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## SUPERSTITIONS BETWEEN USEFULNESS AND STRIFE

### Abstract

The present paper investigates one of the forms of expression and manifestation belonging to popular religiosity, the superstitions, practices through which people get into disagreement with their self and with the ideology advanced by institutions whose declared mission is to investigate and overcome man's spiritual condition, the Church. There will be looked into, on the one hand, the major types of superstitions that the Romanians have according to a number of variables (ages, gender, education) and, on the other hand, the categories of conflict generated by the superstitious behaviour.

Keywords: superstition, conflict/contradiction, efficiency, psychic, collective mentality

1. As a manifestation form of popular religiosity, superstitions come first in the collective mentality, their local diversity testifying to the people's need, irrespective of age and, partially, level of education, to overcome a likely conflicting situation with the self. Through such actions people get to be in a dissonant position to the informed ways of knowing the human inner nature, ways advanced by institutions – the Church – whose declared mission is to investigate and overcome man's spiritual condition.

The present paper investigates, on the one hand, the major types of superstitions that the Romanians have according to a number of variables (ages, gender, education) and, on the other hand, the categories of contradictions generated by the superstitious behaviour.

1.1 From an etymological point of view, the term (i.e. superstition) originates in the French *superstition* or the Latin *superstitio* and designates, according to the *Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language* (Romanian Academy: 1998), “prejudice which results from the belief in good and bad spirits, in spells and witchcraft, in omens, in prophetic numbers or other remnants of animism and magic” or, according to the *New Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language* (Romanian Academy: 2002): 1) primitive belief in supernatural forces; 2) (pl.) totality of such beliefs; 3) behaviour based on the belief in supernatural forces; 4) belief in foretelling signs. To Gheorghe Ciușanu, a reputed specialist who has investigated the matter of superstition, this is a “deviation of the religious feeling through which we are brought to making false duties, to being afraid of things which we should not fear; or to putting one's hopes in other futile things” (Ciușanu, 2005: 15). Analysing the meaning of the term, the folklorist Lucia Berdan pointed out that the term has undergone a strong loss of meaning in the sense that, although initially it “was not part of magic, it

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employed magical practices as common protection against an unhappy event bound to happen” [...], it was capitalized on in a negative way, being assimilated to something unlucky and primitive which needs to be forsaken by the civilized man” (Berdan, 2003: 52).

1.2. In respect to its categories, anthropologists have identified approximately 500000 superstitions in use worldwide (Berdan, 2003: 55). According to a survey conducted in Romania by IRES in 2014 on a nationwide representative sample which includes 1214 individuals aged 18 or over, the percentage referring to the types of superstitions in which the Romanians believe was varying and relevant for our superstitious imaginary.

We quote next some of the findings of this study:

3 quarters of the Romanians believe that miracles do exist (76%), 65% believe in the evil eye, 55% believe in curses, 52% believe in demons, 46% in bad spirits, 19% believe in ghosts, 95% believe in God, 78% believe in angels, 19% in witches who can foretell the future, 4% acknowledge resorting to these, 49% believe in foretelling dreams, 44% claim having such dreams, 33% of the participants claim that dreams can help us in everyday life; almost one third (29%) of the surveyees admit they have a lucky number – 7 and 13 are the lucky numbers preferred by most Romanians; 61% of the Romanians watch the horoscope, 69% don't believe in the ability of the horoscope to foretell events, 46% of the Romanians believe in the end of the world, but 64% believe in the Last Judgement; 64% of the Romanians think of themselves as lucky, yet only 17% say of themselves they are superstitious; 22% of Romanians admit they play the lottery and 18% buy raffle tickets; 7% practice sport betting, 5% practice other forms of gambling and lottery, and 4% generally bet; 61% of the surveyees know the meaning of Halloween but 50% of them do not agree with the Romanians celebrating it and 125 admit celebrating this moment. 32% of the survey participants agree with priests' recent statements that this holiday equals satanic rituals”<sup>1</sup>

In respect to gender, it is well-known that women are the main protagonists both in the Romanian cultural space and in other cultural spaces, a fact which Gheorghe Ciușanu explains through their temperamental structure: “The woman has an in-built conservatory spirit that builds on tradition and is less fit for initiative” (Ciușanu, 2005: 17).

