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The afterlife of sacred space: *casa mare* in contemporary rural Moldova (case of Puhoi village)*

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Rezumat

Transformarea spațiului sacru: *casa mare* în mediul rural contemporan din Moldova (cazul s. Puhoi)

În cadrul cercetărilor de teren realizate în timpul expedițiilor etnografice în satul Puhoi, raionul Ialoveni, în anul 2026, au fost colectate date noi privind practicile tradiționale ale locuitorilor satului. În centrul cercetării noastre s-a aflat un spațiu special din locuința rurală tradițională – *casa mare*. Pe baza studierii locuințelor, a interviurilor cu locuitorii și a unui chestionar suplimentar, s-a încercat compararea datelor obținute cu caracteristicile și funcțiile casei mari cunoscute din sursele etnografice. Din literatura de specialitate se cunoaște faptul că *casa mare* se afla într-o opoziție simbolică față de spațiul locuit: aici nu se dormea, nu se lucra, iar mesele aveau loc doar în zile de sărbătoare sau cu ocazii speciale. Datele colectate de la locuitori au confirmat păstrarea în memorie a anumitor aspecte ale caracterului sacru al casei mari, în special în rândul persoanelor vârstnice. Chestionarul realizat în două grupuri de vârstă – elevi din clasele superioare și adulți – a evidențiat diferențe clare de percepție asupra acestui obiect cultural. Dacă tinerii văd *casa mare* mai degrabă ca pe o tradiție depășită, un spațiu de depozitare pentru obiecte neutilizate, în grupul adulților domină viziunea despre funcția ritualică a acestei încăperi, chiar dacă în realitate ea aproape că nu mai există în casele actuale. Se observă, de asemenea, tendința de individualizare a casei mari ca loc al memoriei familiale.

Cuvinte-cheie: *casa mare*, loc sacru, ritual, memorie, tradiție

Резюме

Трансформация сакрального пространства: *каса маре* в современной сельской Молдове (на примере с. Пухой)

В рамках полевых исследований, выполненных в ходе этнографических экспедиций в с. Пухой, р-н Яловень в 2026 г., были собраны новые данные о традиционных практиках жителей села. В центре нашего исследования – специальное помещение в традиционном сельском жилище – *каса маре*. На основании изучения жилища, интервью с жителями и дополнительного анкетирования была предпринята попытка сопоставить полученные данные с характеристиками и функциями *каса маре*, известными из этнографических источников. Из литературы известно, что *каса маре* находилась в символической оппозиции к остальному жилому пространству – в ней не спали, не работали и ели только в особые праздничные дни. Собранные у жителей данные подтвердили сохране-

ние в их памяти, особенно у пожилых людей, определенных аспектов сакральной функции *каса маре*. Анкетирование, проведенное в двух возрастных группах жителей села, старших школьников и взрослых, показало ярко выраженные различия в восприятии объекта исследования. В то время как молодежь видит в *каса маре* скорее отжившую традицию, склад неустраиваемых предметов, то в группе взрослых доминирует представление о ритуальной функции данной комнаты несмотря на то, что она фактически почти не сохранилась в домах. Также прослеживается тенденция к индивидуализации *каса маре* как места семейной памяти.

Ключевые слова: *каса маре*, сакральное место, ритуал, память, традиция

Summary

The afterlife of sacred space: *casa mare* in contemporary rural Moldova (case of Puhoi village)

Within the framework of field research carried out during ethnographic expeditions to Puhoi village, Ialoveni district in 2026, new data were collected on the traditional practices of the village inhabitants. The focus of our study was a specific space within the traditional rural dwelling – *casa mare*. Based on the examination of houses, interviews with local residents, and an additional questionnaire survey, an attempt was made to compare the collected data with the characteristics and functions of *casa mare* known from ethnographic sources. According to the literature, *casa mare* stood in symbolic opposition to everyday living space: people did not sleep or work there, and meals were taken there only on special festive occasions. The data collected from local residents confirmed that certain aspects of the sacred character of *casa mare* are still preserved in memory, especially among older people. The questionnaire survey conducted among two age groups of villagers – senior school students and adults – revealed pronounced age differences in the perception of this cultural object. While young people tend to perceive *casa mare* as an obsolete tradition, a storage space for unused objects, among adults the dominant perception remains its ritual function, despite the fact that in material terms it has almost disappeared from contemporary houses. A tendency is also visible toward the individualization of *casa mare* as a place of family memory.

