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## **Abstract of Doctoral Thesis**

# **Apotropaic Rites. Mentalities and Practices of Defense**

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**Key-words:** rite; ritual; apotropaic; *ante-facto*; identity constructions; memory/oblivion; magic; religion; witchcraft situations; security; cultural devices.

My personal interest for the theme of apotropaic rituals is based on a general interrogation regarding the various human modalities of connecting to the surrounding world. Each type of ritual practice, magical or religious, can be taken into consideration as a particular way of human interaction with the world. Defined as defence practices against any hostile forces, the apotropaic rites portrait a type of relation to the world laid on adversity principles and displaying conflict, even though their final purpose is placation and finding a (temporary) solution to this conflict.

The theme of apotropaic rites hasn't been approached up until now, at least not as a unified perspective upon the subject. There are various mentions of apotropaic rites in the ethnological writings, regarded as defence rituals practiced in order to prevent the aggression of evil forces, but only occasionally and under the aspect of naming them as such. Surely, the apotropaic rites never seemed to represent a point of interest in themselves, limited to the functional or mythological finalities of the analytical process.

The option to keep the particular denomination of „apotropaic rite” comes from the etymology of the term, underlain in the Greek *apotropos* (the *apo-* prefix and the common noun *tropos*: *apo* > from, away from<sup>1</sup>; *tropos*, *-ou* > turning<sup>2</sup>), which literally means „turning away” or averting the evil. This particular meaning has the potential to orientate the analysis towards illustrating the modalities of prevention, as well as the scenarios about the presence of evil in this world. As a matter of fact, no European language contains a term able to translate precisely the *apotropaic*. In Romanian, „*ap rarea, prevenția, protecția*” („defence, prevention and protection”) represents a set of expressions able to partially equalate its meaning; nevertheless, these particular expressions suggest a rather defensive posture, due to the passive and static

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<sup>1</sup> Marius Alexianu, Roxana Curc – *Cuvinte grece ti universale*, colec ia DEU, cuvânt înainte de Mihaela Paraschiv, Editura Universit ii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, Ia i, 2005, p. 21.

connotations. Yet, the apotropaic illustrated through the magical-religious context, as well as the one naming disjunctive attitudes in the context of identity constructions or a selective modality of operating one's memory, always reveals an active, volitive, even aggressive side to it.

On a theoretical level, I equally appealed to the perspectives of British and American anthropology, to analytical models from the European Ethnology of French orientation and to the suggestions present in the Romanian ethnological writings.

The field research was undertaken during three consecutive summers (2006, 2007 and 2008) and was limited to a specific number of localities from the North-Eastern region of Transylvania: Râca village (Cluj County, Apuseni Mountains); Reteag, Giurgești, Dumitra, Piatra Fântânele, Nășud villages (Bistrița-Nășud County); Deta (Timiș County) and the towns of Bistrița and Cluj-Napoca. As a consequence, the concluding notes regarding the apotropaic rites (followed up during the third Chapter), as well as those regarding the witchcraft situations in contemporary Romania (discussed in the fourth Chapter), address forms and evolutions specific to the region mentioned above. The main research techniques consisted of: participant observation, informal discussions and semi-structured interviews.

The thesis is structured on four main chapters. The first two of them are constructed as analytical and conceptual approaches to the cardinal collocation representing the title: the „rite” and the „apotropaic”, each one following terminological instauration and supplementary openings to the key-terms addressed. Chapter 3 represents, as compared to the approach specific to the first two chapters, a certain specialization of the perspective, a framing of the apotropaic rites in the context of ethnological perspective, especially the one belonging to the Romanian writings. Chapter 4 also proposes a specialised perspective, this time in the sense of framing the apotropaic rites in a context that places them in the contemporaneity: specifically, the situations described as witchcraft situations of the nowadays Romanian society.

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<sup>2</sup> Id., *ibid.*, p. 271.

