

NOTES

1. The title cited is: Franquesa, Jaume. 2013. "On Keeping and Selling: The Political Economy of Heritage Making in Contemporary Spain." *Current Anthropology* 54(3): 346–69. <https://doi.org/10.1086/670620>.

2. The concept of "biocultural heritage" emerged in recent literature with the holistic aim to bridge rifts between natural

and cultural conservation, attempting to formulate a more unified methodology on landscape that takes into account the complex interplay of biological, social and bio-cultural relationships, both in their invisible and material aspects. For more research and a proposed model, see Krystyna Swiderska and Alejandro Argumedo (2017).

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Laura Jiga Ilescu. 2020. *Biserica de alături. Câteva rituri necercetate ale ciobanilor din Carpați. Studiu de etnologie asupra religiozității pastorale* [The church next door. Unresearched rites of the Carpathian shepherds. Ethnological study of pastoral religiosity]. Iași: Institutul European, 226 p.

Reviewed by Cornelia Florea

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Cornelia Florea has a degree in Geography of Tourism (2004), a Master's degree in International Tourism (2006), a Master's degree in Ethnology, Cultural Anthropology and Folklore (2015), and a doctorate in Philology with a thesis on Valea Jiului – The Anthropology of Miners and Mining in the Jiu Valley. An Approach from Literary Studies (2019). This thesis was published under the title Noroc bun! O antropologie a minerilor și a minelor din Valea Jiului [Good luck! An anthropology of miners and mines in the Jiu Valley].

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Due to the environment in which it operates, pastoral life is not easy to understand. Shepherds constantly make physical effort. They are always on the move, whether during transhumance or on a daily basis when they take the sheep up to the mountain plateau in the morning and bring them down to the sheepfold before sunset.

Similarly, those who want to really know shepherd life have to leave their comfort zone for a while. This is not the case for ethnologist Laura Jiga Ilescu, who sees shepherding life as a source of constant curiosity and amazement and an original field of research due to the diverse topics it covers. In the introduction of the book, the author classifies her research as

an “emergency research” because any delay in conducting research among shepherds risks losing the research object itself.

Biserica de alături [The church next door] addresses some of the lesser-known rites of the shepherds from the Romanian Carpathians, such as the marriage at the fir trees, the confession, the prayer at the tree, and eating tree buds at Easter. Laura Jiga Iliescu describes these rites following long-term research on the mountain plateaus and in the hearths of the pastoral villages at the foot of the mountains. Structured in three parts, the book reflects the collection and problematization of some social and ritual behaviors of the pastoral groups specific to the periods spent far from home and the parish community of origin, in the plateaus or “on the road,” in the emic terms of transhumance.

The first part, “Ipostaze concrete și imaginare ale spațiului montan carpatic” [Actual and imaginary sequences of the space of the Carpathian Mountains], opens with a “Preamble” in which the author notes that the interpretation of the research material is “subjective and reflexive” and that she “accepts the metacultural character” of her approach. The book is the result of research conducted as part of the ERC 324214 project “Vernacular religion on the boundary of Eastern and Western Christianity: continuity, changes and interactions.” Then, the author presents the “Premises and objectives” of the book. Sections “Mobilitate și spațiu deschis” [Mobility and open space], “Muntele, spațiu al frontierelor” [Mountain, space of borders], and “Loc și spațiu” [Place and space] introduce the reader to the geographical and temporal space of the field described in the book. Initially, the author conducts field research in Mărginimea Sibiului (Sebeșului, Cindrel, Lotrului, and Căpățanii Mountains) all the way to Parâng, Retezat, Godeanu and Șureanu Mountains. Laura Jiga Iliescu identifies this vast area as an active preserver of the rites documented in the book. The author observes that some of these rites are still practiced nowadays and that some rites, such as the marriage between fir trees

or the marriage in churches situated on the plateau, correspond to similar practices in the Pyrenees Mountains. The author also identified other regions in the Carpathian space where one of these rites has been documented, for example, the confession at the fir tree practiced in Vrancei Mountains.

The second part of the book is structured in four chapters: “Expresii ale religiozității păstorilor din Carpați” [Expressions of the religiosity of shepherds from the Carpathians], “O biserică și două sanctuare?” [A church and two sanctuaries?], “Cruci pe arbori și spovedania la *lemn*” [Crosses on trees and confession to *wood*], and “Muguri de copaci și anafură” [Tree buds and blessed bread] that describe in detail and interpret the rites. One research participant told the author during the *Nedeia*¹ feast in Poiana Muierii that took place on the 29th of July 2014 that the marriage at the fir tree used to take place as follows,

[O]n the day of the nedeia, when the priest was on the mountain as well, they were going in circle. The priest with the censer was saying: “Let’s go behind the fir trees.” They did not officiate the entire wedding, just the wedding ceremony behind the fir tree. (p. 81)

The book contrasts the mythologized discourse attributed to this ethnographic institution, the church of fir trees, with the reality on the ground and with the available bibliography. *Nedeile* were ritualized social events with an interparochial character where different pastoral communities used to meet and perform economic and marital exchanges during the summer season. The author participated in several *nedei* organized on the Day of Saint Elijah. Her interactions with participants in these *nedei* facilitated the partial reconstruction of the wedding ceremony that used to be carried out in the church of the fir trees, along with an exploration of its meanings for those who participated in this rite. It is important to stress that the analysis of the research material demonstrates that these meanings are integrated into popular Christianity.



