

The history of commercial relations that influenced the evolution of folk costume

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PhD thesis

Abstract

Traditional costume constitutes one of the cultural elements that define the specificity and identity of an anthropological group. Therefore, since the 18th century, all cultural and political movements have incorporated ideologically charged perspectives on clothing—particularly traditional costumes—into national discourse or narratives of ethnic alterity, alongside reflections on traditional civilization as a whole. In Transylvania, a number of associations were established to support the interests of Romanians within the monarchy, frequently appealing to traditional clothing as an emblem. The use of folk art as a source of inspiration for high art reflects a broader framework of national identity construction. However, neither in the 18th nor the 19th century—and even less so in the 20th—did traditional costume and culture represent a uniform or omnipresent reality in the Romanian village. Moreover, the aesthetic qualities, depth of meaning, symbolism, and autarkic spirit of rural life were not reflected in the form imagined by the intellectual elite, as a solid essence or innate genius from which all cultural, political, and historical claims could be derived. Influenced by the pan-European ideologies of the time—ideologies that implicitly or explicitly carried the roots of the xenophobia which would explode before the mid-20th century—cultural and political elites engaged in the construction of what became known as traditional culture. The undeniable creative energies of the people, their ethnic specificity, and their cultural momentum happened in close contact to external influences.

This study aims to analyze the interaction between these two dimensions of the phenomenon, which leads to the ongoing evolution of traditional clothing. The village universe—with its unique social and mental mechanisms—on one hand, and the broader sphere of the urban, the state, and supra-state relations, on the other, have always been in closer contact than ethnographic and ethnological literature often suggests. In response to a need for methodological renewal, this research proposes an expanded approach beyond the established ethnographic

bibliography. Understanding traditional dress requires, first and foremost, in-depth knowledge—covering regional, chronological, stylistic, and technical details—and its interdependence with all ethnographic, folkloric, and anthropological phenomena. Equally important is the historical context, including economic, political, ideological, technical, industrial, and commercial aspects.

Ethnographic research has, at each stage, been subjected to the prevailing ideology to such an extent that the partial invalidation of the field by the Romanian academic community is, to some degree, justified. Therefore, this discipline must be reoriented to produce knowledge that is relevant and useful to modern society, fostering an understanding of contemporary realities rooted in cultural specificity and field observation, while also contributing to policymaking. Less evidently, not only was research imbued with national and nationalist ideologies, but traditional culture itself was actively and continuously influenced. Traditional clothing is the product of two equally significant generative sources: the local ethnographic specificity provides the foundation upon which new forms were built. The pinnacle of this phenomenon is reached in the second half of the 19th century, when the elite adopt peasant-inspired fashion, reinterpret it through their own lens, and refine it to a high degree of sophistication. This refined form is simultaneously embraced by the rural environment, the two planes being organically interwoven. Romanian embroidery and weaving workshops, pattern albums, embroidery manuals, and periodicals all served as channels influencing peasant creativity. The production of national costumes remained in the hands of rural women, who expanded their vernacular technical, aesthetic, and stylistic knowledge to accommodate new creations, incorporating the demands of upper-class women. The alleged millennia-old origins attributed to folk creations prove to be far more recent, and their evolutionary trajectory, ongoing.

Overlaying these ideological and political dynamics are the transformative forces of the industrial revolution, with new materials, fibers, threads, dyes, textiles, patterns, and fashions quickly absorbed by traditional society. These changes fundamentally altered the archaic system, placing it on a trajectory of modernization that ultimately led to the dissolution of the concept of traditional dress by the mid-20th century. Thus, the period chosen for this study spans 1850 to 1950—temporal markers that signify the beginning of traditional dress's artistic zenith and the onset of its decline, as well as the decline of tradition in its classical sense. The interwar period marks the beginning of an irreversible shift in the functions of traditional dress, in line with a

redefinition of rural life and tradition in general. We argue that this perspective should not be apocalyptic, nor should it be framed in aesthetic or axiological judgments: the ethnographer's task is to observe and understand these mechanisms.

The evolution of traditional clothing is shaped by both internal and external factors. Internally, it is driven by the human need for self-expression and the manifestation of emotions, beliefs, and experiences. Externally, these influences operate on multiple levels: ideological, mental, historical, industrial, commercial, aesthetic, and fashion-related.

The materials used for making festive garments were overwhelmingly acquired through trade—even as early as the 19th century in some ethnographic regions. Fabrics, embroidery threads, dyes, as well as tailoring, motifs, and decorative structures entered the village world via commercial routes. The development of industry and the “dye rush” of the decades before 1900 had immediate repercussions. As a result, a costume from the turn of the 20th century may include Indian silk dyed with Mexican cochineal, alongside American cotton dyed with synthetic alizarin or Water Blue IN New, produced by large corporations in the Frankfurt area. The vast majority of festive and ritual garments in Romanian traditional culture owe their material composition to the spirit of capitalism, albeit at an invisible level. Plant-based and archaic dyeing methods survived only sporadically, mostly in utilitarian or household textiles. The few exceptions pertain to very poor and isolated regions.

The areas where elaborate festive dress developed—those that remain culturally emblematic to this day—coincide with 19th-century centers of national effervescence and with regions where institutionalized extensions (local subsidiaries, libraries, conferences, schools, parishes, exhibitions with awards, and promoters) were present.

The objective chronology of ethnographic artifacts sheds light on these phenomena and helps counteract idealized theories of peasant art. Although precise dating is difficult in many cases, chemical, physical, and biological analyses—combined with interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary data correlation—provide a realistic framework from which scientific conclusions may be drawn.

From a methodological standpoint, we propose increasing the resolution of analytical instruments, along with recovering and redefining concepts such as chrono-zonal nominalization, ethnographic speciation, stylistic analysis, and the ethnological isogram.

Beyond theoretical and epistemological contributions, this study also brings to light a previously unpublished collection of highly valuable ethnographic artifacts. If the Transylvanian Plains region was previously considered a blank spot on the map of traditional dress, we now publish a series of textile fragments that demonstrate the presence of the clothing ensemble — comprising the shirt with “*ciupag*” and “*zadie cu trup vânăt*”. Additionally, we introduce a previously unknown painting by Venceslav Melka, discovered in the storage archives of the Ethnographic Museum of Transylvania, which provides visual support for these findings. The dating of the aforementioned sample collection was carried out through specific physicochemical analyses, yielding surprising results that strongly support the conclusions concerning the evolution of traditional dress in Transylvania.

The conclusions summarize the ethnographic findings presented in this thesis, alongside interdisciplinary and methodological insights, and propose a new perspective on the 19th-century Romanian peasant of Transylvania. This figure emerges as both a conservative bearer of archaic and deeply rooted practices, and, despite limited political or scientific awareness, a citizen of contemporary Europe.