Key words: *casa mare*, consecrated place, ritual, memory, tradition

One of the first residents of Puhoi whom we met during our expedition was Eugenia Veverița (1968), the owner of *Casa părintească* ("Parental Home") – her own project of reconstructing the house associated with her childhood memories. She explained that after building a new house in the same courtyard and after her mother's death, she had gradually begun moving into the old house various things she no longer needed. However, when her mother's grandchildren, who had spent their childhood there, came into the house, she eventually felt ashamed that it had turned into a storage room and decided to restore order. She whitewashed the walls, painted the interior, arranged everything in its proper place, and changed only the curtains. Characteristically, neighbours who came to see the house advised her to modernize it, but her response was: "I want it the way it used to be". As a result, the house now gives her joy; it evokes memories of life with her parents, when, as she put it, "there were no worries". She also wishes to share the experience of peasant life with her children and grandchildren, who grew up under entirely different conditions.

Eugenia Veverița also recounted another revealing story about how she came to appreciate traditional objects. In the chests preserved in the *casa mare*, her mother had kept towels and entire rolls of homespun linen. She gave two rolls to a local restaurant because, as she explained, "they are very good for polishing glasses". From a towel decorated with lace edges, she cut small pieces to use as dust cloths. One day she dreamt of her mother, who scolded her for failing to value her work. From that moment on, she began to appreciate what had been left behind: "I did not even know that this was a *maramă* (traditional headdress of a married woman), that it was valuable". At the same time, she noted that she had seen similar practices among other relatives, who also used handmade ceremonial towels as cleaning rags.

The stories told by our interlocutor help to problematize contemporary attitudes toward tradition in the village. On the one hand, traditional culture is actively promoted as the "face of the nation" through festivals, celebrations, folklore ensembles, and other public forms of representation. On the other hand, we observe a clear rupture between the parents' generation, whose way of life was shaped by traditional forms of household economy and social relations, and their children, whose adult lives started under already modernized conditions. The grandchildren, in turn, have grown up under capitalism and globalization, and many of them perceive traditional objects primarily as museum exhibits.

Let us examine this issue more closely through the example of *casa mare* – one of the most vivid

and symbolically charged phenomenon of traditional culture. The captivating fact about *casa mare* is its physical disappearance in the modern villages and simultaneous omnipresence in the modern culture through different elements, images and ideas (Ivanova 2025: 47). In local ethnology, *casa mare* has most often been examined from a visual / aesthetic and functional perspective. Its interior, the arrangement of objects, and their regional particularities have been described in detail. Thus, Z. Șofranksy emphasizes the representative function of this room: "it may be confirmed that this room plays the role of a museum of the housewife's skill and diligence, to which are sometimes added the diligent hands of marriageable daughters" (Șofranksy 2016: 16). A major role should be attributed to the dowry, which is stored in this room in a special chest and partially displayed on a bench or bed. In the houses of elderly people, the chest contains objects necessary for burial. T. Nesterova notes that the character of the objects kept in *casa mare* depends on the social status and age of its owners: "Given that every family prepares a dowry to pass on to children at marriage, their houses gradually become emptied, and over time, instead of colorful dowry items, objects intended for funeral ritual use begin to accumulate" (Нестерова 2010: 298). *Casa mare* has a separate entrance, which is significant because the room is used for family celebrations and rituals. This room emerged through the evolution of the single-room dwelling. Researchers note that such a dwelling possessed multifunctionality, since each corner served a particular purpose: heating and cooking, work, rest, and representation. With the development of floor planning, the system of interior organization diversified according to the number of rooms while preserving the original scheme (Negoiță 1987: 27). The corner with icons (analogous to the red corner in Slavic tradition) has been preserved in many peasant houses up to the present day and is therefore particularly well described. E. Postolachi writes: "A sacred place in *casa mare* is the eastern corner intended for icons. Certain rules are observed when placing the icon. In the same corner, beneath the icon, we also find the sacred bread. Access to this corner must remain unobstructed" (Postolachi 2007: 39).

