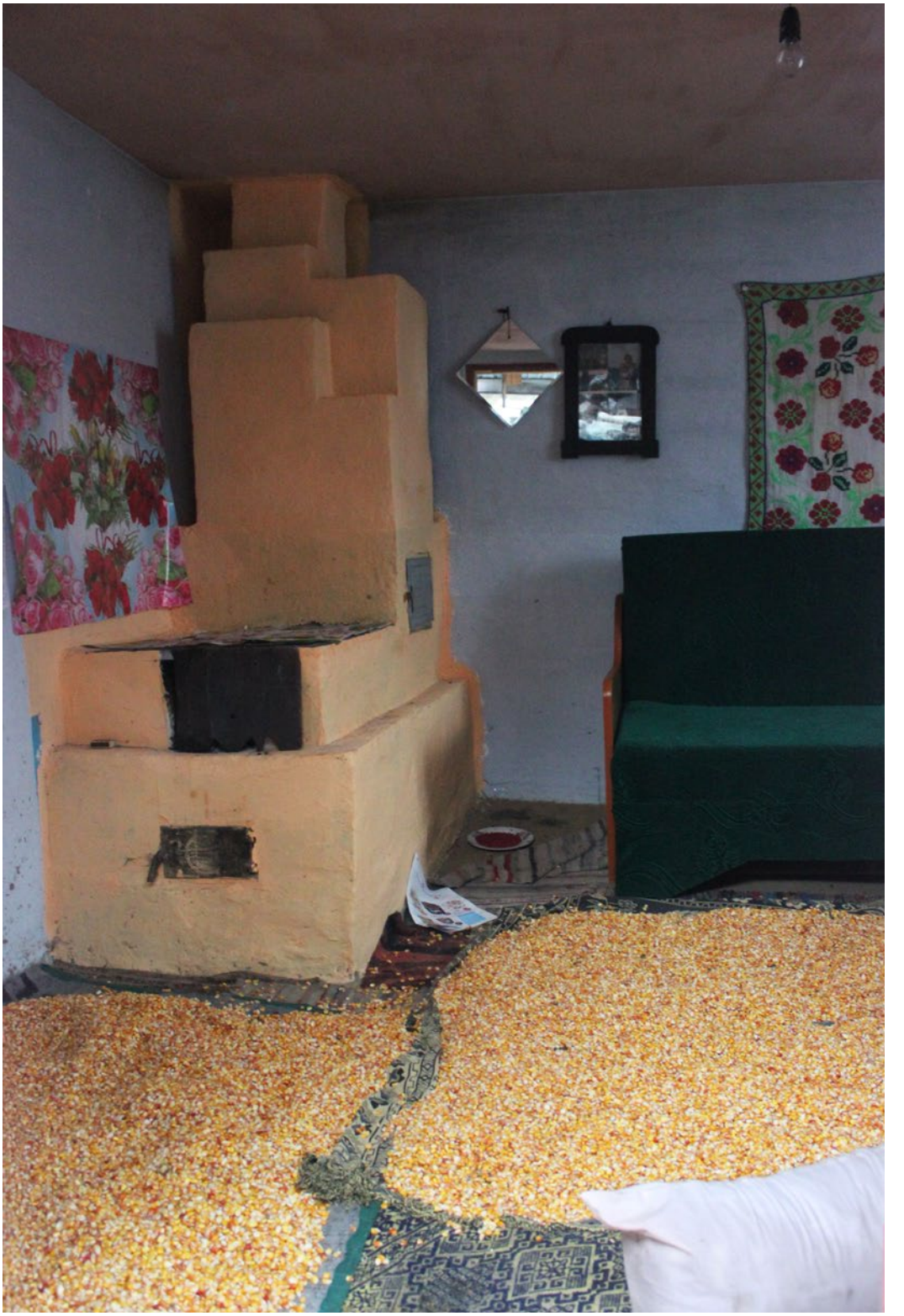
CHAPTER IV



On the street, in Bozioru village.



Adobe stove inside an old house, Scăieni village.

Landscape Practices and Habitation in Buzău Land

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors discuss three different but interconnected aspects of the cultural landscape of the Buzău Land: natural resources, traditional activities and livelihood, starting from concrete, practical elements as well as from cultural symbols and meanings.
The local natural resources (wood, salt, stone, mineral waters, mineral oil springs, amber, plants) have enabled the local people to survive for hundreds of years without great prosperity, but at low cost and with the preservation of biodiversity. Traditional activities have always been organically adapted to these resources. The houses are built using archaic techniques, taking care of the environment, but at the same time according to a vision of life that transcends the material realm. The house, seen as the "centre of the world," reflects the inhabitants' conceptions of earth and sky, life and death.



