

BEFORE THE DELUGE: ȘTEFANIA CRISTESCU-GOLOPENȚIA'S  
PIONEERING WORK ON WOMEN, MAGIC, AND PEASANT  
HOUSEHOLD INTEGRITY IN THE INTER-WAR YEARS

DAVID A. KIDECKEL\*

**ABSTRACT**

This essay locates Ștefania Cristescu-Golopenția in inter-war and post-war Romanian society and social science and shows how Ștefania's career was cut short by political transformation and personal tragedy. I evaluate Cristescu-Golopenția's work, focusing on her discussion of women's magico-ritual practices as critical for the strength and safety of peasant households. I then consider these ideas in the context of my own fieldwork, and how socialist state policies might have articulated with women's magico-religious household ritual.

**Keywords:** Ștefania Cristescu-Golopenția's biography, inter-war and post-war Romanian sociology, women's ritual within peasant households, reflections on Communism and fieldwork.

**INTRODUCTION:**

**ȘTEFANIA CRISTESCU-GOLOPENȚIA IN THE CONTEXT OF HER TIMES**

In recent years I somewhat moved on intellectually from research in Romania to a greater focus on South Asia. So, I was pleasantly surprised to be contacted by my old friend, Sanda Golopenția-Eretescu, to participate in this volume dedicated to the life and work of her mother, Ștefania Cristescu-Golopenția. Having done a decade of fieldwork in the Făgăraș and Olt Land regions of southern Transylvania from the mid-1970s, I was obliquely familiar with Ștefania as part of the "Gusti School of Sociology" investigations in Drăguș village, some 25 kilometers from my main research site. Nonetheless, her work never really played a major role in my own investigations in and around Făgăraș, as did those of Alexandru Bărbat (1938, 1941), Traian Herseni (1940, 1977), or Henri Stahl (1936). Sanda's request thus not only enabled me to better familiarize myself with her mother's impressive contributions and historically significant biography, but also to make use of

---

\* Director, International and Areas Studies: Central Connecticut State University.

Ștefania's perspectives to reflect on the Romanian region I knew from forty years ago.

In retrospect, the work and life of Ștefania Cristescu-Golopenția stands as a signal point in the development of Romanian social science. Her focus on magical and ritual practices set in the context of the peasant household, helped redefine folk-historical approaches to the Romanian peasantry in the crucial Inter-War period. Her approach to women's magic and ritual gave these a definite and nuanced socio-cultural reality, elevated their analysis to the realm of precise, empirical research, and thus amplified the Gusti School researches throughout Romania<sup>1</sup>. But Ștefania's significance in Romanian social science is perhaps as much, if not more, related to her personal story as it is to her professional contributions. In this she illustrates the fate of so many European lives. Her intense beginnings and great promise as an intellectual was stopped short, even dashed, by a quarter century (1930–1955) of massive political upheaval.

As discussed above, Ștefania was a significant member of the group of students that gravitated to Gusti and other seminal figures in Romanian social science, like the linguist Ovid Densusianu. Because of her direct involvement with Gusti, and the direct involvement of many of Gusti's students in the political events of the Inter-war period, she indelibly experienced both the highs and lows of that period of intense ferment in Romania's history and of great change in social science. The letters reproduced in Sanda Golopenția-Eretescu's foreword to the Third Edition of Cristescu-Golopenția's work on "Households in Women's Beliefs and Magical Rituals in Drăguș (Făgăraș)" are especially telling of the excitement and difficulties of the time. They speak about Ștefania's developing intellectual commitments as well as the freshness of Romanian ethnographic understanding.

