

# Introduction. Witchcraft, Magic, Divination and the Twenty-First Century

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Religion, magic and witchcraft allegedly lost significance with modernity. Yet, a genuine resurgence is documented by social scientists in the last decades. Contrary to extensive witchcraft scholarship on 20<sup>th</sup> century Africa, European witchcraft was deemed a matter of the past, restricted to studies on witch trials. The work of Favret-Saada (1980) warned scholars about the existence of contemporary witchcraft beliefs

in France, a trend followed by ethnologists studying witchcraft in contemporary France (A. Juillard, D. Camus, etc.), all the way to Kessler-Bilthauer's work herein. The late translation of Ernesto de Martino's book on Southern Italy had an impact as well.

The first European monographs on contemporary traditional village witchcraft outside France appeared in Romania and Russia and were written by two contributors

to this volume (Komáromi 2009 and Khristoforova 2010 – both still unavailable in English). Tünde Komáromi's monograph (her PhD thesis from 2005) is based on fieldwork in a Transylvanian village, and is a complex analysis of local accusations, followed by case studies of victims and accused people of different ethnicity. Khristoforova's monograph (2010) is based on fieldwork in Moscow region and most of all, in the Urals, among Russian Old Believers. Both scholars have been publishing later on spirit possession (Khristoforova 2013, Komáromi 2017, 2019). The next volumes on traditional village witchcraft, in Transylvania and in Slovenia, were published by Alexandra Tătăran (2016) and by Mirjam Mencej (2017), respectively. Studies on European urban witchcraft started with Tanya Luhrmann's monograph on ceremonial magic orders and on a Wiccan coven in London (Luhrmann 1989).

Both post-socialist Russia and Romania were exposed to massive changes after the fall of the Soviet regime, facing economic crises and the collapse of the health care systems. Emerging religious freedom and the spread of esoteric knowledge resulted in the apparition of new types of practitioners of the occult: healers, seers, specialists in divination and magic, representing fine recorders of social change. New, urban, entrepreneur type practitioners of the occult – *witches* for white magic in Romania (see A. Coțofană and C. Burghel), *ekstrasensy* in Moscow (see Lindquist 2006), *táltos* and shamans in Hungary – re-use the same old local witchcraft strategies, while advertising online healing for problems of health, wealth and relationships, the perennial purposes of magical intervention.

A substantial part of the volume discusses research conducted in the post-Soviet sphere, including the multiple characteristics that define the region and the various research traditions influencing these studies. Taboo before the fall of the Soviet Union, the study of magic, witchcraft, divination, as

well as religion, thrived in post-socialism. A new generation of researchers started to do fieldwork and write about it, using at the same time archival materials, prior ethnographies and the results of several connected disciplines. In Romania, the work by Ileana Benga and Bogdan Neagota addressed forms of popular religiosity, magic transference, seasonal ceremoniality linked to *mana* beliefs, and divination through incubation: narratives around milk and crop magic theft in Zarand and Roșia Montană (Western Carpathians, 1997-2007: Benga 2011), ceremonials with *Green Men* (since 2004, Transylvania) the therapeutic ritual of *Căluș* (since 2006, Southern Romania: Benga and Neagota 2010), Rudar *Gurban* (since 2011: Neagota and Benga 2016), which all may involve local variants of ecstatic witchcraft. Neagota published work on the werewolf (Neagota 2023), together with Komáromi (Komáromi 2023), puberty rites in the *mana* calendric cycle (Neagota 2018, Neagota 2019), communication with the dead (Neagota 2014), magic pathology (Neagota 2017a), iatric ritology (Neagota 2015, 2017b); Benga published work on fertility (crop, livestock, people) rites (Benga 2015, Benga 2018), on the syntax between dance and trance in the performance and endurance of Romanian *Căluș*, and on the alms exchange between the living and the imaginary (Benga 2021).