Interesting research has shown that Romanian young people constitute an age group who lives superstitious beliefs with great intensity, especially the educated ones, unlike the Western young people who display greater attraction to such behaviour. Depending on the intensity degree of the belief, first come the superstitions “that rest on the idea of influencing the course of life and the activity of forces exterior to man – the belief in fate and luck, then come those with a magical character, presentimental and also those with a mystical character” (Buburuzan, 1999: 74). The study also revealed some significant aspects out of which the most important ones refer to the defining factors in “the emergence and perpetuance of superstitious mentalities”: social (family, relatives, neighbours, entourage), psychological and natural (natural disasters, special events). Other variables are, according to Ana Maria Borlescu: age – teenagers being most drawn to superstitions; gender – girls have a higher inclination toward superstitious behavior, the most frequent superstitions referring to fate, destiny, zodiacs, horoscopes, sorcery, unlike boys who are more receptive to superstitions referring to luck and healing through miracles; the degree of education – predisposition to superstitious behaviour decreases with the level of education<sup>2</sup>; geographical area – Oltenia is the most superstitious, followed by Dobrogea, Muntenia, Bucharest, Crișana, Maramureș (Buburuzan, 1999: 75).

1.3. Regarding the origin of the superstitions, this has received attention from many scholars and researchers. Sigmund Freud, the famous psychoanalyst, considers that, for example, “these come into being because the man finds outside himself all that remains inaccessible to knowledge inside himself.” (Berdan, 2003: 53). In respect to their source, this is traceable to archaic cultures and religion to which influences from other cultures can be added. The outcome offers a blended imaginary in which a number of elements belonging to previous culture are reinvested with elements

<sup>1</sup> [www.ires.com.ro/articol/271/Romanians-and-their-superstitions](http://www.ires.com.ro/articol/271/Romanians-and-their-superstitions), retrieved on 27. 05. 2016, 15:33.

<sup>2</sup> *Aspects of rationality in a research about superstitions* cf. <http://doctorat.sas.unibuc.ro/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/AnaMariaBorlescu.pdf>, retrieved on 18.07.2016, 17:49.

from one's own culture. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss also noted that superstitions are "so frequent and spread that they beg the question whether they are a form of universal and permanent thinking"<sup>3</sup>.

Archaic signs of magical thinking, superstitions have held a significant place in the traditional Romanian society, their efficiency being unanimously recognised and deemed compulsory in order to avoid unpleasant or even disastrous consequences for individual or even the whole community. Researching the issue of superstitions from the point of view of their use, Lucia Berdan is of the opinion that the community "uses ordinary magical practices as protection against an ill-fated event bound to happen. For this reason, the predominantly positive initial meaning was capitalised upon negatively, the superstition being assimilated with magical practices, with something damaging, primitive that has to be abandoned by the civilised man. Superstitions constitute, in fact, a sort of religion at individual level." (Berdan, 2003: 53). Related in terms of meaning are the beliefs that, according to Nicolae Cojocaru, "express a creed, either religious or secular, in something. Beliefs have as their foundation actual experiences, mirroring a spiritual reality that is correlated with the ritualic effect." (Cojocaru: 2004, 25). The difference between superstitions results from, according to the above author,

the incorrect interpretation of the surrounding world elements, which brings about false beliefs. Although they belong to a specific folk mentality, superstitions do not display trust in something but have as drive the fear of worldly real effects, as a result of a distorted thinking of the universe and the things surrounding man's life. (Cojocaru: 2004, 25)

1.4. Superstitious practices referring to major events in man's life – birth, wedding, death – have a good representation in the Romanian collective mentality. Thus, the desire to ensure the newborn as smooth and safe as possible an entrance into this world generated the following of certain rules by pregnant women: interdiction to eat joined fruit or the knot-shaped bread that got stuck in the oven lest they give birth to twins. (Ciaşanu, 2005: 274). Gheorghe Ciaşanu records a number of superstitions common to certain areas of Romania, with their recommendations:

If a feeble child is born, one that almost seems to be dead, it is best to get him smoked with a piece of linen and he will sneeze at once and come around. (Bucovina); If a child has a blue vein on his forehead, he will be exposed to water-related dangers; if he has a red mark on his neck, he is likely to die because of fire. To avert these dangers, the father and the mother are to cut themselves on the left hand's small finger and let three blood drops fall under the baby cradle saying: Protect us all against fire and water, iron and stone, disease and ignorance. (Transylvania) (Ciaşanu, 1915: 75).

1.4. 1. The moment of birth per se is accompanied by superstitious practices, one of these, for instance, referring to the fact that when a child is born, wine-dipped piece of apple is placed into his mouth in order to make him healthy and merry (Gorovei, 1999: 227) or another one to the moment immediately after birth when the child is sat on the ground so that it looks after him (Ciaşanu, 2005: 22). Gheorghe Ciaşanu mentions another superstition about the newly-born child who has to be passed through the bails of a copper bucket, and then the respective bucket is not to be used until he grows up so he can pick it up himself. The purpose of this practice is for the child to live longer and be stronger than the metal from which the bucket is made. Christening is not free from superstitions either, some of them being mentioned by Arthur Gorovei: "As the child is brought to the christening, the people placed bread and salt in front of him approximately at chest level as they believe that in so doing the child will always have plentiful of bread and salt when he grows up" (Gorovei, 1999: 30). Likewise, the offering of a bowlful of flour to the midwife, even the bowl itself, in which she puts a twig of basil, is meant to make the baby always keep his head high or, from the money raised at the christening, the baby is supposed to be bought a bucket in order to live many years (*Ibidem*).

1.4.2. As for the wedding, the whole traditional ceremony is accompanied by superstitious practices. Thus, it is said that the moment of asking in marriage should take place on a Thursday or

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<sup>3</sup><http://semneletimpului.ro/religie/in-duet-cu-frica-viata-sub-controlul-superstitiilor.html>, retrieved on 18.07.2016, 18:16.

Sunday. The reasons are subjective: it is not advisable to go wooing on Mondays because it is the beginning of the week, neither on Tuesdays because it is when the world started, nor on Wednesdays because he/she who weds or gets engaged on this day may turn a widower or widow, nor on Fridays either, and Saturdays one should not go wooing because it is the day commemorating the dead (Ciașanu, 2005: 285).

The wedding ceremony is also accompanied by superstitious customs, the most important objects with a foretelling role being the wedding candles – more precisely the manner in which these burn: “If they burn with a strong flame, good luck will be upon the newly weds. If the candle flame is weak, almost flickering, bad luck is foretold, and if one of the two candles goes out the death of one of the wedding couple is foretold” (Ciașanu, 2005: 287). Other times, it is the weather that foreshadows the future family’s destiny: “if the weather is beautiful on the wedding day, the marriage will be fortunate, but if it rains, only misfortunes and sadness will befall the newly-weds” (Ciașanu, 2005: 287).

1.4.3. Death has perhaps given rise to the most frequent occasion to exploit superstitious features, which is illustrated by the very signs that herald this moment, most of these through household messengers or from the surrounding environment (the horse, the cock, the raven and the owl). Gh. Ciașanu mentions, for example, the dog’s unusual howling and its digging with its front feet the earth next to the house (Ciașanu, 2005: 101-102). To these may be added the unexpected or willing movement of household objects, specific dreams or gestures made when there is a deceased in the house: “In the house where there is a dead person, no sweeping is to be done until the deceased is buried since it is ill-fated for those in the house”, and “the women are not to wear with their pigtails undone as death may befall their men” (Gorovei, 1999: 195-197). There are also customs that offer remedies in case that someone dreams, for instance, a dead person many nights in a row:

three consecutive mornings an onion will be thrown out of the window in the following manner: with one’s back to the window he/she throws the onion with the right hand saying: He/She who haunts me at night let him/her have nothing to do with me but with the onion. Saying these words, he/she ceases dreaming. From such dreams, clay may be begotten. (Ciașanu, 2005: 59)

1.5 A well represented category is that of the animal type, especially the domestic one, and the bird one.

1.5.1. The dog, for example, represents in the collective mentality the animal with protective role, brother to the wolf (Berdan, 2003: 101). Superstitions about this animal exploit the negative connotations that result from the animal’s eye sparkle especially at night and therefore the connection with evil spirits, with the devil. As a matter of fact, Romanian phraseology records as an euphemism for *devil* the phrase *the old hag’s dog* (Zanne, 1895: 78-81). Besides, its barking foreshadows the presence of evil spirits: “when the dog barks in vain, evil spirits are passing by the house” (Niculiță-Voronca, 1998: 123), and its nocturnal howling foretells of somebody’s death: “when the dogs howl they announce death; when they snort it is an omen, foretelling death (Zanne, 1895: 80).

