

# The Traditional Romanian Blouse - from Peasants Clothing to Today's Urban Closet

Mădălina Căpraru

**Abstract**—An element of identity that reflects the local origin, the social and civil status, the economic power and ethnicity, the Romanian blouse called `ie` was the identity card of every Romanian woman. It was sewn in secret and it represented one of the most important elements of the traditional attire. While realizing one's blouse, the woman knew that the outcome would not only talk about her origin and social standing, the blouse being also a representation of the wearer as a whole. By looking at the way a blouse was made, one would know if the girl was going to be a diligent, hard-working wife or a lazy one. So, no matter the financial prowess of one's family, every household had to have handsewn festive clothing for both the men and women.

Before the industrialization period, the entire process of crafting the clothes, including the blouse was placed in the intimacy of the household, but as the technology and industrialization advanced, the textile related practices ceased to be created only in the home and the people have started to change, simplify or give up entirely on the Romanian blouse. Given these changes, I have chosen to study the evolution of the Romanian blouse in the XXIst century.

While studying the evolution of the Romanian blouse, I have encountered a group of people that recreate it today's age by the authentic and traditional standards, as much as the technology and materials allow them to. To describe the people from this group, I will use the term „rejuvenator”.

In this article I will present not necessarily the evolution of the blouse, but the evolution of those involved in creating it. Once belonging to every peasant woman, the blouse, the authentic one, now belongs to a much narrower group of a different cultural, social and economic standing.

The results emerged after analyzing a number of 16 in-depth interviews conducted with the „rejuvenators”. The analysis was conducted through a grounded theory methodologic perspective through the help Nvivo.

**Keywords**—„rejuvenator”, rejuvenate, traditional Romanian blouse, social standing.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In this article I plan to present the evolution of the traditional Romanian blouse's status in relation to some of its wearers. This article is a part of a chapter that showcases today's rejuvenators of the Romanian blouse, where I present their main characteristic, the main practices regarding the creation and sewing of a blouse, be it for men or women and also their impact on the traditional Romanian blouse itself.

The presence of these rejuvenators on the scene of the

evolution of the Romanian blouse was discovered on the online social-media platform Facebook, where they organize

themselves through the help of Facebook Groups called `Social Soirees`, a traditional form of women gathering meant for peer teaching and help in different household activities. Through these soirees, the women, and sometimes men, exchange information regarding sewing techniques, types of materials used, way of finishing a blouse, rules of sewing and so on. They also use these groups to establish a recurring date and meeting place for face-to-face meetings, museum visits, fine material orders or other related activities.

The research of the evolution of the traditional Romanian blouse and the implication of the rejuvenators brought out a new fact regarding the blouse and its new main wearers and creators. It is important to mention that the main topic of the thesis and this article is the authentic traditional Romanian blouse and not the handcrafted one. Even if both of them are sewn by hand, there are several important differences that I will not tackle in this article as it brings no relevance to it.

To write this article, I have selected 16 interviews conducted with rejuvenators through Zoom, Skype or Facebook interviews, the observation of three Facebook group posts and from the participatory observation of the Social Soiree from the city I live in, Iasi, Romania. The interviews were analyzed from a grounded theory methodologic perspective and the data collected from the participatory observation and the analysis of the Facebook groups was used to confirm the statements of the interviews and to exemplify them.

In this article I want to bring to light how, through their promoting and preserving activities, the rejuvenators have transferred the ownership of the blouse from its initial owners. Although the ownership change was not caused only by the rejuvenators and in no way by their will, their presence and practice has influenced the market through variety and price and image of the blouse.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used to write this article is the same one applied in the thesis, namely constructionist grounded theory from the perspective of Kathy Charmaz, but with the coding process developed by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin. I have chosen K. Charmaz's model of grounded theory because I adhere to her constructivist approach on how data is created.

From this perspective, I recognize and accept the fact that by beliefs, social and cultural background, as well as simply my interaction with the subjects or way of interpreting and analyzing the interviews or other sources of information will influence the results of the research. From K. Charmaz's perspective, data is not created by the subject and simply collected by the researcher, but co-created by both the researcher and the subject [1]. I have not continued with the constructivist grounded theory method of coding as the one proposed by A. Strauss and J. Corbin was better suited for the theme of the thesis.

The data used to write this article was collected through technology mediated in-depth interviews over a span of 7 months. To better understand the world presented by the subjects during the interviews, I have chosen to join the Facebook groups of the social soirees and also to become a member of the local social soiree for the purpose of sewing my own blouse. Such an understanding is necessary as these groups have not been researched before in the local literature and I have no indication of the type of interactions between the members, actions and practices outside of those described by them. Kathy Charmaz suggests such an approach when using in depth interviewing [1]. At the same time as I was conducting new interviews, I was coding the already taken ones to be able to have the data decide the next subject or content of the interviews. That being said, the main sampling method used was the theoretical sampling where the analyzed data guided the ongoing data collection process [2]. Aside from theoretical sampling, I have used the snowballing sampling method, asking the already interviewed subjects to connect me with other possible individuals of interest. This method of gathering subjects also helped me establish the relationship between rejuvenators and/ or social soirees [3]. This proved beneficial, as one of the premises of constructivist grounded theory is that individuals co-construct the reality [4].