It is precisely the symbolism of the sacred that interests us most, since it remains insufficiently explored in the literature and is among the least visible aspects of contemporary Moldovan village life. In the traditional worldview, sacredness is attributed to the dwelling as a whole, because it protects human beings from the external world of chaos and evil forces. For this reason, particular attention is given to those



Image 1. *Casa mare* used as a depository, v. Puhoi.
Photo: Ivanova Nina, 21.04.2026.



Image 2. *Casa mare* used as a depository, v. Puhoi. Photo: Ivanova Nina, 23.04.2026.



Image 3. Corner with an icon, v. Puhoi.
Photo: Ivanova Nina, 16.10. 2025.



Image 4. Corner with an icon, v. Puhoi.
Photo: Ivanova Nina, 23.04.2026.

parts that connect the house with the outside world - the door and threshold, windows, and roof (Van Gennep 1960: 20). Moreover, according to A. Bayburin, “the universe, as it were, finds its continuation in the house, which appears as its condensation” (Байбурын 1983: 214). What role did *casa mare* play within this order of the world? And which of these representations remain alive today?

First of all, one should emphasize the opposition between *casa mare* and the room for living and work

within the traditional three-part rural dwelling. This means that a number of prohibitions and restrictions were associated with *casa mare*: the owners did not sleep there (no matter how many family members there were), did not eat there on ordinary days, and did not work there (which is why no work tools were kept inside). Access to the room was restricted, since it was intended for guests, festive occasions, and other family rituals. I. Ghinoiu emphasized the intergenerational continuity enacted within the

house: "Living rooms are spaces of intergenerational encounters, where some arrive and others depart. For example, on special feast days festive tables were left overnight here for the ancestors" (Ghinoiu 1991: 169). During memorial days, the clean room becomes a sacred place of reunion with relatives from the other world (Pârâu 2001: 30). Thus, we observe the special status of *casa mare*, to which functions of maintaining social order were assigned, together with a connection to the sacred world. M. Eliade emphasized the direct relationship between hierophany (the manifestation, experience of the sacred) and sacred space (Eliade 1959: 26). The restrictions associated with *casa mare*, and its use only on special occasions, therefore imply its sanctified character – if not complete (as in the case of a church), then at least partial. This idea is further confirmed by the necessity of maintaining cleanliness there. In Romania another common name for it is "the clean room", which even more strongly underlines its opposition to everyday living spaces. Thus, the everyday could not be mixed with what was "clean", that is, ritualized and exceptional. It was in *casa mare* that liminal rituals took place – weddings, rites connected with childbirth, the death of a family member, and so forth – all of which required the sacredness of space. J. Assmann, a well-known researcher of cultural memory, pointed out the importance of ceremony for the collective identity: "The ceremony as a means of communication is itself a forming influence, as it shapes memory by means of texts, dances, images, rituals, and so on" (Assmann 2011: 38). Thus, *casa mare* contributed to the maintenance of social order within the community.

Today, the boundaries of this once fundamental opposition have largely disappeared, and *casa mare* in its former exposure is rarely encountered, since village life and rural practices have changed dramatically over the last century. Nevertheless, during our expedition to the village of Puhoi it was possible to trace fragmentary representations among residents that still correspond to the traditional worldview. In many houses, *casa mare* has been preserved, often functioning as storage for objects no longer in use, but sometimes containing old household items, and always with an icon in the corner.

From conversations with villagers, the following comments may be distinguished as related to the sacred character of *casa mare*:

— Festivals and family rituals:

Celebrations were held in casa mare, only when there was a feast – at Easter, at Christmas – all the relatives gathered there <...>. It was opened only on holidays; otherwise it remained closed (Eudochia, 66).