The recommendation that a traditional society passes on is to refuse the household ownership of a black dog or of a yelping one as it brings about bad luck, huge disasters and even death. In fact, it is recommended that “the pregnant woman not to kick a dog as her child will be hard-hearted. (Gorovei, 1999: 47-50). Other customs mentioned by Gh. Ciașanu refer to as many signs and natural remedies for disenchantment:

When one’s dog howls around the house, it calls forth solitude. (Suceava); When the dog fawns, guests will be coming. (Suceava); Should you kill a rabid dog, you will pluck some dog hairs before singeing it (rabid dogs are burnt) in order to smoke, for curative purposes, all the bitten cattle. (Tecuci); When a child is bitten by a rabid dog, he should ask for oakum to cover the bite and dog hairs too to smoke him. Likewise it is to be done when a child is frightened because of a man, a lock of hair is needed for disenchantment through smoking. Bear hairs are also useful remedy against fright (Covurlui). (Ciașanu, 1915: 49)

1.5.2. The cat has many times been associated in many cultures with the symbol of evil, especially the black cat that is considered foreboding of ill-luck. In the traditional Romanian mentality there exists the superstition that the cat is not be called for at night, and in case that the cat is not in

the house and wants to enter at some point, it should be forbidden to do so because it represents the Evil one which, once in the house, will harm household members (Evseev, 2001: 142). Another foreboding sign is, according to Artur Gorovei, the cat's coughing that foretells enmity and arguments within the household.

The positive connotations refer to, according to the same author, the situation when the cat licks its paws or when it climbs the fireplace, which foretells the coming of guests, or the weather forecastings (good or bad): when the cat grooms itself it is a sign of incoming rain, when it grooms itself and looks out of the window the weather will be good, but when the cat looks into the over fireplace the weather worsens and it grows cold.

1.5.3. Considered, in the folk mythology, "either blessed or cursed, either pure or profane, either useful or futile, either benevolent and beneficial or malevolent and evil" (Coman, 1996: 47), the horse is perceived in the superstitious collective mentality as foreseer of evil spirits, of someone's passing away: If the horse won't move, it is a sign the owner is going to die (Nicolau, 2000: 46), and when the horse looks at itself, it will die (Berdan, 2003: 167). Another example refers to the trampling of the horse "under whose hoof there is no pure thing" (Ciașanu, 2005: 341), or, along the same train of thought, it is said that you'd better not step on the earth where a horse rolled over as you get corns.

At other times, the reference is made to meteorological realities, the horse having the ability to foretell weather changes, so: "when horses inhale through their nostrils, it is a sign of rain" (Niculiță-Voronca, 1998: 158). Positive connotations are mirrored in some superstitions from particular areas of the country where a horse head is placed at a pole's top given that the horse is viewed as protector against diseases, epidemics and all the harm that comes near man's household (Niculiță-Voronca, 1998: 127).

Of the wild animals, the wolf is capitalised upon in superstitious practices owing to its behavioural traits in comparison to the humans or other animals. Thus, the wolf's characteristic to attack by surprise and to harm has been linked to some humans' slyness of whom it is said they are like the wolf in sheep-skin (Comșulea, 1998: 123) or that the wolf changes its fur but not its nature (Comșulea: 1998, 123). At other times, the fear people and other animals feel toward this animal is exploited: "Before Saint Andrew's holiday you are not to sweep the house lest the wolf eats your cattle" (Gorovei, 1999: 172).

1.5.4. In respect to birds, the raven has a good representation at the level of superstitions, the negative connotations being the most exploited as a result of this species' particular characteristics. That is why Romanian phraseology records the saying *the raven is never a harbinger of good tidings* which means "we can expect neither good nor bad" (Zanne, 1895: 88). In the collective mentality, there is the meteorological superstition according to which this bird was cursed not to see its offspring nor to drink water from springs and rivers. With the same meteorological attributes, to which others can be added, the crow is also invested: "when the crows arrive early in the autumn, winter is drawing near" (Tecuci). The crows' croaking foretells some disaster. (Bucovina); Encountering crows at night foretells death (Suceava); When crows gather and sit on top of your house, it's a sign of plenty" (Tecuci) (Ciașanu, 2005: 63). By contrast, there are also superstitions in which the healing power of some of this bird's vital organs is capitalised upon: "should you dry the crow's heart on the chimney and then crush it and put it in someone's food or drink, he/she can be cured of any disease, even of epilepsy" (Gorovei, 1999: 285).

