

## THE VILLAGE, SOURCE AND KEEPER OF TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS -THE MASKS-

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**ABSTRACT:** Nicolae Iorga said "It is not enough for a country to birth talents; she must know how to keep them alive." (*Scrieri despre Arta*) The wonderful world of popular traditions and customs is one that still exists, but which is marked by the passage of time, oblivion, aging and, paradoxically, renewal and change.

*It is obvious that many of the customs are lost due to their meaning disappearing, that the traditions suffer from an aging phenomenon and eventually they disappear. It's the law of nature that life goes on, the new replaces the old, and people live the present with a view for the future.*

*A thought about the past, however, can do no harm to anyone, but the contrary; we must remember that our ancestors have succeeded, over the centuries, to ensure the most important thing - the continuity of life within a framework of traditions, knowledge and customs passed down from generation to generation.*

**Keywords:** popular tradition; mask; village; rural community;

### Masks in the romanian popular tradition

Traditions and customs presuppose the existence of rules, therefore including constraints, established on the basis of the experience of several generations. Looked at more closely, they represent unwritten tales for the perpetuation of life, in which the practical spirit, but also the beautiful, equally find merit.

The phenomenon of returning to traditions for their preservation is quite common in the world. The most gained are those who live in their midst, those who do not have to reinvent them, because they have felt them and maybe still feel them. It is important to participate in them and not ignore them, as this would be a first step towards forgetting

The village - a human settlement whose population deals mainly with agriculture, constituting a complex social-territorial category - is made up of an agglomeration of

houses and household constructions, annexes that make up the "village hearth" and a territory from which they are obtains the agricultural production also called "border", "estate", "land". Ever since ancient times, people have formed traditions and customs that, today, are hard to keep and be transmitted from "ancestors" to future generations.

Nowadays, although many rural settlements have been transformed into urban ones, the village is trying to remain as it once was. It is quite difficult to do this, but because of the simple people who love their tradition, it's still possible to do it. We can't do too much, but for these people, these wonderful villagers, who deserve all our esteem, we can try along with them to carry on these traditions.

At the turn of the years, the Romanian village resembles a scene where a huge carnival, a unique show of masks and ceremonies takes place. For centuries, on the threshold of the new year, Romanians have

been transfiguring through masks and games their daily chores, the most important moments in human life. The stupidity and the nonsense are ironized, and the most prominent households of the community are praised.

Disguises appeared on Romanian territory even from the primitive commune for ritual, domestic and warrior purposes.

Some ancient means of disguise are the following:

- powdering your entire body and face with clay;
- painting your whole body with colored plant juice emulsions and simple tattooing;
- covering the body with masks, costumes;

As a means of transfiguration it can be remembered the makeup of the face and the wearing of scratches, masks and mascoïds.

The archaeological discoveries regarding the territory of the pre-Roman Dacia and the post-Roman Dacia confirm the function of the ritual, ceremonial and entertaining masks.

The presence of masks is mentioned in the writings of scholars from the feudal period. Thus, the games with masks specific to the summer holidays, Pentecost, harvest time, New Year, in the writings of Dimitrie Cantemir, Antonio Del Chiaro, Fr. J. Sulzer.

Masks are a reflection of each people's vision of the world. Although the Romanian folk masks are similar to those in the south-east of Europe, they still reflect the main occupations of the Romanian peasant. Thus, in the Romanian tradition, there are masks that depict bears, horses, goats and birds; In other words, masks which belonged to farmers.

The smallest form of mask is the 'maschetă'. It disguises or transvestites by underlining or blurring a physiological element.

The „maschetă” is used for ritual purposes to mask the bride. This tradition has an older connotation. The bride and groom could only see each other only after

the ceremony. The bride was masked with veil „maschete”, her physiognomy was deformed so that the effect of the groom's subsequent surprise was maximized. In Crişana, rich brides hid their faces under a mask called "the bridal collar". It consisted of a band made out of gold coins attached on a red velvet ribbon, trimmed on the edges with a silver thread embroidery.