— Icons:

Icons on the walls – yes (Alexandra, 82).

There were icons in casa mare (Eugenia, 58).

— Cleanliness of the room, perfect order, and proper arrangement of objects:

I maintain it in the form in which I inherited it from my aunt; everything is arranged exactly as it used to be (Eudochia, 66).

It is not in order now; I cannot let you in. Everything must be in its proper place (Alexandra, 82).

The room is not in the proper condition, as it should be (Vera, 89).

These testimonies show that even when *casa mare* no longer performs its former ritual functions in full, the ideas associated with its symbolic order remain remarkably persistent. The requirement of cleanliness, closure, and correct arrangement continues to mark the room as distinct from ordinary domestic space.

— Non-everyday objects, clothing, dowry:

It was closed, with all the valuable things inside (Eudochia, 66).

I keep the burial dowry there in the chest (Maria, 73).

The story described at the beginning of this article – how the protagonist dreamed of her mother, who reproached her for cutting towels from *casa mare* into cleaning rags – is highly revealing in this context. The textiles preserved in this room belonged not to utilitarian objects, but to ritual ones: gifts for weddings, funerals, and other ceremonial occasions. Their use in everyday life deprives them of ritual status and desacralizes them. One of the respondents said that "it was a saint place" in her grandmother's house (Tatiana, 56).

A highly revealing story is recounted by one of the villagers in a book devoted to this village: "Gheorghe Palade's mother <...>. Like a mythological figure, she saved an arm of a crucifix that the Soviets had set on fire <...>. She took the arm home and hid it under the bed in the *casa mare*. She prayed to it and crossed herself before it in secret for more than twenty years. When the village church reopened, she brought it to the church" (Butnaru 2018: 62). Here, *casa mare* appears as the "proper" place for keeping relics, which confirms its status as sacred space.

Over time, however, the function of ritual space has been transformed. What we observe today is a shift in the function of *casa mare* from ritual space to a space of memory and family history. This explains why it often contains numerous family portraits, photographs, and such relics as medals, awards, certificates, and children's toys – memories of children who have already grown up.

Photography as an anthropological object has been studied extensively by specialists. Thus, V.

Dmitriuc and A. Prigarin provide evidence that in rural settings photographs may acquire an almost cult-like status, which is why they are often displayed next to icons (Дмитрюк at al. 2015: 23). These interior elements lead us to the idea that the functions of *casa mare* have shifted toward family memory, toward a certain museification of both the space itself and the objects left behind by previous generations, especially since these objects differ qualitatively from utilitarian modern industrial household items.



Image 5. Family portraits in *casa mare* interior, v. Puhoi.
Photo: Ivanova Nina, 16.10. 2025.



Image 6. Family portraits in *casa mare* interior, v. Puhoi.
Photo: Ivanova Nina, 23.04.2026.

In order to broaden our field material base, we conducted a survey among residents on several topics, including *casa mare*: whether it exists in their home and what associations it evokes. Two age groups participated in this study – senior pupils of the local lyceum (51 respondents, aged 16-17) and adults (39 respondents, average age 47). The associative question was chosen because of its ability to access the respondent's subconscious level of knowledge. As a result, instead of merely obtaining a list of interior objects associated with *casa mare*, we received a much broader range of material for analysis.

In response to the question of whether they or their grandparents have a *casa mare* at home, the majority of young respondents answered positively:

– Yes – 33%

– Grandparents have one – 34%

Nevertheless, such a high proportion of affirmative responses does not indicate the preservation of *casa mare*, for is it often understood as an ordinary living or storage room:

– Yes, at present, but we use it as a bedroom, for storing clothes, etc.

– My great-grandparents had one; now it is no longer such a prestigious room.

It should also be noted that the share of negative responses (no, do not know, no answer) is about 17%.

In the group of grown-ups there were 43% of positive answers, 33% mentioned that they, their parents or grandparents had *casa mare*. Only few respondents provided negative answers. So, we can conclude that grown-ups were much closer to the knowledge about this tradition in comparison to the school students. That means that its disappearance is strictly connected to the overall modernization of the houses, which lack special unheated areas.

