

## ІСТОРИЧНІ НАУКИ

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**HEALTH ANTHROPOLOGY: BETWEEN  
THEORETICAL OBSERVATIONS  
AND MAGICAL RITUAL PRACTICES  
(the case of Romanian witch in the  
Transcarpatia)**

**АНТРОПОЛОГІЯ ЗДОРОВ'Я:  
МІЖ ТЕОРЕТИЧНИМИ  
СПОСТЕРЕЖЕННЯМИ І ПРАКТИКОЮ  
МАГІЧНИХ РИТУАЛІВ (випадок  
румунської відьми в Закарпатті)**

**Ключові слова:** антропологія здоров'я, терапевтична магія, хвороба, відьма, магічний релігійний ритуал.

**Бургеле Камелія. Антропологія здоров'я: між теоретичними спостереженнями і практикою магічних ритуалів (випадок румунської відьми в Закарпатті).**

Стаття зосереджена на дослідженні образу останньої румунської відьми у Закарпатті, на лінії українського кордону річки Тиси, який був населений румунами. Матеріал статті базується на польових дослідженнях, здійснених в румунських селах Закарпаття та низки дискусій, проведених з носієм езотеричних знань в його власному будинку.

Відьмою є літня жінка, яка володіє справжніми терапевтичними навичками. Вона дуже відома в області і її часто запрошують, коли виникає потреба в лікуванні. Ця жінка поєднує деякі медичні знання, отримані від місцевого лікаря (з яким вона працювала з молодих років) з певною біоенергетичною спроможністю, яку вона, можливо, розвинула у результаті постійних практик.

Все це відтворює магічне тло, в якому використовується типовий сценарій ритуального зцілення: співи, масаж, ритуальних заклинань, конкретних інструментів - все це робиться з дотриманням принципів традиційної магії.

З погляду етнографічних досліджень, слід зазначити, що магічна діяльність румунської відьми з України належить до магічного профілю всього румунського населеного пункту.

Health and disease anthropology has lately become one of the most interesting chapters in cultural and social anthropology given all the mutations but also the returns to origin within the therapeutical and psycho-therapeutical system. In this respect, the study of the magical religious ri-

tuals with a therapeutical purpose occupy a central spot. The issue has been of interest to us for the last years – thus the many field reasearch sessions in the nort western part of Ardeal and Ukrain Maramures (the right Tisa bank Maramures).

The unanimous opinion of those who made a thorough and judicial study of the Romanian land is that the current practices of the therapeutic white magic, mainly the one that is focused on somehow common areas, like the health of the young child or the small ordinary accidents, are known in all the environments of the traditional Romanian community. This opinion is also shared by Martin Segalen who focuses his observations on this “domestic” or “household” aspect of therapeutic magic, because in the French villages many of the mothers could perform therapeutic actions with immediate effect<sup>1</sup>.

Likewise, Jeanne Favret-Saada, approaching the subject of magic in Normandy, she refused totally to believe in a backward and stupid rural world, but on the contrary, she found intelligent countrymen that could perform in causality relationships better than anyone else<sup>2</sup>.

Any folkloric culture has a universal background and, as it has models, it can develop a range of local creations of wide originality, with characters in all the fields<sup>3</sup>, that are able to continue and institutionalize the traditional psychotherapeutic model. The traditional community takes, by direct heritage, a series of archetypal structures, with a reverse in the mentality background, which they can adapt according to subjective and objective factors, to its own history.

The field researches show that there are great professionals, that are known in broad areas and whose presence is set in the collective memory for several generations. They say about them that “their IQ is high, are defined by emotionality, sensitiveness and an extraordinary intuition”<sup>4</sup>, as it was asserted by Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert in their famous studies: “an unusual intelligence for the common environments that believe in magic”<sup>5</sup>.

Silvia Ciubotaru, says about these genius characters of a “magic class”, that “they have gathered, starting from their native qualities, an impressive background regarding the ethnoiatric practice and the magic expressions. A certain dramatic talent help them revive the thaumaturgic operations, to grant them credibility in the eyes of the ones in pain”<sup>6</sup>. This observation is supported by the example of a healer from Moldova, Varvara Ungureanu, a Cilinii, from a village of Iași, the author catches several aspects of the psychotherapeutic practice.

