

ANCIENT SYMBOLS OF THE UNIQUENESS OF FOLK MASKS

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“Traditions, customs, stories, games, music and poetry are archives of nations, which help to reconstitute anytime the distant past.” (Alecu Russo)

Abstract

The present research focuses on an important repertoire of ancient customs and traditions linked to folk masks of the Prut cross-border area, highlighting the abundance and variety of games, “an immense creative workshop” of great aesthetic value and current interest. Masked performances constitute an ethno-cultural unit of great value for research, history and art, which was passed on by our forebears.

Keywords: folk masks, symbols, worship, decorations, motifs, tradition, folk art

Acquiring knowledge about one's ancestors by decoding folk art provides more lucidity in assessing the Romanian ethnos, while also being a solid point of reference in the sense of understanding and assessing the larger Romanian culture and modern literature.

The mask is a ritual custom, and since ancient times it has been a prop, a show element that symbolizes the fertility of the soil and the abundance of crops. On the subject of these ancient customs, Mircea Eliade stated: *“Such ceremonies are still popular in the Balkans, especially in Romania, during the 12 days from Christmas Eve to Epiphany. Originally, these ceremonies were related to the return of the dead and involved all kinds of animal masks: goats, horses, bears”. The same author also noted that “We have enough evidence of the pagan heritage, namely Geto-Dacian and Daco-Roman. One only needs to consider the worship of the dead and funeral mythology, agrarian rites, seasonal customs, magical beliefs etc., which have persisted barely changed from one religion to another for millennia”* (Eliade Mircea, 1970).

For centuries, on New Year's Eve, in masked performances and plays, villagers in the Prut cross-border area have transfigured their daily occupations and the key moments in human life (birth, marriage, death), have mocked stupidity and ugliness, have criticised their oppressors and praised the hardworking members of their community. Over the years, the traditional mask has become an object of art, and while ancient meanings have begun to fade away from the

consciousness of contemporary artists, the plastic structures of each type of ceremonial symbol have been preserved, almost miraculously so. Pictures of New Year's masks, goat, bear, deer, and little horses were found in Iasi in 1961 on an indoor ceramic ornamental plate dating from the 16th century AD.

Pierre Francastel, referring to masks in general argued: *“Masks are archives of a people, which, ignorant of writing, could not record their history in libraries. The society of masks remains the book of wisdom of the nations”* (Francastel Pierre, 1972)

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Masked performances on village streets on the eve of the New Year are prompted not only by the carnival nature of the event, but also reflect a deeper meaning. It is the belief that observing and passing on ancestral customs, people will, in the coming year, be blessed with abundant crops and rich orchards, health and power. In most rural communities in the Prut cross-border area, it is a custom that on the eve of the New Year, many masked bands walk down the streets (bands include characters such as the bear, goat, little horses, deer, the ugly one, the beautiful, doctors, bear keepers, etc.). After dusk, the larger bands spread out and smaller groups perform the traditional carol known as “Plugușorul” (‘little plough’), visiting each house until sunrise, to ring in the New Year. The most common in villages across the Prut cross-border in the area, is the worship of the bear, a legacy of the ancient Geto-Dacians who viewed the animal as sacred. In fact, the name of their deity, Zalmoxis, is derived from the word “zalmos” meaning bearskin. Bear masks are made of

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bear or goat skin (preferably red), and two characters usually perform the carol: the bear and the gypsy:

*"Vine ursul de la munte,
Tot în coate și-n genunchi,
Ursul meu de la Humor,
L-am adus pe-un cărucior,
Căruciorul dărdăia,
Ursul meu tot mormăia".*

*(The bear is coming down the mountain,
Crawling on his elbows and knees, My bear came
from Humor, I carried him on a cart, the cart kept
shaking, the bear kept moaning).*

The bear symbolises the death and revival of nature. Mihai Coman, in his book on Romanian mythological bestiary, argued that: *"In carol the Bear, animal dies and rises in a symbolic dramatisation of the myth of the rebirth of nature."* The bear rolling in circles, its beating and death, then its miraculous resurrection standing on staff, metaphorical reflect the sequence of seasons which once were symbolised by this animal, which was able to battle through winter and herald spring. After the dance routine, the bears move independently, simulating their free life in nature, rough playing, doing somersaults, and even faking attacks on the audience.



