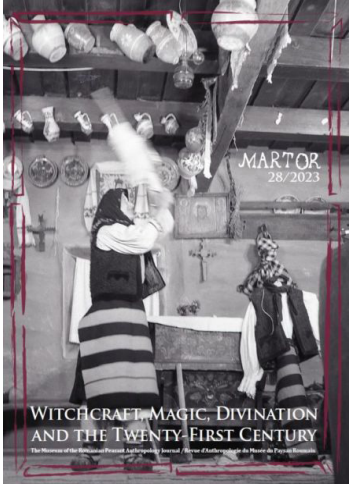


## Magic and witchcraft, Living Socio-cultural Phenomena



It may seem bizarre that at the beginning of the 21st century we still talk about the phenomenon of magic/witchcraft not as a past social or cultural fact, specific to times when ‘wild thinking’ was dominant and rational thinking was barely flickering. As you will see from the scientific articles summarised here – which make up issue 28/2023 of the anthropological magazine *Martor*, published by the Romanian Peasant Museum – beyond the glimmer of a diurnal, rationalist thinking, for contemporary man, magical, nocturnal thinking continues to remain alive and active.

From the article “Witches, Sorcerers and Demons in a Remote Corner of Northern Russia at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century” by Christine D. Worobec (Distinguished Research Professor Emerita at the Department of History, Northern Illinois University, USA), we learn about the beliefs of the inhabitants of more than 50 villages in the Kargopol district of the Archangelsk region regarding magic and its effects on everyday life, past and present. Villagers believe that the evil eye is an energy that both men and women can manipulate and that the sorcerer (*koldun*) can affect people’s fertility. In ancient times in this ethnographic area there was a belief in a forest spirit (the forest being a liminal place where ‘the natural world meets the supernatural’) that could make animals and even people disappear. Local people attributed magical powers to the shepherds of old, who could tame the forest spirit. Today, the inhabitants of the vast Kargopol region interpret personal misfortunes, illnesses that have not been cured by modern medicine, impaired female fertility and sexual impotency as evil effects of magic or witchcraft.

Olga Khristofora's (PhD in Cultural Studies and Doctor Habilitatus/Doctor of Sciences in Philology, Folklore Studies) article, "We live in the Country of the Victorious Kafka: Witchcraft and Magic in Present-Day Russia", studies the phenomenon of witchcraft and magical belief in contemporary Russia, as reflected in the press and online media. The most interesting part of the article, which is based on the author's research between 2016 and 2022, describes how narratives about magic are incorporated into official propaganda in order to paint a negative, evil portrait of political opponents. Here we also learn about the interference between the socio-political elite of contemporary Russia and the occult sphere. On May 20, 2022, the YouTube channel Feigin Live, owned by lawyer Max Feigin, broadcast an interview with political analyst Valery Solovey and occult specialist Andrey Kosmach about occult practices in the Russian government that talked about issues such as connecting to "reptilians", rituals orchestrated by Peruvian shamans in which Ayahuasca was consumed, shaman groups inspiring Vladimir Putin, people who want to remove Putin from the Kremlin being subject to psychiatry, for example Alexander Gabyshev.

In her study *Faire et defaire des attaques de sorcellerie dans la Lorraine (France) du XXI siècle*, Deborah Kessler Bilthauer (Chercheure associée au Laboratoire lorrain de sciences sociales à l'université de Lorraine (France), Doctor of Ethnology), based on research carried out between 2005 and 2012, in which she interviewed 40 healers and 20 patients, reveals the permanence of the socio-cultural phenomenon of witchcraft in a region in north-eastern France, describing the complexity of the rituals of counter-witchcraft carried out by various healers, as well as the alternative medicine, based on magic recipes, which continues to be active in this area. Far from being "a residual belief", says the author, in Lorraine in the 21st century magic continues to be "a coherent explanatory system", effective in various existential accidents, illnesses and misfortunes.

In her article "Changing Destinies by Fighting Against Bad Luck", Camelia Burghele (an ethnologist who specialises in traditional therapeutic magic and modern ways of adapting magico-ritual scenarios) analyses the transposition of magico-ritual acts from the traditional Romanian village to contemporary urban society. The modern witch is usually digitally literate and frequently uses online communication media (Facebook pages, blog or personal websites, video chat) including mobile applications (WhatsApp, for example) to attract clients or to perform her magical practices. In Romania after 2000, witchcraft became official: witches in Bucharest, Ploiesti, Buzău and Craiova set up

witchcraft schools. In 2019 the Romanian Academy of Witches was founded. In the rest of the article, Camelia Burghele analyses the manifestations of the magico-religious mentality during the Covid pandemic particularly in the ethno-cultural area that she investigates, i.e. Sălaj, a county in north-western Romania. Her observations are most interesting. During the Covid pandemic, locals proposed various alternatives to vaccination, for example prayer, worshipping relics, incantations, holy water, to the detriment of a rational approach, which would have involved accepting scientific remedies (the vaccine, in this case). Many of those interviewed recommended making a “Covid shirt”, modelled on one made in ancient times against the plague.

The article “Was I or Wasn’t I Bewitched? Conversations about Magic in Rural Transylvania”, by Elena Bărbulescu (Senior Researcher at Romanian Academy, Cluj-Napoca Branch, Institute of Folklore Archive of Romanian Academy) does not deal directly with any aspect of magic or witchcraft, but with “the discursive nature of witchcraft” (Favret Saada). The author interprets narratives about witchcraft based on interviews with peasants in the Apuseni Mountains, in eight locations in the area. The author is also interested in interpreting the witchcraft narrative as a *story with an open ending*. The key interview is with Badea Avrămuț, a “local storyteller” and victim of malpractice. The interview reveals the conflict between the two rationalities, “scientific, medical rationality” and “magical rationality”, and how the belief that he has been bewitched helps him maintain his status within the community.

