# CHAPTER V



"Fierbătorile" ["At the boilers," that is the mud volcano] from Beciu village.



Balcony of an old house, Beciu.

# Intangible Heritage in Buzău Land

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ABSTRACT

In the Buzău region, the landscape surrounding communities is not a neutral space, but rather an active and meaningful one (Tilley 1994), populated by cultural symbols and linked to symbolic references, constituting a cultural construct (Tylor 2008; Ingold 1993). These spaces and their uses are imbued with intangible heritage, reflected in local tales of ogres, dragons, strange apparitions, or giants. This chapter explores how intangible heritage is considered important in local communities in the Buzău area, taking into account local legends and stories that explain and narrate the landscape, as well as experiences people have personally encountered or those passed down through cultural transmission. Another point of interest in this chapter concerns the ritual and symbolic gestures and knowledge that local healers still use to cure people through magical practices and beliefs. Both of these features of intangible heritage are considered important for explaining local communities' attachment to their traditional values and heritage, thus becoming a point of reference for defining local identity.

## Introduction

The identity of the members of a given community is determined primarily by their individual personalities, but it is also culturally constructed, as "human persons are imagined to assimilate elements of collective identities into their unique personal identities" (Handler 1994, 28). Essential and, at the same time, constructed, identity is strongly influenced by the socio-cultural context (fluid and multiple, as it is continuously constructed and reconstructed – see Rusu 2009) and, at the same time, by the natural habitat in which people live. As a cultural construct, intangible heritage has an active contribution to shaping and defining collective identity, which, in order to exist, is "produced and reproduced at an individual level" (Rusu 2009, 41). In other words, local identity is largely influenced and determined by people's knowledge, beliefs, customs, language and social status.

The intangible cultural heritage is a key focus for us, as it plays an important role in a region's sustainable development. In addition to possible economic progress, long-term development implies ensuring, as well, a strong sense of continuity and identity for the local population and, consequently, giving them reasons to be proud of their local culture.

However, we recognize that intangible heritage, like the broader concept of cultural heritage, is constantly adapting to new circumstances. It consists of values that have been passed down from one generation to the next within the social group, but which are constantly influenced by changes within societies. Thus, cultural traditions are dynamic: continuity and change coexist and complement each other (see Handler, and Linnekin 1984; Mihăilescu 2004). Just as culture as a whole is not static but is constantly evolving, a community's cultural heritage is subject to change and adaptation to the new values that a community holds dear (see Loulansky 2006). In fact, culture is subject to a process of heritage creation[1] (see Iuga 2022), i.e. a process of selection and re-semantization (see Rus and Neagota 2017), but also a social production that falls within the framework of heritage policies (Mihăilescu 2012).

As part of cultural heritage, intangible heritage helps build bridges between the past, present, and future (Tudorache 2016). Promoting this heritage means empowering local communities and, in turn, contributing to their sustainable development. This requires an active appreciation of ancestral values and beliefs, as well as their transformation into heritage. And, above all, it requires adapting them—as components of heritage—to the present in a creative way and bringing them into resonance with current realities (see Mihăilescu 2017). In this way, intangible heritage would provide the cultural roots that people need today.

The Northern Buzău area is composed of several communities sharing a similar intangible heritage, which are now grouped in the Buzău Land Geopark. We see this as a strength because geoparks need structures, teams and projects that actively contribute to raising public awareness of an area's natural and cultural heritage. Their activities are planned to serve both the general public and local communities. In their programs, the geopark teams are committed to providing and creating a context in which local heritage can be fully valued. In some ways, this is linked to the notion of the "experience economy" (Pine and Gilmore, 1998), which involves placing personal experience at the centre of any resource.

As mentioned above, we value theories regarding the dynamics of traditions. These describe how the intangible heritage of a particular place manages to bring together both the continuity of cultural values and their constant adaptation to contemporary values. We should also note that we consider a community as a homogeneous group with shared cultural values (see Agrawal and Gibson 1999). These cultural values, as they are collectively asserted and internalized, contribute to increasing the level of social cohesion within the group, having a direct impact on shaping local identity (see Wetherell 2006). As it happens everywhere, in the Buzău region, although communities are modern, they are still very attached to ancient values and traditions, giving us, as specialists, a ground for highlighting local heritage values.

Let us present you two examples of intangible heritage (place narratives and incantations) from the Buzău region and tell you in what different ways it can contribute to the sustainable development of the Geopark communities.

## Stories in the landscape

We will first discuss the narratives that tell stories about different places within the Buzău Land Geopark. As explained in a previous chapter, from a phenomenological approach, landscape is a cultural asset. People actively interact and connect with it, landscape is not

neutral or passive, but rather active and qualitative (Bernea 1985; Tilley 1994). It is enriched with cultural meanings and is closely linked to people's activities (Tilley 1994; Ingold 1993): geography is shaped by the mental and spiritual maps of the storytellers' home areas (see also Gunnell 2009).

Our analysis will focus on accounts of events that took place in clearly defined places, described at length by our interlocutors. The events involved either the storytellers themselves or their relatives, or ancestors, but were in both cases kept vivid in the collective memory, certifying the symbolic value of the landscape.

