

THE FORTUNE OF THE HOUSE.  
ȘTEFANIA CRISTESCU-GOLOPENȚIA'S  
PERSPECTIVE ON DOMESTIC MAGIC\*

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ABSTRACT

Ștefania Cristescu-Golopenția reorganized the structure of magic intentions by subsuming all human desires under the category of household welfare. This view allows all rites and superstitions to coalesce around a coherent and unexpectedly modern cultural attitude towards life, for which women are directly responsible.

**Keywords:** domestic spirituality, magic, women, rites, superstitions.

The “fortune of the house” came to dominate the thinking of sociologist Ștefania Cristescu-Golopenția (hereafter, Șt. C.-G.) following her participation in the sociologic investigation of Drăguș village during the summer of 1929, a campaign conducted by professor Dimitrie Gusti and repeated in 1932 and 1933. From 1938 to 1939, Șt. C.-G. returned to Drăguș for independent research and gradually came to realize that the higher purpose of all the rites and beliefs centered upon the household was: “to procure, maintain and defend wealth, prosperity, the «fortune of the house»” (Șt. C.-G., 2002, p. 195). She defined the spirituality of Drăguș as a *magical-domestic spirituality*, which she based on “the constant preoccupation of the Drăguș inhabitants for the fate of their household that not only decides the entire economical activity of the people, but also determines, reaches and influences the whole series of their spiritual activities” (Șt. C.-G., 2007, p. 195).

In her book on Drăguș (first published in 1940), Șt. C.-G. reinterprets the sociological well-accepted fact that women generally seem to be in charge of the magical tasks concerning the well-being of the family and house, an observation made often by specialist<sup>1</sup>. Based upon the 1929–1939 sociological study of the

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Elizabeth Bott explains their intense magical activity regarding kinship through “a greater emotional investment in the family” (Bott 1971, p. 136).

village of Drăguş, Şt. C.-G. insists on the paradoxically modern economical function of women's magical practices in certain contexts. Additionally, in my opinion, due to an archaic spiritual phase that has left traces in folk culture, the role of women in various ceremonies is far more consistent than the role of men. Ancient pre-Christian beliefs grant women supernatural powers because of their ability to give birth. As Mircea Eliade has suggested in several studies, a close link exists between water, vegetation and women, allowing them to perform prosperity rites<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, women maintain a spiritual relationship with the departed through alms and ritual gifts, which are meant to ensure the aid ancestors are said to provide.

#### *A NEW AND DISTINCT SUPERORDINATION*

All human desires that represent the bases of magic thinking are included in a specific category of intentions. Before Şt. C.-G.'s *The Household in the Magic Beliefs and Rites of the Women from Drăguş (Făgăraş)* many specialists organized the goals of superstitions and rites into separate classes for each type of need, which included good health, good luck, and prosperity. Şt. C.-G. succeeded in demonstrating that in certain cases, one can find common features and a higher purpose behind many of a community's folk beliefs. In the case of Drăguş, this recurring higher preoccupation was the fortune of the household (*sporul*<sup>3</sup> *casei*).

In the introductory section of her book, Şt. C.-G. uses concentric circles to illustrate her theory and to highlight the centrality of the household. First, she identifies the cosmic setting of the household, since the house can only be built on magically safe grounds. Next, she locates biological coordinates in the physiology of the human body (for example, the confined woman's body that will help increase the size of the family). Finally, she discusses the psychological implications of domestic magic.

Starting from the generally accepted fact that women are the real treasurers of superstitious tradition, Şt. C.-G. identifies three phases of cultural transmission, embodied by successive generations of women. The elder women of Drăguş still represented a strong authority in the 1930s. The second generation attempted to adapt traditions to the new socio-economical context of the inter-war period. The

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<sup>2</sup> The historian of religions considers that women are "the only ones who know and master the secrets of the obscure vegetal life" (Eliade 1993, p. 142) and that they have "a mystic solidarity with the earth" (Eliade 1993, p. 139). Moreover, Mircea Eliade noticed that as soon as from the Neolithic Age, when agriculture was discovered, a common symbolism linked "the Moon, the Waters, the Rain, the fecundity of women and animals, vegetation, the human destiny after death and initiation ceremonies" (1992, p. 156).

<sup>3</sup> As shown in the book, *spor* has a Slavic etymology and initially meant "udder", hence a symbolic source of wealth and health. In time, the word came to include other meanings: efficiency of actions, wellness of the mind and body, richness and a constant luck.

third generation was split between the traditional information they had acquired from their grandparents and the modern ways of living they had heard of rather than experienced. Her observation preceded important approaches to urban migration dynamics (where this phenomenon is fundamental) by many decades. Even today, it is important to bear in mind this generational gradation, since Romania, Ukraine, The Republic of Moldova and other countries from the ex-Soviet bloc are still undergoing the first phase of urbanization and their cities are consequently populated by numerous peasants.

In addition to distinguishing between generations, Şt. C-G. identifies a split between a household spirituality and a village spirituality, which are both found in the domestic magic of the Olt County region. As the author notices, domestic spirituality feeds on the spiritual experience of the community. Within village spirituality, collective knowledge uses events to explain the functionality of superstitions since a set of traditional expectations decodes current occurrences. In other words, the community perceives any violation of a custom as *hybris*, believing a magic fault to be the root cause of all subsequent events and thus reinforcing and socially confirming superstitious beliefs.

In the second part of the book, Şt. C-G. begins with a presentation of the magic beliefs and actions concerning the household followed by an analysis of the practices concerning the stable, the yard, the village surroundings, and the good health of people along with their domestic animals. She concludes with an analysis of the practices that concern work in the home, in the garden and on the field. She links all these aspects to a constant preoccupation for the most favorable auspices, which are constantly sought out and induced.

For example, superstitious beliefs require a villager to build their house on a *clean* piece of land, far from any magic threats, with wood that was taken under ritual rules meant to satisfy the evil spirits of the forest. However, this alone does not ensure a good life for the members of the family living in the new home. According to a universal belief, members of the household must also make a sacrifice at the foundation of the house. To satisfy this requirement, people in Drăguş bury a thread, which measures the same height as a human being and is thus a symbol for the body according to sympathetic magic, at the base of a new house. The person thus “measured” was believed to die when the house was ready. Today, money placed instead in the corners or walls of new houses has replaced the thread as an offering for the domestic deities.

In this context, Şt. C.-G. explores different types of domestic deities. For example, she describes two sacred entities (at times thought to coincide), the snake and *the clock of the house*, which are both believed to protect the home and its inhabitants. In addition to these protective entities, she describes the threshold and the hearth as highly radiant spaces of magic energy in the house, since forgotten gods are said to live there. These two parts of the home, next to which many rites take place, are both treasured and feared. The fire in the oven is, according to the

author, a powerful and vengeful force, that can easily be offended by infringing specific rules. Petru Caraman also analyzed the magic implications of the hearth as part of an ancient marital ritual and concluded nothing impure must come in its proximity because present taboos are, in fact, proofs of an ancient religious cult (1988, p. 120–121). The threshold is important for certain gestures that invoke the spirits with therapeutic intentions. For example a woman who gave birth to twins gently touches patients' injured ankles and hands to make them heal, while standing in the doorway. Others use the hearth and the threshold as a portal between worlds in order to make offerings or to see the dead (looking through the oven door at the flames is believed to allow access to the afterworld, in specific times and conditions). After Romanian villagers have moved to the cities, they continue to avoid performing a number of acts over a threshold including not embracing in a doorway and not exchanging anything through it.

Given the importance of large domestic animals in Drăguş peasants' lives, Şt. C.-G. next shows how the stable undergoes the same magical treatment as the house. A priest consecrates the space of a future stable by sprinkling it with holy water and a sacrifice is made to the spirit believed to govern that place. The parallel between human and animal magical practices continues with rites surrounding the threshold of the stable. We have witnessed similar rituals in Moldova, where people typically bury a calf's placenta under the stable floor (in Cucuieţi, Bacău district and Păltiniş, Botoşani district) so that the luck of the house (here represented by the well-being of the animal) will not be wasted.

The yard and the village surroundings are magically mapped with good and evil places as well. Şt. C.-G. presents the ways in which Drăguş peasants learn to avoid the latter from early childhood. Since traditional Romanian culture is rather homogeneous, we can easily trace in Drăguş a number of beliefs that are to be found in other parts of the country.

