

HEAD ADORNMENT AS SIGN OF MARITAL STATUS. A SEMIOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract: *Contemporary clothing, as guided by fashion, provides information on the identity of the wearer, the latter's self representation and their relation with society. The meaning of traditional clothing (the traditional costume) is independent from and even opposed to fashion. The semiological analysis of the head adornment worn by the unmarried and married women in Rupea, Romania highlights that clothing is a signifier for their marital status and confirms the importance of marriage in traditional culture.*

Key words: *clothing, traditional culture, semiological analysis.*

1. Introduction

Clothing communicates. It provides information about those who wear it, as well as about the communities to which they belong. The clothing of contemporary Westerners is the expression of individualism as a feature of the cultural (and economic) development of this part of the world. In such a context, the unconstrained choices made in terms of garment shape the role and power of fashion as an instrument of individualization.

However, the importance of fashion is not the same all over the world and the effectiveness of dress as a sign does not necessarily depend on fashion. In traditional cultures, innovations rather undermine than fuel the meaning of clothing. That is most obvious in the case of festive and ceremonial garment: their meaning is configured and preserved within the community.

This study focuses on the meanings of the head adornments worn by the Romanian women from Rupea, Brasov County along with their traditional clothing. It highlights the system of semiological differentiations which makes the way women cover their head a status telltale.

2. Methodology

As support for the semiological analysis I used photos from the private collections of some Romanian dwellers from Rupea, as well as photos from my personal collection.

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Their dates range from 1918 until today. I directly analyzed these photos and capitalized on their photo elicitation potential via semi structured interviews with locals whom I consider well-informed informants. Moreover, I used some of the results elicited through the method of participative observation which I employed between 2016-2017 to focus on winter holidays in Rupea.

In Rupea, the group of caroling youngsters together with the girls still scour the town on the first day of Christmas and organizes the ball of the youth between Christmas and New Year. The youngsters also organize a dancing party on Whit Sunday in Rond, an artificially created glade in the forest nearby the town. Married locals also party to a ball before the Lent. Some women wear traditional clothes in church on Pentecost. These are the main events when traditional festive dress is worn in Rupea nowadays. In old times (that is during the last century until the 60s) women would go to church every Sunday wearing traditional clothes. The weddings of wealthier Rupea dwellers were weddings with *horse riders* (English for Romanian *călăraşi*) - a term describing the groom's entourage made of young unmarried men riding horses - in the past (the last such event took place in 1961).

The weddings featuring horde riders were another opportunity to wear festive traditional clothing. Since 1961 there have been several such events, organized for show purposes during some folkloric festivals or as part of projects meant to retrieve and capitalize on the cultural heritage. The last representation of a wedding with horse riders in Rupea was in 2011 when a documentary was shot (<https://vimeo.com/50975759>).

In the semiological analysis I used photos from Christmas, weddings of past times and weddings organized for show purposes. I believe the latter are trustworthy sources of information because the actors are dressed every time in authentic clothing that comes from the valuable clothing chests of the old women of the community, who are knowledgeable about everything. My analysis does not refer to the clothing worn on Pentecost for several reasons: the lack of a sufficient number of photos picturing this type of dress, the uncertainty expressed by my informants concerning old habits in this respect, as well as the fact that nowadays' girls go to the dance in Rond wearing nothing on their head, as they also do at the ball after Christmas.

3. Sociological and Semiological Approaches to Clothing and Fashion

Georg Simmel investigates distinctly clothing and fashion, even though he underlines that both clothing options and the fashion phenomenon are the result of an interaction among opposing forces. According to Simmel in *Adornment* (*apud* Carter, 2003), clothing, placed between bodily adornments embossed directly on the wearer's body and the separate ornaments of the body, such as jewelry and various other accessories, is part of a manipulation mechanism. Individuals embellish themselves to please the others and in exchange for that they obtain esteem, recognition and envy. Thus, they consolidate their ego and extend their power over the others. Clothing makes it possible for the general to encounter the particular, namely the personal features of those who wear it. Clothing is elegant if the relationship between the two is balanced, namely if it does not contain much of that particular or exceptional.

