



THE ROMANIAN TRADITIONAL SHIRT *IA*: AGENCY, COMPLEXITY, AND THING-POWER IN AN IMMIGRANT TEACHER IDENTITY JOURNEY

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Abstract: Through critical collaborative autoethnography with arts-based methods, I experienced the embodied making of a Romanian traditional shirt called *ia*, as a practical exploration of my immigrant teacher identity. *Ia* changed my world; she became an intrinsic part of my identity and the core of my study. She deserved attention and representation because she was a presence. I thus responded to a provocation: not only did I understand the object/subject/agent of my study differently, but I became different myself and transformed my relationships with humans and nonhumans. *Ia* changed from an object into a subject and a participant; she became a storyteller and my teacher. Through complexity, thing-power, and agency, *ia* generated an extensive theoretical framework and enabled juxtapositions of concepts from Romanian village metaphysics, new materialism, and quantum entanglements.

Keywords: *ia*—the Romanian shirt with *altiță*; teacher identity; new materialism; Romanian village metaphysics; quantum entanglement

Throughout my doctoral research study, *Threads of Identity: A Creative, Critical and Collaborative Autoethnography Stitching Immigrant Teachers' Stories into the Fabric of Early Childhood Education Practice* (Enache, 2021a), there were six participants: myself, four other Romanian immigrant early childhood education teachers, and *ia*, the traditional Romanian women's shirt. Through the various stages of the study, our identities became entangled; I experienced the embodied making of *ia* as a practical exploration of my immigrant teacher identity, and, thus, I reconnected with and transformed myself and the communities to which I belong. I experienced my ethnic and cultural being-in-the-world through my body (Dion et al., 2011), through the embodied practical act of sewing a non-identical replica of a 19th-century *ia*.¹

This act of sewing and making *ia* was an integral method of my doctoral study. While sewing *ia*, I sewed together different layers of my identity—the past, present, and future—and two cultural I-positions (Hermans, 2001)—I-as New Zealand teacher and I-as Romanian teacher (Enache, 2021b)—creating a material embodied cultural identity. In the following article, I will share the story of the creation of *ia*.

ia and My Immigrant Teacher-Identity

When I made the decision to immigrate from Romania to New Zealand, *ia* became an intrinsic part of me, although at the time I was not aware of her presence in my life. *ia* had “always already” (St. Pierre, 2018, p. 607) been a part of who I was/am because of everything she represents: she is a quintessential part of (my) Romanian identity. Istrătescu-Târgoviște (2009) gives praise to the collective artisan's creativity in representing a collective identity:

In Europe, I don't know another nation which has succeeded in developing a process of ornamentation so creative and expressive, and a material representation of its ontology so perfectly acquired, as a result of knowing its own identity, like the Romanian nation. (p. 125)

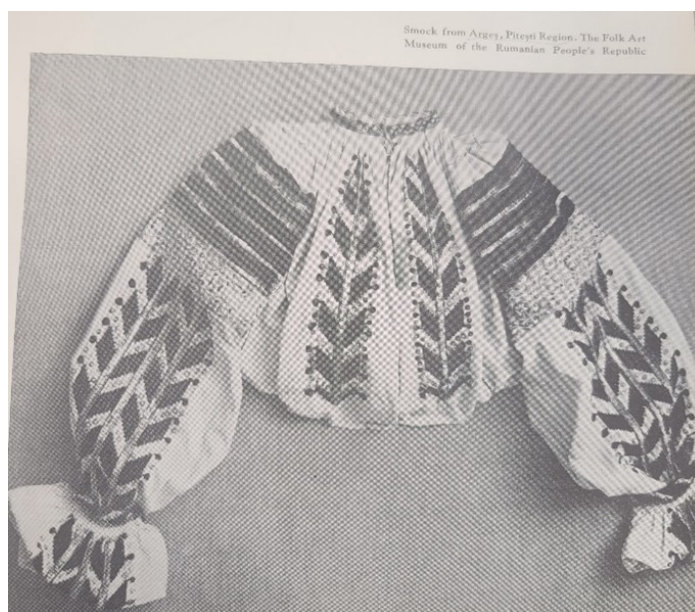
ia, or the shirt with *altiță*,² could be considered the most important piece of the Romanian women's traditional costume. Romanian people have an immense spiritual and cultural heritage in the countryside. In recent times, Romanian women and women from other cultural and ethnic backgrounds have worn and made *ia* worldwide, either as a material representation of their identity (Drăgan, 2016) or as a fashion statement, or both.

My identity journey in New Zealand took an unexpected turn through a simple computer word search at the Auckland Public Libraries. I did this search because I wanted to reconnect with my birthplace. When I typed in Romania or Romanian, to my

surprise, many pages appeared in the search, pages containing music, books, and five old albums about Romanian folk art (Bănăţeanu et al., 1958; Bubociu et al., 1966; Grindea, 1952; Oprescu, 1929; The Rumanian Institute for Cultural Relations, 1955). I did not expect to find so many resources related to Romanian culture. This realisation strengthened my sense of belonging to my new land, enabling me to connect with my land of origin. In the album entitled *Folk Art in Rumania* (The Rumanian Institute for Cultural Relations, 1955), I found a black-and-white photo of an ia from Argeş (Figure 1) —the region where my father was born— that I would make a replica of. In that moment of discovery, I simultaneously felt an overwhelming sensation of connection with my childhood places and my ancestors. The first ia that women sew usually comes from their birthplace or their parents'; I chose this ia to be the first one I sewed (henceforth referred to as *the original ia*).