Centuries of witch hunts in Europe were addressed starting with the works of Keith Thomas, Alan Macfarlane, shortly to be followed by local research in different European countries. For the interest of our volume, we highlight the seminal work on the history of witchcraft in Russia and Ukraine (Worobec 2001, Kivelson 2013, Kivelson and Worobec 2020). In the 1980s, a group of researchers coordinated by Éva Pócs and Gábor Klaniczay in Budapest, successfully shed light on the history of witch hunts in Transylvania and the former Austro-Hungarian Empire (see Kristóf 2013). As a member of this group, Tünde Komáromi



studied witch trials from Cluj (Komáromi 2020). Recently, Ioan and Ștefana Pop-Curșeu published a historical monograph on witchcraft in Romania in the Palgrave series (2022).

Parallel traditions of national ethnographies unfortunately clustered the studies of ethnic communities, even in places where two or three ethnic groups lived in mixed communities, communicated continuously and shared beliefs and practices. Religious diversity, the attitude of the clergy towards magic and witchcraft calls for careful and multi-levelled ethnography, considering not only the approaches of people with different religious affiliation, but also those of the priests and monks involved in the role of the unwitchers and healers (Worobec 2001, Komáromi 2010).



The first part of our volume: *Magic, Witchcraft and Cultural Frameworks*, is divided into two sections. The first one, which structurally constitutes the first chapter, focuses on contemporary Russian and French case studies. It reunites three texts, which have a common denominator: all three capture the actuality of magical practices and their ability to find in contemporary society a place and a role that is always systemic, with resources in all areas of social life: economics, culture and politics. The first two texts that make up this section are two convergent approaches to the issue of magic and occultism in Russia. Christine D. Worobec signs the text that opens the chapter: *Witches, Sorcerers, and Demons in a Remote Corner of Northern Russia at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, that analyses archive material from the Kargopol'skii region. The second study, *"We Live in the Country of the Victorious Kafka": Witchcraft and Magic in Present-Day Russia*, by Olga Khristoforova, anchors the debate on the present-day dynamic of the complex Russian cultural space, covering the

reflection of occult practices in the media, especially the online one.

The third study, *Faire et défaire des attaques de sorcellerie dans la Lorraine (France) du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle* belongs to Déborah Kessler-Bilthauer, analyzing consistent fieldwork (lasting 2005-2012; 40 healers, 20 patients) part of searching alternative medicine in north-east France. Healers, sorcerers and spellcasters are those identified as health magic technicians, with distinct spectra of action: purely beneficial for healers, purely maleficent for sorcerers, and clearly devilish for the *jeteurs des sorts*, all standing for an alternative culture of curing (diagnostic, offensive / defensive magic, breaking of spells).

The second set of the first part of the volume reunites three studies pertaining to research on contemporary Romania's magic and witchcraft, conducted in the longer duration of the decades following the demise of socialism.

*Changing Destinies by Fighting Against Bad Luck* by Camelia Burghele parallels two extensive field enterprises conducted by the author, one in the rural Transylvanian county of Sălaj, the other in the urban witchery complex network of before and after the emergence of the digital era, mainly in southern Romania (radiating primarily from resourceful Bucharest), only to prove that ancient vernacular ways to confront "bad luck" and the many spells it comes by, always find their way into contemporaneity, "for want of [other, better] social mechanisms" to elude adversity.

Elena Bărbulescu's article entitled *Was I or Wasn't I Bewitched?* *Conversations about Magic in Rural Transylvania* brings to attention a discussion around five case studies of witchcraft attestation, emerged serendipitously in a same village during a decade-long research on medical-anthropological broader practices, in a cluster of eight communes in Cluj county. All five attest the priest (or monk) being the leading magic-technician figure, linking perspec-



tives with Burghele's intimation about the role played by religious past in Transylvania, and fostering a research analysis on the role of the local Orthodox priest in magic and divination pioneered by Komáromi (1995).

