

BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTY OF LETTERS

**DEMONIC BEINGS WITH THE
ROMANIANS OF TIMOC (SERBIA)**

ABSTRACT OF THE PHD DISSERTATION

PhD supervisor:
Univ. Proff. Ioan Șeuleanu

PhD candidate:
Annemarie Sorescu-Marinković

CLUJ-NAPOCA, 2010

Summary

1. THE ROMANIANS OF TIMOC – AN INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. Vlachs or Romanians
- 1.2. Geographical disposal
- 1.3. The dimension of the community
- 1.4. Origins
- 1.5. Spoken language
 - 1.5.1. Ethnographic and dialectal groups and their geographical disposition
 - 1.5.1.2. The mining region of North-Eastern Serbia and the origin of the *Bufani*
- 1.6. Conclusions

2. BIBLIOGRAPHICAL STUDIES ON THE FOLK CULTURE OF THE ROMANIANS OF TIMOC

- 2.1. The first researches on the Timoc Valley – 19th century
- 2.2. Romanian researches and studies on the folk culture of the Romanians of Timoc
 - 2.2.1. The materialization of this question in Romania
 - 2.2.2. Romanian researchers about Timoc until WWII
 - 2.2.3. The communist period
 - 2.2.4. The period after the Romanian Revolution of 1989
- 2.3. Researches on the Romanians of Timoc carried out in Serbia
 - 2.3.1. The inter-war period
 - 2.3.2. The period after WWII
 - 2.3.3. Recent researches
- 2.4. The Romanians of Timoc as seen by foreign researchers
- 2.5. Sensationalistic texts on the Romanians of Timoc
- 2.6. Conclusions

3. PECULIARITIES OF FIELD WORK WITH THE ROMANIANS OF TIMOC

- 3.1. The notion of *field*

3.2. Field research method

3.3. Field research proper with the Romanians of Timoc

3.3.1. From office to the field

3.3.2. In the field – the thorny question of researcher-interlocutor relation

3.3.3. Back to the office – from recording to transcription, from transcription to text

3.4. Conclusions

4. IS THERE A TIMOC MYTHOLOGY?

DEMONIC CHARACTERS IN THE NARRATIONS OF THE ROMANIANS OF TIMOC

4.1. Folklore – between obsolescence and revival

4.2. The Timoc *mythology* – a blurry mythology, in between two cultures

4.3. The problem of the text corpus

4.3.1. The context of recording in the field

4.4. Narrations on mythological themes

4.5. The demonic-mythical universe in the narrations of the Romanians of Timoc

4.6. Conclusions

5. ENTRIES IN A MYTHOLOGICAL DICTIONARY OF THE ROMANIANS OF TIMOC

5.1. *Ala*

5.2. *Joimărica*

5.3. *Miazanopții*

5.4. *Moroi*

5.5. *Sântoaderi*

5.6. *Șoimane*

5.7. *Ursitoare*

5.8. *Zburător*

6. DEMONIC CHARACTERS WHICH INDIVIDUALIZE THE TIMOC MYTHOLOGICAL SYSTEM: *VÂLVA*, *MUMA PĂDURII*, *SAMODIVA*

- 6.1. *Vâlva* – from meteorological magic to a mining mythology
- 6.2. *Muma Pădurii* – between vegetal demon and sexual aggressor
- 6.3. *Samodiva* – interpretation and reinterpretation of the folkloric text

7. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 7.1. The moment of demons' disappearance

8. FINAL CONCLUSIONS

- 8.1. The importance of Timoc Valley as a peripheral zone for sketching the Romanian mythological system

9. LIST OF INTERLOCUTORS

10. REFERENCES

Key words:

Romanians of Timoc, Vlachs, Serbia, *Bufani*, field, Romanian mythology, Slavic mythology, folklore, demons, *Vâlva*, *Muma Pădurii*, *Samodiva*.