Figure 1

Ia from Argeş in the Album Folk Art in Rumania (1955)



My interest in teacher identity and cultural artefacts transformed this reconnection into academic research. The discovery of the albums that I subsequently used in my doctoral study was an epiphanic moment. Suddenly, I was catapulted to the village of my childhood holidays with my grandmother Tudora— who used to weave and sew—and my cousins and relatives, reliving a sensation of freedom. Although I did not see my grandmother or any women in the village dressed in ia at the time, I instinctively knew that ia represented the village worldview. The complexity and symbolism of ia captivated me, along with her aesthetic beauty. I wanted to proudly wear an authentic ia, handmade by me. I possessed the necessary skills to make an ia because I learnt to

sew traditional motifs in school, as a child and adolescent, and I have always been interested in creating artefacts.

After my discovery, I posted the black-and-white photo in a couple of sewing groups on an online platform, and found out that the original ia, over a century old, belongs to the National Heritage and the Romanian Peasant Museum collection. Afterwards, I found details and a colour photo (Figure 2 left) online.³

Figure 2

The 19th-century original ia in the Romanian National Heritage collection (left) and the non-identical replica I made during my doctorate (right)



Note: Woman's shirt/ia of Argeş. Romanian Peasant Museum (National Cultural Heritage; n.d.) (left). Author's image and artwork (right).

Historical Roots

ia, as part of the traditional Romanian costume, have ancient origins with our ancestors, the Geto-Dacians, who lived in Dacia, a land between the Carpathian Mountains and the Danube River. Dacians dressed in clothes like those that people still wear in some parts of the countryside today (Grindea, 1952; Roşu et al., 2011). Women's headcovers, men's shirts, large trousers,⁴ and shepherd's hats (Bâtcă, 2006) are depicted on the Tropeum Traiani monument in Adamclisi, Romania (109 AD), and Trajan's Column in Rome (113 AD). Some elements of the traditional costume date back to the Neolithic (9000 BC–3000 BC) and Bronze Ages (3700 BC–500 BC), strong testimony to the Romanian national identity and continuity (Roşu et al., 2011). Dacia—a

land rich in gold that attracted the Roman emperors (Djuvara, 2011)—was conquered by the Roman Empire in 106 AD. Romanian is a Latin language (Constantiniu, 1999; Pop, 2015), and the Romanian word “cămașă” (shirt) comes from the Latin “camisia” (Buzilă, 2022).

At the end of the 19th century, when the original ia was crafted, Romania entered contemporary history as a monarchy, equal to the other European monarchies (Djuvara, 2011). The Romanian traditional costume was presented at the Exhibition of Costumes in Brussels in 1897, thus promoting ethnology and folklore not only as important areas of research (Roșu et al., 2011), but also as important factors in the consolidation of the national identity. When the Great War ended in 1918, Romania became a unified and independent state. The societal elite, like Queens Elisabeta (Carmen Sylva) and Marie of Romania (Figure 3), were enthusiastic promoters of the costume that became a national symbol of unity. The queens also contributed to a significant change in the public image of peasants, who were thereupon perceived not only as workers of the land but as talented artists (Roșu et al., 2011). Royalty at the time placed the traditional costume at the same level as famous designers' dresses (Bătcă, 2006).

Figure 3

Queen Elisabeta (left); Queen Marie with Two of Her Children in Traditional Costume (right)



Note: Queen Elisabeta [photograph], 1882, by Franz Duschek, Public Domain (left); Prințesa Maria, Prințesa Maria și Prințul Nicolae [photograph], by C. Sfetea (1909), București (right).

Traditional art has been a source of inspiration for local and international artists, composers, sculptors, philosophers, writers, poets, and fashion designers, such as Constantin Brâncuși,⁵ Béla Bartók, George Enescu, Mircea Eliade, and Yves Saint Laurent. The Romanian artist Teodor Pallady and the French artist Henri Matisse were friends (Essers, 2012), and Pallady gifted Matisse several ia blouses that Matisse immortalised in his paintings—the most famous being *La Blouse Roumaine* (Figure 4) (Essers, 2012).

Figure 4

La Blouse Roumaine



Note: La Blouse Roumaine, Henri Matisse, 1940. Centre Pompidou, Paris.

Traditional Art and the Origins of Ia

To understand where ia comes from, it is necessary to understand tradition and traditional art. The worldview or sacred beliefs of a community set the artistic standards in traditional or folk art, in close connection with the message that a traditional artist communicates (Roberts, 2007). I employ Kathleen Glanister Roberts' (2007) definition and characteristics of traditional art, as “the particular genre of human creativity that emphasizes artistic process, cultural tradition, and limited individualism” (p. 153). In Romania, traditional practices like sewing, weaving, pottery, and wood carving have been transmitted from generation to generation, not only in villages, but, more recently, in cities and through digital communities. These practices not only promote traditional techniques but, importantly, social responsibility, inclusion, and cultural identity (Drăgan, 2016). Traditional art involves an artistic process and a tradition embedded in a

community over a considerable period, with both process and tradition being guided by cultural boundaries. In traditional art, handcrafting is valued over mass production (Roberts, 2007).

In digital communities, everyone who has access to the internet can be a member, but people who want to handcraft artefacts like *ia* need to be skilled and talented—or ready to learn—and willing to follow the rules of the community (Roberts, 2007). For example, when sewing the traditional costume, people need to follow the compositional balance and the pattern. The process of traditional art treats the artefacts as living beings in the sense that they are intended to be used or worn and cherished in the communities where they are created, an aspect that is more important than their presentation in an exhibition (Roberts, 2007).

