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CASA MARE AS A SOURCE OF AUTHENTICITY FOR THE URBAN CULTURE OF CHISINAU*

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Rezumat

Casa mare ca sursă a autenticității pentru cultura urbană a Chișinăului

Prezența *casei mari* ca unul din elementele-cheie cele mai expresive ale culturii tradiționale în mediul urban al Chișinăului mărturisește despre păstrarea unei legături strânse între cultura rurală și cea urbană din Moldova. În primul rând, această situație este legată de particularitățile procesului de urbanizare, desfășurat în ultimii 70 de ani, în rezultatul căruia s-a format o populație urbană eterogenă, marea majoritate a căreia menține legătura cu satul și păstrează anumite practici rurale. În plus, cultura tradițională rurală este un element-cheie în menținerea identității naționale, deoarece garantează continuitate și unicitate într-o lume globalizată. Astfel se explică popularizarea ei la nivelul politicii culturale și prezența remarcabilă în sfera urbană. Și dacă componenta muzicală a culturii tradiționale domină la sărbători, festivaluri și alte evenimente urbane, atunci în aspectul vizual al mediului urban se observă reflectarea elementelor *casei mari*. Camera de oaspeți a casei țărănești, mobilată și decorată cu cele mai frumoase obiecte și care îndeplinește un șir de funcții rituale nu a putut să fie „mutată” în oraș împreună cu purtătorii culturii. Cu toate acestea, o parte a funcțiilor sale a trecut la restaurante (ritualuri familiale și de sărbători) și teatre populare (folclor), iar partea vizuală reprezentată prin ornamente, gama de culori a covoarelor și broderiilor, a suportat o serie de transformări și este prezentă în mediul urban modern.

Cuvinte-cheie: Chișinău, *casa mare*, tradiție, mediu urban, autenticitate.

Резюме

Casa mare как источник аутентичности для городской культуры Кишинёва

Присутствие *casa mare*, одного из ключевых и наиболее ярких элементов традиционной культуры, в городской среде Кишинёва свидетельствует о сохранении тесной взаимосвязи сельской и городской культуры в Молдове. Это в первую очередь связано с особенностями процесса урбанизации, который пришелся на последние 70 лет, в результате которого сформировалось разнородное городское население, большинство которого поддерживает связь с селом и сохраняет определенные сельские практики. Кроме того, сельская традиционная культура является ключевым элементом в поддержании национальной идентичности, поскольку обеспечивает преемственность и уникальность в глобализованном мире. Этим объясняется ее популяризация на уровне культурной политики и заметное присутствие в

городской среде. И если на праздниках, фестивалях и других городских событиях доминирует музыкальная составляющая традиционной культуры, то в визуальном аспекте городской среды наблюдается отражение элементов *casa mare*. Парадная комната деревенского дома, обставленная и украшенная самыми красивыми объектами и выполняющая ряд ритуальных функций, не могла «переехать» в город вместе с носителями культуры. Тем не менее, часть ее функций на данный момент перешла к ресторанам (семейные ритуалы и праздники) и народным театрам (фольклор), а визуальная часть в виде орнаментов, цветовых решений ковров и вышивки прошла ряд трансформаций и присутствует в современной городской среде.

Ключевые слова: Кишинев, *casa mare*, традиция, городская среда, аутентичность.

Summary

Casa mare as a source of authenticity for the urban culture of Chisinau

The presence of *casa mare*, one of the key and most striking elements of traditional culture, in the urban environment of Chisinau attests preservation of a close relationship between rural and urban culture in Moldova. It is primarily related to the peculiarities of the urbanization process that took place during the last 70 years, which resulted in the formation of a heterogeneous urban population, the majority of which maintains links with the village and preserves certain rural practices. Moreover, rural traditional culture is a key element in maintaining national identity, as it provides continuity and uniqueness in a globalized world. This explains its popularization at the level of cultural policy and its visible presence in the urban environment. While festivals, celebrations and other urban events are dominated by the musical component of traditional culture, the visual aspect of the urban environment reflects elements of *casa mare*. The representative room of the village house furnished and decorated with the most beautiful objects and performing a number of ritual functions, could not “move” to the city together with the bearers of culture. Nevertheless, some of its functions have now passed to restaurants (family rituals and holidays) and folk theaters (folkloric compound), and the visual part in the form of ornaments, colors of carpets and embroidery has undergone a number of transformations and is present in the modern urban environment.

