside. Someone who buys a costume from Roma women pays much less than they would in the shop. For a folklore performer, this not only means that the costume they wear is a commodity (rather than the inalienable set of clothes inherited through kinship), but also a commodity that was obtained under its real value (although there is no indication why the market value of a costume should be more ‘real’). Matters of pollution connected to the Roma as intermediaries also play a part in devaluing this mode of acquisition (though not the objects itself).

The typical story of a costume’s sourcing goes like this: the folklore star performs at a local festival somewhere. At the end, an old lady usually appears with a beautiful, authentic shirt. She is sad because there is no one in the village to wear these beautiful things anymore: young people are not interested and they leave the village without thinking twice. The shirt is offered as a present to the performer, to be worn with pride. This story, repeated by every performer may well be true in some cases. But even if it was not true, there is no denying that there is truth in it. The villages are indeed emptying out, and the young people migrating abroad. The performer is, again, seen as transgressive, able to mend the injustice that history has played on these communities, and, more importantly, on these women. In the

village, shirts, clothes (not necessarily folk ones) and objects are sometimes offered as *pomană*, gifts for the soul of the dead. The offering is thought to be felt by the soul of the deceased, with whom the living reconcile. The gift, in the narrative of the blouse, repairs a situation of the departed too. But in the story it is the village that is dying, and the maker of the blouse – or, in some cases, the inheritor – establishes a connection with the future through the gift. The performer reconciles a gap. That the object is a gift makes it ever more valuable for the performer. The narrative has gender implications: the shirt always comes from an old woman, who has always been in charge of perpetuating tradition.

This narrative explains the in-betweenness of the performer – neither peasant nor urban – and alleviates some of the accusations of inauthenticity levelled against the performer. These accusations can come from two directions: one, that of the folklore specialists who try to impose a morphological ‘authenticity’: the performer can be authentic if they choose to keep in line with a type of costume and song that looks and sounds like the ones from the past. But from the point of view of a post-1989 narrative of folklore, the performers can do nothing to be authentic: in the words Bernea (former head of the Peasant Museum in Bucharest), the true Romanian peasant is no longer with us.

In a way, the narrative of the source of the blouse tries to accommodate both what I call a morphological and an essentialist view on peasantry and folklore. The blouse received from the old woman might comply with the morphological ‘authenticity’ rules of that specific region, but the blouse is also a direct, bodily connection with this dying peasant. The performer is, therefore, a continuator.





8. 4 My fieldwork in the TV studios often involved taking photographs of the folklore performers. Partly because the studios are loud places, not fit for reminiscing and talk – so I had to find something to do. But also because the people I wanted to talk to were stars, doing artistic performances. Their activity there is conducive of reproducing imagery. I often sent them these portraits, and some of the images circulate on their Facebook pages. This is the portrait of Elisabeta Turcu.





8.5 Veronica Geamănu





8.5 Elena Santamaria and her colleague.





8.7 Maria Murgoci. Picture taken in Vrancea. After her performance, we did a photo session.





8.8 I was often asked to take group photographs. In contrast to the poses of the individual photographs, which copy a rhetoric of stardom and of that of bucolic-idyllic folklore, these ones look like friends' group photos. Most of the images that circulate on Facebook are of this sort. Their purpose is to remember the moment and place when they performed together. This is the changing room of TVRM.





8.9 A corner of the changing room of Favorit TV.



8.10 The studio of Etno TV.

## Alterations

Even if it expresses a hegemonic framing of peasantry and folklore, the critique of folklore performances as remnants of *Cîntarea României* does not seem to affect performers too much. Although these views do occasionally permeate their environments, many performers do not even know about the existence of the Peasant Museum, or pretend not to care about it, even though the museum's shop could be a good source of costumes for them. They sometimes go to the Village Museum, the more old fashioned institution, where they often film the videos that appear on Etno TV and other folklore channels, or where they are, occasionally, invited to perform.

Items of dress from the village are highly esteemed, and not only because they provide a ticket to 'authenticity'. People like Mariana and Maria Murgoci have learned to appreciate the fine shirts for their laborious embroidery, their fine choice of colours and the quality of their materials. Mariana handles the shirts with great care, and talks about her techniques for reconditioning them.

When they bring them in [the Roma women who source costumes for Mariana], their colour is yellow, because they are old, and often they have bits and bobs that are missing. Here I have all my materials, I have learned to recondition them, bring them back to their initial shine.

The hands of the peasant woman working '100 years ago' by candle light, and the specific fabrics from the past (some hand woven and homespun, others made of marquisette, an exquisite type of linen, now largely unavailable) are all details to which the performer is attentive. Age is important, perhaps even more so than the hand-made quality of the item. The marquisette is the marker of someone rather well off, who could afford to buy such fabric. 'In my region it did not exist', says



Mariana, adding that she likes to have the privilege of wearing the fabric now, and not only be confined to her own 'region'.

These old, hand-crafted things do more than simply add value to the dress and performance through their 'authenticity'. They become intimate connections between the person wearing the blouse, performing in it, and the person who made it. There is a bodily connection with an action from the past – not just with the past thought of in abstract terms, the 'one hundred years' which usually designate a pre-war, pre-modern past. The strictly delimited ethnofolkloric regions with villages that develop in isolation matter little. The contact with the dress becomes an intimate connection with a precise moment in the past when a woman's labour resulted in an exquisite blouse, and Mariana feels she follows the movement of that woman's hand in mending what time has damaged.

The attempt to fulfil a sense of authenticity goes well beyond an aesthetic which would satisfy the folklore specialists. Mariana tries to source hand-woven white cloth made in the past to incorporate into the items she reconditions or changes. The items she has are constantly reassessed: some are reconditioned, but others are destined for a less noble fate: to be cut to pieces and used as additions to other items. In both cases, it is important that the items that she uses as pieces are also old. It is the quality of old age, and the fact the item is hand made that helps create a valuable piece. Costumes emerge as collages of the past.

The blouse does not remain intact; the mending is an intervention, but not one intended to return it to its initial state. Although greatly appreciated for what they are, the items rarely remain the same. 'I've been unfortunate enough to be tall, and all these overskirts are so short', Mariana explains, 'so I always have to make them longer, to fit me'. In the past, the *fotă* was worn over a petticoat, which was

meant to be slightly longer, revealing a layer of lace. But for the performers who sing in the heat of the studio lights, the *fotă* and the petticoat are merged into one layer only. For these modifications, Mariana has to be resourceful, because she still wants to make valuable costumes: 'I have a whole stack of old fine linen, like they used to weave in the past. I use every piece I find: even a wall hanging, hand sewn using cross sewing, even that I can transform into a piece of *costum popular*'. All kinds of insertions embellish various parts of the costume:

Look, this lace is very old. I use it for shirts and as mock petticoats. But in my family, my mother attached it to tablecloths and bedding. When I came to Bucharest, all the bedding I had from my mother had lace, made by my mother and by her sister, who had a limp in one leg and could not work in the field. So all of her life she crocheted. [...] I've been lucky to have and wear things made in the household, and things that were laboured over by candlelight. I remember my mother would wake up before dawn and make us jumpers, socks, gloves.

Altering and mending these items allows for creativity and intervention. Through labour the blouse is not only appropriated, but becomes part of a dialogical process in which the material and the labour of the person who made the blouse (a century ago) interfere with each other; memories of the handwork of a mother and aunt, contribute to this too. Although standards of authenticity need to be followed, the objects are not altered following the fixed pattern of the 'region'. The work is fluid, and links intimately to the past and the labour of women. 'Peasantry' no longer means 'nation', but the precise work of making these objects. The process is continuous or, in Bakhtin's terms, 'unfinalizable'. It subverts in this way the 'monologic discourse' of 'authentic folklore' body politic.

The stars are often accused of 'altering' the costumes too much. They are accused of being vain, wanting to be different, have a stage presence and achieve commercial success, rather than keep in line with 'authenticity'. But my experience

of seeing the stars getting ready for their performance is that the opinion of their peers matters more. Backstage, before going live, they check each other's *maramă* (headscarf) and embroideries, and congratulate the person who is wearing a special piece. Authenticity becomes an idiom of reasoning about aesthetics, images of peasantry and the past, but also about the act of performance.

The stars can be sceptical about the specialists' demands of 'authenticity'. The specialists ask the performers, for instance, to wear *opinci*<sup>169</sup> on stage. 'But I remember my grandfather, he used to wear different shirts, one for work, one for church and one for the *horă*. He used to only wear *opinci* for work, never for church or for the *horă*', said Mariana.

Mariana's skill for making and remaking costumes is well known among her colleagues, who often ask her for help. One of these is Ion Ioniță, who 'sings Teleorman' – which is to say he is from Bucharest, and has a mixed repertoire. He rarely wears a fully fledged 'authentic' costume, but is happy to modestly wear a 'stage' costume which combines some elements that look slightly like a *costum popular*. Mariana used an old *catrință* (a woman's overskirt) to make him a vest.

Mariana's collection of costumes not only included ones considered 'authentic', but a wide variety of others. I was interested in how she evaluates the costumes, in view of her hopes to open a small museum in the future. I asked which ones she would display:

I think they are all for the museum. In the past, as now, things made by hand are valuable. The world has evolved, other patterns came in. People should learn from the museum what it was like in the past but, also what it is like now. We should know about this too. Because people who make things by hand now also have good intentions, but they think they are doing the things that are more in fashion. For instance, look, some would call this costume

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<sup>169</sup> Simple footwear made of leather worn by peasants in the past.

kitsch [referring to one of the pieces in her collection]. Because it is not made by hand, but with a sewing machine. Because I can't really say it's old. But I *made* it, it has nice embroidery, it has beauty in it, so there is something to show. Maybe in the future people won't even do this. They'll say, let the computer do it. But what I did here is also made by my hands, it's a piece of lace that I made using a sewing machine.

Mariana's endeavour, which started with her own search for stage costumes, has led her to express herself perhaps more through the costumes than she does through song. Rules of 'authenticity' are often negotiated against creativity or personal dispositions or an embodied skill learned from her mother or aunt, who had a terrific talent, according to Mariana, of being able to copy any pattern in embroidery after only seeing it briefly.