Introduction

Landscape is a dynamic entity, contained within a temporal framework, that speaks of past, present and future together (M. Gravari-Barbas 2014), as well as an inflection point between the material and the immaterial and between the cultural and the natural.

The environment has a direct impact on human societies, providing the resources necessary for survival and persistence, while humans in turn act on the environment, transforming it in a variety of ways in their endeavour to appropriate the resources they need. Human action on the environment is, however, culturally conditioned: people "interpret" nature and use it on the basis, for example, of their traditional knowledge[1] passed down from generation to generation and continuously adapted to new social and economic conditions.

Habitats provide a good illustration of the dynamic relationship between nature and culture, between external and internal, social and religious environments. Humans construct and interpret their space as conditioned by the objective data of the natural environment, while at the same time taking into account their own cultural coordinates. Within this topic, Amos Rapoport (1990) rightly places inhabitation at the intersection between culture and the natural environment, with all the related meanings: to possess a space, to construct and improve it. When experimenting with the environment, people consider beliefs about the world and life, heaven and earth, the divine and humanity (Rapoport 1990).



On the road towards Bisoca village.

Marked by a variety of living units, the landscape of Buzău is seen as a consequence of the practical use of natural resources, while giving the impression of an archaic way of thinking, based on the existence of a "centre" around which the world gravitates and functions. The empirical field data that we have gathered during our research prove the importance of perceiving local heritage as a complex entity, made up of tangible, material elements as well as intangible, immaterial elements. Any attempt to preserve local heritage should not be limited to the preservation of the material traces left in the landscape, such as vernacular architecture, for example, but should also include the study of intangible cultural heritage. These include customs and representations relevant to an area-specific way of thinking.

Local activities in the specific socio-historical context

Until the 20th century, Buzău Land's communities had low requirements. The communities relied on the principles of subsistence economy, a moral economy (see Scott 1976), which ensured their survival in exchange for a minimum of prosperity. As a result, the inhabitants of this area did not make full use of the resources available, which means that Buzău Land preserves exceptional biodiversity, varied geological resources and a relatively stable balance between human communities and the environment, while many regions in the world are facing resources over-exploitation.



Building a haystack, Bisoca village.

Within the aspiring geopark there are many tradition-bound rural communities with a rural economy based partly on self-reliance and subsistence. This means providing for the needs of the family first. Excess products are redirected towards ever larger concentric circles: the extended family, neighbours and cohabitants and only then, in the next stage, is the excess of products launched on the free market. This has meant that, to a large extent, kinship and neighbourly relations have underpinned economic relations from production to the point of sale. Mutually supportive relationships were also maintained as a result of the use of old, traditional, low-productivity techniques in all productive areas: agriculture, animal husbandry, exploitation of natural resources (salt, stone, wood, mineral oil springs). The reasons for the maintenance of traditional techniques generally involve external factors: technological progress was slow to reach the villages, only reaching them towards the end of the 19th century, and at prohibitively high prices. But there were also internal causes: adapted to local conditions, traditional techniques proved their effectiveness over time and, although they did not bring high profits, there were no significant costs either.

The main economic resource of rural communities in this area was the land itself. It determined the traditional activities of the inhabitants. Animal husbandry was the primary activity due to the limited arable land in a mountainous region. In general, men looked after the animals, particularly during winter. Children were responsible for caring for the animals in the pastures, during summer. Women tended the animals, tended the field and vegetable gardens, raised the children and worked for half a year (in winter) to process textile fibres (flax, cotton, wool, hemp, raw silk) into clothes, clothing fabrics, carpets, blankets and decorative fabrics.

It is easy to comprehend why this had an impact on the social institution of the family. Normally, men received as dowry the land and grounds of the house, the forest, animals and agricultural implements, while women primarily brought the objects and fabrics that were needed in the house, as well as the animals. But if the woman also had a piece of land, it was easier to marry. After the agrarian reform after the First World War, the inhabitants of many mountain villages were given land in the plain region (Romanian Plain), and used to go to these settlements, to work their land, with an ox-cart (Ion C., 80, 2014, Colţi; Iacob N., 56, 2016, Trestioara; Stelică V., 81, 2014, Colţi). Those whose land was not favourable for growing maize obtained it through barter or trade.