Key words: Chisinau, *casa mare*, tradition, urban milieu, authenticity.

Growing up in Chisinau one should be particularly self-reflective to notice the extent to which traditional culture has spread in the urban milieu. My childhood memories allow me to differentiate between two cultural worlds, which existed in Chisinau in 1980-s and remained since then in the present-day city. The main marker was the language (Romanian and Russian), the other, unperceived, – the culture. Traditional Moldovan music, performed by the folk orchestras on radio and TV, folk festivals, folk dancers in traditional costumes and many other forms constituted a permanent cultural background for all the citizens despite their ethnicity. Moldovan culture could be perceived for a member of an out-group as framed in a village life-style. It was dramatically “folklorised” in media and reduced to several prominent and mostly visible elements because of the state cultural policy – expression of socialist ideas in the national/ethnic artistic forms. The effectiveness of such an approach manifested in gradual transformation of these initially formalized forms into living “normal” practices. The rural traditional culture first was deprived of its religious basis, and after that in such a reduced form became institutionalized. USSR was the first state to create a Ministry of Culture (Куренной 2013: 35) with its local branches in the Soviet Republics, which held under control all the institutions connected with the culture. Jennifer Cash, who wrote about interconnection between national and folkloric movements in independent Moldova, mentions, that for the majority of the leaders of folk ensembles their education as dancers or musicians preceded their engagement in folklore (Cash 2007b: 113). Therefore “returning to the roots” became one of the symbols of national revival after USSR disintegration. Cash argues, that members of the folkloric movement of 1980–1990s sought to replace the choreographed repertoires, stylized performances, and politicized narratives of “folklore” presented by popular ensembles with “authentic” folklore as it existed in Moldova’s actual villages (Cash 2007a: 594). This raises the question of authenticity, as well as forms of further existence of traditional culture in modern Moldovan society.

Generally speaking, the common representations about traditional lifestyle are bound with the rural area, where they formed a definite complex and were practiced for a long period of time. The city usually is associated with modernity, which either excludes or significantly transforms the traditional practices. In Chisinau though there formed an interesting correlation between tradition and modernity. Traditional folk culture happened to play a crucial role in the formation of the modern urban milieu of

Chisinau (Ivanova 2021). Due to a complex of historical, demographical and political reasons (and mainly the specific features of urbanization process) it always was a part of urban life. Now traditions are being promoted as an important element of political branding, as well as a base for national identity formation. The search for identity within the context of globalization led to actualization of traditional rural culture in the quality of origins of nation, seen primarily in ethnic terms. Therefore, the elements of this culture are dispersed everywhere in the city of today, for it is highly promoted and popularized. The elaborated symbol “tree of life” as touristic brand for Moldova (Древо Жизни) became an omnipresent. The elements, stylized or represented as “authentic”, appear in murals, fashion, city and country symbols, music, festivals etc. Thus, Chisinau combines modernity with tradition and in such a way helps to keep affinity for different generations of the rural migrants.

Speaking about traditions and authenticity, it is important to keep in mind that traditional way of life suffered many transformations, especially during the last 150 years. Industrialization, urbanization, migrations drastically changed lifestyles in rural regions of Moldova. J. Cash argues, that after its spectacular revival in 1980-1990s, the traditional culture of 2000s seemed to be abandoned due to the closing of institutions, decrease of interest for the public concerts and massive presence of the foreign material and media culture (Cash 2016: 339). Nevertheless, nowadays there are certain traits of interest towards rural culture and certain traditions remain. In this paper I would like to present some reflections about *casa mare* (*big house/room*), considering its virtual significance and symbolism. Along with traditional cuisine and some folk melodies *casa mare* plays a role of a cultural marker, for it combines visual and symbolic representations of traditional rural culture in the Republic of Moldova. However, traditions do not remain unchanged and undergo specific transformations in the new urban environment. This evolution and the general interest to the traditional culture, passes some stages depending on the national politics and economical state of the society.