For example, her letter to Gusti of 14 December 1932, written while working on her Ph.D. in Paris, indicated how disappointed she was in the lack of intensity shown by the French sociologists with whom she studied<sup>2</sup>. She was in Paris fresh from participating in the massive team field research in the village of Cornova, Orhei County, Bessarabia<sup>3</sup>. Reading Ștefania's words, one can readily imagine the febrile sense of mission she and her cohort of young colleagues felt, the depth of commitment to redefining not only Romanian rural lives, but also their challenges to hidebound social scientific concepts and methods generally. This was a time when long prevailing, near exclusively historical and ethnographic approaches to Romanian "social science," was being actively challenged by Gusti and his students' research. At the same time, these developments occurred square in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Complementing the work in Drăguș, Ștefania's daughter, Sanda Golopenția-Eretescu published the volume on Incantations in Cornova-Basarabia (1984) that was originally delivered as a report on Cristescu's field research with the Gusti team in 1931.

<sup>2</sup> According to Sanda Golopenția-Eretescu, while in Paris Ștefania was especially influenced by the work and pedagogy of Marcel Mauss and Célestin Bouglé.

<sup>3</sup> This area would soon be lost in annexation to the Soviet Union.

context of the growing tensions that would soon lead to the Antonescu dictatorship, the outbreak of the Second World War, and the advent of Communism in Romania. These conditions ran at cross-purposes to informed social analysis, and probably gave the young researchers a greater sense of the compression of time and the need for scholarly production. Little did people realize at the time, but one literally was taking their lives into their hands by one's academic commitments. With the coming of Communism in the aftermath of war, Ștefania's work in her chosen field was aborted, and her world was rocked by the death in prison of her husband and colleague, the Romanian sociologist, demographer, and statistician Anton Golopenția, in 1951, whom she had met while working together on the Cornova research team. Thus, the contributions she was likely to make were restricted and later generations' possibilities of knowing them similarly limited.

#### ȘTEFANIA CRISTESCU-GOLOPENȚIA'S INTELLECTUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Though her scholarly production is moderate, Ștefania still was able to make significant intellectual contributions, especially through her work on women's magic and ritual in Drăguș peasant households. Unlike generations of Romanian folklorists before her, this work transcended basic description of magical practices and fetish objects. Instead she offers a pioneering approach to peasant life both methodologically and thematically. To probe the qualities of women's rituals and their larger sociological significance, Ștefania unified careful ethnographic observation, attention to processes of ritual construction, and women's own understanding of the meaning of ritual. These she gained by careful attention to the linguistic qualities of magical practices, as she also did in her earlier work on women's incantations in Cornova-Basarabia (Cristescu-Golopenția, 1984).

Thematically, Cristescu-Golopenția's volume is first impressive for its general focus on the significance of women's ritual, but as practiced in the context of preserving and protecting household strength, vitality, productivity, and growth. This approach is well within the main theoretical currents of the time, as she integrates ritual meaning and practice with social structure and function, and centers magic and ritual within the material, biological, and social characteristics of the village peasant household (*gospodăria*). However, the work goes beyond static functionalist description by its integrating symbolic and ethnoscientific approaches. Thus as Cristescu-Golopenția shows, women's ritual and magical practices, first and foremost, were motivated by the peasant's definition of the world into the binomial opposites of "safe" and "dangerous" areas of daily life. Sanctifying the safe and avoiding the dangerous thus fell to women, which they carried out via ritual practice in concert with all of their daily activities.

To Cristescu-Golopenția, the peasant household existed and operated in the world as a total socio-economic and cultural entity, incorporating ritual elements in

each of its activities in diverse realms. Within each realm there were complementary tasks and prestations, and the individuals who performed them did so in recognition of their exchange basis<sup>4</sup>. As Ștefania wrote, “The house represents the site where the life of the family group takes place, where every household member feels part of that group, for its improvement and defense (2002, p. 69)”. Most important, this sensibility was cemented and embodied by widespread ritual practice that helped to create social bonds within and between households (especially the former) and that neutralized household fissile tensions.