Prominent characters of witches are illustrated by Radu Răutu and Gheorghe Pavelescu in their field observations: among the witches there were ones that were famous and who “could attract rich clients”; “but although the tradition is almighty,

and here it is also asserted the law of the individual alternatives, through which the creator of folkloric deeds expresses his personality. It is noted that each witch has a limited number of subjects (of disease etc), of images and magic motifs”<sup>7</sup>. They are women with an impressive professional profile and with a reputation that turned them into models, and in some cases they also got to institutionalization, that are dealt with by the anthropologists that studied the exotic tribes.

Based on these bibliographical observations, the purpose of this article is to present the profile and therapeutical activity of a romanian peasant in the Ukraine Maramures, whose take on healing are within the area of European and Romanian studies on this branch of magic.

In Apșa de Jos, one of the villages with Romanian population from Ukrainian Transcarpatia, on Lenina street, at no 238, there lives Măria lui Holdiș, on her real name Costevici Maria Irjina. As we realized after several field campaigns in the area aunt Măria is officially known as the most prominent witch in Zacarpatia. She was born on 28<sup>th</sup> of August, on Holy Virgin Mary, according to the Eastern calendar and she also has a girl that was born on the same day. She has three children that were born on the same day, at the same time, but in different years. Therefore - the first clue regarding the uniqueness and the human exceptional character: being born on a saint day and the coincidence of her birth date with her children’s.

Everybody knows Aunt Măria. There can be found plenty of information about her, within the villages that were under scrutiny and all the subjects in the Romanian villages of Zacarpatia that were interviewed see Aunt Măria as the most skilled witch in the area (a psychotherapist as we would name her).

For instance, a woman in Băscău tells that she has two children, and when she was young, Lucica, the oldest daughter was sick: „o zbierat că s-o uitat cineva la ea, s-o spăriet”, adică „o fost ajunsă”. Cineva „dintre vecini, din somșâzi, s-o uitat la ea mult” și „cucoana s-o spăriet” (she yelled that somebody stared at her and she got scared. Someone from the neighbors stared at her a lot and the lady got scared). She brought the girl to Măria lui Holdiș, of Dibrova (the Ukrainian name for Apșa de Jos), that „stă lângă drum și i-o citit pă apă și i-o citit din carte de rugăciuni” (she stays near the road and she read in water and in a prayer book). After the consultation, the old lady gave the woman water to take home, in a bottle, and told her to have the girl drink of it for several days. The mother kept it in a store room and gave the girl to drink every time she is sick, and then

she recovers as soon as she drinks the magic water. She paid Măriei lui Holdiș, because everybody pays to her. She paid ten roubles, because she “read in water”. Nobody gives her goods, but they pay her money<sup>8</sup>.

Ileana Marina and Maria Marina from the same village, heard both about Măria lui Holdiș of Dibrova and they know that she cures people and animals. „Era, mai demult, două babe vrăjitoare în Biserica Albă, care știau descânta la coconi, pe apă și cărbuni, da o murit și acuma mai este o femeie în Apsa de Jos, care știe întoarce rânza și la care merge lumea. Și mai sunt vrăjitoare în Apsa de Sus, da alea îs ucrainience, nu românce”<sup>9</sup>. (“There used to be some time ago, two witches in The White Church, that could charm away the people, on water and coals, but they are dead now and there is a woman in Apsa de Jos, that can charm away, and people go to her. And there are also other witches in Apsa de Sus, but they are Ukrainians not Romanians”).

