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The Interwoven Existences of Official Catholicism and Magical Practice in the Lived Religiosity of a Transylvanian Hungarian Village

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HUNGARIAN CATHOLICISM

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Photo by Kinga Povedák

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The Interwoven Existence of Official Catholicism and Magical Practice in the Lived Religiosity of a Transylvanian Hungarian Village



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INTRODUCTION

This article has two aims. First, I present a summary version of the material I have gathered during five years of ethnographic field research on the transmission of religious knowledge, especially magical practices relating to farming and agricultural production, in a rural Hungarian-speaking Transylvanian village. I examine these phenomena through the conceptual framework of “collective memory” and “religious transmission.” I show how religious knowledge and practice are transmitted directly—taught by elders—as well as acquired through an individual’s own experiences and overheard from peers and others.

Second, I highlight two different but coexisting “constructions of reality” in this rural community. By “constructions of reality,” I mean interpretations of reality expressed in narrative discourses and local magical practices that are closely and inextricably interwoven with a Catholic religious worldview.¹ By developing this picture of interpenetrating constructions of reality, I offer insight into the interconnection of religious worldviews and magic in a Catholic community. The world created by the lived practice of Catholicism is interwoven with reference and recourse to beliefs and practices associated with magic. These magical beliefs and practices accompany individuals throughout the various stages of life such that they constitute an identifiable “life strategy” that is embedded in everyday experience.² Magical procedures are present and applied in a variety of life situations. Most frequently, they are deployed in relation to the practical everyday concerns of rural agricultural production, including increasing yields, ensuring a rich harvest, holding onto good luck, and maintaining health and strength to work. Magical beliefs and practices also shape individual and collective experience during important annual events (holidays, festivals, rites of passage) and critical life situations (disease, evil spells, death, and other kinds of loss). They also aid individuals in situations when they are confronted with goals unattainable by rational means (love magic). Some of these

1 Because my goals are primarily descriptive and not theoretical, I dispense with an introductory section that weighs the various benefits or limitations of studying worldviews and constructions of reality from the history of science point of view or Clifford Geertz’s thick description approach.

2 Vilmos Keszeg, *Hiedelmek, narratívumok, stratégiák* (Cluj-Napoca: Kriza János Néprajzi Társaság, 2013), 14.

actions belong to the scenario of communal rites and take place in public, while others are of a personal, individual nature, avoiding the public sphere.

Research on local and rural religious worldviews has already been completed in several areas of the Romanian region of Transylvania. However, in the Hungarian-speaking parts of Transylvania known as the Szekler Land (Székelyföld), where a substantial middle-class population emerged much earlier and has had a greater influence on religious culture over time, research on the religious construction of reality remains uneven, which limits scholars' ability to develop a broad and general picture of the religious worldviews present in the Szekler region today.

My methodological goal is for the words of the interviewees to “gain ground,” to allow these statements to shed light on contemporary religious life as a living, functioning, and continuously adapting dimension of human existence. Accordingly, I first describe my field site and methodology, and then give a broad sketch of the character of local religious beliefs and practices. Because a religious worldview and the process of constructing reality shape even the smallest parts of everyday life in the village where I conducted fieldwork, the essay also describes concrete examples of agricultural magic that are embedded in the most basic and essential aspects of farming production.

CONTEXT OF RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

Csíkszentsimon (Sansimion) is a village in Romania's Transylvania region, laying on the left bank of the Olt River south of the closest city and the county seat, Csíkszereda (Miercurea-Ciuc). Up until the 18th century, Csíkszentsimon formed a parish together with Csatószeg (Cetatuia), but it was made up of two congregations. Its church was built between 1823 and 1835 in the honor of King Saint Ladislaus. The village also had a Catholic school, which operated from the 1860s until 1948 when the newly established communist regime nationalized religious schools throughout the country. The village's current population is 3,429 people, the vast majority of which is Catholic.³

3 There are, in addition, 39 Orthodox, 56 Protestant Calvinist, and a single Baptist practitioner in the village. Crucial to the community's identity is that József Tamás, the assistant bishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia) was raised in the village. Being aware of this also



