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Magic and witchcraft in the Romanian peasant imaginary
PHD THESIS SUMMARY

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Popular magic, witchcraft, the image of the witch, magical practitioners, peasant imaginary, evil magic, supernatural evil, devil, partnership with the devil, magical universe, spells, magical disease, accusation of witchcraft, demons and evil spirits, magical tourism, cultural transitions.

Paper Presentation

The phenomenon of magic and witchcraft fascinated different societies from different times and geographies, perfectly adapting to the cultures of which it was part. But if we set aside all the nuances it acquires over time, we will find an element that is common to all ages; it is what Antoaneta Olteanu calls the "temptation of the occult"¹. A captivating element, magic also caught the attention of specialists from different fields (history, anthropology, ethnology, folklore, etc.), who dedicated years of study to it.

This paper aims to explore the Romanian peasant imaginary on the phenomenon of magic and witchcraft. The starting point of this work is represented by the first field collections about witchcraft, which appeared spontaneously and which captivated and also raised several questions. Is the witchcraft phenomenon part of a broader traditional concept of supernatural evil? Are the elements that make up this concept interdependent, as it emerged from those first stories collected in the field? And how is the phenomenon of witchcraft imagined and internalized and how is the witch represented at the level of the local collective imaginary? To answer these questions, we used the oral survey method. Although there was a semi-structured interview guide, it was not applied in any real way in the discussions with the peasants. Thus, the field research involved extensive conversations, focused on the phenomenon of magic and witchcraft, conducted in 2010-2015 with thirty-seven people, of which thirty-two from a village in Vâlcea County, to which we added the interviews conducted with five people from two other counties, Mehedinți and Satu Mare. The interlocutors were mostly women (twenty-six women and eleven men) and mostly born in the 1930s and 1940s. In rendering the interview excerpts, due to the delicate nature of the researched subject, we chose to keep the identities anonymous, marking the names of people with an initial and hiding the names of locations, geographical or

¹ Antoaneta Olteanu, *Școala de Solomonie. Divinație și vrăjitorie în context comparat*, Editura Paideia, București, 1999, p. 8

administrative points that could facilitate the identification of interlocutors' identities. The methodological choice is justified by the very purpose of the paper. To capture the way the traditional peasant society relates to magic and witchcraft and the image it has on the phenomenon, we chose to keep any intervention external to the peasant world to a minimum during the interviews, letting the interlocutors create their own discourse on witchcraft in extensive thematic conversations. Romanian research on the peasant imaginary on magic and witchcraft is almost entirely absent. To cover this gap, but also to provide context, to understand the current cultural transitions, I had these conversations mainly with the elderly. In addition, in the context in which there are not many studies to investigate this topic, and the existing ones do not address it uniformly, the desire to keep external intervention as little as possible was reflected in the subsequent processing of field materials and the drafting of this paper. For this reason, we opted for a paper with a pronounced ethnographic inclination, which would provide a detailed description of the peasant imaginary on the magical phenomenon.

The paper is structured in five chapters. The first two chapters serve to contextualize the phenomenon of magic and witchcraft. The first chapter describes how societies related to the magical phenomenon in a broad historical context, from antiquity to the present, and geographically, covering the entire European territory. The second chapter provides a local contextualization: the local magical universe. In addition to the need for contextualization, this second chapter is one imposed by the peasants themselves, who naturally intertwine the concepts of magical evil and witchcraft. The next three chapters go through the life cycle of witches and the imaginary on the phenomenon of witchcraft, birth, life and death, analyzing, in parallel, the traditional imaginary and the social and cultural echo it has at the community level.

In the first chapter, **The state of magic and witchcraft over time. The image of witches**, we aim to analyze the image that magic and witchcraft have had throughout history, to observe how the concept has evolved in Europe. The journey begins in antiquity where, by analyzing the polarizations between magic/ witchcraft – male/ female, we can see that magic is generally practiced by men, and in the case of witchcraft we see that women enter the scene; deprived of rights in a patriarchal society, women, "non-citizens", seem to be the perfect practitioners of illicit magic, namely, witchcraft². Having a practical nature, witchcraft offers answers, solutions

² Richard Gordon, *Imagining Greek and Roman Magic*, in Bengt Ankarloo, Stuart Clark (ed.), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Greece and Rome*, The Athlone Press, Londra, Marea Britanie, 2002, p. 194

to everyday problems, but at the same time gives birth to fear, certain practices being outlawed since antiquity.

