

# Body, Soul, Spirits and Supernatural Communication



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BETWEEN COLLECTIVE  
AND PERSONAL MYTHOLOGY:  
ORAL NARRATIVES ABOUT MOROI WITH  
THE VLACHS OF NORTH-EASTERN SERBIA<sup>1</sup>

ANNEMARIE SORESCU-MARINKOVIĆ

**The Vlachs**

The Vlachs (*Vlasi*, as they call themselves when speaking Serbian, or *rumâni*, which is the ethnonym they use for self-identification when speaking their mother tongue) are one of the three main Romanian speaking communities in the territory of Serbia, apart from the Romanians of Vojvodina and the Bayash or Rudari, spread all over the country (for more details on the Romanian speaking communities in Serbia, see Sorescu-Marinković 2007; and Sikimić 2012). They inhabit more than one hundred villages in the north-eastern part of Serbia, along the state border with Romania and Bulgaria, and speak an archaic variant of Daco-Romanian, with a great share of neologisms from contact with the Serbian language. Almost all of them are bilingual, with only a few exceptions among the very old or very young generations, which speak either only Romanian, or only Serbian. The Vlachs do not use their native vernacular as a written language, as they are exclusively schooled in Serbian, nor do they have a tradition of literacy in their native dialect. Vlach tales and legends have not been preserved in writing, either; most of this immense corpus exists so far only in oral form.

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## The Vlach mythology, a system at the border of two cultures

The Vlach community of north-eastern Serbia has evolved for generations at the border of two distinct cultures—Romanian and Serbian—which is why the traditional culture and the system of mythological beliefs encountered here are highly archaic and conservative, and characteristic of this region. As for the importance of the Romanian substrate and of Slavic influences on the Vlach mythological system, we must note that, over time, researchers have detected numerous genetic or typological similarities, affinities and kinship between Romanian and Serbian mythologems. Some of these have been signalled by Romanian folklorists, other by Serbian, however, unfortunately, neither Romanian nor Serbian folkloristics has any systematic studies in this field.

If by *mythology* we understand only a rigorously constituted system, with a unitary conception about the world and with its topics adopted by the literature and art of that particular culture (as, for example, in Egypt, China, Ancient Greece, Scandinavia etc.), then we cannot talk of a Vlach mythology as an autonomous system. But not all mythologies have converted into mythographies, and many have survived only in the oral folkloric or religious tradition. In this respect, we can say that there exists a Vlach mythology, with a specific profile, which resulted from an extensive and very tortuous historical syncretism. However, a few observations must be made. The Vlachs have no *mythical geography* with well delimited borders, as in the big mythologies of the world. Its sacred space overlaps with *this world*, which borders on *the other world*, and sometimes spheres of contact appear. This mythological universe is not coordinated by a pantheon or a God, but is rather populated by—as some folklorists call them—*minor mythological beings*, some benefic, other malefic. Kernbach's observation regarding the first conceptual pillar that Romanian mythology relies on can also be applied to the mythological universe of the Vlachs: "The relationship of the human with the uncontrollable and unknown supernatural is very cautious, because the unseen world, inhabited by vaguely personified spirits, be they anthropomorphic (like Fairies), hagiographic (like the Christian saints whose personalities were reformulated into pagan portraits) or teratologic (like dragons and devils), engages in a battle with the humans without the direct interference of destiny or of any predestination of divine source. Thus, all these characters are not able to form a true pantheon of worshipped and feared gods, but form a dismantled supernatural society,

with which the Romanian peasant can have peer relationships” (Kernbach 2002, 205).

As far as Vlach mythology is concerned, it would be more accurate to say that we cannot talk of a single *mythology*, but of a set of mythological texts which come from different narrators. As such, we can notice that the mythological universe of the Vlachs is formed from a series of overlapping and intersecting variants, of blank or shadowed spaces, of repetitions and redundancies, the resulting image of which is highly protean (Hedeşan 2005, 15).