In *The Philosophy of Fashion* (1905), as well as in the less extended study titled *Fashion* (1904), Simmel identifies the opposing forces as follows: one of them is connected to the adaptation to social groups, whereas the other is related to the elevation of the ego and the separation from group. Fashion as a phenomenon exists as long as these two forces are manifest. The end of fashion is rendered by the uniformity that characterizes Western utopias, as well as by extreme individualism (Simmel, 2013). Fashion does not exist in primitive societies or in those that lack social classes (Simmel, 1957). It only emerges when the tendency of differentiation meets the tendency towards imitation. Moreover, it meets both the need for social adaptation and the need for change: "Thus fashion represents nothing more than one of the many forms of life by the aid of which we seek to combine in uniform spheres of activity the tendency towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation and change." (Simmel, 1957, p.543). The phenomenon of fashion, that is tributary to the existence of social classes, is attractive for women. Fashion is imposed by upper classes and changes when lower classes adopt it by imitation. Fashion is an opportunity for women in a male culture. It allows them to express their individuality in a socially approved context, to be conspicuous even though they have to conform to norms (Simmel, 2013). Bordering current political correctness, Simmel (1957) believes that women compensate for the delay in the development of individuality through the extravagance of their clothing. Gotea (2017) underlines that emotions play a significant role in how we think and feel during or after every decision we make each day, including the process of buying clothes; in this context the occurrence of impulsive consumption can be mentioned.

As early as with the publication of *Fashion* (1957) Simmel shows that changes in fashion signal a weakening of nervous energy. Conferring value to foreign influences is only a characteristic of advanced civilizations. In the case of primitive societies, novelty (often introduced by outsiders) is often viewed as a bad thing and, therefore, in such societies changes are rare. The dances of the primitives and the similarity of dancers' outfits indicate the same tendency towards uniformity as that of fashion.

When approaching the difference between clothing and fashion, Simmel believes that clothing is adapted to human needs and is tributary to some grand externalities, whereas fashion does not depend on any objective outside convention.

According to Roland Barthes (2013), fashion is part of dress. It is part of dress either as an expression of the creation of a haute couture specialist or as a result of collective imitation, for various reasons, of a simple act of dressing. Barthes operates with the idea of *dress, dressing and clothing* as analogous terms (through their systemic relationship) to Saussure's *langue, parole* and *language*. Barthes highlights fashion as a significant system, its arbitrariness and structure. According to Barthes in *The Fashion System* (1967), fashion signifies since it merges the element that receives significance with the element that conveys significance, and the one that constitutes, by its variation, the significance (to use the author's example, a blouse receives significance as it has a collar that conveys significance because it can be worn buttoned or unbuttoned). By identifying the differences among drawn, described and real clothing, Barthes analyses the fashion presented by fashion magazines outlining that "the world is present in Fashion, no longer only as human productive power in an abstract sense, but as an

ensemble of "reasons", i.e., as an ideology" (Barthes, 1990, p.278). "Fashion thus appears essentially- and this is the final definition of its economy- as a system of signifiers, a classificatory activity, much more a semiological than a semantic order", he believes (1990, p.280).

Any attempt at covering the body is part of a formal organized and normative system often known by society, dress "is essentially part of the axiological order" (Barthes, 2013,p.7). As soon as a piece of clothing is manufactured it gains semiological status. However, in the case of contemporary Western fashion "meaning is neither motivated, nor coded, by an ancestral grammar in the way that clothing was in ancient oriental societies, that we are forced to look for clothing's unit of meaning not in whole, isolated items, but in true functions, oppositions, distinctions and congruencies" (Barthes, 2013, p.27). According to Barthes (1990), clothes are a code and as such they can be classified by their symbolism (and not by their usefulness or purpose) into several categories: everyday, festive, ceremonial, uniforms, etc.