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I utilized semi-structured and guided interviews to gather information from 68 people in total, of whom 48 were women and 20 men. Sixty-six of my respondents were Roman Catholic and two Orthodox. The eldest was born in 1919 and youngest in 1998. My interviews often dealt with sensitive information; respondents discussed practices that were either clearly proscribed by official ecclesiastical doctrine or had a semi-tolerated status. Many respondents also adopted a “subjective” style of first-person reflection about their lives and the strategies they used for transmitting religious knowledge. I also sought to adapt my interview methodology to account for this tendency. The character of the interview responses varied depending on the location, time and circumstances of the speech event. The identities and personal goals of the speakers also shaped the conversations. Besides my questions formulated during the interviews and the topics of the conversation, genres also determined the way of the conversation. For example, a different linguistic coding system (number symbolism, mythological references) is used in the magical procedure, and as the utterance replaces the action as a speech act, it is often controlled by rules (to whom, when, how one is allowed to tell it).

MAGIC AND CATHOLIC PRACTICE IN LOCAL RELIGIOSITY

Anthropologists have long recognized that religiosity often manifests itself in two alternative modalities, even if these modalities go by different names depending on the scholar’s particular perspective. Anthropologist of religion William Christian,

strengthens and unites them in their faith. An example of this: I.: "Who did you learn it from?"
K.Z.: "From my grandmother, and she learned it from her aunt whose husband was the crosier holder of Sir Áron Márton, the bishop."

who has focused much of his research on European Catholicism, identifies two levels of religiosity: universal, ecclesiastical Catholicism, which is based on the ordinances of a central ecclesiastical authority, and local Catholicism. In Christian's opinion, the most defining characteristic of religious practice is the place and time. That is, the difference is not between the religion of the elite and the masses, but between what constitutes the proscriptions of the church and what constitutes a community's substantive practice.⁴ Brian Morris argues that there is a fundamental and profound difference between world religions (such as Christianity or Buddhism) and local religions (folk religions or spirit cults); Ioan M. Lewis makes a distinction between central and peripheral cults;⁵ McKim Marriott draws attention to the great and little traditions of Hinduism; and Ernest Geller highlights variations between clerical and ecstatic religiosity in Islam.⁶ Finally, anthropologist Charles Stewart distinguishes doctrine from local religious practices. Stewart compares the relationship between these two types of religiosity to the relation of *langue* and *parole* in Saussurian linguistic theory, according to which doctrine may be merely an ideal type of religiosity or a kind of rule system. In contrast, local religiosity as such is always influenced by the broader environment and is a constantly evolving form of practical knowledge; it exists as a worldview and is enacted as personal attitudes and orientations.⁷

In the context of my research, given that my main questions concern how people interpret the world, how they experience Christian religiosity, how they adjust to changing circumstances, and how amidst all of this they try to prosper, then I adopt an approach that avoids separating what these scholars treat separately as different “doctrinal” versus “local” elements of religious life. It can be said that at my fieldsite, local religiosity encompasses both folk practice and some aspects of church dogma. As part of individual and collective knowledge, local religiosity is linked to a

4 William A. Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 176-178.

5 Ioan M. Lewis, *Estatic Religion: An anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (England: Harmondsworth, Penguin Books 1971).

6 Brian Morris, *Religion and Anthropology: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 268-270.

7 Charles Stewart, *Demons and the Devil. Moral Imagination in Modern Greek Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 10-13, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400884391>.

determinatively pragmatic attitude and mindset. Local religiosity and everyday practice are focused on interpreting experience and laying the foundation of subsequent action oriented toward one's environment. Its pragmatic function is outlined by regulations, interdictions, and suggestions; and its main end is to provide answers to the problems of human existence. Local religiosity is integrated into and becomes manifest within both workdays and the feast days when villagers take time for rest and celebration. Local religiosity is so integrated into individuals' experience that it becomes part of their identity and embedded in their particular life stories.

What became evident during my fieldwork, and what constitutes the main point of this article, is that institutional religious phenomena and folk practices are *both* part of local and individual habits. The main example I explore below, in the section on agricultural magic, is the celebration of the spring blessing of the wheat harvest, which takes the form of a procession accompanied by flags and singing. This ritual act complements another ritual form, which I also describe below—the magical act of circling the fields and asking for protection from birds and other pests.

