

Traditions, a means of safeguarding authentic spiritual values

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Abstract

Preserving traditions, particularly in rural areas, can be regarded as a safety mechanism for those who can trace their roots to the respective regions. This entails the certainty of belonging to a specific social group. Therefore, in order to remain unchanged, customs and traditions need to be cultivated in the hearts of the younger generations as true spiritual values.

Keywords: traditions; rural areas; folk costumes.[†]

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1. Introduction

Vrancea is a Romanian county whose seat is the town of Focșani. The county is situated at the boundary between the historical regions of Moldavia and Muntenia (Greater Wallachia), two territories divided by the Milcov River. Situated in the south-east of the country, in the Eastern Carpathian curve, Vrancea can be seen as a transition area connecting the three historical provinces, Moldavia, Wallachia and Transylvania. The region is rich in history and represents a repository of Romanian folk culture. This is where the *Miorița* (*The Ewe*) Ballad, considered a masterpiece of Romanian literature, was first collected ([2], pp. 368-405). Local folklore is equally varied and the folk costume of Vrancea is regarded as one of the most beautiful Romanian folk creations. Folk customs and traditions are still observed in the area. In the following study, we will refer to a number of items of clothing making up the typical folk costume of this region and describe certain traditions and customs specific to this area.

2. The folk costume of Vrancea county

The beauty of the folk costume of Vrancea county resides in equal measure in the items it consists of and the craftsmanship behind them. The items were made using a variety of materials, ranging from the hemp fabric, linen or wool employed in peasant households to the silk, pearl decorations, velvet or Venetian brocade available in the boyar's manor houses. The metallic thread embroidery embellishing such clothing items is a distinguishing feature of the Vrancea folk costume. Sadly, the outbreak of the two world wars in the twentieth century was accompanied by a deterioration in the quality of these garments. As the poverty rates increased, the inhabitants were forced to use much cheaper materials. Moreover, as a result of growing urbanization, the folk costume stopped being worn in a large number of rural households [6].

Nowadays the folk costume is only donned by villagers in mountainous regions, particularly on feast days or other special occasions. In urban areas, folk costumes are only worn in the course of festivities or by school children at end of year shows.

The folk costume of Vrancea is a variant of the folk costume of the Moldavian Plateau, and can be identified by a number of distinguishing features. Two of the typical elements of the Vrancea folk costume are the twisted sleeve shirt and the loose slacks [23].

The female attire

Due to the multitude of items making it up as well as the variety and richness of its decorations, the female attire represents the centrepiece of the Vrancea folk costume. There are distinct outfits for workdays, feast days or special occasions, with specific features depending on the age of the wearer. There are special outfits for little girls, unmarried young women, married women below or over the age of 40. Past their forties, women wear a costume with minimal embellishments, regarded as suitable for that particular age. It is characterized by the use of dark colours, particularly black.

The focal point of the female folk attire is the headdress, with noticeable differences between girls and married women. As regards the hairstyle worn by little girls and adolescents, it can be noted that they usually wore their hair in loose braids, or in a crown braid, without covering it. Once they were married, they adopted a more elaborate hairstyle. This entailed parting the hair in the middle, then braiding it and fastening it in a single plait crown or in a bun. Once a woman was married, she was no longer allowed to go out without covering her hair, such behaviour being regarded as sinful [3].

Salba [**the necklace**] is an item of jewellery worn around the neck. It consists of one or several strings of precious stones, coins, pendants or beads. It is part of the Romanian expression “*salba dracului*” [the devil’s necklace], used to designate a malevolent, villainous, dishonest individual [16].

The earring is an adornment that hangs from the ear lobe. It is generally worn by women and consists of a metal ring which can be further embellished with coins or precious stones [12].

Coin necklaces and earrings highlighted the social status of the wearer whilst simultaneously serving an aesthetic purpose. The preferred style of necklace generally featured three rows of yellow glass beads (hanging at the base of the neck, above the chest and across the chest). Yellow beads were worn by wives, while the ones worn by older women were darker in colour. Earrings were made of gold, silver or other brightly coloured materials (red, blue, etc.) and were worn by girls since infancy. Brides wore metal earrings, which were a wedding gift from the bridegroom, and old women wore round hoop earrings [3].