#### A. Coding process

The data analysis process based on the coding model developed by Strauss and Corbin [5] led to the identification of 2190 codes in the first stage of coding. After a re-coding of these codes and re-analysis of the interviews, I have reached a number of 3200 in-vivo codes after the open coding step. The next step of the coding process, the axial coding, was also realized in two stages, the first one totaled to 30 codes and the second one totaled up to 52 codes. I saw necessary a reevaluation of the first stage of coding after analyzing the existing codes and comparing them to what the data really expressed. Out of all 52 codes resulted in the axial coding process, relevant to this article are only 11 parent codes, some because of the existence of a relevant children code. The translated relevant parent codes are Industrialization, in reference to the influence outside of the intention of today's rejuvenators, like the emergence of new technologies and materials. Another relevant code is the Influences code with the New Materials, Fashion, Individual tastes, Economic influences and Royal Workrooms relevant children codes.

Aside from these impersonal parent codes, the other 9 are more related to the characteristics and opinions of the rejuvenators. The Authentic, Criterion of traditionality, Specificity, The XXIst century blouse, are parent codes that encompass the opinions and standard of sewing practiced by the study group.

The rest of the parent codes relevant, namely Costs, Education, Resources, Rejuvenators and Social Soirees all encompass characteristics of the study group. The next stage of the coding process, the selective coding, should lead to the formation of concepts or theories or to a better understanding of a phenomenon [6]. The last stage brought out two theoretical models, one focused on the traditional Romanian blouse and one focused on the social soirees and the evolution of the blouse from their perspectives. None of these models is of interest for this article so I will not mention them here.

While grouping and grooming the codes, I have developed a model of describing the rejuvenators from their educational, economic standings and social interactions. All these characteristics were shaped by analyzing the discourses of the subjects themselves and are found as in-vivo codes.

#### B. Codes that describe the cultural resources of the rejuvenators

While discussing their journey into the world of sewing traditional blouses, all the subjects underlined the importance of thorough documentation before starting to sew your own blouse. Some of them, if not all, have started by dedicating the first few months just for documentation, that has continued even after starting to sew. The parent codes that cover the cultural resource part are Education and Resources. Some of the in-vivo translated codes that are to be found in the aforementioned parent codes are:

- "...we have conducted research in old albums, we have shared information, we have made tests" (M.M.M.),
- "...and we learned from him. Sewing points, colors, specific terms, techniques, the «functional craping technique»" (M.M.M),
- "...and some books are essential" (B.V),
- "I always tell the girls to use the museum as a frame of reference. ... Do not let any museum pass by." (B.V.),
- "You need thorough documentation: to visit museum, to buy and consult books, to research every ethnographic area, there is no other way" (E.C.).

Here it is obvious that one of the most important characteristics of a rejuvenator is their inclination to always learn, study and research. As it can be seen, the information is only gathered from authoritative places like books, museums, old collections.

Another important criterion of these rejuvenators is the way in which the simple practice of sewing and working on these blouses has changed their spending habits. I want to mention that I have not conducted research on their spending habits before and after starting to sew. The conclusions presented here are drawn from their own statements, correlated with the observations made at the soiree meetings or on the

Facebook groups. The parent codes that describe the way this hobby has changed their habits and expenses are Rejuvenators and Costs.

*C. Codes that describe the economic resources and spending of a rejuvenator (related to the hobby of sewing a blouse)*