In general, people in my fieldsite treated belief as a fundamental and universal feature of human existence. They would agree with statements like, one cannot live but have a faith. Or, everyone must accept something unquestionably as real or true. During one interview, F. T. [31-year-old man], reported, “we can only call those superstitious who pretend that they don't believe.” Others agreed with this perspective and extended the idea of belief as a fundamental human universal to the arena of agricultural magic. For instance, a 63-year-old woman, P. Sz. told me that magical acts affect only those who accept that they work: “I believe in it, and it's effective.” Many also reported that some events happen irrespective of people's presence, so individuals can decide for themselves what significance to assign to the events: “Some believe in it, others don't, but many things have happened,” a 90-year-old man named B. Gy. stated. In this way, beliefs lend meaning to events and make the world interpretable. In the words of one informant, beliefs explain “things that are inapprehensible and unexplainable.” The view that beliefs are present in life as an effect on one's circumstances and experience shapes a vividly

expressive statement by Cs. V., a 49-year-old woman who stated that, “I think, I feel that if the belief was true, that would be good for me, I guess.”

Often, when speaking about beliefs, an alienating, distancing behavior prevails. Respondents are aware that their statements are also regulated by Catholic doctrines. In the mode of discourse about magical practices, statements like, “I’m not superstitious, but I’ve read it somewhere” (Cs. D.) and “I don’t believe it, but there is something to it” (B. Gy.) are typical. In many cases, the character of the narrated stories is typically someone else, a foreigner, a neighbor, an inhabitant of another village, and its location is distant, another part of the village or a faraway space.⁸ In statements about transcendence, the supernatural powers and forces, the views of the folk religiousness interweave with the official points of view of the Church. Both of them are acceptable, that people perform in order to both accept but also distance themselves from Catholic doctrine.

CANONICAL PRAYERS AND FOLK SPELLS

As a fundamental and universal human mode of existence, praying is an element of both work and rest, days set apart for labor as well as days for celebration and feasting. In the religious mode of existence, or *homo religious*, maintaining contact with supernatural power is a fundamental necessity. Based on his fieldwork in Western Moldavia, Hungarian ethnologist Vilmos Tánzos argues that, “communication with the truest, most real being is achieved through individual prayer.” Praying, Tánzos continues, is a rite in itself and is often accompanied by physical actions: “[I]t fulfills its function by means of correctly carrying out the rite.”⁹ At my fieldsite, there are a variety of individual and collective modes for engaging in prayer. Individuals sometimes pray by themselves, children with their parents, family members and neighbors together, prayer communities collectively and, on the occasion of holy masses and feast days, the entire population of the village turns to the transcendent with a unified piety.

8 When a specific practice has been explicitly rejected by the Church, informants will use formulas like “only other people have such superstitions.” Keszeg, *Hiedelmek*, 11.

9 Vilmos Tánzos, *Csapdosó angyal. Moldvai archaikus imádságok és életterük* (Miercurea Ciuc: Pro-Print Kiadó, 1999), 245.

In my opinion, in keeping contact with the transcendent, the supernatural, praying in an ecclesiastical setting is of a *doctrinal character*, while spells abound in *imagistic* rites. While the former is characterized by recurrence, systematization, organization, the repetition of rites and dogmas, and the institutional setting, the latter can be described by words such as spontaneous, offering intense experiences, personal, emotional.¹⁰

At my fieldsite, magic and canonical styles of prayer are simultaneously parallel and also interwoven modes for maintaining contact with divine power. The ritualized character of the recitation of both prayers and spells is given by the belief in oral magic, as well as the function of the recitation. While the former magical character, more precisely the contextualized function of the substantive and formal characteristics of the prayer—shaped by canonical regulations—has ceased, the latter can be found in spells to this day. In a prayer the person addressed in every case is a divine power, while the spell's purpose is to have a direct influence on incidences. The evidence for the shared origin and common root of magic and canonical prayer lies in magical actions' ability to encompass core features of canonical prayer, most prominently when magical requests for divine assistance are directed at saints and holy people.

Thus interpretation is supported by Hungarian ethnologist Éva Pócs's definition of magic as, "a ritual technique and behavioral form that helps an individual or a group in being able to influence certain supernatural powers for the sake of a practical cause."¹¹ Ultimately, my research highlights a necessary addition to approaches to magic inspired by Pócs's definition, the need to view canonical and magical prayer as mutually conditioning and interwoven parallel systems of prayer.