Simmel and Barthes mainly refer to modern Western garment and to the role of fashion in relation with that. Their references to traditional clothes are transient and their purpose is to offer a contrastive picture of nowadays' reality, which is actually the focus of their discussion. The latest approaches to the topic are in the same area of interest and they underline the manner in which individuals are anchored in society via their clothes.

Bourdieu (1984) focused on the interpretation of clothing as an expression of social differences. According to him, the symbolic value of clothes is tributary to political and cultural history, as well as to the ethnic composition of an area. Women's clothes and fashion in general play a role in the shaping of various ideologies, indicates Bouvier (2018) when referring to the Islamic Abaya. Crane and Bovone (2006) believe that clothing can be both an instrument of socialization and social control and an instrument of liberation from cultural constraints. It influences its wearer's perception of self and articulates it. Clothing brands convey values associated with specific ideologies and life styles through their advertisements. Tijana, Tomaž and Čuden (2014) approach clothing as a form of nonverbal communication. Clothing simultaneously highlights the wearer's external and inner nature, as well the traits of society and individual identity. Clothing communicates acceptance and social commitment, on one hand, and social stratification and diversity on the other. It never simply covers the body of the wearer, but it also reveals their identity. The same authors believe that once the need to cover the body was met (100,000 years ago), it was followed by the decoration of clothes and thus by a transfer of meaning to them. P. Wells (1998) indicates that ever since European prehistory people have been decorating their objects in order to delineate and communicate their identity as individuals, families, residential and ethnic groups. Clothing does not only meet physical and physiological needs: it creates social meaning pushing communication beyond the superficial relations among people, according to Owyong (2009).

The evolution of clothing follows and reproduces political and ideological transformations. The Internet makes fashion accessible to large masses and clothing will be more efficient in terms of its comfort, durability, ease of cleaning, safety and health,

considers Coates (2016). Crane and Bovone (2006) show that in the culture of garments there is considerable increased freedom.

4. Head Adornment Used in the Romanian Traditional Clothing from Rupea. A Semiological Analysis

As far as traditional clothing is concerned, especially its festive and ceremonial forms, things are different. The comfort of the wearer is subordinated to the purpose of the clothing to signify, the meaning is rendered by the relation of the individual with the past of the community or with the latter's cultural invariants and, in such a context, innovations are sanctionable. Traditional clothing signifies because it does not change. Fashion has limited power in this field.

The myth that underpins the meaning of traditional clothing as a system of signs is different and older than the one highlighted by Barthes in *Mythologies* (1997) and which imposes the calibration of consumption preferences according to the values of the middle class bourgeoisie. The semiological analysis of head adornment used in the traditional costumes from Rupea underlines the structure of this other myth.

The town of Rupea is situated in the central part of Romania, in the ethnographic area of Târnave and is the center of a distinct sub-area from this area. The presence of the Saxons and Hungarians in the town has shaped status and ethnic relations that are commonly encountered in the history of Transylvania and has favored the emergence of a rather rural community in the area inhabited by Romanians. In the 70s a quarter of blocks of flats was built in order to accommodate the workers of the new asbestos cement manufacturing plant nearby. The new quarter led to the need of the locals to differentiate themselves from the new comers and to assert their prestige by preserving and acknowledging the value of traditions. That was not a complete preservation, though. The manifestations that proved viable and were preserved in the context of the socio-economic transformations at the end of WWII were mainly those related to winter holidays. Besides these, there is also information on the wedding with horse riders. According to the information in the field, the last real wedding of this type was organized in 1961. Its subsequent reenactments as a show with the help of the elderly from the community actually preserved the ethnographic information.

When they accompany the group of caroling youngsters at Christmas, girls wear silk light green or cream-colored flowery scarves with ending fringes on their heads. These scarves are tied under the chin and fixed with hair pins. Such head adornment used to be brought from Poland or Bohemia in the past. Traditionally, the scarf needs to cover girls' hair entirely and leaves the forehead uncovered.