The associative test was designed to reveal whether significant differences exist between younger and older generations in their representations of *casa mare*, and to identify which elements of this image remain the most stable across generations. The responses obtained were grouped into semantic categories, and the relative proportion of each category was calculated, with particular attention given to associations reflecting the sacred dimension of this space. The test, however, proved more difficult for respondents than expected. Participants were asked to provide ten associations each; nevertheless, instead of the expected 510 responses, only 280 associations were collected from the group of school students. In the adult group, the result was proportionally only slightly higher: 223 associations instead of the expected 390. A negative response (“do not know”) was recorded in 17% of cases among students, suggesting a certain weakening in the intergenerational transmission of representations related to traditional culture.

Table 1. Associative test results

General number of associations	School students (51)	Grown-ups (39)
	280	223
Material objects category	34%	41%
Functions / descriptive characteristics category	22%	55%
Emotions category	27%	5%
Family category	17%	3%

Among the associations obtained, four main semantic categories were identified: material objects, emotions/identity, functions/descriptions and family. Within the category of material objects (34% at younger generation and 41% at grown-ups) a clear difference is already visible. Young respondents mainly list interior objects that are still actually found in the houses of elderly villagers: carpets, tables, chairs, wardrobes, traditional clothing, dowry items, chests, photographs, and icons; many of these objects are accompanied by the adjective “old” (old furniture, old dishes). In many cases, it is precisely the historical character of the room and its lack of present-day relevance that are emphasized. It is therefore not surprising that, in functional terms, respondents often perceive it as being closer to a storage room where unnecessary old things are kept (19% of mentions).

Another important function identified by this group is the holding of family celebrations and the reception of guests (41%). This is perhaps one of the few elements that may still be related to the former function of *casa mare* as a sacred space, although specific holidays are not mentioned, and the references concern only family meals and gatherings with guests. This is followed by isolated mentions of other possible functions of *casa mare*: a room for storing dowry, a room typical of old houses, the largest room, the most interesting room, a spacious room, a spare room, an entrance hall, a bedroom, a place of rest, a living room, a hall, or simply a room used according to one's needs.

Only a small number of respondents mentioned icons, holy water, orderliness, or the coldness of the room. By contrast, an important category for this group proved to be the category of emotions, which in a certain way compensates for weaker knowledge and the reduced practical significance of *casa mare* for young people (27%). This category includes memories, fairy tales, warmth, joy, love, and similar associations, indicating the importance of a formed emotional connection not only with *casa mare*, but with the parental home as a whole, associated with carefree childhood. A positive emotional attachment to the home of origin constitutes an important resource in the process of growing up and identity formation. For this reason, associations with family are especially significant for this group of respondents, since family defines their current social status: they live with their parents, depend on them, and have not yet become fully involved as responsible participants in family rituals. Overall, however, respondents perceive *casa mare* primarily as belonging to the past – a space associated with old-fashioned furniture, traditional clothing, candles, and collectible objects.

A completely different picture emerges when analyzing the associative field of adult respondents. As shown in the table, the most significant category for them is the functionality of *casa mare*, followed by descriptions of interior objects. The latter differs qualitatively from the descriptions provided by younger respondents. Modern furniture terms are almost absent here; instead, emphasis is placed on “exceptional” objects: basil associated with the icon, candles, carpets, a grandmother's wedding wreath, dowry items, photographs of previous generations, embroidered towels, traditional clothing, the scent of basil, quinces, carpet-covered walls, and, in many cases, icons. Several respondents mentioned the loom, although this contradicts the idea of a room in which work was traditionally not performed. Easter baking was also mentioned, which corresponds to data obtained from interviews. In many families, it was precisely at Easter that a table was laid in *casa mare*, on which ritual baked goods such as Easter bread and ceremonial loaves were placed. Since this is ritual food, it reinforces the idea of the sacred character of the room. Overall, these associations depict the interior of a truly exceptional space, not intended for everyday routine.