In Buzău Land Geopark landscape plays an active role in people's lives not only in the way it is used, but also in the way it is perceived. People in Buzău do not live in a neutral space. Their settlements are not simply surrounded by hills, nor do they simply stretch along the rivers on whose banks they are located. Rather, they inhabit a space rich with meaning, full of cultural significance and symbolic references (Mesnil 2007). Here there are plenty of stories about fantastical creatures, dog-headed chimeras, winged monsters, ogres and beautiful but mischievous goblins. People know very well which places are safe and which are dangerous, and where it is unwise to linger at certain times of the day. The landscape communicates; it is in fact a story, a presence that reveals itself over time through collective memory and references to ancestors, which give it a significant diachronic dimension. "It enfolds the lives and times of predecessors who, over the generations, have moved around in it [the landscape—n.n.] and played their part in its formation" (Ingold 1993, 152). For this reason, social scientists consider that a given landscape, in addition to being a social space, is at the same time "a cultural construct, a mirror of our memories and myths encoded with meanings which can be read and interpreted" (Taylor 2008, 3).

The Buzău Land area is given a personal identity, primarily through local place names. These reflect a subjective appropriation of the space and cause it to be perceived as a unique place with its own identity, rather than as a neutral one (see de Certeau 1990). People living here are born in a space that their ancestors have already enriched with meanings and their own experiences, transmitted in local memory. Place names "are the living memory of the historical landscape. Their meanings may refer to specific land-use systems or practices, important social phenomena, religious or supernatural beliefs, geographical and geological formations, as well as vegetation and other resources and their utilization" (Ivascu and Stanik 2024, 117). Toponyms can confirm the meaning attributed to places.

A quick example from Buzău is the names of geological sites associated with salt, one of the local natural resources. The most important is "Malul cu sare" [Salt Bank], i.e. the Meledic salt plateau, in the commune of Mânzăleşti, a name that speaks of the former sea that existed there, from which only the salt remained, now present in the composition of the "mountain," considered a shore (remains of the sea). There are several salt quarries here, but they are not in operation, only salt water from the springs is used. There are two other villages in the region that have the name "salt" in their name, such as "Săreni" (commune of Lopătari—just across the Salt Bank), where one can also find places with salt in the soil; and "Săruleşti," which is a commune itself, located 15 km from the Salt Bank, where there is another site with salt pits, exploited, at great risks, by the locals. The region is crosscut by the Slănic [Salty] river, which, after a 73 km course, flows into the Buzău River. The local history is closely linked to the region's salt, one of its natural resources, which currently sees little exploitation.



The salty bank, after a rain, seen from Săreni village.



The salty bank, Meledic village.



Two women heading to the salty water spring, Lopătari village.

But what distinguishes the geopark area of the Buzău region is that many places are given an individual identity through people's accounts. These reflect the existence of a value system and a worldview that are passed down in every local memory through oral tradition. Thus, the landscape is shaped by the stories people tell, that is, "a repertoire of legends based on both experience and tradition" (Gunnell 2009, 308), which develops it into a kind of community book or "a map with historical depth" (Gunnell 2008, 15). The narratives, stories and legends associated with places are evidence of local cultural continuity and alone constitute a statement of belonging to a particular community; these stories clearly help to define local values.

The region is home to a wealth of stories associated with specific places. These can be found in two different sources. First, mentioned from the outset because they are the best known, are the folk legends of the region, recorded by early folklorists or modern-day local folklore enthusiasts and subsequently published, sometimes at a time when these legends were still frequently told within the communities. An example of "mixed orality" (Zumthor 1990), that is, an orality that coexists with writing. The second source consists, to a larger extent, of the recordings that we, as researchers, have made, containing legends and narratives (grade I, II and III memorata, or recounted personal experiences, see Benga 2005, and Neagota 2005) that the locals still recount today. We are dealing, in this case, with a "primary and immediate or pure orality" (Zumthor 1990). These narratives are either handed down from generation to generation or created recently, especially if they talk about new experiences. Nevertheless, they are created in a way that ensures they fit within the spirit of local tradition.

Returning to the written sources of local narratives as "lieux de mémoire" (Nora 1997), as we have shown in a previous study (Iuga 2021), there are two types of publications that become a source of what Zumthor (1990) calls "second orality," that is, an orality sometimes recomposed on the basis of written sources. First there are the early writings, published in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. And second, there are the more recent publications that teachers or local cultural representatives have edited, which contain local legends. The question of orality and how literacy interacts with and influences local narratives in Buzău is extensively discussed in Anamaria Iuga's article (2021).

The earliest mentions of legends are those that received a fixed written form in known works published towards the end of the 19th century. An example is the fairy tale "The king's son who had good luck hunting" [in Romanian: Feciorul de împărat cel cu noroc la vânat], recorded by Alexandru Odobescu in 1874 in his *Pseudokineghetikos,* in which reference is made to a legend about the mud volcanoes of Beciu. Beciu is described as the place where "the Wicked One placed his cauldrons of boiling pitch," with the result that "down below, underground, the muddy earth gurgles and boils" (Odobescu 2010, 211). For the locals, in fact, these places are known as "At the boilers" [Fierbători] (Ioana Ș., 66, 2015, Beciu) or "Mud volcanoes" [Vulcanii noroioși/Pâcle] (Nicolae M., 63, 2012, Pâclele), unproductive areas where nothing grows. However, people can obtain healing substances, because mud from some volcanoes is used in mud wraps to treat rheumatism (Arbănași volcanoes—Ioana Ș., 66, 2015, Beciu; or the volcanoes in the Valea Salciei, in the place called "Chira's Eye"—Dobra D., 63, 2015, Valea Salciei).

