

THE MUTE: RITUAL AND TRANSGRESSIVE MEANINGS OF THE MASKED CHARACTER IN THE ROMANIAN CĂLUȘ RITUAL

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Abstract: The article focuses on the importance and meanings of the masked character of the Mute (*Mutul*), part of the *Căluș* ritual performed at the Whitsuntide feast in several regions of Romania and observed in two villages in Argeș County (Stolnici and Bârla). The *Călușari* (the members of the *Căluș* group) perform specific dances meant, first of all, to cure the ritual illness inflicted by *Iele* (mythological feminine creatures) and also intended to provide for the good health and prosperity of the households where they are being performed. One of the performers is the Mute, archetypally similar to the Jester/Joker, who is impersonated by a man dressed as a woman but endowed with the fertility symbol of a wooden phallus. His presence and actions are all about transgression – he can mock the *Călușari* or the community members assisting in the ritual, breaking all conventional behaviour rules. He plays, as well, an important part in the short episodes meant to make the audience laugh. We inquire into how his performance and actions can be perceived in relation to the social limits they break. At the same time, the article discusses what happens to the masked character in the staging context of the ritual, since from the beginning of the twentieth century, especially during the communist period, it reached larger audiences during local (and international) festivals. As of 2008, the ritual has been recognised internationally as an identity emblem, part of the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Keywords: Bârla, *Călușari*, jester, mask, Mute, ritual, Romania, Stolnici, transgression, Whitsuntide

INTRODUCTION

The year-round calendar of customary practices in Romania, especially in the Orthodox calendar, brims with rituals that include masked characters, starting with carnival ceremonials, commonly held in most communities during winter: at Christmas, on New Year's Eve, or Epiphany (see Pop 1999: 42–98), but also in early spring, at the beginning of Lent, in Banat region and in Muntenia, as well as in the catholic German and Hungarian communities (Pop 1999; Neagota 2012). These rituals are accompanied by a diversity of masks and costumes (phytomorphic, zoomorphic, anthropomorphic), which are defined by various transgressions, all together chasing away the evil and the winter, to protect the community. They bring laughter, and by doing this, purify and renew the world (Bahtin 1974 [1965]). Then, there are the spring customs, in which vegetal masks are more present, such as the rituals of *Paparuda*.¹ And finally, there are the summer customs, with several rituals held at Whitsuntide, such as the ceremonial ox in Transylvania (Neagota 2005), but also the *Căluș* ritual in Muntenia and Oltenia, which this article focuses on.²

The *Căluș* ritual is a complex healing and prophylactic ritual, providing fertility, which encompasses an entire universe of choreographic, sound, costume, and prop elements, as well as a rich imagery supported by numerous beliefs. It incorporates two types of performers. The first are the “non-masked actors” (Benga 2009: 62), the *Călușari*, a group of men of uneven number, whose main role is the “ceremonial aggregation” (ibid.: 61) through dance and specific actions and gestures which they perform. The second is the “masked actor” (ibid.: 62), called *Mutul* (the Mute³), a carnivalesque character who is not allowed to speak while the ritual dances are performed (hence his name), whose main role is, as that of any carnivalesque character, the “ceremonial dispersion” (ibid.: 61). He has a significant ritual responsibility, ingrained in his appearance and displayed by his gestures.

The Mute is our central focus as we discuss his formal appearance and representation, but also his functions and symbolic meanings within the *Căluș* group. While being a consistent part of the ritual, where he plays an important role, he is somewhat of an outsider as well, in relation to the ritual group. Apart from his ceremonial duties, he aims to provoke laughter: on the one hand, he mocks himself, on the other, he teases, pranks, and mocks the *Călușari*. At the same time, he is teased by the other performers.

He acts as a sort of binder – his actions connect the *Călușari* with the host families and the community: as he is teasing the audience, he is actually aggregating the people's participation in the performance. By wearing a mask, the Mute is transformed by it into a vehicle for ritual acts, but, furthermore, he is an animator, a jester, a joker; all in all, he is a transgressor.



Figure 1. *The Mute is teased by a Călușar. Stolnici village 2014. Photograph by Georgiana Vlahbei. Personal archive.*

RESEARCH CONTEXT

When writing about the *Căluș* custom, ethnologists and anthropologists have always referred to the different layers of its functions and significance – both the ritual and the spectacular ones. There has been much debate on the transition from the ritual to the secular structure and manifestation (Giurchescu 1992) which accompanies the heritage-making process undergone by the ceremonial. As a consequence of this transition, a change in the audience has been observed: from performing for the community to performing in front of outsiders (Știucă 2009). In the 1960s, ethnologists discussed the transformation of the custom, focusing on its de-ritualisation (Pop 1998 [1962]); these studies emphasised the importance of artistic performance, praised not only during musical festivals but also in local communities. Researchers argue that *Căluș* has considerably lost its spiritual meanings. “Today, only the dance with all its virtuosity has remained from the *Călușari*,” claims Horia Barbu Opreșan (1969: 143), although the detailed descriptions of the custom he is making suggest otherwise, and stress the importance and meaning of the ritual act for numerous communities at the time of the research (1950s–1960s).

Already at the beginning of the 1980s, Gail Kligman⁴ asked the question “What is *Căluș* today?”, unfolding three different layers⁵ of meanings: “To some it is a vivid memory of a healing and fertility ritual; to others it is a dramatic event through which respect for tradition can be expressed; to others it is still an existing artistic performance” (Kligman 1999 [1981]: 13). We find all three layers verifiable on the field today, although we strongly believe that the ritual is a living tradition, not a memory capsule as G. Kligman suggests, since the members of the communities where *Căluș* is performed strongly believe in its protective, beneficent, and therapeutic power. Healing still occurs nowadays, reported more rarely,⁶ but nevertheless, it is always certified to be a reality during the interviews.