Returning to the theme of religious transmission, we can see that prayer allows

10 See Harvey Whitehouse, *Inside the Cult: Religious Innovation and Transmission in Papua New Guinea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Whitehouse distinguishes between two types of religious forms: the doctrinal mode and the imagistic mode. Doctrinal religiosity includes regularly occurring, codified rites based on repetition, with a constant content and a low level of personal involvement. The imaginative form can be described by the tendency of sporadic, small-scale rites with intense emotions.

11 Éva Pócs, "Néphit," in *Népszokás, néphit, népi vallásosság. Folklor 3*, ed. Dömötör Tekla (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1990), 643.

people to engage in acts of formal didactic teaching as well as spontaneous mimicry. The imagery and strong performative character of the prayers puts an emphasis on experiencing the recitation as a rite. Out of the inventory of non-verbal communication, prayers implicate mimicry, the gaze, gesture, touch and posture, all of which are considered appropriate for transmitting emotions and attitudes. The process of religious transmission, or the act of acquiring emotions and attitudes implicit in the practice of prayer, is possible both through formal education (deliberate teaching) and implicit copying (spontaneous learning). One woman, A. K., engaged in a formal style of education when she showed me how she prays. She explained, “I put them together [my hands], I am not just talking and that’s it.” Lifting one’s eyes to the cross, as well as the use of objects indicates distancing from the outside world and makes praying into a complete physical-spiritual process. Anointing one’s forehead with holy water, placing the rosary beads on the dashboard or rearview mirror of one’s car, keeping the Miraculous Medal in one’s purse or a keychain is all part of the broader system of prayer and ritual behavior.

Many people at my fieldsite insisted that acquiring religious knowledge begins in childhood. In the words of one woman, “I learned it as a child from my mother, and they repeated it all the time at the church.” From the point of view of the practice of religion, besides family education the intense character of this life stage is strengthened by catechism at school, Bible classes, the preparations relating to the rites of coming of age (First Communion, confirmation), church liturgies and preachings. As a recitation habit, prayer is incorporated into everyday life: “Well, that’s what we got used to, we got used to it like this since we were little girls.” (F. D.) The conscious practice of religion is characteristic of adulthood, when the individual’s own system of ideas is formed, in which dogmatic knowledge interweaves with elements of folk belief.

In the material I gathered during fieldwork, the most common type of magical recitation focused on counteracting or healing diseases. Many examples of magical spells sought to cure the evil eye or forms of bewitchment that afflicted both people and animals. I recorded two texts for preparing water used to cure the evil eye. According to my informants in the Csíkszentsimon, the ritual for preparing this type

of healing water begins outside the home and in the early hours of the morning. One pulls water either three or nine times from a well in the period before the sun has risen. After collecting the water, one recites the following text:

The Blessed Virgin Mary set off through the water of the Jordan, and she found three Jewish maidens who bewitched her Holy Son. The Blessed Virgin Mary scooped water from the Jordan and cast water for his Holy Son. May water casting be as useful to *** (the name of the animal/person) as it was to the Holy Son of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

An alternative version of the text that I recorded is as follows:

The Blessed Virgin Mary set off with his blessed Holy Son./ She found 77 evils, and she asked them: Where are you going, 77 kinds of evils?/ We are going to smell the red blood/ And to split the bony flesh of C. S./ I banish you to the branches of the forest/ Find yourself a lodging.

In these prayers, the effective power of the Virgin Mary is not at all limited to the past, to a bygone mythical time following after the birth of Jesus Christ. Nor is this mode of divine power limited to a particular space in and around the course of the Jordan River. Rather, Mary's intercessory action is also effective in and effected through the act of recitation. As a text recitation, both prayers and spells are linked to time (morning, noon, evening, night), time of the day (sunrise, dawn, noon, sunset, night), occasion (disease, work), posture (kneeling, folded hands, sign of the cross, drawing a cross), repetition (three, seven, nine times) and rules (subalternation, wordlessness). The highlighted places of prayer recitation are the church, the graveyard, the chapel, crossroads, and the end of the street where a crucifix is placed. The selected place of spells is usually the family home, the yard, but it can also be some kind of frontier joining/dividing human and supernatural spaces, a field, the frontier of the village, a doorstep, a door or window.