Peasants practiced a system of adapting their occupations to the available land. For example, they raised as many animals as they could afford to feed with the hay they cultivated (calculated as follows: two hectares of hay for a pair of oxen; 5 sheep for a cart of hay; a cow meant 5 sheep - inherited system - Dobra D., 63, 2015, Valea Salciei). On average, they had 7-10 sheep, a pair of bulls for transport and a cow or two to provide milk and cheese for the family, 2 or 3 pigs. During the summer, shepherds tended peasants' flocks in the mountain pastures. Under these conditions, although there was not much profit, the losses were not critical and the family's material situation was balanced.

Today, however, only a few people still keep as many animals as they did before the Second World War, because farming is no longer the most important source of income. Cows and bulls are still kept for labour, but the number of sheep has fallen dramatically, meaning that only a few sheep owners in the village produce milk and cheese, mostly for personal consumption and little for trade. In the weekly village markets, the cheese that is sold mostly comes from shepherds in Covasna, the neighbouring region over the mountains (direct observation at a Sunday market in Lopătari on 27th of November 2016). Even so, there have been some cases of sheep farming development in recent years, due to new initiatives of younger sheep owners (Bisoca, Valea Salciei, Lopătari).

In the 20th century, lack of profitability led to labour migration. Men left for many years to work in the oil fields or as shepherds, but returned regularly. For example, animal breeders from Buzău became famous on the other side of the mountains, in Covasna region, Transylvania. Women had to carry the difficult household tasks alone. In the inter-war period, companies such as "Columbia," "Romanian-Belgian Oil," "Steaua Română," engaged in oil exploitations; natural gas was extracted in Beceni, Beciu, Niculeşti and Policiori; a lignite mine was in Ojasca; "Bahna" and "Aluniş" amber mines in Colţi; a gypsum mine in Odăile; and there were spas of local interest in Meledic and Fişici, containing sodium chloride, iodide and bromine waters and chalybeate waters. All of these employ local labour.[2]

Nowadays, oil exploitation still takes place in Beceni, Berca and Scorţoasa. During the communist period, men also worked in logging and turned to secondary occupations, such as resin collectors – people who collect the resin formed on trees in the summer and hand it over to the local forestry administration in the autumn, were receiving in return a large amount of money and/or products, such as corn, wood, etc. (Constantin M., 56, 2014, Bisoca). They also found other solutions to increase their income, by engaging in economic exchanges with the lowland villages (until the middle of the 20th century); or work during the communist period in factories that were built nearby (glass, furniture). Some of the families have moved to the cities and, in the last decades, people have been migrating abroad, in search for work.



Natural and economic resources

Buzău Land has a wide variety of natural resources that have been exploited by local people since ancient times, mainly for personal use and very little for trade. These resources are summarised below:

Water. It has been used for both human and animal consumption. People learnt to identify water sources and dug many springs. Water was the driving force behind water mills and baize (textiles used for cutting the "cioareci"—traditional tight-fitting white woollen trousers and for winter clothes) mills, which are now abandoned and replaced by small grain mills powered by electricity. In natural and man-made ponds, they raised fish and crabs for consumption, but they also made a pond for melting hemp to obtain textile fibres (fish cannot live in water in which hemp melts).

An old legend says that in the water of a brook in the village of Bisoca, in the 19th century, gold was mined from the sand using sheep wool (Gheorghe B., 52, 2014, Bisoca; Constantin M., 56, 2014, Bisoca), but geologists say that there is no possibility of gold ores in the area. This legend can be heard in many mountainous parts of Romania, and the writer Vasile Voiculescu, a native of the Buzău region, mentions it in his novel Dragoste magică [Magical Love] (published posthumously in 1966).

Mineral water. Some mineral waters with curative properties exist in several places. At the beginning of the 20th century, some ferruginous waters from Meledic were commercialised and even sold abroad (Mânzălești 2013, 62-63; Valer B., 55, 2014, Mânzălești; Gheorghe S., 65, 2016, Trestioara). At the same time, the inhabitants knew some sulphurous water springs that they used for bathing as an anti-rheumatic treatment (Dobra D., 63, 2015, Valea Salciei).

Stone. It was widely used for construction and roads, but only locally. People used to dig it from rivers, from places they had known for generations. The availability of a stone with the right roughness led to the development of cross carving and the emergence of professional stonemasons. Crosses were sold locally or in other, more distant villages (Ion B., 70, 2015, Ciuta). Near the geopark area there is the stone pit of Măgura, exploited extensively by professional stonemasons from Ciuta village.

