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# THE STITCHED LANGUAGE OF THE IE: FROM THE SEMIOTICS OF TRADITIONAL MOTIFS TO CONTEMPORARY IDENTITY RECLAMATION

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***Abstract.*** *This paper proposes a paradigm shift in the study of Romanian material culture, approaching the ie (the traditional sleeve-embroidered blouse) as a complex semiotic system and a non-verbal text governed by precise grammatical rules. Historically, the white fabric served as a projection screen for an entire archaic cosmology. Utilizing the tools of structural semiotics, the research deconstructs the visual syntax of the blouse into three fundamental registers: the altiță (the celestial register, cosmic order), the încreț (the terrestrial register, stability), and the râuri (the flow of time). At a lexical level, geometric motifs functioned as genuine ideograms (the rhombus for fertility, the zigzag for vital forces), ensuring instantaneous social communication within the traditional community (marital status, age, regional background).*

*However, modernization and urbanization have caused a code rupture. Blind copying and computerized industrial reproduction - specific to the fast-fashion trend - have led to the de-semanticization of the costume, transforming an articulate language into visual noise. Nevertheless, the study highlights an ongoing dynamic of re-semanticization and identity reclamation through three directions of revitalization:*

*Virtual communities - groups like „Semne cusute” or „Măiestria” act as schools of textile paleography, turning manual stitching into a form of cultural resistance.*

*In conclusion, the paper demonstrates that the contemporary ie refuses inert museumification. It remains a living object and a bearer of collective memory, capable of generating new meanings as long as society respects its structural alphabet.*

***Keywords****: semiotics, Romanian blouse (ie), de-semanticization, identity reclamation.*

In the study of Romanian material culture, the traditional blouse with *altiță* - generically known as the *ie*, has been approached predominantly through the descriptive lens of classical ethnography, decorative aesthetics, or its utilitarian functionality within agrarian society. Valuable studies regarding the folk costume as a whole belong to the research of V. Buzilă, M. Bâtcă, S. Laiu, V. Țurcanu, S. Laiu among others. The present study proposes a necessary paradigm shift, investigating the *ie* not merely as an object of adornment or a rigid vestimentary vestige, but as a complex semiotic system, a non-verbal text structured on the basis of precise and rigorous grammatical rules.

For centuries, within the archaic community, the white linen, hemp, or cotton cloth served as a projection screen for an entire cosmology. Every needle stroke, every chromatic choice, and every geometric arrangement in the structure of the *ie* constituted arbitrary decorations, but formed a coherent ensemble of signs (signifiers) that pointed directly toward profound mythological and cosmological meanings (signifieds). Thus, in a predominantly illiterate environment in the sense of alphabetic writing, the *ie* represented a form of sacred and

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social writing of extraordinary conceptual density. Indeed, in highlighting a people's identity, the garment constitutes its emblem of recognition, the mark of belonging to a certain cultural space that it identifies and defines, a distinctive sign which, alongside language, customs, and traditions, plays a particularly important role in highlighting the fundamental coordinates of ethnic specificity[2].

In the current Romanian space, however, we are faced with an evident visual and cultural paradox: on one hand, we observe the ie isolated in the showcases of ethnography museums, preserved as a rigid and intangible historical document; on the other hand, we find the same blouse, or reproductions of it, integrated into the dynamics of urban festivals, on fashion runways, in country branding campaigns, or paired with modern clothing items online.

The central question of this research is: can the ie still be considered a cultural document frozen in time, or has it become once again a living object, subject to a permanent renegotiation of meaning? The hypothesis we advance is that the survival and relevance of the ie are due not to a passive and museum-like preservation, but precisely to its unique ability to oscillate between institutionalization and cultural consumption, undergoing a profound process of re-semantization. The contemporary ie undergoes a process of identity recovery precisely through the reactivation of its value as language, being transformed from a local community code into a global identity discourse.

## 2. Semiotics of traditional motifs: syntax and the visual lexicon

To fully understand the mechanisms through which the *ie* functions as an articulate language, it is imperative to deconstruct its structure using the methodological tools of structural semiotics. In traditional society, the process of making a blouse was not a purely decorative act, but a scriptural operation of writing that respected a rigorous visual syntax, divided into three major ornamental registers arranged on the sleeve. Each register corresponded to a precise existential or cosmological dimension:

- **Altița (the celestial register).** Located at the upper part of the sleeve, on the shoulder, the *altiță* constituted an autonomous ornamental space that was never repeated on the body of the blouse. From a semiotic point of view, it encoded the cosmic order, divinity, the sky, and the great spiritual archetypes. In a symbolic interpretation, the *altiță* reflected the celestial vault, being decorated with signs that made reference to the stars (the sun, the stars) and to the sacred, unchangeable order that governs the macrocosm.