Because such magical texts are secret, their transmission is linked to ritual rules, and they can only be transmitted according to the dictates of oral educational processes. For instance, one is allowed to teach them only to someone younger. Both magical

texts and prayers that are preserved in the community's long-term collective memory are, today, maintained through processes of oral memorization. According to Walter J. Ong, the foundation for preserving texts through oral memorization consists of thinking in "mnemonic patterns that combine easily into speech." That is, memorization operates by forming words into rhythmic and balanced configurations, including repetitions, oppositions, alliterations and assonances. Recurrent attributive structures, such as rhyming lines, syllabo-tonic versification, and symbolic content of the images, also facilitate embedding in memory.¹² In Csíkszentimón, individuals use strategies like the mechanical recitation of such texts to sediment and transmit religious knowledge. But also and just as importantly, individuals utilize the recitation of prayers on specific occasions and for particular purposes to conduct the work of transmission.

The use of written sources, in contrast, allows transmission to operate independently of memorization processes. Knowledge becomes accessible regardless of time and place, and the texts used in prayers and spells become accurately recallable in any context. At my fieldsite, I observed that numerous written religious texts (the Bible, prayer books, psalm books, and other publications) and the symbolic objects of the Church (crosses, holy water, and rosary beads) are also placed in the living space of individuals who employ magical practices. These printed texts as well as prayers transmitted by the media and consumed via the internet are all incorporated in the everyday practice of religion.

The encounter with spells as texts and ritual practices lasts through all life stages and starts first in childhood. Learning to apply and practice begins in earnest after marriage and starting a family, when concrete life situations make knowledge of traditionally accepted magical practices a vital concern. The role of expert in traditional knowledge is essentially linked to adulthood as a life stage, and associated even more clearly with being elderly. Thus, both of the ritual recitations influence physical and spiritual states, relations and connections in any stage of life.

12 Walter Jackson Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Methuen, 1982), 33-36, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203328064>.



AGRICULTURAL MAGIC

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Cecília Sándor

Agricultural labor and production were pervasive areas of concern for the people I met and interviewed while conducting fieldwork in Csíkszentimre. I came to sense that the natural environment is the foundation of their lifeways and livelihood, which helps explain my informants' preoccupation with agriculture. Their lives are closely and clearly situated in the conditions of the natural world, and they depend on this environment for their continued existence. During interviews, this connection was discussed in relation to earning a living through semi-industrialized farming as well as practices of agrarian magic and the symbolic value of land.

Based on my research, it can be said that some elements from ecclesiastical, prescribed religiosity are absent from lived religiosity. However, religious experience in the everyday life includes other aspects of official Catholic practice while also embracing many extra-ecclesiastical ideas and orientations, including many practices associated with agricultural magic. Official biblical narrative and agricultural practice come together, for example, in statements about the value of hard work and assiduousness. People in Csíkszentimre associate this value with those who use agricultural labor as a basic way of earning a living. There is a biblical precedent

for this association; agriculture is associated with the first humans who were expelled from the Garden of Eden. Quoting B. F., an 86-year-old woman, that “in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread,” doing manual labor and the belief in divine blessing provide confirmation of a biblical origin.

The boundary between magic and official ecclesiastical practice also becomes blurry in the case of ritual acts of predicting weather and harvest yields. Canonical Christian feast days and predictions relating to weather changes are closely connected during agricultural work phases. Thus, farmers graft their fruit trees on the 25th of March, the feast of Annunciation, the day of Jesus’ conception according to the teachings of the Church. Palm Sunday is the time for sowing summer flower seeds. On Good Friday, farmers bathe their animals, washing their cows, horses, and pigs before sunrise. Saint George’s Day, the 24th of April, has interwoven with getting the animals out to grass for the first time in spring. Saint Medardus’ Day is an occasion for predicting the weather: if it rains on this day, then it will rain for the next forty days. The 11th of November is the day marking the end of the farming year, when animals are brought in from the pasture. The weather of the approaching winter can be predicted from the breast bone of a goose or chicken eaten on Saint Martin’s Day. In Csíkszentstimon, a commonplace saying for Saint Catherine’s Day is, “if Catherine knocks, Christmas will splash.”

The timing and order of tasks for preparing one’s garden can be memorized according to the days of the Church year. Sowing needs to be started on Saint Rose’s Day, the 4th of September, while harvesting on Saint Anne’s Day, the 26th of July. Hoeing is forbidden on the week of Saint John’s Day, otherwise crop yields will be poor. For example, cabbage needs to be sowed on Saint Anthony’s Day, cucumber on Saint Gisela’s Day, the 7th of May, while carrot and onion in early June. Putting a hen to sit needs to be done by the housewife (it is bad luck if a man does it) on Sunday, when people come out from or go in for the mass, as a crowd brings abundance and she will have many chickens.