Communism changed Romanian society and life irremediably. The flourishing creativity of cultural life was paralysed when the communist regime was installed in 1947 (Djuvara, 2011). After the Second World War, the village suffered changes in all areas of life. The land, animals, and all material possessions were confiscated through forced collectivisation and industrialisation (Iouraş, 2016), and atheistic education was enforced, changes that had disastrous effects on traditional life and, implicitly, on the traditional costume (Roşu et al., 2011). The costume was devalued through machine production, and traditional features were distorted (Buzilă, 2021). In regions further away from the big cities, and in remote areas or in the mountains, it had more chances to be preserved and not altered by mass production in the handicraft cooperative system (Roşu et al., 2011).

In the 1970s and 1980s, people dressed in the traditional costume for shows that celebrated the Communist Party. In the need for communist uniformity, the costume suffered “stylistic distortions, unprofessional interpretations and obvious mistakes, which altered its authentic character” (Roşu et al., 2011, p. 11; see also Corduneanu, 2013). This led to a uniformisation of the costume. For example, everyone in a choir or dancing group had the same costume. Nobody could be different. This new ideology was a stark contradiction of the symbolic thinking of the villager and of the collective imagination and individuality represented through the traditional costume. The complexity, symbolism, and metaphorical dimensions of *ia* could be explained through *ia*’s birthplace, the Romanian village.

The Romanian Village—The (Meta)Physical Cradle of *ia*

Eminent poet and philosopher Lucian Blaga (2011), in his 1936 speech of acceptance into the Romanian Academy, *Praise to the Romanian Village*, brought the

village to the forefront of life. He demonstrated the close philosophical and material connection between village, childhood, and children. He identified the village as living in him, through his lively and exciting childhood experiences. For Blaga, the childhood spent in the countryside was the only valuable childhood. Thus, childhood and the village formed an inseparable entity. To understand the fullness of village life, Blaga believed that adults needed to understand the depths of a child's soul first. According to him, childhood was the only gate to the village metaphysics. Blaga considered the village a living metaphysical presence, an immortal and worthy ancestor.

The Romanian village was built around the church and the cemetery, thus, the village topography embodied many mythological places. For example, at night, as a child, while contemplating the Milky Way, Blaga felt that all the stars descended into the village, participating in their lives, and listening to them breathing in their sleep. The village was the breath of life and through its geography was situated on a mythological and metaphysical continuum. It was the centre of the universe, going beyond the universe into myth, in the cosmos, where there was nothing else. Blaga stated that that was the latent conscience of the village about itself/himself. The village became more, it became the *village-idea* (Blaga, 2011).

Juxtaposing Blaga's village with a new materialist lens (Bennett, 2010), the village-idea has agency and power, and, like ia, the village becomes he/she.⁶ Blaga's village has agency and is in a relationship of intra-action and intra-connection (Barad, 2007) with the physical and metaphysical worlds. The Romanian village transcends time, space, and matter and becomes much more. Thus, the village was not only the cradle of my childhood, but, in my study, it provided the (meta)physical cradle of ia.

Vibrant Matter and Thing-Power

As a teacher born in Romania and living and teaching in New Zealand, ia represents my country of origin, Romania's uniqueness as a nation. When wearing ia, women are protected, because ia has apotropaic powers, with the role of protection (Apan, 2006). Over time, ia has been revived as a symbol of identity, femininity, strength, revitalisation, and living a more sustainable life. At present, this is evident through the creation of numerous groups—composed mostly of women, and based not only throughout Romania, but, most notably, in Romanian communities around the world—who focus on sewing ia and identify with ia's symbols and meanings.

The original ia that inspired me was made by an anonymous woman. Both this original ia and my replica changed my world. Ia deserves attention and an ethical representation because she is a presence. During my study, I was finally ready to listen

to her story, to acknowledge her agency and take it into account. I thus responded to a provocation: not only did I understand the object/subject/agent of my study differently, but I became different myself and transformed my relationships (Rosiek et al., 2020) with humans and nonhumans.

ia transformed herself from an object into a subject and a participant in my study. Further, she became a storyteller and my teacher. She taught me lessons of history, geography, ethnology, and folklore. She possessed a vibrant matter, something that Bennett (2015) defines as a “strange agency by which ‘inanimate’ things somehow produced real effects both on and in living things” (p. 93). Following Bennett (2015), I asked myself: What kind of power did ia have, as material body and force? Could I accept that there was an efficacy or affectivity proper to her? What effects might she have produced or induced as I met her directly (in space) or indirectly (through description)?

To understand and explain ia’s sophisticated presence and her inter- and intra-connections with my identity, I needed a new theoretical framework. Bennett’s (2010) new materialism theory advances concepts like the force of things, called *thing-power*. She believes that humans and nonhumans possess some similar characteristics, and that things are “vital players in the world” (p. 4). Based on Spinoza, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty’s philosophies, Bennett (2010) gives voice to a vitality intrinsic to materiality, and in the process absolves “matter from its long history of attachment to automatism or mechanism” (p. 3). Bennett hopes that humans’ receptivity to the world of things will generate a more subtle awareness of and intervention in the ecology of things. Another concept that builds on Spinoza’s philosophy is that of the agency of assemblages. Thus, agency is not only a capacity localised in the human body, or in a collective produced only by humans but, rather, in what Deleuze and Guattari describe as an assemblage, consisting of a cluster of participants, macro- and microactants, “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts” (Bennett, 2010, p. 23). This inorganic agency (Bennett, 2010, 2011) gives things vitality and vibrancy, calling for what Bennett calls a “sensuous responsiveness to things” (Bennett, 2011, 16:07), where the senses are affected more than the intellect.