Until the end of the 40s, young fourteen year old girls called in Romanian *zăblăicuțe* would join the big dance organized on the second day of Christmas outdoors in Tânărog (a meadow on the outskirts of the town). During the event they would cover their head with brown or cream-colored mousseline scarves tied under the chin. Nowadays, they dance at the party organized by the caroling youngsters on the first Saturday after Christmas, and their head is not covered.

When they turn sixteen, girls would *put on their aprons* for the Christmas dance or on other occasions. The expression refers to the wearing of *aprons with roses* (English for Romanian *şurţuri cu ruji*). These are two aprons, one over the other. The one underneath is simpler in ornaments than the one above and they are made of camel hair fabric waxed in the Saxons's workshops in town. They are made from three fabric widths joined by plain colored seam, hemmed with golden yarn and tinsels, and ornamented on with red and green ribbon in the shape of roses at the bottom, in the corners and in the middle. When girls wear their aprons they also *tie the scarves* (English for *îşi leagă cârpele*). On a linen cylinder they place *horse riders' scarf* (English for *cârpa de călăraşi*). The latter, as part of the Romanian traditional costume from Târnave, is a red kerchief of industrially manufactured cloth printed with flowers. This is worn by the groom and his companions during the wedding featuring the horse riders. In this case, there are actually two such scarves, folded diagonally, crossing over the shoulders and joined in such a manner that they cover the back and the chest. Used as girls' head adornment, the horse riders' scarf is tied with one of its corners hanging by the left ear. Another black, embroidered or printed with red flowers scarf is tied over it. The corner of the red scarf needs to be visible on the left side of the head: it is on the left of the girl where the young unmarried man assumes the dance position when she joins the big dance, as the old ladies who know the customs say. The way unmarried and married women tie the scarf is different. Married women do not leave the corner of the red scarf visible and only a finger breadth of the horse riders' scarf in the shape of a wide band is visible on the forehead from underneath the black scarf.

The bride in a wedding with horse riders also wears the two aprons. In addition, she also has a woven towel tied around her waist, and two horse riders' scarves hanging sideways over the aprons. The scarves normally worn by unmarried women are replaced by *toque with peacock feathers* (English for *bortele cu peuni*). This is an assembly of two metallic ornamental lines of prisms transversally arranged above the forehead. Between the two lines pins from the so-called *vălitoare* (another wrap for the head to be described below) are used. On the forehead and hanging from the first line of prisms there is a string of money made of silver. Vertically, at the back of the head, on a wooden stand wrapped in red cloth the bunch of peacock feathers is attached. The entire set is fixed with a small pillow called in Romanian *coif* in which pins are placed. The bride wears ornamental roses made of cloth called *vrâste* by her ears.

In her first year of marriage the young wife wears the *conci*, namely the two lines of prisms but without the peacock feathers, at weddings and other events. Around these she wraps the *fachel*, a two meter long towel woven on three shafts with black lace on edges. When this is tied over the prisms and under the chin, the laced edge remains visible on the left side of the head and is fixed with pins. At the end of her first year of marriage the woman replaces this adornment with the scarves. If the bride or the groom is not at their first marriage, then the bride wears only the *conci*.

The god mother also wears aprons and *conci*. After a wedding where a woman acts as a godmother she needs to wear the *vălitoare* with *fachel* on every celebration for a year.

The *vălitoare* (the wrapper, in an approximate English translation) is a piece of white cloth that is manually woven and has black lace on edges. It is folded on its length and

fixed on a 5 cm high cardboard cylinder with silver pins with ornamental heads made of precious or semi precious stones mounted in the shape of a cross. The more inclined the adornment is towards the top of the head, the prouder the wearer. This type of adornment can only be worn in the costume featuring the aprons.