Another determinative element of religious activity in agricultural life is the distinction between workdays and feast days. For believers, feast days mean interdiction from work, a time for attending mass and praying. One especially devout



family in Csíkszentsimon claimed that family members refuse to work the earth in any way on Thursdays, since Saint John the Baptist's head was cut off on this day. Because his blood was shed on the ground, *they can't touch it* even if this means that weeds end up *overgrowing their garden*. The more general practice of avoiding agricultural work on feast days is expressed in the words of an informant, M. Sz., who reported, "On religious feast days, set aside by the Church, the Székelys were more godfearing than now. The most dangerous day is the feast of Peter and Paul when, without a cloud or any warning sign, the will of God struck down on a farmer, it came all at once from the sky. On Saint Elias' Day it was also forbidden to go to the fields."

It is a basic tenet of Catholicism that the land and its crops are God's gift. One cannot live without work, which encompasses both labor and rest. F. D., a 53-year-old woman's words concerning the importance of a work ethic express these basic principles:

I could give work to all the people. To all the people. Look, son, you had this much land, stand next to it, you had that much, stand next to it with your family and work! Cultivate it, you don't have to go anywhere from home. You have the opportunity to work, if you don't forget God's teaching. If the young people can learn, they should learn, and if they like to work, they should stand next to the land and hoe. They say that it is not fashionable. It will be fashionable, the good Lord created us for work.

When the farmer goes out to the field, he starts his work with making the sign of the cross, this being a precondition of his success. Before sowing, he takes off his hat, and asks for God's blessing on his handiwork. "Lord, give your blessing on my handiwork," he says, which is a known blessing request text. When leaving, as a kind of closing he says: "The good Lord shall protect the land." Along field roads, near pastures and ploughlands, residents have erected numerous crosses as means for asking for God's blessing. The inscription on one of them is: "You, man, who are passing by, greet your heavenly Saviour./ Oh, accept our heartfelt prayer, bless, protect our lands./ Keep us from hail, wind, blizzards and all harm. Amen."



Photo courtesy of
Cecília Sándor

The customs of consecrating the wheat harvest and tracing the boundaries of one's fields are composed of several ritual elements. In the spring of every year, at the canonical blessing of wheat, the village people go out to the fields in the form of a procession, to ask for God's blessing and a bountiful wheat-harvest. In addition to this more formal and ecclesiastically-approved agricultural practice, people in Csíkszentsimon also perform magical procedures aimed at counteracting dangerous forces of nature and keeping away birds that ruin crops. G. L., an old lady who has lived all of her 97 years in the local community, learned to trace the boundaries of her fields from her father. During our interview, she confessed that she herself has not been able to work her land for years. But when she was healthier and younger, she used to go out to the fields silently, holding a stake at its sharp end while saying the rosary to herself. She circled the field three times always keeping the property on her left-hand side. When she reached a corner, she recited a spell.¹³ In this interdiction, she invokes the Passion story with the image of overflowing blood and the crucified Christ's five holy wounds: "Mice, birds, do you hear me?"

¹³ She was the only person in the village I interviewed who spoke about this ritual with a sense of practical expertise.



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We haven't sown this for you, but for our own nurture. I banish you for the sake of the five holy wounds of Jesus Christ, the wedding ring of the Blessed Virgin Mary, to the branches of the forest where you don't harm anyone!"

One of the most important parts of agricultural life is the protection of domestic farm animals. An animal's milk and fat is an essential farming product, and protecting these parts of the animal is essential for those who accept the reality of the evil eye or bewitchment. According to people I interviewed in Csíkszentsimon, one method of ensuring protection is to pour the first drop of an animal's mother's milk through a stone with a hole in it in the moments following birth. Here, the stone functions as a magical object. Another procedure is cutting the nails from the feet of the newborn animal, putting the clippings in fresh milk and having the cow drink it. Some use the method of feeding an animal with a potato cut in half and dipped in milk. Illness caused by the evil eye can also be fended off by subtle or concealed actions: when a stranger enters the stall, a man turns his hat around, and a woman turns her apron inwards. One informant, F. D., claimed that she prevented such curses by shaking her hands three times under her apron and repeating to herself: "pew-pew, no evil spells." Her husband is supposed to simultaneously shift his hat three times on his head. Another practice is using a piece of chalk to draw a cross on an animal's hide, most commonly on pigs. Others tie red ribbons on their appendages to guard and protect valuable domestic farm animals.



