



## ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

### Audio Transcript

#### **Folklorisation and reenchantment**

GEORGE-PAUL MEIU: In the Moldavian villages of Romania, masked rituals were a central part of New Year's celebrations. Young men with masks would enter the villagers' houses, turn things upside down, make noise, pinch the hosts, pull their clothes and insult them. They made noise, shouted, rang bells. Children would run away scared. People were horrified by the masks, but they also welcomed them. In fact, many villagers looked forward to the rituals all year.

During the socialist era, the Communist Party tried to strip these masked performances of any ritual or religious meaning, because they saw them as potentially subversive. The government reframed masks as expressions of folk art, colorful, harmless, and apolitical. Mask-makers were suddenly celebrated as craftsmen, and masked performances were moved on to the official stages of folkloric festivals.

But the rituals quietly continued in the villages, often unnoticed or tolerated by the regime. Over time, and ironically, the performances in the villages began to be influenced by the performances on stage. They shifted from acts of ritual disruption to displays of cultural tradition. And at the center of this transformation was laughter, which gradually became the defining feature of the performances.

Mr. Gheorghe was an old mask-maker who I interviewed in 2004 in the village of Vorona. He recalled the following:

MR. GHEORGHE: In our village, the "ursariu", the bear-mask, recited very ugly things. I am even embarrassed to tell you. But he would do it skillfully. Even when he'd enter the house of the priest, he'd ask: "Father, with or without curtain?" In other words, how vulgar should he be? And he would start. And he'd say it all, the good and the bad. That was the best fun. He'd make jokes.

The masks have to be ugly. I make them from my mind. Me, if I see someone. For example, I saw someone from Poiana. I'm not sure if he's still alive. And he had some big pimples on his nose. So I made a mask. If I see an ugly person, I make a mask. I wouldn't make beautiful ones, because who would laugh at them?



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GEORGE-PAUL MEIU: A young neighbour of Mr. Gheorghe once talked to me about him. Laughing, the boy said the following: "God forbid you play football by this man's house and your ball ends up in his yard. He'll take the ball, cut it in two, and make two masks. He destroyed so many Artex balls of ours."

The story of the villagers and of Mr. Gheorghe shows how people kept traditions alive in their own way. The masks were funny and full of meaning. Even when the masked performances and the political landscape changed, the spirit of the ritual remained.