We hear the same story in Bouțu Mic, where Măria lui Holdiș is placed on a privileged place among the old witches in the area: “o fost oarecând o femeie, știa să dăscânte așe, dă diochi, și o mai fost așe, o femeie, din Apsa de Mijloc, care știa dă schimbat și cu unsoare trăgea laba piciorului. Da mai este o femeie în Dibrova, care știa, așe, să întoarcă rânza. L-am dus și pă coconu ăsta la o babă în sat, și i-o întors rânza. Mama lui nu credea, da io l-am dus și i-o întors rânza, și o fost bine copilul. Da, aiasta-i coconu, apoi cine știe de câte ori l-am dus așe...Mărie aceie, că-i o băbucă, zice c-o fost soră medicală pă timpu războiului și îl trece așe pă pântece și zăce că-i întoarce rânza. Băbuca aceie stă acolo, între drumuri și atunci când te doare ea știe ce te doare, și maiu, și altceva și așe, întoarce rânza”<sup>10</sup>. (There was sometime a woman that could charm away, and there was a woman from Apsa de Mijloc that “știa de schimbat si cu unsoare tragea laba piciorului”. And there is also a woman from Dibrova, that could do magic massage. I also took this kid to an old lady in the village and she performed a magic massage. His mother did not believe, but I took him and she did this massage and the kid was fine afterwards. Yes, this is the kid, and I took him countless times.... That Mărie, that she is an old lady, says she was a nurse during the war and she does the massage to people. This old lady, stays there at the crossroads and when something hurts you, and she knows what it is and she does the massage).

Therefore, another essential reference and one that was often named by the subjects: the spatial placing of the witch’s house “between the roads” meaning that special place where unusual things

take place: the crossroad. The specialty literature is full of references about the crossroad<sup>11</sup>, because its symbolic value loaded right by the spatial intersection of the roads, the crossroads being felt as a center of the world, as a place of epiphanies of all kinds, and in its center there can be dreaded spirits, whose favor has to be got either by the specialized persons, as witches are, or by sacrifices, by unholy people. Moreover, the studies in universal magic show that the earth at crossroads is often used in the magic-divine or magic-therapeutic stories, which recommends it as the main ingredient for a successful witch. On the other hand, the universal mythology certifies that the crossroad is the privileged moment of the man meeting its destiny, so a witch that lives right in the heart of the crossroads must have open many access paths to the destiny of her patients. The spatial crossroad is a place of contrasts, as theurgy is close to malefic deeds: at the crossroads the witches and the evil spirits meet in order to celebrate the Sabbath and to set various malefic deeds, but you can also find at a crossroad, symbolically the light, by the emergence of good spirits, whose good deeds are besought especially by roadside crucifixes, shrines, flowers. The crossroad is a place of unknown, and that is why inspires fear, but is also a place of hope, of the beginning of a new path, better than the previous one.

Such a symbolist context, certainly less familiar to the interviewed subjects, under its scientific expression, but familiar at the level of sensorial perception that is fueled by the tradition layer of the collective imaginary, increase the exceptional powers of the witch in cause, that is a proof everybody associates the detail of the spatial place with the person’s fame. I recollect that some women told me that it is known that on the crossroads or at the boundaries the poltergeists fight with the bats. Even when they are “freed” by the presence of the poltergeists „la răscruce de drum nu e bine să zăbovești noaptea, că te poți întâlni cu diavolul ori cu boli spurcate, ciurma, ori duhuri necurate”<sup>12</sup> (at the crossroads it is not good to hang about at night, or you could meet the devil or bad illnesses, plague, or evil spirits).

With all these references we got to Apsa de Jos, at Măria lui Holdiș. In the yard, at the house entrance, a black cat is greeting us, another sign of the magic belonging of the master lady. Despite the fact that the symbolist of the cat is an heterogeneous one, changing from malefic to benefic, and the other way around, mainly because of its dual, mild, but hidden features, the particular case of the black cat is received as a kind of apprentice of the witch, that relates to darkness and black magic<sup>13</sup>. The black cat of Aunt Maria follows her

everywhere as a faithful servant. Following our surprise, the woman defends: „am avut întă-deauna o mătă neagră, că mi-s dragi” (I have always had a black cat, they are dear to me).

Aunt Mary is a woman that you can hardly tell the age. She is short, wise and blue-eyed. You can notice she is not a woman tired by the field work and that she spends a lot of time in the house, praying and performing therapeutic incantations.

In the house, the first room, the woman has set a special table where she performs the incantations. On the table one can find the property specific for the magic performances: cross, basil, beads, a big knife, a rock, an icon with Virgin Mary holding child Jesus, a prayer book, matches, a thread reel, a pot with fat.

The table in the first room is ready for what Aunt Maria does regularly, that is the incantation in water or „întors rânza”, which is a stomach massage.