Figure 1 The bear's dance at Rebricea (Vaslui county)

The goat is another common character played by the carolling bands across the Prut cross-border area. It is noted for its excessive vitality, capturing the attention of the spectators (from Christmas to New Year, carols and performances are done in front of the houses)². During the goat dance, there is a scene where the animal becomes ill and falls to the ground. The shepherd panics and talks to the goat. While the goat is in agony, members of the party act worried, but once the animal recovers, they are filled with delight and cheerfulness.

This point in the goat dance signifies the "death" of the year that comes to its end and the "birth" of the new year. The dance is accompanied

throughout by shouts and commands, mostly directed at the goats (Diacon Vasile, 2002):

*"Foaie verde lemn de fag,
Săriți capri, piști prag,
Foițiți ca aluna,
Intrați capri, câte una,
Toată, casa – congiurați,
Și vă vadiți cum giucați"*

("Green beech leaf, Skip you goats across the threshold, Little peanut leaf, Enter you goats, one by one, Surround the house, So all can see you play").



Figure 2 Goat dance at Dorohoi (Botoșani county)

The mask for the goat performance is made of wood, supported on a stick, it has a mobile jaw and is snapped rhythmically during the carol by pulling the rope with which it is attached. The head is decorated with mirrors, glass, beads, ornaments made of tinfoil and crepe paper in various colours. The person who plays the goat is covered in a rug to which veil strips are attached.

Căiuții (the little horses) come in groups of four and do not act in a play as such, but perform a suite of dances, an exuberant performance of virtuosity, with very fast movements. The Moldavians once believed that the little horses' dance would fight off evil, which would thus not follow them into the new year.

Căiuți's dance reflects the courage and joyfulness and bravery of those who were ready to defend the country's borders. The tricolour flag is always present in their costumes. Those who wear the Căiuți costume wear horse heads made of wood and covered with white cloth along with other decorative elements (mirrors, garlands, ribbons). The horse head is fixed to a wooden base, usually a small trough with a hole in the middle covered by a white cloth, on which decorative elements were applied.

The Căiuți are grouped in bands led by a captain. They perform their routine face to face, radial, in line and in a circle, following the captain's directions. It is believed that in ancient beliefs, the horse had a defense function, protecting the homes and churches from evil spirits. Nowadays, the Căiuți

² Similar to the goat, in terms of dances and costumes, is the stag.

carol is performed not due to the ancestral symbolic meanings, but for the beauty of the dance performed by young costumed dancers.



Figure 2 The little horses' dance, Miroslăvești (Iași county)

The Căiuți are accompanied by two “harpies”, wearing red shirts, helmets and carrying maces. “Urații” (the ugly ones) and “Frumoșii” (the beautiful) are characters who go before the gathering composed of the Goat, the Bear or the Little Horses. Their role is to draw attention and cheer the festive atmosphere. Performances in the Prut cross-border area also include elements typically found in the northwest of the country, i.e.: kings, sergeants, doctors, merchants, gypsies, merchants, queens and their associated universe. During the time from Christmas Eve and to the holy day of Epiphany, the Prut cross-border communities become lively spaces full of colour, particularly attractive to locals and tourists in search of beauty.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Folk mask plays are known to be remnants of certain magical and mythological rites, whose meanings have been lost in time. The bear was thought to have the power to heal, as back pains were healed by the practice of bears treading on people's back; the stag was viewed as having beneficial powers, so that antlers, usually mounted in the guest room, would not be missing in any house in the Prut cross-border area.