[2] Laiu Simona. *Rolul costumului național în făurirea României moderne*. Iași: Junimea, 2023.

- **Încreţul (the terrestrial register).** Positioned immediately below the *altiță*, the *încreț* is a decorative band made through a specific fabric-gathering technique, usually monochrome in shades of yellow, ochre, gold, or gray. From a semiotic perspective, the *încreț* represented the earth, the fertile field, stability, and the structural duality of the world. It ensured the geometric and conceptual transition from the divine order (*altița*) to the plane of human becoming.
- **Râurile (the register of flow and life).** Represented by the vertical or oblique ornamental bands that descended from the *încreț* toward the wrist and on the chest of the blouse, the *râuri* (rivers) symbolized dynamism, the flow of time, the succession of generations, and the continuous connection between heaven and earth. In contrast to the static character of the *altiță*, the *râuri* introduced the temporal dimension of human existence.

At the lexical level, the abstract geometric motifs embroidered inside these registers functioned not merely as ornaments, but as veritable ideograms. They represented an extreme abstraction of the surrounding reality and of metaphysical concepts. For example, the rhombus was not a simple geometric figure, but the universal sign of the soil, of the fertile earth and fecundity. A rhombus divided into four compartments, with dots in the middle, directly encoded the sown field, being a bearer of luck and prosperity. The broken line (zigzag) represented the manifestation of the vital forces of nature, encoding lightning, light, or flowing water - essential elements for cosmic regeneration[3]. The ear of wheat and the tree of life conveyed the idea of succession, of the world axis (*axis mundi*), and of sacred regeneration, closely binding human destinies to the rhythms of nature.

In the archaic traditional community, this structural language ensured a function of instantaneous social communication. The blouse functioned as an open identity passport. By looking at a woman’s *ie* at the village dance (*hora*), the community could decode on the spot a complex matrix of data regarding the wearer: exact age, marital status (unmarried girl, young wife, woman with children, or widow), social position within the community, regional geographical origin (down to the level of a valley or village), and even her emotional state. The latter was rendered through the chromatic code: bright, saturated colors (bright red) were reserved for youth and festive periods, while dark, muted colors or the total absence of color (the black *ie*) signaled mourning, old age, or ritualistic asceticism.

[3] Moisei Ludmila. *Ornamentul- fenomen artistico-estetic*. Chișinău: Pontos, 2017, p. 37.

**3. The *Ie* between museumification and standardization, the normative tensions of heritage**

In December 2022, the inscription of the "Art of the traditional blouse with *embroydery on the shoulder (altiță)*" - an element of cultural identity o Romania and the Republic Moldova on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity marked a moment of global institutional recognition[4]. However, from a critical and anthropological perspective, this success brings with it the inherent risk of museumification and rigid canonization. The transformation of a living craft into a heritage canon often generates a profound normative tension between specialists and the current community of practitioners.

This tension is visible within the large online communities dedicated to the revival of traditional sewing. On one hand, there is the purist or museum-oriented trend, supported by experts, ethnographers, and collectors, who rigorously demand strict adherence to the old *izoade* (patterns), historically documented regional chromatics, and specific 19th-century materials (handwoven loom-made cloth, natural silk thread, unspun cotton). Any deviation from scientifically established canons is interpreted as an alteration of heritage.

On the other hand, contemporary creators and needlewomen feel an acute need to adapt the object to the realities of the present. They often opt for lighter industrial fabrics adapted to the rhythm of modern daily life, use accessible threads, or freely reinterpret motifs from one geographical area to another based on personal aesthetic affinities.

We are witnessing, therefore, a direct negotiation of cultural ownership over tradition: to whom, ultimately, does the *ie* belong? To the museum and the experts who fix immobile scientific norms, or to the active community of practitioners who transform it to keep it functional in daily life? When a cultural object is completely regulated and subjected exclusively to preservation norms, it risks becoming a dead historical document, an archaeological relic. Symmetrically, when it is left completely free within the circuit of consumption without any structural anchor, it risks losing its specificity and identity. We believe, however, that the survival of the *ie* depends directly on the fragile balance between these two vectors.