She also has several books: Ion Chiș Șter - *Antologie de folclor din județul Maramureș*, Baia Mare, 1980, *Aghiasmatarul* coordinated by PF Teoctist, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 1992 and several loose sheets, handwritten, with *Psalm 68, for those who think evil to you, Prayer for helplessness and diseases, Prayer for headaches (evil eye)*

I ask her to charm away “in water”. She wants me to bring a bottle of fresh water the next day. I explain her that we are accommodated at an inn and I ask her where I should get the water from. She tells me that the water has to be clean, tap water that will be stored in a clean bottle. The water has to be “from a place that you stay at least three days”, therefore it has to be customized, to belong to the environment, to the habitat of the patient.

I come back the next day with the water bottle and Aunt Marie starts the incantation performance.

Firstly, the water that I brought in a plastic bottle she puts in a one liter, glass jar until she fills it. She spits in three sides. She makes a cross with the iron knife over the jar and then she sinks it in the water. She adds basil to the water. Subsequently, she adds a little “dust from Athos mountain”, that smells of incense. She touches (“caută”) the water with the knife and puts off three matches in a row. She touches the basil and the matches, looking closely the content of the jar.

During all this time she is uttering something that seems like a prayer, but also an evil eye incantation.

She then leaves the knife in the water while she adds the matches.

She says that „tecile”, the evil spirits will so move on and then she says Our Father, so that the patient will “stay clean and with no evil spirits”.

She then fights with the evil spirits that she sends „hăt” (which means a very far away space and which is frequently used in the local language). The expression is the one that is commonly found for the incantations:

„ Acolo să mergeți,

Acolo să ședeți,

Acolo să rămâneți.

Iar Camelia să rămână curată,

Luminată,

Ca argintul strecurat,

Să rămână liniștită și fără dughuri, și fără durere”.

(You will go there

You will stay there

You will live there.

And Camelia will stay clean

Full of light

As the filtered silver

To stay restful and with no spirits, and no pain)

She then looks at the jar against the light. She does a cross over the jar and holds the cross and the basil from a linen bag and a piece of broom and continues the evil eye incantation. The gestures are broad: she does a circle over the jar and then a large cross over the water.

Unfortunately, the incantation is uttered in low speech or whispered and there can only be grasped pieces of the incantation, but all the words are in Romanian language.

She says the incantation three times, always at a fast tempo, with no breaks, yelling sometimes, other times whispering.

She does again circles over the jar and locks with the eyes the water jar. During all this time, the black cat stays in the front of the witch, on the bed.

She holds the hands over the water, in a gesture of communion with water. The intonation of the incantation doubles the staccato rhythm of the incantation. The words are spoken very quickly and some are incomprehensible. All this time the knife is in the water.

She makes broad gestures when she shows where the spirits should go, so that everything is very evocative. She sends and casts them away: she makes broad gestures with the hand, in order to cast them as far as possible.

At this time, the incantation is cut-off, because there is a woman that enters the room, and who, after the polite greeting, gives her a bag with clothes: hers, the husband's, the girl's, and the son's in law, in order to “search because she will

undergo a surgery” and she would like to know which will be the result.

Aunt Mărie writes everything on a scrap of paper: Mărie, Ion, Ioana, Erji. The woman adds, concerned that “there are a lot of arguments between them”. She leaves the pants, the cap, the shirts and she says again what are the problems Aunt Mărie has to focus on: “Aunt please do something to get better: for shame and do something for the young and for me, that I will undergo surgery, to be for my health”. She adds that on Monday will come with fresh water and she asks the old lady to tell her whether she will die or not during the surgery. Crying, she reminds her that her husband drinks, is a drunkard and when he is drunk he takes everything from home.

The woman is called again on Thursday or Friday, because Aunt Mărie needs time to perform more incantation on clothes, in more days. She mentions that the water has to be drunk by everybody that she performs incantations for.

She then explains that: it is Friday and it is “zi de bazar la Apşa” (a fair day at Apşa) and many women that come to the fair look for her and leave clothes or water for charming away. This is happening in all days that there is a fair. As I understand she is respected by people, they ask her to solve their family or health problems, or to make predictions about the future.

She shows me that she has many bags with clothes under the table and each of them has a paper with the owner name. She says their name during the incantation, because they are written on the paper with Russian letters.