Women’s rituals were ubiquitous. They were carried on throughout any and all daily practices, within and around the actual physical household, and over the entire life course of individuals. The chapters in the *Drăguș* volume are organized to reflect the weight of the diverse sectors of peasant practice and interest in which ritual was then carried out to affirm and enliven. Thus, the book places the analysis and specification of the qualities of the whole household first, before discussing the particular characteristics of household members in, as she says, their cosmological, biological, psychological and historic qualities. Only then does she begin to detail women’s spiritual practices. With this main conceptual frame established, Cristescu then figuratively “walks us” with the peasant women as they recite beliefs and engage in ritual interventions at diverse locations, activities, and celebrations of their lives.

The focus of each of these detailed evocations of magical practice, oral and otherwise, is their articulation with the forces of safety and danger. There are thus “positive” practices to access the safe and appropriate, and there are “negative” practices that ward off or neutralize danger. In using their ritual inventory, *Drăguș* women thus kept the world and the household, its members, possessions, animals, and its quality of personhood and respect in balance. Most impressive for me, an anthropologist who has largely focused on the nature of labor regimes in my decades of research, was Cristescu-Golopenția’s detailed discussion of household labor which, as she recognizes, is mainly fulfilled by women who “make bread, spin, sew, knit, wash, and clean, among other activities”. Each of women’s sundry labor responsibilities was tied via ritual with the essentials of what it meant to be a woman in the peasant context. Thus, for example, female fecundity was addressed in the life-giving act of baking bread. Here, as Ștefania describes, after a woman put the bread into the oven, she took two pieces of charcoal from the oven with a shovel, and placed the coals on top of oven while saying: “Bread get up and grow large, like a young girl, just married”. Working with animals was another of the critical activities of the woman of the peasant household. From observing prohibitions against slaughtering chickens and pigs to the incantations one used to ensure that your water buffalo gave sweet milk and plenty of it, to the need to seed your onions and peppers with two fingers to ensure the plant to grow within two

---

<sup>4</sup> One can certainly see the influence of Marcel Mauss in her understanding of household relations and practices, with her emphasis on the mutuality of ritual practice and household integrity.

weeks, the life of the Drăguș woman was enveloped and enlivened by the certainty of magic to overcome the uncertainty of life.

In some ways, the map Ștefania draws of the physical household, its spaces and forces within and without, and their interpretation by Drăgușeni, is a tour de force of symbolic anthropology and ethnoscientific analysis. Ștefania's work may also even mark her as an early feminist. She showed how the intense engagement of women in ritual practices were found in virtually all aspects of life, from perambulating one's household and defining magical practices and spells for each juncture or space, to the special incantations and practices in which women engaged related to preparation and carrying out of household life crisis rituals, to practices to ensure that new born infants avoid becoming sprites and demons. In fact, as Cristescu-Golopenția shows, it was these rituals, and women's practice in carrying them out, that gave the household substance and integrity and acted as sinew, knitting together all the diverse aspects of peasant practice. That is, she showed the critical role women's activities and spheres of practice made in the success of the household enterprise as a whole. In thinking of this, this work echoes that of Annette Weiner's challenge to Bronislaw Malinowski's classical ethnographies about Trobriand Island life (1983). Here Weiner showed that it was, in fact, women's ritual exchanges of grass skirts that underlay male exchange and kinship status. So, too, Ștefania documents the critical importance of women's practice (magical and otherwise) that is necessary for men to succeed in the tasks appointed them.

#### WOMEN'S RITUAL AND MAGIC DURING SOCIALISM

As indicated above, my chance to read Ștefania's work encouraged my thinking back to my fieldwork in the mid-seventies to mid-eighties, carried out in a number of villages in Țara Oltului, including briefly in Drăguș. At that time, I was mainly concerned with the relationship of households and local social organization in the development, practice, and perceptions of collective farming. Household ritual did not occupy much of my thought or observation. Consequently, I missed a world of understanding by the inattention I gave these issues and practices. So, "better late than never" and thinking hypothetically while writing this essay, I tried to imagine how Ștefania's observations and research preoccupations might have informed issues and relationships I did observe; how women's ritual practices might have been affected by Communist politics and socialist economics, and how their changes might have fed back on people and relations among kin and friends in the socialist communities (Kideckel 1993, Kligman and Verdery 2012). In fact, women's magico-religious practices, as noted by Ștefania, dealt most directly with domains the socialist state was intent on transforming, especially the definition and practice of labor. Thus, where Ștefania defined a female-centric, ritualized ensuring of safety and protection from danger, the socialist state sought a male-centric

planned production and household dependency on the expansive state for wellbeing and safety.