Going further, we arrive to Christianity which, even though it does not have an offensive position towards witchcraft in the beginning, starts to create a whole literature based on demonic magic, with a new Christian doctrine emerging at the end of the Middle Ages: demonology. At the same time, Christianity is waging battle with heretics, who worship the Devil and have nocturnal meetings where they make plans to destroy the world, while ordinary people struggle on a daily basis with disease, famine, calamities, wars, and instability. In this extremely hostile context, the witch hunt is born. The analysis of witch-hunting in this paper has three directions: the magnitude of the phenomenon, the factors that influenced it and the image of witches during the persecution, and two plans: the European and the Romanian territories. Jean Delumeau, who analyzed the phenomenon of persecution by placing fear at its center, identifies two types of witchcraft: the traditional one, based on evil, and the one defined by the elites, based on demonology, and draws attention to the contamination of the imaginary in both directions: people-elites/ elites-people³. It is at this time that witches sign a pact with the Devil which, as we will see, has a strong echo in the popular imaginary even centuries later.

Towards the end of the 18th century, the pyres begin to fade out, and European societies start questioning their old ideas. The Devil loses his corporality, witches lose their credibility, and salons of occultism, spiritism or hypnotism appear on the streets of European cities. Traditional witchcraft, although it does not disappear altogether, is no longer the main, visible actor in social dynamics. It retires and continues its activity in the shadows.

The second chapter, **The evil magical universe in the peasant imaginary**, is a foray into a world ruled by another set of laws, the magical ones. Space and time go beyond the laws of physics and become characters, acquiring evil magical traits in certain contexts, and normality is broken by these evil ruptures: evil places, evil times.

Romanian mythology is populated by numerous unclean spirits, Fete ale Pădurii, Mume ale Pădurii, Sântoaderi, Joimărițe, etc. But the supernatural evil is under the sign of duality. Mythological characters are not evil through excellence, they are vigilantes of the traditional world, making sure that man does not break the order of the world and punishing him horribly

³ Jean Delumeau, *Frica în Occident. Secolele XIV-XVIII. O cetate asediată*, Editura Art, București, 2020, pp. 576-595

when this happens; in other words, bringing order: the strict scheduling of domestic work before the beginning of the agricultural year, the sexual initiation of young people or the protection of the threads of destiny. We also find contradictory images, occasionally almost endearing, with evil spirits; Fetele and Mumele ale Pădurii beg to be released and are in a hurry to save their children. An extremely important aspect is the fact that, from the field research, we can observe that these mythological beings have lost their corporality. Muma Pădurii is a children's disease, the spirit fled into the forest. Sfintele / Iele have lost their physical beauty, and they can be identified only through their unusually beautiful music. Sântoaderii are just a verbal expression. Rusaliile and Călușarii, their antagonistic human pair, are a temporal landmark. Although the rules and prohibitions remained, the spirits did not cross the borders between the worlds. The Strigoi, however, remained a reality. The suite of apotropaic practices that prevent the dead from turning to Strigoi in the funeral ceremony is accompanied by a lot of moments in which the soul of the deceased did not reach the world beyond. What is interesting is that even the Strigoi, restless dead trapped between the worlds, occasionally return without any ill-intent, sweeping the yard or finding the lost key, an image absent so far in popular culture. However, even when the presence of the returned dead is not malignant, the Strigoi are still an imbalance and a danger to both worlds, so their emergence is always followed by rites of banishment.

The next three chapters analyze, in parallel, the traditional imaginary and the social and cultural echo it has at a community level.

The third chapter, **The birth of witches**, focuses on the actual appearance of witches, the birth of witches, the definition of magical practitioners and the initiation of witches, but also on the social element: the emergence of the accusation of witchcraft.

