The English abstract of Varvara Buzilă's book
"Creators, Bearers, and Admirers
of the Traditional Costume in the 21st century",
Chișinău, Epigraf Publishing House, 2022 (2nd edition, 2024)



CREATORS, BEARERS, AND ADMIRERS OF THE TRADITIONAL COSTUME IN THE 21ST CENTURY

We admire old costumes, preserved in exhibitions and museum collections or families' inheritances, also those presented in books and reproductions. We appreciate the beauty, richness, and refined artistry of these creations. We look at them attentively, charmed or puzzled. We try to fit them for us, to find out how we look in them, as well as to perceive the preferences, mentality, psychology, and way of life of those who created and wore them, who transmitted them along the centuries so that they reached us keeping their entire heritage charm. They convince us through their originality and authenticity. They have passed the test of time and of the generations who mediated creatively this continuity. When you regard the traditional costume, as it deserves, like an inheritance that passed through centuries, there immediately arise the questions: what about us, nowadays people, how and by

which means we shall support this continuous creativity to provide its present-time, and in this way its future too? How can we enrich our historical values to pass them on to our descendants? How can we maintain the heritage balance that is necessary to express identity and consolidate social cohesion? In other words, on whom depends which of our clothes will complete the museum collections several decades later?

The answer to this inevitable question is not simple at all. However, heritage bearers and members of communities called "șezători" [socials] raise this question within their activities addressed to the public. Especially those that got the thread of tradition and strengthen it as a value priority. The idea concerns a goal, but to reach it, you should listen to what elderlies say about the dress tradition; involve in learning about it from credible sources; appropriate it by repeating consecrated activities that fit into social patterns; learn about the peculiarities of materials, specific techniques, the principles of decorating the traditional costume and the rules of wearing it, and many other operations that select, evaluate, centre, pass on the properties of the traditional culture among contemporaries.

The book was intended to highlight the way how we know to acknowledge, through concrete deeds, the vestimentary artistic work of previous generations and to bequeath it to younger generations, rescuing it in new materials, with much comprehension, responsibility, and creativity, in order not to lose anything from its so valuable richness. Its adequate transmission supposes, first of all, to discuss, this time through this book, how we know to recover our collective image and present it before the world, wearing its most natural garment of our identity.

Firstly, its discourse is based on revealing the specifics of the traditional costume, and how we understand and respect it, by making and using it within cultural practices. It regards further the cultural dimensions of the blouse with "altiță", worn by women, which belongs to this set. We chose this way of presentation for several reasons. They are in a relationship between the whole and one part; they impose themselves as bearing major importance in the current social and cultural processes. The traditional costume is a vestimentary set, which was historically consecrated; it was created and worn by several generations; historical communities understand it as the sole true one that represents their identity, seen synchronically and diachronically when they compare the Collective Self with the Others. We emphasize the phrase *traditional* or *folk costume,* to underline the idea of its organic character and unity, in this time when we note the tendency to dismember it, for the sake of wearing only one item of it, as a rule, the shirt. We shall also use the phrase *folk dress,* which is, in our view, similar to the other two ones. The genre of the work is a dialogical one, of formulating questions and searching for answers to them, together with the readers. Since the domain it

valorizes belongs to the community, hence revealing the specifics of these clothes too, the explanations and final expertise should belong to the community. The social memory, which was transmitted orally, protects images and contents of this vestimentary set; across time, it selects and validates, through social practice, patterns, which are a part of the mechanisms of the tradition, and are to be obeyed because they suit most of all the collective personality. The traditional Moldovan costume belongs to the rich tradition of the Romanian costume; it expresses the mentality, aesthetics, and ethics of its bearers who shaped and brought to perfection its essence; they have thus ensured it an honourable place in the gallery of traditional costumes of world nations.

All the cloth items that make the costume are important. Still, the blouse is considered essential for fashioning its specific. The blouse is the first cloth to be dressed, thus it can be understood as the first cultural sign. As a consequence of multifaceted processes, like those from contemporary society, the costume is differently perceived; some people wear it entirely, others only partly. When it is disassembled, people use to wear only the blouse, as the last sign of identity. It is sure that communities take notice of the possible cultural losses and start to recover their costume. The institutions that are qualified to support communities to acknowledge its values, step in to explain the cultural poverty resulting from this process, which is regrettable for both bearers and admirers of the quaint costume. As it is normal, they chose to wear the entire costume.

The traditional blouse with "altiță" [embroidery on the shoulder], worn by women, is a Romanian common cultural property; it gained a high national prestige and a good international acknowledgement. It reached nowadays as the most beautiful and most elaborate from an aesthetical perspective because the entire society contributed to its enrichment and artistic refinement. It is the most exquisite dress worn on feasts and namely, within them, society enhanced its prestige. As it is known, in the context of customs, rites, and ceremonies, the essential values of communities are validated through acts, attitudes, and sanctions. To maintain in the circuit of values this symbolical dress, in March 2021, was submitted to UNESCO the nomination file *The art of the traditional blouse with embroidery on the shoulder (altiță) – an element of cultural identity in Romania and the Republic of Moldova*, for inscription in the *Representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity*. In this way, it was delegated to represent us before the world. This option was made in a social context of rediscovery, revaluation, and reassuming the values encrypted in it.