In his writing, Odobescu also mentions the Dragon's Hill to the left of the Slănic River, which derives its name from the winged monster that tried to get rid of the king's brave son who had good luck in hunting. This hill is located close to the village of Beciu (Odobescu 2010, 210; Gheorghe B., 78, 2012, Pâclele; Nicolae M., 63, 2012, Pâclele). Another traveller who roamed Romania in the late 19th and early 20th century was Alexandru Vlahuță, who



"Fierbătorile" ["At the boilers," that is the mud volcano] from Beciu village.

in 1901 wrote enthusiastically about the amazing places he had visited, including a number of villages in northern Buzău. Vlahuță praises the beauty of these places and names some of them, but he records only one legend, that of the giant's child who finds some people and, intrigued, takes them to his mother to find out what they are: those who will inherit the Earth, the giant explained, as the giants themselves were to disappear (Vlahuță 1972, 123-124). This legend, widespread in Romania (Muşlea, and Bîrlea 2010, 190-191), was also encountered during our research trip, in the village of Scăieni, narrated by Ilie B. (92, 2014).

In addition to the two writers already mentioned, there is also the teacher Dumitru Şerbescu-Lopătari, who in 1937 recorded another legend that explains the toponymy of the Lopătari-Mânzăleşti-Bisoca region. It is the legend of Giurgiu, the shepherds' ruler, and his beautiful daughters Great Muşa [Muşa Mare—"muşa" is an archaism for "frumoasă," meaning "the beautiful one"] and Little Muşa [Muşa Mică], who were attacked by thieves. The legend refers to various toponyms that are still in use today and relates the transformation of legendary characters (both people and animals) into natural elements (rocks, rivers, mountains, etc.) In this legend we also find an explanation for the phenomenon of the "eternal flame," *ignis fatuus* (i.e. will-o'-wisp), in Romanian, "Focul viu." This would have appeared on Mount Smoleanu (a name meaning "extruded from pitch") during the final battle between the heroes of the legend. Şerbescu-Lopătari also mentions the stones called "Bucur's Table," a place that even today is a source of local pride, as it is believed to mark the birthplace of Bucur, the legendary founder of Bucharest (Bucureşti).

In the following example we explain how local legends become a cultural trademark of a village, with the active intervention of village intellectuals, contributing to the solidarity of the group and at the same time actively promoting the intangible heritage of the village. Such is the example of the legend that explains the name of the village of Mânzăleşti. It tells the

story of two brothers, Manea and Mânzală, and their foray into a place forbidden to men, a place where women gathered to dye cloth (Ilina D., 71, 2015, Mânzăleşti; Cecilia P., 65, 2015, Mânzăleşti). It is a legend also mentioned by the teacher D. Cristea from Mânzăleşti, in the 1970s. Based on the legend, he created a theatre play that the children of the school, and later the members of the folklore group created in the village in the late 1970s, performed several times at regional festivals. In 2001 the play was performed in Sibiu at the ASTRA Village Museum. In 2015, at the opening of the local museum, "Time of Man," the play was performed again (see Iuga 2021, 150).

A further important documentary source for the legends of the Buzău region consists of more recent monographs dedicated to specific localities, written with passion and dedication by local history teachers and folklore enthusiasts. These works contain a wealth of beliefs, place names, and other local legends (e.g. Costea 2012; Gâlmeanu 2004; Mânzăleşti 2013).

However, some stories about certain places remain particularly vivid in the memory of locals, who have shown in interviews that such narratives are still important to the community.

Such are the legends involving fantastic beings said to have inhabited the region in time immemorial. The muddy volcanoes and Dragon's Hill, mentioned above, fall into this category, as does the story of Malul Roşu [Red Riverbank] (in the village of Lopătari). In this legend, two girls running away from dog-headed chimeras threw themselves off a cliff and reddened the hill with their blood (Maria D., 70, 2015, Dimiana).

Other accounts (in addition to the legend recorded by Alexandru Vlahuţă) speak of giants, also known locally as "Tatars," and focus in particular on their strength and abilities:

> In ancient times there were Tatars on the Tatar's Hill (...). And it is said that these Tatars were very great, very powerful people and that we (...) were but dwarfs compared to them, and it is said that there, on the Tatar's Hill, a treasure was buried. (...) I remember it was said that the woman... the Tatar woman put one foot here and [one] on the next hill... the other foot on Straja Hill. You know, somewhere on Straja Hill, near Râmnicu Sărat. (Dobra D., 68, 2015, Valea Salciei)

The villages of Buzău Land are also populated by other mythological beings. Many narratives have to do with "Iele" (fairies) or "Rusalii," elemental fairies of air and water (see Muşlea, and Bîrlea 2010, 200-209). What is specific to this region is that narratives about supernatural beings – which are also found in other areas rich in folklore – are most often recounted in the form of *memorata*. In other words, they are presented as personal experiences. The interviewees recount their own observations, which complement the body of collective experiences (Culianu 1996, 40). Sometimes, these experiences overlap completely with those passed down through the community's collective memory, especially when the interviewees talk about events that they themselves and other community members have experienced. They "present specific cases, selected based on their own interests and interpreted according to highly personal criteria" (Hedeşan 2001, 11). Here is an example of a first degree memorata that we recorded in this region, in which the narrator recounts experiences from his own life, giving them the authenticity that is inherent to personal feelings:

> God, it was out of the ordinary. I was taken to work on the ranch for a man who had a barn where that pump house is, there. That master of mine had a barn with 150 sheep there and I was working for him, I was supposed to look after them (...). And one night I left the sheep there and went down there, lower than the stable, to feed the animals, when he was going to leave with the oxen. And I left there in the night, it wasn't like nowadays, when you're afraid of wild animals, and just for a

moment I heard singing above me in the night. And I said to that master of mine, "Mr. Gheorghe, look what's happened," "Well, that's the goblins, that's what." And did you say anything? "Because if you say anything you'll end up dumb." "I didn't say anything, sir!" "Well, if you come across something like that again, be careful not to speak, or you'll be mute." (Dumitru U., 87, 2014, Aluniș)

Other types of narratives (generally third-degree *memorata*) deal with special places where treasures are buried and where flames burn on the night of St. George's Day, a belief found in many parts of Romania (Muşlea, and Bîrlea 2010, 435-436). However, a distinctive feature of these accounts is that the treasure is usually cursed and that those who found it were unable to benefit from it. There is also another interesting phenomenon: the mystical properties of the buried treasure are transferred to human remains. For example, one of the recorded accounts tells us that flames also appear above the bones of those who died a violent death (Pompila P., 86, 2015, Cornet).

A characteristic feature of rural communities is their in-depth knowledge of whether the local surroundings are benevolent or malevolent. Locals know which good places are auspicious and bring prosperity. They know, for example, that sandstone formations—known locally as "gorgons" or "mushrooms" depending on their shape—provide prosperity to any house in front of which they are placed (Andrei D., 56, 2014, Bozioru; Dumitru N., 75, 2014, Colți, etc.).



"Trovant" (sandstone concretions) from Ulmet village.



“Trovant” (sandstone concretions) from Ulmet village.





Wooden bridge crossing the Slănic river, Dogari village.





“Crucea Spătarului” [The Ruler’s Cross], Bozioru village.

In the same way, people also know which are the bad places that should be avoided, especially at certain times of the day. This topic, which has been extensively discussed in a separate article (Iuga, and Andreescu 2016), demonstrates that members of rural communities in Buzău are aware of the various characteristics of their native places and convey this information through narratives recounting concrete experiences. These are considered true because they were lived through by someone and because they fall into the category of collective experiences that are kept alive in the collective memory through local beliefs (see also Eliade 1993).

Other types of narratives evoke historical events. Among the most common are those recalling the invasions of migratory populations, especially the Tatars (Mongol invaders from the Middle Ages). This category includes, for example, narratives about the hill called Podul Mândrei [Beauty's Bridge], where women supposedly took refuge during the invasions (Cecilia P., 66, 2015, Beşlii).

We also have accounts of man-made objects, such as the "Crucea ciumaţilor" [Plague Cross] near the village of Colţi (Filofteea B., 72, 2014, Colţi; Dumitru R., 84, 2014, Muscelul Cărămănesc). Here, the local priest took the Eucharist and placed it in the hollow of a tree, so that the sick who had been driven out of the village could take it as a comfort. Another famous cross is the "Spătarul Cross" [Leader's Cross] or "Agaton's Cross" [Agaton's Cross], a 19th-century monument situated at 980 m, which, according to local legends, mentioned on a panel next to the monument, was erected by a local nobleman who escaped the invaders by finding refuge in that area.

Although they follow the patterns of local tradition, these narratives can diversify and adapt to new situations. They achieve this by lending a legendary atmosphere to recent history, such as events from World War II or even the communist era. These events, kept alive today in the memory of those who lived through them, will find a permanent place in local folklore generations to come. One example is the inter-war story linked to the village of Mânzăleşti, near Grunj, the volcanic tufa that has remained like an island in the middle of the village of Slănic, behind a bridge where the road connecting Mânzăleşti to the Meledic plateau crosses:

> And somewhere over there [near *Grunj*], it was eventually discovered that the legionnaires were keeping communications. Either they pretended that they had gone to catch fish... After all, as it's a rather isolated place, you see... and in the end, precisely because it was such a place, one of them was picked up, because he was visible: "And why is he still hanging around in that area?"—and so on. And they were arrested. (Cecilia P., 66, 2015, Beşlii)

All these memorable places are linked to a story and thus become, as we have shown, active elements in the shaping of local identity: as a "laboratory" or site of practices and uses, the landscape contributes to the definition of local memory (Le Dû-Blayo 2011, 417). For this reason, landscape is considered to include "a subjective element and cannot be understood outside the symbolically constructed life worlds of social actors" (Tilley 1994, 11). This aids the tasks that the geopark aims to accomplish. Namely, to strengthen the cohesion of the locals in the region and to make them cherish old traditions. This should be done while, at the same time, looking to the future and transforming these traditions into cultural heritage, active on different levels, contributing to the strengthening of local identity. This is done with the help of specialists from inside and outside the communities involved in the creation and promotion of the geopark.



The “Grunj” (volcanic tufa), Mânzălești village.