**Chapter 1, RITE AND RITUAL – ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES,** represents a dynamic approach of these two nuclear terms from the social sciences, grounded in the necessity of assuming a personal theoretical perspective. This particular necessity derives from the consequences of the epistemological debates, carried out in the disciplinary frame of anthropology as a cultural critique – consequences that impose a certain enlarged responsibility for each and every specialist regarding the nuclear concepts which one chooses to employ. A concept as important as *ritual* represents one of those anthropological key-terms that require, on one hand, a certain recognition of the multiple semantical sedimentations, tending to coincide with the very development of the discipline; on the other hand, such a fundamental concept can no longer be employed as implicitly or self-explanatory understood, precisely due to the origins and contexts so diverse accumulated during its becoming. As a result of these assumed epistemological necessities, Chapter I represents a critical, historical and perspectivated view upon the various theoretical contexts that framed the concept of ritual, capable of suggesting its contingency, as well as asserting the need for analytical categories capable of describing the world. The relevance of rite and ritual was, from a historical point of view, multiply subsumed to the particular relation of magic and religion. The notes occasioned by this theoretical level of framing the ritual function as an introduction for the theoretical assessments from the final part of the thesis, opened by the field material centred upon the witchcraft situations discussed in Chapter 4.

The second chapter of the thesis, **READING THE APOTROPAIC. EXPLORATION, EVOLUTION AND CONCEPTUAL APERTURE,** addresses the second nuclear concept of the title. The necessity of circumscribing the operating concepts equally serves the approach regarding the *apotropaic*, as it was the case for the concepts of *rite* and *ritual*. However, the significant difference lies with the fact that the *apotropaic*, far from the success held by the terms of *rite* and *ritual*, has a rather fragmented, limited and approximated history. Therefore, the examen dedicated to the concept represents an attempt to supply the lack of definitions and theories proper, through an increased emphasis of all the possible significances and all the exploratory directions, opened and permitted by the term.

Starting from etymology, moving through the conceptual value attached to the *apotropaic* in the Humanities (and particularly the national ethnologies), to the openings that can

be followed in philosophy, literary criticism and psychoanalysis, the term invites (at least) a double level of reading it.

On one hand, the *apotropaic* of ethnology or archaeology names a type of generally-human attitude which, followed in the register of ritual performance, expresses a conflictual relation to the world or, more narrowed, to the particular forms of evil present in this world. In this view, the apotropaic stand for magic and religious forms and practices of prevention, protection and defence, against a wide variety of menaces possible to aggress from the exterior: evil spirits, enemies, sorcery and witchcraft, disease, drought, floods, hailstorms, snakes, wolves, the evil eye, death and so on. The *apotropaic* coincides with the *ante-facto* idea, with ritual actions performed *before* the actual installation of evil or disorder, which distinguishes it from the actions *post-facto* oriented, such as the incantations (*descântece*), exorcisms or unbinding a spell (*dezleg ri*), meant to act as counter-offensive to an evil already produced. It is important to emphasize the fact that the *apotropaic* of these particular contexts would never name positive pragmatic actions, such as defence by building guard walls under the concrete menace of an imminent invasion, because its meaning is intimately linked to the sacral connotation, to the conventionalized character of magical-religious rite or ritual.

On the other hand, just as the ritual in its “profane” hypostasis (naming routines, recurrences, sports activities, politeness and so on), the *apotropaic* is a concept whose aperture can exceed the limited sacral connotation or the strict magical-religious dimension; it can equally account for actions, phenomena, interaction mechanisms present in everyday life (at a psychological and individual level), or grounding forms of identity collective constructions, at a macro-political level. In this perspective, the *apotropaic* can name a process of turning against alterity as refusal of difference, the appeal to the past as a modality of generating “invented traditions”<sup>3</sup> (through the selective dialectics of rememory and forgetting), or the particular forms of defence against anguish (through the obsessive reiteration of self-abuse and self-suspension mechanisms when faced with life).