During weddings the association of this adornment with other costume elements indicates the role of the woman in the event. If it is worn with the horse riders' scarf tied beneath the chin under *fachel*, then the woman is part of the closest members of the family, she is an aunt or godchild. The other women related with the bride or groom wear *vălitoare* only with the horse riders' scarf. Older relatives wear a simple *vălitoare* over a red cloth tied at the back.

Old women (that is those over fifty) who are not related to the bride or groom wear a simple *vălitoare* or the scarves. If they do not wear the latter, then they cover their head with the scarf they would wear when they went caroling as young girls, or cream or yellow scarves tied under the chin. The other women (who are neither relatives, nor old) wear the scarves.

Recapitulating, the head adornment indicates the status of married or unmarried women within the community. Depending on the importance of the role played by the woman wearing the head adornment during traditional weddings or at Christmas, the head adornments are ordered decreasingly as follows:

Head adornment worn by the girls and women from Rupea

Table 1

1	<i>borte cu peuni</i> : the bride
2	<i>conci</i> (<i>borte</i> with <i>fachel</i>): the bride in her first year of marriage and the godmother
3	<i>vălitoare</i> with <i>fachel</i> : close relatives (godchildren, aunts), the godmother all throughout the year when she wedded
4	a <i>vălitoare</i> with horse riders' scarf: other young relatives a simple <i>vălitoare</i> over a red scarf tied at the back of the head: old relatives
5	a simple <i>vălitoare</i> : old women
6	scarves: girls of marriage age (the corner of the horse riders' scarf is visible), wives
7	cream or light green caroling scarf: <i>zăblăicuțe</i> (fourteen year old girls), old women, and girls of marriage age at church
8	simple mousseline scarf: <i>zăblăicuțe</i> , old women

All girls and women sharing the same status use the same type of head adornment. Thus, traditional costumes are, from this point of view, like uniforms. From among the categories mentioned by Barthes (1990), the uniform is the only one that does not communicate at personal level, does not support the personal symbolic touch, as Tijana, Tomaž and Čuden (2014) show. National costumes, as national uniforms, reflect the characteristics of a given age, as well as the features of a community. They are ethnic, local and regional expressions of traditional culture. As the previously mentioned authors state, they carry with them the political, economic and cultural history of their place of origin without providing information on the individuality of wearer.

Beyond local contextual meanings, traditional costumes (and the head adornment as their component) act at the anthropological level as a system of signs.

The various head adornments can be characterized by several pairs of opposite terms. In terms of their colors, they are discreet/ conspicuous. The cream and brown scarves of the fourteen year old girls and of the old ladies are discreet. The flowery black (black is the color of abundance) and red (the color of life) scarves worn by girls of marriage age and by women, as well as the set of metallic prisms with precious or semi-precious stones are conspicuous.

Depending on where the main piece of the head adornment is tied: under the chin or on top of the head, head adornments are open/closed. This opposition overlaps with that of the terms unobtrusive/ provocative. Closed head adornments are unobtrusive. For example, girls of marriage age go to church at Christmas with their caroling scarves tied under their chin, whereas they go out for dance with their colored scarves tied on top of their head.

Finally, from the point of view of the abundance of significance it is associated with, the head adornment is a unifying / differentiating one. Simple adornment worn for celebrations shows uniformity, while the one used for ceremonies (as it is the case of the bride, godmother, young wife, etc.) shows status differences.

There are two dimensions that organize these differentiations: the marital status and the kinship. The former separates girls (fourteen year olds and those of marriage age) from women (namely the ones who have already been brides). The latter separates the groom's and bride's relatives (including the godmother as a spiritual mother) from common participants to the wedding.

5. Discussions and Conclusions

Head adornments hide girls' and women's hair. They are not provocative, erotically speaking. Even though they show nubility and marital status, they do not incur any sexualized hints. According to Mccracker and Roth (1989), in order to communicate clothing operates with a code that is not very well known by those who employ it. Concerning the head adornment, this is a system of signs that only works and communicates within the closed circle of a community. The marital status of women who belong to a community that values endogamous marriage (Coposescu, 2006) should not be the concern of outsiders.