The last study of this section, *Marriage and Magic in a Transylvanian Village*, signed by Tünde Komáromi, is the result of long-term field research and presents through detailed case studies how the villagers use magic to interpret the delay of the marriage, conflicts between spouses, broken relationships or the death of a spouse. Aspects of local culture and characteristics of post-socialist social change enrich the study. The author pays special attention to interethnic and interconfessional relationships among the locals.

The third section of the book tackles, in a distinctive succession of field options, the ever old and new relationship between magic and religion.

Laura Jiga Iliescu's paper, *Oneiric Authentication of a Miraculous Shrine. Case Study from a Dobruja Monastery, Romania*, represents the author's investigation of *incubation* primarily as a successful narrative in the long duration (religiously and politically complex) of the extant miraculous stone crosses (first mentioned 1877) around Dervent Orthodox monastery in southernmost Romania. Research was conducted mainly on four central narratives of miraculous healing presented on the monastery's website, but is enriched by the author's observation of the site (started 2004) and interviewing pilgrims.

Astrid Cambose's work in *Reflections on Christian Magic* wells for origins and reasons of magical usages of canonical ritual acts (fasting, consecration of objects, liturgy yet on a client's demand, cutting morsels, opening the holy book, taking oaths) of vernacular Christianity. Longstanding resulting fusion between magic and dogma stands for a layered structure of belief, which is followed with the help of interviews conducted by the researcher (2015-2021), attesting, like in the works of Jiga Iliescu and Bărbulescu,

the prominence of the hieratic male figure (priest, monk) within the lore of magic.

Mihaela Călinescu's article *The Magical Power of Căluș Against Iele's Possession in Dolj County* revisits the relationship between the therapeutical ritual of dance and music *Căluș* is, and the mythical-magical folklore collective figure of *Iele*, researched with participant observation and interviews in Dolj county of southern Romania from 2016 to the present. Extensive narratives excerpted from interviews support the author's demonstration of the complexity arisen around the moment (Whitsuntide) and the community event (*Căluș*) of healing this specific culture-bound ailment.

The fourth article of the third section of the book is: Bōlērākō-cu! / "Speak, I'm Talking to You!" *Reconstructing the Self in Tamang Shamanism* signed by Vasile Albineț. The paper, visually enriched with unique images and links to video materials, grounded in a plethora of theoretical assets stemmed from the cognitive sciences, reports the author's own years-long field research in Nepal around the therapeutical value of the initiation in the Tamang shamanism, existential and religious solution embraced by both Buddhist and Hindu members of the Tamang minority group in Kathmandu valley.

The section devoted to *Field Notes and Dialogues* begins with Tünde Komáromi's interview with Gréta Vaskor on *Witches in Fairy Tales and their Use in Therapy*. This consistent dialogue illuminates the successful ways in which well-chosen fairy tales can mirror and reframe experiences, with great therapeutical impact. Nicolae Mihai's full-bodied study about the folklore-bound weed *Vincetoxicum hirundinaria*, officially attested during the Organic Regulations regime in Wallachia, conflates historical and ethnological research. Anamaria Iuga's interview with Alexandra Coțofană *On "The Familial Occult"* is revealing the complexities around experiences of being raised in the presence of practitioners of the occult, of escaping home-ground stigma, and of



eventual intellectual rallying with fellow social scientists.

The closing part of the volume, devoted to reading notes and book reviews, aligns, in a historical-religious perspective, hermeneutical lenses in the long diachrony, from the Basque *Akelarre* addressed in the thorough work of Emma Wilby (reviewed by Ileana Benga), to the iconography of witchcraft in Romanian Art, in the intertextual work of Ioan and Ștefana Pop-Curșeu (addressed by

Bogdan Neagota), to the cultural environment around Early Christianity in the works of Joseph Sanzo and Fabrizio Conti, and the amulets from Antiquity to Early Modern times as seen by Christoffer Theis and Paolo Vitellozzi (reviewed by Hajnalka Tamás).

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