Altogether, in the past years, there has been a strengthening of the “outsider” type of audience, especially since 2008, when the *Căluș* ritual was included in the UNESCO Intangible Heritage Representative List. Thus, it is more and more promoted as an emblematic heritage for mankind.⁷

In our text, we focus both on the living tradition of the *Căluș* and on its perception as an artistic performance, emphasising the role that the masked character plays. We support our assertions with our qualitative research conducted in two communities, Bârla and Stolnici⁸ (Argeș region), in several years – 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2018. We conducted a series of interviews and direct observation in the villages on stage performing. The two communities are situated approximately 150 kms away from Bucharest and are mentioned in the monograph of the ritual published by Oprea (1969: 206, 210) as villages where the ritual was active in the 1950s–1960s, thus assuming that there has been, up to now, a continuity in performing the custom. The village of Stolnici was, furthermore, extensively researched by Anca Giurchescu in the 1970s, 1990s, and 2000s (Giurchescu 2009b), which is all the more reason to stress its continuity. During our documentation visits, we witnessed three different actants impersonating the Mute character within the groups, and, apart from the differences in acting due to their distinct personalities coming into play, we were able to observe the similarities that unify this *dramatis personae* with other *Căluș*’ Mute characters encountered in other field sites.⁹

RITUAL CONTEXT

When discussing the *Căluș* ritual, the ritual timeframe should be explained first. The custom takes place on Whitsunday and the week that follows. It is “a critical time when the dead spirits return, and the activity of the *Iele*¹⁰ is

at its height” (Giurchescu 1992: 35). Thus, one of the core beliefs in the region where the custom is still active is that there is an important connection between the performers of the ritual and the *Iele* spirits. The relationship between the two instances is of a complex nature, “including similarity, polarity, and ambivalence” (Giurchescu 1992: 34; see also Vuia 1935;¹¹ Neagota & Benga 2011; Eliade 1973) – the *Călușari* being the only ones able to heal the illness inflicted by these fairies on those who break working taboos during Whitsuntide week.¹² The healing practice and process is perceived as an ecstatic experience, pervaded by a complex of ritual gestures, including dance and magic (Neagota & Benga 2011).

The performers, the *Călușari*, are a group of men, usually of an uneven number (7–9–11, although lately the number has not been considered that important), organised in a similar manner to an initiating brotherhood, a proof of its ancient origin (Eliade 1973; Neagota & Benga 2011). The group carries a banner, a “flag”, made of a tall wooden stick (usually a light wood, such as hazelnut), adorned at the top with a cloth and garlic (*Allium sativum*) and, in some regions, also wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*). These plants are meant to protect them from the *Iele* spirits. The flag is ritually built when the group of *Călușari* gather together and take an oath of obedience¹³ to the bailiff, the leader of the group called *vătaf*, in order to assert their compliance with the ritual rules and taboos.¹⁴ Although the performers in both researched communities knew about the importance of the flag (Kligman 1999 [1981]: 30–34), in Bârla, as well as in Stolnici, the performers had given up flag-binding and oath-taking years ago, though this does not mean that they, or the community, consider the ritual not to be effective (Giurchescu 2009b). As stated by the interviewed *Călușari* themselves, the reason for giving up both the flag and the oath is that the rules are too rigid to be abided to these days – performers cannot commit, for instance, to being part of the group for seven years in a row, nor to performing the ritual during the whole canonical timeframe. This limited timeframe is connected to Whitsuntide: Whitsunday and Monday, the two days of the feast, but also some of the days of the next week (Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday – when they “break” the group, as they call the end of the ritual, when their flag, the protective symbol of the *Călușari*, is unfolded). In some communities, the *Călușari* unfold the flag on the Tuesday after the Sunday that follows the Whitsuntide feast (Oprișan 1969). Nowadays, due to various socio-economic factors, such as the mandatory presence at work of the employees, the calendar of the ritual has been reduced drastically to two, or sometimes three, days.



Figure 2. A group of young Călușari from Bârla, dressed in the typical Calușar costume. Bârla 2013. Photograph by Anamaria Iuga. Personal archive.

The *Călușari* have special costumes: black hats decorated with beads and colourful ribbons attached to the back; embroidered shirts, worn over the trousers and tied over the thighs with a wide woven belt, where they hang garlic (for protection against the *Iele*); and handkerchiefs that were offered by the young girls, as they believed that they would be healthy if they wore them afterwards, as the leader from Bârla explained in 2014. A pair of woven straps in the shape of an X, made of the same material as the belt, are placed over the shirt. Under the knee, over the trousers, the leggings are decorated with flower patterns and adorned with small bells attached. They wear the traditional *opinca* (leather sandals) to which *pinteni* (spurs) are fastened, which accompany the dance moves with sound. The *Călușari* always carry with them a decorated wooden stick/staff, used nowadays more for resting purposes during the dances they perform.¹⁵ It is important to note that as the custom was intensely promoted on stage, the costumes suffered transformations: today they have become more unified, although there are still some communities¹⁶ that do not use this type of standardisation or “uniform” for their *Călușari*.

The ritual develops over the course of several days and it implies for the group to go from one household to another, but also to perform a suite of dances in public places, such as markets, squares, and at times even on the road. The

dances are performed in a circle in both communities, to the music played by the musicians that accompany the *Călușari* during the days of the ritual. Several ritual elements are placed amidst the dancers, believed to protect the household and the attending people: a bowl of salt, used after that in preparing food; garlic¹⁷ used for cooking but also attached to the waist when people want to carry on jobs that are forbidden in the Whitsuntide ritual time; and a ceramic pot with water, which is meant to be broken at the end of the dramatic play (whose chips are believed to prevent nightmares).



Figure 3. *The ritual elements that the Călușari dance around. Stolnici 2015. Photograph by Anamaria Iuga. Personal archive.*

The dances¹⁸ have a more or less complex structure, with a vivid rhythm, and are performed in a certain order established by the leader of the group, the *vătaf*, the one who decides when to change the sequence of steps, by shouting codified commands. During the dance suite, there is at least one interlude when the Mute comes into play. The performance ends with a round dance, a *hora*, where the hosts and other members of the audience are invited to join in alongside the dancers. That is the moment when babies are given to the *Călușari* to be carried in their arms (during the *hora*), as the people have a strong belief that this will provide good health for them. At the *hora*, people

also ask the *Călușari* to place their hats on their heads, as it is believed that the beneficiary will not suffer from headaches. At the end of the dance suite, performers are rewarded with food, drinks, and money. The salt and garlic danced around are considered beneficial and are kept by the host, although women from the audience outside the recipient household can also ask for a piece and leave a symbolic amount of money.

As to the territory one group can cover, it is important to note they are not received in all the houses in the village. Also, the group may visit neighbouring villages or towns as well, where they have more success in raising the necessary money to pay for the musicians and other services (the rest of the sum received is equally divided among the performers). In this sense, some of the favourite places for the *Călușari* to perform are the nearby cities where they dance, for instance, in the marketplace, public squares, restaurants, shops, parks, and for whomever requests them to.



Figure 4. The *Călușari* from Stolnici performing in front of Pitești City Hall, 2018. Photograph by Anamaria Iuga. Personal archive.

