

Ana Fuciu

## Give Credit Where Credit is Due—a Brief History of *ia*

I received my first *ia* when I was just beginning to have a sense of my own life on earth. I believe it was the anniversary of my second lap around the sun when I first got acquainted with it (see photo of me with my grandparents on my 2nd birthday, 2004). Back then, I was not aware of the significance of this gift in my culture; all I knew is that I felt like a little princess who got a new ball gown and couldn't stop showing it off. You might have no idea what this thing is that I am talking about. First things first, *ia* is the name for the Romanian women's blouse. It comes from the Latin "tunicae linea" which translates to a straight, thin linen tunic (Gheorghică).



The blouse has a history that dates back centuries—and I dare say even millennia. It is more than just a folk costume item used by women to cover themselves; it is a symbol of femininity, grace and uniqueness. Each *ia* is unique. The traditional way of weaving it includes a wooden loom, along with a very patient and passionate seamstress. It has all sorts of embroidery, motifs and seams that are carefully sewn on the clothing piece after weaving. The motifs differ from one region to the other, as well as the color scheme and sometimes even the material it is confected from; *ia* can be made from cotton, homemade mulberry silk, linen, or hemp. Serving a great range of purposes, from being a day-to-day item to wedding attire, *ia* has both an individual and collective significance for each Romanian woman who wears it.

My grandma is the one who introduced the importance of conserving our ancestral heritage to me. She has three boys—my dad and his two brothers—so she has never experienced the joy of dressing up a toddler girl. I suspect she even prepared this attire for my 2<sup>nd</sup> birthday long before I was born, hoping that I would turn out to be a girl. I called my grandma to find out more about her relationship with *ia*.

“How did I react when you dressed me up on my birthday?” I asked.

She laughed.

“How do you think?! You were glowing as you always do,” she said. “You had no idea what that costume was, but it didn’t matter. Maybe your sixth sense felt its value.”

“When did you receive your first one?” I asked.

“Oh Lord, it must’ve been in elementary school. Back [in the 1950s] you couldn’t find anything to wear here.”

The Communist regime had just settled in 1947; in the 1950s, peasants were left without their lands which became state owned. They had to find means to dress their children for school—so women were forced to carry on the tradition for the sake of their families.

“Mamma weaved me blouses for school that I wore until I grew out of them. But the first embroidered one... in middle school when we started having school feasts,” she said.

“Mamma? Did she know how to weave?”

“Yes, she learnt it from her mother. And her mother from her grandmother. Those were the only passions peasant women had. Weaving and sewing.”

I never knew this about my great-grandma. Last year, my grandma gifted to me another *ia*, very different from the ones I already had. I never got to ask her about the blouse’s origin.

“So, is the blue one you gave me last Christmas woven by Mamma?”

“Yes, she made it for me when I was 18 to wear it at the [traditional Transylvanian Christmas] dance. That’s where your grandpa courted me.”

After turning 18, girls were due to marry as soon as possible. Around Christmas time, there were a lot of traditions and customs happening in rural areas, including this type of dance event. Only unmarried girls were allowed to participate, and it was widely known that single boys made them advances for the purpose of marriage. Also, it was a time to show off their newly-woven garments.

“Wow, I had no idea. Did women wear them at work also besides feast days?”

“Of course they did. Before we found clothes in stores, Mamma wove at the loom blouses for every season and occasion. Woollen for winter, sheer linen for summer in the fields. They weren’t only holy day attire” (M.Fuciu).

After talking to her, I realized once again why I felt so connected to my heritage. I mean, how can I not when I descend from so many generations of skilled women? It’s already in my DNA.

Folklore has developed throughout the tumultuous history of humanity in communities where literacy was mostly non-existent. As Roxana Claudia

Tompea states in her article “The #GiveCredit Campaign and Why It Matters: A Case Study of La blouse Roumaine,” illiterate peasants who relied on orality expressed themselves through signs and symbols placed on pottery, decorations, and clothing which depicted their narratives, sufferings, and creeds. This is how folklore fashion came to life. After meeting the basic need of warmth and protection, folk costumes serve the role of a history book to us. They are proof that our ancestors’ existence goes far beyond the earthly and mundane; it transcends to the metaphysical world, the world of universal ideas such as faith, love, courage, fear (Tompea), that all cultures have in common. Through them, our ancestors gave future generations something to hold onto when trying to understand their origins.

Ioana Corduneanu, co-author of “Semiotics of White Spaces on the Romanian Traditional Blouse, the *IA*,” is a Romanian architect and founder of *Semne Cusute* (Sewn Signs), a blog transformed into an online community that strives to carry on *ia*’s legacy by bringing together people who are interested in the traditional methods of weaving and sewing. She outlines the semiotic structure of the traditional blouse; the most important motifs include celestial elements (suns, moons, stars, angels etc.), geometric elements (such as the diamond with seeds which represents the most popular symbol of fertility), and “The Rivers” which flow either straight or meandering down the sleeve of the garment, depending on how the region’s topography influences their course (Corduneanu and Dragan 54). When wearing the *ia*, a woman “carries the sky on her shoulders, the story of her past (origins and rituals) on the back of the garment, and the stories of the future (collective fears and beliefs) on the front” (Tompea). This is essential to know in a conversation on giving credit to folklore.

The outside world had no idea about our beloved *ia* before the French painter Henri Matisse acknowledged its existence in one of his Expressionist masterpieces “La Blouse Roumaine,” in 1940. Since then, it has gained popularity on the international scene. The first notable designer who paid homage to the Romanian blouse is Yves Saint Laurent; he strongly promoted the apparel in his 1981 A/W collection dedicated to Matisse’s “La Blouse Roumaine” (Tompea). *Ia* became a statement piece that never gets out of style, a must-have for every fashion connoisseur. While Romanians were enjoying the international recognition, a new issue came into sight. Some foreign fashion houses started taking advantage of the Romanian culture and made great profits from pieces that replicated the original source. This is the reason why Andreea Tanasescu, former casting director at MediaPRO Studios in Bucharest, decided to rise against injustice and founded *La Blouse Roumaine*, an online community that fights cultural appropriation of the Romanian blouse, aiming to transform *ia* into a national brand. In an interview she gave in June 2020 to Mihnea Maruta, journalist and host of *InspiraTUFF*, she recalls the scandal caused by Tory Burch that claimed one of her 2017 coats was inspired from the African culture but emulated on a one-to-one scale a Romanian Coat exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The online community’s followers, as Tanasescu recounts, stormed on Tory Burch’s social media pages, and demanded the brand to admit the real inspiration for the 2017 collection—which they did in less than 48 hours while also removing the clothing items from their line.

Another incident that occurred around the same time tarnished Christian Dior's reputation. Tanasescu states that she recognized two embroidered vests that perfectly resembled the traditional vest from the historical region of Bukovina, Northern Romania, with prices starting at \$30,000 in Dior's 2017 collection. After the Tory Burch fuss, *La Blouse Roumaine* was already set on proposing a bill that would protect Romanian folk symbols from being misused—and what Dior did was the last straw (Tanasescu).

Even though the copyright bill didn't pass through, Tanasescu started the #GiveCredit campaign with a similar aim: raising awareness over copyrights and intellectual property theft of unregulated artistic creations such as the folk costumes. She said she was motivated to create this campaign because the traditional weaving techniques and motifs should not be appropriated without acknowledging their origin. A further aim of all her actions would consist of bringing creative industries and local communities together to support the intangible Romanian heritage passed down through many generations. Tanasescu also initiated the Universal Day of the Romanian Blouse—with the help of the Embassy of Romania in Washington DC—which has been celebrated since 2013 on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June (Midsummer Day or *Sânziene*) in Romanian communities all over the world after being officially recognized by the Office of the Mayor of Washington, D.C.

Intellectual property theft has undergone a surge in the past few years due to the lack of copyright laws for apparel. While inspiration is understandable, plagiarism is not. And that's exactly what happened in both of the cases mentioned above. Amalia Sabiescu, author of "Problematizing heritage crafts authorship and ownership: steps towards the intellectual property protection of the traditional Romanian blouse," describes the authorship of heritage craft—which is essential when talking about intellectual property protection—as "collective and anonymous," fundamentally different from contemporary crafts (186). Thus, it is harder to exert the power of IP protection over artisans' work. Nowadays, the know-how of traditional crafts goes beyond households, into collective associations which support production that was once only practiced at home by peasant women (Sabiescu 186). This doesn't make authorship less important; on the contrary, unauthorized selling of knock-offs may be regarded as an ethical theft. But as of today, there is no international intellectual property law to safeguard these crafts.

For a Romanian woman, the *ia* has a story attached to it because of its symbolism given by our ancestors' centuries of labour and sweat. When I told my grandma about this media mess, she put her finger on it: "I'm happy they haven't gone through the horrors Mamma has in order to get the inspiration for my *hora* (Romanian folk circle dance) blouse."

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