She comes back at the incantation over the water hat was prepared for me and continues the performance with the same low voice. When she finishes the incantation, she says the prayer for evil eye, perhaps from Aghiasmatar, but she knows it by heart.

During all this time, she holds the cross in front of her, in the right hand, as in the stories where the witches stop the poltergeists. At the end, she says the prayer for pains. She crosses herself while holding the cross in the other hand. She looks all the time at the magic water. She crosses herself three times. The cat is always near her, because as she says “the cat takes the pain”.

She finally, puts the water from the jar back in the bottle, but before that she empties the bottle, so that now in the bottle there is only magic water, undiluted, so that it will be “more powerful” and to be used as “more as cure”.

All the performance with the charming away the water takes half an hour.

In the end, she gives me the final instructions: to drink 9 sips, spinning the bottle towards the

left, “always to the left”. “Then you would drink 3 times from different parts of the bottle. The more often you drink, the sooner you heal”.

As a conclusion, one can say that we are witnesses to a standard case of magical religious healing, as depicted in Romanian literature. In our case, the character is an old woman, with real therapeutic skills, that is well known in the area and she is asked to cure several kinds of diseases. Aunt Mărie combines medical knowledge, which she received from an old physician in the area, that she worked with in her youth, with some bioenergy characteristics that she developed, probably by using them repeatedly. Everything is overlapped on a background of magic features that is used to operate the traditional scenario of the healing: disease incantations, massages, ritual incantations, specific tools, and everything being done according to the popular magic principles.

From the point of view of the field ethnographer, we can also notice that the magic activity of the Romanian witches from Ukraine belong to the magic-ritual pattern that is used throughout the areas that are inhabited by Romanians.

For the future, we propose to extend these studies to other therapeutical magic practitioners as well as including such cases in the current practices of traditional therapy quoted by Romanian and European bibliography.

**Note:** this paper is part of a more ample research – „Assumption of cultural identity in the Romanian communities in the Ukraine Maramures (Trans-Carpathia, Ukraine) conservation and/or social cultural dynamics in a multi-ethnic context”, within the Romanian Academy project „Putting value to cultural identities in the global processes”, European Social Fund, POSDRU 2007-2013.

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<sup>9</sup> Ion Alb, Biserica Albă, Transcarpatia (historical Maramures)

<sup>10</sup> Ileana Gandic, Bouțu Mic, Transcarpatia (historical Maramures)

<sup>11</sup> Chevalier, Jean, Gheerbrant, Alain. Dicționar de simboluri (Dictionary of Symbols), vol. III, Editura Artemis, București, 1995, p. 148 – 152

<sup>12</sup> Ludovica Gui, Valcău de Jos, Sălaj (Romania)

<sup>13</sup> Chevalier, Jean, Gheerbrant, Alain. op. cit., p. 99 – 100

**Бургеле Камелия. АНТРОПОЛОГИЯ ЗДОРОВЬЯ: МЕЖДУ ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКИМ НАБЛЮДЕНИЕМ И ПРАКТИКОЙ МАГИЧЕСКИХ РИТУАЛОВ (случай румынской ведьмы в Закарпатье).**

Статья сосредоточена на исследовании образа последней румынской ведьмы в Закарпатье, на линии украинской границы реки Тисы, который был населен румынами.

Материал статьи основан на полевых исследованиях, осуществленных в румынских селах Закарпатья и ряда дискуссий, проведенных с носителем эзотерических знаний в его собственном доме. Ведьма – немолодая женщина, которая обладает настоящими терапевтическими навыками. Она очень известна в области и ее часто приглашают, когда возникает необходимость в лечении. Эта женщина сочетает в себе некоторые медицинские знания, полученные от местного врача (с которым она работала с молодых лет) с определенной биоэнергетической способностью, которую она, возможно, развила в результате постоянных практик. Все это воспроизводит магический фон, в котором используется типовой сценарий ритуального исцеления: пение, массаж, ритуальных заклинаний, конкретных инструментов - все это делается с соблюдением принципов традиционной магии.

С точки зрения этнографических исследований, следует отметить, что магическая деятельность румынской ведьмы из Украины принадлежит к магическому профилю всего румынского населенного пункта.

**Ключевые слова:** *здоровье антропология, терапевтическое волшебные, болезнь, ведьма, магические религиозный ритуал.*

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