If the ritual forms seem to communicate more about the relation between the human being and the world (through the process of assuming an active role in a conflicting perspective, taking the side of the necessity to magically and religiously fight off the subversive evil), the *apotropaic* forms at a social or individual level (identity collective constructions or the

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Hobsbawm - „Introduction: Inventing Traditions”, in Eric Hobsbawm, T. Ranger (eds.) – *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 1-14



assuming of the diagnostic of being bewitched) belong to the relationship between the human being and otherness, to the particular dialectics of belonging, accommodating and excluding. From an anthropological point of view, the common stake unifying the two specific fields of the *apotropaic* lies precisely with highlighting the need for coherence and security of the human being.

The third chapter of the thesis, APOTROPAIC RITES, PRACTICES AND MENTALITIES OF DEFENCE: AN ETHNOLOGICAL READING, represents a specialised and ethnologically circumscribed illustration of apotropaic rites. More exactly, the approach consists of taking the apotropaic into consideration only in its ritual manifestations, therefore limited to the magical-religious dimension previously signalled, and placed in the context of Romanian traditional society of agrarian and pastoral profile. The specific approach represents a dynamic and juxtaposed reading of the ethnological material published in specialised writings, completed by personal fieldwork observations. The chosen modality of presenting the illustrative material is guided after some of the basic ethnological models in this respect. In the first instance, I follow the apotropaic rites present in the calendar cycle, inserted in the crucial moment of seasonal crossing and highlighted by the religious holidays. A second approach is dedicated to the apotropaic rites inserted into the crucial moments of the human-life cycle (the birch, the wedding and the death). Finally, the apotropaic rites specific to traditional agrarian and pastoral occupations, as well as those dedicated to the household's protection, are able to complete the chosen modalities of presenting and analysing the material.

All these modalities chosen to singularize the apotropaic rites, in terms of the belonging socio-cultural context, as well as the manifested frame-scenarios, are capable to highlight, on one hand, the ritual modalities proper dedicated to prevention and protection, while being able to accentuate, on the other hand, the multiple „faces of fear” or the forms of evil possible to ritually address in a traditional society. We can observe the fact that the picture offered by the latter actually subsidiary affirms the centrality of the human being: the „evil” ritually adverted is a rather wide and formally extended category, whose substantial unity resides with the fact that it represents *all* and *only* that which contravenes to the individual and communitarian interests and wellbeing.

The felt necessity, to limit the range of the discourse describing the approach present in the Chapter III, to that of *reading perspective* of the ethnological material, is a modality to signal

some of the personal difficulties faced when inserting my own fieldwork material into the conceptual frames and the specific perspectives consecrated for ethnology. It questions the possibility to place the contemporary apotropaic rites in the contextual frame known as “traditional society”; taking into consideration the continuous current process of changing and re-laying of the Romanian rural world, such an attempted contextualization would open the risk of portraying the contemporary apotropaic rites as “survivals” of other historical times, (hypothetically) marked by cultural and social coherence. The contemporary Romanian society continues to undergo significant structural transformations, which lead the rural world into a different direction, insufficiently shaped yet. At a narrower level, these structural changes affect the forms, the weight and the focus of the defence mentalities and the associated ritual gestures. Therefore, in order to be able to present the apotropaic of today, and in order to respond to the scientific requirement of placing the apotropaic rites in a coherent context, I started from micro to macro, from the fieldwork data towards theoretical considerations and conceptual assessments.

The result of this course is represented by the fourth chapter of the thesis, WITCHCRAFT SITUATIONS. MAGICAL FORMS AND FORCES, RELIGIOUS RITUAL. Jean Cuisenier recalls, at the beginning of his book *Memoria Carpa ilor. România milenar : o privire interioară*, a recommendation made by Claude Lévi-Strauss regarding the modality to delimitate an anthropological subject for scientific investigations: the necessity that the chosen event would represent a clearly identifiable unity from the indigenous perspective<sup>4</sup>. The *apotropaic* per se cannot represent such a coherent, identifiable unity, as long as it is an elitist concept and doesn't belong to the common actors' vocabulary, when describing their magical or religious means of defence. Instead, the responses to a direct and explicit question, such as „*Against what is it necessary to protect oneself?*”, can offer valuable insights regarding the active areas of apotropaic actions in contemporaneity and, whether we address the rural or the urban area, very seldom the answers have any affinity with the protection against evil spirits inserted to temporal crossings, the human life cycle or the traditional occupations, as it is the case for the magical-religious apotropaic rites of ethnological writings. Most frequently, the necessity of magical-religious protection stated in close connection to „evil people” and the evil spells thrown by them. In Aurora Liiceanu's terms, although the Evil is general and everywhere, „the evil spirits

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Cuisenier - *Memoria Carpa ilor. România milenar : o privire interioară*, traducere de Ioan Curcu și Iuliana Pop, Ed. Echinoc, Cluj, 2002, p. 28.

inhabit the human beings nowadays”, they take the face of known or assumed enemies and act through the agency of spells, charms and witchcraft. Therefore, Chapter IV represents an analysis of apotropaic practices in the specific context of witchcraft discourses of contemporary Romania.

The witchcraft affairs represent a type of subject that would recall the method of „a longer time<sup>5</sup>, which requires the researcher’s participation to a community that would allow him/her eventually to abandon the external position towards the chosen subject and to accede to an active participation, preferably from the interior. Unfortunately, this was not the case of my fieldwork, temporally restricted and spatially fragmented. Nevertheless, the fieldwork data obtained as a result of the 2006-2008 anthropological field investigations allowed me to observe some of the characteristics that define and situate the witchcraft accusations in the context of Romanian contemporary society.

Regarded as an integrated phenomenon in today’s Romanian society, the investigated field of magic, witchcraft and sorcery can be at best characterized by vastness and heterogeneity. In any actual situation, it combines ancient rural magic and mentalities, religious practice, modern and urban divination techniques and pseudo-scientific explanations belonging to paranormal or New-Age concepts<sup>6</sup>. Shaping this field is overwhelmingly linked to the impact of media, through the free circulation of the various explanatory systems for the existential dilemmas of the contemporary man.

Nevertheless, the fourth chapter of the thesis is focused not on the composing elements of this heterogeneous field (a type of analysis, undoubtedly, extremely necessary, but which exceeds the limits of this study), but on the witchcraft situations proper, actor-centrally approached and described through three of its crucial moments: the moment of assuming a crisis situation; enunciating the diagnosis of being bewitched; starting the therapeutical process aiming at restoring the anterior state of wellbeing – always considered, by comparison, the prototype for

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<sup>5</sup> André Julliard – „Urgia sor ilor. Vr jitoria zilelor noastre în Fran a”, *Magia i vr jitoria în Europa, din Evul Mediu până ast zi*, volum coordonat de Robert Muchembled, trad. de Maria i Cezar Iv nescu, Editura Humanitas, Bucure ti, 1997, pp. 274-326, p. 301.

<sup>6</sup> As it has also been remarked by Gabriel Troc (1998), the Romanian market of pseudo and cvasi-religious products flourished after 1989. There is a vast commercial category of religious/magical/mystical/occult concepts vehiculated mainly throughout the media, which can be added to any personal explanatory list in various crisis situations. For instance, the classical *evil eye* (Rom.: *deochi*) is often explained in both a traditional manner (a type of magical aggression provoked by the eye-contact with someone unaware of their evil magical powers, much like a witch) and in a modern bioenergetical terminology (as energetical vampires, compensating their personal lack through energetical theft).

wellness. We can assert the fact that the actors assuming a diagnosis of being bewitched are, mainly, of feminine gender. Instead, we are far from a discourse that exclusively places those actors in the rural area, according to the representation (stigmatizing, as a matter of fact) that the actors assuming this type of diagnosis are but faces of the primitives within the modern, civilized nations. The diagnosis of being bewitched is equally assumed in the cities and the villages, by people less educated, as well as by those with a higher educational level.