### Field material

This study is based on the field material we have recorded between 2002 and 2009 in several Vlach villages of north-eastern Serbia, during semi-structured interviews on mythological themes. In this period, we accumulated material of a rather extended and diverse nature on mythological themes (different narratives on mythological themes, personal information, beliefs, legends, charms and incantations etc.), which is contradictory and uneven, fragmented and repetitive, but fascinating in its substance.<sup>2</sup> If we read these texts carefully, we notice that we cannot speak of a “robot portrait” of any of the supernatural beings; both physical descriptions and the way people talk about them are remarkably different and do not follow a distinct pattern (to give just one example, we can say that verbal taboos function in parallel with extensive stories about various demonic characters). Differences are great not only from one region to another, from one place to another, but also over the territory of the same village or from respondent to respondent. The characters that appear in mythological texts often have fluid outlines and interchange their roles. As Romanian folklorist Ion Cuceu has noted, “mythical representations, legends and superstitious stories” are placed, more than any other narrative categories, in “the area of the diffuse” (Cuceu 1999, 165). They seem to form “eternal quicksand where surface figures never appear twice—or only by absolute chance—while underneath, strict rules and ordering symbols command” (Hedeşan 2000, 13).

Based on texts recorded so far in the field, we can see that in the Vlach villages of north-eastern Serbia a mythology with specific features

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<sup>2</sup> For the Vlachs, mythology and demonology are not taboo topics; on the contrary, they can be approached with great ease in the field (Otilia Hedeşan suggestively described this society as a society “craving for horror”), unlike the Serbian environment, which is, generally speaking, more reluctant.

emerges. In the mythological inventory of this community one can find mythological beings known both in Romania and in the Slavic environment in which the community has developed over the past centuries. Three demonic beings that appear in the repertoire of all the Vlach respondents (as well as those in Romania, Serbia and throughout the Balkans) are *ursitoarele* (fairies who establish the destiny of the newborn), *zmăul* (a dragon-like creature which torments and tortures young girls) and *moroiul* (ghost; wandering soul)—connected to three important periods in human life: birth, adulthood (its erotic side) and death. These mythological beings can be classified as *active demons*, as they are talked about in the present, from personal experience, and the practices meant to annihilate or to “appease” them are still alive today (e.g. the ritual meal for the *ursitoare* prepared three days after the birth of a child; the incantations designed to cast away *zmău* and the rituals for their annihilation; the apotropaic practices which developed from the belief that the deceased can return as a *moroi*).

## **Moroi and its equivalents in Romanian, Serbian and Vlach mythology**

### **Strigoi in Romanian mythology**

Romanian folk beliefs centred on the *strigoi* can be encountered in all the regions of Romania, which is proof of the vitality of this mythological representation. Romanian folklorist Otilia Hedeşan, in her book *Seven essays about strigoi*, made a well-documented review of the terms used to refer to this mythological representation—*strigoi*, *moroi*, *priculici*, *boscoroi*, *vampir*—, and concluded that the arhilexeme *strigoi* established multiple connections with the terms in its semantic field: *moroi* and *boscoroi* are regionalisms, while *vampir* is a neologism, which serves as proof of the geographic and historical amplitude of this domain (Hedeşan 1998, 16). The terms used to refer to the vampire in Romanian are numerous: *strigoi*, *moroi*, *priculici*, *boscoroi*, *vampir*. This synonymic series indicates the existence of an extremely rich mythological complexity, with a huge power to absorb information from diverse sources.

