

FROM ONE GENERATION TO THE NEXT: THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN PRESERVING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE IN SMALL COMMUNITIES IN ROMANIA

IONELA BOGDAN*

Abstract In this article I reflect upon the role women play in the creation, preservation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage in small communities, in the context of the changes brought by the communist regime, which promoted both men and women as equally active participants in the building of socialism. I consider traditional weaving techniques—passed down from mothers and grandmothers as a form of intangible cultural heritage. Using the methodology of oral history, I intend to bring to the fore testimonies recorded in the village of Cincu, Brasov County, Romania, and analyse how gender and intangible cultural heritage intertwine, while highlighting the importance of gathering, preserving and safeguarding the life stories of small communities for future generations.

Keywords Oral history, women, gender, intangible cultural heritage, communism.

In 2014, UNESCO described heritage as “a legacy from past generations, cherished in the present for its recognized aesthetic, spiritual and social values within society. It comprises historic monuments, cultural properties and artefacts, landscapes, natural environments, as well as intangible, or living, heritage.”¹ Intangible cultural heritage is defined as “the traditions and living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants. Anchored in the past, it allows us to navigate the present, while charting a course for the future. Living heritage helps us

* *Babeş-Bolyai University, Oral History Institute, Cluj-Napoca. ionela.bogdan@ubbcluj.ro.*

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1297-836X>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26424/philobib.2026.31.1.09>.

This research has received funding from the European Union through the Horizon Europe project 101132781, RESTORY - Recovering Past Stories for the Future: A Synergistic Approach to Textual and Oral Heritage of Small Communities. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

¹ UNESCO, 2014, *Gender equality, heritage and creativity*:

<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000229418/PDF/229418eng.pdf.multi>, 33.

understand who we are, where we come from, and where we need to go.”² Throughout this study, I refer to heritage as a “cultural and social process, which engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present.”³ At the same time, I highlight that heritage may also have the ability of challenging the ways in which groups and communities are perceived and classified by others.⁴ Last but not least, I bring forward the idea that there is a relationship between gender and heritage which should not be overlooked, but rather brought to the fore, because it helps frame a broader understanding of the world we live in. Gender is considered “a socially and culturally constructed concept that helps structure and understand our behaviour and experiences as women and men it is interlinked with, but is not determined by, our biological reproductive functions as females and males.”⁵ The communist regime in Romania created a context in which women in small communities used intangible cultural heritage, by integrating it into their present and giving it a practical, palpable meaning. These skills served not only as an informal way to earn money but also as a form of exchange to help make ends meet, highlighting the continued importance of these traditional practices. Thus, heritage was, and still is, intentionally passed down to future generations as a tool of growth and independence for women. I employ the methodology of oral history in supporting my arguments, using interviews recorded with Romanian and Roma women in the village of Cincu, Braşov County, Romania – a village founded by Saxon settlers in the 12th century, where we conducted two oral history field campaigns between 2024 and 2025.

The communist regime was established in Romania during a period of on-going modernization, in a society that continued to exhibit traditional social structures, particularly within the family sphere and its small, rural communities.⁶ Throughout the communist regime, propaganda, public policies and legislative measures offered a view of women as independent, career-orientated, and active participants in the building of socialism.⁷ Moreover, participation in the labour market was mandatory and, according to the law, everyone who was able to work was required to do so. In Romania, women’s transition into the labour force had a rapid pace and it was followed by policies that in theory legislated women’s equal rights in public and private spheres.⁸ The role of women as “productive workers” and “prolific socialist mothers” were paramount to the communist ideology; this “double burden” as Barbara Einhorn described it, was

² UNESCO, 2024, *Basic texts of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*: https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/2003_Convention_Basic_Texts_2024_version_EN.pdf, v.

³ Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ Laurajane Smith, “Heritage, Gender and Identity,” in Brian Graham, Peter Howard (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity* (Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 157.

⁶ Radu Pavel Gheo, Dan Lungu (coords.), *Tovarăşe de drum. Experienţa feminină în comunism* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2008), 10.

⁷ See Călin Morar-Vulcu, *Republica îşi făureşte oamenii. Construcţia identităţilor politice în discursul oficial în România 1948-1965* (Cluj-Napoca: Eikon, 2007).

⁸ See Jill Massino, “Something Old, Something New: Marital Roles and Relations in State Socialist Romania,” *Journal of Women’s History*, vol. 22, no. 1, (2010).

massively promoted by the official channels and propaganda of the time.⁹ This apparent equity¹⁰ was also reflected in gender relations, as women became an important element in building the new socialist state. In this sense, Mrs. Maria Lăcătuș, one of the main interviewees for this article, sums up the beginning of her work life and the process of entering adulthood:

“At 17, I also went to work at a factory, in the city, to earn a living. I worked at a cotton spinning mill for about a year. After a year, I came home because I had a sick sister who needed my help. A month later, I got a job at a factory in Făgăraș. I worked there for two or three years. Then, I came to a state farm here in Cincu, and I started working as a cook. I worked in the kitchen for a year, until I got married.”¹¹

Oral history is an effective and much needed method of obtaining coherent testimonies in regard to the past of women from small communities in Romania, because in-depth oral history interviews emphasize the individuality of each narrator, so “diversity in interpretation is expected and enriching.”¹² Usually, the life stories recorded are marked by subjectivity and represent “a particular construction of the past and are thus mediated by the discourses to which the subject had access.”¹³ This may foster a better understanding of the people one is interviewing, paving the way to a reciprocal connection between the interviewee and interviewer.¹⁴ When recording oral history interviews, a paramount goal is to ensure an environment in which both the interviewee and interviewer feel safe. Moreover, within the framework of oral history, one perceives the work we embark on as “experiments based on equality between the historian and his witness.”¹⁵ Once this is accomplished, interviewees might be able to go deeper with their life story, which was the case with my interviewee:

“And then I got married to my husband and we had four children. And I raised them and sent them to school. And I started weaving and sewing, because you had to do something, you couldn’t just sit around, saying “oh dear, I’m a housewife and I’m doing nothing.” We had land, and I worked at the collective farms too, because it was mandatory. I worked there; I worked at home too, and I raised the kids. And that was my life, but it wasn’t all rosy, it came in all kinds of shades.”¹⁶

⁹ Barbara Einhorn, *Cinderella goes to Market: citizenship, gender and women’s movements in East Central Europe* (London: Verso, 1993), 40.

¹⁰ See Alina Hurubean (coord.), *Statutul femeii în România comunistă. Politici publice și viață privată* (Iași: Institutul European, 2015).

¹¹ Maria Lăcătuș, interview by author, audio file, no. 2433, OHIA, Cincu, Brașov County, 07.02.2025.

¹² Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Oxford: Altamira Press, 2005), 260.

¹³ Jill Massino, Shana Penn, *Gender Politics and everyday life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 15.

¹⁴ See Doru Radosav, “Istoria orală și etnotextul: afinități subiective,” *Oral History Institute Yearbook* (no. XII, 2010).

¹⁵ Ionuț Costea, “The Roma Community: Between proscription and assertion of Historic Consciousness,” *Oral History Institute Yearbook*, no. XVI (2015), 16.

¹⁶ Maria Lăcătuș, interview by author, audio file, no. 2433, OHIA, Cincu, Brașov County, 07.02.2025.

This oral history interview represents the starting point in exploring the role of women in preserving intangible cultural heritage in the context of the communist past, and how, without even realizing it, the interviewee becomes actively involved in the creation, recreation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage through a craft which was handed down from her mother and which she then passed down to her daughters, as one of them points out, both in the oral history interview and in the informal discussions that followed: “from mother to daughter, for many generations, we spin, weave, embroider and create textiles as it had always been done in olden times.”¹⁷ Mrs. Maria Lăcătuș passed her skills and knowledge to other young women from the community as well, or was always available when someone asked for help. A remarkable episode highlighting this aspect is the account of the interviewee of how a woman from the Cortorari community asked her to assemble a loom, expressing her desire to learn how to weave. This story is shared by other women in the Cortorari community as well and it is remarkable because through weaving, these women, belonging to different communities, which normally would not interact, found common ground. When asked about the motivation behind the desire to learn such a craft, an interviewee from this community insisted on the need to remain active and productive, especially during the winter season, when the time available for outdoor work was limited.¹⁸ These ideas are very common among rural communities and, at the same time, they reinforce the general reflections of the majority of the interviewees regarding the need for being productive and for gaining useful skills.

As she further unveils the layers of her life story, Mrs. Maria emphasizes that women should be open to learning anything and everything, which should be viewed as a necessity rather than a choice, because in times of adversity knowledge is indispensable and every skill matters. At this point, the interviewee explained how the unexpected illness of her husband transformed her into the head of the household, which made her rely on the traditional weaving techniques and its related crafts learned from her mother in order to sustain her family, using it as exchange method: for her work, instead of money she would receive different products or other services. In doing so, the interviewee illustrated her resourcefulness, while also revealing relevant characteristics of the relationships built within her community: the element of trust, which is prevalent throughout oral history testimonies and may have been a general trait of small communities at the time; the sense of camaraderie; and an overall spirit of mutual support stemming from shared experiences and a common past.

The life story of this interviewee is undoubtedly connected to her craft, for which she is well regarded and appreciated in her community and surrounding villages and she speaks about it with great passion. Moreover, when I met her and recorded the first oral history interview, she was in the process of sewing a Romanian traditional shirt. When asked to share how she learned to weave, she told the following story:

¹⁷ Sanda Tarog, interview conducted by author, audio file, no. 2420, OHIA, Cincu, Brașov County, 27.09.2024.

¹⁸ A.G., interview by author, audio file, no. 2422, OHIA, Cincu, Brașov County, 27.09.2024.

"I learned from my mother. I was the youngest, so she would ask me for help when she had to assemble the weaving loom. Nobody knows what it really means to work with threads: to count them, to arrange them. Recently, I was asked by someone nearby to help start the weaving loom and they were impressed by my work. And I told them: you have to talk to the threads, to have proper heat in the house if you want to untangle them; outside, you'll never be able to do it. The threads have secrets. They asked how I know this. I said I weaved for so long that I'm like a computer; I already know everything by heart."¹⁹

The methodology of oral history presumes a dialogical nature, as described by oral history specialists Alessandro Portelli²⁰ and Paul Thompson²¹ and, in ideal situations, when recording oral history interviews, a relationship starts to build between the interviewer and interviewee, which is welcomed in these types of interactions and may bridge differences between one and the other. In these cases, one asks a question and, as historian Lynn Abrams pointed out in one of her renowned works,²² receives a story similar to the one in the fragment above.

In more recent years, Mrs. Maria Lăcătuș, as well as her daughter, acknowledged the great risk of their craft becoming obsolete, due to the lack of women practicing it, while expressing the difficulty of finding young women interested in it. In this sense, one has to acknowledge the importance of gender and the role of women in the transmission and practice of culture, while admitting that "certain cultural expressions are gender specific, [and] gender relations in a given community play a crucial role in creating and recreating intangible cultural heritage."²³ Mrs. Maria Lăcătuș may be seen both as creator and safeguard of heritage. At the same time, alongside her daughter and other stakeholders, she managed to raise awareness about traditional weaving and its related endeavours, creating, in a way, a "heritage community."²⁴ They managed to do so by being involved in different cultural projects and disseminating their knowledge through workshops and by attending fairs, with the aim of educating younger generations about a past that may be crafted into the future.

In conclusion, even though a global understanding of gender, its values and roles does not exist, since these characteristics are continuously under construction, continuously reinterpreted and reshaped, varying from one community to another, from one group to the next, I argue that they have the power of shaping the discourse(s) and practice(s) of heritage. In the end, "gender should be mainstreamed in the protection of cultural heritage, which means that women should be actors rather than vulnerable subjects in need of protection, in order to empower women and gradually combat discrimination against them."²⁵ Leaving aside the official discourse regarding

¹⁹ Maria Lăcătuș, interview by author, audio file, no. 2433, OHIA, Cincu, Brașov County, 27.09.2024.

²⁰ See Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (SUNY Press, 1991).

²¹ See Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2000).

²² Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London & New York: Routledge, 2010), 15.

²³ See UNESCO's stand on gender equality: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/gender-equality-00195>, last accessed 21.04.2025.

²⁴ The Faro Convention, Art. 2b: <https://rm.coe.int/1680083746>, last accessed 24.04.2025.

²⁵ Sara de Vito, "Mainstreaming Gender in the Protection of Cultural Heritage," in *Cultural Heritage. Scenarios*

heritage, involuntarily, during the communist regime, in small communities in Romania, women took it upon themselves to “do heritage work”²⁶ by using, reusing, interpreting and sharing traditional weaving techniques for practical purposes, but also in an effort of cultivating the grapes of self-sufficiency for the younger selves and, dare I say, for the hope of independence for the future generations of women belonging to these small rural communities.

2015-2017, Simona Pinton, Lauso Zagato (eds.), 2017, 464.

²⁶ Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 1.