Clay. It is used in construction, for houses (less nowadays) and outbuildings. It is extracted from certain sites in the area of each village. When the clay pit is situated on a piece of private land, the person who takes the clay pays or offers products in exchange (Costică H., 68, 2014, Bisoca). Clay is also used in the production of pottery vessels, and there is a famous pottery centre in Mânzălești (the collection of the Romanian Peasant Museum holds 154 ceramic pieces from Mânzălești).

Chalkstone. A lot of villages had chalk pits where chalk was fired, for local use, but also for trade. Today, most of the chalk pits are abandoned, as people prefer to buy building materials commercially.

Salt. There are numerous salt pits throughout the Buzău Mountains, which can be exploited from the surface. Salt has been mined from known sites for generations for both domestic and commercial exchanges. The salt extracted from the salt marshes of Luncile (Lopătari village) and Sările (Bisoca village) was the most appreciated (Ioan Z., 59, 2016, Lopătari; Constantin B., 72, 2016, Lopătari; Costel M., 58, 2016, Bisoca). However, salt exploitation is sporadic. There have not been massive exploitations, due to the lack of infrastructure and, currently, investors. However, the inhabitants exploit the salt water springs for domestic use, to preserve food during winter and to cook local recipes that are adapted to the different salt concentrations of the springs.

Mineral oil springs. Many inhabitants exploited the mineral oil (petroleum) that floated on the surface of the springs. It was used for domestic use, for oiling ironware, for treating pig slag and for trade. It is known that, in the 19th century, some people were able to extract lamp oil from this water-petroleum mixture using rudimentary equipment. They sold it in lowland villages or used it for lighting (Gheorghe B., 52, 2014, Bisoca; Constantin M., 56, 2014, Bisoca).

Amber. Amber was exploited in Colți, but without much economic value for the inhabitants. Even so, they still work amber locally as an alternative source of occasional income. Apart from that, amber is a symbolic product, being used in some customs (at baptism, as explained by Dumitru N., 75, 2014, Colți), or symbolic local gestures (welcoming new family members after the wedding, as mentioned by Ciprian C., 37, 2016, Colți).

Forests. Feudal villages owned land in condominiums. The descendants of those leaving the condominium, becoming owners, had a small number of hectares of forest, but rationally exploited them for personal buildings and firewood. After World War II, the communist regime confiscated all the forests, and after 1989 many owners, being too old, sold them to large companies that cut the trees irrationally (Ioan Z., 58, 2015, Lopătari). But there are also situations where the forest has been carefully tended (in Bisoca). Oak ("gârneața"), and conifers were exploited for construction. Conifer wood was used to make roofing shingles. Very old willows with trunks up to two metres in diameter can be found on the farmlands. They were planted by people to mark property boundaries, shade animal shelters or exploit their flexible branches. They used to make chains for fences, posts, gates for animal shelters (Constantin M., 56, 2014, Bisoca). A species of Fraxinus ("mojdrean," "manna ash") was used to give the "țuica" (local brandy) a golden colour. Maple was used for tanning. The Roma communities living in some villages (such as Brătilești, and Brăești) had no ownership over land, but are famous for making wooden spoons, wood carvings, pans, pots, eyelets, and corn baskets made of softwood (willow, or lime), which they sell in neighbouring villages. Their wide area of use suggests the deep knowledge the inhabitants had of the properties of the trees in their environment.

Sea buckthorn. It is a halophiles plant and therefore grows in abundance in Buzău area. This shrub with medicinal properties, which grows wild, was not appreciated until the 1970s and 1980s (Gheorghe B., 52, 2014, Bisoca). The locals did not know about its properties, although foresters forced them to collect sea buckthorn fruits for export. They learnt about his properties in 1990, when the information became accessible. In recent years, it has been intensively harvested and sold in the country by small businesses or companies that export it to Germany.

Local plant and animal varieties. Isolation has helped some old plant varieties to resist or even adapt to new varieties over time. Local plum varieties, "Grasă," "Vânătă de Buzău," "Roșie de Buzău," 'Țigănești" are all suitable for pickling and for keeping dried, smoked or in sweets. Green plums are often pickled in Lopătari (Maria B., 69, 2016). There is also a local variety of maize called "Dintele Caprei" [Goat's-Tooth].

Nowadays, there is an inherent tension between local communities in the search for ways to increase living standards, including the efficient export of local resources and the desire to preserve local traditions, as well as traditional economic practices and traditional occupations. However, in the Buzău area, the tendency of local communities is to practice and pass on inherited practices and knowledge to younger generations. These are proven solutions for efficient use of local resources and building bridges between generations.