FESTIVAL CONTEXT

Described above is a somewhat typical scenario of a village *Căluș* encountered in the two field sites where it is conserved and performed mostly within the traditional cultural transmission inside the group. Nowadays, the *Căluș* is not only a ritual that has an important meaning for the recipient rural communities but has also acquired the emphasis of an important cultural heritage icon. The awareness of its singularity and representativity has become pervasive for the whole Romanian culture, and, since 2008, for the whole humanity, as it was listed on the UNESCO heritage list. Through this recognition and promotion, it has joined the “cultural market of traditions” (Mihăilescu 2008), that is, the heritage-creation process, a process that assumes, as Guy Di Méo (2007) points out, the transformation of a cultural object (that could be material, or spiritual) into its symbolic double.¹⁹

Căluș dancers have always impressed the audience with their dances and performances, and groups of *Călușari* have been invited to perform in front of officiality, as historical records from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have shown (Oprișan 1969; Vulcănescu 1970). There are important transformations that occurred in the ritual in Transylvania, due to the influence and efforts of local intellectuals (Giurchescu 2009a), resulting in the *Căluș* being transferred on stage both as a ritual, as it happened in London, at Albert Hall, in 1935,²⁰ but also as an art performance, pointing out its aesthetic dimension.

Căluș was placed on stage at numerous festivals, especially during the communist period, when “*căluș* became a symbol for Romanian’s cultural antiquity, historical continuity, unity and high artistic qualities” (Giurchescu 2008: 17). One of the most important festivals is, still, the Romanian *Căluș* Festival.²¹ However, as Anca Giurchescu observes:

In the Socialist Era and until 1992 however, the festival was deliberately organised at Pentecost in order to hinder the practice of căluș in the villages at its ritually prescribed time. For the cultural activists it was much more important to enforce the new ‘tradition’ of the Căluș Festival than to keep alive the traditional căluș in its natural settings. (Giurchescu 2008: 18)

After the fall of communism in Romania in 1989, the staging of the *Căluș* continued nevertheless: the festivals grew in number, but ever since it has been accepted on the UNESCO Intangible Heritage List, there are very few festivals that occur precisely on Whitsunday; they commonly take place on the second day and other days before and after Whitsuntide.

Outside of the ritual context and time, the *Călușari* from our field site of Stolnici also participate in different local, regional, or national festivals that take place around the feast of Whitsuntide, to perform the *Căluș* dance among many other groups from the country. The leader of this group, Petre Măsală, is a renowned *vătaf*, who in 2020, upon turning 80, received the title of Living Heritage (*Tezaur uman viu*), bestowed by the Ministry of Culture in Romania,²² as a reward for his longstanding and prodigious activity as group leader (since 1962). For this reason, he is always invited as an honorary guest to regional folklore festivals or other festivities. The *Călușari* from Bârla, on the other hand, have not been equally active in festivals during the past years, as their number is decreasing and because there is another group of young *Călușari* in the village, receiving more attention from the local community. The older *Călușari* from Bârla have also acquired wider recognition due to their central representation in a documentary movie produced by a national TV network in 2014.²³

THE MUTE'S CHARACTERISTIC TRAITS AND FUNCTIONS

The Mute is the carnivalesque masked character of the *Căluș* ritual,²⁴ responsible for emphasising the theatrical/dramatical layers of the ritual, which complement the dance and the music performance of the non-masked group. At the same time, he is in charge of a series of ceremonial gestures and actions meant to provide for the prosperity of the recipient family or community. His appearance plays an important role as his true identity is hidden from the audience by his mask and his costume, thus creating a “hetero-individuality” (Vulcănescu 1970: 12). Part of the disguise of the Mute character is the prohibition on speaking while the dances are performed.

The dramatic segment of the ritual has different intensities in the various regions where *Căluș* is performed. In some sites (Dolj, Romanați) there has never been a record of a masked character (Știucă 2009; Pop 1998 [1962]), and thus, the theatrical performance is provided by the *Călușari* themselves. The *vătaf* usually plays the part that the masked character customarily does. In other villages, such as Giurgișă (Dolj region), there is an element of suggestion pertaining to the Mute's specifics – *cioc* (a beak) – a wooden stick covered with rabbit skin, with a hook at the end, handled by the *vătaf* or the leader's help. It is used to scare the audience, especially children, but also to induce a sort of trance state among the *Călușari* during the healing ritual (Kligman 1999 [1981]).

Before detailing the Mute's role in the two villages where our research was conducted, we sum up a keynote from Narcisa Știucă, which explains the part the masked character has in the *Căluș* ritual:

The status symbols of the Mute are numerous and important, and well known and respected by the members of the group and the audience. From setting the succession and choosing of the households (according to the prestige of the family, and the foreseen gaining), to setting the rules in relation with the beneficiaries (marking with the sword the magical circle of the dances and punishing the profanes that oversee it, asking for objects to be used in the play, making some licentious gestures that used to bear fecundity stimulation rituals), and then choosing the respiro moments destined for the pantomimes (observing the physical condition of the Călușari), the Mute is omnipresent and omnipotent, a real support for the vătaf, whose place he is ready to take, sometimes joking, sometimes for serious. (Știucă 2009: 21)

Appearance

The Mute, generically, wears a mask and a costume, usually made from ragged clothes. In Horia Barbu Opreșan's (1969) description, the face mask is attached to a wool cap. He also mentions that the Mute is dressed as an average person, wearing modest or worn-out clothes, though not visually extravagant.

In the two villages, Bârla and Stolnici, the masked performers were dressed as women, either with distinctive garments (skirt, apron) or a dressing gown. They had quite different types of masks in terms of materials and fabrication: in Bârla, the mask was hand-made or hand-painted specifically for the play, suggesting a type of "ugly man".

In 2013, a black hat was added, and in 2014–2015 the mask was attached to a wig, whereas the Stolnici Mute used a gasmask adorned with a goat-like beard, two cloth ears, and tassels attached to his head over a woman's scarf, adding a grotesque-ludicrous element to his worn-out clothes, on top of which small toys, such as dolls, toy-cars, and so on, were pinned in places (in 2015), attesting to the ingenuity and laughable composition of his costume.

There were a few times when the Mute took his mask off, either because it was extremely hot, or to greet people from the audience. Nevertheless, this only happened after the dance-performance was done or in the time between houses, not during the performance *per se*, while attending to his ritual duties. This testifies to the fact that hiding his true identity is not that rigorous anymore, especially since the people in the village are aware of the identities of all the members of the *Căluș* group, and probably know who is the one impersonating the Mute.



Figure 5. *The Mute's costume. Bârla 2013. Photograph by Anamaria Iuga. Personal archive.*



Figure 6. *The Mute's costume. Stolnici 2015. Photograph by Georgiana Vlahbei. Personal archive.*

Props

During the performance, the Mute can make use of anything he finds in the visited households, transforming it into a prop. Such adjuvants to the improvisation of the Mute can be objects, such as bicycles, blankets, watering cans, old clothes, old water basins, old pots, and even animals – practically everything can become a tool for the Mute.



Figure 7. *Mocking the Mute. Stolnici 2015. Photograph by Georgiana Vlahbei. Personal archive.*

He may also carry a container (in our examples, a cross-body bag, or a raffia sack) to store his props (e.g., medical equipment) that he can use while improvising. Nevertheless, like the masked characters from other regions, also in the field sites, the Mute had two essential signifiers apart from his distinctive clothing: a wooden sword and a wooden phallus.