1. The Romanians of Timoc – an introduction

In the Slavic and Byzantine sources, the representatives of the Balkan Romance, who used to live and are still living in bigger or smaller communities, spread all over the Balkan Peninsula, were known under the generic name of *Vlachs*. In the present chapter we have shown how a question of linguistic equivalence may sometimes degenerate in a source of confusion: this is the case with the term *Vlach* – in the last decades, intense disputes and polemics have flourished around it and a series of theories about the ethnic identity of this population have been launched. This community is officially considered, both in Serbia and in Bulgaria, to be formed of *Vlachs*, not Romanians, who do not speak Romanian, but a separate language, the Vlach language. We have also argued why we have decided to use the expression *Romanians of Timoc*, in spite of the fact that it is inexact from a geographical point of view.

The community of Romanians of Timoc forms an ethnical-geographical continuum in the two neighboring Slavic states South of Danube, Serbia and Bulgaria. Its dimensions have extremely varied, both during the years and according to the ones making the estimations. While in the official censuses – which presented them in the beginning as Romanians, but later, trying to conceal their Romanianess, put them in a special column, *Vlachs* – their number has steadily dropped, the figures presented by different NGOs are continuously rising: both estimations are probably the result of the extremisms which animate both sides.

According to the Romanian vernacular they speak, the Romanians of Timoc can be classified in more dialectal and ethnographic groups: *Țărani*, *Ungureni*, *Ungureni-Munteni* and *Bufani*. We have paid a special attention to the last one, the *Bufani*, which is the most recently settled in Serbia, because, on the one side, it has not been subject to scientific research so far and, on the other, it is about to be assimilated by the more numerous *Ungureni*.

The problematic of the Romanians of Timoc is complex and even painful: both for the community members and for the outsiders, Serbians or Romanians; both at an identity and discursive level; in the distant and near past, but also in the present. We did

not intend to clear up the gloomy history of the Romanians of Timoc, but only to lay down several guide marks as starting points for our analysis.

2. Bibliographical studies on the folk culture of the Romanians of Timoc

In this chapter we have shown that the interest for the community of Romanians of Timoc is not recent: the first notes on them have been made more than two hundred years ago. The first writings with a scientific character on the Romanians of this region date back to the 19th century and come from the big Serbian folklorist Vuk Karadžić, the German linguist Gustav Weigand, the Bulgarian ethnography professor Stojan Romanski and the Serbian ethnographer Tihomir Djordjević, who also signs the first important work on the Romanians of Timoc. We can notice that the first attempts to sketch the question of the Romanians of Timoc offer, first of all, details on their geographical disposal and put forward hypotheses on their arrival South of Danube, sometimes describing their customs or offering short collections of folk creations. In spite of the fact that the first researchers of this region did not offer consistent studies on this community and many times lacked scientific objectivity, they could not help noticing the specificity of this Romanian population: with no access to school, religious service and administration in their mother tongue, the Romanians of Timoc have managed to keep unaltered, through the centuries, their language and customs, which have functioned as a true “resistance belt” of this community.

The two researchers who have materialized the question of the Romanians South of Danube are the geographer George Vâlsan and the linguist George Giuglea. Their studies confirm the importance of this subject and indirectly guide the interest for the Romanians of Timoc in four main directions: geographical, demographical, historical and ethnographical/folkloric. After this pioneering period, both the Romanian and the Serbian specialists have become interested in this population and in its folk culture, but their researches have followed different directions. The Romanian ethnologists and folklorists have applied the ethnic principle, bringing the existence of this Romanian community outside the borders of Romania to the attention of the scientific community and of the

wide public. The Serbian specialists, on the other side, have been guided mainly by the regional principle, in the detriment of the ethnic one, talking about a so-called “Serbian-Vlach symbiosis”. The major points of interest for them have been the cult of the dead and the ritual acts which precede and follow the funeral, as well as the holiday of *Rusalii* and the hypnotic dances which take place with this occasion.

Recently, due to the political changes in Serbia, the interest of the researchers for this community has grown significantly; many of them are even Romanians of Timoc, dedicated to the scientific study of their own community. As well, the international scientific community has started to show a special interest in the Romanians of Timoc. The most consistent study is that of the Swedish sociologists Carl-Ulrik Schierup and Aleksandra Ålund, named *Will They Still Be Dancing? Integration and Ethnic Transformation among Yugoslav Immigrants in Scandinavia* and published in 1986. The two researchers discuss the profound attachment of the Romanian emigrants towards the native places and the incredible conservation of all the rites of passage, which remain strictly tied to the country of origin: no wedding, christening, funeral or *pomana* has taken place in Scandinavia in the two decades of migration.

3. Peculiarities of field work with the Romanians of Timoc

In this chapter we have tried to show that, in an era when traditional and conservative communities are gradually dying and anthropology is forced to redefine its object, the Romanians of Timoc have managed to maintain almost unaltered their entire immaterial cultural heritage. Thus, in Timoc we can find ‘out of time’ villages, ‘model-peasants’, but, in the same time, we can also notice the expansion of modernity into tradition, as well as the appearance of ‘half-time’ peasants.

Starting from the typology of scientific research made by Mihai Pop and Pavel Ruxăndoiu in *Romanian Literary Folklore*, who distinguished three fundamental types of research, *immediate research*, *typological research* and *theoretical research*, we tried to offer our own typology of field research with the Romanians of Timoc, emphasizing the characteristic features of this region, which can negatively affect fieldwork. With regard to the employed research method, we mentioned that, apart from the questionnaires on

mythological themes we used in the field, we have always recorded the comments, digressions and free discourses of our interlocutors, out of the strong belief that the compilation of a comprehensive questionnaire, which would encompass all the possible aspects of the subjects of interest, is just impossible. Only the natural conversation gave us the possibility to add new problems, which the material we collected raised up and were not originally included in the questionnaire. We have also detailed here the troublesome problem of the researcher-interlocutor relation, emphasizing that the researcher represents an integral part of the research process and has a major impact on his/her interlocutors: the volume, type and quality of the data we obtained greatly depend on his/her personality. As well, we have drawn attention on the stages which precede and follow fieldwork.

4. Is there a Timoc mythology?

Demonic characters in the narrations of the Romanians of Timoc

We have tried here to sketch the demonic universe of the Romanians of Timoc. The observation we made from the very beginning was that this universe is formed of a series of overlapping and intersections of variants, of blank spaces or shadowed ones, slidings, repetitions and redundancies, the image which results from here is a blurry and protean one. We believe that we cannot generalize and talk about a *mythology*, but only about an assembly of mythological texts, obtained from different narrators. As most narrations of this type, the texts we have transcribed can be repetitive, prompt or, on the contrary, very long, with certain artistic qualities or mere utterances with no artistic quality, and cannot be included in a certain category. However, we have faithfully transcribed all of them, with the strong belief that “mythology is more than a nice story, it is interpretation of the reality, as well as a kind of participation to the community’s memory and imagination” (Otilia Hedeşan). We can even say that, in spite of any attempts to map and record it as exactly as possible, the mythology of the Romanians of Timoc still remains a *blurry* one. It is a universe with sequences which repeat themselves and overlap, a universe with zones of merging and mutual irradiation, which can be able, in the end, to lead to the fusion of variants.

The corpus we based our analysis on sums up more than a hundred texts, of different types and dimensions, collected between 2003 and 2009 in more localities from North-Eastern Serbia. All texts have been audio recorded, then transcribed with the help of a simplified system of phonetic transcription, in order to convey as exactly as possible the Romanian vernacular spoken in the localities where the recordings were made and, in the same time, not to render their reading difficult.

As for the context of the recordings, in North-Eastern Serbia we had the incredible chance to record a series of narrations on mythological themes during real storytelling ‘sessions’, in the very moment of their performing. However, the transcription of such texts was quite difficult, because of the polyphony which made possible their creation. The resulting transcribed text is a fragmentary one, with many completions, redundancies, recurrences, withdrawals, repetitions, but it can represent a valuable material for the study of interaction of story tellers, of the way in which oral creations are born and transmitted, as well as of the permanent changing of roles between the public and the story teller.

The fundamental problem the texts we based our analysis on pose is that these oral creations cannot be encompassed by a strict taxonomic system and ‘travel’ unbothered through the blank spaces between its categories. We have recorded a lot of texts which are not fairy tales, nor myths, nor animal stories, or, on the contrary, due to their specific features, possess features of fairy tale and myth and animal story. Thus, our initial intention to organize the material according to a thematic criterion failed, because most of the times a text encompasses more than one sequence and it does not belong to a sole narrative type. Consequently, we adopted the emic perspective, respecting the order in which the narrations were communicated by the interlocutors – legends, fairy tales, superstition stories, stories about the encounter with the supernatural – and treating them as a whole.

If we carefully read these texts, we can notice that we cannot speak about a pattern portrait of the supernatural beings: both their physical descriptions and the way people narrate about them widely differ (e.g. the verbal taboos function concomitantly with extended stories about different demonic beings). The differences are huge not only from region to region, from locality to locality, but also on the territory of the same

village and even from interlocutor to interlocutor. The characters which appear in the mythological texts have, most of the times, blurry and protean outlines and change their roles. On the basis of the texts we have so far recorded on the field, we can notice that the Timoc Valley has a specific mythology, with pronounced characteristics. It encompasses both mythological creatures known in Romania and in the Slavic environment where this community has evolved in the last centuries.

5. Entries in a mythological dictionary of the Romanians of Timoc

In this chapter we have tried to briefly present the beings which appear with the Romanians of North-Eastern Serbia in different mythological texts, drawing attention each and every time when they are only mentioned in charms or during specific rituals, even if they have lost their initial demonic function. All these ‘entries’ have been compiled from a comparative Balkan and Slavic perspective.

For the beginning, we have noticed that the three demonic beings which people narrate about in all the regions of the Timoc Valley inhabited by Romanians (as well as in Romania, Serbia and wider in the Balkans) and which appear in the repertoire of almost every interlocutor are *Ursitoarele* (the Faiths), *Zmăul* (the evil spirit tormenting girls and women) and *Moroiul* (the Ghost) – connected to three important periods in a man’s life: birth, adulthood (its erotic side) and death. They can be classified as *active demons*, because they are narrated about in the present, out of personal experience, and the practices which aim to neutralize or to pacify them are still present nowadays (e.g. the ritual meal prepared for the Faiths three days after a child is born; the charms for sending away the *Zmei* and the rites meant to annihilate them; apotropaic practices which have developed out of the belief that the deceased can come back as a ghost). The other demonic characters that drew our attention are: *Ala*, *Sântoaderii*, *Joimărica*, *Miazanoșii* and *Șoimanele*. Every time it was necessary, we have marked the fact that they are still alive in the memory of our interlocutors, who tell about them using the present tense; as well, we have emphasized whether they are ‘active’ or have been ‘deactivated’, being transformed into mere masks or processions. A series of other demonic beings which can be encountered in the repertoire of the Romanians of Timoc (*Baba Marta*, *Dracul* (the

devil), *Pricoliciul*, *Sfânta Vineri* (Saint Friday), *Vânturile* (the Winds), *vârcolacul*, *Zânele* (the Fairies)) were not included in the analysis because of the reduced dimensions of the recorded material, which made it impossible to draw a pertinent conclusion on their spreading, or because of the lack of such a material.

6. Demonic characters which individualize the Timoc mythological system: *Vâlva*, *Muma Pădurii*, *Samodiva*

In this chapter we have concentrated on three demonic characters which lend a specific character to the Timoc demonologic system, namely: *Vâlva*, *Muma Pădurii* and *Samodiva*. They cannot be found in all the regions of North-Eastern Serbia inhabited by Romanians and their circulation is restricted to some zones whose peculiarities will be emphasized in the following. As well, they are not part of the so-called ‘major mythology’, but rather revolve around the edges of the Timoc mythological system. As opposed to the ‘entries’ in the previous chapter, here we have analyzed in detail each of the three mythological beings in questions, thus the three subchapters can represent independent units.

6.1. *Vâlva* – from meteorological magic to a mining mythology

On the basis of our own field recordings about *Vâlva*, we have reached the conclusion that it is possible to clearly demarcate a zone where legends about *Vâlva Minei* (the spirit of the mine, the local equivalent of the western Tommyknockers), namely around the mining town of Majdanpek. The material collected in the mining region of Bor, where there are no *Bufani*, but only autochthonous Romanians, denies the existence of the *Vâlva Minei* in their folklore; it can be asserted that these beliefs have been recently “transplanted” from the mining folklore of different zones of Romania in the Timoc Valley exclusively by the *Bufani*, who are the most recently settled Romanians in this region.

As for *Vâlva Pădurii* (the spirit of the woods), we have come across this term only in Majdanpek; the *Ungureni* from the other regions believe in *Muma Pădurii*, and the *Munteni* in *Miazanopții*. On the other hand, the beliefs in *Vâlva Norilor* (the spirit of

the clouds) are widely spread, in most of the Romanian localities of North-Eastern Serbia. *Vâlva Casei* (the spirit of the house) and *Vâlva Omului* (the spirit of the man) are mythological representations insufficiently individualized; even if they have probably been more spread in the past, they are now persisting only in a few localities around Majdanpek.

As such, the mining town of Majdanpek seems to be a real irradiation centre as far as the beliefs about *Vâlva* are concerned, most probably because of the recent group of Romanian migrants, the *Bufani*. Due to the important role *Vâlva* plays in their mythological system, the folklore of this zone has been ‘reanimated’ and granted a specific, unmistakable profile.

6.2. *Muma Pădurii* – between vegetal demon and sexual aggressor

Muma Pădurii (the Mother of the Woods) is one of the most spread mythological characters with the Romanians of Timoc: the numerous recordings on this theme witness to this. *Muma Pădurii* is one of the demons still active today, which appears most frequently in the mythological stories told in the first person singular, and placed in the present or in the very near past. When it has a demonologic character, it appears as a vegetal demon, with mostly acoustic characteristics, or as an anthropomorphic one, sexual aggressor of men. As a vegetal demon, it can be encountered in the region inhabited by *Ungureni* and *Ungureni-Munteni*. The spread of such legends at the two dialectal groups is easily explainable: they mainly populate hilly and mountainous regions, with deep forests, which helped preserve the beliefs about vegetal and dendromorphic demons. As a sexual aggressor of men, it seems to be present only in the stories of the hunters living in the town of Majdanpek and in its neighboring. We can also notice that in some localities its demonic features tend to get fainter and the active demon tends to be transformed into scarecrow for the children. In the Timoc Valley, as well as on the territory of Romania, *Muma Pădurii* is also present in charms. Last but not least, we must emphasize that *Muma Pădurii* can also be a plant used in the rituals for protecting the children, with the Bayash of the Timoc Valley and all around Serbia.

6.3. Samodiva – interpretation and reinterpretation of the folkloric text

In North-Eastern Serbia, some of the isodoxes of Romanian traditional culture overlap with the dialectal isoglosses which demarcate the zone inhabited by *Ungureni* of the one with *Țărani* dwellers; this is also the case with the belief in the demon called *Somođiva* / *Somođiia* / *Somod'iva*. Among the *Ungureni*, which speak the Banat subdialect of the Romanian language, *Somođiva* (always in the singular) represents the personification of death and can be found in *Petrecături* (funeral songs), while the stories on this theme are very rare and of reduced length. Among the *Țărani*, which make use of the Muntean subdialect, this type of funerary creations is unknown, and in the stories recorded in the field, *Samodive* (in the plural) possess a series of common features with the Faiths, being presented as demons of the destiny, disease and death of the infants and their mothers, which partially corresponds to the *Babice* in the Serbian folkloric tradition.

Samodiva / *Samovila* is not widely spread in the Romanian and Serbian folklore. But among the *Țărani*, who live closer to the region where Bulgarian and Prizren-Timoc dialects are spoken and where *Samodiva* has a central place in the demonological system, the stories about this demon are also more elaborated. As for the Romanians of Bulgaria, it is possible to speak of the contamination of their demonological system with the Bulgarian one or of the adoption of beliefs about this demon from the Bulgarian demonology. There are for sure important differences between the dialectal groups of Romanians in Bulgaria, as far as the system of beliefs is concerned, but further research is needed in order to draw a definite conclusion.