Casa mare is a separate room in a traditional three-chamber house. This structure formed in the XIX century. The chamber was distinct from the other two (with living and household functions) as being cold (unheated) and uninhabited. It was used as a festive room for the family ceremonies and different holidays and as a clean room to keep the most valuable objects, especially *zestre* (dowry). The latter should be represented by means of a special piece of furniture – carved chest, and include self-made fes-

tive garments, woven fabrics, rugs etc. The dowry aimed to show the economic well-being of the family, as well as the bride's handicraft. The whole room was covered with different kinds of fancy decorations, rugs, and the central wall was garnished with the biggest carpet, which had different names depending on the region and time period (scoartă, război, covor etc.). Therefore, scientific literature attributes representative functions to this room, particularly in the rituals of courtship and marriage as a part of economic exchange. Decoration of *casa mare* in the houses of elderly villagers was more modest and included objects, clothes and different pieces of woven fabric for the death rituals. As a rule, the traditional worldview opposes the category of clean objects and sacredness to the profane ones. Specifically, the same room in Romania acquires such names as *casa curată*, *casa cea bună*, *casa frumoasă* (clean, nice, good house) (Pârâu 2001: 27). As Romanian ethnologist, Ion Ghinoiu, argues, the traditional worldview conferred to the house a definite meaning of a sacred place, where people are born and die (Ghinoiu 1991: 167). Therefore, *casa mare* owns a special sacred zone – the eastern corner with icons. Thus, it integrates several important functions: a socio-economic space, a sacred space for performance of rituals, a place for intergenerational gatherings. It was filled with the most valuable, prestigious and festive objects. A separate room with similar functions and interior was present in the houses of the other ethnic groups, inhabiting Moldova – Gagauz (Маруневич 1980: 142), Bulgarians (Miron, 2023, 130), Ukrainians (Кожухар 2021: 410), and even Russians Old Believers (Dushakova 2013: 32). It was intended for welcoming of guests and holiday celebrations, and was also nicely furnished with the most valuable objects of the family. Although as Moldavian ethnographer Elena Postolachi notes, “No other nation does accord so much importance to this space as Moldovans do” (Postolachi 2007: 35).

Drastic changes of the XX century significantly damaged traditional rural lifestyle on the territory of nowadays Moldova. Modernization changed the rural hierarchical and gender structures, and there was no more need in creating and collecting of hand-made dowry. The number of homemade fabrics decreased everywhere and they were replaced by purchased products (Постолаки 2010: 440). While the industrial products took place of handicraft, the communist ideology deprived religion of its role of a leading social institution. The rural house also continued its evolution: due to the new materials and heating possibilities it changes its size and structure. The three-chamber house was often divided into sep-

arate buildings – a small one for living and another big one with representative functions. The latter – ornately furnished and with new furniture – usually remained closed and cold, and was used only during the celebrations. Its functions could be attributed to the previous *casa mare*, for it intended to prove the high social status of its hosts, their hard-working nature – a basic value for rural Moldovans (Postolachi 2007: 36).

Nowadays it is almost impossible to find an original *casa mare*, for the old houses stay mostly ruined or abandoned, and if not – the only function left is accumulating of the family memories in photographs and personal objects. In some cases, it is kept as a family sitting room. It ought to be noted that until recent times the status and social prestige was maintained due to the labor migration. The first waves of migrants spent their earnings to construct huge new houses in their native villages. Today a big part of such houses stays uninhabited, for their hosts moved away together with their families.

Nevertheless, elements and overall symbolism of *casa mare* are spread throughout the country, even in the urban space. First of all, the “exemplary” *casa mare*, arranged by museum workers or ethnographers, is presented in many museums, especially the local ones (village museums). Here they serve as a memory of a relatively recent lifestyle, typical for the majority of Moldovan population. They are mostly comprised of the objects collected from the local villagers to keep an image of local “history” perceived majorly as tradition.

