Lakes and Cultures: Water in the Romanian Medical Folklore

Cornelia Petroman, I. Petroman and Georgeta Rață
Agricultural and Veterinary University, 119, Calea Aradului, Timișoara, Romania,
E-mail: c_petroman@yahoo.com, i_petroman@yahoo.com, georgeta_rata@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to show the importance of water in Romanian medical folklore. The study area is the field of folk beliefs concerning the humans - water relationship. The method is a descriptive one. The results show that: water has special effects on the human anatomy and physiology; lack of water may be the origin of diseases; water can annihilate the bad effects of humans’ deeds; the word “water” appears in names of diseases; water is a medium preventing disease and bad deeds; water is used in the treatment of diseases and in mimicry magic; water can transfer diseases to earth, water bodies, etc.; water is used in symbolic acts to chase away disease, to tight or lock diseases, and to scare the evil. The conclusion: since these beliefs are part of some very interesting Romanian local traditions (e.g. Drăgaica, Paparudele, and Sânzienele) they should be included in eco- and rural tourism activities.

Keywords: water, Romanian folk medicine, traditions.

INTRODUCTION

Water from lakes, marshes, wells, and other water bodies has always played an important role in Romanian medical folklore. Thus, folk beliefs contain a series of restrictions concerning the effect of water on the human body and on its physiological functions. The origin of diseases lies in the disrespect for elementary hygienic or hospitable rules, and in the lack of precipitations. Charms, spells, and magic rely on water as a medium for annihilating the bad effects of humans’ deeds. Water is so omnipresent in humans’ life that even diseases are sometimes given names containing the word “water”. Nevertheless, water is also a disease preventing medium and a medium preventing people from doing certain deeds. It is used by priests as a sacred cure in curing diseases, and by medicine people in mimicry magic, in charming away by magic words associated with fresh water. Water also serves as a way to carry away diseases to the earth, to other water bodies, or to different objects. It is also used in other symbolic acts meant to chase away disease, to tight or lock diseases, and to scare the evil.

All these beliefs related to the importance and uses of water under different forms are also part of some very interesting Romanian and/or Balkan traditions (e.g. Drăgaica, Paparudele, and Sânzienele) that have started to be included in eco- and rural tourism activities, but this is still a trend that needs to be strengthened through well designed programmes if we need it to become a staple attraction point of any form of tourism related to the rural environment (agri-tourism, country tourism, cultural tourism, farm tourism, heritage tourism, on-farm tourism, pick-your-own tourism, rural tourism, school tourism, village tourism) and not only.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

We have surveyed the role water from lakes, marshes, wells, and other water bodies, has played in Romanian medical folklore: restrictions concerning the effect of water on the human body, on its physiological functions; water as the origin of some diseases because of the disrespect for elementary hygienic or hospitable rules, and of the lack of precipitations; water as a medium for annihilating the bad effects of humans’ deeds; names of diseases containing the word ‘water’; water as a disease preventing medium and a medium preventing people from doing certain deeds; water used by priests as a sacred cure in curing diseases, and by medicine people in mimicry magic, in charming away by magic words associated with fresh water; water as a way to carry away diseases to the earth, to other water bodies, or to different objects; water used in other symbolic acts meant to chase away disease, to tight or lock diseases, and to scare the evil.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. As far as Human Anatomy is concerned, there are good effects on the face (one should wash his/her hair with water in which Easter eggs were reddened if he/she wants to have a red cheeked face; women wishing to have a white, glowing complexion should wash their face with water from the rainbow tail), and bad effects on the height (children bathed in water brought in the day before, or in water from small mugs stop growing), on the nails (nails should not be thrown away, but collected, otherwise they will serve to the building of bridges in the realm of shadows), on the feet (if you dry your feet after washing them you get unlucky; if you wash your feet...
in the bathing water of another person, this person will get a headache.