Tunde Komaromi (Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Media Studies, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary), in her article “Marriage and Magic in a Transylvanian Village”, studies the influence of magic on marriages in the Transylvanian village, how the act of magic influences the conclusion or, on the contrary, the dissolution of marriages, and the interpretative role that magic plays in the collective mind when it comes to villagers explaining why a young man has remained unmarried, why quarrels between spouses undermined their relationship or why one of the spouses has died: “witchcraft is a convenient explanation for inexplicable misfortunes”, the author observes. One of Tunde Komaromi’s most interesting observations is that no marriage contracted by appealing to witches has a smooth and happy course. They all fail, in one way or another, through divorce, illness or the death of one of the spouses.

Laura Jiga Iliescu (Senior Researcher at the “Constantin Brăiloiu” Institute of Ethnography and Folklore in Bucharest, The Romanian Academy, and Associate Professor at the University of Bucharest), in “Oneiric Authentication of a Miraculous Shrine: Case Study from a Dobruja Monastery, Romania”, deals with an unusual cultural phenomenon in the form of the healings that take place at an ancient stone cross, which, 20 years after the emergence of the mystical phenomenon, has come into the custody of an Orthodox Christian monastery. Iliescu focused on analysing the narrative strategy that gave Christian authority to the site. These are mainly a series of legends that relate the origin of the healing cross to the local Christian martyrdom past.

“Reflections on Christian Magic”, by Astrid Cambose (Researcher at the Department of Literary History, “Alexandru Philippide” Institute of Romanian Philology, Romanian Academy Iași Branch), deals with the interferences between religion and magic through an analysis of Christian magic. Although magic is condemned by the Christian churches, in practice some ordinary believers, fortune tellers and clairvoyants – exponents of popular religion – resort to magic rituals by fasting for magical purposes, using priestly cures, performing ‘black liturgies’ and consecrating various objects in church which they then use in magic rituals.

In “The Magical Power of Caluș Against Iele’s Possession in Dolj County”, Mihaela (Marin) Călinescu (Research Assistant at the Romanian Book and Exile Museum in Craiova) analyses the healing of the person “taken from Caluș” by Iele (female mythological beings), a neuro-psychic disorder, within the ritualistic game of Caluș, revealing significant features such as the transfer of the illness from the victim to a member of the game band, the death and resurrection motif, the return from trance.

Starting from the description of an initiation ritual in Tamang shamanism in Nepal, Vasile Albineț (PhD in anthropology at the Department of Sociology, National School of Political and Administrative Studies (SNSPA), Romania), highlights in “Bolerako-cu! Speak, I’m Talking to You! Reconstructing the Self in Tamang Shamanism”, the importance of ritual in restoring psychic balance, the mental health of the subject undergoing this ritual and the way in which it confers identity, a “narrative of self”, in a world of instability and fragmentation. “Witches in Fairy Tales and their Use in Therapy” is Tunde Komaromi’s interview with Greta Vaskor, a dialogue between a psychotherapist specialising in family and individual therapy and an anthropologist who has delved into the

fields of magic and witchcraft. This interview reveals the healing importance of magic stories in therapy, as they engage the emotions and minds of patients and provide models for solving existential problems.

In this issue of *Martor* Nicolae Mihai (researcher in the Department of History and Archaeology, “C.S. Nicolăescu-Plopșor” Institute for Research in Social Sciences and Humanities at the Romanian Academy, Craiova, Romania) publishes an exciting article titled “Did White Swallowwort (*Vincetoxicum hirundinaria*) Exist or Not during the Organic Regulation Regime? Notes on some Previously Unknown Documents from Wallachia”. The article addresses the conflict between Romanian popular culture and modern culture, which has become state culture, based on the discovery of some unpublished documents in the archives of Romanați County, Wallachia, written in 1835 in which “the non-existence of the plant *white swallowwort*, famous in Romanian traditional legends, is publicly proclaimed”. It is said that this plant had magical properties, for example outlaws could pick the lock of any door or window, and would be protected from physical harm even if a posse shot arrows at them.

In “On ‘The Familial Occult’: An Interview with Alexandra Coțofană” Anamaria Iuga (head of the Ethnological Studies Department at the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Bucharest, Romania) interviews Alexandra Coțofană about the book she coordinated, *The Familial Occult: Encounters at the Margins of Critical Autoethnography*, a volume that studies researchers from the social sciences and humanities who have been initiated into various magical practices within their families.

The last part of the anthropological magazine *Martor* (“Reading Notes and Book Reviews”) contains reviews and reading notes in which magic is approached from an interdisciplinary perspective including the disciplines of ethno-anthropology and literature, and from the angle of art history and the history of religion. Here we read about the occurrence of archetypal magical images in Romanian art (Bogdan Neagota’s “Notes on the Iconography of Witchcraft in Romanian Art”), the witch hunt in the Basque region in the 1609-1614 period (Ileana Benga’s “Insights on Magic and Early Christianity”) and the interpretation of gemstone amulets in Late Antiquity by Hajnalka Tamas (“Magical Objects, Magical Writing: Amulets Across the Ages”).

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