Label from the beginning of the 20th century about the mineral water exploited in Meledic village.



Stone wall, Lopătari village.



The wooden church in Ruginoasa village, 19th century monument, Brăești comune.



Sea buckthorn plant, close to Bisoca village.



The salty bank, Meledic village.



Old fence in Pănătău village.

Living in Buzău Land

Housing is one of the essential features of the Buzău landscape. Both older and newer building techniques, as well as the significance of the different residential buildings, contribute to the area's unique character and its tangible and intangible heritage.

The traditional houses in the Buzău region were built using ancient techniques specific to the area, the work being carried out by local craftsmen skilled in carving and shaping stone and woodworking. Although building a house was mainly a task for members of the extended family, there were always skilled craftsmen around. These stone and timber builders have left a legacy built on their techniques and skills, learnt and practiced from father to son, from one generation to the next.

There are houses with wooden and strut walls, which are the most common type in mountain villages far from urban centres, but also handmade brick houses in more accessible villages influenced by the urban way of building. In addition to old (traditional) architecture, which emphasises natural materials, in recent years many houses have been built using urban construction materials and techniques that bear no resemblance to rural vernacular architecture. Nevertheless, they complement the local architectural landscape, which is characterised by the diversity of its historical development and, by extension, by the transition from traditional peasant civilisation to modern rural society. Despite all these changes, a number of ancient building techniques are still practiced today. Relatively isolated, with an infrastructure that remains inadequate and roads that are sometimes impassable, the communities still preserve housing construction techniques and knowledge inherited from their ancestors.



Cells at the Monastery Poiana Mărului, Bisoca commune.



Cells at the Rătești Monastery, Rătești village.

In mountainous areas, houses are built mainly on land, avoiding riverbeds, as can be seen in localities such as Lopătari, Valea Salciei, Bozioru and Brăiești. The terrain is quite hilly and has a tendency to slip, so that the construction of houses requires a good knowledge of the sites and favourable soils. "Living places" are chosen on the basis of older constructions that have stood the test of time, and "until they reach the stone, [the villagers of Lopătari] don't build" (Ioan Z., 58, 2015, Lopătari). Once the right place is found, the perimeter of the house is established and the foundation is started, built with stone taken from the riverbed. This is quite a difficult operation because of the uneven terrain, so the stones are brought only by carts, as is still done today in Bisoca (Costică H., 68, 2014, Bisoca). That is why houses were quite often built "on the surface", not "at the root, deep in the ground," with a foundation of stone mixed with earth (Costică H., 68, 2014, Bisoca).

The next stage of construction is the erection of the wooden house structure. The wooden floor joists and posts are connected to the stone foundation. These were connected with two rows of "spiders" or "beams" made of hazel branches. At the upper level, these were tied together into a "belt." Not just any kind of wood was used to build the frame of the house, but only hardwood, usually oak. The wood was prepared at least a year in advance. The trees to be cut and used in the construction were carefully selected according to their size and thickness. They were cut in winter, not in full growth. The wood was cut as needed and left to dry, sheltered from rain and damp. Only after it had dried was it used in construction. After assembling the wooden frame of the house, the next stage was to finish the walls. A mixture of earth, and either straw or manure, was prepared and placed between the "beams" or "slats." The walls were then plastered with the same mixture. Sometimes goat's hair mixed with dung and earth was used for plastering (e.g. in the village of Bozioru). The best manure was horse dung, as it was rich in fibre. However, the peasants of Buzău did not usually have it, due to the scarcity of horses in the area (the rugged terrain meant that oxen, which were more resistant and adapted to the morphology of the area, were needed for transport).



Old house in Florești village.



Wooden house in Brăești village.



Chicken yard in Pănătău village.



Old house from Dogari village.

Old house in Brăești village.



Finally, the beams and roofs were joined together. The houses were mostly covered with fir shingle. Installing the shingles also required special techniques, which were not mastered by most of the inhabitants. This stage required the skills of specialised craftsmen. To make it easier to cut, wooden shingle was cut along the "ribs" of the wood. To ensure durability, the shingle was coated with oil or tar, preferably taken directly from a local natural source. Once the shingle was laid, the house was nearly finished. The next steps were to fill in the walls with lime or white stone, install the sills and frames, the doors, the windows and, finally, the floors.



Wooden roof in Florești village.