A broad category of functions and descriptive characteristics confirms the idea that in the representations of the adult generation, *casa mare* was attributed a special and sacred quality: cleanliness, mystery, family altar, corner of the soul, sacred corner, darkness, silence, holy place, mysterious room, coolness, blessing, symbol of faith and spirituality, and a solemn space. Characteristically, only two respondents described it as a storage room, which marks a substantial contrast with the younger group. For adults, the primary function of *casa mare* is the performance of family rituals; one especially frequent expression was: “from here we set out on the final journey”. The ritual component in the associative field is directly connected with celebrations, family, heritage, and intergenerational continuity. These are highly indicative associations, leading us back to the cycle described above by I. Ghinoiu, who interpreted the traditional dwelling as a place of entrance into this world and transition into the other world. Within such a worldview, *casa mare* functions as a kind of liminal portal. For the adult group of respondents, not only the ritual dimension of the family life cycle is evident, but also the participation of new generations in these cycles. At the same time, in the younger group we observe that this transmission has not fully taken place. It is possible that tradition will acquire greater significance in their lives when their social status changes and they themselves become respon-

sible for organizing family rites of passage. Whether this happens will depend largely on the sociocultural context in which their adulthood unfolds.

Another important aspect that emerges from the associations provided by the adult group is the social/status dimension, namely the representative function of *casa mare* – its role as a visual display of prosperity: wealth, beauty, a family's calling card, the preservation of valuable and beautiful objects and dowry items, family pride, industriousness, and hospitality. By contrast, the categories of emotions and family were considerably less significant in this group. Within the emotional category, and only conditionally, memories predominated. In the family category, only a few isolated words were mentioned. This is likely related to the respondents' age: for them, the ritual dimension of the life cycle is not an abstract representation but lived experience. Consequently, *casa mare* is associated not with the emotional childhood perception of the parental home (as in the younger group), but rather with an instrument for carrying out specific practices. Associations with family are embodied here in concrete images – status, well-being, and ritual. A particularly significant group of associations concerns family photographs and portraits, which point to a fundamentally new function of *casa mare* – that of family memory, increasingly displacing the room's formerly exclusive sacred functionality. To this same category belong associations such as history and tradition, since they introduce a degree of distance between ritual and practitioner: this is knowledge about ritual rather than its active performance.

Thus, in the representations of the adult group, *casa mare* has retained many traditional characteristics and functions. In many families it continues to be used for certain rituals, especially in funeral practices. The gap between its present external appearance – where it survives as a kind of museum of family memory – and the image saturated with sacred elements points to a transitional state of tradition. It should also be noted that more than half of the respondents no longer have *casa mare* in their homes; therefore, their associative responses were linked to memories of their parents' or grandparents' houses. For younger respondents, *casa mare* and its ritual repertoire have largely lost their meaning: it is simply a place where old things are stored. For adults, it remains a place of partial ritual practice, but even more a place of memory – associated with tradition, photographs, and history.

This shift from the idea of a sacred place to a place of memory confirms the general conception that tradition as such exists only when it is embed-

ded in the everyday life of a community. When a ritual ceases to function synchronously within a community, it indicates that the context has changed, that the ritual has lost its former significance, or that it has been replaced by one considered more relevant.

The transitional state of the *casa mare* tradition fits well within the broader scholarly understanding of the changing role of tradition in modernity, as described, for example, by John B. Thompson. Thompson argues that tradition gradually loses its normative and legitimizing role while retaining its capacity to provide meaning and create a sense of belonging. He emphasizes that traditions do not disappear; rather, they lose their fixed points within everyday life (Thompson 1996: 94). Applied to *casa mare*, this suggests that it persists both as an idea and as a material form, but increasingly outside the private household – in museums, ethnographic restaurants, folk-style cultural venues, and similar settings. In this sense, *casa mare* no longer functions primarily as an active ritual space embedded in daily domestic practice, but as a cultural sign through which local identity continues to be articulated. It is likely that new forms of its embodiment will emerge over time, since *casa mare* condenses many of the key meaning-producing elements of local ethnic culture: memory, ritual inheritance, social representation, and symbolic continuity.

Note

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