## *Descântecul* [The Incantation]—between religion and magic

The second section of this chapter is dedicated to the role of incantation (*descântat*), a series of archaic magical-religious performances carried out for the purpose of healing. We will analyse how these elements of intangible heritage are perceived by local communities. According to the literature (see Bîrlea 1983), this practice includes the spoken text of the incantation, together with the gestures and facial expression of the woman performing the incantation—the "descântătoare"—and the substances (material support) that she uses in the ritual performance. The defining features of the practice of incantation, the tensions between its magical and religious aspects, and the cohesive role played by the incantation performers within their social communities demonstrate that this tradition continues to be important and significant for the local communities of the Buzău Land. They add value to the area.

We will describe the phenomenon of incantation practitioners, women or men who exert a beneficial effect on other people through the use of symbolic and ritual gestures and spoken formulas. They are known to be healers, curing a range of ailments such as evil eye, sprained joints and diseases caused by fear. We have met many people who still use traditional lore to cure certain ailments. For example, people still know the properties of medicinal plants. However, we have also met people who have expressed confidence in the women who practice chanting in their community.

People continue to believe that ancient healing practices are viable. They have deep roots in the local belief system and are an active part of local identity. The observations that follow are based on interviews with a number of subjects, but the one that stands out is Veta B. (81, 2015, Floreşti village). She is a professional practitioner of incantations. She has twin sons, which is relevant to her status: "I gave birth to twin boys. Only someone who gave birth to twins has healing powers." She learned the art of chanting from her grandmother, and the words of the incantations are deeply ingrained in her memory. Veta B. has an extensive repertoire of incantations, including those used to rid a man or an animal of the evil eye, which is known to most women in the village, both old and young. She also knows of incantations used "for indigestion," for sprains, "for illnesses caused by fear," "for love," to find out who the future husband will be, or to rid a peasant household of mice and rats. The interview with Veta B. aimed to reveal the relationship between her, as a practitioner of the ancient traditional profession of incantation, and the local church, in this case the Romanian Orthodox Church, represented locally by the parish priest of the village of Floreşti. The relationship is an ambivalent one, but this ambiguity is one that dates back a very long time in the archaic mentality of the Romanian peasantry, surprisingly relics of which can still be discovered through modern ethnographic research:

> I explained to the departing priest: I told him I knew how to cast a spell over the cows. "Well, Aunt Veta, it's a sin," he said. "But, he says, will you tell me the incantation?" "Yes." "Well, Aunt Veta, this is a prayer, not an incantation!" the priest said after listening to the incantation. Well, if I say, "Has the Virgin Mary gone?" [Aunt B. wants to say above that it cannot be a sin, because in this incantation spell, the Virgin Mary is invoked – n.n.]. This kind of incantation is very good; it is a prayer, as long as you say: "I woke up in the morning, I made *the sign of the cross*..." (Veta B., 81, 2015, Floreşti village)

Indeed, the enchantment in which the Mother of God is invoked somewhat resembles the "primitive" peasant prayers, without theological pretensions, that Romanians used in other

times. Like this one: "Cruce-n casă/Cruce-n piatră,/Cruce în tus-patru/Cornuri de casă/ Dumnezeu cu noi la masă,/ Maica Precistă la fereastra" [Cross in the house/ Cross in the stone/ Cross in all four/ corners of the house/ God with us at the table/ Mother of God at the window].

But the priest's confusion between chant and prayer is surprising. The ambiguity between the practices of the Christian Orthodox religion and magic is further highlighted by the information provided by Ana M. (69, 2015), a local from the same village, Floreşti. When her cow's milk ran out, she turned first to a witch without a cure, then to the local priest. He came for three days in a row, read prayers to the cow and the milk came back. The priest taught Ana to say the *Lord's Prayer*, but as a chant: "Tuesday three times, Thursday six times, Saturday nine times," performing the hymn-prayer over the corn or bran that the cow would eat.

In the canon book of Orthodox Christianity, the *Pidalion* (2013), in canon 36 of the 60 canons established at the Synod of Laodicea, we read that those clerics who dabble in incantations or witchcraft will be excommunicated/blamed ("We have commanded that they be cast out of the Church"). In the same way, in the most widely used *Confession Guide*, signed by Nicodim Măndiţă, sins such as wearing the colour red to guard against the devil, the appeal to "devilish help with divinations, incantations, charms and spells," if you have been struck by trouble, must be confessed to the priest (Măndiţă 2000, 21).

The priest has another healing prop provided by the church whose rightful minister he is: The Sacrament of the Holy Oil, the prayers for the sick in the *Molitfelnic*, the sacrament of Confession (through which people are forgiven their sins, in the Christian mentality sickness is usually seen as the consequence of committing sins), the Eucharist. To these can be added other means of healing proposed by the Christian tradition of the Church: pilgrimages, the veneration of miracle-working icons, intercession that the faithful ask certain saints known as healers (Cosma 2024, 125-126). But, as Valer Simion Cosma has sagaciously observed, popular religiosity – interested in the urgent healing or rapid removal of any evil sent by *magic* – operates with a notion of the sacred that does not perfectly overlap with the sacred of orthodox theology. The sacredness of popular religiosity is ambiguous (Caillois 1997, 38-39, 42), ambivalent, and can have both beneficial and malefic effects on man. It can, for example, resignify the liturgy and the Eucharist, suggesting to the follower of popular religiosity to use their power to draw *good fortune* or to find out his future in his daily life – cases taken from the everyday life of the peasant can be cited here, in which the sacrament of communion is instrumented in the art of divination (Cosma 2024, 111-112). The priest in Veta B.'s narration obeys docilely to popular religiosity, confirming the truth captured by Valer S. Cosma:

> It can be observed that, at the level of country priests, the priest himself is most often closer to the horizon of folkloric religiosity, relating, like the parishioners, in a magical-religious manner to his own function and priestly duties, than to a theological horizon in which there is a clearer delimitation of the magical from the religious and in which the mission of the priest is linked to the salvation of the souls of those he shepherds. (Cosma 2024, 114)

Back to the incantation. In the present context, we can speak of an inherent ambiguity in the practice of chanting and also of an ambiguity in the status of the person who performs it. The phenomenon of incantation, both in the collective mentality and in the way it has been described and interpreted by ethnographers, has been perceived either as an expression of a religious way of thinking or, on the contrary, as a magical practice, sometimes linked to black

magic. In incantation, an essential ingredient is "the ancient belief in the power of a word uttered in a certain ritual context, which must be fulfilled with precision, a feature common to carol verses and to popular wishes in general, curses being no exception" (Bîrlea 1983, 13). Incantation could be described either as "popular prayer" or as "poetry with a pragmatic purpose" (Bîrlea 1983; see also Răutu 1998).

On a social level, the ambiguity inherent in the status of the woman practicing incantation is an ancient feature that has survived in the collective consciousness to this day. Another specialist in Romanian folklore, Adrian Fochi (1976), establishes the precise difference between the ancient socio-professional categories of incantation practitioner, spell caster and wizard/witch, taking as a criterion the effect, they sought to have on their patient or client, namely, beneficial or harmful. In general terms, incantation has a beneficial effect, whereas witchcraft and spells have a harmful effect. Those who practise incantation generally do good, bring help, have a social role as folk or community doctors. For this reason, they are regarded positively: they utter words that have an affinity with prayer, they are people of God, but they are sometimes confused with those who cast spells or even with witches. Casters of spells generally do evil, cause sickness, trouble and misfortune and "drive a person mad." Wizards predict the future and fortune, control other people's will, break spells, cause harm, drive people mad and make them have bad luck (Fochi 1976).

It was this double ambiguity, inherent both to the act of incantation and to the position of the village practitioner of incantation, that made Veta B. refuse, from the very beginning of the first interview, the labels of spell caster and witch: "I told you that I only practice incantation with the help of the Virgin Mary. I know absolutely nothing about spells or undoing their effects." One of her arguments was that none other than the former parish priest compared her incantations to prayers. But the possible negative social perception of women practicing chanting also emerged from the testimony of Luiza C. (39, 2015, Floreşti, 2015):

> Incantations are good, but in our village, they are also considered tools of the Devil. Because you don't pray, you practice incantation. Usually, when these old grandmothers go to confession, the priest tells them: "If you continue practicing these incantations, I will not admit you to communion." In our village, [the threat of banning] communion is used to frighten people.

At the same time, the sacred energy of the Church and the priest is used in domestic white magic when the socio-ritual context demands it. This happens, for example, in the incantation for discovering the future husband with the help of basil purchased from the priest (Cecilia P., 66, 2016, Mânzăleşti; Filofteea R., 72, 2014, Colţi, etc.). The incantation for a girl who wants to get married, which Veta B. shared with us, must correspond to a certain moment: it can only be used on a clear night when the moon is visible. It can only be said on a Thursday. While performing the incantation, the practicing woman must look at a star:

> When you leave the house, fix your gaze on a star. And say: "Star, my dear little star/ All the stars must stay where they are/ Only Ioana's star must not stay where it is/ It must walk in her robe and shirt/ And from sunrise to sunset/ From noon to midnight/ Bring my future husband before my eyes/ Be he a shepherd/ Be he a gypsy/ Don't let him sit down to eat/ Or sleep to rest his weary feet." (Veta B., 81, 2015, Floreşti)

Ritual actions are not lacking either: after uttering these words, the woman doing the incantation slowly wraps around her right arm a belt that belonged to the person her client wants to marry. She utters another ritual formula as she does so.

Veta B.'s clientele is made up of members of the local community, inhabitants of the village of Floreşti, but also includes people from the surrounding area, from the city of Buzău, and even some who live in other countries, such as Germany. From the information gathered from her and other locals, it appears that magical-religious practices are a flourishing aspect of village life. In this context, Veta B. fulfils a well-defined role in the society as a practitioner of incantations, contributing significantly to the increasing degree of cohesion among the members of this community. When the person wishing to benefit from her services lives a long distance away, a number of tools are used which are invested with magical powers: Veta sends her an onion over which an incantation has been uttered (when the person in question has fallen ill after eating something), or she sends the incantation over flowing water [e.g. a river]. She even utters the incantation into a mobile phone: a sign that ancient magico-religious practices have managed to adapt to the conditions of our technologized society and have become even more effective through the use of new technologies. Sometimes Aunt Veta goes out on the road in front of her house and blows the incantation into the wind, as her mother-in-law taught her to do:

> I said it over the phone to a woman in [the village] Lac. But I did it for many people in the same way, I went out [in front of the gate] and gave them [the cure over the phone] (Veta B., 81, 2015).