From the point of view of Human Physiology, there are good effects on hiccupping (Romanians, as well as Italians, Germans, and Slovaks, are given a glass of water to drink all in one breath; Romanians are given brook mint infusion to drink, while Ukrainians are given a few drops of curl mint brandy on a sugar lump and some water to drink with it). Spitting after bathing is bad (the evil can get the spit and harm you), and so is spitting into the water, since it is purifying (Romanians who spit into the well get leucoma), but epileptics should spit into any body of water to get rid of the disease. Spitting and blowing after baptising a baby can draw the evil away, and so does breathing while crossing a body of water on a Tuesday or on a Saturday, if you want to chase away evil eyes. But fresh water from a spring, well, running water, or watermill water drops is also used to put away embers: the sick person then has to drink the water, and is rubbed with it on the head, on the heart, and on the wrists; the remaining water is spilled over a fence or a door hinge, or on a dog or a cat, thus passing on the sickness.

Water in general, spring, and well can act as evil eyes. But fresh water from a spring, well, running water, or watermill water drops is also used to charm or to sicken somebody.

Water is so omnipresent in humans’ life that even diseases are sometimes given names containing the word “water”: thus, “black water” is the name for glaucoma, “water (disease)” is the name for dropsy, and “white water” is the name for leucoma.

Bathing on certain days protects you or cures you from any disease:

2. Rain Calling is done by throwing an icon or the wooden or metal plate sounded to call the people to church into a well, or by throwing a (drunkard’s) tomb cross into a river, pond, or lake; or by sprinkling the gypsies, the cats, and the dogs with water from the well; or by throwing the dead body of a drunkard into a river.

In different parts of the world, there have been practices meant to make divinity or the different deities send rain to the earth. According to Petronius, two thousand years ago, matrons would climb the mountains barefoot, their hair not combed, and their soul unspoiled, to beg Jupiter for rain. Nowadays, Romanians, as well as other European peoples, carry icons, relics of saints, or banners in processions to the field, while priests beg for rain.

The most efficient way to get rain is rain calling or rainmaking. It is an attempt to supernaturally induce or increase rainfall (precipitation), usually to stave off drought, through rain dances – ceremonial dances performed in order to invoke rain and to ensure the protection of the harvest.

Various interpretations of these rain dances can be found in different cultures, from Ancient Egypt and certain Native American tribes (the Cherokee tribes performed them to both induce rainfall and to cleanse evil spirits from the earth) to the present Balkans, where the ritual is known as Băbăudă, Băbâruţa or Mămăruţă (in the Hunedoara County), Măţăluţă, Muma Plöiu (in Țara Moților, in Transylvania), Papalugară, Papalunga (in Dimitrie Cantemir’s Descriptio Moldavie and in the County of the Târnave of present day Romania), Paparudă (in the Romanian historical provinces Moldova, Muntenia, and Oltenia), Paparunga, Păprădă, Peperuia, or Pipirudă at Romanians, Pipirună at Aromanians, Pipiruna at Greeks, and Peperuda,
Peperuga, or Perperuna at South Slavs. The name Paparuda is probably derived from either the south Slavic goddess Peperuna or from a local divinity of the Thracian substratum. This custom is also called Dodola, Dodoloaia and Dodolita (in Crișana), Dudula, and Dudulica (cf. Albanian Dudulë, Greek Tuntule, and South Slavic Didilya, Dodole, and Dudulya), the name of Dodola being possibly cognate with the Lithuanian word dundulis 'thunder'. This rain ritual is called Caloian, Iene, or Scaloan in Dobrudja, Moldova, and Oltenia, and is celebrated during the time of severe drought or when there is too much rain. In this case, young girls and boys make a doll or several dolls of clay and cloth adorned with flowers, painted egg shells, and candles and a cross – namely either 'Mother of the Rain' or 'Father of the Sun', depending on the purpose of the ritual – that are buried with the traditional burial near some well. Three days later, the doll is dug out and thrown in a deserted well or in bodies of water to stir the weather and bring the rain. In this case, there is no water sprinkling.

In Romania, rain dances – that attempt to increase rainfall and, though there is no evidence that this has ever worked, the ritual is surprisingly persistent with such Romanian ceremony known as paparuda or paparudele (plural form) continuing to the present day.