#### THE MOTHER OF THE FAMILY

The largest part of the book deals with the confined woman and her newborn child. When reading about the numerous taboos, magic interdictions and practices that concern the mother-child dyad, one is struck by the fact that, even in urban environments, most of these practices have managed to survive nearly one century later. Since the woman maintains the fortune of the house on a spiritual level, modern life cannot remove traditional behavior without risking a dangerous imbalance.

Şt. C.-G. uses Arnold van Gennep's work to structure her extensive study of childbirth practices by following the three phases of the *rite de passage*. She also distinguishes between positive and negative customs, or between sympathetic and contagious ones. As a preliminary phase of these customs, a set of rules, formulated as guidelines as to what to avoid doing in order to protect the unborn baby from harm, creates the conditions for both the physical and mental well-being

of the pregnant woman. Most of these prescriptions offer answers for coincidences science cannot explain. For example, these rules suggest that birth marks resemble the shape of things stolen by the mother while pregnant, that hemangiomas appearing on the newborn child are associated with a fire that may have frightened its mother (the red flames are thought to be distinguishable on the skin), or that the delayed development of speech (by the age of four or five) is a sign the mother may have concealed her pregnancy from the community.

A family with good luck has many healthy children, which is one of the main goals of rites and superstitions. As such, actions that use sympathetic magic before and during labor allow for easy delivery. Șt. C.-G. portrays the empirical midwife as an initiated person that guards the fortune of the child and influences his future by using both magic objects and magic words. The vital energy of the baby born in the house invigorates domestic magic. Some of the gestures described by Șt. C.-G. are still performed in contemporary Romanian villages. For example, the umbilical cord is kept at the beam or in the threshold and the placenta is buried under the base of the house or next to the hearth. Such gestures can be interpreted as sacred offering to the house deities, which are asked to watch over the newest member of the family.

At the end of the 1950's, authorities forbid traditional birth attendants to help women give birth in their houses. Șt. C.-G.'s detailed analysis of the highly respected figure of the midwife helps explain why today, sixty years after her official elimination, the midwife has become a ritual character. A woman is often appointed to act as the midwife *after the baby's birth*, during the christening ceremony and later on, for the infant's ritual bath. Moreover, the medically trained midwives continue to receive a gift that was imparted to the former ritual midwives a century ago: a towel and a soap, which magically cleanse the birth blood from their hands. Only a powerful social status with a deep cultural background (we can think here of the Romanian legends about Saint Nicholas's wife helping the Virgin Mary give birth) could have created the conditions for this socio-cultural evolution.

The main phase of the birth ritual comprises the confinement period, during which the "impure" mother must avoid offending the house deities that ensure luck. For example, the fire in the hearth could morph into a vengeful force if the mother handles it before the special religious service that is performed eight days after birth. The child is said to suffer from fire during his future life, a belief still found among urban Romanian people today. The confined woman and her unclean energy must avoid other spaces as well, which are also directly linked with the well-being of family. These include the source of water or the animal shelter. Therefore, the confined woman risks transforming the topography of the home by adding to it a series of dangerous places.

Although the confined woman can magically harm the community, the latter can also exert unwanted influences over her and her child. Visitors with *evil eyes* or the ritually unclean may bewitch the newly-born or the confined woman. They may

give the child a skin rash or “steal” the milk from the mother’s breasts. To avoid these types of harm, iron objects prove helpful in protecting the household’s fortune. The child is often left alone “in the company” of a key placed underneath his head, an iron ring is tied to his clothing and fire tongs lie next to his cradle. In addition to protecting her child, the confined woman also protects herself with iron objects. Her bed is “guarded” by an apotropaic instrument made of iron. Moreover, she does not leave home without an iron object before the religious service performed forty days after birth. The fact that they frequently touch domestic fire enhances the power of iron objects. Thus, the household deity acts through iron instruments in order to ward off evil. Inhabitants of Drăguş thus never stroke their children with the fire tongs, knowing that terrible magic effects could affect their health and their growth.

As recently as 2012, I have recorded people living in Romanian towns who admitted they knew about the use of fire tongs to protect babies before christening. They also mentioned the destructive powers of an improperly used broom. In Şt. C.-G.’s account, peasants from Drăguş never throw a broom at cattle or pigs because they believe this might make the animals perish. It is a common belief today not to sweep toward an unmarried woman for fear that she will never get wed (her suitors being chased away by the magic powers of the broom).