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It can be seen in many places that, in order to keep good luck, they place a horseshoe at the left corner of farm buildings. “A horseshoe has to be put the other way around on the doorstep of the stall as, if a horseshoe is not there, those who enter take good luck out with them,” relates Gy. C., 71-year-old man. On Saint George’s Day they draw a cross on the door of the stall with garlic blessed in a liturgical setting, based on the belief that this plant keeps evil powers away. As they are objects bestowed with power by means of church ceremonies, one is allowed to take only pieces of *catkin* (popular name: pussy willow) that have been blessed into the house, or else the farm’s chickens will be barren and there will be no baby chicks born. The connection between these plants and chickens is related to the visual and tactile similarity of the pussy willow’s aments and the soft plumage of baby chicks, suggesting that the basis of this practice lies in analogic magic, or the practical act of comparison or attribution of similarity between two objects. Another example of how religious and magical spirituality are synchronically practiced and lived in the agricultural life is connected to the Christian feast day of Epiphany. On this day after the priest blesses Epiphany water in the Church, the farmers pour on the buildings with this newly blessed water and they also mixed it into the drinking water of the animals with the purpose to prevent the harm and to protect them from garbling.

As a conclusion, we may state that the teachings of the Church and the elements of folk belief, interweaving in the Catholic worldview, represent the reality of everyday human life. Sacrality, also present in agriculture, reflects the authenticity and timeliness of religion for Roman Catholic worshippers.

CONCLUSION

There is a well-known tendency in ethnographic description to present a culture and place as isolated, fixed, and static—as if they are still images or photographs. In the case of the study of agricultural magic, there is a similar tendency to refer to an eternal idyllic relation between human beings and nature. But of course the community of Csíkszentsimon is changing, and so is the relationship human beings adopt with the land. Attitudes toward agriculture and nature are changing, and my informants offered different views depending on their age, occupation and generation. One major factor in this process of change was the introduction of agricultural collectivization by the Romanian socialist state starting in the 1950s. Collectivized agricultural production transformed farming as a way of life and separated households from their land. An additional factor shaping lived religious practice today is the declining market value of agricultural produce. Following 1989 and the process of “decollectivization,” one cannot guarantee a basic level of sustenance for one’s family through agriculture alone. Starting in the 1950s, industrialized, factory-based production scheduled according to the socialist government’s five-year plans sought to establish a new worldview in communities like Csíkszentsimon. Collectivization created a pathway to replace subsistence farming with wage labor performed in factories and other spaces of industrial production. For example, many residents of Csíkszentsimon who worked at the socialist-era Starch Factory of Csíkszentsimon were unable to perform regular agricultural labor in the fields.

Despite these efforts and the evident impact industrialized production has had on the lives of people in Csíkszentsimon, it is important to highlight that following the regime change of 1989 and the redistribution of collectivized property, the older generation has returned to traditional farming. However, one should not interpret this as the reappearance of a totally alien worldview among an older generation of villagers. On the one hand, there is certainly evidence that recommends

this interpretation. Many of my informants were among those who have returned to agricultural production; they evince a commitment to modes of sacredness intertwined with laboring on the land. The material I presented above provides ample evidence that they consider themselves to be subordinate to God, and nature to be controlled by divine power. In this dualistic world view, villagers believe in transcendent power, and try to influence natural forces by prayer and magical practices. Members of the younger generation see agriculture as a business and aim to obtain abundant crops with the help of machinery and chemicals. In this effort, they try to place themselves above the ecosystem and try to dominate nature.

On the other hand, however, the two generations share some commitments and values, which are implied in their common ritual practices—some ecclesiastically-approved and others not. For both groups, the land represents an ancient heritage and should be held in respect. Whether farmers use traditional or industrialized forms of agricultural production, they stop and pray when they encounter crosses marking the boundaries of fields. The wheat blessing ceremony, overseen by the village priest on the morning of Holy Saturday, draws a group that crosses generational lines. All village farmers who raise cows, regardless of generational identification, cast holy water on their animals, and most also keep a horseshoe nailed above the door of their barns for luck.

