

# Architecture of Transhumance in Țara Oașului, Northern Romania: Fieldnotes

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## ABSTRACT

This research is an incursion into the topic of memory and recollection as processes of identity reconstruction, but also as a dimension of the heritage creation process. In the context of current social mobility and alienation, this issue receives new values, especially in the contemporary context of mobility (leaving rural communities in favour of urban living in the country or abroad). This uprooting led to the demolition of old houses with traditional architecture. The text presents a case study: the example given by a local entrepreneur, whose intention is to set up a touristic pension complex and thus, he buys old houses from all the villages in Țara Oașului (a region situated in the North-west Romania). In order to prepare the houses for their new location, detailed research was carried on, in order to find out the story of the family that lived there, the use of the objects that were discovered there. The article describes this endeavour for the house of the shepherd, making reference to the lifestyle of shepherds of yesteryear, and the objects they used. All in a strong connection with the people who actually inhabited and used the house, and the objects found inside. Last but not least, the research approach is an autoethnographic one. The insider position of the researcher is assumed and instrumentalized in the work of ethnographic description.

## KEYWORDS

Traditional culture; transhumance; shepherd; architecture; identity reconstruction; heritage memory; pastoral inventory.



## Crossroads on a journey down memory lane

Until the 1989 revolution that opened Romania's borders and allowed migration "outside, for work,"<sup>1</sup> people from Țara Oașului<sup>2</sup> (*oșeni*) made their living in a world where the rules were cast in stone by ancient rural traditions. The region was, and still is inhabited by shepherds, guardians, if I may say, of an age-old culture. Shepherds have an existence marked by festive moments that unify the experience of pastoral solitude with the joy of family

and community feasting. They live like hermits, technically with their family, but *in absentia*. They live together with the *văjniceri* [small sheep owners, who give their animals in the care of a *iuhaș*] and the *iuhaș* [owners of larger flocks, who have the means of building a sheepfold], but without these villagers. They live without a church but bringing the priest to the sheepfold. They live on the threshold of the house where they raise their kids, since they mostly stay at their hut in the sheepfold, without their families, yet providing them with food and clothing. The life of shepherds is, thus, on a border: living in the village and, at the same time, outside of it.

*Martor* 29/2024 - Dynamics of Intangible Heritage. Shepherding



Paul Lușca and Simion's house from Cămârzana while it was demolished in 2023. Photo credit: Mihaela Grigorean.

In the past, the *oșeni* were intensively engaged in raising cattle, because the hilly terrain did not allow for an increased productivity of plant cultivation. All four types of pastoralism were practiced in the region: sedentary, agricultural-local, pendular and transhumance (see Vuia 1964; 1980; David, Vlad and Fărcaș 2020). Even during the collectivization of the communist period, in Țara Oașului each family had 20-30 chickens, geese, ducks, turkeys, pearl hens, 2-4 pigs, 2-4 horned cattle and a pair of oxen or horses, 8-20 sheep and 2-6 goats (while buffaloes appeared after 1949 in some villages). Keeping animals provided them with food necessary for daily living: meat, milk and cheese, while skins, furs and wool were basic materials for making some pieces of (festive) clothing. Products obtained in the household constituted the basis of the diet in the region. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sugar, sweets or other fine food were often bought in exchange for eggs in Jewish shops selling various products. They sold a pig to buy corn that fed sheep and chickens during the winter.

Having both good grazing lands and hayfields, the *oșeni* adapted to the natural conditions in which they lived and knew how to capitalize on the local natural resources, both for raising animals and for building shelters from natural materials. In the interwar period,

the number of goats in Țara Oașului was higher, each household had 15-20 of them in addition to 20-25 sheep (Focșa 1975, 63). They gradually became fewer, because it was difficult to raise them, as they prefer prickly bushes and shrubs with nutritious buds. Sheep were the precious animals of the *oșeni*, both from the perspective of material living and as bearers of symbolic meanings in the rites of passage: "they are promised as gifts at births and weddings, as well as given as funeral gifts" (Focșa 1975, 65).

This research is an incursion into the topic of memory and recollection as processes of identity reconstruction, but also as a dimension of the heritage construction process (see Nora 1998). In the context of current social mobility and alienation, this issue receives new values. Moving away from the vein of traditional culture, by leaving rural communities in favour of urban living in the country or abroad, the uprooting led to the demolition of houses with traditional architecture. Those who went to work abroad in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century always had in mind the desire to validate the status of wealthy people via behaviours and practices generated by the modernization and Europeanisation of the Romanian village. These practices gradually imposed themselves as new norms of community behaviours and of signalling social hierarchies: the replacement of local natural materials with those manufactured industrially; the

demolition of wooden houses with stone foundations and glued with clay, and their replacement with large brick or concrete constructions; giving up animal husbandry and therefore also shepherding; buying from shops and supermarkets. Traditional objects and tools were exiled in the attics, as they no longer were useful for this new lifestyle, although their owner could not leave behind yet...

The Paul family from Cămărzana, an isolated depressed area in Țara Oașului, is one of the few families in the village that still preserves, in 2024, the house of their parents and grandparents in the yard, even though it has been uninhabited for several years. The interior is intact, frozen in the 1980s and the 1990s; the attic is full of the material testimonies of life in the past. The children, who have been abroad for many years, whenever they return home, prefer to stay in a new, but not yet finished house. Simion and Lușca Paul decided to live in a small room, attached to the new building, which is also a kitchen, a bedroom and a bathroom. Thus, the generation of those who stayed at home, Lușca and Simion, now around the age of 60, represents that bridge-generation that cannot definitively separate itself from the old existence. They keep the traces of the past life in the attic. Or they “hide” in the dowry-chests, well-kept in front rooms,<sup>3</sup> textiles and clothing items that have a spiritual significance known only to them. As a living mechanism of reproducing local culture and without fully assuming the role of “manager-custodians,” in their posture of “conservators” of the inherited dowry, they become guardians of a family heritage inextricably linked to the memory of the heart.