The first compulsory prop is a wooden sword painted in red, which has several uses during the ritual.



Figure 8. Wooden sword placed upon the ritual elements the Călușari dance around. Bârla 2014. Photograph by Anamaria Iuga. Personal archive.



Figure 9. The Mute making use of his phallic prop. Bârla 2014. Photograph by Georgiana Vlahbei. Personal archive.



Figure 10. *The Mute teasing women before a performance. Stolnici 2015. Photograph by Georgiana Vlahbei. Personal archive.*



Figure 11. *The Mute teasing old women to touch his wooden prop. Bârla 2014. Photograph by Georgiana Vlahbei. Personal archive.*

The Mute is considered to be the helper of the *vătaf*,²⁵ although he sometimes situates himself in opposition to him. With the sword, a symbol of power (Oprișan 1969), he is supposed to admonish the dancers who confuse the steps of the dance, installing a sort of correction or order inside the group and duplicating the *vătaf*'s function. Altogether, we have not witnessed this scolding part in the two villages. One of the first uses of the sword is to visually delimitate the area where the *Călușari* would perform the dances²⁶ from the rest of the area. The sword can be equally used as a stick by the Mute and, at times, as an adjuvant in the plays or pranks he performs. Many times, when the humoristic interlude starts, the Mute enters the circle made by the *Călușari* with his sword elevated above his head, pointing to the sky, or to the other *Călușari*, or even to members of the gathered public. At one of the performing houses, we witnessed him using the sword to break the ceramic pot (see below) that did not fall to pieces during the play.

His second mark used during the performance is a wooden phallus, a symbol of fertility, attached to the waist by a string,²⁷ hidden under a skirt. With the phallus, the Mute “fulfils and perfects his acting part” (Oprișan 1969: 188). The licentious actions have an important ritual meaning (see also Știucă 2009; Kligman 1999 [1981]): he is using the wooden phallus to tease the *Călușari* who do not obey him, as well as members of the audience, especially women. The teasing consists of indecent, inappropriate, or eccentric gestures or closeness to women, including making women touch the phallus.

It is important to mention that the phallus is perceived as a fertility and prosperity-inducing object. Thus, women are not abashed to touch it, as it is believed, both in Bârla and in Stolnici, that this will make the corn cob grow big. Actually, as Romulus Vulcănescu explains, “the audience does not consider this phallic prop to be obscene or indecent. It was, for them, the expression of a belief and of a magic-medical practice” (Vulcănescu 1970: 169).

The Mute's part in the ritual

The Mute is meant, first and foremost, to trigger laughter – through pranks on performers and audience alike, including nonsensical gestures. Throughout the performance of the *Călușari*, the Mute can perform actions such as rolling on the ground and even dragging people from the audience along; checking the blood pressure of the people in the crowd; giving shots to women; harassing or pushing around animals (chickens, dogs, donkeys); even creating a costume of an animal-installation with the help of selected people from the audience; as well as through his more or less complex dramatic plays, which, in Horia Barbu Oprișan's view (1969), act as interludes in between the dance sequences of the group.

Figure 12. *Checking the blood pressure. Bârla 2015. Photograph by Georgiana Vlahbei. Personal archive.*



Figure 13. *The Mute creates a cow-costume with the help of children from the audience. Stolnici 2015. Photograph by Georgiana Vlahbei. Personal archive.*

He can be unpredictable, act dumb, have a short temper and a quarrelling attitude. Whenever he is not laughed at, he can attempt to frighten small children or household animals.

The Mute from Stolnici is a great example of a carnivalesque performance, as he managed to hatch numerous and varied, seemingly unconstructed episodes out of each circumstance with extraordinary wit and ingenuity. His demeanour is a good example of popular theatre, being, as is usually the case of other masked characters in *Căluș*, the main actor of these sketches, but also their director and author. In the eyes of the ethnologists who have researched this custom for a longer period of time, such as Narcisa Știucă (2009), apparently the theatrical moments tend to have a more important place in the syntax of the ritual. There are some regular themes that the Mute engages with, enriching them with improvisations according to his own imagination.

One of the most frequently played dramatic sketches is the quarrel of the Mute with the *vătaf*. During the sketch, the Mute tries to convince the audience that he is the real leader of the group, and so the *Călușari* must listen to his orders. Of course, this short play, a duel with the *vătaf*, is meant to bring laughter, as, each time it is played, the *Călușari* perform the opposite of the commands the Mute asks of them, and, in contrast, obey the leader. We witnessed this sketch several times when following the group of *Călușari* from Stolnici village and also in some places in Bârla; in some of the households, this intervention was longer, and in others it was shorter, according to the inspiration, mood, or importance given by the *Călușari* group to the host.

Usually, at the end of the pseudo-dispute sketch, or just without this one, there is the sketch on the Mute evaluating a cow (impersonated by a *Călușar*), searching for it, and after finding it, milking it. He places the ceramic pot, which the performers danced around, at the feet of the “cow”, at the back of it, but, as it is a vicious cow, it moves and with a hit of the wooden stick, the ceramic pot is broken.

If the pot does not break from the first hit, the masked character would break it with the help of his wooden sword. This sketch is performed widely, and it can be longer or shorter, according to the talent of the Mute, the *vătaf*, and the *Călușari*. This is, actually, the dominant sketch in the two villages.

One particular sketch we witnessed only once in Stolnici but never in Bârla was related to the status of a host – a member of the Stolnici city administration, a strong supporter of the *Călușari* (as the performers explained). It encompassed a moment dramatising the life, death, and resurrection of a *Călușar*.²⁸ This sketch implied the participation of several *Călușari*, who, on top of their traditional costumes, had put on some old clothes found in that particular house in order to impersonate several characters: a *Călușar* who had gotten sick, his wife, a priest, or a doctor.



Figure 14. *The moment the ceramic pot broke during a performance of the Călușari. Stolnici 2015. Photograph by Georgiana Vlahbei. Personal archive.*



Figure 15. *The Mute with the character of the priest impersonated by a Călușar. Stolnici 2015. Photograph by Anamaria Iuga. Personal archive.*

The Mute played as himself, with no change in his character. The props were extremely varied, as the performers used everything that they could get their hands on. At the end of the sketch the ceramic pot was also broken. This short play was but a carnivalesque display of the ritual act that used to be part of the healing ceremony (Neagota & Benga 2011), when, during the dances, one of the performers would be touched by the *vătaf* with the flag (or with the *cioc*), and then he would fall down in trance – an act that accomplished the transfer of the illness (*luatul din căluș*) from the sick one to the *Călușar*. Altogether, the sketch is, as Bogdan Neagota and Ileana Benga (2011) claim, a reminder to the community of the primary function of the ritual: healing of the *Iele*-induced disease.

The performance of the sketches is followed by more dances: at the sound of the breaking ceramic pot, the *Călușari* immediately start their dance. Meanwhile, the Mute is performing the ritualistic acts that he has in the ceremonial: he mixes the salt and the garlic that the *Călușari* dance around, touching them with his wooden phallus.



Figure 16. “Consecrating” the garlic and the salt with the wooden phallus. Bârla 2014. Photograph by Georgiana Vlahbei. Personal archive.

All the ritual elements bear ceremonial (magic?) meanings. The salt is considered to be protective for the animals in the household, and the garlic is used for cooking and worn at the waist if a person engages in an activity²⁹ that is ritually forbidden in the Whitsuntide's timeframe. Also, the chips from the broken ceramic pot are considered to have an apotropaic purpose, as they are believed to protect people from nightmares if placed under the pillow. Thus, the actions of the Mute, although prevalently carnivalesque, have an important ritual meaning.

When the dances end with a *Hora mare* (a round dance with everybody), the Mute gives away the garlic and the salt to the hostess or even to other women who pay a symbolic amount of money in exchange for it. The Mute also receives payment from the hosts and stores it, to be later divided among all the performers.



Figure 17. *The Hora mare (round dance). Bârla 2015. Photograph by Georgiana Vlahbei. Personal archive.*

The Mute and the festival

With all the changes in the audience and the heritage-making process that took place in the past century, changes have also occurred in the ritual itself. On stage, the *Călușari* often perform the ritual as a theatre play, including moments that are otherwise kept secret from people who are not performers, such as taking the oath and binding the flag. Also, whenever the Mute is present on stage, his actions are censured (Știucă 2009), and he never shows off his wooden phallus.

In the case of the two researched villages, the Mute is excluded. He does not even participate in the stage performance, since, as the *vătaf* from Stolnici explained, his actions are licentious and scandalous for a profane public, unaccustomed to this display of gestures. For the same reason, nor do the *Călușari* from Bârla include the Mute when they rarely appear on stage, as it happened, for instance, during the local festival held in Bârla in August 2013 or in 2015 when they were invited for the screening of a documentary about them in Cluj-Napoca.

What is even more interesting is that the *Călușari* from Stolnici, when in Pitești city (Argeș County), excluded the Mute from the street performances in the big city, providing the same motivation – that people from the city would be scandalised by the masked character's actions.

TRANSGRESSIVE IMPLICATIONS OF THE MUTE CHARACTER

The upside-down dialectic of masked characters has long been studied (Caillois 1958; Bahtin 1974 [1965]; Lévi-Strauss 1975; Vulcănescu 1970, etc.) as an intrinsic part of the ritual time-space manifestation. Within *Căluș*, the Mute embodies this paradox within his appearance, his actions, gestures, and attitudes.

His persona is in strict relationship with the larger context of ceremonial performing, as he is a symptom of the imbalance of the world itself. First, in connection with the ritual time *Căluș* is performed – the Whitsuntide and the week to follow – the effect of the ritual is that of marking the transition to the summer. Thus, it can be better understood only in relation to the specific calendar time it is set within the rituals of the life cycle, especially the commemoration of the dead (see also Giurchescu 1992). The week-long *Căluș* ritual takes place after the Saturday of the Souls, a pre-Christian remnant of the worship of ancestors, integrated in the liturgical year within the Eastern Orthodox Church as the commemoration day of the dead. It is believed that leading to Whitsunday, the souls of the dead leave the graves on Maundy Thursday and go around free for

50 days. In the days before the commemoration ritual (locally called *Moșii de vară* (Summer Forefathers), or *Moșii de oale* (Forefathers of Clay)), it is said that the dead wake up from their sleep and search for the offerings made for them, until they are reconciled on the Saturday of the Souls. It is of no coincidence that the ritual of *Căluș* takes place after this time, as, according to beliefs, the spirits of the dead are capricious and make their presence felt in different ways. Another context concerns the mythological creatures, the *Iele*, and the work interdiction connected with the ritual period, which, if broken, would arouse the angry punishing deities' wrath. As previously noted, "the *Călușari* dances are performed at the time when fairies are most dangerous to people" (Vuia 1935: 100), as "on Whitsunday they are especially powerful" (Pamfile 1910: 18). To be added is also a series of time liminalities surrounding the different stages of *Căluș* – e.g., binding of the flag and taking the oath, as well as the dismantling of the flag on the last day of the ceremonial – all of which happen in-between (at sunrise or at dawn). The context of the performance is thus a moment in need of re-establishing order, the sacred mission of the ritual "cast".

In this context, the Mute plays an important part, even more – liminality is his strong prerogative. The carnivalesque character is a walking metaphor for the undifferentiated matter, which can only manifest inside of this fractured time in need of the *Călușari* intervention to be repaired. His scandalous, obscene, ostentatious gestures or actions and the general frenzy he spreads have their origin in the same chaos birthed by the transgression of rules that make the *Călușari* needed in the first place. Viewed from this perspective, the Mute is an expression of the very untameable, capricious, and unpredictable forces whom the *Călușari* are trying to pacify and, afterward, to restore order.

Costume and mask: Hiding/revealing of sexual taboos

The Mute is the masked character of the *Căluș* group, and, as such, the appearance of the man impersonating it is changed by disguising, which is considered representative of traditional societies, as they perceive this action as a ritual or ceremonial act:

[T]he people that got masked, individually, or in a group, were seeking, along with the real or magical protection ... also the spiritual connection, through the masks, with the supposedly spiritual (benign or malignant) forces or fantastic divine figures (demons, demigods, gods, or heroes), which they believed to control, persecute or protect them. (Vulcănescu 1970: 13)

As a masked character, the Mute is a unifier of opposites. This can be seen, first of all, in his looks: he is dressed as a woman, but has, under the skirt, an oversized wooden phallus. Apparently, this is a contradiction, but, in fact, it is a reiteration of the undifferentiated chaos the Mute embodies: “symbolic inventions give expression to both the male and female aspect or components of Being” (Kligman 1999 [1981]: 185). His gestures give rise to a male/female paradox: the maleness of the actor is concealed under the women’s appearance (in the two studied cases), while his sexually provocative gestures mainly target women, revealing the unleashed, primal masculine force. Literature about phallic representations in ritual contexts describes its functions from apotropaic, fertility inducing, attacking, and entertaining aspects. Of course, in this case, we are in the presence of an object endowed with magical properties, inscribed within the formally playful and entertaining atmosphere surrounding the Mute character. Moreover, in the documented groups, the Mute had his phallus painted red, a possible reference to a deflowering act or to impregnation. The Mute, bearing a signifier of potency and virility is expected to bring life/abundance to women, animals, and crops, by using the wooden phallus in his actions.