One of the most common incantations is against the evil eye. It is believed that "a person dies very, very quickly because of the evil eye. [But] if you tell him [the incantation] for the evil eye, he will recover" (Veta B., 81, 2015). Another widespread belief in Buzău Land, as in many parts of Romania, is the one about stealing the goodness of milk (Luiza C., 39, 2015, Floreşti; Mircea M., 77, 2016, Sărulești; Cecilia P., 66, 2015, Mânzălești, etc.). In order to cure animals of this disease, people have to rely on the woman practicing the incantation or the priest, as Ana M. (69, 2015, Floreşti) herself admits: "After we finished the service in the house, he [the priest] said to the cantor: Iordache, let's read it to the cow! And, if you believe me, he read it to the cow, and three days after the service in the church her milk came back to normal." In this case, the incantation is a combination of a consecrated magico-religious practice and the practice of prayer recommended to Christians by the priest. *The Lord's Prayer, Our Father,* is said on certain days when the incantation is particularly effective. Veta B. adds that the effectiveness of the incantation is increased if dung from the animal in question is used.

> The priest taught me: "Aunt C., start on Tuesday! The incantation must be said on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays." But I don't know much about this incantation; what I do know is that the priest told me: "Say the Lord's Prayer. Also, take a little cornmeal or wheat bran while you say the Lord's Prayer.... Tuesday you say it three times, Thursday six times and Saturday nine times." (Ana M., 69, 2015, Floreşti).

I believe that a valid criterion by which we can separate white magic from black magic or witchcraft is the intention of the person who performs the spell or magical ritual. If we have no doubts about the "deochi" or "qualm" (evil-eye) incantation, we can say that the "love" incantation (by which the person being addressed has his free will annihilated) or the one to drive away rats leads us into the dark territory of witchcraft. Interesting are also the details Veta B. gives us on how to perform the "spell of the big rats": the person casting the spell does it naked, but wearing an apron in which bread and salt are placed. He surrounds the house three times, then sends them elsewhere, to another household. The incantator, for the incantation to be effective, must return home on a different path.



Veta B. casting a spell using a rubber band, onion, needles, and ashes, in Florești village.

Veta B. learned the spell from an old woman who lived in the mountains. She first used it when she was a maiden because pests were eating their corn. The end is her own story:

> And I took them (the mice) to a mill at T. B. The next morning, Mommy went there to see. When she went there, do you know how they went down?! B. shouted: "Sister-in-law, Sister-in-law, come here to see a misfortune! It wasn't one or ten, it was thousands! That's how the mice were getting down from there." (Veta B., 81, 2015, Floreşti)

We've talked about witchcraft, but how can it be described? Two modern definitions of witchcraft highlight the specifics of this ancient craft. For Dominique Camus, witchcraft is "a set of magical procedures performed in secret by a practitioner, the sorcerer, to satisfy a demand which entails action by one man against another man and which may come either directly from the officiant or from a third party on whose behalf he will act" (Camus 2003, 5). In contrast to this classical definition, Favret-Saada does not see witchcraft as a "belief system" but rather as a discourse on misfortune and healing, an interpretation of them. This discourse competes with two other (official) discourses: that of medicine and that of the Catholic Christian faith. Witchcraft, Favret-Saada argues, is a life-and-death struggle between the disenchanter, on the one hand, and the witch on the other hand, resulting in the defeat of one of them or even in death (Jeanne Favret-Saada 1980, 11ff, 194ff).

On the basis of her research, carried out between 1969 and 1972 in the rural north-west of France (an area she refers to as the "Bocage de France de l'Ouest"), Favret-Saada has highlighted the forces involved in an act of witchcraft and the stakes of the dispute between a sorcerer and an disenchanter. According to him, only sorcerers and disenchanters possess *magical power.* Ordinary individuals possess *vital force*. The bewitched person finds himself in the following situation: a sorcerer tries to deprive him of his life force by magical means, and he does not know how to protect it. The person under the spell

> is left with no other way out than to turn to a magical vigilante: the disenchanter. He or she must be able to apply a stronger magical force to the perpetrator and thus compel him or her to return the amount of life force that has been stolen. Otherwise, the bewitched, gradually losing vital force, would inevitably be condemned to ruin or death. (...) The sorcerer's defeat is marked, for him as for everyone else, by the loss of a certain amount of vital force - a loss which may be total and tantamount to death. (...) What circulates in a witchcraft crisis is the *vital force;* and what makes this circulation possible is the *magical force.* (Jeanne Favret-Saada 1977, 330)

The vital force designates the individual's capacity for survival, reproduction and production. The spell attack goes on for a long time and "only the repetition of the attacks enables the bewitched to recognize himself as such" (Jeanne Favret-Saada 1977, 333) Charms can be considered "harsh" (if they affect the "capacity for survival" or "gentle" if they affect the "capacity for production" of the head of the family concerned.

To conclude, it is worth revealing a few details about our meeting with Veta B., which shed light on the specificity of the art of the bewitching, in which the power of the spoken word can decisively tip the balance between life and death. In witchcraft, Favret-Saada observes, "the act is the word".

The data we collected from the Buzău Land emphasize the conditions that must be met for the ritual act of incantation to be effective in restoring the patient's psychophysiologic balance. All the incantations that Veta B. repeated for us were uttered at high speed. This is no coincidence, because the person who accidentally hears an incantation should not be

able to understand it. Since an incantation is frequently learned on the sly ("pe furate") and since its effectiveness depends on the relationship between the person performing it and his client or patient, reciting the incantation quickly in the presence of a third person is an effective means of protection for the person performing the incantation. Failure to keep the incantation secret may have harmful consequences for the person practicing it (Barlea 1983). As a last remark, some of the incantations repeated for us by Veta B. ended with the verbal formula "Cure, and for the old woman a "colac" [a ring-shaped loaf of bread made of milk dough]. This is a classic formula in the repertoire of incantations, which expresses an ancient belief: in order for the incantation to have the desired positive effect, the woman who performs it must be paid or rewarded. Payment is generally in the form of money or food.