Having moved to the city, rural residents retain ties with the village due to the extensive network of relatives and bring certain practices, traditions, and ideas. One of the prominent examples of using the image and concept of *casa mare* in the urban environment are ethnic style restaurants. In 2022 I carried out a special research of such restaurants and traced their evolution and typology (Иванова 2024). Their main feature suggested the outplay of hospitality rituals in a specially designed space by means of different objects typical for a traditional *casa mare*. Some objects used to be deliberately brought from the rural areas to raise the ratio of authenticity of the place. Many restaurants in ethnic style offer separate festive zones for the family celebrations, even the weddings, thus fulfilling another function of *casa mare* – family gatherings and rituals (for example, very important rites connected with birth and baptism of a child or funeral feast). The concept of interior was gradually changing. The older restaurants used to present a “museum” model of a rural house filled with a huge number of objects, including souvenirs and

pieces from the Soviet period, as well as the modern one. Most probably it was the hosts' memory about the houses of their parents or grandparents, which formed a corresponding representation (Image 1, 2). Together with the development of interior design in Moldova there appeared new concepts with much stylization and rethinking of traditional elements (Image 3).

However, despite stylization there can be observed one persistent element, which in some cases represents *casa mare* as a whole. In the new *La Plăcinte* restaurant, the whole interior is modern with much stylization of traditional motifs, but for the wall carpets, with original ornaments and colors (La Plăcinte). Thanks to its size and visibility, the big wall carpet is used in restaurants from abroad, for example one from Thailand, which carries all the symbolic assignment (Image 4).

The abovementioned carpet has a certain history of transformations due to the discontinuity of tradition in the XX century. It can symbolize not only *casa mare*, but also its evolution, as well as degradation of some traditions, including needlework and weaving. The carpets collected by ethnographers and held in the museum collections demonstrate a radical change in colors and motifs together with emergence of new chemical pigments. Originally Moldovan carpets are characterized by the two main distinct features – mild colors due to the natural pigments and stylized images and ornaments (geometrical, floral, zoomorphic, anthropomorphic) (Шапануца 1984: 8). At the turn of the century, big wall carpets started to represent big naturalistic red or pink roses on the dark (black) background, which replaced the original moderate natural pigments and stylized images. The image of red roses on black background gradually developed into a *sine qua non* attribute of Moldovan culture. Generally, specialists attribute its appearance to the end of the XIX century (Постолаки 2010: 440), and in the 1960–1970s it reached its peak of popularity. The problem of the origin of this design and its specific vogue among the population requires a separate study. Among multiple examples, I would like to point out two referring to Chisinau. The image of carpet with roses won in a competition and was painted on a wall near the National library (Image 5).

The city administration decided to cover a part of the central pedestrian street with stylized carpet motifs. This is a good example of traditional culture promotion in the city (Image 6).

This carpet with roses is so pervasive in everyday life that it is taken for granted by non-specialists as old and original, as a self-evident symbol of national

traditional culture, as it is woolen and homemade. For example, this pattern and color combination can be found not only in carpets, but also in furniture upholstery and in garment production. Fragments of the carpet motifs and colors spread in interior design, decoration of clothes. Thus, the type of carpet ornamentation that emerged in the XX century has been actively developed and acquired its own symbolism. As one of the central elements of traditional culture, it accumulated certain mythology and continues its evolution in individual craftsmen and in industrial production. It is actively promoted for sell in social networks as original, for example in Facebook groups like „Casa mare official”, „Zestrea” etc., and not only inside the country, but also abroad, on huge Internet marketplaces like Etsy, where they are also called *Moldovan rose kilim rugs* (Images 7, 8).

The carpets are used as decorations at the city festivals and fairs, where they mean to attribute the hand-made objects to tradition (Images 9, 10).

Another function of *casa mare* in the urban environment is its ritual compound reflected in the folklore. Almost all family celebrations were highly ritualized and accompanied by special texts and songs. Although this part of nowadays celebrations is omitted or replaced by the modern “folk” music, there are ensembles and theaters which tend to revive this tradition. First of all, it is important to mention „Tălăncuța”, founded in 1980 by Andrei Tamazlîcaru, which was at the origin of the following folklore movement. Its role in national revival was amply researched by J. Cash (2012). It was known for performing and promoting the original folklore heard in the rural area. As to the *casa mare* image, it was originally applied by the theaters, for it best served their tasks. Thus, the “Epic Theater of Ethnography and Folklore Ion Creangă”, founded in 1989, defined its scene as *casa mare*, where they played festive rites and folk narratives, aiming their promotion (Teatrul). Another theater “Moldovan village Bucium”, was founded in 1992, but due to some events closed and re-opened in 2022 with the help of the city administration. The whole auditorium there represents a kind of *casa mare*, where a part is filled with seats, and another serves the scene. The walls are partly covered with carpets and there are also some objects which are meant to represent tradition (Image 11).

Although the role of these theaters in revival of traditional culture remains unclear because of a very modest exposure, their presence in the city life and particularly in the recent years (renovation of *Buciumul*) proves the actualization of interest towards tradition for the state and society. This apparent interest marks a phase in a long process of traditional culture

ups and downs, with decades of disregard because of modernization of the household and urbanization. Thus, one of my respondents said that her parents were offended by her disrespect towards the *zestre* – when she put the hand-made wall carpet on the floor of her city apartment. Some authors note that rural women refuse to continue the tradition of weaving, because their children object to receive their hand-made dowry perceived as “out of vogue” (Susai 2020: 41). Now these carpets even with a kitsch design are becoming part of memory, of tradition, and as such successfully merchandised. We can observe that this phenomenon deals with the search of identity and therefore with the nation-building process. As one of the prominent nation-building researchers Anthony Smith noted, national traditions are not being invented, but reconstructed in an innovative way; he was one of the first who observed a special role of traditional culture in politics, economy and social life (Паин, Простаков 2016: 257).

Tradition as such is a part of modern life. Simon J. Bronner, analyzing connection between traditions and modernity, argues that “tradition is a living and ubiquitous, if often neglected or suppressed, process in modern people’s lives. Its constancy in, and interaction with, modernity can be explained by its reference to precedence, social connection, consecutiveness, and what I call its “handiness” as well as “folkiness” (Bronner 2011: 1). The necessity of having roots widens the popular notion of tradition, when people perceive as traditional all the objects which satisfy two main criteria: they should be hand-crafted from natural materials and they should have rural origins (their parents or grandparents). That’s why in many public spaces such as restaurants we see not only truly traditional objects, but also souvenirs from the recent periods, including the Soviet one. In the visions of Moldovan citizens, the notion of authenticity is applied to such objects as a whole.

Authenticity is an important and complicated issue that remains unsolved in the Republic of Moldova. Modernization and the Soviet cultural policy, which institutionalized the culture and promoted it in the format of festivals, has led to a loss of cultural continuity. As a part of the state policy the culture lost in its authenticity, for between the cultural practice and its performer there appeared an institution, which regulated not only the form of this practice, but educational and organizational parts as well. As the crucial connection between the culture and its performers was largely broken, there appeared a range of cultural products that looked as traditional, for example, the above-mentioned carpet with roses and majority of souvenirs presents on the market. Now-

adays traditional culture from the one hand, searches for its originality and “purity”, from the other, it is affected by the worldwide commoditization and continuing institutionalization. The latter though is no more socialistic by the contents, but capitalistic one. This dilemma seems to be unsolvable so far, for it requires codification of “real traditions” and their purification from the kitsch. Erik Cohen argues that authenticity cannot be viewed only in strict scholarly frames as a quality of pre-modern life, but as “an eminently modern value, whose emergence is closely related to the impact of modernity upon the unity of social existence” (Cohen 1988: 373). Thus, authenticity, being closely linked with a range of phenomena generated by tourism, carries out an essential function of revealing culture to the external public. From this point of view, the contents of authenticity loses importance. For example, as E. Cohen demonstrates on different cases, “Commoditization does not necessarily destroy the meaning of cultural products <...>, although it may do so under certain conditions. Tourist-oriented products frequently acquire new meanings for the locals, as they become a diacritical mark of their ethnic or cultural identity” (Cohen 1988: 383).

The demonstrative example of *casa mare* shows evolving of a tradition under the processes of modernization. Being once a concentrate of visions about beauty, status, memory and handicraft in a limited space it lost its initial physical frames and some of important functions. Due to the change in social structure, gender roles and economy type it quit its representative role connected with social and economic village hierarchy. Nevertheless, *casa mare* replaced its main functions of family reunions and new social connections into the new spaces of restaurants. The function of social memory found itself in museums. It also sporadically emerges on festivals dedicated to different traditions and as a longing for acquisition of an “authentic” product. The festive and folkloric drama moved into ethnic theaters and folk ensembles, and its material visual part became dispersed through private and public urban areas (elements of interior, murals etc.). One more important function – demonstration of hospitality – spread out from the physical limits of private sitting-rooms and public places (restaurants) across the whole country. Today *casa mare* is used in the country brand to underline its hospitality and authenticity of its culture (for example, <https://moldova.travel/en/>). It became the symbol of openness, sociality, supportiveness and actually of those values, which are promoted for a healthy modern society, and thus – it remained a living tradition.

Note

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Annex:



Image 1. Restaurant *Acasă la mama*, Chișinău. Photo Nina Ivanova



Image 2. Restaurant *Sălcioara*, Chișinău. Photo Nina Ivanova



Image 3. Restaurant *Fuior Gourmet*, Chișinău. Photo Nina Ivanova



Image 4. Restaurant *Moldova*, Thailand, Phuket. Photo from <https://locals.md/2022/v-tailande-na-ostrove-phuket-otkrylsya-restoran-moldova/> (visited 10.07.2024)



Image 5. City mural, Chișinău. Photo Nina Ivanova



Image 6. Street fragment, Chișinău. Photo Nina Ivanova

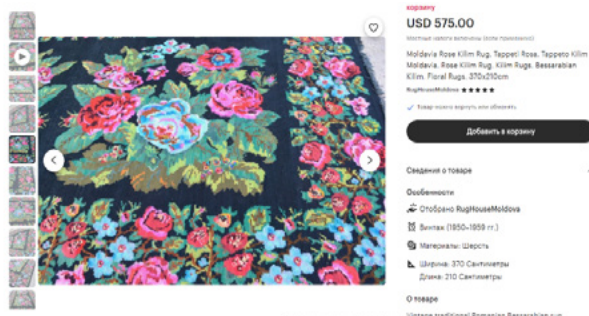


Image 7. Moldovan rug on Etsy. Photo from the site: https://www.etsy.com/market/moldovan_kilim (visited 15.08.2024)

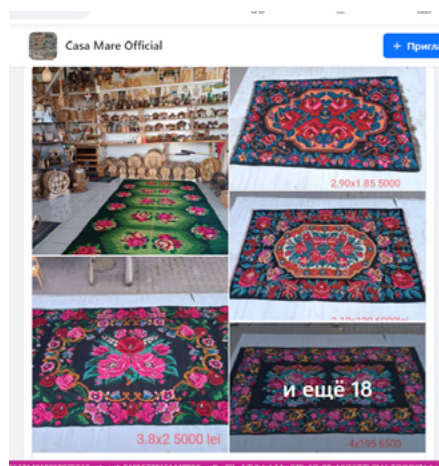


Image 8. Rose rugs in Facebook. Photo from the site: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/685803341974552> (visited 10.08.2014)



Image 9. Wine day, 2023, Chișinău. Photo Nina Ivanova



Image 10. Chisinau City Day, 2022. Photo Nina Ivanova



Image 11. *Bucium* Theater. Photo from the official site: <https://buciumul.md/> (visited 11.08.2014)

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