**4. The semiotic rupture. De-semantization in the modern era and fast-fashion**

Accelerated modernization, urbanization, and the transition from an archaic society to an industrial and post-industrial one have caused what semioticians call a code rupture. With

[4] *6 ani de cămăși tradiționale cusute în Șezătoarea Basarabiei*. Chișinău, 2022.

the destructuring of the mythological and community context from which the traditional costume was born, the direct link between the sign (the geometric motif) and the signified (the mythical concept) dissolved.

In globalized consumer capitalism, the *ie* undergoes a fundamental mutation, marked by a dual process: the emptying of its original meaning (de-semantization) and the loading of it with completely new meanings (re-semantization). We can synthesize this structural mutation through the table below:

*Table 1. Structural mutations of the traditional blouse with altiță*

| *Analytical dimension* | *Traditional archaic society* | *Society consumer, modern society* |
|---|---|---|
| *Fundamental value* | Cult, sacred, and ritual value | Exchange, aesthetic, and commercial value |
| *Temporal dimension* | Long time (months of reflective manual | fast-fashion (mass industrial production) |
| *Status of the motifs* | Signs read collectively as a social text | Decorative motifs viewed as pure design |

This conceptual rupture becomes evident with the emergence of the phenomenon of blind copying and computerized industrial reproduction. When the ie is mechanically reproduced in factories in Asia or in industrial workshops using synthetic materials, without any understanding of the grammar of the signs, the visual text of the blouse becomes completely incoherent.

The introduction of chaotically combined motifs, such as placing a motif specific to a mourning or elderly woman's ie onto a cloth associated with festive colors, transforms what was once an articulate language into mere visual noise. The sign loses its initial ritual value, and the memory of the gesture (the act of hand-sewing, which implies time, reflection, and generational transmission) is canceled out by the speed of consumption. The modern festival buyer seeks a look, an immediate aesthetic impact, rather than a craft carrying sacredness.

**5. Identity dynamics: The re-semantization of the Ie as contemporary discourse**

Despite the pressures exerted by industrial standardization, the ie has not disappeared as a language; rather, it is undergoing a period of profound and intense re-semantization. We

are all witnesses to how, over the last two to three decades within the context of constructing and asserting cultural identities, the populations of Southeastern European states have begun to value and wear the folk costume or, at least, some of its pieces. The same processes are unfolding in Ukraine, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, and the Republic of Moldova. In the Republic of Moldova, upon gaining independence and with the Romanian language re-entering the natural flow of social communication, social strategies for reviving the garment of identity - the folk costume - intensified[5].

Furthermore, because this emblematic ensemble was subjected to distorting tendencies during the Soviet totalitarian period, affecting the main benchmarks of its specificity, the issue of safeguarding its authentic, original aspects was gradually raised. The contemporary wearer (predominantly urban, educated, and globalized) reactivates the *ie*, utilizing it not to signal their position within a village micro-universe, but to assert their position and uniqueness in relation to a standardized global world.

We can identify three major directions in which this discursive revitalization manifests itself:

**1. The *Ie* as a political manifesto and identity branding**

In the international public space and in cultural diplomacy, wearing the *ie* has surpassed the boundaries of regional folklore, becoming an instrument of collective identity branding. Global events such as the Universal Day of the Ie have transformed the traditional blouse from a local sign into a universal national and cultural symbol.

This political dimension was also highlighted by civil society's reactions to unauthorized cultural appropriation (such as the collections of famous fashion houses like Tom Ford in 2012 or Tory Burch in 2017, which copied motifs from the folk costumes of Bihor and Oltenia without mentioning the source of inspiration). The international "Give Credit" campaign, initiated by the La Blouse Roumaine community, demonstrated that the contemporary *ie* functions as an actively defended identity border, forcing global capital to negotiate directly with the ethics of preserving local heritage.