Lactation represents one of the main preoccupations of the Drăguş people, since milk allows children to grow up healthy and the family to prosper. She-buffaloes were in turn believed to be victims of the milk demons (*strigoii de lapte*), thus threatening the fortune of the house because, as people from Drăguş acknowledged, cattle allow peasants to achieve “their outgrowth and their welfare”. Thus, because the place where the mother sleeps is vulnerable to visitors, they are forbidden to sit on the bed for fear they might leave the mother without milk for her infant. The interdiction to give away anything away, which restrained her during pregnancy, persists after birth, since she could also magically give away her milk. The breast-feeding mother is also forbidden to walk barefoot since those following in her footsteps could “steal” her milk. Finally, another superstition concerning milk demands the mother not to allow another woman to walk on the spot where drops of her breast milk have fallen on the ground. A mother may protect her milk by making an offering to the house deities. She buries some drops of it together with other magic substances (bread, pepper, incense, salt) underneath the house. Drăguş people can use magic antidotes in order to restore lactation if something had stopped it, of which onions left in a fountain or a river are just two examples.

In addition to lactation, an infant’s sleep is central to the welfare of a Drăguş household. Since sleep conditions an infant’s harmonious growth and the peace of the family, their rest must be protected from both human influences and supernatural forces. Because an infant’s sleep could be harmed by fairies called *măiestre*, parents refrain from doing a number of things including bathing him with

water brought in the house after sunset, leaving his diapers out to dry during the night, allowing the infant to rest outside, or putting him down on suspicious spots (such as a trodden piece of land where the fairies may have been dancing). Other interdictions include not allowing parents to kiss the baby in his sleep or take straws away from his cradle.

Like antidotes for lactation, magical remedies exist in Drăguș for infantile insomnia. Visitors do not leave the house without tearing a thread from their clothing and placing it in the infant's cradle, a gesture that is still performed today even in cities. The thread symbolizes sleep and guests also say: "May your rest be as peaceful as mine!" It is probable that we are dealing with a personal sacrifice that protects the newly-born from any unwanted effect of being exposed to strangers. The mother can also steal locks of hair from the baby's elder brothers and put them next to the baby. Since pigs are known for their peaceful rest, she may also bring straws from the pigsty and use them in the same manner. This belief proves persistent in many villages in Moldova. Moreover, even after moving to towns in search of a better life, people still magically "bring" sleep to their small children, by stealing it from the neighbors who keep their lights on in the night.

As a comparison of global beliefs shows, hair contains the vitality of the being to which it belongs. For this reason, only godparents are allowed to cut the hair of the newly-born for the first time (and likewise his nails). Family care and the care of cattle are comparable. To ensure that it will grow nicely, the mother carefully disposes of her child's hair in a fruit-tree. Similarly, pieces of cattle fur are kept in the house after the animal has been sold. This custom brings to mind the gesture of cutting off a lock of hair from the deceased and keeping it in the house, in order that the part the deceased played in the luck of the family not to be wasted. All these magic beliefs are primarily enacted by women and the general luck of the household depends upon their attention to propitious and unpropitious acts.

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It is already obvious that a great vitality and cultural adaptability to the new and widespread socio-economical conditions characterize the beliefs in the fortune of the household. Șt. C.-G. saw the common feature of so many rites that intend to keep the good health and the cheerful mood of the family members, to give them the pleasure of working efficiently, to keep the animals in a good condition and to enjoy rich crops. Her ability to synthesize human desires drew attention to the symbolic implications of bringing something into or giving something away from the house. The former allows for the gathering of more luck, whereas the latter can make the fortune of the house fade away. Disposing of dough or eggs, lending something at night time as well as during any rite of passage, selling things from the house to someone with "a bad hand" (ill intentioned), or being the victim of a theft could jeopardize the well-being of the family.

The wedding or the funeral of a family member was enacted in Drăguș not only on a psychological level but also on economic grounds. Although there are not as many rites and superstitions to consider as in the case of childbirth, the luck of the house proved itself vulnerable at such times as well. Șt. C.-G. thus unifies disparate segments of folk culture under the same principle and allows her readers to understand gestures that otherwise may seem exotic and heterogeneous.

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