Considering these questions, then, it is likely that demands socialism placed on women for labor and commitment (see Cernea 1978) may well have also forced limits on household ritual practices. Transmitting knowledge of these practices to younger generations would also have been confounded, thus further intensifying the transformational processes of the socialist state. Socialism's affront to family and household via change in property and labor, and the social statuses that derived from them, was hard enough. But limiting women's quotidian ritual activities would likely have weakened even further the ties of household members to each other and to their key agro-pastoral possessions of land and animals. At the same time, there were no doubt differential responses of women in magico-religious ways. Understanding these differences would likely have enabled a clearer window into processes of compliance or resistance to the new socialist practices, such as they were. Did women in households with or closely related to party members change their behaviors more than others, or was variation in ritual practice more a function of household demographic composition? Finally, for Drăguș village, was Drăgușeni retention of "traditional" practices like their continuing to dress in folk costume well into the 1980s, related to women's commitment to ritual practices, and did this contribute to or merely co-vary with the widespread parrying of collective farming in Viștea Commune, of which Drăguș was part?

Questions and uncertainties aside, women's rituals in everyday Țara Oltului were still practiced during the time of my fieldwork, though politics had moderated their intensity and visibility within peasant households and communities. In fact, everyday ritual was over-shadowed by the presence of other, more formal ritual practice. In contrast to women's ritual domain, cut back with each socialist advance, the male-dominated Orthodox Church seemed the spiritual center of the village community. Furthermore, Romanian state authorities supported the church both as the symbol of male authority and as a regime force multiplier. Still, to believe Ștefania, women's domain in the household was the more critical one. Though attendance at mass was important, it was the small, ubiquitous acts and interventions of women in and around the home, that were essential for retaining whatever integrity the Țara Oltului *gospodărie* could muster under the onslaught of the state and class war, collectivization, industrialization, and migration.

In fact, ritual practices sprang up in some of the more unlikely places and times during the daily life of households in the socialist village. I first became aware of these practices through my relationship with the mother of my host's wife, Rozalia Herseni<sup>5</sup>. Rozalia had lived her entire life in Hârseni village though, as she said, she had seen the world as she had been twice to nearby Făgăraș. Rozalia was

---

<sup>5</sup> Rozalia's husband, Octavian, was Traian Herseni's uncle, the younger brother of Traian's father. The entire family was originally from Hârseni village, though Traian's father married in the Țara Oltului village of Iași, where Traian was eventually born.

a funny, friendly, talkative, deeply wrinkled octogenarian when I lived with her, her husband, daughter, son-in-law, and unmarried granddaughter. Every morning in the winter of my residence, Rozalia would quietly open my door and, thinking me asleep, light the fire in the small wood-burning *sobă* in the corner of my room. As she did, she quietly muttered under her breath. On occasion I used to watch her and listen as I feigned sleep. Though I never knew exactly what she was saying, it was clear this was ritualized behavior and, according to Cristescu-Golopenția, of a particularly important kind in Drăguș, in any case. There fire was an archetypical symbol that unified both safety and danger, and anything having to do with fire was especially hedged around with ritual and magical sayings and practices. Fire gave life in the baking of bread<sup>6</sup> and heating of homes, and fire was the main threat to the wooden homes and barns of peasant householders. Rites of passage, meanwhile, were ambiguous as to the roles of men and women. Men were prominent in rituals more concerned with social status, like weddings (see Kligman 1988 for a contrary case). Women, however, were more visible where ritual concerned the enhancement of safety and protection from danger. Thus baptism and funerals were especially infused with women's ritual practice. They said special incantations to ensure the future of children and they keened over the corpse of their deceased kin.