The shirt is a clothing item made of linen or silk. It is worn next to the skin and covers the upper half of the body. It appears in a number of idiomatic expressions, such as *a rămâne în cămașă* [to be left with *nothing but the shirt on one’s back*], meaning that one has been reduced to poverty, has lost everything, or *își dă și cămașa de pe el* [he’d give you the *shirt* off his back] which suggests excess charity and generosity. Another expression featuring the same word is *a nu avea (a nu ști) pe unde să scoată cămașa* [to have nothing up

one's sleeve] which refers to being in great trouble, not knowing how to get oneself out of a predicament [11].

The shirts women wore on workdays were made of hemp fabric and cotton and the ones meant for feast days were made of cotton and silk. The cut of the shirt featured either a straight collar, following the line of the neck, and sleeves widening from the shoulder, or a square or round opening and no collar, or a bib, if it was made of cotton fabric [3]. In terms of how the garment was structured, three distinct types of shirts were worn by the women of Vrancea: the creased neck effect shirt, the twisted sleeve shirt and the wide sleeve shirt or oversized shirt.

The creased neck effect shirt is a clothing item based on the ancient Dacian shirt and is very richly decorated; the style of its embellished sections is borrowed from the decorated shoulder bands of traditional Romanian blouses.[‡] The sleeves are cut from a single piece of fabric, have a small fold under the arm and end in a cuff referred to as the 'bracelet' ([1], pp 16-17).

The twisted (or spun) sleeve shirt is one of the most representative items of clothing worn in Vrancea communities. It commanded attention and was relatively rare, which augmented its value. The spiral sleeves were created by means of special sewing techniques and contributed to the understated elegance and simplicity of the garment. The distinguishing features of this type of shirt result from the unique design of the sleeves. Such a shirt is tailored from a piece of linen cut width wise into four equal strips, representing the front, the back and two folded sections. The sleeves are tailored by cutting two right-angled triangles out of a piece of fabric measuring approximately 1.5 metres in length; the cut is made diagonally, from one corner of the piece of fabric to the opposite one [24]. The sleeve features an embroidered shoulder band, which is where the structure begins to twist, and the embellishments follow the line of the sewn edge.

The wide sleeve shirt or oversized shirt is based on a straight type of cut. The sleeves are fastened to the rest of the shirt at the shoulders and are as wide as those of men's shirts, hence its name ([1], pp 23-24). During the interwar period, shirt designs started to feature wide sleeves or a ruffle tied up at the bottom. The embroidery was outshined by sequins, and the colour blue became increasingly prevalent. Vegetable silk embroidery, a subtler and more delicate type of embellishment, started being used towards the end of this period, maintaining its popularity until the 1960s. Rural households became poorer during the Second World War and as a result of this wool took the place of linen. On the other hand, sequins continued to be used, resulting in more resplendent garments [6].

[‡]According to DEX (*The Romanian Explanatory Dictionary*), 'altița' [the shoulder band] is the shoulder section of male and female shirts and is decorated with a variety of embroidered patterns.

The word *catrința* [**the apron skirt**] is derived from the Hungarian *Katrinca* and refers to an important part of the folk costume worn by Romanian women, an item of clothing with side slits which can be worn either as a skirt or as an apron. It consists of a rectangular strip of fabric, woven with different colours of wool thread, primarily red and black. Apron skirts were home-made and decorated with flowers or traditional Romanian patterns. They had to undergo a dying or 'blackening' process, which entailed using vegetable dyes obtained by boiling alder or oak bark [10].

The apron skirts of Vrancea county are not structurally different from the items worn in other parts of the country, but stand out through a number of particularities to do with the way in which they were decorated. For instance, women past the age of 40 used to wear a black apron skirt with a red stripe on the hem ([1], pp 25-28). The apron skirt is a typical element of the folk costume worn in mountain villages. In plateau areas the apron skirt was replaced by the 'flannelette' or 'flannel' skirt. This item was woven out of wool and featured a simple pattern of yellow, red, blue or green stripes, one fingerbreadth wide. It was a floor length garment with abundant pleats, worn by young girls and older women alike [3].

The male attire

As far as the male attire and headdress are concerned, things are less complicated than in the case of women. Most men used to wear a beard or grow their hair long, apart from those situations when they pursued an education or had to do their military service [6]. During the summer, unmarried young men wore wide-brimmed hats decorated with flowers and peacock feathers fastened above the right ear. Younger boys wore plain hats. During the cold season, young and old men alike wore winter hats. In order to showcase their wealth, some locals wore pointed hats, white, grey or black in colour. The hats worn on feast days were round, with an upturned edge [3].

The shirt

The items of clothing making up the male attire are generally fewer in number and less richly decorated. This was partly due to the fact that men were less involved in the various routines and important events in the life of the village. The 'wide sleeve' shirt (with a very large opening) was extremely appreciated on feast days. This item of clothing gave birth to the idiomatic expression *a primi cu mâneci largi* [to receive with open arms], that is to give a warm welcome to those crossing your threshold. It was gradually replaced by the 'cuffed' shirt, a more practical option given that the sleeves entail less work on the part of the women sewing them. Sometimes, both types of shirts were

worn on feast days. An advantage of the cuffed shirt was that it didn't reveal any skin while the wearer was dancing [6].

The male work shirt was made of cotton and hemp fabric (the so-called *homespun fabric*, a type of linen woven using hemp, flax or cotton). The shirts intended for feast days were made of cotton and silk and worn by men of all ages. Men's shirts were knee length and had a straight collar that followed the line of the throat. They fastened at the neck by means of either two laces or two buttons. The decorations were embroidered manually, using white, yellow or blue thread. Feast day shirts were worn on top of long johns. The same floral patterns used to embellish the shirt were also embroidered on the legs of the long johns.

According to DEX (*The Romanian Explanatory Dictionary*), *izmenele* [**the long johns**] are items of male underclothing that cover the body from the waist down to the ankles. Long johns worn on work days were made from the same type of fabric that was used for shirts, and the ones meant for feast days were made from cotton fabric [3].

Ițarii [**the slacks**] are a type of tight-fitting or creased trousers worn in rural areas during the warm season. They are made of cotton or wool and worn on top of the long johns by mountain dwellers or shepherds [19]. A specific feature of Vrancea resides in the fact that, unless the occasion was a special one, the shirt was tucked inside the slacks, not worn loose on top of them, as was the case in other areas.

In addition to the twisted sleeve shirt, specific to the area, another characteristic element of the Vrancea folk costume was represented by the loose slacks. They were made of baize (a thick cloth) and stood out through the asymmetrical layout of their folds. This asymmetrical cut resulted in a garment which looked the same from the front and the back and was equally wide in both directions. They were also known as night slacks and cannot be found in any other ethnographic area of Romania or beyond the country's borders ([1], p. 38). Apart from the long johns and slacks, the men also wore trousers. These were made of brown cloth dyed with walnut shells. The trousers were usually worn in winter [3]. During the post-war period, as a result of increased trading and closer links with the city, the folk costume was worn by fewer and fewer men [6].

Common elements of the male and female attire

The section below outlines a number of items of clothing worn in equal measure by women and men.

The handkerchief. This fashion accessory was made of cotton fabric and its corners were embroidered with cross stitched flowers. The colours used to decorate it were red, blue and yellow ([4], p. 313).

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The girdle is a component of the folk costume worn by both men and women. Women fastened the girdle on top of the shirt and followed it with the apron skirt or flannelette skirt. Men wore the girdle on top of the shirt, which covered the slacks, long johns or trousers. The girdle was woven out of wool. A white girdle was worn on work days and the one intended for feast days was red or featured a combination of red and green [3].

Bunda [**the winter coat**] is a long shaggy coat made of sheepskin. It is a winter garment generally worn by men [9].

Ciubota [**the boot**] is a type of lace-up boot or riding boot. Traditional types of footwear were worn both on work days and feast days and were made of pigskin [8].

Cojocul [**the shearling coat**] is an item of clothing made of sheepskin. It has a thick fur lining and is particularly popular as a winter coat in the countryside. The word is part of the idiomatic expression *iarnă cu șapte cojoace* [seven coat worth winter] used to describe an extremely harsh season [13].

The hood is an item of clothing made of baize or a variety of waterproof fabrics; it is cut in the shape of a conical bag [14]. In the Vrancea area the hood has a particular status, as it serves a double purpose, protecting the head against rain or snow, but also functioning as a bag [6].

Opinca [**the folk boot**] is a traditional item of footwear fastened around the foot with a strap or a shoelace. It is made from a rectangular piece of leather or rubber [20].

Pieptarul [**the vest**] is an item of clothing made of baize or wool. It is a sleeveless jacket which covers the upper half of the body [15].

Sarica [**the woollen overcoat**] is a long traditional overcoat, made of thick wool thread. It is worn by mountain villagers, particularly by shepherds [17]. Its attractiveness depended on how shaggy it looked and it was worn by the most prominent members of the local community on feast days [6].

According to the *Romanian Explanatory Dictionary*, *sumanul* [**the folk coat**] is a knee-length coat worn by peasants. It is made of thick handwoven wool cloth and worn by both men and women. It could be black or grey (the natural colour of wool).

Traista [**the bag**] This fashion accessory was woven out of wool and mostly worn by women. The material it was made of resembled the one used for flannelette skirts. Work day bags were made of hemp cloth [3].

The folk costume of Vrancea county is a variant of the traditional Moldavian attire and the main structural elements, the cut, as well as the materials used in the making of these garments are quintessentially Romanian. Because all traditional attires have common roots, the folk costume of Vrancea county is influenced both by the garments in other parts of Moldova and by the clothing worn in other Romanian regions: Wallachia, Oltenia, Transylvania, Banat. For instance, variations on the flannelette skirt can be encountered in the Ialomița area and around Oltenia. It is particularly important to note that the hood, the folk boot, the shirt, the apron skirt, the shearling coat are depicted on Trajan's column and on the metopes of the Tropaeum Traiani monument ([4], p. 319).

In the present age, a large number of renowned fashion houses are drawing inspiration from the Romanian folk costume, especially the Romanian blouse known as *ie*.

3. Traditions and customs specific to the Vrancea region

The section below will outline several of the traditions and customs found in the Vrancea region.

Chiparușul [**the funeral dance**] is a funeral rite specific to the Vrancea region [24]. It is a dance routine performed by twelve men whose faces are covered by traditional masks [5]. The masks are crafted from wood and depict an old man and an old woman. Such masks are still being used in the countryside to ward off evil spirits. It is said they help dispel dark thoughts, curses and ill health. The masks can also be displayed in front of the house [21]. As per tradition the men would wear these masks while dancing in front of the house of the deceased person [24]. They would stand one behind the other, being bound by the 'chain of life.' As the masked men danced around a fire, they would occasionally jump over the chain to symbolise the purification undergone by the soul of the dead person. Nowadays, this funeral dance is only performed during wakes organised for the elderly.

Hora cu scrânciob [**variation on the hora folk dance, involving a swing**] is an Easter Monday rite performed by the local young men [22]. It is a tradition specific to the Vrancea region [24].

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The swing is a large wooden implement which can be made to spin or gyrate and thus provide a means of entertainment. Although it is also referred to as a cupboard [18], the swing is more reminiscent of a water mill wheel. The device is set into motion by the sturdy young men of the village, who turn a crank. As per tradition, girls of marriageable age are entertained on the swing by the young men wooing them. The swing supposedly makes the girls dizzy and they can therefore be more easily persuaded to get married. The boys were rewarded for their efforts with gifts of decorated or dyed Easter eggs [5]. Older people and married couples occasionally took a turn on the swing, which was said to be a way of ensuring a prosperous year and making one's wishes come true [22]. This particular ritual was only performed during the days following Easter. When this period was over, the local young men dismantled the swing, which was put into storage until the following year [5].

“Uncheșii și babele” de la Păunești [**“the gaffers and gammers” of Păunești**] is an old ritual in which carollers wear terrifying masks [7], crafted from sheepskin or goatskin and decorated with goose or duck feathers. Later on, these masks were further embellished with tinsel or ribbons [5]. This 1st of January custom is associated with the Păunești commune in Vrancea County, where the participants announce the beginning of a new year by chasing away the evil spirits of the one that has just ended [7]. The ‘gaffers and gammers’ carry cowbells and scare away the spirits by means of loud noises [5].

4. Conclusions

The folk costume is one of the greatest expressions of Romanian creativity. Folk art represents an important link between the village and the rest of society, irrespective of the aspects it incorporates. Nowadays there are still areas in which older people wear the traditional folk costume, which highlights the significance of the Vrancea region as far as Romanian history and civilisation are concerned. In this part of the country traditions have not been affected by the passage of time and the villagers are still attached to old customs [6].

For the essence of Romanian customs and traditions to be preserved, they need to be instilled into the hearts of children and young adults as authentic spiritual values.

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