Like Bennett, I believe that thing-power is perceived by people who can employ a childhood sense of the world filled with human/nonhuman, organic/not organic animate beings and that it invites thinking beyond the life-matter binary which is believed to be “the dominant organizational principle of adult experience” (Bennett, 2010, p. 20). Further, Barad (2007) defines matter as “neither fixed and given nor the mere end of different processes. Matter is produced and productive, generated and generative. Matter is agentive, not a fixed essence of property of things” (p. 137).

In a relational context, in connection with my energy, hard work, and effort; and thoughts and wishes of renewal, health and happiness; ia became vibrant matter (Bennett, 2010), an energetic force, a part of who I am. In the process of making, close to my skin, ia became impregnated with my DNA, my sweat, tears, and blood from pricked fingers. The material and spiritual relationship and connectiveness between ia and me are powerfully described by Bennett (2010):

Humanity and nonhumanity have always performed an intricate dance with each other. There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore. (p. 31)

Following Bennett's suggestion, I engaged attentively and alertly with the vibrant matter of ia. In this complex process of engagement, I became immersed in the world that produced ia, and I deliberately included my linguistic and cultural traditions as a significant part of my studies. Ia was an agentic matter that produced and generated new meanings and new identities, facilitating the emergence of stories, and shaping the way the stories were told and received (Monforte, 2018) and the way stories shaped my identities in turn.

Through a formidable power, ia developed an I-as promoter of Romanian-identity position (Enache, 2021a). Through her nonhuman agency (Rosiek et al., 2020), ia became my teacher. Ia, a two-letter word, represented for me an onto-epistemological immensity and complexity. She and I together, and the vibrant matter around us, became one, and simultaneously we became *more* every day. She was not static but fluid, she moved in "spacetime-matter" (Barad, 2010, p. 266). As in a tandem motion, I had been engaging with the particularity of ia's nonhuman agency. It became potent through my relationship with her, and with the communities to which we belonged; we were in a performative relational entanglement (Rosiek et al., 2020). Her story would continue after my written words had finished, after I had written the last full stop. In part, she drove this story, because she was "a materiality that is as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension" (Bennett, 2010, p. 20).

I felt the thing-power of ia like my grandmother felt the forest in my childhood village of Căscioarele. Within ia, I could visualise a heterogenous ontological assemblage (Bennett, 2010) of womanly power: my grandmother Tudora coming home from the forest; fields of hemp, linen, and cotton; dirt, water, sun, laughter, crying, togetherness; activated by an agency, altogether, at the same time. Within ia, I could see me with a bird's eye view, writing and sewing, thinking and reading; greenery, birds, and cicadas outside my window; fabric and silk threads; my sweat and sighs; the other four participants in the study⁷—all Romanian immigrant early childhood education teachers; my supervisors; and my family near and far, all creating "an animal-vegetable-

mineral-sonority cluster with a particular degree and duration of power” (Bennett, 2010, p. 23). Thus, ia perpetuates an assemblage composed of affective human and nonhuman bodies, “never a stolid block but an open-ended collective” (p. 24). Many times, I felt that I could not contain her within pages of writing.

My ia became the sixth participant in my study, a teacher and a personal promoter extraordinaire (Enache, 2021b) who shaped my teacher-identity development. Her influence in my life is of incommensurable value.

The Metaphoric and Symbolic Worlds of Ia: An Imago Mundi

The complexity of ia comes from the metaphoric and symbolic meanings that reside in the villagers’ worldview. Ioan Sorin Apan (2006), a Romanian ethnologist and professor of physics, states that the traditional costume was like a temple for the person who wore it, a representation of the cosmos, where place and time ceased to exist. It represented an alphabet of symbols and manifestations of the sacred, that created a fairy tale or legend image around the costume. It was an imago mundi (Apan, 2006; Corduneanu & Drăgan, 2016). The costume had a practical utility, but also carried signs and symbols, synthesising all the spiritual and ontological dimensions of the people who created them (Bâtcă, 2006). People in the countryside could read the symbolism and significance of the designs. It gave the Romanian people a unique and inimitable cultural identity. The villager used to dress in the costume at special religious events, like Christmas or when they needed to confront a cataclysm, so that they were protected (Apan, 2006; Corduneanu & Drăgan, 2016). Ia became a spiritual shield (Apan, 2006). The traditional costume had the characteristics of a superhero of modern times. The costume gave people a metaphorical stature. When women were sewing their costume, they had the memory of each stitch, as Grindea (1952) observes: “Into the designs women and girls put all their imagination and hopes, creating exquisite and intricate patterns” (p. 19). Women in a family were the keepers of an extraordinary cultural heritage.

People took pride in the clothes they made themselves for different occasions: work, weddings, church, and burial. The social status could be observed in the way they dressed. For example, there was a special ia worn only by the priest’s spouse, and another ia for the midwife, with long sleeves that she used to hold, cover, and protect the new baby with, instead of a towel.