However, in Romania, the most common are the „obrăzarele” or masks themselves. The most important ritual masks were the funeral masks that were in use until the end of the 19th century. These masks were made to be worn at the feast and the funeral convoy. They represented the deceased's ancestors descending from the mountains to attend the funeral. These masks were called "uncles" or "elders". They consisted of untreated skins of domestic animals or carved wood. The skirts were made of hemp and the fur was rabbit fur.

In our time, the construction of the masks of „uncles” belongs to the grotesque, satirical and caricature art of the New Year masquerades.

Another type of masks are costume masks or "body masks". These can be in plant, animal or human form.

The most popular costume mask in the form of a plant is that of the paparudas. The game of parrots was a typical fertility rite. They were dressed only in a cone of leaves.

Among the costume masks that mimic wild animals we can mention "bear masks". These were used in the "bear game". The player in disguise grumbles, hums and grunts in the drum and flute's rhythm. The resurrection of the bear metaphorically depicts the succession of seasons. The bear cult is inherited from the Geto-Dacians, who considered this animal to be sacred. In fact, the very name of Zalmoxis is derived from the bear fur. "Zalmos" even means bear fur.

At the Mouth of Humor the habit of the straw bear was kept. The one who masks himself in the straw bear is dressed on New Year's Eve with the ropes that have been

twisted from wheat straw or rye. He accompanies the bear's mist all night of the New Year. In the morning of St. Basil it is customary for these ropes of straw or rye straw, which were stitched on the clothes, to be burned. Those who play the bear are not allowed to undress until the passing of the new year.

In other areas the shape of the bear's head is obtained by stretching a calf's skin over a metal cauldron, or a metal skeleton is used as a support, on which a calf or lamb's fur is placed. From the neck down, the body of the masked bear is covered with fur, sewed like a costume. The game of the bear is the most spectacular of all animal games. The bears play at the command of the bears, handsome young men, dressed in more colorful clothes, who wear on their backs a cloak and on their heads have caps akin to military ones, on which spheres adorned with mirrors and globes are attached. Under the command of the bears, the bears play in the circle, roll, hit the ground with their feet, and finally die. Then he miraculously resurrects, when he metaphorically depicts the succession of seasons, a succession that is under the sign of this animal, capable of overcoming winter and who knows when spring really comes.

The custom of masking in the period of renewal of the calendar time, has its origin in the courts dedicated to the god Dionysos. Those in this courtyard wore animal masks (deer, sheep, goat) and dressed in animal skins. (Ghinoiu, 2004)

This custom of the mask takes place during the period between Christmas and New Years. The animal that is the main character of this habit varies from one region to another: deer in Hunedoara, goat or turkey in Moldova and Ardeal, In Muntenia and Oltenia the goat is called „brezaia”. (Lavric, 1997)

The goat is a zoomorphic mask dworn at Christmas by one of the bachelors of the band, She is accompanied by a noisy band that accompanies the goat's dance, both vocally and instrumentally.

In this period of the winter solstice, the goat is born symbolically by making and having a boy wear the mask. Through her dance and release, the goat leaps, twists, turns, bends, then dies violently and is reborn. This game of the goat that includes the killing, the slaughter, the burial and the resurrection refers both to the death and resurrection of the deities, as well as to the fruits that the new year brings, especially to those who receive it and throw grains of wheat, barley, corn during the dance. ( u ea, 1992) According to the rank of the goat, it acts independently, not obeying the rules of the leader, defends the other children in the band and has fun scaring the women and children.

In the vision of Tudor Pamfile; the goat is composed of the head, body and a stick on which it rests. The head is made of a short wood that is adorned with colored paper. The whole body is adorned with ribbons made of colored paper, laces and beads, artificial flowers made of colored paper, bells and a mirror. The body is made of a thick cloth or a bag, on which the strips of colored paper stick. Underneath this bag is the one who takes the goat and will make it flap it's mouth.(Pamfile, 2018)

People, especially those from the village, believe that despite its behavior, the goat is predicting the weather and the fruits of the earth in the new year.