**2. Relearning the alphabet in virtual communities**

The emergence of large virtual communities (such as *Semne Cusute*, *Măiestria*, *Moldova coase Ie*, or *Șezătoarea Basarabiei*) has generated a remarkable movement of cultural resistance[6]. These online groups function as veritable schools of textile paleography. Their

[5] Buzilă Varvara. *Arta tradițională din Republica Moldova*. Chișinău: Cartier 2018, p.196.
[6] *6 ani de cămăși tradiționale cusute în Șezătoarea Basarabiei*. Chișinău, 2022.

members do not limit themselves to mechanically copying patterns; instead, they deconstruct old blouses from museums, draw their logical diagrams, translate their *izoade* (traditional patterns), and recompose them by hand. Thus, for the modern individual, the long hours dedicated to sewing a blouse become a conscious act of meditation, of reclaiming affective memory, and of direct opposition to the standardization imposed by the fast-fashion industry.

**3. Semiotic hybridization (street-style as postmodern text)**

An eloquent example of the dynamism of the ie as a living object is its integration into postmodern urban street-style by the younger generation. When an ie embroidered with ancestral motifs is worn eclectically alongside a black leather jacket, denim pants, and sports footwear, we witness a complex phenomenon of semiotic hybridization.

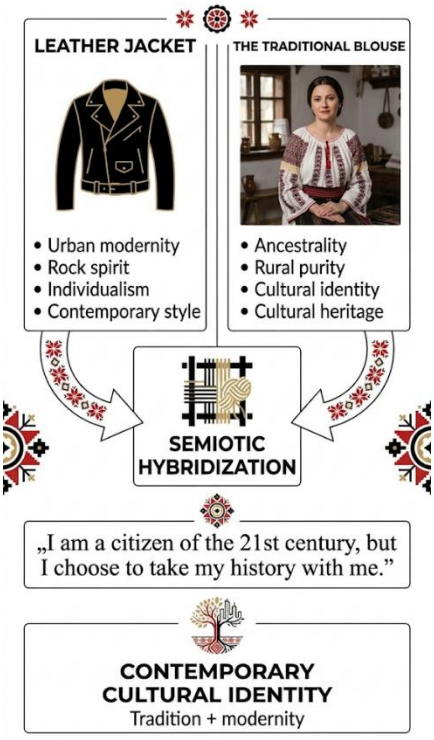


*Fig. 1. Semiotic hybridization*

The leather jacket - a sign of urban modernity, of a rebellious or rock spirit - enters into a collision-style dialogue with the ie - a sign of the ancestral, of rural purity, and of collective memory. Far from destroying the traditional object, this decontextualization generates a completely new cultural text adapted to the alert rhythm of metropolitan life. The message transmitted is hybrid and deeply relevant to the present: I am a citizen of the 21st century, but I choose to wear my history and roots in plain sight.

According to researcher Maria Bîtcă, "the folk costume was honed and perfected with the participation of many generations and, regardless of the changes that occurred in the context of evolution, care was always taken to infuse details into it - symbols that adapted it to the times while preserving its originality”[7].

The analysis of the Romanian ie’s metamorphosis, from the rigorous semiotics of archaic society to contemporary processes of identity recovery, demonstrates with certainty that traditional ornament was never a simple abstract geometric decoration, but an unwritten yet highly articulate form of preserving collective memory.

[7] Bâtcă Maria. *Costumul popular românesc.* București: Centrul Național pentru Conservarea și Promovarea Culturii Tradiționale, 2006, p. 36.

The initial dichotomy between the frozen cultural document in museum showcases and the fashion object subject to consumption should not be viewed as a destructive opposition, but as a creative tension absolutely essential for the survival of heritage. Museumification and the scientific rigor of ethnographers are vital for keeping the basic grammar and the unchangeable lexicon of our identity signs intact. Equally, fashion, ethical cultural consumption, stylistic hybridization, and the transformation of the ie into an everyday clothing item represent the oxygen that prevents this heritage from becoming a simple, inert archaeological relic.

Even if contemporary society has partially lost the ability to literally read the meaning of every rhombus or every "wolf's tooth" on the încreț, the public intuitively perceives that the ie carries a deeply encoded message[8]. Through the efforts of current communities to relearn its grammatical alphabet and through the refusal to reduce it to the status of a simple globalized commercial design, the ie is successfully transformed from a static historical document into a living, powerful, and highly eloquent discourse of identity. The ie continues to speak to the present; our duty is to continue learning and respecting its structural alphabet.

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[8] Bâtcă Maria. *Însemn și simbol în vestimentația țărănească*. București: Semne, 1997.