### **Stage costumes**

The authenticity and value of the costumes that folklore performers wear can be questioned by specialists in more than one way: the costumes may have been made in a factory during the socialist period when the patterns were influenced by communist ideology (see Popescu 2002), or they may suffer from the poor taste that the peasants acquired through contact with modernity and the urban environment, when they officially became 'working class'. This latter criticism of the costume addresses commercialism and presumably the responsiveness of the performer to their unknowing audience. Alexandru, a young folklore performer studying Folklore and Ethnography at the University of Bucharest, calls them by the denigrating name of 'pub costumes'. He describes some of them as being completely 'stylized', beyond what he found acceptable as a 'stage costume'.

Alexandru is only twenty, and was born in a neighbourhood of blocks in Bucharest. When he was young he met the well-known performer Maria Ciobanu, who took him under her wing and taught him all she knew about folklore – including the way to assess a costume. In interviews they refer to each other in kinship terms: Alexandru as a gifted continuator of Maria Ciobanu's performing art. This relationship, too, authenticates the performance. But even though she taught him everything she knew, Maria Ciobanu nevertheless pushed Alexandru to go to university and improve his understanding of folklore and acquire more cultural capital. But Alexandru still thinks he learned all he needed from Maria Ciobanu. She taught him the costume that each ethofolcloric region has; but by following her around, he also learned to be a performer.

Rarely will you be able to find a *muzică populară* performer wearing an authentic costume these days, one which is not stylised, one that doesn't have wide, unusual edges. Interpreters used to wear authentic folk costume before Ion Dolănescu made an entrance into *muzică populară*. He revolutionised everything – music, text, and also costume. He is the one who came with a shirt sewn with beads, and with wide patterns sewn on the front part, on the sleeves... and, in general, very heavily embroidered shirts. I always said – it was a good fashion. Because each artist could stand out through something. He brought a good stylisation to *muzică populară*. Now it's all gone astray, performers stylize without any sense of good taste.

Like Mariana, Alexandru took his own sequins and beads from those old costumes that he chose not to recondition, but to tear up and use their fabrics. In the end, the rules of a proper costume are embodied and hard to explain. The pleasure of making and wearing a unique, beautiful costume drives the choices, more than the specialists' rules:

I was patient enough to learn. Because I was very demanding, I never liked to show up on stage with a costume that looks the same as someone else's. I make them, but I make them with good taste, I don't go overboard. Yes, it is

not authentic, but, you see, this word 'authentic' is used by too many these days and it means nothing anymore. Because we don't find those anymore.

In all of my discussions with the folklore performers there appeared to be a tension between the positive aspects that come with authenticity and the desire for aesthetic improvement, but there were also efforts to establish the border between value and kitsch. 'Authenticity' is not the only characteristic that lends value to the costume – in its absence, *taste* and aesthetics need to fulfil an ethical demand. This brings us back to Benjamin, who proclaimed that in the age of mechanical reproducibility, the aura is reduced to aesthetics. For Alexandru too there is no going back to 'authenticity', although this demand for 'authenticity' remains an ideal of a sort, as something that cannot be disregarded. The accumulation of capital through higher education, through claims of artistic creativity, through claims of fulfilling the right taste requirements – these all suggest the different worlds that a folklore entertainer needs to accommodate.

To guide him, Alexandru refers back to the artistic genius of the old peasant women, who knew the perfect balance between colours, patterns and sequins. Throughout our conversation, Alexandru referred to women's costumes, and when he did talk about 'stylisations' in men's shirts, he talked about richer embroidery that makes the men's shirt more effeminate. An exceptional, transgressive costume is susceptible to falling either into the 'tasteless' category or rising into that of 'highly valuable'. One of Alexandru's tales, which apparently circulates among folklore performers, captures the matter:

Maria Ciobanu has a costume from 1867, with precious stone beads sewn onto it. It was sewn by a woman in jail. It is unique. She told me she bought it in 1973, when the communists were in power. The woman had been commissioned to make the costume for the Royal House, but while making it, was imprisoned. She was then made to continue to sew it for a great



royal personage of those times. But it is superb. I think it has over three thousand beads, or more, both on the front and on the back, one could not count them. It is a work of art, a unique costume.

The pain of making the costume, the exceptional destiny of both the maker and owner of the costume, the labour, story, time and place all permeate this object and make it unique. Its uniqueness is more precious than its being typical of one folkloric region – which it is clearly not. Displacement is key in this story: of the woman making a costume not for her peasant community, but for the highest of ranks (subsequently, her oppressors became the oppressed). The story is reminiscent of Penelope's web, and other images of women who weave while singing of their longings and sufferings, transforming them into embroidery. Finally, the costume arrived in the hands of the great performer, Maria Ciobanu. Even though disrupted, the destiny of the costume is partly fulfilled, or mended, rather, because it is in the possession of a continuator of folklore.

The performer is in a special role in this narrative. Subverting the bureaucratization of costumes into ethnofolkloric regions, he or she is able to transgress and transcend it, because of the artistic qualities of their art and their costume. Authenticity resides in a dramatic story from the past, a woman who painstakingly sewed the embroidery, thus herself transcending time and space through her art and suffering. The performer here is the continuator of a singular story, and not just a representative of an ethnofolkloric region.

### **Costumes from the factory**

One way in which costumes can be deemed 'inauthentic' is by having been made in a 'factory' or a workshop. Such costumes are usually acceptable for the dancers,

whose movements are choreographed, and who would find it hard to dance in the heavy 'authentic' garb. Similarly, men are less sensitive to these accusations of authenticity. Traditionally, men's costumes were heavy, made of wool and with very simple embroidery. The performers, however, need to stand out and wear a light costume that doesn't make them sweat too much in the studios. But even so, male performers are still shy of admitting that they wear costumes made 'in the factory'. One of the layers of 'inauthenticity' that comes from the factory costumes is their association with the socialist period.

Before 1989 thousands of workers were employed in the factories and workshops connected to UCECOM – the national cooperative producing all things folkloric, from costumes for performers to interior decorations. The products were distributed through a network of shops called *Artizana*, or were exported – there was a significant market for them, internally and abroad. However, *artizanat* things were also the target of debates about authenticity .

I arrived in Tismana and found myself standing in front of the partly derelict factory. The ground floor façade had been entirely refurbished with PVC windows, and had three doors. The largest was for a bargain shop. The *Artizana* shop was closed. Between these two, there was a workshop where a woman was frantically weaving a rug. Next to her there was an unused large loom (for huge rugs, the lady tells me), and in front of the workshop's door, two crates with wilted cabbages and a sign 'cucumber - 1 leu/kg'. The rhythmic beats of the loom were the only sound disturbing the sleepy main street of the village.

The building had been one of the biggest factories in Romania for *artizanat* and other products inspired by folklore. I found out from the woman weaving the rug that many of them had been made redundant after 1989, when most sections of

the factory had closed. Some of the unemployed people opened workshops, and, because they did not all pay taxes, they could afford to offer bigger salaries to the employees than the factory could. She suggested one street where I would be able to find some of the *artizani*. Next to her workshop/vegetable shop, one *artizan* was making felt jackets. Cardboard patterns of sorts were hanging on walls. On a separate table he had his model: a felt jacket that was 'at least 70 years old', from Transylvania. Other models were lined up: a blue velvet costume, which he was going to use to make 20 purple velvet ones for an ensemble in Banat, and two more felt jackets, for which he only had the model of a child's costume.

He told me about the good old days when there were approximately 700 workers in the factory, working in three shifts, producing anything from 'authentic' folklore costumes, to 'stylised' clothes – felt coats with folk motifs and shirts inspired by the Romanian *ie*, which featured in fashion magazines. Most of the clothes they produced had an 'authentic' version and a 'stylised' version. Regardless of what they made, the factory had people well trained in crafts, able to do intricate work with all the materials one encountered in the peasant household. He was the last one to work with felt and leather in the village. Working with leather required an expertise that one could gain from working with a master, but at that moment he had no apprentices.

Tismana was, in actual fact, more of a small town than a village, with a small shopping centre dating from the socialist period. There were no blocks, but the houses were large and looked respectable, distinguished by the pillars carved in folk motifs at each entrance. The town hall's walls were covered in posters

advertising EU projects for a healthier life after the closing of the mines.<sup>170</sup> The small folk museum was closed to the public.

I walked along the main roads looking for the part of town where I was told I would find the craftspeople. One of the streets took me to what looked like a *mahala* (the poor outskirts of a town), where a lively community of Roma was busy working. A few women were sat together doing embroidery and chatting on a bench outside one house. Soon we ended up in the house of another person: 'take pictures of the young, beautiful girls who have their lives ahead, not of old women like me', said the lady I encountered first. I was offered coffee and made a fuss of.

Nearly all the women on the street were employed, either on contracts with what remained of the factory, or more commonly without contracts, by the other small companies that opened after the factory went into decline. They did not want any pictures taken of themselves and they explained why: a few months before they had appeared on television as part of a feature called 'Solutions for Crisis', about how these women were doing well during hard financial times by using their skills. When they appeared in the press, their boss was angry: some of them were being paid under the counter, so they were asked to keep their jobs more secret.

Most of the time they gathered in groups in someone's yard or house to work. Unlike all the people involved with folk things I had met so far, they had no knowledge about the value of 'folklore' – except for the fact that they were making it. None of them claimed to have an ancestor who spent time doing exquisite embroidery for the household. They had all learned the skill from their grandmothers, who had been the first generation of women to work in the Tismana

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<sup>170</sup> Not far away, in the Jiu valley, the largest mining area in Romania has been blighted by unemployment since 1989 (see Kideckel 2008, 2011).

factory, and the first to have the benefit of a pension. If one of them did not know how to make a pattern, they would gather and work it out together. None of these women, though, felt connected with 'traditions' through the work they did. What they did was valuable on the market, they said, because it was made by hand (and their customers appreciate handicrafts), and because it took them forever to make.