Among the researched rituals, the confession and the prayer at the tree are characterized by an ambiguous and uncertain sacredness as suggested by the cross as a “visible mark” of Christian devotion and by the ritual sequences centred on the fir tree. By using a rich corpus of apocryphal legends and folklore texts, the author identifies the fir tree as the “tree of the cross.” The relativization of the stereotypes includes this ritual within a dendrolatry complex and results from an extensive investigation that resembles the work of a detective. The possible functions of the cross engraved on the trunk of the trees are also questioned, including the need to mark nature with religious elements. This process realizes a transfer of sacredness that endows the tree with the quality of a religious artifact. The author argues that:

Their decoding can be done cautiously, considering their location (next to the footpaths or in the heart of the forest), the orientation (to the east or towards the destination point), the surroundings and, above all, the knowledge (impossible basically) of the history of each individual cross. (p. 111)

Confession at the tree requires a specific scenario and setting and several features that activate it, including the absence of a priest and the imperative need to confess to the tree. One research participant told the author that you confess to the tree as “you confess to the priest.” The author discusses the hypothesis of a possible connection between the shepherds’ breach of behavioral or ritual conventions and a decrease in milk production and an increase in attacks from predators. In such situations, “liberation from sin” can restore the functional balance of both the flock of sheep and their environment.

Eating tree buds at Easter is the oldest ritual mentioned in the book. While no research participant admitted they ever confessed at the tree, some of them recognized they used to eat tree buds instead of blessed bread. “To take *Paști*”² has a different meaning than to receive Holy Communion. People used

to substitute *Paști* with willow buds, fir tree buds and, more rarely, with fruit tree buds because of the considerable distance from a church where people could receive *Paști*. Why these trees? Laura Jiga Iliescu confirms these trees are charged with sacred meanings, citing numerous legends about the isomorphism between the fir tree and the cross on which Christ was crucified and between the willow tree and the Holy Mother of God.

The last part of the book, “Concluzii deschise” [Open Conclusions], examines several concepts related to popular religion. The author proposes the concept of “common religion” that is represented,

by a repertoire of doctrinal knowledge and religious practices known by the high clergy, but also by believers of all kinds, priests, teachers, or common people. Shared, but not uniformly internalized and evaluated. (p. 171)

The long-term research on the theme of the pastoral rituals reported in the book is the contextualization of such rituals within the mountain landscape and the pastoral community and the configuration of some of the values of the pastoral culture in relation to the religious context. At the same time, the author defines the process of “making archaicity” to account for the specific case of the so-called “Fir Church” (*Biserica de brazi*) corroborated with information from other mountain massifs in Europe. At the end of the volume, Laura Jiga Iliescu argues:

The analyses we undertook led us to a special, almost extinct, form of Christian religiosity, configured in conditions of solitude, seasonal living in the mountains and outside domestic settlements, liminality, itinerancy, and pastoral profession, a religiosity that gives nature the role of mediator between God and the human believer. (p. 183)

The volume is the result of a multidisciplinary research that puts together historical, geographical, theological, ethnological data

and history of folklore studies to reveal the imaginary, ritual, and narrative framework of the “geographical reality of the Carpathians.” The author presents a marginal space, made up of less accessible facts, a space exposed to dangers that the large public is unaware of, a space where “the real intertwines with the imaginary.” We follow both the physical map, and the mental map articulated by people who participated in Laura Jiga Iliescu’s research and who guide us through the Carpathian space of past times.

The interviews in the book have a strong narrative character which, together with the rituals described and the legends collected, lead to the creation of a rich folklore corpus. This corpus is meticulously supported by numerous bibliographic and especially archival references analysed hermeneutically that complete the thorough documentation process. We note that the regional language of the research participants often requires a translation into everyday language to be accessible to a reader that is not an ethnologist. For example, “to talk to a girl/boy” once meant

“to have a romantic relationship.” The author tries to map the rites analysed and the legends associated with these rites with the help of toponyms, for a better understanding of how they operate. Sometimes, the thread of the field investigations starts from the oral or folkloric toponymy to reach cartographic representations.

This book remains a testimony of the current existence of lesser-known rituals, whose presence still survives at least in the memory of some older generations. Laura Jiga Iliescu uses the narrative of the interviews to make these rituals accessible to a heterogeneous audience.

NOTES

1. *Nedeia* is a popular rural festival organised in the Summer on the top of a mountain, either on a religious feast, or on a patron saint of the church from a village near the mountain.
2. Pieces of bread sprinkled with wine that are traditionally blessed by the priest usually before the Easter Vigil Mass. Traditionally, Orthodox Christians eat *Paști* in the morning on an empty stomach during the Bright Week.



Shepherding. A Total Social Fact

Review by Ciprian Voicilă

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Ciprian Voicilă finished sociology and psychology studies. He is a researcher in sociology at the Romanian Peasant Museum. In his articles and volumes his research topics are basically on topics of anthropology of religion: magic, the celebration of saints, the interferences between literature and religion in the work of well known authors (J.D. Salinger, Fyodor Dostoevski, Eugen Ionescu, and so on).

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Voicilă, Ciprian. 2024. “Shepherding. A Total Social Fact.” *Martor* 29: 251-7. [DOI: 10.57225/martor.2024.29.21]

The volume *Păstoritul carpatic. Tradiție și continuitate* [Shepherding in the Carpathians. Tradition and continuity], coordinated by Lucian David and Ionuț Semuc (2022) presents the practice of shepherding from an interdisciplinary perspective: historical,

sociological, economic, cultural, political, and religious. This is the only methodological approach capable of describing the complexity of shepherding. “Shepherding has always had a distinguished place in the occupations and the cultural expressions of the Romanian