

“Was I or Wasn’t I Bewitched?” Conversations about Magic in Rural Transylvania

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ABSTRACT

For people who are familiar with my work, the topic of this paper is pretty much a surprise. I was surprised myself both by the question in the title, which I have received in my field research in medical anthropology, and an abundance of stories of bewitched people I found when I explored the relation between illness and healing. The question was addressed to me, and I sensed that it was more than a rhetorical question. The argument of the paper starts from the question in the title and what it could possibly mean for my research participants in rural parts of Cluj County. I discuss the case of a bewitched man who believes he had been subject to witchcraft and therefore tells his story in the first person. The article problematizes the local cultural context of the interviewees, especially in relation to their memories and the reasons why they continue to tell stories of witchcraft.

KEYWORDS

Magic; witchcraft; conversation; narrative; bewitchment; rural.

Over the past ten years, I have conducted field research in medical anthropology in eight villages in Cluj County, Transylvania. In two villages, research took place during multiple visits. The research topic was part of a grant research (2009-2011) that followed the feedback given by people living in rural areas to the biomedical system in place during the communist period. This theme was developed into a research project regarding the relation rural people have or had with the medical system. Therefore, witchcraft was not a topic in itself, but rather a by-product of the research focused on medical issues. It is true, though, that during the interviews I used to ask a question like: *Have you heard of people getting sick or die from “makings/doings”?* The answers to this question represent a whole spectrum of opinions, ranging from people utterly sustaining their disbelief in such things to

people who asserted they have been bewitched at some point in their lives. My interest here is with the narratives in the first person of people who had been bewitched and people who appropriated somebody else’s experience of witchcraft.

There is a whole body of literature regarding witchcraft inside and outside Europe, which shows that witchcraft is not a subject of the past, but it very much emerges in new forms in time and space. Therefore, my point in this paper is not whether people believe or not in witchcraft, but rather how they actually relate to witchcraft, how they refer to it when prompted, and the role witchcraft narratives have in the relation between researcher and his/her research participants.

Most of the literature on witchcraft starts from the important change Evans-Pritchard (1937) brought in the anthropological under-



standing of witchcraft, following his research on Azande. Thanks to his work, anthropologists today do not question the “rationality” of witchcraft. Almost half a century ago, the work of Favret-Saada (1980) marked another important turn in the study of witchcraft, by bringing forward the importance of the discursive nature of witchcraft. A recent turn is constituted by the work of Éva Pócs (2004) and the group around her, with names such as Gábor Klaniczay (2017) who studied healers accused of witchcraft, Tünde Komáromi with a Ph.D. thesis and two research articles on witchcraft in a village in Arieş River valley – one article on a personal crisis that has been seen as a possession by all people who were directly involved and another article on the pursuit of help from Orthodox clergy (Komáromi 2016, 2010) – and Ágnes Hesz (2017) who brought to light different aspects of witchcraft in communities in Central and Eastern Europe. I find the work of Ágnes Hesz most helpful for the approach I use in this paper, since the conversational side of the witchcraft stories is the one that I am interested in. Hesz’s work belongs to a strand of literature that focuses on the discursive qualities of witchcraft, a “language through which people perceive and construct their own social reality,” highlighting especially the way this “language” is “constructed and represented” (Hesz 2017, 352), what hierarchies it refers to (Argyrou 1993), the connections it has with the local narrative traditions, and the relation between witchcraft and rumour and gossip (Stewart and Strathern 2004). Hesz argues that her approach is “language-centred” and follows what “talking about witchcraft” means for people when they negotiate their social environment. Unfortunately, the PhD thesis written by Tünde Komáromi is inaccessible to me due to language barrier – I cannot read texts in Hungarian. However, in the Romanian abstract of her thesis I found the idea of *flexible ideology* in relation to witchcraft:

In the case of the witchcraft, we confront with an extremely flexible ideology, that, on the one side sustains the valid moral norms (by asserting that witchcraft has effect

upon the guilty person), and, on the other side, it maintains the possibility that certain cases of bewitchment can be interpreted as consequences of bad intentions or errors, and consequently the victims can be considered innocent. (Komáromi 2005, 13)

At the same time, when Hesz is talking about the flexibility and dynamism of the witchcraft discourse, it remains unclear to me if the perspective is a collective one, where each person contributes with a personal view/interpretation of the magic or a certain person has multiple interpretations. Nevertheless, most of Hesz’ interpretation of the conversational angle matches in great measure the results I have found in my own research. Therefore, I will refer to the conversational angle as a context for the two core arguments of my paper. First argument refers to the interpretation of the narrative about witchcraft told in the first person (people’s conversations with me) as a dialogue *with* me, rather than as a story told *to/for* me. The second argument is the interpretation of such narrative as an *open ending* story – a story that invites the interlocutor as a particular person from the audience to come up with an ending. This argument is somewhat different from the idea of open-ended story that Favret-Saada (1980) described in her work. My second argument shows an individual dynamism regarding the narrative in question, which is different from social dynamism. The individual dynamism moves away from Baroja’s idea of temporality where “‘reality’ is always constructed differently in every time and society” (Clark 2001), to the idea that an individual constructs his/her story in the same space (his/her home, in our case) but differently in time. Thus, my interpretation is partly using Hesz’s (2017) argument that the narrative of witchcraft can be seen as a conversation and Argyrou’s (1993) work that sees witchcraft narrative as a statement about the social status of the interlocutors. That being said, Badea Avrămuț and I, the researcher, belong to different walks of life and, at least in principle, we have different rationalities. At the same time, making a parallel with another paper



(Bărbulescu 2018), I interpret the elements that my research participants cannot say openly because they fear they would “lose face” in their communities.

I start with examples of how people in rural area relate to magic to create a broad contextual frame and to point out the local cultural knowledge, aspects that are similar in all villages I have conducted research. Despite the different geographical (and ethnographical) settings in Cluj County, the local cultural knowledge seems to be similar in all the eight villages studied. Then, I discuss one narrative told by a man in the first person, which ended with the question: *Was I bewitched or not?* Further on, I compare the findings with another first-person narrative told by a woman from a different village.

As the local cultural context regarding witchcraft is similar in all the villages I have studied, I discuss and bring examples of interviews from one village in the county. This is the village where the key informant of this paper is living. The village is situated in a picturesque area in the Apuseni mountains, with hamlets spread on the hills and valleys formed along small springs. Most inhabitants take pride they are a predominantly Orthodox Christian community and in the fact that the township escaped the process of collectivization during the Communist regime. This means that people never lost the property of their lands. Nevertheless, as they put it, “the land is weak,” which means they had to change their professions periodically to make a living. In the second part of the 19th century, most men were millers, and the valleys were filled with watermills. Then, in the period between the two World Wars, people concentrated on breeding cattle and sheep and working in woods. After the 1970s, people started to commute to work in the city. In the past thirty years, most people have been working in the woods and cultivating potatoes. Their life is relatively modest. The hamlets are usually constituted around an extended family, which transforms the relation of vicinity in a relation of kinship. Endogamy has been quite frequent until the recent years. The village¹ is subject to the national trend of

depopulation and ageing, while most young people have graduated some form of higher education in Cluj-Napoca. This has had a great impact on the circulation of knowledge and goods between the city and the village. Almost every home with a child attending school has a PC, numerous house appliances, and at least one personal car. These possessions show the efforts people make to escape isolation. Most of the permanent residents are aged between 60 and 80 years old, with a minority of adult population aged between 20 and 50 years old.

I will present four cases that are essential for the local cultural knowledge regarding magic and witchcraft. There is only one local term used in the community to designate witchcraft. The literal translation of the term would be *making* or *doing* – the idea is that somebody is *making* a harmful deed to somebody else. I do not know the origin of the term in the community, but I can say that it is reinforced permanently by the Orthodox priests (here and in the other seven townships) who mention it in their Sunday homilies. Most of the research participants confirmed that “even the priest said in the Church that there are evil *doers*.” Used as a noun, the verb *to do/to make* has negative meaning only, so there is no need to add any other form of negation (like, for example, *bad doing* or *evil doing*). The term *making/doing* is enough to express a bad deed and to be recognised by everybody in the village as such. Even though during my field research I could not find an ‘active’ witch, my interviewees did not find it hard to believe in witchcraft (Ankarloo and Clark 1999). In the village, there have been many cases of people related to each other who hanged themselves, cases that were interpreted as witchcraft. In all eight villages, the priest “introduces” the idea of witchcraft using unfinished phrases, hints, and – as the story develops – more direct references like, “Are some neighbours coming to your house?” or “The person that comes first to visit you, that’s the one [that bewitched you].” In all the interviews about cases of witchcraft, “the most striking characteristics of the witch that appear is her being a neighbour of the



bewitched” (Ankarloo and Clark 1999, 168). Then, bewitched people ask priests to help and fix the problem. At the same time, research participants told me that the priests only practice white magic (see also Greenwood 2000, 180). Though, the fact that a priest can harm by “opening the Book” is common knowledge in the villages or, to agree with Éva Pócs (2004),

it is part of the local system of bewitchment. I rarely found people saying, “there was a priest in the neighbouring village that was *making/doing*,” where the meaning was that he was harming someone. Then, people quickly added that the priest in question was dead long time ago, which gave these kinds of priests a mythological aura.

CASE 1

Badea Gheorghiță, born in 1940.

R: *Can one be sick, or even die if somebody does you a “making”?*

B.G.: I, believe me, with these *makings*, I do not stand against, but I also do not believe in them. The *making* is... each person does do himself (...)

R: *But did you hear about it?*

B.G.: How should I not? Of these *makings*. No, I don’t know, because someone said that they go to priests, if you are not guilty and if you are unblemished, they cannot disturb you in anyway. They can hurt you like, for example, some stray man gives some medicine to my cow, and the cow dies, and things like that. I

understand that they come, in my opinion I think this way with people and *making* and whatever: it is, it might happen/occur, I do not stand against, because they say about the ... Baptists, and the Pentecostals... I get along with everybody, you see? And they love me, and I love them, if they are good and from there, I do not care.

R: *And this is a “making”?*

B.G.: Well, *making*, the man said it was *making*. This *making*, the bad man that want to disturb you. But what should I say about these things?! It might happen, I do not say that there are no evildoers, there are evildoers. But listen to what I say to you: if you are not guilty, it might happen that nothing will happen to you!

CASE 2

Badea Ionaș, born in 1936 and his wife Lelea Lucreția, born in 1943.

R: *I have heard that here there are people that know how to do things and one can get sick or one can die...*

B.I.: I do not believe it!

L.L.: We do not believe in such things!

R: *Well, I know that you don’t believe it, but are they? Have you heard of someone to be sick because somebody else did it to him?*

B.I.: Those are not right in their heads.

R: *Or that the priest course them, and... if they stole?*

L.L.: Well, of these I heard people talking...

B.I.: I do not believe in such things... even now,

they keep talking... that man is not married... he had a family at the end of the village. He has two lads. Their father died. In a car crash... and they live with their mother. The youngest has the same age with my boy, and my boy got married now, late and he has a daughter of eleven. And the elder, has passed his fifties. He kept saying that a woman there did it to him, that she did charms on him... God did it!

R: *But what did she do?*

L.L.: Because she said he had a girl and it had been taken from him. But the girl didn’t even like him because the girl was the same age with ours...

B.I.: The girl didn’t want to stay...

L.L.: She was hiding, not even at Sunday dance

they didn't want to go, not even our daughters, not even they wanted to dance with him. Not to mention...[marriage]. Nobody did anything to him, but he just has troubles in his head!

B.I.: There is something else...

L.L.: They say that the *gadina*... the *gadina* is inside him... yes. From the *makings* [charms].

R: *That is why he did not marry?*

L.L.: He did not marry, no, no.

B.I.: Neither of them.

L.L.: No, neither of them.

B.I.: And their mother said once to me: "I am

not afraid! 'Cause I go with them anywhere I want!" 'Cause they were very rich... They were... they had a lot of land, cattle... but no jobs. He could rather become a bus driver, or a car driver or... They just stay at home! Now they have a tractor, they have... The other one no, no job, no anything. They thought that if they were rich... And even for Christmas or Easter, when people usually make preparations... but they only know to make pies like one would do in an [ordinary] evening. And they were like that, they were laughing at the others because they were rich.

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CASE 3

Badea Tutu, born in 1938.

R: *They say you can get sick if they charm you?*

B.T.: Well, what can I say, nobody knows better than the priest, because here they confess to him...

R: *Did you hear of such cases?*

B.T.: I hear, I heard, but, here, I didn't hear of cases that has been here. I heard that it was to that woman, a deed, and that. There was a woman in that village, and she wanted to destroy all. But she could not destroy all because they discovered who did it. She was ill for a long time, long time. And I don't know, she went to priests.

R: *But is she still alive?*

B.T.: She is alive. Her husband died, he died. She is a widow, is a widow; she had, she has

children. Well, things like this that they heard cries on the hills on Friday evenings or Tuesday evenings, maybe it was a man who cried, but it could also be a female goblin [*striga*]. It didn't happen to me. Once, when I was little I was with my dad to sheep, and there in the autumn we were shepherding. And there it was an old woman, and it was on a Friday evening, and a moon, you could see like in the middle of the day. And she came inside the house and said: "Those of you who haven't heard of *striga* come outside and listen to it now." Well, we went outside, and it was across the water, it was that township, and there were cries and music and... in that forest, just like that! But the old people said that when you hear them you should let them be, do not cry at them, never. If you call them names, you get them angry, and of course, even a bee... if you... it bites you!

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CASE 4

Lelea Vetuța, born in 1927.

L.V.: Well, here they do *making/doings*.

R: *And what is that – a "making/doing"?*

L.V.: I can't tell you, it can't be told, it makes harm, there are people who know how to do these and they make people ill, so that he doesn't know about himself, he is powerless, and then they go and look for it (to the priests).

It also happened to us, with our granddaughter. She went to school because she learned, and she got to be a physician, she made the physicians school, and just as she started to work, she started to work in winter and in spring that disease hit her. And on one Saturday she slept until Monday. And they took her to the doctors, but they couldn't find anything. And they said to my son, tell them to go and look where they

go for Saint Mary, didn't you hear? Where they go and pray. Well, they went and stayed there three days, and the priest from that place told her she is bewitched, that someone cast a spell on her. And the one who did it, that person will visit her when she returns home. And even a goddaughter of her came to visit. And she lied that she came to see her because she heard she was ill. And she did not leave a thing [in the house]. Because the priest told her, "Be careful who did it to you, [he or she] knows and will come to you." And she did come. That goddaughter had been married for 3-4 years and her husband had a car and he died in a car crash. And she started an affair with her godfather (the husband of my granddaughter). And she did the spell so he would remain with her. And so, my granddaughter walked [went to doctors, priests, and healers] so much, even now she is not well. She went so much and did so many masses [religious services] to the whole house and... So that woman cast a spell on her because the priest told her that that woman did it.

R: *What does this "making/doing" mean?*

L.V.: Well, she does it that you won't have power and she [the granddaughter] did not have power, because after she fell asleep, she didn't wake up for such a long time, and then for three weeks she could not talk, she could not walk.

R: *But what is it, she is given something to eat or...*

L.V.: I don't know what spell they do; how should I know how these spells are, they throw something there, or I don't know anything, just the fact that they cast spells and then these women are not well. It was another one from that hill. After he got married, it happened to him, and his neighbour did it to him, and he was well married with good wife, until God took his stamina, he didn't have any power, and then he went and looked, and he found out who did it. A neighbour next to them. And he went and did masses and now he is well, but you have to go/move quickly, if you let it long you cannot unmake it because with one mass the trouble returns!

R: *Are there people who do these ["makings/ doings"] here?*

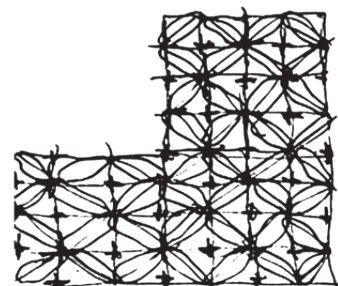
L.V.: The priest says they are.

R: *So that goddaughter who did it to her godmother, she did it herself or she went to someone to do it?*

L.V.: Well, only God knows how she could do it, because they can take from a cloth, or they throw something, God knows, only that she remains with the trouble. Another neighbour of her was here and for three - four years she only said that she was dying, she was dying. She was unwell for a long time, she just said she would die, such ache came on her, such pain she had! And she went quickly to a priest, he did her a mass and now she is good. He told her it was a spell, and you know who did it because that person comes to your house. Another one was here for a long time, and she was bewitched to drink, she could not let the alcohol, and her husband beat her, poor her, and she went to a woman to un-witch her, and her husband beat that woman, she suffered a lot. Now she does not drink, but she could not give up drinking at that time.

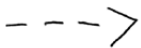
R: *But these can be done for drinking?*

L.V.: Yes, with drinking and with other more, and they give you something, and you have aches, and who knows maybe they put something in your drink. And then you are finished, you are finished, ill.



These four accounts express the cultural knowledge of the community, and the place witchcraft has in it. The accounts show the "dynamic" perception of witchcraft, that is, the flexibility that both Komáromi (2005) and Hesz (2007) have pointed out in their works. I arranged the vignettes in a crescendo, where the last one presents the way witchcraft happens in relation to kinship. The old woman refers to the act of witchcraft as something that *happened to us*, thus including herself in the "damaged" group, at the level of discourse. The woman brings other four cases as solid proofs for the main story about her niece. At the same time, she briefly describes the steps to follow in similar cases of witchcraft, which makes her act like a guide for enchanting. Her attitude is inclusive, we are in her world, and she does not leave me room for doubt. Rather, she describes a virtual situation that is quite possible, if not even probable. She talks about a virtual situation without me asking about it, as the interview was about her life history. In her narrative we can see that the local priest or the monk are the characters that take a stand and name the crisis "a bewitchment."

By doing so, they manipulate everything that is related to the crisis inside the community. They do not offer a laic interpretation of the marital crisis. Rather, they present the facts as the result of some supernatural powers and assume the role of mediators in solving the crisis. In the second case study, the dialogue between a man and his wife looks at the beginning like a dialogue between a believer and a non-believer. By the end of the dialogue, this dialogue reaches a different outcome by using the word *gadina* that is a local term for an evil spirit living inside a person. This outcome is close to the idea of gossip about a witchcraft topic (Stewart and Strathern 2004). In my research, I did not sense that people were distancing themselves from the topic of witchcraft fearing I might take their words as superstition. I observed a difference in the way people remembered events that happened at different points in time. People used to talk more, more freely, and even unasked if the witchcraft crisis occurred few years before the interviews. At the same time, they tended to be more expeditious if the crisis occurred long time ago.



CASE 5

Badea Avrămuț, born in 1930.

A rash appeared on my skin from that hard work. I was using some ointments, but they were so stinky. I was ashamed to go out of the house. But the rash didn't go away. Then, a doctor from Cluj *decided* that my body is weakened, and he prescribed a shot, insulin. That is for diabetics. I went to the doctor in my village, a friend of mine, and he said, "I am giving you that shot." He did it, and I didn't feel anything. Meanwhile, he went to the nurse and told her that she needs to give me a shot and how much of it, but he didn't tell her that he already gave me a shot. The nurse comes and gives me a shot, too. And I fall into a coma on the bed. From here, I walked eight kilometres to the health centre, and they brought me back with the carriage! From that moment on, I could no longer... as I ate, I threw out. It destroyed the

nervous system of my stomach, my liver, my... I was trembling so much they put a bed sheet in my mouth to not break my teeth. They washed me with cold water, whatever they did, and I came home. Then, I became weaker and weaker. I went to doctors, but they didn't believe me [that the shot generated the problem]. At some point, one doctor said, "Dear lad, you should try something else, with *other stuff* [magic], because who knows what you have?" As I sat in the hospital, one patient told me, "You should go in my village..." because in the village next to his village there is a monk who knows everything. Good. After I got out of the hospital, I went there. I walked over one hill near Cluj, and then walked far away from Cluj. I went to his [monk's] house. He was in his garden, digging with a hoe. As I got closer to him from behind, I was afraid I would scare him when I greet him. And I did like this [he



cleared his throat] to attract his attention. Then, he turned like looking with one eye to me, and with that beard he was like [scary], and I knew he was a wizard, and... so... with chills [I stepped in].

And I said: "Good day."

"Good day" he answered. He said: "You come from the hospital."

"Yes."

"You are ill for three years."

"Yes."

"Your father is N."

"Yes."

"You have a brother, I."

"Yes."

"You have an aunt, M."

"Yes."

"Well, come in."

He takes me inside a kitchen, a summer kitchen. Now, he was hiding *that book* because he had been inquired two-three times by the police. The police took him [into custody]. They went to him dressed in civil clothes. [As if] they were looking for their luck. And he told them: "Why did you change your clothes? Why didn't you come with your clothes [uniforms] on? You want to spy on me?" And they no longer wanted to... Anyway, I just saw him, he rolled up his sleeve and put his hand in a hole and took out a book. And he asked me to open it. He started to cry. "Oh, you are so miserable, you are in such trouble..." and this and that. Well, I got scared also.

He said: "You should bring me three kilos of wool, water from nine sources, from your house, and you should come in *that week*." He said "You should not think that I need the wool. I have to give it to some women to spin it on a Friday evening or on a Tuesday evening," I can't remember exactly, "to spin it for you."

Well, and I went, and he said: "You should come, *that time*." He said he would do some masses, and I don't know what he did. I don't recall because he did not explain to me what he did. When I went for the second time to him, the police had already visited him. He received nobody. I had heard about it from the neighbouring village, they said, "you go for nothing because they arrested him again, he no longer receives anyone [to visit]." At night,

I crossed some pasture lands, I went through thistles, I walked to his house. Then, I knew [recognized] the place. I knocked on the door. Nothing. I knocked on the window. Nothing. Across the lane there was a woman, who was not his woman, but she washed for him and did other things for him. I went to that woman, I knocked on her door.

She said: "Oh my God, but what are you doing here?"

I said: "Well, I have been to the monk and he told me to come again."

"But you should come no more because I don't know... [he does not remember what the women said]"

"Well, then, now give me something, a blanket, some place to sleep."

"Well, how can I give you, and you disappear with the blanket?"

"Here, I put my ID card on this table, and I go to sleep."

I left my ID card on the table. I climbed up on a pigsty, and from there I could see the monk's house. And in the morning, I saw a man with a big luggage entering that summer kitchen. And I wait, and when the other guy gets out, I go too. When I saw that man out, I climbed down a small ladder and went to him.

"Good morning father. Do not mind, I was last night and knocked on your window."

"Well, why didn't you say you are from that village because I would have let you in."

Good. And, dear, he starts to take his clothes off: he takes the shirt, the underwear, the pants, the underwear, like an angel in my face. And I was trembling and stared at a wood basket that was under the stove. It was like... what does this man want from me, you know?! He said: "Now it is your turn. I undressed so that you won't be ashamed of me. You should undress like me, naked." And he touched me here. He said: "From here all your trouble has started. You did that insulin shot and you shouldn't have." He knocked me out! And he continued. "But with Veturica from your village what did you have?" When I was in the army, I was there with her brother, and she came to visit her brother and took us out in the city. She fed us like they used



to do it with the military in those times. And she kind of liked me, you know? And we talked, I also sent her a letter, but this was twenty years ago. Anyway, fifteen years at least. He said: "Do what you can and bring me something from her!" Well, dear, another trouble. I come home, I tell my wife, how to do it, what to do? And I go to a fair. And I suddenly hear someone calling from a carriage, a covered carriage: "How are you Avram?" I turn around and there she was, Veturica coming down, and I told my wife that this was the *flighty piece*. And we chatted and my wife [said], "Oh, what a nice jersey you have!" And she took, I don't know what, a very tiny [peace of it]... and I gave it to the priest. I went there [to his house] a few more times but we no longer talked about it [the bewitchment situation]. Just how I was feeling, and he did some more masses and then the story with him ended but I did not get rid of the trouble.

I had some trembling and I threw out what I ate, but when I reached the doctor, I was fine and didn't know what to tell him. Meanwhile, I made friends with a neurologist, and while

we were barbequing a goat, he told me: "Look, Avram, you won't get rid of this disease until you get away from home. You should go and get a job somewhere. And you'll see, it will be better." The neurologist said. He was not a shrink, but a neurologist. And I got a job. And my wife and my mother started to cry because my father had died... [they asked] how can I leave them alone, and we had so many cattle. I don't really know how I got the courage to leave home and take the job. And when I was in that job community, I was fine. When I got home, I kept on having them [the problems]. And slowly, slowly, the disease disappeared.

And this is how I got better, but this lasted almost 25 years... all this story. And so, I spent time with the witches. Now, you think it over. Was I or wasn't I bewitched? I do not believe in witches, but I passed through some moments... How could the priest know? Ok, maybe I told [him] the story. But he knew about my father, he knew about my aunt. Only about my mother he didn't say anything.

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I conducted many sessions of interviews with Badea Avrămuț, as he was famous in his community for being an extraordinary storyteller. Our encounters fully proved this fame. While I determined the settings of the interviews, I initiated the talk and the main topic of the interview (de Blécourt 1999), I did treat Badea Avrămuț as an interlocutor and let him choose *what* and *how* to talk about. The main topic of discussion was stories of illnesses, which allowed me to indirectly get to the subject of witchcraft without jeopardizing my position as a researcher (de Blécourt 1999, 155). The first thing that caught my attention was that Badea Avrămuț talked about his bewitchment at present tense though my question was referring to a generic past (or at least a general one). This made me think that at some point he believed in witchcraft. In fact, by telling me the story, he re-lived the experience and tried to make me live it as well. The fact that he did not give up and he was so determined to sleep

on the pigsty of the priest's neighbour suggests that he must have believed in witchcraft at the time. The fact that he left his ID card on the woman's table shows that the story took place at a time when the chain of traditional solidarity in relation to misfortune was weak. On the other hand, the priest made a broader contextualization in a traditional manner, by stressing the background of Badea Avrămuț and important details about his kins. This kind of knowledge established the necessary relation of trust between the two. The fact that Badea Avrămuț detailed each element of the undressing episode transmitted the shock he had at that time and represented a direct reference to a sexuality issue that is somehow present in different forms in his life history. The idea of witchcraft is coming (surprisingly) from a doctor, who basically declined his competence in curing Badea Avrămuț. We understand that the medical misconduct he suffered might have been the possible cause of his illness. However,



this has been denied by all the medical staff he visited after the event, but it was utterly expressed by the priest. On the other hand, there is the personal social context that cannot be ignored. Badea Avrămuț is a wealthy peasant in the village and the only man in the household, so, assuming an illness or some sort of weakness (as he defined his state) would mean to “lose his face,” that is, to not live up to the expectations in line with his status in the community. Consequently, the bewitchment can be seen as a strategy to “save face” (Argyrou 1993).

Both Badea Avrămuț and Badea Gheorghiuță in the first vignette were deputies in the local administration during the communist regime. They had a strong trust in biomedicine. At some point, Badea Avrămuț said, “I wouldn’t be alive today if it weren’t for these pills.” In his house, he had several medical devices to measure his blood pressure and do other investigations. Badea Avrămuț made a distinction between a psychologist and a neurologist. His daughters graduated higher education and he talked about his second wife as a woman who “walked around in the world for a while, not just a simple-minded woman from the village.” Used and abused by two people and by two healing systems/ideologies that would not admit their limits, Badea Avrămuț told me a story about his internal (emic) and dynamic witchcraft knowledge. While Lelea Vetuța and especially Lelea Veronica (in Bărbulescu 2018) interpreted their medical crisis as a bewitchment right from the start and used their stories to attract me in their rationalities (though I interpreted the story of Lelea Veronica as a jealousy crisis with somatic repercussions), Badea Avrămuț did not want to convince me of his witchcraft knowledge. He did not try to pull me in his world of belief. By contrary, he left that world, and he made me a partner to his story, rather than an audience for it. Renowned in his community as a great storyteller, Badea Avrămuț tried to make an impression on me, the outsider-researcher, by making use of his status as a representant of the local narrative tradition (Clark 2001, 9). His story is the story of an extraordinary event in his life, he is the hero of an extraordinary

action. In the end, the (Hamletian) question *was I bewitched or not?* is his philosophical question that makes him travel from the world of local cultural knowledge to the world he assumed I (the researcher) belong to. By asking this question, he examines and enforces the hierarchy of one over the other as Argyrou (1993) exemplified in his work in Cyprus.



Conclusion

In all the villages in Cluj County where I conducted research, witchcraft knowledge is flexible and dynamic as Komáromi (2005) and Hesz (2017) suggested. Badea Avrămuț constantly negotiate his interpretation of the crisis with me. Moreover, the conversations with him and with Lelea Veronica go beyond a simple meaning or a single aim: on the one hand, they want to know if I believe them so they can make a “virtual” portrait of me, as an assessment of who I really am. On the other hand, when the stories become detailed, I sense the two narrators try to include me in their world, the world of believers. How can I remain outside this world after their strong demonstrations possibly meant to convince me? They want me to believe that there is no other world outside the magic one. I notice a gender aspect that needs further research.

Magic/witchcraft is still the rationality of many people living in rural areas, and, as I have occasionally seen, of some people living in urban places as well. Re-reading some of their stories of illness in a “rational” key, is both easy and complicated. For some time in his life, Badea Avrămuț must have believed that a former lover bewitched him. For many years after this episode, he worked outside his village, he visited different biomedical experts, and managed to heal his illness, which made him question the nature of his crisis. While in the first interviews he was stressing the extraordinary events he lived, in our latest encounter he re-told me the story and then he looked piercingly



straight in my eyes, and asked the question that made me think of Hamlet’s famous ontological question. My etic interpretation is that the witchcraft crisis helped Badea Avrămuț “save his face” as the richest man in the village. In this way he preserved his social status and concealed the fact that he could not handle the burden of his household. The emic interpretation is a Pygmalion puzzlement: he knew either too much or too little of the scientific rationality and the local magic to fully adhere to one of these. Therefore, he lived in-between the two

worlds. I wonder if this attitude represents the opposite of Favret-Saada’s assertion that the “witchcraft discourse did not allow a neutral attitude” (1980, 10). Badea Avrămuț’s final question transforms his story in an open ending one, which means that depending on the interlocutor, the narrative represents an invitation to participate in its very construction. At the same time, by asking the question he is aiming for a neutral position where the play *belief-disbelief* confers a particular dynamism to an interpretive process (Hesz 2017, 360).



NOTES

1. I will generally use the term village, but the vignettes are expressing views of the people living in different villages of one administrative unit (*comună*).



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