In Romanian folk mythology, the *strigoi* is usually of two types: the dead *strigoi* (*strigoiul mort*) and the living *strigoi* (*strigoiul viu*). The dead *strigoi* represent, almost always, seemingly dead people whose bodies do not decay, because they had two souls (the good one left the body after death, while the evil one stayed there) or because their souls came back to the body at a certain date after death (Taloş 2001, 165). The dead *strigoi*

can also be people who did not receive a proper funeral, became lost on the way between this and the other world or lacked the money to pay their way there (Ghinoiu 2001, 183). According to the beliefs, they torment their relatives, come back and ask for food, drink or clothes, may transform into cats, dogs, pigs, goats or other animals, as well as into insects, flames, lights or shadows, and then disappear with the dawn. In order for a dead person not to become a *strigoi*, the body is subject to certain ritual practices (Taloş 2001, 166).

The living *strigoi* are living people with a clear identity, who were conceived incestuously or on a holiday, children born with a tail or with the placenta on their head. They may become invisible, may bring about epidemics, steal men's virility, "tie" and "un-tie" rain, steal cows' milk etc. Protection against *strigoi* includes anointing doors, windows and gates with garlic and adorning them with lovage, dewberry and beech branches (ibid., 167).

The most important contribution to the completion of the "strigoi encyclopedia" in Romanian traditional culture is that of folklorist Tudor Pamfile, who, in *Mythology of the Romanian people*, aims to achieve a complete picture of this mythological character. The author scrupulously records beliefs about the birth of living and dead *strigoi*, registers the key moments of the funerary and post-funerary ritual, which have an important role in maintaining the integrity of the deceased, cites evidence which attests the age of the beliefs in *strigoi* and so on, publishing an impressive series of narratives which have as their central character the *strigoi* (Pamfile 2006, 569–619).

### **Vampir in Serbian mythology**

Generally, the Serbian and Slavic beliefs about this kind of creature overlap with the Romanian ones, as they stem from a much wider, Balkan cultural background. In Serbia we can also encounter the belief in living and dead *vampiri*. The dead *vampir* returns home, makes a big noise in the house, and attacks people and livestock. *Vampiri* can appear at any date, but they usually "return" in the winter, between Christmas and Ascension. They are first sensed by dogs, which bark and try to hide, then by horses and oxen, which neigh, bellow and try to escape from the yoke. The *vampir* can transform into different animals, but can also be invisible. It generally shows up at night and returns to its grave when the cocks begin to crow. It can continue to maintain sexual relations with its wife, and the child resulting from such a relationship has the power to see vampires and kill them (Tolstoj and Radenković 2001, 61–2).

Romanian dictionaries state that the term *vampir* comes from French, while French etymologists argue that the French term comes from German, where it entered from a Slavic idiom—from Serbian, according to some authors, or from Old Polish, according to others, while other researchers believe that its origins must be sought in Russian (Hedeşan 1998, 14). The Serbian area is also full of controversies related to the etymology of this word. However, it is generally accepted that in Serbian the original form *upir* was replaced with *vampire*, probably in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, while at the end of the seventeenth century the Serbian word entered into Western Europe (Kulišić et al. 1998, 75). The Serbian *vampir* has a linguistic family of impressive amplitude: a *vampirić* is a “butterfly coming out of the mouth of a vampire, in which the full power of the vampire resides”, a *vampirović* is a “baby born from an earthly woman’s relationship with a vampire”, a *vampirče* is a “baby born out of a relationship between a woman and a vampire, and who has the ability to recognise and kill vampires”, while *vampirdžija* means “person who can see and kill vampires” (ibid., 75).

### Moroi with the Vlachs

Most scholars who have studied the Vlachs of north-eastern Serbia have been fascinated with the complicated cult of the dead of this community, the ritual funerary and post-funerary practices and the complex system of *pomanas* (funeral and post-funeral ritual offerings). Many have also mentioned the strong belief in *moroi*. Probably the first to mention the Vlachs’ beliefs in *moroi* was the physician Stevan Mačaj, who, in the 1870s wrote that one of the apotropaic measures against the deceased transforming into *moroi* was to place a spindle by its head (Mačaj 1966, 64). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the renowned Serbian ethnographer Tihomir Đorđević, after extensive field research in the Vlach village of Valakonje, made a number of additions to this comment. He wrote that Vlachs believe that the following categories of people can transform into *moroi*: those who were destined to do so at the moment of birth, those who died on Tuesdays, Thursdays or Saturdays, or those who were passed over by an animal while lying in the coffin. He also noticed the belief that *moroi* can eat the heart of an adult, child or animal, but had no power over those born on Tuesdays, Thursdays or Saturdays (Đorđević 1906, 286). Đorđević also supplied some legends about *moroi*, collected in the locality, as well as an incantation with the role of preventing the dead one from turning into a *moroi*. He also mentioned the practice of burning