Even though 'tradition' did not necessarily figure in the way they talked about their work, there was some talk of mastery and achievement. There was the recognition of the sophisticated work done by the person who made the original model costume or item used for their work. When Mirela showed me the work *pe şabac* (ajour embroidery) that she was doing, she also showed me the model she was copying, and told me how complex she thought that work was. No one taught any of them how to copy it, so they just had to go about it intuitively. There was also the pressure of time, and they could not afford to spend months on one shirt. They came up with a technique that imitated what the eye could see, but was faster to make than the old model. They were aware that the costumes were for the dancers (and that nobody was going to spend a long time looking at them), so they proceeded with a 'cheat' version of ajour embroidery.

Although most of the orders they received were for dance ensembles, occasionally they got orders for individual shirts and costumes for the folklore stars. For these orders, too, they worked in a team. Even if they no longer worked in the factory building – and Mirela's generation has only done work from home – they divided the workload. Some of them were quicker with the simple 'fly' embroidery, others were quick at cutting and sewing the fabric, others at doing a good finish and so on. Working from home, they could also do household work and mind the children.

None of them, not even the women specialised in weaving, use any of the things they make for themselves: 'It takes so long to make one of these blouses, nobody can afford to take so much time to work for themselves', one of the women explained. The interior of Mirela's house is modern. Like other women who work with folk patterns, her aesthetic preferences has gone in a different direction: she has bought wall carpets and blankets with representations of wild life and fairy tales that have little in common with the geometric designs she embroiders. In her work, creativity is limited by the pattern she has to follow, and there is never any time to make things for the household in any case.

Mirela was working on two things in parallel. One was the ajour for the costumes. The other was a piece of fine material three meters long and one meter wide which she had been commissioned to embroider for a high-street fashion designer who needed many rows of material. To the women from Tismana, the folk things they made were specifically for performers, and not for everyday use. The fashion designer was also part of that category – the exceptional world of television and stage. Sometimes their boss would send them a text when performers with costumes they had made were shown on TV. The performers, however, never mentioned them. The Tismana women made costumes in patterns from all regions of the country so that, through the costume, the performer can claim a connection to the place he/she claims to 'sing' or 'dance'. The places that these performers evoked on TV through song and narrative could never include the workshop of their costumes: Tismana.

In the past, Tismana had been the source of costumes with 'authentic' pattern for many of the performers in *Cîntarea României* who did not have access to folk dress (although then too it did not figure in the geography of authentic



folklore). This is where the costumes for a 'sanitized folklore' were produced, a type of folklore that rejects the idea of movement, 'contamination' of pattern or an ethnically mixed population, and one that rejected the rich Roma music and folklore from the stage of the festival. Ironically, (but maybe not surprisingly) the majority of the women working here are Roma. In an area that seems numbed by unemployment and the lack of opportunities (known today more for a nearby monastery), the women of Tismana continue to work on their embroideries unacknowledged.

## **Conclusion**

In this last chapter I turned my attention to those people who engage closely and continuously with the folk idiom, but who occupy an ambiguous position vis-à-vis the ethnographic museums: they are the ones most susceptible to being accused of 'inauthenticity'. These accusations, as I have shown, can come from more than one direction, as the understandings of 'folklore' are also debated between generations of museum specialists and ethnographers. But 'authenticity' is not only an abstract way of evaluating costume and 'folklore', imposed onto performers by specialists of sorts. It becomes a way of ordering and understanding experience, which is permanently negotiated.

Costume is the key focus of these attempts to define what is or what is not valuable and authentic. Through their intimate relationship with costumes, the performers connect to other places, times, stories, as well as to labour. Collecting, keeping, preserving, performing, altering, repairing, recycling and transforming illustrate an understanding of folklore beyond politics and nostalgia. Pleasure and personal, embodied rules of aesthetics come to the surface when the folklore

performers talk about or handle costumes. The discourse on authenticity comes through not as something imposed from above, alienating, and opposed to materiality. Both the material and narratives emerge as loci of encounters with the past and with the other, and are, in this way, loci of negotiation.

# Conclusion

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## Revisiting again and again

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### What has 'folklore' ever done for us?

My journey was prompted by a search for precious folk objects, the true 'counterparts' of the Horniman collection, and for the 'context' in which such objects are produced and used. But it ended up taking me from the sanitized environment of the museum stores (where contact with objects could only be achieved wearing a pair of white gloves) to the TV studios and stages of *muzică populară* (a world of cut-and-paste outfits, costumes and narratives built around the village and kinship). Following this elusive thing that is 'value' and its 'context' has opened up multiple paths for me to explore. In each of the places where I found myself, I was pushed further on to other places and other connections that promised to reveal yet another piece or layer in the history of the folk objects and their meanings. Mine was an odyssey through time and space, in search of the 'home' of the Horniman artefacts. At the end of this journey I was not to find, like Ulysses, the weaving Penelope, reproducing the community through her skill, engrossed in her labour. Instead I found a lament for the lost skills and traditions, as the villagers made it clear to me over and over again that they no longer had 'folklore'. And yet 'folklore' is there if one looks out for it – (re)presented, kept, debated about in all the places I have described here.

I have argued throughout this thesis that the particular way in which this quest was framed – as a reconnection with the particular places where the

objects were originally collected, in order to 'collect' a new 'context' in turn – is problematic, and counterproductive for the study of material culture and the social relations created around it. But my journey revealed a complex web of relationships connected with the production of value, one which was not independent from ethnographic museums (in Romania and in Britain) and their claims for value and truth, while contrasting starkly with these museums' limited capacity to represent this complexity.

The memories and narratives prompted by the photographs of the Horniman objects that I carried with me failed, in most cases, to connect the precise objects with their former owners. But the images did evoke memories of important moments for the people that I engaged in my research, bringing to light social and political shifts that folk costume was caught in. Its absence from the landscape of the village was stark (Chapters Two and Three), as 'context' could not be identified in a fixed place or time (Chapters Three and Seven). While 'folklore' might not have been part of the everyday, folk objects were present, and they occasionally came out from hidden places (Chapters Four and Five) and determined reflections on value, on the past and the future, or simply provided the momentary pleasure of engaging with patterns and fabrics (Chapters Five and Eight). Taking this journey 'back' in a quest for the non-existent object or the moving target which is 'the context', I wanted to allow myself space for surprises when it came to how people engaged with material culture and where they thought value was located.

But what is 'folklore' anyway? I set out on this journey thinking, with Hobsbawm, that it is an invention, but I finish on the same page as Latour (1993), (and with Williams (1973), for that matter) thinking it is made up of 'hybrids',

testifying to the fact that we may never have been modern after all. At some point during my research I noticed the anxiety some of the ethnographers, choreographers and museum specialists felt when naming things 'folklore', while others continued to use the term without concern. For those anxious about 'folklore' and 'authenticity', I realized that the notion of 'folklore' had been unveiled as a human artifice, and carried with it an element of the disingenuous. I decided to follow the way people dealt with this sense of alienation, with the distance entailed by the notion of folklore: whether they embraced performance without anxiety, or whether they continued to search for more truthful (indeed authentic) objects.

Latour would say that through the category of folklore, and the act of purifying and categorizing the confusing and (why not) dazzling objects found in the countryside, 'the moderns' define their modernity: as a category it constructs a linear history of humanity, distinguishing between moments in time (pre-modernity from modernity), between modes of production (industrial and alienated, versus organic, wholesome and not alienated), between the settings where it is displayed (pre-modern rituals such as the *horǎ* vs. ethnographic museums), between borders of nations, urban and rural, between elites and peasants, self and other, people and things. These ideologies are ways of making sense of a bundle of objects that are at once alluring and redundant from the point of view of the moderns. They are means of purifying the hybrids.

Folk dresses made of synthetic materials, using patterns borrowed from women's magazines; villagers dressing up in peasant dress only when the TV crew comes to the village; folklore stars who developed their careers through factory unions, and who source their clothes in the countryside to increase the

value of their performance; folk objects made in the factory: these are just some of the many examples of hybrids, objects that defy the efforts to purify 'folklore', and continue to refuse the distinction between modern and pre-modern, between people and things. The 'hybrids' that I discuss throughout this thesis address and challenge the most important institutions that define and manage objects in this category: the ethnographic museum.

My research project, which was framed at the crossroads between museological and anthropological academic practice, was a 'recontextualization', a journey to Romania which had two aims: one, to reconnect some of the objects in the Horniman collection with the people to whom they belonged, and second, to understand where the counterparts to these objects in the Horniman collection are placed in the Romanian context today. If the first quest limited me to tracking particular individuals, whose names, more often than not, were to be found in the graveyards of the villages where the objects were collected, the second quest, of finding the counterparts of these objects, opened up myriads of possibilities for objects and the networks they are part of.

From this emerged a study that adds firstly to an anthropology of material culture carried out in ethnographic museums in recent years, addressing the very intention to re-contextualize museum objects. Secondly, this ethnography accounts for the political and social shifts in Romania since 1989, in which various actors have constantly attempted to attach objects to particular meanings. Many of the ethnographic examples that I have used reflect on the relationship between subject and object, or form and experience (through the work of Bakhtin and Benjamin), as I develop arguments addressing the two



fields of the discipline: ethnographic museums on the one hand and the Romanian post-socialist political and social processes on the other.

The 'contexts' in which the objects that I followed were immersed could not be disentangled, as they form a complex map of networks through time and space, and are caught between different practices of engaging with material culture. Some of these practices place folklore objects in a close relationship to the ideology of the socialist (or nationalist-communist) state, others are self-consciously 'resistant' practices of defining folklore, others are connected with post-colonial museums in Britain, with ideological East/West divisions engendered by the Cold War, while yet others bring to the fore class distinctions, or the desire to add weight and value to the paper-thin simulacra of folklore that circulate in the mass media.