Paparuda is a Romanian rain ritual, probably of pagan origin. This is a tradition that does not have a fixed date, but is dictated by the necessities of agricultural production, by the calendar of agricultural works. Therefore, it is performed in the spring on a date that varies from place to place and in times of severe drought. In some cases, there is a rather fixed date for it – the third Tuesday, Thursday, or Sunday after Easter, in Mâcin (in Dobru[d]ja), any of the first nine Thursdays after Easter, or the same day as Caloianul – but as a general rule it is performed in June or till late July, if necessary. Though still widely spread between the two Wars, it is disappearing nowadays. It is still performed in certain places, such as Mâcin (in Dobru[d]ja), and in other villages in southern and south-eastern Romania.

The ritual varies from village to village, but all the variants have a ceremonial sequencing. The scenario is quite simple: a pure person (a young girl in Southern Romania and a child – be it a girl in Moldavia or a boy in Transylvania) dressed in green crosses the village singing and dancing while housewives sprinkle water over her and offers gifts. Hundreds of years ago, the villagers of Moldova would dress a girl aged below ten in a dress made of leaves and grasses (weeds): accompanied by boys and girls of her age, she would then cross the village singing and dancing. Old women would sprinkle her or them with cold water. In some parts of the country, children knit coronets, adorning them with ribbons. Then they dance, going from house to house. The hostess throws water and milk after them. The children and the young people have to receive a coin or wheat, corn, flour or bean. In other parts of the country, a young girl, wearing a skirt made of fresh green knitted vines and small branches (in Moldova, covered in leaves of dwarf elder – body and head), sings and dances through the streets of the village, stopping at every house, where the hosts pour water on her. She is accompanied by the people of the village who dance and shout on the music. The custom has attributed a specific type of dance and a specific melody. Elsewhere, two girls or a group of girls, naked or wearing a skirt made of young branches of willow or alder, would cross the village singing, dancing, and clapping their hands. The villagers would then sprinkle them with water. In other parts, little girls and unmarried young girls accompany a girl representing a kind of vegetal deity adorned with leaves and flowers. In the Bistrița-Năsăud County and in the Hunedoara County (Transylvania), it is a boy called “bloc” or a young man dressed in leaves. Nowadays, this tradition is being carried out by young Gypsy girls who undress, then put small coronets of dwarf elder on their heads, cover themselves with red ribbons, decorate themselves with gold or silver necklaces, and start going from house to house. An elder Gypsy woman sings the slow song of the ritual, while the girls dance snapping their fingers, clapping their hands, and saying “Ha! Ha!” to mock the nature. Housewives sprinkle them with water or milk which the gypsies fake to avoid. There is bad luck for the houses not visited by the gypsies. The plants used to cover their bodies are healing plants, but not after the ritual day. Only true papardu – dressed in leaves and weeds and covered by dwarf elder branches) bring about the rain. Paparuda generally closes with the burial of the vegetal coronet representing the death of the persona, followed by a feast and by gift distribution.

If paparuda is always accompanied by sprinkling, caloianul never involves water sprinkling, while in Christmas carols is only announced, never performed. Perfume sprinkling is customary on Palm Sunday and on Easter Monday, to call for abundance.

CONCLUSIONS

Water from lakes, marshes, wells, and other water bodies has always played an important role in Romanian medical folklore.

According to these beliefs, the origin of diseases (often associated with famine and death) lies in both the disrespect for elementary hygienic (personal) or hospitable (towards Pest or wicked fairies) rules, and in the lack of precipitations. During the millennia, folk culture has developed its own ways of fighting drought. Among them, such very interesting Romanian local traditions (e.g.
Drăgaica, Paparudele, and Sânzieni) that have already started to be included in eco- and rural tourism activities developed in the neighbourhood of water bodies and water courses, a trend that needs to be strengthened through well designed programmes.

REFERENCES

www.antrec.ro
www.eco-romania.ro
www.infotravelromania.ro
www.romaniantourism.ro
www.turismrural.ro