Before formulating some final conclusions, we express our astonishment at the existence of a social fact with multiple implications: although we live at the beginning of the 21st century, a time in which science has made unimaginable progress until yesterday, beliefs in magic and witchcraft—the defining features of "wild thinking" (Lévi Strauss 2011)—coexist with rational thinking and positivism, with the internet and new technologies, with the achievements and aspirations of transhumanism. This social fact is not an isolated one. For example, Christine D. Worobec, a professor in the Department of History at Northern Illinois University in the USA, has published an interesting study, based on research she conducted in over 50 states located in Arhanghelsk, Kargopol district (Worobec, 2023). She surveys, among other things, the widespread belief in the "deochi," an energy that locals believe man can manipulate, bringing misfortune and harm to the health or prosperity of his fellow man, and the belief that the sorcerer (*koldun*) can steal people's fertility.

Surprisingly, political power can also enter into terrifying relations with the shadowy areas of occultism. I am not referring to the relationship between Nazism and the occult, which has been much written about and speculated about. In 2009, for example, Traian Băsescu won the presidential elections, beating Mircea Geoană. Geoană later complained that he and his wife felt energetically attacked during the presidential campaign by people specially hired by Traian Băsescu (Calapodescu 2010). This statement targeted Aliodor Manolea, a "specialist in psycho-energetics, bio-synergy and neuro-linguistic programming," who volunteered for Băsescu's campaign team and was present at several key moments, including the famous televised debate between the two candidates on December 3, 2009.

The interweaving of political and occult power does not remain circumscribed within Romania's borders. From a relevant study by Olga Khristofora (2023), we learned how the two types of power at the top of the Kremlin's political leadership pyramid are mutually reinforcing: certain groups of shamans are fighting among themselves, pivoting around Vladimir Putin, some inspiring him, others seeking to annihilate him. One of them, Alexander Gabyshev, has been arrested and committed to a psychiatric hospital.

## Conclusions

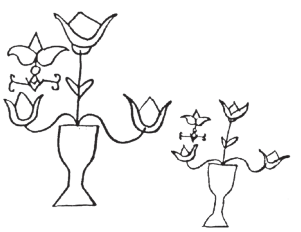
All these examples of different categories of legends associated with various places throughout Buzău County, along with the beliefs associated with the incantations, reinforce the idea that intangible heritage makes a rich contribution to defining, shaping and affirming a region's identity. As long as the narratives and beliefs we have described remain part of the present-day experience, the community continues to demonstrate its attachment to

local traditions, a factor that leads to the strengthening of social cohesion. With the aim of promoting the cultural heritate—and, by extension, the intangible heritage—of the area, the activities carried out in the Buzău Land Geopark include initiatives that help strengthen people's sense of belonging to a specific territory and community.

Thus, one of the strategies adopted is to highlight the importance and significance of the area by drawing on narratives specific to different communities. This involves promoting cultural heritage, a topic addressed in the following chapters. This is achieved both by involving local communities—particularly intellectuals (teachers, priests, engineers, etc.) who already have experience in preserving local culture (see also Goody 1977)—and by involving intellectuals from outside the communities. That is, specialists from the Geopark, as well as curators and researchers from the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, as was the case in 2015. With their help, the local cultural heritage is effectively showcased and promoted in an integrative manner that highlights both perspectives: the native's point of view ("emic," see Geertz 1983), and the point of view of a foreigner ("ethic").

At this stage, it is worth organising activities that promote local stories and beliefs, with the active involvement of the local community. Excellent places for such activities include schools and cultural exhibitions, such as those organised in Buzău Land Geopark team in recent years in several villages across the region. Another good example is the public-oriented publications hosted on the Geopark's website (https://tinutulbuzaului.org/harti-si-carti/), which allows visitors to download them; these brochures feature outstanding graphic design and have a user-friendly format. In this way, visitors to the geopark can discover and learn more about the cultural values, while also becoming interested in the natural heritage, which is extremely rich and has so many stories to tell.

Ethnological field research reveals hidden anthropological dimensions of contemporary humans: one could say that they remain open to everything that might be called or labeled irrational, magical, or mystical, despite both theistic and simplistic approaches to the condition of contemporary humans—approaches that have gained prominence in various fields, from psychology and philosophy to sociology and neuroscience: from this perspective, contemporary humans would be entirely postmodern (viewing their cultural past only with self-irony), living in a disenchanted world, seemingly interested only in consumption, slaves to the principle of immediate pleasure, relativists, nihilists, and so on. As we have seen in this article, in reality he retains a legacy inherited from his ancestors, which is activated almost spontaneously when he faces failure or an existential crisis, helping him on a psychological and epistemological level: through this legacy, he/she manages to make sense of what is happening to him/her, integrate experiences, and carry on with his/her life.



## NOTES

1. "Patrimonialisation"—as it is called in French, a term that is widely used when talking about how cultural heritage is created and how it is used today (see di Méo 2007)

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A pattern for a textile from Ana Dumitrache's notebook, Colți (Buzău dept.). Courtesy of her nephew.
Archive of the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant.