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# SYMBOLIC COMMUNICATION OF TRADITIONAL COSTUME FROM BANAT COUNTY

Theoretical  
article

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## Abstract

*The historic province Banat covers a variety of landscapes from Romania, Serbia and Hungary, which shows the cohabitation of a mixed ethnic population, each with its own identity and particularities. In this multicultural context, the messages were transmitted through decorative elements of the traditional costume. This paper analyzes the symbolism of the traditional costume from Banat County, decrypting many messages that communicate important elements about the social identity and culture of Banat's people. In the actual European context, each historical region tries to preserve its national culture, aspects of their identity, shown inclusively through the iconic elements such as traditional costumes specific to each region, which gives a perspective of the main regional features. The methodology used in this micro study is accomplished upon observation and semiotic analysis. The study concludes that Banat's traditional costume has in the national and international context, an unique symbolism, which promotes the multicultural identity of the Banat Region.*

## Introduction

Romanian Banat region is located at the confluence of the West and East, having the opportunity to know many cultures, with specific semantic and artistic meanings. After living together with other ethnic groups settled on lands Banat, Romanians were able to observe the port and customs, taking what costumes give them. In this study, we tried to highlight the symbolism of the original costumes and ornaments characteristic to this area.

Language, customs, traditions and folk costumes are the trademarks of ethnic identity, documents of historical and cultural value.

The similarities of today's folk costume resembles that of the Dacian ancestors who can be seen on Trajan's Column in Rome, and the Trophaeum Trajani in Adamclisi, Dobrogea, may prove persistent millennial clothing pieces that have kept the same structure cut and shape, until today.

Globalization, representative until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, led to cultural uniformity and loss of heritage items. In Romania, since 1989, there have been changes in the behavior and mentality of local civilization, due to greater access to information through the Internet, becoming a people of consumers. (Turcuș, 1982)

In this context, the traditional culture of rural communities are lost or they are converted into media or cargo type, both commercial and less exponential facets of cultural values and identity of the authentic Romanian folk spirituality.

Banat has an important tradition in crafts due to massive colonization and population growth in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Craft secrets were passed from parent to son, from master to apprentice for generations. (Matei, (2014). *Tezaur Bănățean (costume populare, broderii, țesături, bijuterii)*. Timișoara-Sibiu: Astra Museum.)

Today, folk art can only be found in collections in museums or private collections and we can see that the female folk costume is richer ornamented than the male costume.

In the Lugoj area there has been an evolution of ornamentation and techniques of making the motifs, so that women's shirt composition becomes richer and more difficult, which developed a new specialization, made by so called "maistorițe". This specialization in the community is due to the high level of sophistication and complexity of the folk costume, which means a high precision of execution. Materials used in the past to achieve costumes were expensive, rare, and natural (silk, gold and silver thread). Today, these costumes are kept by off springs not only because of their high and sentimental value, which reminds them about the status of their ancestors. (Matei, 2014). *Tezaur Bănățean (costume populare, broderii, țesături, bijuterii)*. Timișoara-Sibiu: Astra Museum.)

When talking about folk costume, we consider a product of traditional domestic industry, which hides behind symbols, the artistic, cultural and historical legacy of our ancestors.

## Materials and methods

As an object of study was chosen a folk female attire in the Banat County of Costeiu town, on which was conducted a semiotic analysis regarding ornamental symbols. This outfit is part of the collection of the curator Marius Matei, from Banat County.

The methods used for this study were qualitative-interpretative analysis, using observation and semiotic analysis. For the interpretation of the results were consulted dictionaries of symbols and specialized studies.

Saussure considers that semiology is a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life, in order to become aware that we live in a world of signs and we can understand this world only through codes they are organized into. (Narița, 2007)

This study tries to highlight how the motifs, the fabrics and stitching aren't random, and all are elements of symbolic communication, in a certain context.

## Results and discussions

Depending on the two archetypal occupations: agriculture and animal husbandry, we can observe the decorative elements of the costume. Color, type of fabric, trim, thread, sewing, shape and occupation are elements that indicate the approximate data bearing age, social status, location and time in which they lived. (Tipa & Gogolan, 2010).