Even at birth, witches are physically marked, like demons (Fata Pădurii, Muma Pădurii, Sântoaderii, the Strigoi). Being born with a caul, a tail, or any other distinctive mark on the body, the fate of witches is revealed from the moment they appear in this world. According to popular beliefs, magical practitioners can also be initiated into the mysteries of magic and witchcraft, but this image is almost absent in the studied community. The general idea of the villagers is that the gift is an innate one, most often even inherited from the family. Although there is the myth of the witch's book, bequeathed to children, the book rather stores the texts of enchantments and magic tools but does not offer magical power.

To analyze accusations of witchcraft, we used several existing social theories, using the social mechanisms observed in historical societies by Jean Delumeau, but also by Mary Douglas, to which we added research on contemporary communities that use cultural theories on rumors and gossip⁴. Thus, we can see that in the studied community, the appearance of the accusation of witchcraft goes on two levels. We are dealing with the identification of the magic practitioner and the charge of practicing witchcraft. Because the idea of inheriting the gift from the family is present, the accusation of witchcraft extends to the whole family tree, from an already identified witch down to her children and grandchildren. However, the accusation of witchcraft also appears in other cases. Pre-existing conflict situations or even, in isolated cases, the strange behavior most often caused by a mental illness, can lead to the identification of people as witches in a certain social group. The witch act requires at least three performers: the victim, the aggressor, and the initial magic practitioner who will perform the spell. Additionally, in time, we can add the magic practitioner who confirms the existence of spells and the magic practitioners who will perform the counter-spell or enchantment. Consequently, the peasants will also make accusations against the aggressors. The suspicion that the aggressor went to a witch appears as a result of a series of unfortunate events (diseases, unexplained misfortunes), which are then interpreted by the social group (family or extended group) and transformed into certainty; occasionally, to become certain that the victim is dealing with a witchcraft issue, the presence of a magical practitioner is required to validate this idea (the soothsayer). Also, the victim will unmistakably identify the initial moment of the witchcraft crisis, the moment when the spell was sent: the strange presence of the one who cast the spell or of some foreign objects at the gate/ in the yard. Such accusations will always go toward acquaintances with whom there are various conflicts before the moment of the spell. Last but not least, in this chapter, we look at how the accused people react when they find out that this accusation is brought against them. The accusation of witchcraft is a social turning point, and the emotional impact of such an

⁴ Jean Delumeau, *Frica în Occident. Secolele XIV-XVIII. O cetate asediată*, Editura Art, București, 2020, Mary Douglas, *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, Londra, Marea Britanie, 2004, Pamela J. Stewart, Andrew J. Strathern, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Marea Britanie, 2004, Max Gluckman, *Gossip and Scandal in Current Anthropology*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Iunie 1963), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, SUA, 1963, pp. 307-316, Robert Paine, *What is Gossip About? An Alternative Hypothesis in Man*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Iunie 1967), Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, Londra, Marea Britanie, 1967, pp. 278-285, Wolf Bleek, *Witchcraft, Gossip and Death: A Social Drama in Man*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Dec. 1976), Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, Marea Britanie, 1976, pp. 526-541

accusation can be strong, which is why the accused seek to raise any trace of suspicion as quickly as possible. To do this, the accused try to distance themselves from such practices. One of the strategies to eliminate suspicion and accusation is to deny the allegations. The alleged witch denies that she practices witchcraft, denies that she has information about witchcraft practices, going as far as to deny that she has knowledge of common magical practices. She does this because in the collective mind there is a belief that if a person has such knowledge, then it is very likely that they also put it into practice. The second strategy is to condemn such practices; not only do they not practice and do not know how, but they are also very afraid and do not accept such actions. The third strategy is to provide alternative explanations for the adverse events that are attributed to them, when there are relevant moments in the personal history of the accuser. And if none of these options work, the accused resort to one last action: they refuse to talk about practices and accusations, regardless of form or context. Without having any chance to dismiss the accusations, the alleged witches manage to build a wall between them and the accusations that hover around them.

The fourth chapter, **The life of witches**, looks at the situations in which the villagers turn to witches: to ensure the well-being of the family (in situations related to collecting manna from the fields or to animals), finding out the future (oracular practices), health (diseases sent or cured by magic), love (bewitching the one they love or eliminating the rival in love) and, perhaps most surprisingly, solving legal/ administrative problems: winning a lawsuit or escaping compulsory military service. Although we encountered only two such situations, the beneficiary of the spells in both situations being one single villager, the validity of such practices determined at the level of the entire social group, as they being mentioned and recalled by most interlocutors.