7. Final considerations

In this chapter we have tried to analyze the impact the modern civilization on the legends and stories from the traditional repertoire, pointing to the fact that some of the demonic characters we have talked about in this study are undergoing today a process of 'deactivation'. If we carefully analyze the recording made in the Timoc Valley, we can notice a series of causes of this process, which mark the dissolution of the demonic beings, from our interlocutors' perspective. As well, the attitude of the story tellers towards the object of the stories about demons and their actions has also changed. Today

credibility is one of the central problems of stories and legends, while in the past it was considered an essential premise for the act of narration. The firm belief that there exist demonic beings today makes place to the skeptical discussion.

The folk beliefs are continuously undergoing changes and, as far as the mythological system is concerned, we can notice that some of the demonic creatures have ‘lost ground’ very fast in this century. The migration of young generations abroad, the political changes, the new social and economical contexts, the technological and medical progresses – all that can be encompassed by the term *modernity* represents the cause of their dissolution. The myth of rationality usurps the local beliefs and the villagers’ authority in coming up with explanations for the natural and ‘supernatural’ phenomena. However, as we have seen before, not all the demons are subject to this ‘filtering’; the beliefs in demonic beings of all kinds are still alive with the Romanians of Timoc.

8. Final conclusions

In this chapter we have tried to emphasize the importance of the Timoc Valley as a peripheral zone in sketching the Romanian mythological system. In trying to reconstitute the demonic-mythological universe of this Romanian community we had several aims. In the first place, for outlining the distinct physiognomy of the Romanian mythology within the wider frame of the other European mythologies, it is compulsory to inventory the demonic characters who have survived at the borders of the space inhabited by Romanians. Field work – especially in an almost ‘virgin’ field, like the Timoc Valley – can offer new revelations and, in some cases, can even prove wrong things that were considered definitively and impeccably demonstrated. In the second place, the comparison with the Slavic environment where this culture has developed in the last centuries can prove helpful for illustrating possible patterns of intertwining of the two cultures, two ways of seeing and conceiving the seen and unseen world, and of the permeability or resistance of the Romanian substrate to external influences. In the third place, we have tried to draw the mythological profile of this community solely on the basis of contemporary field documents, thus to offer a synchronic image of the mythological universe of this region. As well, we have tried to emphasize not only the

‘end product’ of the research, namely the texts on mythological themes, but also the interaction between researcher and interlocutor, performative contexts, anchoring of some legends and mythological texts in the reality of these Romanian villages at the beginning of the third millennium, what the interlocutors think about their stories and the modification of the functions of some mythological texts. In the fourth place, we must emphasize the specific nature of this border zone, which can fully reveal itself only after a thorough analysis of the entire material collected here and of the similar variants from Romania or from the Serbian or Bulgarian folklore. Last but not least, we must say that what we have obtained by transcribing the texts on mythological themes recorded on the field indicates a process unfolding. This process implies the individual liberty, namely the active and personal decision of the interlocutor to select, from the local collective corpus of the ‘folk mythology’, only some elements and to form a ‘personal mythology’. This process follows the direction of the individual limitation of the local traditional corpus and, in the same time, is paralleled by the process of innovation, of introduction, in the newly created mythological system, of contents of non-traditional and non-local origin.

Finally, we cannot help but notice that the Timoc Valley is – to use a word game – an ethnographical paradox and paradise. Here, elements belonging to the Romanian traditional culture which have long disappeared in Romania, have survived, untouched by time, like in a natural ethnographical reservation, in a museum in open air, while other aspects of this culture have taken a specific direction, unknown to the other regions in Romania. Nevertheless, this traditional community at the very borders of the space inhabited by Romanians, by definition more conservative than the centre, but undergoing, as most of the European regions, a rapid process of modernization, today offers the fascinating image of a world where the Romanian ancestral beliefs have intertwined, in time, with the Slavic ones and have also encompassed the newest components of modern culture. Thus, the system of beliefs and ritual practices we meet here is a profoundly Romanian one, but, in the same time, characteristic of this zone, and it functions as a real identity mark of the inhabitants of this heterogeneous region.