This study aims at bringing to the foreground the forms adorned with authentic traditional cultural values that shape the rediscovery of cognitive-emotional features of each rural community.

To contextualize this study, considering the relationship between the object viewed and his creator (in this case the craftsman) the relationship between the object viewed and point of origin (village) and the connection between the object viewed use different frameworks (everyday festive ceremonies).

The study of human communities leads to decrypt messages phenomena, processes, artifacts that have a symbolic communicative value, parts that governed and still governs the existence of the Romanian people.

How to manufacture and decorate garments, ceramic modeling techniques, housing typology, habits are just some testimonials of our connection with the great cultures and civilizations European and extra-European countries.

In terms of composition and technique work, the folk costume from Banat has some specific features

that distinguish it from traditional costume from other provinces. The opreg with tassels and head coverings for women, presents problems of origin and local interference by using precious materials (gold and silver thread) and as working technique. Girls wore oprege pairs and married women, Cotrânta. Thus, the pieces of the folk costume have symbolic values, expressed in a language that all the community members knew but was inaccessible from outside.

“Cotrânta”, was superimposed with opregul, made from the same decorative techniques where they used cotton wool or hair in bright colors (red, green, yellow). (Tipa, & Gogolan, 2010). In traditional rural communities each has its own typology of folk costumes, dominated by certain colors and they all respected the ornamental style. Thus, from the costume one could determine from what village the carrier was.

According to semiotic analysis, the chosen costume from ethnographic subzone Lugoj ( as presented in *Figure no. 1* ) is composed of:

*Shirt* (“spăcel” worn from the waist up) of cloth that is worn directly on the skin, showing decorative elements on the collar and around the chest and sleeves.

It’s decorated with motifs arranged vertically in strips of rhombus, both in front and on the sleeves. Inside the rhombus there are motifs of power, called the ram horns which was initially a symbol of men at war, but also for the shepherds.

*Hem* (“poale” the waist down) who are also made of cloth. Decorative stitching techniques used are: in crosses over the thread of drawing gold or silver thread, or Byzantine point. It is decorated with floral geometrical arranged in groups on the sleeves with gold or silver thread. (Tipa & Gogolan, 2010). Golden thread represents wealth and knowledge as for the silver thread symbolizes purity.

“*Cotrânta*” contains the richest ornament of costume and matches with the shirt and in particular with their motifs. The model from “Cotrânta” is formed from geometric ornaments made by weaving machine technique. It is made with combings of yellowish-white color.

The ornaments are actually rows of rhombus forming rhombus and other large broken lines arranged over the entire surface. The symbolism of the diamond refers to the feminine principle, namely the earth, especially its fertility and fruitfulness, and its elongated shape may be referred to the relationship and exchanges between heaven and earth, between the upper and lower world.

These rhombuses are flanked by rows of spiral type motifs, of Thracian-Illyrian inspiration, which symbolize the infinite. These, in turn, are within other small rhombus containing motifs such as hooks. From a symbolic point of view, they represent continuity, doubling the spiral function.

Inside some of the rhombus there are abstract designs of flowers, indicating the provenience of the costume: from the plain.(Chevalier& Gheerbrant, 1993).

*Girdle* (belt) is around the waist, with fixing utility value and aesthetics to the costume and to brand in color the carriers age. In this case, the belt is decorated with the Romanian flag and the representative colors are: red (whose symbol is related to the vital principle, blood, power and strength), yellow (solar color of gods, and also the eternal in the Asian views, representing fertile land) and blue (the color of deep, cool and pure spectrum represents the heavens) (Chevalier& Gheerbrant, 1993).

“*Opregul*” with tassels (is an element found in the entire Balkan Peninsula and the Mediterranean people).