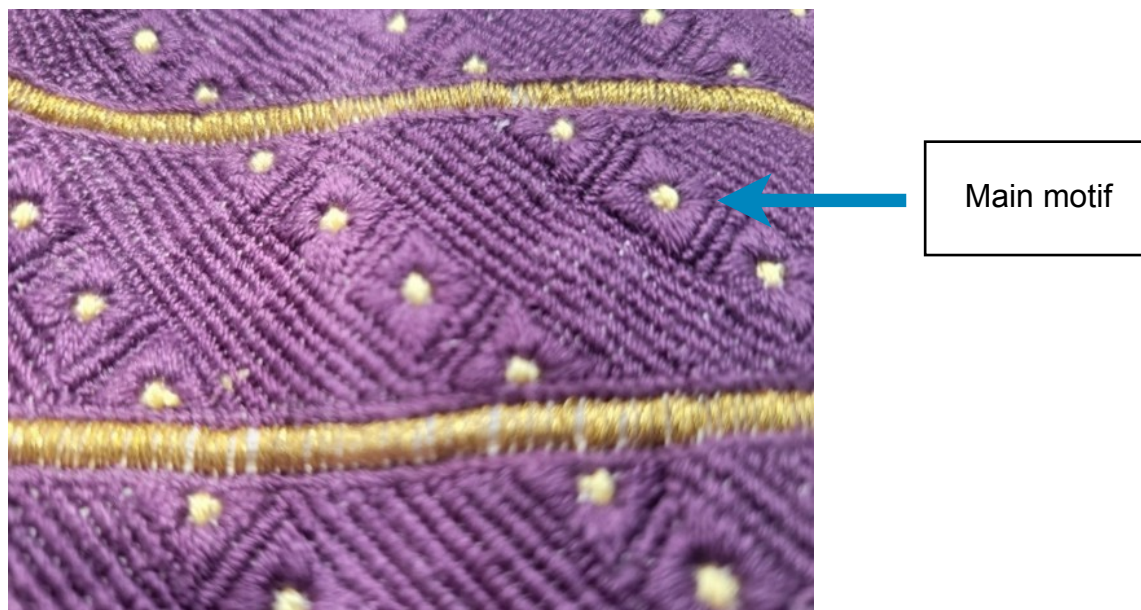
Romania is divided into folkloric regions, but the structure of the costume in a region is the same (Bâtcă, 2006). Noticeable differences come from the details and amplitude of the decorations and the quality of materials, all dependent on the women’s

social status (Bâtcă, 2006). As in many cultures, embroidery is placed at vulnerable areas of the body, where the evil could go in and attack: the neck, cuffs, and hem, but also at the shoulders and sleeves as a symbol of strength (Corduneanu & Drăgan, 2016). The colours of the costume were first black and red, gold and silver, then, in time, shades of red, green, blue, and yellow appeared, showing differences in age, marital status, the occasion the costume was worn for, and ethnic and regional differences (Bâtcă, 2006). At Easter time, each young girl or woman wanted to wear something new and unique, created by her and symbolising the renewal of life in springtime (Antonescu, 2016). Each artisan created original works of art, according to their skills and talent, thus there was an inexhaustible stream of innovation and variety of costumes (Bănăţeanu et al., 1958).

The Making of My Ia—A Replica of the 19th-Century Original

Judging by the expensive silk thread used and the abundance of sequins and beads, I believe that the original ia I replicated was worn on special celebrations. I did not make an exact replica of this ia, but I wanted to follow the original design as closely as I could. The process of making took two and a half years, with the *altîțe* (shoulder embroidery) taking five months to complete. I adapted the design, techniques, and colours so that they fit my interpretation, bringing a 19th century artefact to life in the 21st century. Because I saw the original ia only in photos, I had to find out about the pattern, fabric, and threads used, as well as the sewing and embroidery techniques from people in online sewing groups in Romania. There did not seem to be anyone in Auckland who knew how to sew an authentic ia at the time.

First, I had to decipher the main motif⁸ (Figure 5) that, in the original, looked like a cross in a circle. The significance of the sewn symbols on my ia is lost; I did not intend to find those meanings, but I would have liked to meet the woman who created the original ia, to find out who she was. Due to a travel scholarship that I obtained through the Association of New Zealand Embroiderers' Guild, I travelled to Romania and saw the original ia in real life for the first time in 2022, only after I had finished my replica. On this occasion, I found out that the original belonged to Sabina Brătianu-Cantacuzino. She was a prominent personality of Romanian high society at the time, who probably ordered her Romanian shirts to be made in a village and subsequently donated her whole collection to the Museum of Romanian Peasant in 1947. For me, the encounter with the original ia felt as if Sabina's and my ia were "two sisters in two hemispheres, united by invisible stitches across oceans and centuries" (Enache, 2023, p. 13).

Figure 5*Detail of Alțița with the Main Motif*

The ia I created followed the old pattern, with the alțița cut separately. The fabric I used was woven out of cotton in a small atelier in Bucharest,⁹ on a handloom similar to the ones used by our ancestors in countryside Romania. I used purple, red, and yellow silk for the embroidery and fewer sequins than in the original. I replaced some of the sequins with colourful thread in *râuri* (rivers¹⁰) so that my ia is lighter to wear, as the climate is warmer in New Zealand. All the materials were sent by my relatives from Romania, and this aspect added a sense of authenticity to my ia and promoted my I-as-Romanian position (Enache, 2021a), as they came from the same place from which I started my journey to New Zealand in 2001.