On the surface, Csíkszentsimon is a homogeneously Catholic village. Based on my research, we may state that one primary effect of the Catholic worldview is its ability to construct a sense of truthfulness; Catholicism regulates human action and provides a specific interpretation of the world. With the knowledge it offers, both to the individual and the community, people are able to interpret events within Catholicism's system of meanings. Through its ideas, Catholicism provides an effective ground for individuals' judgment of both emotional and ethical experience, helping villagers discern whether something is acceptable or deviant and sinful.

Yet it is also clear from my interviews that when villagers adopted an everyday attitude toward religious practice, speaking about their general approach to transcendent and supernatural powers and forces, folk religiosity became interwoven with the Church's prescribed ideas and practices. The end of functionality and

effectiveness provides the basis for villagers' magical practices. If church rites do not have an adequate outcome, as in the case of the ritual circling of farmland, magical practices come to the fore, or farmers use both at the same time in a complementary mode.

The worldview being drawn is characterized by temporal syncretism: it contains the past and the present at the same time. These are simultaneously existing interpretations of reality, creating different images of the world within the same social, political, economic, and natural sphere. There are similarities and differences, but what is important is the fact that they are connected to local norms and knowledge is transmitted during socialization in the village community. The experience of the generations gone by serves as a model for those to come. Individuals make decisions based on the social habits and value system of their social environment, setting up their way of life within this framework. The Catholic world of faith, the world of knowledge and actions, is based on continuous transmission as well as face-to-face interactions across generations.

Many practices that my informants would view as magical are also connected to turning points in the human lifespan. The transition from childhood to adulthood, then from adulthood to old age results in the transformation of the approach to magical actions. The surplus of empirical and special knowledge provides status and prestige within the community. Although the different generations are privy to other worlds of life, they belong to the same community based on their system of belief: during their socialization they came across the same teachings of the Church and folk knowledge, their inventories of concepts match, with smaller or greater overlaps. Their worldview is similar, but their approach is different. Younger people often call into question the truth value and reality content of happenings and explanations. Their knowledge or the absence of it, their answers given to the questions or their negations do not vary only on generation level, but individually as well, on the level of families and groups.

But this account of religious transmission in Csíkszentsimon should not be taken to signal that patterns of folk religiousness are permanent existents. Rather, magical practices and even patterns of transmission themselves are continuously





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formed and reformed during contact with others and in the process of acquiring knowledge about the world. Religious life based on the Catholic tradition and experiencing the belief knowledge of the former generation are continuously repeated and renewed through the transmission of knowledge and recurring social practices. So there is a consistency in the present, while with modernization everything is regularly reviewed by the new information. According to the theory of the representatives of symbolic interactionism, G. H. Mead and C. H. Cooley, the self is an “interactive” concept, it is not autonomous and independent, but “is forming during the relation kept with the significant others.”¹⁴ Thus, the world of the individual “is taking shape and changing during the permanent dialogue carried on with identity models” offered by others. According to my in-depth research in a Transylvanian village, we may state that affiliation lends content to actions, and has a decisive role not only in individual acts, but also in the process of creating and recreating religious worldviews.

Decline and disappearance is one way of describing transformations in the domain of lived religiosity in villages like Csíkszentsimon. Agricultural practices are being

14 Stuart Hall, “A kulturális identitásról,” in *Multikulturalizmus*, ed. Margit Feischmidt, trans. Krisztina Farkas (Budapest: Láthatatlan Kollégium, 1997), 60–61.

especially affected by changes in patterns of social interaction, and one index of these transformations is the decline of traditional farming and related practices of agrarian magic. With the expanding of the world of life, the individuals' system of relations changes, and the forms of spells for protecting crops and animals and guaranteeing yields grow dim. The experience of individual religiousness exceeds the limits of the village's system of norms. But decline is the full story. We need to emphasize that change is disappearance and reproduction at the same time. Even if the knowledge and practice characteristic of agricultural magic loses its function and becomes part of a community's "passive memory," it will still survive for a long time and be sustained through processes of socialization, coexistence and remembrance. In other words, in parallel with technological evolution, elements of a religious and belief system of a previous era still remain, and in place of the magical knowledge and practices that are disappearing with emerging lifestyles, based on my research in Csíkszentstimon, there is evidence that rural communities will continuously recreate their own transcendent faith and beliefs.

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