with a hot iron old people who struggled too much on their deathbed, so that they did not transform into *moroi* (ibid., 288).

The Vlach ethnologist Paun Es Durlić, in a recent study on the cult of the dead, stresses the difference between the living *priculiš*, who “destroys” the livestock by sucking their blood and who tortures children in their bed, and the real *moruoñ*. The ethnologist notes that these beliefs are similar to the Serbian ones, but are more elaborate and widespread: “If all the vampires in Europe were to unite in a single image, it would be pale in comparison to the one the Vlachs have about these demons” (Durlić 1995, 239). Another Vlach ethnologist, Slavoljub Gacović, in a 1985 study on the beliefs in returning souls from his native village of Halovo, made the same distinction between *pricolici*, the living ghost, who mostly visits his living wife, and *moroi*, the dead ghost, mentioning that both of them are capable of transforming into white dogs, rabbits, goats, donkeys, and can frighten their family by taking human form (Gacović 1985, 80).

### Field context

Ideally, the audio recordings in the field should be made during “storytelling sessions”, so as to grasp the very act of narrating, when the narrator is in direct contact with the group of listeners and interacts with other storytellers. In this respect, Romanian theoretician Mihai Coman has noted that “The socio-cultural context creates the necessity of producing a story and, at the same time, determines its kind, setting it in a certain genre of oral literature. If I refer to context as a key factor that does not mean we have to see it as a term with “metaphysical value”, it is not a blind, absolute, independent force; on the contrary, it is the “place” of an (always lost and regained) balance between the concrete elements of a society and culture, between the community and individuals, between tradition and innovation, between centrifugal and equalising tendencies, between the particular case and the existing cultural pattern, between the epic repertoire and social requirements and so on” (Coman 1985, 123).

Romanian folklorist Şeuleanu notes that, in artificial situations created by the researcher, in front of the researcher and recorder, “not sensing the pulse of the auditorium, or its unforgiving control” (Şeuleanu 1995, 109), the narrator does not feel at ease and is tempted to simplify the narrative, to avoid some episodes or add others. Even if such storytelling sessions are becoming increasingly rare, I had the chance to record a series of narratives on mythological themes during two such sessions in the Vlach villages; however, the subsequent transcription of texts was very difficult because of the multitude of voices involved in the act of storytelling. The

resulting text is fragmentary, with many additions, redundancies, withdrawals, and repetitions, but can be a valuable material for studying the way in which popular prose is created and transmitted, as well as the permanent change of roles between audience and narrator. Analysing the communicative situation of mythological texts, Russian folklorist Levkieskaja mentions that they are most often narrated in the evening, in the free time of the narrators or at a certain calendar date, and the participants have, most of the time, a similar level of knowledge. Storytelling qualities and mythology related information held by an individual can influence their social status and prestige in the community. This is called by the Russian researcher a *co-authorial communicative situation* (Levkieskaja 2006).

As for the interviewees in the Vlach villages, we have usually selected them from among older generations: the few elders who still inhabit these villages automatically transformed into our interlocutors. As massive migrations abroad have practically emptied the Vlach villages, the impressive mansions which were built by the younger generations as a symbol of prosperity in foreign lands remain empty most of the year and the migrants return to their native homes only around Christmas and a few weeks in the summer.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows we will try to illustrate the way in which the respondents talk about the *moroi*. They mainly talk about them either in the first person singular, from their own experience, which includes them in the category of *memorates*, or in the third person, reproducing the already existing texts which circulate within the community for generations, the *fabulates*. On most occasions these narratives fit in with the widely spread Balkan patterns, which are encountered both in Serbian and Romanian folklore, as the Vlach system of beliefs has developed at their confluence, as we mentioned at the beginning.