All in all, the Mute is surrounded by taboos of sexuality:³⁰ flaunting the exaggerated anatomical representation of his male genitalia, teasing, and making women touch it, implications of defloration³¹ and, nonetheless, cross-dressing.

Of the elements of his appearance, the mask-wearing is also an indicator of the Mute’s symbolic transgression: while his identity is concealed, he is free to do as he wishes. The mask imposes a distance of its wearer from his rule-breaking behaviour, enabling it and making it acceptable for the community as it is worn under the auspices of the ritual. Nevertheless, behind the mask still stands a member of the community, who is prescribed with a certain character role and attributions expected from him, which he must comply with, proving Roger Caillois’ (1958) remark that in ritual context, the mask is a sign of a social institution.

As the extensive literature on the subject suggests, the mask appears in liminal situations and has a mediator role. It is inscribed within the binary logic of hidden/revealed, visible/invisible, apparent/real, but altogether it signals a transformation of its bearer, far from being a simple disguise. Its wearing within the ritual context allows the mundane realm to connect to the supernatural one, bringing forth the invisible into the visible. The Mute (together with his fellow *Călușari*) acts as a bridge between the worlds in a time of crisis.

The binder

Improvisation plays a key role in the Mute's apparent disorder-seeking, both in relation to objects and people. Making use of anything available from the courtyards or houses visited during the ceremony and taking advantage of people's reactions at any given moment, he displays creativity and craft in his pantomime, conjuring comic buff situations. Actually, the actions of the Mute have been perceived as *buffo* theatre (Oprîșan 1969) or *commedia dell'arte* (Giurchescu 2009a). Nevertheless, these are means by which he integrates the entire household – animate or inanimate – making it partake in the ritual act. His chaos-driven behaviour (reminiscent of the instability of the timeframe in the “cosmic plane”) draws the community in as active actors and not mere spectators, functioning as a linkage between performers and the audience.

At some moments when his ritual prerogatives allow it, the Mute may assume the role of a spectator from the audience, along with the gathered crowd. This is also noted by Tudor Pamfile (1910: 65): “during the play performance, the Mute does not dance; he simply wonders with his sword, at times inside the *hora*, at times outside, making the space larger and gathering the people round”.

In any case, he is the only member of the group to act in both realms – that of the sacred being conjured and “in/of the world”, thus creating a continuity between the two domains.

Archetype of the jester/fool

The symbolic traits of the Mute pertain to the wider category of the Jester. Also known as the clown, trickster, comedian, practical joker or the fool, the Jester is the mercurial archetype that is at peace with the paradoxes of the world. The Mute uses humour to illuminate irrationality and also levels the playing field between those with power and those without. He is a fun-loving character who seeks the now, light-heartedness, and carefree living, inviting others to partake in creating a self-deprecating form of satire. Practical jokes are often a part of his repertoire as seen in the description of the comical sketches centred on him.

In mediaeval times, a court jester was there to amuse the members of the court, but he also stood behind the king and offered him discernment on the actions of others who came before the throne. So, while definitely not the centre of power, he played an important role on the sidelines (Otto 2000), much as the Mute does, especially in relationship with the *vătaf* (see below).

One note must be made on the power of laughter as a cohesive mechanism and the idea that laughter aids recovery (thought to be apotropaic): it can be argued that the comic relief surrounding the Mute's suite of actions can also help the community bond by sharing in deep laughter.

The antagonist

The Mute's relationship with power-play adds another layer of his transgression and is revealed in connection with the *vătaf* – the bailiff, the leader of the *Călușari*.

During the ritual performing of *Căluș*, more visible in the dispute sketch, the Mute sometimes acts as the opposing force to the leader, as an “anti-*vătaf*” (Kligman 1999 [1981]: 27), or the “*vătaf* in the negative” as Gail Kligman (ibid.: 255) calls him, contesting his status by emulating (without success) his posture or commands. Placed within the failed mimicry/overthrowing scenario, he ends up making a fool of himself and being mocked by the other *Călușari* and/or the audience. While attempting to question or to become the leader, he turns out, in fact, to reinforce the latter's rulership and authority. The power-play becomes more evident since it is recorded (Oprișan 1969; Giurchescu 2008) that the Mute had originally been the ritual leader of the group, and that in the regions where there is no masked character, the *vătaf* also plays the part that the Mute otherwise would.

Being a ceremony meant to restore cosmic order (imbalanced by certain forces drawn by human trespassing), the *Căluș* ritual is not void of socio-political relations. As any ritual, it offers an insight into the group's doctrine, expressed through behaviours. The Mute's episodic anarchy or undermining of the group's hierarchy, though veiled by humour, reveals the means of control exercised by the one in power and their legitimacy.

Consecration and contamination

Though his power is limited, within his ceremonial functions still lies the consecration of the ritual space and elements: with his sword he draws an imaginary line delimiting the dancing place from the outer space. This is seen in his very first gestures he makes as the group enters the yard area: he asks the host to bring garlic and salt, and he places the elements meant to be consecrated (salt, a ceramic pot with water, and garlic), making sure they are at the centre of the dance formation before it begins. He therefore marks both the centre and the surrounding space within an imaginary sphere, where the ritual act can come

to fruition. Even more so, by mixing the elements, sometimes using his phallus, he marks their contamination with the *numinous* essence of the *Căluș* ritual.

The oath of silence

As presented above, the Mute is not supposed to utter a word while the dances are performed in the ritual timeframe of the *Căluș* festivities, otherwise, it is believed, he might go mad (Oprîșan 1969). Even from the moment of the flag-binding, he must remain silent, or else he might lose his voice for good (Pamfile 1910). On the other hand, “in rest mode, his mouth won’t shut up” (ibid.: 64), as he makes use of his carnivalesque role and mocks the *Călușari*, the audience, and himself as well.

The annihilation of language is an essential trait of the mystical experience (Kalamaras 1994), as in the presence of higher beings (spirits), words are incapable or even futile in conveying to the exterior world these realms, materially incommunicable: “silence conveys an ineffable experience and accompanies the transformation of one’s consciousness when in contact with the divine” (Montiglio 2000: 24). Since the performing of the *Căluș* is related to the communication between the worlds and involves a sacred “cast” of initiated men, the silence is also a way of protecting the knowledge, explaining the foreseen counter-effect for breaking the interdiction: madness as divine punishment.

Nowadays, the breaking of silence is no longer considered a sacrilege, as in many of the households visited, especially with hosts of closer ties, the Mute can easily engage in dialogue, making use of language as another tool to incentivise joy and laughter.