1.5.5. Considered in the collective mentality a messenger between two worlds, the cuckoo, which returns every springs from the other side and sings at the heaven's door before coming back to this world (Gorovei, 1999: 35) is a bird of which it is said that it has the mission to foretell the future: "when the cuckoo sings at night too, the year will be a good one" (Gorovei, 1999: 83). Hence the interdiction to eat or shoot this bird since it leads to great mishaps: "if you kill a cuckoo your parents will die" (Berdan, 2003: 22). As a matter of fact, the multitude of beliefs that circulate about this bird which "feels, understands, and respects the secret course of life" (Coman, 1996: 120) demonstrates its role in the rural community:

when the cuckoo sings at night too, the year will be a good one" (Suceava); In spring, if you get out in the morning without having taken a bite and you hear the cuckoo singing for the first time, you are tainted with a bad breadth. Similarly, when the hoopoe puts a curse on you, you have bad breadth all summer long. That is why is good to have even a mouthful (Teleorman). He/She

who hears the cuckoo sing for the first time and counts how many times it sings, that many times he/she shall live (Ialomița); If someone sees the cuckoo in a green tree in the spring for the first time, it is consequently thought that he/she will be healthy that whole year. If someone sees the cuckoo on a dry branch it is said that he/she will keep being ill. If someone sees the cuckoo on the ground, it is bound that in that place he/she will have many worries and needs that year. (Ciașanu, 2005: 83-84)

The cuckoo's domestic counterpart invested especially with negative attributes is the cock. We quote further on some beliefs and superstitions mentioned by Gh. F. Ciașanu:

Should the cock crow on one's doorway, it is a bad omen; that is why the cock should be chased away. Should the cock crow while on the fence yard it means that it commends his master who is a good man unlike any other (Teleorman); It is believed that if the cocks crows in the evening, robbers will walk through the village (Bukovina). When cocks fight, it foretells quarrel. That is why you need to sacrifice one of them (Tecuci). When the cock climbs the gate and crows with its head turned to the road, some household member will set off on a journey; but if it is turned to the house, someone from afar arrives (Suceava). In the spring, when someone first sees white storks and swallows fly, he will embark on a travel that year; but if he/she sees them sit on the ground, he/she will not go on a single trip. (Ciașanu, 2005: 88)

1.6. The manner in which these forms of religious manifestations are imprinted on the collective mentality has also come to the attention of the Church that, even from its very beginnings, deemed them "deceiving pagan beliefs and customs that estrange man from God, truth and salvation"<sup>4</sup>. Thus, the 6th ecumenical council (680-681) from Constantinople defines and treats superstitions as sorcery: "superstitions are beliefs and mistaken customs inherited from the heathen world which, having no knowledge of God's truth and neither of the truths of natural sciences and life, have led people astray into their ignorance. Any vain beliefs and superstitions are deemed as sorcery by the Church (VI, 61-65)". The old age of these practices results from, according to some Churchmen, their mention in the Epistles of the Bible, for instance the Epistle to Timothy: "But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness." (1 Timothy 4, 7). Having as consequence the degradation of clerical life and the human psychic, resorting to such practices was seen as a refusal to avoid discomfort and suffering<sup>5</sup>.

1.7. Resorting to such practices has also underlined other types of conflicts, of an inner nature. Thus, the multiple influences that the superstition has on the human psychic have constituted the subject matter of laboratory research, which pointed out that the use of such practices has as purpose "the acquirement of more control. When there is something important at stake and the outcome is uncertain, superstitions come into play to make us feel more confident"<sup>6</sup>. Another justification refers to, according to Daniel M. Wegner, professor of psychology at Harvard, the need of (holding) control: "The feeling that your thoughts can somehow control events is actually a need for safety"<sup>7</sup>.

2. In conclusion, the analysis of such practices belonging to folk science as they are represented in the collective mentality points out to the manner of understanding and receiving both the main moments from its existence and the events which the traditional community re-assessed and after which it modelled its way of life so as to avoid the conflict between the self and the outer world.

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<sup>5</sup> Pr. Ștefan Morariu, *Superstiții și practici deviate în ierurgile cultului creștin ortodox*, cf. [http://roea.org/files/Clergy%20Resources/Superstitii\\_Pr\\_Stefan\\_Morariu.pdf](http://roea.org/files/Clergy%20Resources/Superstitii_Pr_Stefan_Morariu.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Vyse, *Psihologia superstiției*, apud <http://semneletimpului.ro/religie/in-duet-cu-frica-viata-sub-controlul-superstitiilor.html>, 18.07.2016, ora 18, 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

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