### **Narratives about moroi as an active demon**

The *moroi*, as it appears in the narratives of the Vlachs, can be categorised, in most cases, as an active demon: the respondents talk about it in the present, from personal experience, and the apotropaic magic intended to protect the individual is still alive today. Most of the time, the *moroi* returns to a familiar space (the house, yard, at the window, in the stable), its presence being revealed by a series of sounds which correspond to its actions: pounding, yelling, tipping, banging, knocking, hitting, tapping etc.

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<sup>3</sup> For details regarding the so-called *prestige games* of Vlach migrants to Western Europe, see Schierup and Ålund 1986; Sorescu-Marinković 2005.

The image of the *moroi*, as it stems from the memorates of our respondents, is very far from the quasi-hollywoodian image of the Transylvanian vampire who sucks blood. We have recorded no narrative of this type in north-eastern Serbia. Except for the sounds the *moroi* produces, it can at most frighten the livestock or people or torment children by casting the evil eye upon them. Thus, we believe the best equivalent term for *moroi* would be *ghost* or *wandering soul*.

Sometimes, *moroi* torment children by transforming into different animals:

I1: It happened to me. And I didn't have any dead relative, I don't know what to say. When he was a baby. I was weaving, at the barn, up in the mountains [...] I fed the cattle, and the child was with me, playing. But after that he was crying all night long. My mother tried to cast off the evil eye, because she knew how to do it.

I2: Yes.

I1: But the child wouldn't stop crying. What could I do, it was winter, I couldn't go to the doctor [...]. It was night, but the moon was shining very bright. [...] I was thinking what to do, I couldn't sleep. But the child fell asleep in the end. And then a cat came. In the village, my elder daughter had a big cat, five kg, with a big yellow head.

I2: Yes (laughs).

I1: It was that fat! And I saw it, in the moonlight. It jumped up onto the bed. I forgot I was not in the village, but at the barn. It came to me, because we all loved that cat. And when it jumped up onto the bed, I realised: Wait, this is not our house, how could this cat come all this way? And I hit it with my hand: Bang! It fell down. At that moment, the child started to cry.

I2: Oh my God!

I1: The child was only one year old. And the grandmother was very tired: I can't sleep with this child anymore, what should we do? Wake up, I said, the vampire has come to the child. How? It was here. How, what? That fat cat with the big head. It was here, it wanted to sleep here. And she woke up and cut a piece of wood from the door: Dear God, the one who believes in the cross should come to the cross. And she started to cast smoke around. She also smoked the child and it stopped crying. So it was not necessary to go to the doctor anymore (Urovica village).

Often the *moroi* returns to his household and wife. The animals recognise him, but the wife gets frightened and curses him, which makes him disappear. Sometimes, when the wife is "visited" at night by the deceased husband, the border between *Eros* and *Thanatos* gets blurred and the image of the vampire overlaps with that of the *zmău* / *zburător*.



Fabulates about living wandering souls are more numerous and anchored in the real, familiar space than those about dead *moroi*. The living *moroi* are people who have long been on their deathbed, but cannot die, and whose souls are wandering, while their body lies in bed:

I1: A *moroi* is something else. One can be a *moroi* and be still alive...

I2: If he lies for a long time, if he is ill for long and cannot walk, he transforms into a *moroi*. His soul is wandering, but his body is lying in bed.

I3: He is lying and is still alive. This didn't happen with my parents. After they died, I didn't see them any longer.

I1: Well, it happened with old Mila. [...] My mother was ill for twelve years, confined to her bed.