The subjective personal experience of researchers, which derives from my position as insiders of the studied culture, is part of the way I am structuring my approach. I will describe the pastoral transhumance in Țara Oașului, from Cămărzana, a small mountain village in north-western Romania, starting from this methodological premise: an exercise in the archaeology of individual memory, its

representation in archival images confronted with collective memory. It is presented the process of transforming pastoral practices into cultural heritage, independently from the community’s memory.

The first part of the article contains the results of my field research and tells the story of Simion Paul’s house in Cămărzana through fragments of interviews and life stories. It is but a fragment of my last research project, that started last summer (in the year 2023). The interlocutor is a businessman from Oaș region who owns a wood processing and wooden construction company. He asked me to help him save a house from all the villages from Țara Oașului (14 in total), which he intends to include in a touristic project. This involves relocating the houses on a mountain, near a new ski track, where the businessman intends to lay the foundations of small [pretend-] village as accommodation for tourists. My work in this project involves documenting and recovering the story of the house before it is disassembled and rewriting it for tourists... One of these houses is a household of shepherds from Cămărzana, used and handed down from father to son. I rewrote the story of the shepherd family listening to stories about the objects found in the attic and in the old house, now relocated, by integrating an anamnestic incursion of old family photos taken out of drawers.

The second part is the result of an archival research, which took into account unpublished images and manuscripts from the Ioniță G. Andron Collection, included in the heritage of the Satu Mare County Museum, and an ethnographic study by Gheorghe Foțsa (1975). Starting from these two sources, I focused on the constructions of the sheepfold from the perspective of an evocative descriptive analysis. The emphasis was on aspects related to local history and types of shepherding in Oaș, the organization of the flock, the rights and obligation of shepherds, the inventory of the sheep flocks, the origin and ratios of measurement units, milk processing—all in relation to the organization of a traditional house in the region.



## An image of shepherding as archaeological exercise of individual memory

*Now there are few sheep in the village, people no longer want to stay at the pens like before. The shepherd's house is nowhere, nobody wants to eat mutton anymore, only at Easter, a little cottage cheese and curd. Now everybody goes to the store to buy all that stupid stuff. And when they organize the celebration of measuring milk, people stay for a while, then everybody hurries to go home... [...] Nobody wants to be a shepherd anymore, for there are no people left in the village... they all went abroad...*

This is how the story of the Simion and Lușca Paul family from Cămărzana begins, with a general view on shepherding in our days, when transhumance is replaced by relocation to foreign lands in search of a better life. The contemporary shepherding of the *oșeni* is an experience of breaking with nature and tradition. Knowing the secrets passed down from father to son over several generations, Simion Paul had to accept the fact that, with the departure of his children abroad, a cycle has ended, both in family life and in the traditional occupations of the former village; herder's tools are deposited in the attic and the dust of oblivion started to settle on them...

Arriving at the location, to take down the old house, we discovered in the attic: two wooden buckets with metal staves, one large and one smaller; two hollow wooden cups for measuring milk; a nail clipper for sheep; three wooden containers for storing cheese; a *barbânță* [wooden container in shape of a small barrel with staves, used for preserving cheese]; a *cofă* [a cylinder-shaped vessel, with wood staves made of pine and a handle used in the countryside for storing drinking water]; a wooden tally (a piece of wood in a cylindrical or parallelepipedal shape on which, in the past, various calculations related to the amount of milk obtained during the first milking were indicated); a *străgetar* [a wooden tool for mixing and homogenizing sheep's milk with



Objects that were salvaged after Paul Lușca and Simion's house demolition, 2023. Photo credit: Mihaela Grigorean.

the curd], which had the concentric circles of hazel rods replaced with a flexible wire; a *copâie*, which is a wooden trough (two and a half Liters) hollowed out in a round trunk (a household object used for measuring corn, oats, etc.; it used to be made out of a log, and it had a handle—this particular piece had a capacity of two and a half kilos, ten *copâie* standing for one *mniertă*, which was a common measurement unit); a wooden scale, hemp string and two stone weights, used for measuring meat and cheese.

These are a few pieces from the inventory of the old sheepfold. Pieces of scraps of life found behind beams blackened by smoke in the attic and the passage of time. From the wooden hook they used at the sheepfold while the sheep were “on cheese”,<sup>4</sup> only the shelf remained—its “arm” so to speak, which used to be fastened to the upper end of the pole (a wooden stick) at right angle and having a hollow in the middle and several holes in which they introduced a wooden arm. This was then set lower or higher accordingly, closer or further from the fire, by inserting a wooden peg in the most suitable hole, holding a metal cauldron.

*We are looking for a bent wood, in the shape of a boomerang, only it has to be bigger. The*





The *comarnic* [barn] and the *sãrginer* [a wooden rack on which pots are put to dry] from a sheep fold, 1956.  
Photo credit: Ioniță G. Andron. Collection of the Satu Mare County Museum.

*thickest part is sharpened and sticks into the ground, in close proximity to the hearth of the fire, and the other, thinner arm, stands above the fire. From this arm hangs the cauldron in which the milk is boiled for preparing polenta or balmoș [polenta with cheese].*

In another corner of the attic, there was a *gujba* [a support made of a thick branch for hanging cooking pots at the sheepfold]. This was used at the sheepfold after *rãscolit* [which symbolically marks the end of the pastoral year and the descent of the sheep from the mountain]:

What was lost in the passage of time, in the fog of alienation and the whirlwind of changes?

The copper cauldron with a capacity of 60-70 Liters.

The metal or tin kettle.

The *putina* [wooden container] made of fir tree wood and tied with fir circles in the past, later replaced with metal staves, having the shape of a larger vat, bought from the *moți* [inhabitants of Țara Moșilor, Central Transylvania Mountain region] who came in

Spring to sell them in the fairs of Oaș region.

The *bucket* made of mulberry wood, with its bottom wider than the mouth for greater stability and a capacity of 15 Liters.

The *cup* made of a single piece of hollow wood, having a capacity of 1.5 Liters.

The *gânj* made of birch and used for tying two sticks or two “wattles” (braided from twigs of different shapes and used for various purposes—wattle for the pens, wattle for drying fruits, wattle for fish)—which is the most archaic and resistant way of making bonds.

The *străgetar*, a wooden tool composed of a hazel stick (because they are straighter than others), having in the lower part two concentric circles also of hazel rods, fixed on two pieces of sticks in the shape of a cross that passed through the lower part of the arm. With this tool shepherds mixed with slow movements the coagulated sheep’s milk from bottom to top and top to bottom.

The *măciuca*, a piece of wood with a blunt end hollowed out with the edge of an axe and used to prepare cheese, mixing the fatty whey

squeezed from the curd after kneading, so that it will not stick to the bottom of the cauldron.

The *sărginer*, a wooden rack on which pots are put to dry, stuck in the ground in the close vicinity of the hut to hang items from the sheepfold.

The *răvaș* (*răboj*, *carâmb*—tally), a notched and marked piece of wood, used both in measuring milk to record the quantities of milk from the first milking, as well as in establishing the due amounts of herders from the first cheese (the large cheese—a measure and a half, depending on how much milk the herder's sheep produced) and the second (the small cheese—called this way on the basis of the small quantity of milk produced by sheep in the second half of the summer). The law of the sheep was inscribed by signs and symbols incised on the *răvaș*.

The *răvaș* with the total number of sheep at the sheepfold before milking in the cup.

The *răvaș* with the number of sheep each herder has and the *socoți* [the amount of cheese due to each sheep owner based on the amount of milk obtained at the first milking] to know everyone's contribution to *sarea oilor* [literally: sheep's salt].

The *răvaș* shown to the authorities of the town hall in case of a check-up. This did not reflect the reality, showing only about 50% of the number of sheep in the fold.

The *răvaș* with the amount of milk obtained on selection day (barren sheep and those giving milk were selected and a first measuring would take place). This was the most important *răvaș* and was kept by owners.

The small *răvaș* recorded with notches made with a knife on a green birch branch the amount of milk that belonged to the herders, which they transformed into cheese as they wished, provided they brought flour and salt for the stew of the shepherds.<sup>5</sup>

The *dăraburi* [small pieces] and the half *dăraburi* for those owners whose sheep could not fill one full cup.

The *acău* [a volume measure of 56 Liters used in the old days in Transylvania], which is properly a multiple of the cup, having 50

notches on it, next to which they would place the half *dăraburi*, so that each owner can receive the due measure of his right.

The hatched (axe) for cutting firewood, repairs, defence against forest beasts (bears and wolves), which used to attack the sheepfold.

These objects from the inventory of a sheepfold disappeared even from the attics of old houses. Having various forms, the tally for keeping the account of products, called *răvaș/răboj/carâmb* changed its shape and number of notches every year, like the sky changes its colours in a day. During the field research I have also found, hidden behind the master beam, *răvașe* forgotten in old houses, closed and deserted, ennobled only by the power of prayers spoken at the icon left to watch over the river of memories...

By evocatively reconstructing the picture of a family of shepherds from Oaș, the portrait of a key character was gradually shaped, a person who seems to embody the tutelary, protective spirit of the family. Ana Paul is the wife of a shepherd. She knows the rules of this domestic transhumance: the daily walk from the house to the sheepfold weaves a constant and subtle daily connection between the hearth of the house, the hearth of the village and the hearth of the summer farm. This is a closed circuit of traditional rules. This type of circularity that connects the family, i.e. the village, to life on the sheepfold, creates a bridge that maintains the balance between the edge and the centre of the rural community, a bridge that will break with the exodus of *oșeni* abroad.

In the domestic household, the shepherd's wife made the *străcura* [a kitchen tool used to strain food], from oakum and hemp, in order to strain the milk while she is sitting on top of the cauldron. The women also made the *hășcuiet* [a net with holes woven from hemp threads] in which the curd was squeezed.

Women prepared the food at home and took it to the sheepfold. At the sheepfold fire, shepherd would only prepare dishes based on sheep (milk, cheese and mutton). They used shepherd's spoon (spoons with a vertical handle carved at a right angle and used at the



sheepfold work). The handle, decorated with notches, was inserted into the actual spoon almost vertically, so that one could eat with them from deeper and narrower vessels, too.

The house of Simion Paul has been demolished.

What did Lușca, his wife, intended to keep as objects that lost their functionality and entered the process of becoming heritage (as the ethnologists would say), symbolically embodying a tangible and intangible family heritage from the ineffable realm of emotional memory?

1. The kneading through<sup>6</sup>
2. Ceremonial pots
3. Cradle
4. Bed
5. Wooden dowry chest
6. The 5 Liter can with which they carried food at the sheepfold
7. Textiles from the chest
8. Steam iron



What did Lușca save?

The bed and the chest—her dowry from her mother, made by *Ionu lu Piț*, a carpenter from Cămărzana.

The chest of Anuța of Simion of Ion Grigor, who as a girl was from Văsâi Cornii, and who

Movable pen (*staul*), 1942. Photo credit: Ioniță G. Andron.  
Collection of the Satu Mare County Museum.



received it as a dowry, has been donated to *Chilia Zânelor* [The Fairy cell], a house with a traditional architecture located in Chilia, an area of Cămărzana village. This house was preserved and renovated with help from the local community.

The kneading through—Simion's mother (Ana Paul) got the chest as a dowry from her mother. The chest was made of willow wood:

*we fixed one of its corners, because it got cracked and we repaired it with a jar top and small nails. Until they made the plastic bowls, we kneaded our 10 kg bread in it. Now that they broke the wall to put the scaffold, we took it to the attic, so that it will not get any more cracks... Simion does not want to get rid of it. He wants to keep it as a memory. When we used to slaughter a pig, we would put its intestines into it, because it was long enough. At that point they still washed the intestines. And the kneading through was wide and one could clean the intestines with the dull side of a knife's blade. We would blow air in each intestine. Current plastic bowls are round, and they cannot be used for this purpose. The kneading through is thin and nicely polished. Simion's mother would tell us: take care how you handle it, do not crack it, because I got it from my mother!*

Simon's father—Simion Paul—had sheep in the wood. Simion had 3 sheep lately, two died and they are left with one.

*Since we were children there, we would keep sheep in the woods, in a nice place, at Copârcea, where we have 9 hectares of land. We used to have 50-60 sheep. My father built there a sheepfold and took care of them very much. We always went to the sheep, and everything was always freshly painted when the priest came on separation day. Currently, inside it's clean, but from outside is bad.*

The house's attic was too low... He put another beam and heightened it. Simion spent his childhood in that house.

Simion's Anuța—an exceptional mother

*Ten children (12 children, 2 of them died), of which four were two pairs of twins, were difficult to raise... and they organized weddings to all of them... from work only... she was born in 1933 and died in 2003... there was only one dispensary in the village... she would give birth at home... there was a midwife called Maria...*

*After she gave birth, Simion's Anuța, just like other women, would combine earth with horse dung to remake the floor, because it was dirty from the birth... she was strong... two days after giving birth she would knead bread and bake it in the oven... she would make hay like her husband...*

*When I came in the family as a daughter-in-law, since I was the youngest child of my parents, I did not know how to knead, how to bake the bread, how to make the fire, how long to keep the bread in... then they would put clothes in the ghiboc [a sort of barrel with no bottom, made of a massive beech trunk used for bleaching clothes, in some villages it is called toc] with ashes... you would wash them with lye... one had to use cold water and to place them in layers nicely and on the top there was a strainer to make the ashes pass through all of them... it had such a nice smell... oh, my God, that smell... then you would go to the river, when they were done... you would have to pour 12-13 pots of boiling water to be washed... and at the river you would beat them with the mai [wooden tool used to wash clothes], a tool that I also kept... If they were not treated with boiling water, they would not be clean... The water had to boil when one poured it over them....*

*When I came into this house as a daughter-in-law, there was also the small house, but my in-laws did not move into it, for in that period there was a crisis of firewood. We had a stove in the small house, but they would not allow us to make fire because of the lack of firewood, and we would all sleep in one room. My parents-in-law would sleep in one bed, we in another, and the child in a small bed. When the children were small, we would all live in one room to save on the firewood. In the summer children would also stay in the other room, when they did grow a little and would sleep all in one room...*

*But my father-in-law would rarely sleep at home. He was with the sheep in the woods... He was always there... Only in heavy winter would he come home... If the winter was milder, he would be there with the sheep... He had 50 sheep and he would only come home when he exhausted his food reserves... my mother-in-law would not stay there, at the sheepfold, with him... She liked it only until they got the cheese, then she would come back to the village... At home... There was a lot of work here...<sup>7</sup>*



**The architecture of transhumance in archival images deciphered through collective memory. Pastoral transhumance on the border**

As a typology, sheep breeding in Țara Oașului is an occupation that falls within the local agricultural shepherding, being closely linked to the need of improving the less fertile soil. The primary purpose of raising sheep and goats is to fertilize hard-to-reach lands—most of them podzolic—through manure. Placing the flock of sheep in places where it was difficult to transport the dung allowed to improve the

soil and fertilize the land by moving it where it was needed. Fertilizing the weaker land in hilly regions permitted to obtain fodder and richer harvests.

Another purpose of sheep farming is to obtain products necessary for human nutrition—milk, curd, cheese, meat, as well as materials in the manufacture of woollen clothes, leather... An old saying from Oaș: “If the sheep are not sheep, and the rams are not rams, the lambs are not lambs...” The good life of the sheep is given by the good food and the special care of the owners. The sheep are taken out to the border of the village at the beginning of spring, and a few specific constructions are needed that allow them to be cared for in the



The fireplace with the *gujbă* [a support made of a thick branch] for hanging the cooking pot, 1972. Photo credit: Ioniță G. Andron. Collection of the Satu Mare County Museum.

household area, before they are taken to the fold: the rolling manger (round trough in which the cattle are fed), the sheepfold with pens (where the sheep are fed and sheltered during the winter), the trough (obtained by hollowing out a wooden trunk and used for feeding the animals), the *hoboroc* [which is part of the sheepfold where the hay is thrown from the attic before is laid in the manger].

#### *The sheep pen*

In the spring, in the courtyards of households in Oaş the fencing of sheep is carried out by joining several sequences of wattles (braided from twigs of different shapes and used to fence a sheepfold or the place in the courtyard of a household where the sheep were kept until they were taken to the mountains) that configure a pen, where the sheep are kept when they are taken out into the yard, from the end of April until the sheep leave for the mountains and are “on cheese” for grazing during the summer. These pens are made of 6, 8, 10 or 12 wattles and are made in a rectangular shape, in a traditional technique, and consist of a horizontal sole (a thin piece like a fine board), in which wooden sticks are inserted. Between them there are green twigs

of bush, hazel or beech, the size of wattles being 2.50 x 1.50 m. Recently, they are made out of wooden boards attached by iron nails. Within the pen and outside of it there is a manger for hay and a small trough hollowed out of a tree trunk, supported on two forks on the proper height, for cornmeal with salt.

#### *Wattle for the pen*

A wattle (*leasă*) is about 5 m long and is made of birch wood split in two or carved and joined in the following way.

*Each wattle has 6 planks (pieces of split and carved birch wood) fastened at the two ends by iron or wooden nails and a pole carved of a birch tree. They are placed in parallel rows at a distance of about 20 cm, leaving about the same distance both down and up from the first and the last plank respectively. The stakes at the two ends are sharpened so that they can also be fixed in the ground, while the top part is not sharpened. From near the marginal stake and from the lowest plank, there is another piece of plank the same size as the plank from above placed diagonally, from the bottom up, to the middle of the uppermost plank and the same on the opposite side, so it forms an obtuse angle. Between the two planks on the upper side, another plank is fixed vertically from bottom to top, all of which are fastened to each plank, at their meeting point, with nails. These have the role of strengthening and increasing the resistance of the wattle and are called wattle straps. The wattles are fastened to each other by means of a wooden pole well stuck in the ground and above them there is a gânj [a connecting link made of twisted green cane] of birch, which therefore fastens both the pole and the upper part of poles from the two wattles.<sup>8</sup>*

The number of sheepfolds in Țara Oaşului varies from village to village, Cămărzana having the most of them. In the 1930s there were 13 sheepfolds with 3,000 sheep. In the 1960s-1970s their number increased to 23-25

sheepfolds with 6,000 sheep, other villages having 5-7 sheepfolds (Focșa 1975, 63). In Cămărzana, the sheepfolds were settled over time, either closer to the village, at half a kilometre—at Vârșor and Săcătură—, or somewhat farther, at 5-10 km from the village, under Holmu Mare or Geamăna Mare, on Valea Mare, towards the springs: the Dimbocul Cuptorul Ursului sheepfold, the Dâmbul lui Deac sheepfold, the Vâlcea Cornii sheepfold. The sheepfolds in Oaș are established by the association of several sheep owners called *văjnicari* (those who own the most sheep in the flock are called *iuhaș*) according to neighbourhood and kinship. They trust the sheep to *păcurari* [shepherds], establishing rules with duties, obligations and reciprocal rights. The *văjnicari* are a pastoral grouping of relatives and neighbours:

Two categories of small sheep owners are associated with each fold. Shepherds (*ciobani*, *păcurari* or *iuhași*—in Hungarian *juh* means sheep), the organizers of the common pastoral household during the summer, and the *văjnicari* (small sheep owner who entrusts the sheep to the *iuhaș*) or *văjniceri*, who give their small flocks to shepherds throughout the summer grazing period in the mountain area (Focșa 1975, 90).

The *iuhaș* is the one who can afford to pay for his own shepherd or herdsman. Not all *păcurari* can become *iuhași*, but all *iuhași* can be *păcurari*, if they wanted to. The *iuhași* and *văjniceri* stay at the fold only as long as they receive their share of milk, according to the number of sheep they have in the common flock. The *păcurari* can become *vătafi* [watchmen] when they get along well, until the dismantling of the sheepfold. For a few days they have the right to milk the sheep for each of them, that is, to get one day's milk from the flock.

All these unwritten rules, rights and obligations, strictly respected in the pastoral community, are carved symbolically either on the *răboj* (*răvaș*) or sealed in a festive context, among the rules of measuring day: *aldămașul*

*sâmbrei* [the glass of *pălincă*—strong liquor—drunk by those present at the *sâmbră*, the milk measuring for establishing quotas each sheep owner will receive], *mulsul păștimb* [when each sheep owner milks the sheep of another], *alesul sterpelor de mulgări* [separation of milking sheep from the barren ones], *număratul la strungă* [counting the sheep that give milk in relationship to the amount of milk obtained per each sheep], *măsurîșul laptelui* [measuring the milk produced by the sheep of a *văjnicer*, so that one could calculate the due amount of cheese].

How to choose the place of a sheepfold, which is the seat of seasonal pastoral household for three months? The sheepfold is placed in the vicinity of a source of drinking water, with a wide meadow for grazing at the edge of a beech forest. The flock comprises between 150-300 sheep gathered from smaller flocks called *boteie*, which have 50-70 sheep. The *botei* for which each *păcurar* is responsible includes his own sheep and those of his *văjniceri*.

In Țara Oașului, from the beginning of spring until the coming of the snow, the flock of sheep is re-located four times over the landscape, between lands and beyond the border of the village. It is an orbital movement of close distances, because the herd gravitates weekly and gradually moves away from the centre—the hearth of the village—to the edges, on the border of high areas, of mountain meadows, returning in the autumn to the area of the houses gathered around the three valleys of the village of Cămărzana: Lechincioara, Valea Mare and Ceaslașul.

The herd is formed in February from several *boteie* of sheep collected from several *văjniceri* (one *botei* has between 50 and 100 sheep), the *păcurari* (one *păcurar* for 50-70 sheep) and *strungari* (people—they may be children—who help the sheep enter the space where they will be milked). The sheepfold of Simion Paul from Cămărzana included, in the 1960s and 1970s, approximately 267 sheep, of which 137 milking sheep and 54 goats, of which 30 with milk, the rest being barren, and 8 rams.



The first stop of the newly formed flock at the beginning of spring (around St. George's Day) lasted two weeks, during which the sheep grazed in the orchards and pastures around the hearth of the village, the herd then went out to the places intended for summer grazing, down the coast, above the village, in the area of cultivated land, which can be used only after harvesting.

In the second, longer stop, of six weeks, the heard was placed on the property of the association, in a jointed place (of about 15 ha), on grazing areas where the grass is not usually mowed.

In the third stop, the fold was placed under Triholmuri (the name of a mountain chain with three peaks in the Oaş Mountains), in a place called Buțureasca on the property of Paul Simion, inherited from his elders. The fold stayed there for four weeks, in the production area, where the grass is mowed regularly, only 200 m away from the pasture area, further down in the hayfield area.

In the fourth stop, the flock stationed for another four weeks in the mowing area adjacent to the other one, called Sănătoare, a period that ends on August 15. After dismantling the sheepfold, the herd returns to grazing in the land around the hearth of the village—where there are lands with different destinations: orchards, gardens, grain crops, hayfields. In spring and autumn, before the start of crops and after harvest, the lands are free for collective grazing. During this last period, in the evening, the sheep return to private households. (Focșa 1975, 88-9)

*The constructions of the sheepfold: pen (staul), barn (comarnic), fireplace (vatra focului), hut (coliba), rack (clinci)*

In the past, the sheepfold was a multi-functional architectural complex with several components, made by archaic techniques and using local natural materials—wood, clay, stone—available to the shepherds who used the resources (beech, birch, oak, durmast, alder wood, hazel sticks, wicker) from the area where they lived or from

its surroundings. These movable constructions formed an assembly integrating components interconnected by functionality and purpose, being built from parts that one could easily remove, joined at the corner by a hook made of twigs or tree bark, so they could be disassembled and easily regrouped in another neighbouring place, in order to ensure the manuring of the lands. The interconnection and proximity of each element of the constructive assembly of the sheepfold facilitated and strengthened the permanent supervision of the sheep. The spirit and archaic vibration of the sheepfold was marked by the silence of the natural setting, counterpointed only by the sound of the bells, whistles and trumpets of the shepherds, the barking of the dogs and the simple, elementary, rudimentary architectural forms specific to transhumance.

*The pen—the sheep's bedroom with stars*

The pen represents the epicentre of the sheepfold. It is the first construction of the pastoral settlement intended to enclose the sheep, thus protecting them from animal attacks at night. It has two partitions: one for the barren sheep and another milking sheep. It has a square or rectangular shape and is made of 20-30 wattles made of birch or alder bushes braided on 10 *roșteie* [a device in shape of a frame in which wooden rods are fixed and which is used as a fastener]. The *strunga* [the milking pen] is mounted on the milk sheep's side, having a structure of longer wattles linked by joints made by archaic techniques, such as the *gânj* woven from birch bark. The *strunga* is equipped with four gates built from planks that border the opening necessary for the milking sheep to pass one by one, so that the milkers wooden chair can be placed in front of it. The pen is the "sheep's bedroom," with the starry sky as a roof and the protective silence of nature.

The pens are movable and dismantlable to ensure a natural fertilizer for the soil, which becomes a hayfield after, the perimeter of pens being made of fences made





Measuring the milk in Spring. Inventory of wooden instruments: bucket, cup and spoon, 1942.  
Photo credit: Ioniță G. Andron. Collection of the Satu Mare County Museum.

of poles and wooden crossbars acting as supports. People could obtain grain grown permanently with natural fertilizers generated by this archaic crop rotation system and thus have staples with supply of nutrients necessary for a healthy diet.

The four-cornered pens have a variable number of fence units (18 to 30), depending on the number of sheep in the flock, and are changed every night or every two nights, in the areas close to the shepherds' lands, to manure the land of all sheep-owners.

Gradually, the pen located on the land of a shepherd is moved a little in 2-3 weeks. Later, the entire construction, including the pen, is relocated on the land of a different shepherd, repeating the relocation for each of them. After three weeks the pen is also moved, and the surrounding fence is destroyed by fire or remains in place. If it is still good, it can be used again after two years. Next year the flock does not return here, for the land changes its destination—one year is field left for grazing, the other one is reserved for hay harvesting or sowing. (Focșa 1975, 90)

By function, there are:

1. The home pen, set in the courtyard during winter

The enclosure formed with fences is called a "pen" and it can have different shapes. The simplest is square or rectangular, which is usually made during winter, when the sheep are left in the households located in the village, or in late autumn before the snow, when the sheep no longer give milk, therefore when they are not milked.

2. The milking pen at the ceremony of measuring the milk

This pen is divided for several sheep owners with their *văjniceri* and has several compartments, according to the number of *iuhași*, and each compartment has a *strungă* where the people who milk the sheep sit. The *strungi* are made according to the number of owners. The sheep come out one by one to be milked, usually urged by a diligent child. During milking in a cup, in the pen there are also relatives of the owners, who know the sheep and bring them to be milked.

3. The pen for after milking in a cup (the milk obtained from the first milking of the





Shepherd's wooden spoons, with decoration, near a wooden container (*putina*), 1966. Photo credit: Ioniță G. Andron. Collection of the Satu Mare County Museum.

sheep is measured in a wooden cup)

After cup milking, the pen is organized as follows:

1. *Sterpar* [area intended for the barren sheep]
2. The lamb pen
3. The milking pen (area reserved for sheep that give milk and are to be milked)

Depending on the materials used and the construction techniques, the pens can be made according to two different systems: poles with twig fence or simple twig fences.

1. Pen made of *gâteje* [wooden beams]

The pen made of *gâteje* is the most archaic form of this pastoral construction. It is a rudimentary fencing overlapping, on the four sides, branches of trees, beeches, firs, keeping the sheep closed, but with no protection against wolves attacking the flock sometimes even during the day:

*It used to be made of gâteje and the wolves went through! By the time the men and dogs realized, the wolf would catch one or two sheep. If it could take them, it would do that, if not, it would only kill them and that was all.* (Ion Morar from Cămărzana)

2. Pen made of beech twigs fenced with poles

Poles are driven into the ground at 60 cm distance from each other and support a 1.50-2 m high twig fence: "For there are lots of wolves around here" (Văsâi Pașca a lui Badârcă din Cămărzana).

3. Pen of wattle

In the third stage, which is even more evolved, there is the pen made of rectangular wattles, 3-4 m long and between 1.50-2 m high. A series of twigs are fastened with nails on two carved planks. At 3-4 m, there are poles in the ground to which the wattles are tied with rope or, more recently, with a metal wire ("drolt"). At both ends of the wattles there are two poles. More recently, the wattle is made of carved planks. Each wattle usually comprises seven horizontal planks of 3-4 m length, fastened with three vertical planks at the middle and at the two ends, with two diagonal elements for reinforcement. (Focșa 1975, 104)

4. Pen of stakes

This sort of pen appeared after 1950 as an influence from Maramureș (Săpânța). It is a more complex and solid form that provided a much higher protection against wild animals.

The beech stakes are planks split from the trunk, 2 m high and pointed at both ends to prevent wolves from jumping over, while they are also resistant to rain. The stakes are fastened with nails on two parallel planks. (Focșa 1975, 104)

The ritual functions of pens

1. The turning of the pen after the sun

After measuring the milk, the shepherds gather the sheep spread around the sheepfold





Sheep grazing, 2023. Photo credit: Remus Țiplea.

and make a circle with all the sheep around the pen for three times, following the movement of the sun.

2. The poles of the wattles in the pen are market with X-shaped carvings, which have an apotropaic function.

3. A piece of wood turned like a handle, using a tree branch led back to the trunk from which it grew. They milk with it the animals that lost their milk, whose mana has been taken away.

*The barn (comarnic)—a kitchen with no chefs*

The barn is a functional fusion of the pantry, the porch and the kitchen of a traditional household, a semi-open place (to allow air to circulate), intended for food products obtained from the sheep's milk. Its wooden structure—planks, flexible tree branches, twigs—is used for straining the cheese, drying the curd, depositing their packed form. The package is usually of material weaved on the loom.

The *comarnic* is also the place where they

store recipients made of wood or copper, hung on sticks made of three branches. Woven by the wives of shepherds on a loom, the saddle bags and pouches are used to store cornmeal, salt, bread and flour, which are all necessary on a sheepfold. The *comarnic* is placed next to the hut or even in the hut, that is, between the hut and the fence surrounding the sheepfold. It consisted of 4 wooden forks firmly stuck into the ground at a distance of 1-1.5 meters, in a square or rectangular shape.

*Above, on the uppermost beams, there were two parallel beams and on these they place a tightly knot wattle made of twigs. This wattle served as a support for curd left to dry and ripe, after they removed the churn milk. The watchman took care of them so that it would not be eaten by birds.*

The *comarnic* has a circular or ellipsoidal shape and is built in front of the hut where the shepherd sleeps, at a distance of about 40 m from the pen and closer to the edge of the forest, in order to keep the curd in the shadow.



Milking the sheep, 2023. Photo credit: Remus Țiplea.



A simple construction of four beech forks stuck in the ground, about 2 m above the ground. These support 4-5 beams, made also of beech branches; on these freshly cut green branches, which still have leaves of them, they place a backrest made of beech twigs or a wattle woven from hazelnut or beech twigs. Forks stuck in a loop at distances of a palm from each other and they are 1.5 m long. Among thinner twigs are woven. On the wattle they place the curd for draining and drying. The attic of the *comarnic* is made of thin fir boards larger than shingles, used as coverings, or woven of twigs, which are called a wattle. (Focșa 1975, 106)

The *comarnic* could be fenced with four wattles of green branches—three fastened to the walls and one mobile, so it could be opened. The fifth wattle, which is smaller, is fastened to the *comarnic* as a shelf for the curd. In the past, the *comarnic* was covered with rye bundles, tightly tied with green twigs on three or four planks, being used as a mobile roof system.

*The fireplace—a patio with a unique menu and bonus spectacles*

The fireplace has multiple values, both symbolic and practical, being placed right next to the *comarnic* and assuring the night-guarding of

the sheep, as well as of the entire sheepfold. It is the place where the food is prepared for the shepherds, as well as a natural frame for telling stories in the sounds of flute, whistle or leaf.

Outside of the *comarnic*, but in its close vicinity, the fireplace is set up with the *cujba* [a fork-like piece of wood, which is stuck in the ground, and on which the shepherds hung the cauldron above the fire]. They also hung here the cauldron for boiling the curd and next to it there are two branches forming a sort of hook for hanging the curd strainer. Under this there is a wooden keeve with staves, in which the shepherds collect the churn milk. (Focșa 1975, 100)

The paddle is the most used tool at the sheepfold, since it is used every day to make cornmeal. The paddle is usually made of hornbeam, 40-45 cm long. Its upper part, which is also its handle, is round, while the rest is carved so that one could mix the cornmeal or its various variations with cheese.

Shepherds never leave their flute, just like dogs never leave the sheepfold, and they play in evening, next to the fire, when nobody listens.

*The hut—the mobile bed without a bedroom*

The hut of the shepherds can be of two types: simple, built only of two vertical wooden forks, and more evolved, with four forks, both being surrounded by a narrow, but deep ditch as a protection from floods.

The simple hut has two natural forks of beech or birch, which hold the upper horizontal beams and the oblique ones, covered with ferns and leaves, overlapped so that the rain will not fall inside. The goal of this sort of shelter is to protect from water the fire, the milk and the cauldron for preparing curd, the shepherds' clothes and food (the flour, the salt, the bacon). In spite of the fact that summer rains fell through the cover of the hut, improvised of ferns, branches and leaves, the shepherds used this place for sleeping in bad weather.

The most evolved and effective as a shelter was the hut built on four wooden forks—two vertical and straight, two oblique and leaned towards the back, which delimit two “walls” in shape of two rectangular panels (3 x 4 m in size), covered in planks and covered with beech shingles. This sort of hut has its main wall resting on the ground and supported by the two oblique forks from the back. It is made of four layers of shingles. The patio of the hut is made of three layers of shingles, placed at the ends of the four forks and the horizontal beams, serving as a roof slightly leaning towards the back.

The hut is made of two loops called *spătariu* and *pohirnă*. Usually both of them are leaning on the ground, forming an angle for protecting the fire from wind. The *spătariu* stay with its bottom leaning on the ground with an inclination and its upper edge leaning on two forks or two vertical poles placed into the ground. For sheltering from the rain, the *pohirna* is placed as a rectangular layer on the roof, leaning on the upper edges of the *spătariu* in the back and in the front on the two forks. It has a position inclined towards the back for facilitating the flow of water. Both pieces are mobile and made of thin planks fastened on some thicker ones. The hut has two forks in the front, which are stuck in the ground, and at about 1 m above the ground they support a beam, or a stick made of wood, which holds the handle of a large copper cauldron, suspended above the open fireplace. In this cauldron they boil the churn milk and separate the curd. (Focșa 1975, 101)

#### *The rack—a hanger for dishes*

The rack can be a separate beech, stuck in the ground, next to the hut, as a tree of racks cut at a distance of 20-25 cm from the trunk, on which various items from the inventory of the sheepfold are hung to protect them from dogs and other animals. The racks can be simple wooden branches cut to fit the forks supporting the *spătariu* and the *pohirna* of the shepherds’ hut and used to hang various items needed in

the sheepfold: bucket, strainer, dishes, spoons, etc. The shepherds used the various forms of wood as constructive solutions and chose “forks” from the forest, created by nature, for building their hut or the *comarnic*, as well as for making joints between the forks, using birch bark or carved wood nails. In the last decades they started using iron nails, joints made of blacksmiths and metal wire.



#### **A different heritage of pastoral cultural values. Beyond the cultural memory of the community**

The phenomenon of migration among the *oșeni*, in search for work, not only produced transformations in the practices and behaviours of the local traditional pastoral culture, but also generated dislocations and trans-cultural displacements connected to the European phenomenon of transforming pastoral cultural values in cultural heritage. Not always these changes brought by the European edifice, which were intended to be generated through the process of European integration, could sustainably preserve the particularities of local identity of the traditional material and spiritual culture. The dissolution of pastoral cultural values occurred simultaneously with the process of safeguarding them by inscribing them in the immaterial cultural heritage of the world (transhumance was recognized as immaterial cultural heritage of humanity in December 2023), therefore by connecting uniqueness to the dynamics of universality. The gradual disappearance of pastoral transhumance happened, after 1989, in a strict mirroring of the increase of the exodus abroad for work; the shepherds left their sheep behind, to step over the borders of their world. After years of wandering abroad, Simion Paul has returned to Cămărzana. The first thing he did after this was to make a *tilinca* [an old and popular musical instrument called whistle, as a flute but without holes, made of





Abandoned shepherd's house, 2023. Photo credit: Mihaela Grigorean.

great maple, wicker or linden bark] and played his own song, under the walnut tree from his courtyard, thinking of the milk measuring feasts from the old days. Then he took his *trâmbița* from the attic [a wind instrument for folk music, consisting of a long conic tube, up to 3 m long, used in the mountain regions for various signals] and plays with difficulty *The Ballad of Irincuța*, because he no longer has good teeth, but he does not give it up. He blows like the wind awakened in the memory of the heart, from the place where images of his Lușca bringing him food to the sheepfold roll in, when in the village has resounded the signal that the milking was over.

He looks for his flute in the drawers and asks Lușca if she knows where it is... she laughs mysteriously and mischievously and tells him, as in a declaration of love, that she took care of it while he was away for 20 years through France, Italy and Germany, and placed it well, in a piece of fine cloth printed with a colourful design, a scarf that women wear to cover their heads in rural communities. She hid it behind the only icon that the kids did not

throw away when they built the new house. As for the promotion of traditional pastoral values through the creation of thematic routes integrated into the offers of rural cultural tourism, as a solution for their safeguarding, it is out of question in Oaş. Why? Because the thinking patters of the *oșeni* from our days are not subject to traditional behavioural patterns; the rupture of uprooting creates a discontinuity of traditional orders. Today, only a few *oșeni* keep their love for shepherding and raising sheep, becoming rather craftsmen of big and fancy houses, not forgetting, however, to rest on the porch of Longing...

... Where there are the stars watched in the old days by those who sat around the fire in the huts of shepherds.



## Epilogue

Romanian Ministry of Culture was proud to announce in 2023 that the traditional seasonal relocation of flocks and shepherding were included on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Together with another 9 countries—Albania, Andorra, Austria, Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg and Spain. Romania applied with the “Transhumance, the seasonal relocation of sheep flocks” in March 2020. A rightful question: do the *oșeni* who live outside the borders cultivate and nourish the memory of their pastoral origins? The conclusion is open. It has an answer in the visual conciliation of contrasts permeating contemporary reality during a whole decade (2012-2022) in the testimonial photographs created in the villages from Oaş by Remus Țiplea<sup>9</sup> (2022), in his photo project entitle *Oi* [Sheep]—a visual chronicle of the contemporary exodus of *oșeni* in the mirror of traditional transhumance as an emblem of uprooting...

Translation by Alexandru Polgár

## NOTES

1. “Outside, for work”—is the common expression used by people in Romania in order to designate seasonal migration abroad.
2. Oaş region is situated in the north-western part of Romania, close to the border with Ukraine. The locals call themselves *oşeni* [people from Oaş].
- 3 The “front room” is the festive space of the peasant house, where all the best textiles are kept, the dowry of the girls. Here are taking place the most important events in the life of a family (see also Iuga 2011).
4. Being “on cheese” refers to a week in which the shepherds—or the sheep owners—receive their due amount of cheese after the first milking and the measuring of the milk, indented on the tally.
5. Drawing on the paper *Păstoritul în Racşa—Țara Oaşului* [Shepherding in Racşa—Țara Oaşului], Ioniță G. Andron, typewritten manuscript, no date, 53 pages, Collection of the Satu Mare County Museum.
6. Made of a manually carved piece of wood.
7. Fragments from the interview with Simion and Lușca Paul in

the autumn of 2023—September and October—in Cămărzana. In this part the person who speaks is Lușca.

8. *Păstoritul în Racşa—Țara Oaşului* [Shepherding in Racşa—Țara Oaşului], Ioniță G. Andron, typewritten manuscript, no date, 53 pages, Collection of the Satu Mare County Museum.

9. Remus Țiplea is one of the most skilled and creative Romanian photographers with a notable activity in documentary domain. His interest in photography started in 2009 when his son was born; since then, he was involved in large scale successful projects from documenting the macro world of tinny damselflies to the less known aspects of the religious confessions in his area, the tough (but still beautiful) life of a cowherds family, the sadness of gravediggers and the main life events of the shepherds from Oaş region. His work is largely recognized, the best of it being included in famous magazine’s articles (The Guardian, The Telegraph, La Repubblica, National Geographic, The Huffington Post, LensCulture and FutureShot) or being exposed in personal exhibitions worldwide and honoured with countless won awards (see: <https://1x.com/magazine/permalink/8096>; <https://remustiplea.blogspot.com/>).



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