Another characteristic of the subject is that the fieldwork material regarding witchcraft and sorcery presents itself as a mainly discursive one<sup>7</sup> – that is, as *discourses* about witchcraft, victims, sorcerers and spells. During my field research, I didn't have the chance of being directly involved in a witchery situation. Due to that fact, the approached field material consists of: memories, opinions, stories and happenings-telling, suspicions and accuses, gossip and rumours, recommended remedies and steps to be followed. Besides, it is difficult to guess what exactly would represent the empirical directly observable fact of witchcraft situations, as long as this type of subject engages the researcher in a field characterized by the imponderability of magical force or the causality relation existent between the evil wanted and the evil suffered, interpreted as such from the perspective of the actor assuming the diagnosis of being bewitched.

A (partial) conclusion addresses the importance of re-examining the magical - religious relation. As a participant to the contemporary complex society, each and every informant is fully aware of the conceptual dichotomy between the religious pole and the magic pole. Nevertheless, this conceptual polarization doesn't seem to be as operational when examined in practice, in individual action. Additionally, we have to acknowledge the fact that the operated disjunction fully belongs to the dogmatic religious pole, while the magic specialists legitimate themselves precisely by resorting to religious elements.

Discussing the apotropaic embedded in witchcraft accusations of today's Romania leads toward reassessing the complex relationship between popular magic and the Orthodox religion which, as part and illustrator of a continuously changing society, still requires a great deal of further fieldwork and theoretical consideration. For the purpose of this

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<sup>7</sup>The fact that the fieldwork material regarding the experiences of being bewitched presents itself mainly as a collection of texts might not only be a matter of personal contingency (for instance, the particular conditions of my field research), as I initially suspected. Jeanne Favret-Saada (1977: 25) noted that: 'Sur le terrain, je n'ai pourtant rencontré que du langage. Pendant de longs mois, le seul fait empirique que j'ai pu noter, c'était de la parole'. And again (1977: 51), she stated that: 'Le fait empirique n'est alors pas autre chose qu'un procès de parole et mes notes prennent la forme d'un récit'. Perceiving the witchery situations more as *words* and less as *facts* do not make them, however, any less 'real' – which is precisely one of the underlying perspectives of this article.

presentation, I will limit my approach strictly to the apotropaic elements. In the particular frame of witchcraft situations, the relevance of apotropaic behaviour takes not only a ritual form, but also the form of an individual psychological dimension: the subjective interior relation to one's memory.

The ritualistic aspect is informed by various typical elements of magical defence. The pre-eminence of red colour, whether as a thread on the wrist or as a patch rapping up, with a talismanic value, other apotropaic substances (garlic, pepper, frankincense, silver) is largely common. The individual protection requires constant wearing inside out of any piece of under linen. There is also an important individual protection provided by religious objects employed as bodily amulets, such as small icons, crosses and frankincense granules. The domestic space is protected by specially forged talismans, as described above, placed mainly on the threshold. The generic protection insured by the house's main religious icon is supplemented by yearly religious hallowing of the interior space (especially on the Epiphany, the 6<sup>th</sup> of January), repeated in times of danger. In contemporary Romania, all these mechanism of protection address, in rural as well as in urban areas, the threatening possibility of being bewitched.

The psychological dimension of the apotropaic behaviour marks the actor's entrance into the witchcraft discourse. As E. R. Leach observed (1949: 163), the diagnosis of sorcery is normally retrospective – a kind of symptom analysis'. The key-moment of assuming the diagnosis of being bewitched, along with the motivation for following a future set of necessary therapeutical actions, triggers the process of what Kathleen Marks (2002: 47) calls 'rememory': a suspended moment of retrospective rearrangement of happenings, discussions, interactions, reinterpreted as parts (signs) of the current situation. As in any selective re-memory, a set of previously irrelevant elements become significant and, in the particular context of witchcraft accusations, highly suspicious (a casual shake-hand, an unexpected visit), so that the resulted coherent ensemble of past events can sustain the diagnosis of being bewitched. In this discursive frame, the apotropaic manifests itself as a *tropos*: a turning, returning and figure of speech (metaphor), for a process of (re)adjusting the memory.