Again in retrospect, and as a testimony to Ștefania's anticipatory feminism, the preservation and practice of all these rituals in the years of socialist ascendancy showed the continuing importance of women and their household practices for the Țara Oltului household. This ritual presence was also mirrored and enhanced by the overwhelming presence of women in household decision-making. In a challenge to the received wisdom of male dominance in peasant communities, the women of Țara Oltului communities were the essential element for and the backbone and strength of peasant practice. Our knowledge of their critical practice is especially reaffirmed in the work of Ștefania Cristescu-Golopenția, though she did not live to see her ideas widely cited or appreciated for their significance.

#### ȘTEFANIA CRISTESCU-GOLOPENȚIA'S LEGACY, OR WHAT WE GAIN FROM WHAT WE LOST

Sadly, Ștefania Cristescu-Golopenția's influence on Romanian social science at mid-century was not commensurate with the depth and insight of her work and extent of her scholarly production (Herseni, 1971). The advent of communism in Romania was not the only factor that submerged the potential significance of Ștefania's work, though its influence was manifold. Furthermore, these changing politics not only affected Ștefania, but also the host of young researchers with

---

<sup>6</sup> When baked in home ovens, every loaf of bread was sanctified with the sign of the cross. However, with the development of socialism bread-baking in the household ended and was shifted to various state and cooperative bakery organizations.

whom she worked as part of Gusti's Romanian Sociological Institute. Sociology, the discipline with which Ștefania's research was imbued, was itself deemed anathema to the new state masters. Its positivist leanings ran diametrically opposite to the tenets of dialectical materialism and Leninist class struggle. As a consequence Gusti's Sociological Institute was shut down, with much of its research materials and archives subsequently lost. Many individuals associated with the Institute, Cristescu's mentors and consociates like Gusti, Herseni, and Densusianu were deemed overt threats to the success of the new socialist state by virtue of their participation as officials in the "*ancien régime*", though Gusti, himself was later allowed to be rehabilitated by open expression of loyalty to Communism. Still, a number of Institute members, like Traian Herseni, Octavian Neamțu, and Ștefania's now-husband Anton Golopenția, suffered imprisonment, in Anton's case only after some years of diligent service to the new regime<sup>7</sup>.

As an individual much of Ștefania's work focused on areas of life unquestionably alienating to the Party and its ideological watchdogs. Her concern for women's spirituality was no doubt perceived as threat to a system that sought to transform the role of women, and which brutally opposed the alleged superstitions of a retrograde peasantry. She had no political connections to speak of nor did she have Gusti's renown to protect her from the changes washing over Romania, if not all of Europe in the late 1940s. Though she never suffered incarceration, neither was she formally rehabilitated and recognized for her accomplishments, like Traian Herseni or Henri Stahl. Some of Cristescu-Golopenția's distance from scholarship was also a product of the responsibilities of a young wife and mother. After the war she continued as a part-time researcher and also began service in a girls' secondary school. However, her research quickly tapered off and, because of her compromised political circumstances, she was demoted to increasingly lower levels of educational responsibility and denied the right of publication. At the same time the pain she experienced with the imprisonment and death of her husband Anton, related to the trumped-up charges against Lucrețiu Patrășcanu, also clouded her life and kept her from working in her chosen (i.e. sociological) domain. The intensity of the relationship between she and her husband, and the ultimate weight this placed on Ștefania, is portrayed vividly in the collection of letters between she and Anton from the early days of their marriage, through their numerous times apart due to work and study, and finally to their ultimate separation in Anton's imprisonment. The remarkable chronology of Ștefania's life compiled by Sanda Golopenția-Eretescu attests to Ștefania's frantic and frustrating search for information about the fate of her husband and ultimately for his posthumous exoneration.