While the places that I visited during my research are connected in networks, objects cannot always make their way easily from one space to another. I have discussed these spaces as 'regimes of value', although I have often found this too vague a term to explain how value is actually produced. Bourdieu's notion of 'spheres of cultural production' has proved a more effective way of showing how aesthetics are embodied in people's *habitus*, but more importantly, how the objects' journey from one sphere to the other is often halted – objects can be rejected and denied value. In order to bring out the specificity of the Romanian social and political context, as well as the contradictions within the ethnographic museum as an institution, I have focused particularly on those objects which are semiotically fragile, and at all times in danger of changing meanings and value.

In the remaining sections of this concluding chapter I position my research within the academic and practice fields where my research is most relevant, the anthropology of museums and that of post-socialist Romania, and draw out my main findings in these fields. But before that, I want to go back to the objects in the museums stores that initially sent me on this journey. I want to explain what happened to the complex map of materials and contexts after I returned to the Horniman.

### **Epilogue, or where the journey ends**

After a year of travelling through Romania with my file of photographs of the Horniman objects, I returned to London with quite a few actual objects. Many of the objects I brought back were from Vrâncioaia: a smock made of synthetic fabric; a neckerchief for godparents embellished with sequins (a fad of the 1980s in the village, from what I was told); a few table runners, some of them ‘authentic’, made by somebody’s grandmother, or using a simple, old-fashioned pattern; and one *catrință*, never worn by the person who gave it to me. In Chapters Four, Five and Six I introduced all these people as they were taking things out of their wardrobes, sharing their memories or dressing up to perform.

Then there was the blouse that I received on my first visit to Vrâncioaia, the only time I reconnected an object with someone who knew its former owner well. Mrs Dănilă, daughter of Maria and Vasile Ghinea, had been quite taken by my visit to the village. We each took the other by surprise, even if I knew I had come there to reconnect the family narrative with the object. Later on I realized that we both expected or wanted objects to mend some kind of a broken history, or a reconnection of sorts to take place through them. I was looking to fill in the

gaps in the museum documentation, looking for the moment of rupture in the biography of the objects in the museum. But I now think she was also hoping I would mend or reconnect something broken of hers: as I came in unexpected, asking about her father, who had sold objects made by her mother to the museum, she was maybe imagining a reconnection with her family. The items were no longer 'folk things' but somebody's garments. Mrs Dănilă gave me her mother's gown – a thick home-woven fabric made of homespun hemp and cotton, the lower side hanging heavy, the upper side embellished with simple 'rivers' on each sleeve, and on the front embroidered with metal thread and sequins, with thin red cotton lines threading along the sutures of the gown. I meant to bring that small part of her mother to the museum, next to the items which represented a small part of her father – both items brought together, to alleviate the loss of their death. The gown also came with its own story of ruptures in the 1950s, as the family went through poverty. This was most certainly absent from the documentation files of the Horniman objects.

I also brought back with me objects which I had paid for. One of them was the bag bought from Maria Oneșan who would not talk to me unless I made a substantial purchase. For her, as for other women in Cerbăl, the fact that I was there in the village, with photographs of objects, but claiming to only be after *stories* about objects made no sense. The other object I bought was another bag, made by one of the *creatori*, Domnica Gheț. For her I was a folklore specialist who, like the people from the museums or the School of Popular Arts, could potentially put her in touch with the Bucharest market for folklore. The bag was intended as a gift for me, or maybe as a sample – the border between gift and commodity was hard to place. I immediately decided to pay for the bag as I

would not be able to maintain the connection that she wanted me to establish through this gift.

Together, these objects that I had brought back mapped out most of the aspects of my research: in terms of their ambiguous character, their power to elicit my own memories of the year I spent doing fieldwork, and mostly the variety of ways in which these things drew me into the complex web of networks, alongside their givers. Mauss' copy of 'The Gift', which, to my surprise, I had found on a bookshelf in my host's living room in Vrâncioaia, had once more come back to haunt me. Some of the people I included in my research had given me material things (not just stories, or a way into their communities, as in the case of most anthropologists), and I owed them something.

In the meantime, at the Horniman museum preparations were being made for the 2014 exhibition. When Magda Buchczyk and I finished our fieldwork research, we were asked to contribute our knowledge to the exhibition, which was to be called 'Revisiting Romania'. What was the new context for the objects, they asked.

I proposed that the Horniman display some of these 'counterparts' that I had brought next to some of the old objects in the collection. But there was no room there for the objects I had brought. Physically, the stores were already overwhelmed with things, and no new ones could enter without thorough scrutiny. And nothing was allowed to be part of the exhibition unless it belonged to the museum.

The objects I had brought back were of little relevance to the museum: some were too similar to the ones already in the stores, and museums only look for samples; others differed simply by their synthetic fabric, which made them

less valuable. The blouse that I got from Vasile Ghinea's daughter was too tarnished, and besides, the museum already had a 'Vrancean' example of shirt. As in the beginning of the research project, the production of rules – never entirely laid out and made explicit – put a halt to many ideas.

So should I have offered these objects to the museum, if I knew they would not go on display? Perhaps I was not ready to abandon them to the museum stores, and let go of those fragments of relationships. But it was not clear how I was going to ever use them – they were certainly not for wearing. I found myself in the same conundrum as some of the people I had interviewed, who kept things in suspense, hidden in their wardrobes, though they knew that the objects had once been made to be shown. They were going to be part of my thesis, but somehow, I thought, the people whom I had received them from prized their materiality, not the photographs, concepts or narratives that I would myself weave around them.

Another opportunity for a display came about: the Constance Howard Gallery of Goldsmiths College was the place where, together with Magda Buchczyk and Gabriela Nicolescu, I organized an exhibition to explore some of the related themes that we tackled in our work. The overarching theme of our exhibition entitled *Forging Folklore, Disrupting Archives* was centred around the material culture in archives. Here I had the chance to display the objects I had gathered from fieldwork, and to comment on the difficulty archives can have relating to fragmentary objects and personal narratives. Instead of labels, the objects on display had the personal stories of the people who had given me the items, or ones that explained how the objects connected me to those people. My colleagues Magda and Gabriela had different approaches that intervened more

creatively with the objects from archives, which were used as inspiration for different artistic paths. By comparison, I could recognize in my own display the ideology of all ethnographic displays, that objects can be shown 'as they are', even if I knew that just putting them in the museum was not enough to tell the whole story. I did not attempt to recreate their environments but I wanted to bring to the fore the relationships between the anthropologist, material culture and the field site, and between objects and the rules of the archive. The visitors, however, tended to be indifferent to the machinery of the archive that I was trying to reveal; if anything, they were drawn by the objects themselves, and by the stories of their acquisition. The one object that was the centre of attention was Maria Ghinea's shirt, which hung heavy with the natural fibres and the old metal thread and, to my mind, with its complex, layered history, which the label could not encompass. Many of the visitors remarked on its tarnished embroidery and the few bent sequins, and some of them asked me whether I had thought about mending it to bring it back to its original shine. Why not? But, on second thought, I did not have the ability and drive to intervene and change the gown, unlike the folklore stars I had encountered, who simply cut out pieces and match them by their own aesthetic standards.

The exhibition brought these hybrids out into the open and put them on display. It revealed tensions between different intentions towards which the objects were mobilized, and between the distinctions of class and generation. It occurred to me that I had been searching for the tarnished old items all along, with their undeniable traces of rupture, of a different past that makes its way and disturbs the present. But I admired the boldness of the folklore stars, with their

passion for and knowledge about fabrics and patterns, old and new techniques of making and mending things, which alleviated the temporal distance.

As I have argued in Chapter One of this thesis, the Romanian collection at the Horniman is entangled in histories connected to Romanian museological and ethnographic practices. It is almost as if the Horniman has swallowed the collection whole, without absorbing it, leaving it as intact as it was on its arrival and first display in 1957. Its initial purpose, as Buchczyk reveals was as a diplomatic gift from Romania to Britain. Although it may initially appear that this gift was not reciprocated by the Horniman, what it did was to create a relationship whereby Romanian official bodies have had to play a part in its display ever since. As Magda and I began our fieldwork, the Romanian Cultural Institute (RCI) and the Horniman established a close connection, and funding was provided by the RCI for further trips to Romania and the re-establishment of connections with Romanian ethnographic museums. The space of this 'Epilogue' is too small for a full analysis and details of the institutional collaborations woven around and determined by the Romanian collection at the Horniman. I wish to reinforce, however, that the establishment of this collection, and its position at the Horniman, have been conducive to diplomatic relations leading up to a display based around national identity, in spite of other on-going research projects that seek for alternative significations, such as the one of which I have been part.

'Revisiting Romania' which opened at the Horniman in October 2014 managed to incorporate some of the details that the reader will have found throughout this thesis – a link to members of the 19<sup>th</sup> century elites who were lured by the rich folk embroideries found in the Romanian countryside,



references to the *Cîntarea României* festival, a few of the photographs relating to women's wardrobes and to folklore performers. Overall, however, the notion of 'context', 'authenticity', and 'peasants' – as expressed through their labour and their specific aesthetic – remained intact, together with that of national identity, in a display made up almost entirely of the old folk objects in the Horniman stores.

In order to relate the exhibition to the present day, 'Revisiting Romania' was accompanied by a photographic exhibition with portraits of Romanians in London, funded by the RCI. The aim was to counter the image of poverty-driven working class Romanians migrating to the UK, dominant in the British press, by showing Romanians as middle class professionals, well integrated into British society and bringing a positive contribution to it. Meanwhile, 'Revisiting Romania' brought to the fore the beauty of the folk objects, suggesting a long-standing tradition of skill, and signalling national identity. The current situation, identified as one of crisis, or as a turning point (not unlike the 1957 and the 1984 exhibitions) pushed the task of the display into the hands of institutions which reproduced themselves through it. For both the Romanian Cultural Institute and the Horniman Museum need to be seen in this instance as institutions at once authoritative (monologic) and weak, threatened by the current crisis in various ways.

### **An anthropology of museums**

The findings of my research are mostly relevant within the study of material culture in museums, as they reflect on the anthropological task of working with museum artefacts. More precisely, as I stated in the Introduction, this thesis

addresses the recent projects to recontextualize museum artefacts, and can be linked to other complex processes into which museums are drawn, such as artefact restitution.