Furthermore, in this chapter, we analyzed an essential element which the peasants emphasized countless times: the Devil. The analysis of the image that demons have in the peasant culture is followed by the observation of the relationship between the witch and the Devil, which turns out to be an unstable partnership, which oscillates between submission and domination, in both ways. There are many situations in which the Devil severely punishes the witch for not respecting some terms of this partnership, such as insufficient payment. But the witch is not a permanent subject to the evil character but has a privileged position that allows her, in certain contexts, to command the Devil where to go and what evil to do.

Another fascinating theme is magical tourism, i.e., traveling long distances to benefit from the magical witchcraft services of a skilled crone. The peasants travel through towns or entire counties to be received by a witch and receive magical solutions to burning problems. This occurs when the local village witch is not specialized in the problems they face, when they are suspected of having brought misfortune, or when the problem is a delicate, if not a shameful one. Our research shows that there seem to be underground networks of magical tourism, hidden from the communist system. Whether or not they really exist and how they work can be the subject of adjacent research.

And so, we reach the last chapter of this paper, **The death of the witches**. This chapter examines two issues in parallel. First of all, we are concerned with death itself and how the great passage of witches is recorded in the local collective imaginary: death and the journey of the soul. Second, the research focuses on the cultural transitions of the supernatural evil and beliefs about witchcraft.

The death of the witch does not seem to be recorded in the local collective imaginary, which is at least strange for a society that records every great passage in the lives of the villagers. When asked about when or how the witch died, the peasants did not know how to answer, the only documented death of a magical practitioner being extremely violent and directly related to the evil image that is attributed to a witch: after being tormented for a long time by the Devil himself, who shows himself only to her, the witch ends up hanging herself. They also refrain from discussing even the journey of her soul after death; In the afterlife, we find no trace of the witch, neither in heaven nor in hell.

We are witnessing the restructuring of the evil magic imaginary. Without exhausting the researched subject, this paper sheds light on the magical peasant universe and on the traditional imaginary of witchcraft which, until recently, according to historical and folkloric sources, has known minimal variations. Witches have adapted their magical practices to answer new problems: legal/ administrative problems. The peasants still believe in the magical manifestations around them, but the magical world is changing. Mythological spirits lose their corporality or transfer their characteristics to a demon, who takes over the attributions of the magical absolute evil, the Devil. In addition, the Devil gradually takes possession of man, who becomes the source of evil. And the changes don't stop there. The young, keepers of the fragments of mythical information, seem to intertwine the old with the new, traditional magic

with cult magic. They also intertwine the magical with the profane in a completely unexpected way; we are referring here to fieldwork findings of a situation in which an evil anthropomorphized spirit tempts the young boy with cars.

Thus, the elements that make up the concept of supernatural evil, evil time, evil space, evil spirits, the Devil and witches, are indeed interdependent. The witch relies on the evil magical context created by the evil elements to practice witchcraft, and the presence and power of these non-human characters increase due to the witch's magical activities.

Reading the field materials shows that the peasant imaginary is extremely rich in the phenomenon of witchcraft. The peasants have an antagonistic, dichotomous representation of the whole concept of magic and witchcraft, which is also transferred to the magical practitioners. Without being quintessentially evil characters with absolute powers, the magical characters are often placed in situations in which they react almost humanly, and the witch does not evade this rule. They are ambivalent characters who bring misfortunes but also help the peasants in critical moments. Both evil and full of remorse, the witches oscillate between human and bestial, between profane and sacred. The trace of beastliness is defining for their entire existence: the sacred physical marking from birth, the demonic sexuality, and the partnership with the Devil during life, respectively violent and obscure death. The impact they have on social dynamics is strong: the suspicion and accusation of witchcraft mirror the social interactions, but they also change the way villagers relate to each other, and witches have the power to change the destinies of peasants.

This paper reveals new potential directions of research. A possible theme could be magical tourism, the context in which these long-distance trips to benefit from the services of a witch take place, but also their social implications: how information is transmitted, if and how underground networks are created. Another topic could be, of course, the continuation of this approach and the analysis of the restructuring of the imaginary on the evil magic and/ or on witches in the peasant culture.

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