I have to say, I am humbled by my brief review of the work of Ștefania Cristescu-Golopenția. Central European history between, during, and just after the

---

<sup>7</sup> Anton, who had been head of the Romanian Statistical Institute, a key position for the new "planned society," suffered as a result of his relationship with Lucrețiu Patrășcanu, who himself was executed in 1954 after falling victim to internal Communist Party intrigue.

Second World War was monumental and defined troubled days for the world, Romania, and science generally. For any person, living these times while retaining any measure of one's capabilities, was a formidable feat indeed. People like Ștefania Cristescu-Golopenția gave of themselves and yet suffered in the giving. They contributed broadly to the creation of a new kind of social science, and yet were largely denied the recognition of their contributions. Ștefania seems to have lived her life and practiced her scholarship with a degree of intensity and a conscious desire to leave something not only to her children, but to all of us who follow her path. Reviewing her work today, we can gain an even greater appreciation of people's struggle to maintain and grow scientific practice in the midst of historical trauma. Thus, Ștefania Cristescu-Golopenția not only provides us today with a significant scientific record, but also a testimony to a life filled with dignity and humanity, of which no one could deprive her.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. BĂRBAT, ALEXANDRU (1938), *Dezvoltarea și structura economică a Țării Oltului cu un plan de organizare*, Cluj, Tipografia Națională, Societate Anonimă.
2. BĂRBAT, ALEXANDRU (1941), *Studiul economic al satului Drăguș-Făgăraș*, București, Imprimeria Națională.
3. CERNEA, MICHAEL (1978), *Macrosocial Change, Feminization of Agriculture, and Peasant Women's Threefold Economic Role*, "Sociologica Ruralis" 18 (2-3): p. 107-23.
4. CRISTESCU, ȘTEFANIA (1984), *Descânțete din Cornova-Basarabia*, Providence, Ed. Hiatus, orig. ed. 1931.
5. CRISTESCU-GOLOPENȚIA, ȘTEFANIA (2007), *Sporul vieții. Jurnal, studii și corespondență*, București, Ed. Paideia, orig. ed. 1931.
6. CRISTESCU-GOLOPENȚIA, ȘTEFANIA (2002), *Gospodăria în credințele și riturile magice ale femeilor din Drăguș (Făgăraș)*, București, Ed. Paideia, orig. ed. 1940.
7. GOLOPENȚIA, ANTON (2010), *Rapsodia epistolară: Scrisori primite și trimise de Anton Golopenția (1932-1950)*, Vol II, București, Editura Enciclopedică.
8. HERSENI, PAULA (1971), *Din publicațiile Școlii Sociologice de la București*, „Sociologia Militans”, Vol. IV, Școala Sociologică de la București. București, Editura Științifică, p. 155-214.
9. HERSENI, TRAIAN (1940), *Drăguș: Un sat din Țara Oltului*, București, Imprimeria Națională.
10. HERSENI, TRAIAN (1977), *Forme străvechi de cultură poporană românească: Studiu de paleoetnografie a cetelor de feciori din Țara Oltului*, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Dacia.
11. KIDECKEL, DAVID A. (1993), *The Solitude of Collectivism: Romanian Villagers to the Revolution and Beyond*, Ithaca and London, Ed. Cornell University Press.
12. KLIGMAN, GAIL A. (1988), *The Wedding of the Dead: Ritual, Poetics, and Popular Culture in Transylvania*, Berkeley, Ed. University of California Press.
13. KLIGMAN, GAIL A. and KATHERINE VERDERY (2012), *Peasants Under Siege, The Collectivization of Romanian Agriculture, 1949-1962*, Princeton, Ed. Princeton University Press.
14. STAHL, HENRI (1936), *Vecinătățile din Drăguș*, „Sociologie românească” 1(1): p. 18-31.
15. WEINER, ANNETTE (1983), *The Trobrianders of Papua-New Guinea*, Fort Worth, Ed. Harcourt Brace Jovanovic.