Another costume mask is that of a goat. This costume mask is characterized by the fact that the upper part is organically different from the lower one. The head of the mask is a copy of a real animal's head and the body is made up of brightly colored barks arranged on the player's body in a cone or cylinder.

Ribbons, mirrors, slings and bells are attached to the costume from the bark. The goat's mouth is movable so that the bellows print the necessary rhythm. The rhythm of the music, the rhythm of the bell and the humming of the bells increase the artistic effect of the costume mask.

The "healing" of the goat symbolizes the arrival of the New Year. The goat is accompanied by characters that symbolize shepherds, nuns or babes, as well as dancers in folk costumes. During the dance of the goat there is a moment when the animal becomes ill and falls to the ground. The shepherd panics and carries on a dialogue with the goat, a dialogue that, in some localities, is even a spell. While the goat is in agony, members of the alai are worried, but with the animal's recovery, the joy reappears. This moment in the dance of the goat signifies the "death" of the year that is just ending and the birth of the coming year.

Just like the goat, the bear also seems to have a geto-dacic cult as his origin, whose goal is the purification and fertilization of the soil and house.

The bear is represented as a young man wearing a bear fur on his head and shoulder. Right next to his ears, the fur is decorated with red ornaments. If the villagers don't have a bear's fur that has the animal's head attached to it, they usually just craft it themselves out of wood, and cover it with a piece of fur, while the body is just made out of cloth. However, the cloth is decorated in such a way that it clearly conveys what it's imitating. (Toca, 2004)

The bear is followed by musicians and other characters such a bear cub who's usually played by a child, who's usually lead around by another adult whose tasks is to sing to the bear cub during the play. The bear growls and imitates the slow and heavy steps of the animal. The play concludes with blessing the owner of the house with health, luck and wellness.

Although this custom of leading the bear around was usually seen during the New Years in Moldova, with time it spread around until the current day, where it can be seen inside cities around Christmas time.

Another category is masks in human form. With the help of these, the player also disguises himself in man but with new, complex and fantastic morphological and

functional attributes. We can remember here the mask of the grandfather and the grandmother, the mask of the devil, the masks of the horsemen etc.

In the "goat game" that I mentioned, the following masks appear: "the old man", "the old-woman", "the priest", "the witch". The costume mask in these cases presents the character and temperament of the characters played to a grotesque level.

Of note there is also the "game of the cups" where the players are disguised as fantastic characters. The mask-costume is made in this case based on the local folk costume, modified in the decorative elements. The mask itself, called "visage" is composed of "beard", "bargain" and "face". The bargain is made up of a huge bouquet of colored paper flowers, ribbons, bins, bells and round mirrors. It sometimes reaches 50 cm. The face is a caricature of a human face. It's nose is exaggerated and a bell is attached to it. The cheeks, nose, forehead are sealed with red "magic signs". The beard, a rabbit fur, is adorned with round mirrors.

## Conclusions

Today, masks can be found on the streets of the Romanian villages, especially during the winter holidays. The presence of masks is not only determined by the carnivalesque meaning of the party, but has a much deeper motivation, the belief that by respecting and carrying on the customs of the ancestors, people will have, in the coming year, embellished harvests and fruitful orchards, health and strength.

Over the years, the traditional mask has become an art object and, although some ancient meanings have begun to disappear from the consciousness of contemporary creators, the plastic structures of each type of ceremonial insignia have been preserved.

During the present day, people don't realize that their behavior they fight against the holiday, in other words, with that which is true. We should pay closer attention and a

lot more respect towards “the traditional world of our villages and the treasures of folklore, where the remains of holidays are kept, keeping our conviction that we we’re a nation of peasants and we should also be a nation of peasants in culture aswell, if we desire to give the world an original and essential spiritual configuration”, as was

mentioned by Vasile Bancilă (Bancilă, 1996) While there still is hope and optimism, and while there still are old folks who don’t accept the idea of the old traditions fading away, while transmitting them to the their children, grandchildren and possibly even their great-grandchildren, these traditions will be kept from generation to generation.

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