The Architecture of My Ia and Its Symbolism

All the component parts of ia are strongly related to the natural world and symbolise a close connection between human beings and nature. I identify with this symbolism and recognise the natural environment as an intrinsic part of who I am and an important part of my teacher identity and teaching practice. The tripartite sleeves are considered the most elaborate parts of the ia. Alțița (Figure 6) represents the sky, the celestial symbolism, with stars, birds, or geometrical symbols (Buzilă, 2014). This is the upper part, or the shoulder, of a sleeve, composed of five rows. The last row always appears distanced from the others, separated with gold thread. In the original ia, alțița was surrounded by an open row of sequins on the outside called the *cradle*. In my replica, I surrounded the cradle with gold thread. Alțița is the most important part of the blouse, exquisitely embroidered and decorated with thread in various colours, sequins,

and beads (Bănăţeanu et al., 1958), and laden with symbols. By its positioning on the upper part of the sleeve, *altiţa*—a word deriving from Latin (Academia Română, 2009)—relates to altitude.¹¹ As the name suggests, *altiţa* is destined to be placed only at an upper, superior level. In traditional Romanian culture, it symbolises the proximity of a woman to the sky, to celestial places. In my study (Enache, 2021a, 2021b), *altiţa* was representative of our aspirations and dreams for the future—my own and those of the other participants—and simultaneously of connections with ancestors and history.

In traditional symbolism, in the eastern part of Romania (Moldova), the two *altiţe* are placed where the soul rests, near the roof, as the wings of the soul. They would carry the soul of a departed woman to heaven and place it among her ancestors' souls (Buzilă, 2014, 2022). My research study symbolised both an external and internal escape, a physical flight into the unknown, represented by immigration, but also an internal, spiritual, and metaphorical flight into exploring teacher identities, not only for a teacher's own wellbeing and benefit, but also for the benefit of broader communities. In my study, the symbolic *altiţe* of *ia* carried all of us—we Romanian immigrant teacher participants—from one hemisphere to the other, through past-present-future (St. Pierre, 2018), and from traditional to modern and postmodern times (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010).

Figure 6

Altiţa



Altiţa: The Sky, a Pair of Wings for the Soul, and Quantum Physics

The powerful symbolism of *altiţa* is described below by Corduneanu and Drăgan (2016):

Alțița is all arranged inside of a “cradle,” a border in “U” shape, and it is not good to close it to a rectangle. The cradle must be infinite, opened at the upper part. Alțița was considered sacred and used in the funeral rituals. When somebody died, an “alțița” was placed on the roof of the house. The soul, recently escaped from the body, must’ve felt naked and scared and disoriented and alțița offered a comforting familiar refuge. The soul nests in, and from the roof of the house it can watch all friends and relatives who come to say farewell. (p. 54)

Inspired by the powerful metaphorical language in the above paragraph, I symbolically associated my alțițe (Figure 7) and my soul to the domain of quantum physics. The association between alțițe and a human soul is similar to two entities connected in a quantum entanglement. A quantum entanglement is defined by physicist Niels Bohr as “an incredibly close relationship between a pair of quantum particles whose fates are intertwined” (Al-Khalili, 2018a, 32:24), for example, when they were created in the same event. Following this reasoning, I could extrapolate that the fate of each pair of alțițe is intertwined with a woman’s soul. Thus, the alțițe and the woman’s soul “can subtly and instantaneously influence each other across space” (Al-Khalili, 2018b, 9:38) and, like quantum subatomic particles, they “can be in many places at once and send each other mysterious communications” (Al-Khalili, 2018b, 4:54). In my case, my alțițe and my soul have their fates entangled; thus, my alțițe metaphorically flew with me to the southern hemisphere. In a new spacetime, ia and I found new ways of communication and our bond has become indestructible.

Figure 7

My Alțițe, Like a Pair of Wings



Încrețul (Figure 8) represents the earth and contains rhomboidal and triangular motifs. In Romania, the rhombus is known as a feminine symbol, the matrix of life, ready to ripen and a gate to the subterranean world (Buzilă, 2014). The earth grows food; it

represents sustenance and life. The colours of the *încreț* are those of the soil in different regions of Romania, from dark brown to pale yellow, depending on its fertility. In this image, the colour is golden yellow, representing the wheat fields near the region where my father was born.

Figure 8

Încrețul—Work-in-Progress (left) and Completed (right)



The *Râuri* (rivers) placed both on the sleeves (Figure 9) and on the body of the blouse (Figure 10), represent the underground world, where the water originates. It contains geometrical, cosmic, and vegetal symbols. Water sustains the life of all seeds, roots, and living beings in the soil (Buzilă, 2014). Ia also has some adjacent parts, like the two cuffs, that represent the metaphor of a large body of water into which the rivers from the sleeves and the body of ia flow. In Romania, these would be the rivers Danube and Argeș, the last one near my childhood village, and the Black Sea. In New Zealand, they would be the Pacific Ocean and the Tasman Sea.