It is worthwhile to indicate that the women who are at the beginning and at the end of their social femininity, namely fourteen year old girls and old women, use almost the same type of head adornments. However, women's nubile period is signaled by multiple and spectacular differentiations.

In the case of unmarried women the differentiations are related to the important moments of winter holidays, while in the case of the married ones the differences are connected to the important moments of their personal lives. Winter holidays proceed the time period when most weddings used to be celebrated (between the Saint John the Baptist Celebration on January 7 and the beginning of Lent) and represented a very good opportunity for the youth to become better acquainted.

In the case of unmarried young men and married men, the clothing differences are less numerous and more simple. The unmarried young men wear, a five centimeter wide

leather belt that displays round metal buttons. The belt is long enough to surround the waist twice. Married men wear *șerpar* (in Romanian), an approximately twelve centimeter wide belt that has pockets and vegetation like ornaments that are pressed onto the belt. Both groups wear a black rolled scarf around the neck whose fringed ends hang onto the chest. The number of fringes varies by the status and age of the wearer. As for the head attire, both unmarried young men and married men wear lambskin hats in winter and black felt hats in summer, but only those of the unmarried young men's have *vrâste* (in Romanian), buxus and geranium bunches fixed sideways.

The diversity of women's adornments suggests that it is the men who seek and choose. Hence, they have to be correctly guided in their search by properly signaling women's status.

All these differentiations show that traditional clothing works as a system of signs. The clothing signifier (the head adornment, in the case of this analysis) has the marital status of the wearer as it's signified. Behind this relationship of significance lies the interest of the community in marriage. Thus, traditional clothing proves to be part of a community's self preservation and perpetuation mechanism.

The myth behind clothing differentiations is related to one of the cultural universals outlined by anthropology (Coposescu, 2006): people are made to get married, the role of women is to give birth to children and the role of men is to search for the right women to this end. Thus, the Command given by the God from the Old Testament: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it" is not just a particular expression of this myth. All girls of marriage age are dressed alike since they, and not the fourteen year olds, nor the young women, are potential future brides for the lads.

Such a context unveils the potential of clothing for sacredness and its availability for rituals. These dimensions are obscured nowadays when fashion dominates. Nonetheless, the sacredness of traditional clothing is too tightly connected to sexuality to be internalized by Christian sacredness. Intuitively, unmarried and married women wear head adornment tied under the chin unobtrusively when they go to church. The bride wears the *borte cu peuni* only after the religious ceremony. During the latter she only wears a white veil and a crown. Such differentiations indicate the survival of pre-Christian faiths in the aspects related to the wedding ceremony together and yet separately from the Christian faith. Terms like *tradition*, *survival*, and even *unobtrusiveness* show the insignificant role played by fashion in the context of traditional cultures. In the case of head adornment, the last significant change introduced by fashion is the replacement of the cloth used for scarves and which was homemade with industrially woven scarves brought from Poland and Bohemia (the caroling scarves) or from the United States (the flowery black and red scarves). However, such a modification does not impact the semiological status of these pieces of clothing.

In this context the semiological analysis is also an exercise of anthropological archaeology. It supports the hermeneutic approaches to traditional clothing. As Codoban (2001) shows, the semiological and hermeneutic methods are opposed and complementary. Head adornment is a sign and that leads to the interpretation of its symbolism. In this respect, red and black, floral ornaments, covered hair, the edge of the

horse riders' scarf left visible as an invitation to the unmarried men etc. are not arbitrary at all. From a hermeneutic perspective they could unveil a plethora of meanings. Nevertheless, such an approach is to be the focus of a different study.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Mr. Vasile Danciu and Mr. Sorin Nistor for giving me access to their private collections of photos. Without their old and new photos, this study of traditional clothing in Rupea could not have been conducted.

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