As it was initially set out, my task in this project was to find information on different ways of engaging with material culture (following the undefined ‘counterparts’ of the objects in the Horniam stores). However, my interaction with the Horniman museum pulled the task in a particular direction: only those objects considered valuable by the museum standards merited attention. What the museum sought to rectify was not its relationship and perspective on the objects, but the *content* of the taxonomies through which it already engaged with objects, and put them into place. This is the reason why, for the Horniman museum, research into the collection was best fulfilled by the ethnographic museums in Romania (in 1984 and also partly in 2011), who responded to (instead of unsettling) its categories. These ethnographic museums provided the Horniman with systematic studies on material culture without questioning the role of the museum in creating value around such objects.

Concomitantly, my other task in the field site was to reconnect the object (or rather, its photograph) with the narrative and place it was extracted from, and to bring back the story of loss and reconnection to the museum. This practice, which has come out of recent academic engagement with ethnographic museums, addressed a more radical critique. More than any other modern institution, ethnographic museums in western Europe contain the material proof of a violent colonial history, but this also means they have the great potential to bring this history into the open, and to act as dialogic places. ‘Recontextualizing’ practices addresses this history of colonialism, as they start with the question:

how did the artefacts end up in museums? Following Latour, this critique is a realization of the failure of the modernist project, acknowledging 'we are no longer committed heart and soul to the double task of domination and emancipation' (Latour 1993, 10).

However, this institutional critique is only accepted half way, as museums persist in their quest for authenticity and demand that contexts be scientifically classified. The quest of these museums for the redemptive, legitimizing narrative is only declarative. In the case of the Horniman project, this quest was formulated in light of the recent post-colonial literature on material culture (in the initial AHRC project), assumed by the Horniman, and passed on to me. But as I have shown, a blouse with a story that brings the unsettling past out into the open was easily rejected as unimportant when brought to the museum, by invoking various other constraints of purification (value, representativeness, aesthetics, etc.). In addition, the special character of this Romanian collection exempted the museum from any responsibility towards the people the objects were collected from. The 'reconnection' was never going to be with the world of the villages – that direct relationship between the Horniman and the villages was part of the ideology maintained by the museum, and it never existed in the first place. The historical trajectories that the objects elicited involved relationships between the villages, the Romanian state and institutions and the Horniman.

The 'crisis' state in which the Horniman and the Romanian Cultural Institute found themselves encouraged these institutions to turn back to the authoritative, monologic voice. Nevertheless, an attentive eye would be able to spot different voices and inconsistencies within the exhibition discourse of

'Revisiting Romania', which resulted from all the forces that tried to mobilize the objects in one direction or another.

My main critical contribution to the anthropology of museums is my argument about the necessity to destabilize the inside-outside dichotomy when it comes to museums. The 'outside' is usually considered to be the context, where objects and information are collected from, while the 'inside' of the museum is the space of storage and representation. My work shows not only that we need to look inside the museum and assess it as a 'context', but also that outside the museum one finds many spaces of representation, instead of a virgin field site of de-alienated crafts. A field site unaffected by its representations (in museums or elsewhere) is, I argue, impossible to find and it is unfruitful to look for one.

In fact, my ideal dialogical museum was one that I found in one of the Vrancean villages – the display of Mrs Joița Maftai, which I present in Chapter Six. It was a place which concealed nothing of the relationships between objects, field site, discipline, anthropologists and the people they bring into their research; one where the layers of history were made apparent, and which absorbed everything – patterns, ideals and relationships. Perhaps a further line of enquiry into museums as institutions would be to ask: how can we make the displays more absorbing, revealing, and personal, like the large room of Mrs Maftai?

### **Reconfigurations: fragile objects in Romania**

A second field of enquiry that my thesis addresses is the much wider study of post-socialism in eastern Europe. My focus throughout this thesis has been on objects that are semiotically vulnerable and liable to change value; they brought out conflicting and hegemonic narratives of history and definitions of culture, all

of which attempt to mobilize objects and pin down their meanings. I moved along from one place to another, together with the objects that I followed. My work brought forth the interlinked networks of shifts in museological discourses and practices in Britain and in Romania, the demise of cultural institutions in Romania, and the emergence of the market economy – processes that cannot be seen as separate, and only together can they account for the ways in which the folk idiom is used today.

I wanted to illustrate not only how objects shift from one regime of value to another, but also to point out where their movement is halted, made difficult, and their inalienability contested. What is at stake in this permanent negotiation is, I believe, dignity, being valued as a person through the recognition of the object's value. My presence in these field sites elicited narratives, demonstrations of value and debates, and people's reactions to my own ethnographic practice (along with that of the folklore specialists and ethnographers of the past) was relevant to me as ethnographic data.

In the Romanian countryside where I conducted part of my research, the study of material culture through memory is not an uncommon practice (in Chapter Three I describe how it became institutionalized in the village, especially after World War Two). But these repeated research endeavours have framed traditions and heritage, and elicited memories in very specific ways that separated modernity from pre-modernity, and singled out the communist period as either destructive or irrelevant for 'traditions'. The very set up of the Romanian collection at the Horniman, in the vein of the Romanian museological discipline, was conducive of the same kind of research.

What I have tried to carry out is an investigation that goes against the grain of the collection, which does not dismiss other previous and current ethnographic practices, but seeks to make them part of the research question. My reframing of the object of memory, from 'traditional, pre-modern' to 'socialist past, modern', suggested a different way of framing the past. I have sought to break the binary perspective on the socialist period, with 'folklore' seen either as ideologically tainted by its incorporation into state propaganda, or as a practice of anti-communist 'resistance' through the maintenance of traditions.

This thesis, I believe, has opened up the path for further investigations into each of these 'contexts' in which material culture deemed 'folk' was significant. The ethnographic and museological disciplines in Romania and eastern Europe, and their relationships to political shifts and reorientations need to be further explored. A more in-depth analysis of folklore in the mass media, and its importance for migrants is yet another path of enquiry. An analysis of the current market of folklore would provide more insights into how objects shift between commodity and gift, from being inalienable and alienable things, and would build on the findings of this thesis.

The most interesting future enquiry, however, would be the redefinition of culture, value and heritage in relation to overarching bodies such as the EU, or international organizations such as the UNESCO in Romania. At the end of my fieldwork there, the discourse of heritage (historic, cultural and environmental) became the focus of political and economic tensions which brought thousands to some of the largest street protests that Romania has seen in the last 20 years, stirred up by the prospects of re-opening a gold mine in Roşia Montana, in Transylvania. At the same time, in regions where coal mines have closed down,

leaving people unemployed, EU funded awareness projects encourage the locals to turn to cultural and environmental heritage as valuable objects that they can capitalize. One of the most appreciated folk craftsmen in Vrancea I have met had worked all his life as a miner in the Jiu valley, and had only taken on crafts after he lost his job. He was still surprised at the respect he is shown today as a craftsman, comparing it to how he used to be treated when he was a mine worker. The hope and ideologies attached to objects of heritage must not be underestimated; as I have shown throughout this thesis, the exploration of these themes go well beyond that of 'national identity', and I believe further enquiry on this route would bring new insights into the on-going social and political shifts in the region.



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# Appendix

Documentation for objects 1957.252 and 1957.256, found in the archives of the  
Horniman Museum

DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL FILE

No. T 6382

1957. 252 iasb

- 1) Name of object  
Literary: rawhide mocassins  
Local: -
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Gaspar Oprisoni, from the village of Cerbăl, District of Hunedoara, Region of Hunedoara.
- 3) Description  
The large "gurgui" tip in this model is reinforced by stitches made with strips of leather. Printed decorative designs and tin buttons.
- 4) Dimensions  
Length: 33 cm  
Width: 10 cm
- 5) Use  
Worn both by men and women.
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
The mocassins of the Padureni area are exceptionally resistant and are used on stony mountain tracks and in forests by the inhabitants. The high "gurgui" tip is both practical and decorative. They are typical of the footwear worn in the mountainous area of the Hunedoara Region.
- 7) Materials employed  
Rawhide
- 8) Technique and tools  
Cut out and fashioned with a special knife, after having been soaked in water. Stencilled decorative designs. The tin buttons are cast by qualified peasant tinsmiths.
- 9) Time needed for making object - one day
- 10) Made at home, every peasant makes his own mocassins.
- 11) Place and date of confection  
Village of Cerbăl, where mocassins were purchased in 1955.
- 12) Artisan  
Gaspar Oprisoni, aged 65, seller of mocassins.
- 13) State of object - in good condition
- 14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan in May 1956

No. T 6231

- 1) Name of object  
Literary : Headdress  
Local : "ceapsă"
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Maria Iancu, from the village of Cerebăl, Region of Hunedoara.
- 3) Description  
Conical shape, composed of the actual "ceapsă" and the "ciptă", the lace around the edges. The "ceapsă" is ornamented with compactly sewn geometrical designs in black. The lace is needlework in the Venetian style.
- 4) Dimensions  
Length: 24 cm - Length of lace: 49 cm
- 5) Use  
Worn by married women, black is used by both young and old women.
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
This style of headdress is only worn in the area called "Pădureni" in the Hunedoara region. This area, that was once well wooded, is isolated and of difficult access; it contains about 30 villages inhabited by peasants of Rumanian nationality. Their costume, common today also, has maintained its ancient aspects. The women's headdress has common characteristics with the caps worn by the Dacians, who inhabited this territory.
- 7) Materials employed  
Cotton or hemp material, homespun woollen thread. Purchased cotton thread lace.
- 8) Technique and tools  
The "ceapsă" is hand embroidered in a characteristic style, especially the stitch which joins the two cotton bands called "chee". The white cotton material is embroidered in white wool, which are both subsequently dyed black. The needlework used for the lace is minute ("point de Venise")
- 9) Time needed for making object - about 30 days
- 10) Made at home
- 11) Place and date of confection  
Village of Cerebăl, District and Region of Hunedoara, in 1950
- 12) Artisan  
Seller, aged 45
- 13) State of object - in good condition
- 14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan in May 1956

## DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL FILE

✓ No. T6232

- 1) Name of object  
Literary: bead ornament for headdress  
Local: -
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art, from Maria Iancu, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, from the village of Cerbăl, Region of Hunedoara.
- 3) Description  
Strings of beads plaited to form a ribbon, decorated with multi-coloured crosses on a white background.
- 4) Dimensions  
Length: 24cm  
Width: 0.8cm
- 5) Use  
Wound round the top of the headdress, underneath which the hair is gathered.
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
A very common ornament in North and South-West Transylvania, especially in the "Dădureni" area, where ornaments made of large beads are even more typical.
- 7) Materials employed  
Factory made beads and hemp thread.
- 8) Technique and tools  
Beads strung on threads which are plaited to form a decorative pattern.
- 9) Time needed for making object - one day
- 10) Made at home, every peasant woman makes her own ornaments.
- 11) Place and date of confection  
Made in the place where it was purchased in 1952.
- 12) Artisan  
The seller, aged 45.
- 13) State of object - in good condition
- 14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan in May 1956



- 1) Name of object  
Literary: Lambskin jacket  
Local: -
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955.
- 3) Description  
A vest shaped jacket edged with black lambskin. Many-coloured floral designs on a red appliqué sheep leather background. The designs and technique of this embroidery are specific of this kind of jacket.
- 4) Dimensions  
Length: 43 cm  
Width : 103 cm
- 5) Use  
Forming part of the peasant costume.
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
Widespread throughout the Pădureni area.
- 7) Materials employed  
Prepared at home: Lambskins  
Purchased: coloured wool, sheep leather, braid, cotton yarn.
- 8) Technique and tools  
The skin is tanned, the jacket cut out and sewn together. Decorated with red leather appliqué and characteristic embroidery.
- 9) Time needed for making object - 10 - 12 days
- 10) Made in village workshop
- 11) Place and date of confection  
Village of Cerbăl, Region and District of Hunedoara, beginning of the XXth Century.
- 12) Artisan unknown
- 13) State of object - in good condition
- 14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan, 6.VI.1956

No. T 6224

- 1) Name of object  
Literary: metal girdle  
Local: "Balti"
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Gaspar Oprisoni, peasant of Rumanian nationality, from the village of Cerbâl, District of Hunedoara, Region of Hunedoara.
- 3) Description  
Three rows of tin tacks fixed to a belt made of sheep's hide. At intervals, these tacks are attached to the leather lining by red and blue buttons. Buckles at both ends.
- 4) Dimensions  
Length: 87 cm - Width: 5 cm
- 5) Use  
Worn by young women, as an ornament, over the woollen sash and between the narrow woollen girdles. This belt is considered extremely valuable.
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
This belt is worn within a very restricted area, called the "Pădureni area", which is isolated in a region of thick forests, where the archaic costume is still worn today.
- 7) Material employed  
Tin, sheep's hide, buttons, wire
- 8) Techniques and tools  
The molten tin is poured with a spoon into a notched mould and allowed to set. The mould is made out of a notched piece of flint. The tin tacks are made very quickly and placed on three narrow bands of sheep's hide, then fixed by buttons and wire to the leather belt, which serves as a lining. The buckles are moulded in the same way. The tools are home made and the moulding is done over an open fire.
- 9) Time needed for making object - two days
- 10) Made at home by peasants who, though amateurs, have specialized in this trade.
- 11) Place and date of confection  
Made in 1955 in the village of Cerbâl, where it was purchased.
- 12) Artisan - Vinătorul, aged 65, people's artist.
- 13) State of object - in good condition
- 14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan in May 1956

1) Name of object

Literary: braid

Local: "briu pistrit"

2) Origin

Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Sabina Ticulă, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, from the village of Cerbăl, Region of Hunedoara.

3) Description

Long shaped, made out of a fabric that resembles elastic network. Multicoloured designs, with zigzag stripes running down its whole length.

4) Dimensions

Length: 266 cm

Width : 10 cm

5) Use

Forms part of peasant woman's costume. Wound round the waist, to hold up the skirt, more braid wound on top of it.

6) Typological classification, frequency

Typical only of the "Pădureni" area, Hunedoara Region, where the ancient costume is still worn today. The wearing of this braid is a very old tradition.

7) Materials employed

The long and resistant thread obtained from wool and designated under the name of "păr".

8) Technique and tools

A special form of plaiting is used to make this braid. The ends of the threads are caught up on a nail fixed to the beam, supporting the ceiling of the room; the braid is then plaited by means of small sticks which

9) Time needed for making object - 2 days /replace the the healds in the loom

10) Made at home. It is only the old women who know how to plait braid.

11) Place and date of confection

Village of Cerbăl, Region of Hunedoara, made in 1940.

12) Artisan

Sabina Ticulă, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, 50 years old.

13) State of object - in good condition

14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan in May 1956.



1) Name of object

Literary: braid

Local: "brăcieră"

2) Origin

Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Domnica Nan, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, from the village of Cerbăl, District of Hunedoara, Region of Hunedoara.

3) Description

Long braid, many coloured, woven geometrical designs along the edges, stitched along the central stripe.

4) Dimensions

Length: 350 cm

Width : 3.5 cm

5) Use

Worn by peasant women around the waist and over the "brâu pestriț" ( girdle ).

6) Typological classification, frequency

Very common in the Pădureni area of the Hunedoara Region, typical because of the weaving method and stitched designs. The colour scheme is also typical of the same zone.

7) Materials employed

Woollen thread called "păr" ( hair ).

8) Technique and tools

Homespun thread, dyed and woven in 4 thread pattern. Woven without the loom comb, which is replaced by the batten for wool. The central stripe is stitched over.

9) Time needed for making object - 4 days

10) Made at home. Every peasant woman makes her own braid.

11) Place and date of confection

The village where it was made in 1940.

12) Artisan

The woman who sold it, aged 55.

13) State of object - in good condition

14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan in May 1956

No. T 6230

- 1) Name of object  
Literary: chains  
Local: "zale"
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Maria Miță, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, from the village of Cerbăl, District and Region of Hunedoara.
- 3) Description  
Six rows of chains, composed of copper rings plaited in a special way.
- 4) Dimensions  
Length: of 6 rows: 95 cm x 6 + 23 cm at both ends.  
Width:
- 5) Use  
Worn by peasant women tied to the waist and allowed to hang behind over the hip.
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
Ornament only worn by peasant women from the "Pădureni area", together with the key and ring chains (described in Files No. 6228 and 6229), completing the richness of the "Pădureanca" costume. These chains, considered modest ornaments, are worn every day and when out working in the fields. It is the simplest ornament of its kind.
- 7) Materials employed  
Copper
- 8) Technique and tools  
Made of copper wire, twisted with pincers.
- 9) Time needed for making object - 6 days
- 10) Made at home
- 11) Place and date of confection  
Village of Cerbăl, where it was purchased round about 1925.
- 12) Artisan  
Ion Lascus, peasant of Rumanian nationality, dead in 1948 at the age of 58.
- 13) State of object - in good condition
- 14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan in May 1956.

1957.252 ix  
1957.252 x

1) Name of object

Literary: apron

Local: "opreg"

2) Origin

Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955.

3) Description

Oblong shape. Decorative scheme carried out in the weaving. The hem is ornamented by various stitches typically used in hems and hand made tassels (sewn on to the edge). The front "opreg" is worn shorter, showing about 20 cm of white petticoat, passing sideways over the back apron, which is worn underneath. Thus, from the waist downward, the body is swathed tightly and soberly, in contrast to the rich and brightly coloured embroidery of / the smock.

4) Dimensions

Length: 82 cm } No. 6220  
Width : 68 cm }

Length: 82 cm } No. 6221  
Width: 67 cm }

5) Use

Worn by peasant women as a double apron

6) Typological classification, frequency

Worn throughout the Pădureni area.

7) Materials employed

Homespun wool ("hair")

8) Technique and tools

Homespun long carded thread, woven in the hand-loom in 4-thread pattern, following a special system of weaving called twisted rows. Made of white wool which is then dyed at home (black). Handmade hem and tassels.

9) Time needed for making object - 3 days

10) Made at home

11) Place and date of confection

Village of Cerbăl, District and Region of Hunedoara, 1948.

12) Artisan

Maria Iancu, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, born in 1915.

13) State of object - in good condition

14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan on 6 June 1956



1) Name of object

Literary: smock

Local: smock

2) Origin

Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from

3) Description

Cut out from straight pieces of material with lower part sewn on to the top, the same traditional cut that has come down the ages. Sewn together with "chainstitch" in red cotton. Rich and compact decorative designs embroidered round the neck, across the chest, along the sleeve and in vertical stripes down the skirt. The actual top of the women's smock is generally embroidered in red and black, while the skirt is always

4) Dimensions

Length: 126 cm

Length of sleeve: 78 cm

embroidered in black. Different hues are used as "umplutura" (stop agaps).

5) Use

Forms part of peasant woman's costume, worn next to the skin.

6) Typological classification, frequency

Widely worn throughout the Pădureni area, Region of Hunedoara.

7) Materials employed

Homespun hemp thread. Purchased: cotton thread.

8) Technique and tools

Homespun hemp thread, woven together with cotton thread in 2 thread pattern. Cutting and sewing of smock done at home. Embroidery carried out in two kinds of stitches "ateste" and "șinorește". The rest of the stitches

9) Time needed for making object - 2 months

are less important. Crochet work lace.

10) Made at home

11) Place and date of confection

Village of Cerbăl, District and Region of Hunedoara, 1945

12) Artisan

Maria Iancu, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, born in 1905

13) State of object - in good condition

14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan on 6 June 1956

## DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL FILE

✓ No. T 6236

- 1) Name of object  
Literary: gloves  
Local : -
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Cosandra Iancu, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, from the village of Cerbâl, District of Hunedoara, Region of Hunedoara.
- 3) Description  
Stripes worked in relief, decorative designs in various colours
- 4) Dimensions  
Length: 28 cm. ; Width of cuff: 7 cm
- 5) Use  
Worn by women
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
Very common in the Pădureni area
- 7) Materials employed  
Wool
- 8) Technique and tools  
Knitted
- 9) Time needed for making object - 2 days
- 10) Made at home; every peasant woman makes her own gloves
- 11) Place and date of confection  
Made in the village where they were bought in 1953
- 12) Artisan  
The peasant woman who sold them, aged 22.
- 13) State of object - in good condition
- 14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan in May 1956

## DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL FILE

No. T 6235

197 1957.252 xiv

a86

1) Name of object

Literary: mittens

Local: -

2) Origin

Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Viorica Lăscuș, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, from the village of Cerbăl, District of Hunedoara, Region of Hunedoara.

3) Description

Cylindrical shape, ornamented with polychrome stripes on a red background

4) Dimensions

Length: 8 cm

Width: 18 cm

5) Use

Worn by peasant women to protect their knuckles

6) Typological classification, frequency

Very commonly worn in the Pădureni zone, because of the cold climate. Characterized by bright colours and linear designs.

7) Materials employed

Purchased fine, coloured, woollen thread

8) Technique. and tools

Knitted

9) Time needed for making object - one day10) Made at home. Every peasant woman knits her own mittens.11) Place and date of confection

The village where they were bought, after the World War.

12) Artisan

Peasant woman who sold them, aged 45

13) State of object - in good condition14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan in May 1956



- 1) Name of object  
Literary: greatcoat  
Local: -
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Leonora Lăscuș, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, from the village of Cerbăl, District of Hunedoara, Region of Hunedoara.
- 3) Description  
Made of straight pieces and side flares. Ornamented in front by a band of red cloth and "birnași" braid, laces made out of white or green wool "hair". The "birnaș" is plaited and sewn on by hand, forming wheels at regular intervals.
- 4) Dimensions  
Length: -  
Width : -
- 5) Use  
Worn both by men and women
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
The white greatcoat with simple ornamentation is typical of the costume worn in the "Pădureni" area (in the Hunedoara Region). This area, which has the richest costumes, also has the simplest greatcoat, due to the fact that the latter is worn in rain and cold, as a sort of waterproof.
- 7) Materials employed  
Wool
- 8) Technique and tools  
Handwoven in 4 thread pattern and fullled, to become thicker. Cut out and sewn by hand. The "Birnaș" braid is spun and plaited by hand.
- 9) Time needed for making object - 6 days
- 10) Made at home
- 11) Place and date of confection  
Village of Cerbăl, District of Hunedoara, Region of Hunedoara, 1953.
- 12) Artisan  
Made by the seller, aged 30
- 13) State of object - in good condition
- 14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan in April 1956



## DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL FILE

✓ No. T6227

- 1) Name of object  
Literary : necklace with bits of mirror  
Local : -
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Valeria Onesan, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, from the village of Cerbăl, District of Hunedoara, Region of Hunedoara.
- 3) Description  
Ribbon shaped, ornamented with bits of mirror, beads and ribbons, with a row of coins attached to one of the edges.
- 4) Dimensions  
Length: 36 cm ; Width: 4 cm
- 5) Use  
Used as ornament to be worn round the neck.
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
Ornaments with beads, coins and bits of mirror; typical of the area called "Pădureni".
- 7) Materials employed  
Purchased ribbons and beads, coins.
- 8) Technique and tools  
Sewn and threaded by hand.
- 9) Time needed for making object - one day
- 10) Made at home; every peasant makes her own necklaces with bits of mirror.
- 11) Place and date of confection  
Place where it was purchased in 1946.
- 12) Artisan  
The peasant woman who sold them, aged 32.
- 13) State of object in good condition
- 14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan, 1956

## DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL FILE

✓ No. T 6226

1) Name of object

Literary: coin necklace  
Local : "baer cu bani"

2) Origin

Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Leonora Lăscuș, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, from the village of Cerbăl, District of Hunedoara, Region of Hunedoara.

3) Description

Neck ornament, composed of 4 rows of copper chain, with coins attached.

4) Dimensions

Length of 4 rows: 200 cm

5) Use

Worn as ornament around neck, falling on to the breast.

6) Typological classification, frequency

The coin necklace is a national ornament worn with the Rumanian peasant costume. In the area called "Pădureni", the coins are attached to copper chains, however these necklaces have become much rarer in this area.

7) Materials employed

Copper wire and coins.

8) Technique and tools

The chain is made with pincers.

9) Time needed for making object - 2 days10) Made at home11) Place and date of confection

In Cerbăl village, where it was purchased, made at the beginning of the XXth century.

12) Artisan

The chain made by Ion Gădean, aged 75, peasant of Rumanian nationality.

13) State of object in good condition14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan in May 1956

1957.252 XVIII a26

DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL FILE

✓ No. T 6238

- 1) Name of object  
Literary: woollen cloth stockings  
Local : "toloboni"
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955
- 3) Description  
In the shape of a top-boot, made of white drugget cloth. Coloured decorative design ("drug") round the top.
- 4) Dimensions  
Length: 40 cm ; Width: 40 cm
- 5) Use  
Worn by men and women alike with peasant sandals ("opinci")
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
Woollen cloth stockings are frequently worn in the mountain areas in Transylvania, forming part of the peasant costume. Various kinds may be observed.
- 7) Materials employed  
Homemade woollen cloth
- 8) Technique and tools  
The wool is spun at home and woven in the hand-loom in a four thread pattern. The cloth is thickened at the fulling mill. The stockings are cut out, sewn and embroidered with coloured thread round the top,
- 9) Time needed for making object - 2 hours
- 10) Made at home
- 11) Place and date of confection  
Village of Cerbăl, District and Region of Hunedoara, 1948
- 12) Artisan  
Domnica Lăscuț, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, born in 1920
- 13) State of object - in good condition
- 14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan, 6.VI.1956



## DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL FILE

✓ NO. T 6225

1957.252 XIX  
(Object appears to  
missing)

- 1) Name of object  
Literary: set of keys  
Local: "chei pe chiciu"
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Gaspar Oprisoni, peasant of Rumanian nationality, from the village of Cerbăl, District of Hunedoara, Region of Hunedoara.
- 3) Description  
Composed of five rows of scallops sewn in a row on a small band of sheepskin, then fixed to a piece of leather by buttons attached with wire. Five copper rings and keys, ornamented with dots and circles, are suspended to the lower part.
- 4) Dimensions  
Length: 19 cm  
Width : 9 cm (including keys)
- 5) Use  
Worn by young peasant women, who tie it over the right hip.
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
This set of keys forms part of a series of metal ornaments belonging to the peasant woman's costume of this region. It is supposed that the keys and rings have some ritual significance. Today they are considered as simple ornaments.
- 7) Materials employed  
Tin, sheepskin, copper, buttons, wire.
- 8) Technique and tools  
The tin scallops are made in the same way as those of the "balți" (described in File No.6224), the copper keys and rings are cast in stone moulds, then stencilled or scratched with the end of a nail.
- 9) Time needed for making object - 3 days
- 10) Made at home: tin scallops. Made by specialists: copper keys and rings.
- 11) Place and date of confection  
Village of Cerbăl, where it was purchased; made in 1955.
- 12) Artisan  
Gaspar Oprisoni, the seller, aged 65, made the tin scallops. The keys and rings were made by Maria Grincean, specialist of gypsy origin, who died in 1953 at the age of 105.
- 13) State of object - in good condition
- 14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan in May 1956

1957.252xxii  
(object appears to  
be missing)

1) Name of object

Literary: chain with keys

Local: "Zale cu chei"

2) Origin

Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Domnica Lăscuș, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality from the village of Cerbăl, District of Hunedoara, Region of Hunedoara.

3) Description

The chain is composed of small parts caught one to the other by these pendants called "chei" (which resemble keys). The decorative designs on the keys are stencilled dots and circles.

4) Dimensions

Length: 100 cm

Width :

5) Use

Worn by young peasant women around the waist and hanging over the hips and down the back. Worn on feast days together with the chain with rings (see File No. 6229).

6) Typological classification, frequency

This chain with keys forms part of an old tradition and is also supposed to have had some magic significance. Today, the population considers it a simple but very popular adornment. The wearing of the key chain by peasant women is limited to the "Pădureni" zone of the Hunedoara Region.

7) Materials employed - copper

8) Technique and tools

The chain is made by hand, out of copper wire and with the help of small pincers. The keys are cast in rudimentary stone moulds, then filed with a file, then stencilled and scratched with the end of a nail, as

9) Time needed for making object - 3 days / ornamentation

10) Made at home, every peasant makes it for his wife or betrothed. The keys are made by specialised gypsy tinsmiths.

11) Place and date of confection

Village of Cerbăl, where it was purchased in 1940.

12) Artisan

The chain was made by Ion Lăscuș, the husband of the peasant woman who sold it. He is a peasant of Rumanian nationality aged 45. The keys were made by Maria Grancea, specialized in copper work, of gypsy nationality, who died in 1953 at the age of 105.

13) State of object - in good condition

14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan in May 1956



1957.252  
(object apparently  
missing)

- 1) Name of object  
Literary: Chain with rings  
Local: "zale cu inele"
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Maria Lăscuș, peasant woman from the village of Cerbăl, District of Hunedoara, Region of Hunedoara.
- 3) Description  
The chain is in the form of a ladder with attached rings made of brass. Standard rings, decorated with stencilled dots and small circles.
- 4) Dimensions  
Length: 97 cm  
Width :
- 5) Use  
Worn by young women tied round the waist and hanging down the hips and behind. Worn together with the key chain (see file No. T6228), especially with sunday clothes.
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
The wearing of this chain and rings is an old custom, supposed to have had some cultural significance. Today it is a greatly-cherished adornment. It is widespread only in the "Pădureni area" of the Hunedoara Region.
- 7) Materials employed  
Brass
- 8) Technique and tools  
The chain is handmade, of brass wire, twisted with pincers. The brass rings are made by casting into rudimentary stone moulds, they are then polished with a file and the designs stencilled with the sharp end of a /nail.
- 9) Time needed for making object - 3 days
- 10) Made: Everyman makes these chains at home for his wife or sweetheart. The rings are made by gypsy tinsmiths, who sell them to the Rumanians.
- 11) Place and date of confection  
In the village of Cerbăl, where it was acquired before the World War.
- 12) Artisan  
The chain was made by Vasile Lăscuș, father-in-law of Maria Lăscuș, peasant of Rumanian nationality, who died in 1950 at the age of 68; the rings were made by Maria Grancea, naturally qualified tinsmith, of gypsy nationality, died in 1953 at the age of 105.
- 13) State of object - in good condition
- 14) File compiled by Elena Secoșan in May 1956

✓ No. 6259

- 1) Name of object  
Literary: woman's smock  
Local: -
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Ioana Juga, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, qualified seamstress, from the village of Vrancioaia, District of Vrancea, Region of Galați.
- 3) Description  
Cotton smock with hemp skirt. Geometrical and floral designs embroidered on the collar, in front, on the sleeves, round front opening and in a lesser degree in the back.  
Embroidery on the sleeve: the "altiță" (a piece at the top of the sleeve) is formed of two rows of rhombs embroidered inside a square and divided by two rows of tinsel; small triangles are inserted between them. The "puckers" are worked in yellow cotton thread ("tiriplic"). Two rows worked in yellow "key" stitch run down the length of the sleeve. The portion between these two rows is ornamented by a wider strip of geometrical designs (rhombs enclosed inside squares), on either side of which "pui" (small stylized flowers) run down the sleeve at some distance from one another. The sleeve ends in a narrow band, embroidered with small rhombs enclosed inside circles.  
Embroidery in front: simplified flowers are embroidered round the opening at the neck, followed by squares enclosing rhombs and a row of "pui", small simplified flowers.
- 4) Dimensions  
Length of smock: 103 cm  
Length of sleeve: 82 cm
- 5) Use  
Part of peasant woman's costume.
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
Typical of the Vrancea Region.
- 7) Materials employed  
Homemade cotton fabric, cotton and hemp fabric for skirt of smock.  
Purchased: coloured cotton thread, gold thread, tinsel, fine coloured woollen thread.
- 8) Technique and tools  
Material woven at home in 2 thread pattern. Fine coloured woollen thread, coloured cotton thread, gold thread, tinsel used for embroidery.
- 9) Time needed for making object - about 2 months
- 10) Made at home
- 11) Place and date of confection  
Village of Vrancioaia, District of Vrancea, Region of Galați, 1916.
- 12) Artisan  
Ioana Juga, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, qualified seamstress, born in 1879.
- 13) State of object - in good condition
- 14) File compiled by S. Stanciu in April 1956



- 1) Name of object  
Literary: skirt  
Local: "catrința"
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Maria Timbrea, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality (skilled craftswoman), from the village of Vrâncioaia, hamlet of Muncei, District of Vrancea, Region of Galați.
- 3) Description  
Oblong shape, woven in 4 thread pattern. Decorative scheme, grouped stripes at both ends which cross in front, back plain black. The colours used for the stripes are red, green, morello red, blue, gold thread and yellow. Round the top and bottom of the skirt there is a red stripe surrounded by green, yellow, blue and white lines. The "fota" is worn tightly wrapped round the body from the waist downwards.
- 4) Dimensions  
Length: 89 cm.  
Width : 130 cm.
- 5) Use  
Forms part of the typical peasant woman's costume worn in the Vrancea area. Held up by the braid wound around the waist. One of the ends is sometimes caught up at the waist, to give more freedom of movement.
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
Typical of Moldavia and Wallachia, where it is very common.
- 7) Materials employed  
Homespun wool. Purchased: fine, coloured woollen thread, gold and white thread.
- 8) Technique and tools  
Handwoven in 4 thread pattern. Decorative scheme composed of stripes.
- 9) Time needed for making object - one week
- 10) Made at home
- 11) Place and date of confection  
Village of Vrâncioaia, District of Vrancea, Region of Galați, 1916
- 12) Artisan  
Maria Timbrea, peasant of Rumanian nationality, born in 1894.
- 13) State of object - in good condition
- 14) File compiled by S. Stanciu in April 1956

✓No. T 6254

- 1) Name of object  
Literary: girdle  
Local: "br̂u"
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Maria Juga, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, from the village of Vr̂ncioaia, District of Vrancea, Region of Galați.
- 3) Description  
Long girdle, woven in 2 thread pattern. Ornamented with vertical stripes ("v̂rste") covering the entire surface of the girdle. The following colours are used : red, black, white, green, yellow and "morujan" (morello).
- 4) Dimensions  
Length: 270 cm  
Width: 15 cm
- 5) Use  
Wound around the waist, over the smock.
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
Accessory to peasant costume, typical decorative design used in the Vrancea area, where it is very common.
- 7) Materials employed  
Homespun wool
- 8) Technique. and tools  
Handwoven in 2 thread pattern - hand picked designs.
- 9) Time needed for making object - one day
- 10) Made at home
- 11) Place and date of confection  
Village of Vr̂ncioaia, District of Vrancea, Region of Galați, 1895.
- 12) Artisan  
Maria Juga's mother, peasant of Rumanian nationality, died in 1916.
- 13) State of object - in good condition
- 14) File compiled by S. Stanciu in April 1956.



## DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL FILE

✓ No. m 6262

*Can't find m'*  
(7) 1957.256 (iv)

- 1) Name of object  
Literary: braid  
Local: -
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Anghelina Tătaru, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, from the hamlet of Poiana, village of Vrâncioaia, District of Vrancea, Region of Galați.
- 3) Description  
The braid is narrow and long (wound 5-6 times round the waist). Zigzag lines covering the whole length. Colours: red, blue, white, dark morello ("morujan"), yellow, green. Tassels at both ends.
- 4) Dimensions  
Length: 385 cm  
Width: 4 cm
- 5) Use  
Wound round the waist over the skirt, which it holds up.
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
Forms part of peasant woman's costume. Typical throughout the country. The decorative scheme is typical of the Vrancea District. Very common today.
- 7) Materials employed  
Homespun "păr", long and well twisted woollen thread.
- 8) Technique. and tools  
Handwoven in 4 thread pattern.
- 9) Time needed for making object - about 2 days
- 10) Made at home
- 11) Place and date of confection  
Hamlet of Poiana, village of Vrâncioaia, District of Vrancea, Region of Galați, 1915.
- 12) Artisan  
Anghelina Tătaru, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, born in 1852.
- 13) State of object - in good condition
- 14) File compiled by S. Stanciu in April 1956

## DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL FILE

No. ✓ T 6263

- 1) Name of object  
Literary: woollen stockings  
Local: "călțuni"
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art, from Anghelina Tătaru, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, from the hamlet of Poiana, village of Vrâncioaia, District of Vrancea, Region of Galați.
- 3) Description  
Kneehigh stockings, knitted in white wool. Knitted pattern along a portion of 19 cm up the leg.
- 4) Dimensions  
Length: 64 cm  
Width: 12 cm
- 5) Use  
Worn in autumn and winter
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
Very common throughout the country and especially in the Vrancea area
- 7) Materials employed  
Homespun sheep's wool.
- 8) Technique and tools  
Handknitted on 5 needles
- 9) Time needed for making object - 3 days
- 10) Made at home
- 11) Place and date of confection  
Hamlet of Poiana, village of Vrâncioaia, District of Vrancea, Region of Galați, in 1953.
- 12) Artisan  
Anghelina Tătaru, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, born in 1851.
- 13) State of object - in good condition
- 14) File compiled by S. Stanciu in April 1956



1957.256 vi

DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL FILE

✓ No. T 6258

- 1) Name of object  
Literary: head veil  
Local: "stergar"
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by RPR Museum of Peasant Art in 1955 from Măriuța Dumbravă, peasant woman of Rumanian nationality, from the hamlet of Poiana, village of Vrâncioaia, District of Vrancea, Region of Galați,
- 3) Description  
Oblong shape. Pattern design groups of three stripes and alternate wider stripe. The stripes are more compact at the ends, alternating with geometrical designs. Yellowish white colour.
- 4) Dimensions \_ length 282 cm ; width 63 cm
- 5) Use  
Used for adorning the head. Worn only on feast days.
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
Article forming part of the typical peasant women's costume worn in the following regions: Galați, Pitești, Craiova; very frequently used.
- 7) Materials employed  
Silk and cotton
- 8) Technique and tools  
Handwoven in a 2 thread pattern, hand-picked designs
- 9) Time needed for making object - approximately 3 days
- 10) Made at home
- 11) Place and date of confection  
Hamlet of Poiana, village of Vrâncioaia, District of Vrancea, Region of Galați. Made in 1936
- 12) Artisan - unknown
- 13) State of object - in good condition
- 14) File compiled by Smaranditza Stanciu in April 1956

- 1) Name of object  
Literary: rawhide mocassins  
Local: -
- 2) Origin  
Acquired by the R.P.R. Museum of Peasant Art in 1955, from Vasile Murgu, peasant of Rumanian nationality, from the village of Vrîncioaia, District of Vrancea, Region of Galați.
- 3) Description  
Mocassins of black-dyed pigskin ("cerniță"), gathered round the edges. The "nojițe" ( laces with which the mocassins are tied on ) are made of goat's hair.
- 4) Dimensions  
Length: -  
Width: -
- 5) Use  
Footwear. Mocassins worn with stockings and tied with the "nojițe" (laces) above the ankle.
- 6) Typological classification, frequency  
Typical mocassins worn in Moldavia. Extremely common.
- 7) Materials employed  
Dyed pigskin ( dyed with alder bark ), "nojițe" (laces) made of goat's hair.
- 8) Technique. and tools  
The oblong piece of leather is perforated and the "nojițe" are threaded through the holes and drawn tighter or looser according to the size of the foot.
- 9) Time needed for making object - several hours
- 10) Made at home
- 11) Place and date of confection  
Village of Vrîncioaia, District of Vrancea, Region of Galați.
- 12) Artisan  
Vasile Murgu, peasant of Rumanian nationality, born in 1910.
- 13) State of object - in good condition
- 14) File compiled by S. Stanciu in April 1956