The chosen “cotrânta”, was superimposed with “opregul”, made by using the same decorative techniques with cotton or wool in bright colors by the young girls, or in dark colors by the married women. It completes the outfit by giving information on the socioeconomic status of the carrier, the silver coins attached to “opregului” and the tassels on the attire. (as evidenced in *Figure No. 2.*) (Matei, M., (2014). Tezaur Bănăţean (costume populare, broderii, ţesături, bijuterii). Timişoara-Sibiu: Astra Museum, Doagă, A., (1978). Cusături româneşti, Bucureşti: Ion Creangă)

The traditional folk costume from Banat contains both elements of the identity of the carrier and ancient symbols that prove the beliefs and values of the Romanian people that are preserved over time, in the midst of change and the emergence of other ethnic groups in the local area. All items and the motifs are taken from the old cultures and were subjected to reinterpretations and encodings that made sense for each region. In this case, the analyzed costume brings precious elements of the owner’s identity, cultural values and identity of the authentic Romanian folk spirituality.

The first plan reviewed is the carrier identity, on which emerged the following: the original owner of this festive costume from 20<sup>th</sup> century was a young unmarried Romanian girl from Banat plain, whose economic status was high (the presence of silver coins from opreg) from an environment where both agriculture and livestock is practiced (presence of rhombus and motifs called ram’s horns), (the motifs are drawn in *Figure no. 3*)

On the second level, it has emerged as the core values of respect for nature Banat (growth, processing and wear natural fabrics), the longing for sacred, to preserve the balance between the two worlds, the telluric and celestial (rhombus symbols used both in vertical and in the horizontal, the tricolor and the spiral), but also artistic and creative genius who coded for posteriority sacred elements

of national folk outfits and by motifs and techniques of creative ingenious fashion.

### Conclusions

Throughout the analysis, we can highlight the following conclusions:

The signs of the folk costume were used throughout the world as a file in the great book of human history in which each culture leaves its mark.

The folk costume ornaments represent indicators of marital, economic, social status, background and personal elements of the carriers

Agriculture had a major impact on the use of signs with floral stitched on linen, hemp and raising livestock, especially grazing, have led to the use of wool for weaving signs such as the horns of the ram (*coarnele berbecului*), spiral, rhombus, shepherd hook (*cârligul ciobanului*).

Due to helping each other, both farmers and herders, have established relations that resulted in combinations of signs, increasing the variety of models.

Considering the existence of multiple ethnicities in Banat County, natives have chosen to decorate their specific attire and codified elements related to their ancestral identity by communicating its distinctive symbols to us.

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Figures



Figure No. 1. Overall female garment for celebration, ethnographic area Lugoj, Town Coșteiu (Jabăr), Timiș district, 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century  
source: Matei, M., (2014). Tezaur Bănățean (costume populare, broderii, țesături, bijuterii)

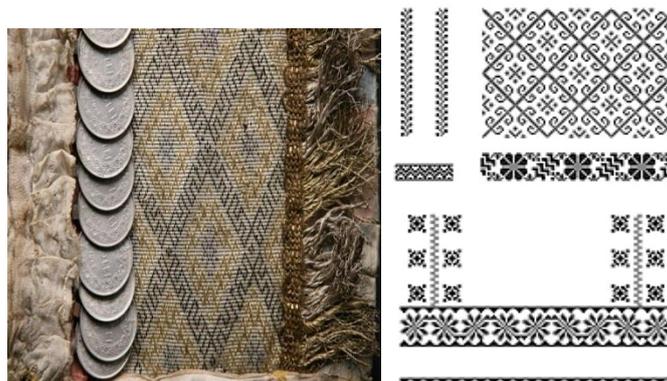


Figure No. 2. Opreg with silver coins and tassels (left), decorative models with different patterns from Banat (right)

source: Matei, M., (2014). Tezaur Bănățean (costume populare, broderii, țesături, bijuterii) (left)  
source: Doagă, A., (1978). *Cusături românești*, București: Ion Creangă. (right)



(a)(b) (c)

Figure no. 3. Motif symbolising (a) ram horns (power), (b) rhombus (earth),  
(c) shepherds hook (balance)