Figure 9

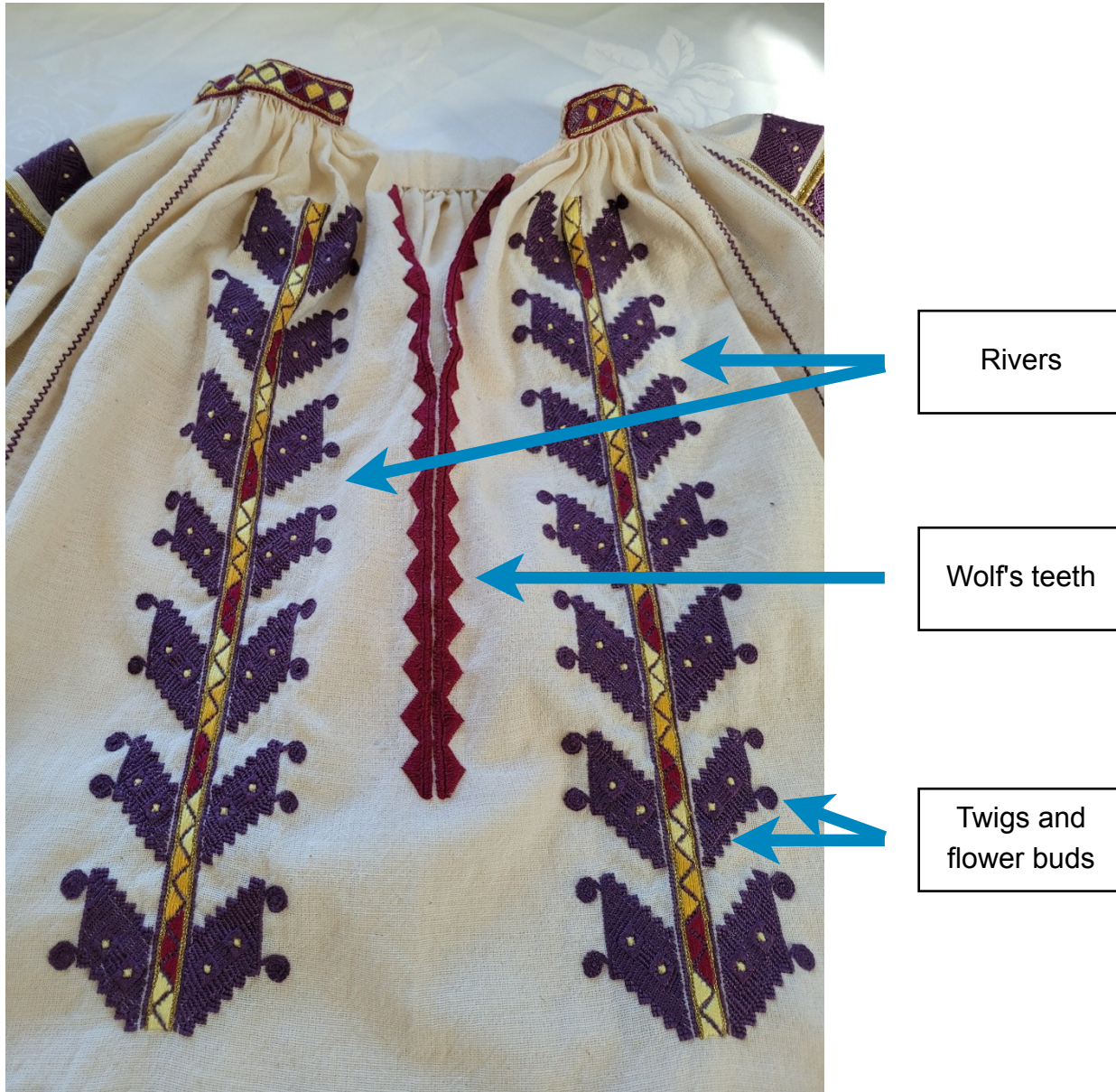
Rivers on the Sleeves—Work-in-Progress (left) and Finalised (right)



The front and back, called *stani* or the body of the ia, are the biggest parts (Figure 10). Like the sleeves, they are decorated with *râuri*. The main pattern of the *râuri* is called *fuște*, a regional word meaning twigs. At the end of the *fuște*, there are flower buds, that resemble the shape of *koru* (fern) in New Zealand. At the front cut, ia has a decorating motif called the wolf's teeth, symbolising protection (Figure 10).

Figure 10

Front Stani with Rivers Composed of Twigs and Flower Buds

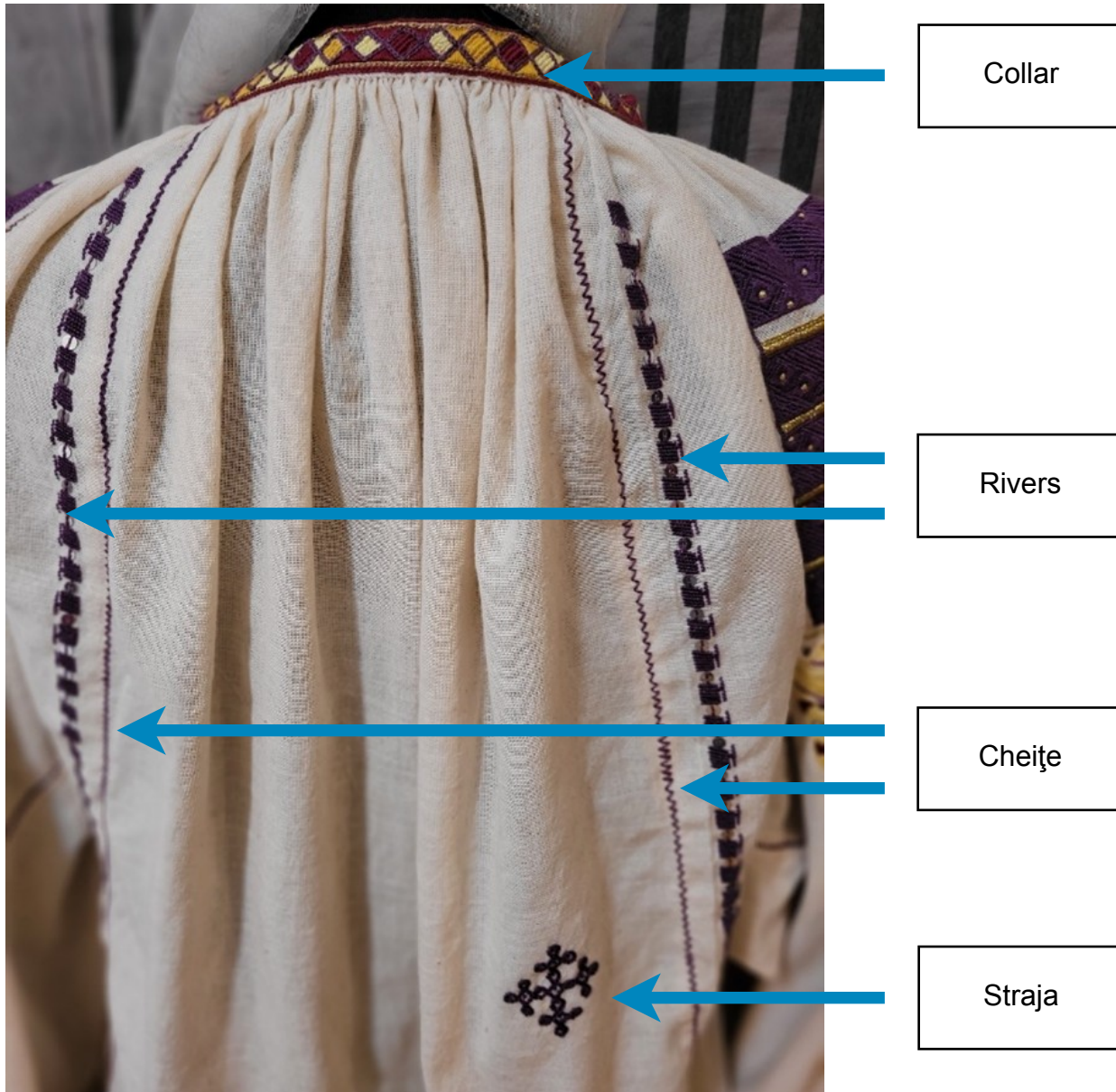


On the back stani, there are smaller rivers (Figure 11). The parts are sewed together using a technique called *cheițe* (small keys). *Straja* is a symbol of protection.

The one shown here is unique because my father taught me how to draw this symbol in my childhood, thus connecting me again with significant people and places.

Figure 11

Back Stani with Collar, Rivers, Cheițe, and Straja



To conclude, I offer two images of myself wearing ia of Argeș, one on a beach in Auckland, and the other at the graduation ceremony when I obtained my doctoral degree (Figure 12 left and right). The images are followed by a poem dedicated to this extraordinary artefact that continues to transform my life and identity in multiple ways. The poem contains important landmarks and concepts from ia's symbolic world that constitute the frame upon which my identity is continually sewn and created.

Figure 12

Me Wearing Ia of Argeş on a Beach in Auckland (left); Me at the PhD Graduation Ceremony, The University of Auckland New Zealand (right).



Note: Photo, right, taken by my husband, Mihai Enache; Photo, right, from my personal collection, photographer unknown.

My Ia = My Identity¹²

I open my *altițe-wings*, like a bird, soaring to new horizons,
 To a land of a Long White Cloud¹³
 I lift my sleeves-branches to the stars like a tree of life,
 Future generations—our sons—my genealogy
 My *Alțița* whispers stories of Ursa Major¹⁴ and Matariki¹⁵
 She protects my flight to the cosmos, to galaxies of billions of stars
 As I carry the sky on my shoulders (Corduneanu & Drăgan, 2016).
 My *Încreț* breathes stories of ancestors working their land in Vlașca,
 rioting for a piece of bread, dying on the battlefield,
 It murmurs stories of a garden with fantails, bees, and butterflies
 And golden beaches on the North Shore of Auckland
 Where my roots of decades have been nourished and protected.
 My *Rivers* flew in stories of Argeș, where children swam in summer
 And crossed a bridge to go to school
 They cascade stories of the Pacific Ocean and Tasman Sea at Cape Reinga
 Where the waters meet and greet the spirits under the pohutukawa¹⁶ tree
Ia connects hemispheres, *ia* connects identities.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Figure 2, right.

² *Alțiță*: embroidered element on the shoulder. This will be explained, described, and discussed further throughout the article. Plural *altițe*.

³ Details on the website: [Cămașă Femeiască - INP, Bunuri Culturale Mobile Clasate în Tezaurul Patrimoniului Cultural Național \(cimec.ro\)](http://cimec.ro)

⁴ Romanian, *Ițari*.

⁵ Many of the traditional art symbols are found in the famous sculptor's work, symbols found on *ia* as well, like the rhombus, the circle, the bird, and flight.

⁶ In Romanian, the word village is masculine singular and feminine plural: *un sat/două sate*.

⁷ All also Romanian immigrant early childhood education teachers.

⁸ Mrs. Mirela Drefi helped me to figure out the sewing of the main motif.

⁹ Mrs. Mariana Neacșu and her husband Gheorghe Neacșu weave fabric used in sewing traditional shirts.

¹⁰ See Figure 9.

¹¹ Latin *altit̃ia*, Italian *altezza*. Plural noun *altițe* (Academia Română, 2009).

¹² Ideas, artwork, and the poem in this article were presented at the University of Arts and Design George Enescu, Iași, Romania in 2024 (Erasmus+); the European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, Edinburgh in 2025; the International Symposium of Poetic Inquiry, Auckland in 2024; the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, Chicago/online in 2022; Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education conference, Vancouver/online in 2022 and non-academic audiences in Auckland and Tauranga, New Zealand since 2018.

¹³ Aotearoa (the Māori name for New Zealand) means land of the long white cloud.

¹⁴ A constellation in the northern sky.

¹⁵ Matariki (Māori name), known as the Pleiades or Seven Sisters in English, is a constellation in the southern sky whose rising marks the Māori New Year.

¹⁶ A native tree of New Zealand, known as the New Zealand Christmas tree for its red flowers blooming in December.