The structure of the "old house" in the mountain villages of Buzau is very simple. The houses always had a wooden porch, initially open but later closed with windows. From the porch one entered a hallway that connected the two rooms of the house. To the left was always the living room, where the whole family lived. On the right was the clean guest room, where the most valuable possessions of the house were displayed: the dowry of the girls to be married or the dowry brought by the mistress of the house at her marriage. At the back of the house there was usually a pantry, and on the right-hand side an enclosure where the animals were kept over the winter. To the left, a room was used as a storeroom for provisions in winter and as a summer kitchen in warmer seasons.

The timber-framed houses were not very durable. They were houses built for a generation, two generations at most, which underwent alterations or even total reconstructions over time. However, they had the advantage of maintaining optimal temperatures: warm in winter and cool in summer. The houses were flexible and extremely resistant to earthquakes. Gradually the wood used for garden fences was replaced by wire mesh, which was cheaper and easier to install. Very small houses were extended, walls were raised and windows enlarged. In many cases, pantries were converted into living rooms. The place for receiving guests and chatting became the kitchen or the inner courtyard (a recent invention, which tends to spread in rural areas of Buzău).

The households are equipped with a variety of household outbuildings, animal shelters and household annexes. The bakery for bread, wafers and cakes was made of either brick or stone. It was built under a shed, which was used as a "summer kitchen," and was equipped with a hob that could be used for cooking.

The cottages are enclosed by a variety of fences, from wooden planks to wicker or garden plots.

There is an interesting element that can usually be found around households and villages.

The fences of the houses were usually low in height, allowing for neighbours to engage in conversations, thus fostering closeness and good relations. In fact, almost all houses had benches at their entrances, which had the same function of strengthening neighbourly ties, family bonds, and friendship among the villagers.

There are also stone and wooden crosses near the houses and enclosures, which will always catch your eye when you visit the Buzău countryside (see Passima, Manolache and Voicilă 2010). Their number is impressive, being present in the most unexpected places: crosses found near crossroads, crosses found on the outskirts of villages, crosses by the roadside and in front of houses. There are two types of crosses: those intended to commemorate the dead, and those used for votive and religious purposes. By putting up these crosses, the space was sanctified: the sacred entered the profane, everyday world. Crosses are extensions of the ecclesiastical space, the boundary between our world and the world beyond. Crosses "belong" to those who build or sponsor them, as well as to those who worship them, and are meant to help both the sponsor and the worshipper or traveller. These crosses are a sign of stability and a sign of passage, of eternal remembrance here on earth, as well as of faith in the afterlife.

Related to rites of passage and homesteading, there is an interesting ritual that we observe in the Buzău Land. It consists in the making of a miniature little house which is given to the soul of a recently deceased person 40 days after the funeral: the "alms house" (see Manolache and Passima 2015). It is made of wood or blankets and contains everything a living person would need: bed, table, chairs, television, stove, lamp, underwear, clothes, food, etc. The cottage, with all the miniature objects inside, is given to a younger or poorer family as a donation. It is dismantled and reassembled (in the case of wooden houses) in the household of the recipients, who are required to honour the person for whom it was offered, by holding a memorial service at the church. The custom is particularly interesting for the communion of faith, transcending the boundaries between our world and the world beyond, but also between young and old, rich and poor. The memory and remembrance of the dead are centred on the notion of home, which is symbolically extended by reducing its physical dimension. The house thus appears as an existential matrix, a bridge between heaven and earth, an extension of the human person on the road from "here" to "the hereafter."



Roadside cross in Brăești village.

Roadside cross close to Bisoca village.



Conclusions

The landscape of the Buzău Land is organic and traditionally sustainable. It is centred on the use of local resources, the perpetuation of old occupations, building and processing techniques, practices and spatial representations. All these elements still remind us of a pre-modern way of thinking, in which people can communicate not only within a natural and social environment, but also within an invisible, intangible, divine world. A good example of the perpetuation of this archaic way of thinking is the dwelling specific to the area. There is the village house. There's the little cottage on the hill, a seasonal dwelling used during periods of field labour. There are country-side houses. There is the church, or the "House of the Lord," but also the "house of grace," a communal house where alms are given. And, of course, there is the alms house (the house of the soul). All these make up a space that evokes transcendence and the link between the seen and the unseen, the physical and the divine.



NOTES

1. "Traditional ecological knowledge", see Berkes et al. (2000).

2. The Project *Interwar Romania*, http://romaniainterbelica.memoria.ro/judete/buzau/ , last accessed 11 June 2025.

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A family in front of their house. 1965. Courtesy of Cecilia Petrescu, Mânzălești.