People wear a traditional costume or only a representative part of the whole formed by it, for instance: *the blouse, belt, head kerchief, cap*, etc. In this practice, one can see an expression of the freedom of choice or to prove each one's desire to

belong to the big community called people or nation and which identifies itself with that costume. Everyone participates in this way in a polyphonic social dialogue, including images, with the representatives of the group they belong to, but also with the rest of the world, harmonizing the relationships with them through all cultural labels. It means a consolidation of social groups too, but it can also be a new manner of positioning in the coordinates of time of the human who comes out of the flood of history and meditates to define more clearly its place in the present and future. It seems that people need to confound themselves with timeless symbols, a part of them being the traditional costume.

In this book, we address current issues of the folk costume, as well as of the blouse with "altiță". The reason is that they constitute the dominant elements of social practice in this domain. The ideas and estimations of craftsmen, of designers of costumes, and of the main bearers of these attires are the results of a complex investigation, carried out for many years; these ideas were conveyed in interviews, reports, speeches delivered at "șezători" [socials], masterclasses, and seminars organized to learn about the authentic costume. The civil society organizes itself in voluntary groups called, like in old times, "șezători" [socials] or with a more modern word – communities –, wishing to learn about the costume in its whole richness. Society requires consequently this kind of support to replace the gap in the traditional mechanisms of transmission of such skills. This is the reason why traditional clothing interests us from several interdependent aspects. The first and essential one is to determine what kind of clothes our citizens wear when they want to show their cultural identity. It is their choice and we want to know to what extent they acknowledge its representative character. Aiming to be useful, we shall note what items constitute this set and what relationship they have with the century-old tradition to which people refer in all the environments. Since we discuss social relationships, about how values are structured, it is the right place to ask: what do creators and bearers think about the costume, and how do they integrate it into the cultural priorities of present-time?

Be it a paradox or not, but simultaneously with the increase of the prestige of the folk costume, especially of the traditional blouse with "altiță", there grew the number of producers that pollute the space of holidays with clothes that are very approximate from the perspective of the tradition. Mass media constantly draws attention to this category of products, by criticizing them and turning to authenticity. In this context, it is necessary to specify from the very beginning – making a costume is not an economic activity like any other. The folk costume belongs to the symbols of our culture; it has a venerable age; it has united us during the centuries and, to keep its qualities of symbol, it is natural to perceive deeper its meanings. Since it is a part of the traditional culture, to keep its many functions, it has to correspond to

the traditional patterns that society knows and accepts. Through collective memory, society perpetuates an ideal pattern of this costume, constantly referring to it. How the cultural practice manages to fit this pattern is a wider discussion we have just started.

They wrote about the folk costume and its creators mostly from a positive perspective. However, a critical approach is a mandatory necessity to reveal also the causes that undermine the image of this vestimentary symbol. Wishing to contribute to the recovery of the state of things in this domain, we shall compare the achievements obtained in this realm, through many common efforts, as well as the problems that negatively influence it. We shall refer to the basic tendencies that jeopardize the image of the traditional costume as a consecrated symbol, regarded entirely, and particularly that of the traditional blouse with "altiță". For a better comprehension of these deviations, we shall present them in comparison with the demands of the tradition. We approach the domain of imagination par excellence and we illustrate the volume with many pictures to reveal all the issues accumulated during the last decades. The images, like the text, witness both well-done samples and wrong ones, from a structural viewpoint, of proportions, composition, and other principles of organizing the décor of these clothes. At the end of the analyses, we support those willing to stitch traditional blouses with "altiță", by providing them with 50 tables of vectorial decipherments; our aim is to offer the tradition and users a modern handbook, which has passed a good verification in the practice of the communities that stitch manually.

The tradition acted for centuries, through institutions, to support the cultural consequence, although each generation instilled in it its own part of newness. Each generation contributed to adapting it to new conditions, materials, visions, abilities, technical realities, and to its evolution too. The cultural mechanisms that maintain the functioning of the traditional culture, as a whole, validate these results and offer them cultural paternity. Folk culture largely came into the view of social thought already in the 19th century. They recognized it as an important domain of human knowledge by institutionalising ethnology, ethnography, anthropology, and folkloristics. Nevertheless, at that time, traditional culture was losing ground in relation to modernity. Another type of culture was gradually gaining social ground. It continued to lose until they arrived at a change of paradigm. Within it, under the impact of technical progress, the breach inevitably arrived. We accept this idea; however, facing the many losses, useful in our opinion, we start considering that the breach was premature. The argument is that society did not manage to recover praiseworthily the knowledge, competencies, and good experiences of the forerunners. In the new context, other institutions, such as museums or voluntary organizations assumed the responsibility to create opportunities so that cultural

properties and the values defended by them may circulate freely and have resistance through time.

Compared to other institutions that have competencies in this field, such as the Union of Folk Craftsmen from Moldova, the National Centre for the Conservation and Promotion of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, during the last decades, the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History involved in this process of redefining, reconsideration, sometimes of changing its meanings. Civil society, as well, has many prompt and useful initiatives intended to save the cultural heritage that creates identity. For the first time in our recent history, civil society, through its various forms of voluntary participation, imposes itself in the social practice, having a clear attitude towards the preservation of cultural heritage, first of all, of properties that are representative of big communities. Cultural institutions cooperated with several communities, called with an old name rescued from oblivion – "șezători" [socials]. They reached thus the level of experiments, accomplishments, and achievements in the field of protection of the traditional costume, of the blouse with "altiță". The mentioned processes deserve to be studied in continuous evolution, to comprise their numerous manifestations.

Our recent history proves that next-to-skin clothing – the blouse, as well as the costume to which it belongs –, in their turn, took the ideological garment of their age. They manifested themselves more or less depending on the permissiveness of the system. Besides the essential features of traditional clothing, such as the cut, materials, and ornamental structures, each period may have promoted a certain image of the traditional costume. It maintained to a greater or lesser extent the basic background of this field. The creations were connected through the well-known postulate, which is promoted by orality and is generally spread: "So dressed our elderlies, so we dress too!" The cultural models that fundament the traditional culture were perpetuated to the extent to which society, under the impact of certain dangers or desiderata, more or less esteemed and respected them. Another postulate, which became prominent during the last two centuries, has a bookish origin and completes the dignity of orality: "Our costume is thousand years old. Its images can be found on the ancient monuments Trajan's Column and the Monument from Adamclisi". Both prescriptions centre upon ideals and they meet to perpetuate a costume acknowledged as Romanian, functional from all viewpoints, from practicality to symbolism. Notwithstanding the main intentions, in fact, it happened so that, in different regions of the Romanian cultural area, emerged vestimentary sets having a local specific; tradition consecrated them as a natural part of this whole. How they managed to keep this diversity within unity, is a constant current issue in the studies about the folk costume. To a lesser extent, they discuss analytically the

present stage of the traditional costume. Criticism dominates, in public opinion, a fact that appears normal.

An essential question for our exegesis regards the statute of the folk costume. We agree that it is a product of the traditional culture. Yet what condition does it hold in contemporary culture? Does it play the role of a cultural reminiscence or is it a cultural phenomenon integrated into contemporary processes? We approach this problem also to facilitate the demarches that will continue to develop its analysis. Rediscovery, reconsideration, revalorisation, and the investment of new meanings are esteemed as revivalism. They enable the articulation of forms, symbols, and representations in the collective practice.

In this work, we analyse three essential contributions to the current phenomenon of costume: the contribution of those who mainly make it; of those who mainly wear it, and of those who admire it; the latter two could belong also to the first two areas. We signal the deviations from tradition, especially those discussed in society, also pointing out the causes that lead to them. So that readers may understand them better, we counterpose them to the patterns perpetuated by collective memory and considered the most successful.

There are not many folk craftsmen, compared to society's demands for these symbolic garments. Civil society has very valuable initiatives to learn and create "șezători" [socials] or other cultural forms. They are not oriented towards the commercialization of clothes, but towards wearing them in family, among kinsfolk, like in older times.

Artists, instrumentalists, singers, dancers, members of professional bands of folk music and dance, of ethno-folkloric groups of enthusiasts, have been and continue to be the main bearers of folk costume. With small differences, those from professional bands respect a costume that is more adapted to the stage, while others have a costume that permanently valorizes the tradition, most frequently – the local vestimentary tradition. Folk craftsmen and the members of the Union of Folk Craftsmen from Moldova are faithful bearers of folk costumes during exhibitions, fairs, contests, festivals, and other holidays. The creators that are united in other communities wear during every feast this costume made by them, following all the requirements of the tradition. They aim to prove that it is possible to design manually a blouse of great artistic complexity. Thus, the products made by these two categories of creators round off and motivate each other.

We reveal the attitudes of social groups towards the costume and the values defended by it. These actions have been and are in sight. The symbolic clothing that represents the members of a community should be comprehended upon merit. It is worn during holidays and forms a face addressed to others, which must be understood as such.

Wearing the folk costume does not exclude, contrariwise it encourages, the representatives of other cultures to valorise their vestimentary inheritance too; to show it with full dignity before neighbours and friends. During public events, the Ukrainians, the Bulgarians, and the Gagauz living in the Republic of Moldova demonstrate their costumes. While admiring this cultural diversity, one understands that there is a special relationship among the traditional costumes of various nations, as it exists among folk music and dance. All of them raise our awareness in a special way, and then they link us with a great openness to our cultural universe.