(Oh my God!)

I1: She couldn't get up on her feet. One summer, my son came home late in the evening. When he jumped over a fence, he felt something like the wind blowing. Like somebody stepping on dry leaves. There was something making sounds. He looked around, but could not see anything. But he felt something like a man walking and the wind blowing. And he entered the room. His grandmother was lying in bed. And I asked him: Do you want to eat? And he started eating and told me what happened. [...] And I immediately understood that the old one had transformed into a vampire. So I rushed, grabbed fire and incense [...] She started to struggle, covered her head with the blanket. My son couldn't move, he couldn't believe his eyes. Next morning it was Saint Peter's Day, July 12<sup>th</sup>, summer. I slaughtered a chicken and cooked lunch, as it is the custom to make *pomana* offerings prepared with chicken. And I put the lunch beside her, on the chair. And she started telling me that there was a man in her room and she couldn't recognise him. But I replied: Mother, don't you lie to me. Didn't you meet S. by the fence? She hasn't uttered a word since.

I2: She saw that...

I1: She saw that... I suppose. [...] Danka came and we cut a piece of her sandal off and went to the river to drown her, if she was a *moroi*, to throw her into the water. Before the girl came back home, the old one had fainted and died. I rushed to grab the candle, but I didn't even have time to weep, she died all of a sudden. And she was dead for some time, then woke up and said: Danka did this to me, she drowned me.

I2: Oh, dear God! She did see her (Valakonje village).

### Narratives about *moroi* as a legendary character

Apart from the memorates, which are strongly anchored in the familiar space of the respondents and relate events witnessed by real persons, *moroi* can also appear in a series of texts (fabulates) which are structurally very close to the legend. Real persons are replaced by generic ones

(*priculan, his wife, a woman, somebody*), the time of the events is also characteristic for the legend (*a long time ago, once upon a time*), while the space (Romania or Bulgaria) is close enough for the story to seem real, but far enough for the micro-landmarks to fade completely. The following narrative combines two motifs: that of *moroi viu* (the living *moroi*) who returns to this world and goes on living and that of the man transformed into a dog (*priculan*), who attacks his wife, but is later recognised and “annihilated” with incense:

*Moroi viu...* Yes, the dead one can transform into *moroi viu*. It was a long time ago... You are from Romania, right? (laughs) From Romania? He died there and transformed into a *priculan*. He had a slaughterhouse there. And he and his wife went to bring wood, by cart. His wife was leading the oxen, in front of the cart. And he transformed into a dog and showed himself like that to his wife. And he started to bark, and he barked and barked, and when she got really frightened he disappeared. And when he came back as her husband again, she told him about the dog. But the dog had torn her skirt. She had a red skirt. And she saw red pieces of her skirt between her husband’s teeth. And she went home and told everything to a neighbour. And he said: he is a *priculan*. And he said: You should put incense in the fire. And she put incense in the fire when he was asleep. And he transformed into jelly. *Priculan*. Yes, it was like this, a long time ago (Urovica village).

## Conclusions

With the Vlachs, the beliefs in vampires are still alive today: vampires are both textual and extratextual creatures. The transcripts of the narratives reveal that the vampire is part of the collective mythology of the informants, but it also belongs to the personal mythological systems of each and every participant. We can ask ourselves what the fate is of the memorates about vampires. Even if they are not collective creations, most of them are relating similar experiences, following the same textual pattern, and thus they have the potential to become, at one moment, a collective asset, and to penetrate into the repertoire of the community. It has been shown before that the memorates, which are individual creations par excellence, through the process of fabulation, may become a collective asset, transforming into a fabulate or collective memorate.

As a general conclusion, we can add that the perspectives of our Vlach interlocutors on the supernatural beings and on the happenings they are narrating about vary considerably. Some of them chose to be simple narrators, others distant spectators, happy to pass on a certain tradition,

while others are active readers, who try to find meaning in all their narrations.

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