From the ritual perspective, the apotropaic of witchcraft situations is placed in an anticipative plan, through the relation with the adverted evil expected to appear in the future. From the perspective of (re)memory as strategy of assuming the diagnosis of being bewitched, but also embedded in the etymological construction of the term, the apotropaic presents itself as a modality of recuperating the past with a double meaning: the one of returning towards and the

one of returning from evil, or refuse of memory. Nevertheless, the thing that binds them is the essentially preservative function.

The problem of anteriority does not represent the exclusive feature belonging to the psychological individual plan of confronting the diagnosis of being bewitched. It is true that, only at ritual level (as surprised through the third chapter of the thesis), the apotropaic seems to deploy in a unique orientation – through projecting, future delegation, posteriority - according to the purpose of the action: the protection executed in the present safeguards the future moments. And yet, anteriority underlies any apotropaic rite, even though not as visible or explicit as the relation to posteriority. As long as we take into consideration the apotropaic sequences inserted to the calendar cycle, the life cycle or dedicated to safeguarding the possessions and the spaces, we speak of “rites”- that is, collective devices previously elaborated, consecrated by repetition and sanctioned by tradition. Secondly, the adverted evil represents a vast category, placed, named or assumed in the particular forms by the practice of anterior generations. The very cyclic vision to which they belong pre-supposes a direct relation to past experimenting. As expressed by C. Riley Augé, survival firstly demands recognition<sup>8</sup>. The protective actions against any elements capable of provoking evil can be elaborated only based on this particular „turning back” (of a mnemonical, cultural and ritual character).

Taking the ritual into consideration as a type of improvised or planned performance, with the effect of operating a transition from daily life into an alternate context through which the quotidian is transformed, as concluded at the end of the first Chapter, we can acknowledge the fact that there is always a bit of an apotropaic note in every rite. The very repeatability communicates the idea of *securing function* of the rite, capable to diminish not only the human being’s anguish in the face of the unknown, but also the anguish provoked by everyday life’s province of meaning. After all, in its capacity of only being possessing consciousness, the human being is the only one capable of assuming that life is filled with dangers and able to develop cultural devices meant to deal with this fundamental insecurity; and “magic and religion are mankind's earliest warning systems. (...) We flatter and deceive ourselves if we believe that we have outgrown the apotropaic use of language.”<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> AUGÉ, C. Riley – „Supernatural Sentinels: Managing Threshold Fears via Apotropaic Agents”, *Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness*, Panel: Threshold States and the Natural & Human Built Environment, April 4–8, 2007, [http://www.crossingthethreshold.org/welcome\\_files/MicrosoftWord-Soc of Consc.pdf](http://www.crossingthethreshold.org/welcome_files/MicrosoftWord-Soc of Consc.pdf), p. 0.

Employed when describing a type of magical or religious ritual, it is able to express some of its fundamental coordinates: circumscription, demarcation, agency, aggression. By the very means of ritual as performative action, the apotropaic elements are made visible and, to a certain extent, tangible. When describing a general human social or individual attitude towards the surrounding world, the apotropaic is grounded in existential insecurity, anguish and a fundamental need to make sense – whether we address the subjective mechanisms of reconfiguring one's memory or the social mechanisms for constructing identities.

Articulated through a particular dialectics of retrospection versus projection, the apotropaic concept can function as a prospective reading able to retrace not only the infernos, but also the culturally-represented paradises of every society. More than defence, a formula that limits the meaning to that of mere defensive posture, the apotropaic postulates, beyond the various engaged attitudes expressing it, the possibility of existence of an ideal world: freed from evil, from anguish and anything uncontrollable.

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Szasz – „Psychiatry and the Control of Dangerousness: On the Apotropaic Function of the Term «Mental

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