Self-censorship

As traditional recipients of the performing group, the locals and villagers intrinsically comprehend the Mute’s role and accept his non-conventional behaviour, especially its sexual connotations and indecency, and take them with light humour. Reverence towards the uninitiated public is offered as an explanation by the two researched groups for why the Mute is excluded from manifestations outside the “village *Căluș*”: on stages, festivals, or other showcasing gatherings. What might appear as a self-censoring choice might be driven by the fear of not being properly understood, of misleading the public perception or being poorly judged, which might be a signal of actually observing the ritual norm underneath: the Mute’s exclusion from the stage could be interpreted as a technique

to protect some of the old meanings of the ritual, destined, in fact, only for *connoisseurs*. It can also be a sign of the fact that taboos around sexuality and eroticism are still present in the community mentality, but not much understood outside its borders. The power and vigour of the performance and the more spectacular/aesthetic features are brought forth on the stage, suppressing the transgressive features and concealing what might be prejudicial or wrongfully interpreted by the outsiders. Transgression is thus only allowed to manifest within the well-established confines of the village. In another interpretation, the self-censorship is perceived by Giurchescu (2008) as a remnant of the communist period, enabled by ideals of adequacy.

The mild or rougher censorship of the transgressions of the Mute pertain to the field of sexual taboos and must be understood in relation to the evolution of the ritual's receptor audiences, as well as the relationship of the ritual group with these audiences. What is welcomed as a fertility and abundance enabler within the village context is seen by the group itself as gaining questionable morality when decontextualised on stage. Restricting or altogether depriving the ritual of its transgressional features reveals a self-reflexive moral act and brings out the dynamic of the dialectical relation between purity and pollution.

Furthermore, another effect of excluding the Mute from stage is that the binder is removed from the whole ritual experience, making the gap between the actants and the receiving audience even greater.

CONCLUSIONS

Rituals make the transgression temporarily acceptable. Transgression is a ritualised violation of societal norms, as the elements of the ritual are used to question the taboos and limits that dominate societies, in order to coax a reaction out of the audience. All is allowed for the Mute within the original performing settings, as he unveils the rawness of human character and instincts, testifying to what Gibson claims that “[r]itual transgressions are moments of revelation in which the participant penetrates or deconstructs the illusion of metaphysical, moral, social, linguistic and rational norms or frameworks, and experiences directly the creative force of nature alive within each individual” (Gibson 1991: 1). As such, the Mute paradoxically becomes a sort of truth-teller, uninhibited and free under ritual circumstances. He can be seen, furthermore, as a potential exponent and tool of resistance which upturns the taken-for-granted establishment and hierarchies. His performance can be perceived in relation to the limits of the society that he engages with and breaks.

At the same time, other optics are also valid: the Mute's transgressive behaviour ends up affirming the rules inside the ritual cast (it does not provide a way out of the rules of the cast but reconfirms order as he is pushed back in his place). Thus, the transgression attempt becomes a means of ensuring cohesiveness of the group in the end; reinforcing the rules is a form of social solidarity, or, as Bataille puts it, "transgression suspends the taboo without suppressing it" (Bataille 1986 [1957]: 36). Nevertheless, contestation, or critical reflexivity, remains important as he pursues disorder in a highly regulated context: he makes a dangerous play at the boundary of social constructs.

The reception of the Mute's transgressive behaviour by different audiences and over time reveals how society views, constructs, and controls deviant behaviours and the evolution it has within these boundaries. The limit of the Mute's transgression is still set within the ritual group, as a means to control the perceptions or meanings of the ritual (sometimes by prohibiting the transgressor to perform in a certain space altogether). Self-censorship is a sign of auto-criticism in relation to high modernity audiences and a means for the ritual to adapt.

The more recent relaxation of interdictions surrounding the Mute – the ability of taking the mask off, breaking the silence during the ritual timeframe – brings us to the conclusion that transgression nowadays has become more symbolic than factual. The lightening or softening of his proscriptions is a result of the shifts from ritual to spectacular, more specifically, the change in audience, and the evolution of the mentality of receptors (the liberalisation of beliefs, etc.). This loosening testifies to the evolution of perception of the transgression itself: what was transgressive in a certain context vs. what is now perceived as such there and elsewhere (village-stage). The Mute's documented presence and manifestation in the two villages seems to signal towards a normalisation of transgression, moving it from marginal to mainstream, while his absence from the stage reinforces the taboos and moral interdictions that annihilate his whole presence and prerogatives within the ritual. While in the village context, taboo-breaking is needed for the ritual to function, on stage it becomes redundant.

All in all, the Mute, as marginal, exposes the fluidity of boundaries and the ambiguity that lies underneath social norms.

NOTES

- ¹ The custom of *Paparuda* is encountered in spring and summer feasts (Saint George's Day or Whitsunday) in Transylvania, and is meant to provide rain for the crops, although here it is also connected with initiation rites for young men (see Neagota & Benga 2009). In southern Romania, a similar custom with the same purpose (bringing rain) is followed (although the number of the communities is decreasing) at any time when drought is installed, and it is performed by young girls or children (see Pop 1999).
- ² Customs similar to the *Căluș* ritual are encountered in other European regions. As Anca Giurchescu mentions, *Căluș* "is closely related to the ritual variants *Kalushari* and *Rusalii* of the Balkans, and shares similar traits with Morris and Sword Dance categories and their various types, as described in Britain, southern Europe (Basque Country, Spain, Portugal, southern France and Italy), as well as in Central Europe" (Giurchescu 1992: 35).
- ³ In the English versions of different ethnologic and ethnographic texts, specialists refer to the masked character as "the Mute" (Kligman 1999 [1981]; Eliade 1973; Giurchescu 1992), and only one ethnologist, Romulus Vuia (1935), refers to it as "the dumb man". In our text, we prefer the designation "the Mute".
- ⁴ Gail Kligman's research on the *Căluș* ritual was conducted at the end of the 1970s, and her book (see Kligman 1999 [1981]) was first published in 1981 by the University of Chicago Press.
- ⁵ Ileana Benga and Bogdan Neagota also stress that *Căluș* is a "polyphonic custom" which has several layers of interpretation: it is a historical phenomenon, a sociological process, a cultural fact, a choreatic fact, it has a psychological ground, and it is also used as an ideological instrument. They stress that the custom should be analysed at all these "explanatory levels" (Benga & Neagota 2010: 201).
- ⁶ In 2009, B. Neagota tape-recorded such a healing performed by the *Călușari* from Giurgița (the material is archived at ORMA Sodalitas Anthropologica, in Cluj-Napoca). One year before, in 2008, the same group of *Călușari* cured the same person, a healing that was witnessed by researchers A. Giurchescu, F. Iordan, B. Iordan, and R. Pop, and recorded by S. Sift (the material is archived at the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant in Bucharest). Each type of illness inflicted by a taboo break is diagnosed and healed by a different dance (see Giurchescu 1992).
- ⁷ See Cătălin Alexa's (2022: 353–372) discussion on the new challenges that this nomination brought about: the pride, the pressure, and a new reason for "specialists" to interfere with the *Căluș* ritual.
- ⁸ A. Iuga conducted research on the *Căluș* ritual in Bârla in 2013, as part of the research project "Vechi paradigm epistemice – noi paradigm instituționale integrative pentru studiile de folk-lore" (Old epistemic paradigm – New institutional paradigm that integrates folklore studies), coordinated by Dr Ileana Benga, and financed by the Ministry of Research, CNCSIS, grant number TE280. In the years 2014 and 2015 the team increased and A. Iuga, G. Vlahbei, and F. Iordan, researchers from the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, did research together in Bârla and Stolnici. In 2018, A. Iuga accompanied the *Călușari* from Stolnici at their performance in the city of Pitești.
- ⁹ A. Iuga explored the *Căluș* ritual in the villages of Giurgița, Pietroaia (Dolj region), and Olari (Olt region), together with B. Neagota in 2009; in the village of Slobozia (Giurgiu region), together with B. Neagota and I. Benga, in 2012. These field researches were conducted within the ORMA Sodalitas Anthropologica research group. In 2021, together with G. Vlahbei and F. Iordan, we documented the villages of Sâr-