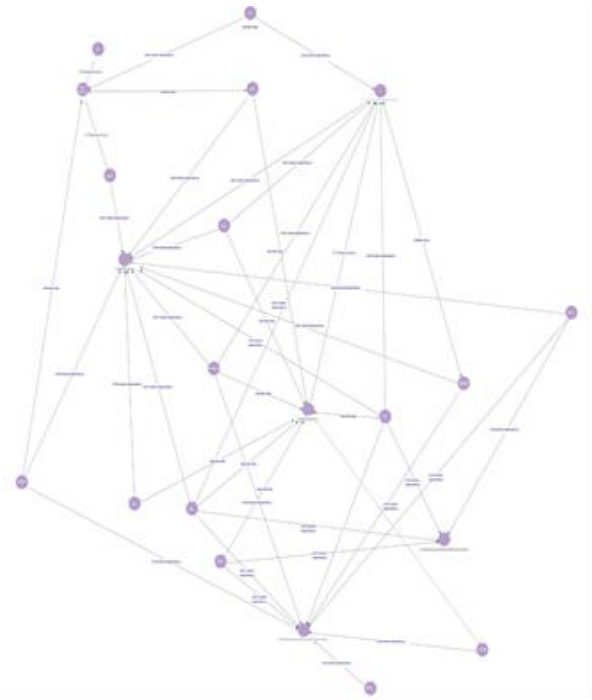
When talking about preparing to sew a blouse, aside from collecting all the information needed, the subjects also talked about materials and their importance. While in the social soirees there are multiple types of members that invest according to their budget and prefer industrial fabrics, most of the rejuvenators I have talked with prefer old or new, hand-woven materials which are more expensive compared to the new, industrial ones. Also, to supply the need of hand-woven textiles, some studios have started to produce it. But the cloth meant for the blouse is not the only expensive material one needs. The traditional blouse worn at festivities was sewn with golden or silver threads or metallic tinsels, especially in the richer families. While today, there is a variety of materials that can mimic the metallic thread, at much cheaper prices, to sew a blouse using high quality and resistant materials, one has to sometimes pay a few times more. While talking to one of the rejuvenators, she told me about an order made in Spain for a metallic thread for which only the advanced pay was around 20.000 euros. While it is true that the order was placed for a large group of women, the price of one spool of golden thread is 120 euro, while the price for an imitation is 12 euros.

Another type of rejuvenator that falls into the group of high spenders is the collector because the act of sewing a blouse may be expensive, but the act of buying an old, authentic Romanian blouse is far more expensive, the price ranging from 57 euros for a newer one to 400 euros to an older, richly decorated one.

If I were to make a comparison between the sewing practices and economical status of today's women compared to the women of the XIXth century, I would say that the balance has somewhat remained the same, but shifted towards the urban sector, as all of the rejuvenators interviewed live in cities.

*D. Codes that describe the social interactions of the rejuvenators*

Another important characteristic encountered only in the case of rejuvenators is their connectivity, described in the parent codes Rejuvenators and Social Soirees. This translates in the relations they have with other rejuvenators, other social soirees and public or private institutions like museums, collectors and museum staff. With the help of the Nvivo software, I have created social network charts between the rejuvenators and the most relevant actors involved in the process of creating and rejuvenating a traditional Romanian blouse. Here is a network charts that presents the relationships between the rejuvenators interviewed, their affiliation to social soirees and interaction and dependency to several Facebook groups, scientific material and relation to museums and museum staff.



This social network graph shows exactly how important it is to be engaged in a community. The members of these communities have periodic face-to-face or on-line meetings and are active Facebook users, where they share their work progress, ask for advices or share information regarding sewing techniques, museum visits or books.

Even after describing the main characteristics of the rejuvenators, the change of the status of the blouse is still not deciphered. Aside from the fact that the blouse started to be created by more economically stable and educated men or women, it's shift to the urban wearers is still not explained.

The first time the blouse started to be embraced in the urban sector was when the wives of the Romanian aristocrats, by the advice of the queen, started to open workrooms for the purpose of creating traditional attires. This transformed the blouse from an intimate item to an industrial one. After the fall of the monarchy and transition to the communist regime, the Romanian blouse began to be realized in handicraft cooperatives mainly for export use.

After the fall of the communist regime, women working in such cooperatives started to be employed by craftsmen to sew traditionally inspired blouses mainly and solely for commercialization in fairs and city shops. This is when the shift from a village only attire, the blouse became a mainly city attire.

Nowadays, even if there are materials for women to start sewing again, out of all the subjects I have spoken with that sew authentic blouses, only one craftswoman was living in the countryside, the others, the rejuvenators, were living in cities. Among social soirees, all members war living in the city and the most active social soirees exist in the bigger cities.

### III. CONCLUSION

The idea of looking into the shift of the traditional Romanian blouse from the rural to the urban wardrobe came after meeting the rejuvenators. Even if it was somewhat obvious, as the handcrafted blouse was sold in the cities, the traditional was always associated with the rural, with the handcrafted. Even nowadays, the workshops of the artisans are mostly located in the countryside, where most old women live. But their work does not remain there.

If we take into consideration the creation and existence of the authentic blouses, they now belong mostly or solely to the city wardrobe of the upper-middle class or higher.

That is also because the city offers the possibility to acquire the necessary materials, knowledge and help needed to sew a blouse. Though, through their activities, some social soirees have started to encourage the process of sewing authentic Romanian blouses in rural areas as well, through schools and churches. This is a start to the re-introduction of the traditional blouse in the rural parts as well.

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A symbol of the Romanian peasant woman, the festive traditional Romanian blouse is now an expression of the economically independent, educated and stylish city woman