The traditional folk groups in the localities of the Prut cross-border area include: *Plugușorul* (Little plough) in Tătăruși, Iași; *Colindătorii* (Carol singers) in Mogoșești, Iași; *Capra* (The Goat) and *Căiuții* (Little horses) din Drobnîța, Iași; *Cerbul* (The Stag) in Cucuteni, Iași; *Alaiul de căiuți* (The band of little horses) in Tudora, Botoșani; *Capra* in Popești, Iași; *Cerbul* in Pârcovaci, Iași; *Căiuții* in Fântânele, Iași; *Boul* (The Ox) din Sinești, Iași; *Cerbul* in Ceplenița, Iași; *Alaiul din Miroslăvești*, Iași; *Cerbul* and

Ursul in Scobinți, Iași; *Ursul* in Todirești, Vaslui; *Colindătorii* in Durlești-Chișinău, the folk group “*Datina*”, Hîrbovăț (Anenii Noi), the folk group “*Sanie cu zurgălăi*” in Cenac (Cimiștia), the folk group “*Florile dalbe*”, Chetrosu (Drochia), the folk group “*Colinda*”, Edineț, the folk group “*Dalbe flori*”, Florești, the folk group “*Florile dalbe*” (children), Zîmbreni (Ialoveni), the folk group “*Semănătorii*” Cucuruzeni (Orhei), the folk group “*Colinda*”, Soroca, the folk group “*Datina*”, Petrești (Ungheni), *Cerbul* of Costești, Iași; *Turcii* (The Turks) in Buda, Iași; *Urșii* in Zărnești, Botoșani; *Alaiul de la Vorona*, Botoșani; *Alaiul de la Ungureni*, Botoșani; *Căiuții* in Talpa-Mihăileni, Botoșani; *Capra* in Puiești, Vaslui; *Vălărețul* in Rafaila, Vaslui; *Irozii* (The Herods) din Dragomirești, Vaslui; *Irozii* in Solești, Vaslui; *Ursul* in Colinele Tutovei, Vaslui.

To ensure the durable preservation of these traditions and customs, the people of villages like: Voroana, Pârcovaci, Hârlău, Ruginoasa, Tomești, Codăești, Bârlad continue the craft of mask making, much needed to perpetuate such traditions.

To foster artistic activity, the county centres for folk arts, on both banks of the Prut River, regularly organise folk festivals in which artists from both sides of the Prut take part: The festival of wintertime traditions and customs (in the counties of Suceava, Botoșani Iași, Vaslui, Galați); The festival of wintertime traditions and customs in the districts of the Republic of Moldova: Drochia, Strășeni, Aneii Noi, Cantemir, Cimișlia, Căușeni, Orhei, Edineț, Chișinău, Fălești; The winter traditions festival “Din timpuri străvechi” (Iași county); National folk music festival “Mugurelu” - Dorohoi (Botoșani county); National Moldavian folk music “Satule, mândră grădină” (Botoșani county); the folk festival “Drag mi-e cântecul și jocul” - Santa Mare (Botoșani county); The festival and contest of winter traditions and customs “De urât v-am mai ura !”, (Chișinău, Nisporeni, Orhei); The regional festival of carol bands – a festival of traditions and customs (Călărași).

Such events emphasise to the current generation that the authentic spiritual values are rooted in the traditions of the Romanian people.

CONCLUSIONS

Masked performances across the Prut cross-border area are traditional agrarian and pastoral archaic customs, dating back to millennia, that celebrate the New Year.

The village hearth is the scene of folk masked plays, the spectators being the citizens of

the village. The whole community takes part in crafting and decorating the folk masks. These are embellished with various ornaments, colored ribbons, glass, bead collars, scarves, girdles and other traditional garments that are kept in crates especially for such occasions.

In the Prut cross-border area, the deafening noise of the drums, starting on the evening of the “Andri” (St Andrew’s) and especially on the eve and New Year’s Day, accompanied by the sounds of cowbells, bells and whistles, all recall the ancient belief that they could keep evil spirits away from people’s homes.

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