- bii Măgura, Optași Măgura, and Colonești (in the Olt region). In 2022, A. Iuga and V. Bulza documented the village of Cezieni (Olt region), and G. Vlahbei the village of Titu (Dâmbovița region).
- ¹⁰ The *Iele* (They), *Frumoasele* (The Beautiful Ones), *Dânsele* (They), *Rusaliile*, *Șoimanele* (The Falcon-like) are mythological feminine creatures active during the summer. It is believed that if someone (usually a man) sees them dancing and speaks about the encounter, he will remain mute.
- ¹¹ “*I am of the opinion that the Călușari themselves personify the fairies. This is the first important conclusion we came to in the course of our investigation*” (Vuia 1935: 100; italics by the author). Some of Vuia’s arguments are their appearance, the number of the *Călușari*, the dance that imitates one of the fairies, and the knowledge of healing plants.
- ¹² The dance therapy applied for healing is accompanied by ritual acts: “The sick person is touched with herbs and spit on with garlic, a jug with water is broken, one black chicken is sacrificed, etc.” (Eliade 1973: 119).
- ¹³ The oath and the unfolding of the flag are performed in a secret place that only the *Călușari* and the musicians would know, and no outsider is allowed to participate. For example, in 2012, in Slobozia, A. Iuga was not allowed to participate at the moment of the unfolding of the flag, at the end of the ritual, which was an important sign that for the *Călușari* this ritual moment is still of great importance.
- ¹⁴ Such rules and taboos refer to the ritual purity of the *Călușari*, who are not allowed to sleep with their wives during the whole time that the dance is performed; another rule is that they should be part of the *Căluș* for a fixed number of years (seven years usually); yet another rule is that the *Căluș* must be performed during the whole ritual timeframe.
- ¹⁵ Some interpreters have included the ritual in the group of dances of sword and sticks (Giurchescu 1992; Eliade 1973). From this perspective, the stick is considered as a symbol of power in relation to the group, which is seen as a military group.
- ¹⁶ For example, Olari (Olt region) or Giurgîța (Dolj region).
- ¹⁷ In some regions, the ritual plant is wormwood, or both garlic and wormwood.
- ¹⁸ More information about the choreography can be found in Opreșan 1969; Kligman 1999 [1981]; Giurchescu 1992; Petac 2009.
- ¹⁹ The heritage-making process has been highly instrumentalised as a political tool, being used to strengthen the national identity (Lazea 2012), but most of all, it is a sign of a disruption of the present from the past: “When the past loses its original meaning and influence upon the present, heritage is born” (ibid.: 87).
- ²⁰ In 1935, for the performance in London, the *Călușari* would not perform unless they had garlic on their flag, and the organisers had to find this plant at the market (see Giurchescu 2009a; Știucă 2009).
- ²¹ *Călușul Românesc* Festival [The Romanian *Căluș*] was initiated in Slatina in 1969, and later moved to Caracal, both important cities in the Olt region. Until the pandemic year, 2020, it was organised every year, and it eventually became a benchmark for all the *Călușari* groups in Romania.
- ²² See: <http://www.cultura.ro/sites/default/files/inline-files/Petre%20Masala-EDITAT.pdf>, last accessed on 4 October 2022.
- ²³ *Călușarii din Bârla* (*Călușarii* from Bârla) is a documentary directed by Adriana Oprea, produced by DigiWorld, in collaboration with the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, in 2014 (58 min.). It has been presented on the DigiWorld channel

every year since, and has been screened at several film festivals in Romania: ASTRA Film Festival (Sibiu 2015); TIFF – Transylvanian International Film Festival (Cluj-Napoca 2015); DocuArtFest (Bucharest 2015); CRONOGRAF (Moldova Republic 2016).

- ²⁴ In 1714, Dimitrie Cantemir, in his book titled *Descriptio Moldaviae*, describes the group of *Călușari* from Moldova (the only document mentioning this ritual in the Moldova region). In his description, he writes that the *Călușari* wear a white cloth over their faces and have coloured ribbons that hang over their heads. This is the only historical reference that alludes that the performers of the *Căluș* ritual were all masked (Vulcănescu 1970: 168; Opreșan 1969: 187).
- ²⁵ Actually, in the *Călușari* group where they take an oath, the Mute always sits near the leader of the group, and the other *Călușari* have to equally obey the masked character, not only the *vătaf* (Opreșan 1969; Știucă 2009).
- ²⁶ Horia Barbu Opreșan (1969) mentions that the sword is used to delimitate the area where the *Călușari* are dancing but also to protect the performers from the crowd.
- ²⁷ Horia Barbu Opreșan (1969) described the wooden phallus from several regions where the *Căluș* was performed and mentioned that it was tied around the waist of the Mute with a string made from linden branches. Linden is a plant that is symbolically related to the Whitsuntide religious feast. During the ritual that we observed, we could see a regular string that was used to fasten the phallus.
- ²⁸ This is a common sketch present in other communities (Opreșan 1969; Kligman 1999 [1981]).
- ²⁹ For example: washing clothes, mowing, harvesting, working with horses, digging and so on (see Giurchescu 1992: 39 for the specific dances that heal each of the transgressions).
- ³⁰ Sexuality (or any other transgressive behaviour) can be seen as taboo only when viewed from the outside, exterior of an inner experience, as Georges Bataille observes (1986 [1957]).
- ³¹ Defloration symbolically refers to a primal form of violence (Bataille 1986 [1957]).

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Interview materials from 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2018 are in possession of the authors and in the Ethnological Archive of the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant.

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