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The Mystery of Vlach Magic in the Rural Areas of 21st century Serbia

Abstract

This article offers an ethnographic exploration of the Vlachs in the Branicevo region of Serbia. The Vlachs rarely exist anywhere as a distinct ethnic group due to their permanent assimilation with other ethnic groups. The thing that has always been linked to the folklore of the Vlachs and still attracts a large number of people to come and visit some remote parts of Eastern Serbia is definitely a certain mystery which represents the essential part of the culture of this nation. Instances of Vlach magic can be seen in the Timok area, all over Eastern Serbia and across its borders. Vlach magic is a miracle or is miraculous, when looking at how long it has been present, its unique rituals, beliefs, shamans and spells.

Vlach culture intertwined with pagan customs and interesting rituals, makes the municipalities in Eastern Serbia mysterious places in modern 21st century Europe, because the Vlachs are a mostly closed (endogamous) population which do not blend with people of other nationalities.

Keywords: beliefs, magic, culture, Vlachs, Serbia.

Introduction

Most municipalities within the Branicevo region are considered to be among the most underdeveloped parts of Serbia, and have always represented a mysterious area, full of mysticism. The eastern part of Serbia invites people to explore and get to know it better, perhaps due to the Vlachs who have managed to preserve their culture and traditions, without giving up on them, even in the 21st century. The Vlachs rarely exist anywhere as a distinct ethnic group due to their permanent assimilation with other ethnic groups. In recent history, most of them inhabited the eastern parts of Serbia.

The thing that has always been linked to the folklore of the Vlachs and which still attracts a large number of people to come and visit some remote parts of Eastern Serbia is definitely a certain mystery which represents the essential part of the culture of this nation. The Vlach population respects pagan customs and believes in so-called “black” and “white” magic. This phenomenon is characterized by the presence of a large number of rituals taking place in various places (rivers, streams, forests, crossroads..) depending on the purpose of the magical deed. Believing in magic is characteristic for people living in this area, but also attracts people from different parts of Serbia and Europe who come to visit the local women who are popularly believed to possess a “shamanistic talent.”

Branicevo region is unique due to the richness of the two cultures, Serbian and Vlach, which are intertwined and which, each in its own way, make this region an interesting part of Serbia. This phenomenon provides a great cultural wealth that has not yet been properly presented on the cultural map of Serbia.

The authors acquired the data after many years of fieldwork, including observation, participation in local customs and interviews with the local population (of Serbian and Vlach origin) in the Branicevo region (Eastern Serbia). This paper presents the results of a survey involving 288 respondents, and refers to the knowledge and attitude of the locals towards Vlach magic.

Who Are the Vlachs?

Little has been written about the Vlachs. Information about them can mostly be found in the descriptions of their customs, traditional costumes and economic life. However, little is known about the origin, migrations and influence of the Vlach population on the creation of a contemporary state of the population in Eastern Serbia.

These people kept their own language (no alphabet), tradition, culture, folklore and customs which they have passed down the generations. The Vlachs belong to the Orthodox Church, but in their religious and ritual life they have kept many pre-Christian, Indo-European and Paleo-Balkan elements until this day.

The word Vlach is of German origin and was used by ancient Germans to refer to the citizens of the Roman Empire. This name was eventually embraced by Byzantium, the Ottoman Empire and generally by all Slavs, though the

name was later limited to describe the remnants of the Romanized population of the Balkans.

Before the Roman conquests of the Balkan territories in the 2nd century BC, within the territories of present Eastern Serbia, the provinces of Moesia and Thrace were situated, and their inhabitants spoke a mixture of Asian-European languages, which also borrowed some concepts from the Latin and Germanic languages. The Ostrogoths and Visigoths had come to and lived in the Balkans from around 200. until 500. AD. It is assumed that they named the Balkan natives “Welsch” which means “Roman”. There is also an assumption that the name “Vlach” was derived from the Gothic language and it originally meant “foreigner” and later “the one who expresses his thoughts in Latin.”

After the influx of Serbian tribes and suppressed by the invasion of the Avars, the population inhabiting the areas which were south and east of the Danube and which was mainly engaged in farming, left their farmland and retreated to the mountainous regions of the Balkans, where they became engaged in cattle breeding in order to survive. When the Slavs crossed the Danube they probably took the Ostrogoth name “Welsch” and changed it according to the Slovenian pronunciation into “Vlach”, “Vallach” or “Voloh”, and the Greeks called the region that stretched from the Danube to the Carpathians – Wallachia. After 1200 all people around the Vlach region accepted the name with the root “Vlach” or “Olah”, which was the case with the Hungarians.

It is interesting that, in their own language, when talking among themselves, the Vlachs never referred to them and called themselves “Vlachs”, using some variant of the word “Roman”. The Vlachs, however, call themselves Arumani, Armani, Aromanians and Ruman – all of these meaning Romans. Internationally, the most common names are Vlachs and/or Aromanians (Jović 2011: 3; Ružica 2006: 2).

The earliest written accounts of the Vlachs were written by Greek historians. They were thoroughly described by the Greek (Byzantine) general Tzimisches in the 10th century.

There are three basic ethno-cultural groups of Vlachs present in the Balkans today:

1. The first one is ethnically, linguistically and spatially close or identical to today's Romanians. Broadly speaking, this group lives in the territories of South-Eastern Serbia and Bulgaria. Their dialect is almost identical to those of the Romania-proper dialects. Until quite recently they lived as nomadic herders and still live in rural areas, keeping their language

and culture alive, though the process of assimilation is slowly taking its toll on them.

2. The second group consists of the Aromanians. They are of different ethnic origin which was directly shaped by Greek culture, environment and history. They are mainly concentrated in the Pindus mountain region and within the triangle of today's borders between Albania, the Republic of Macedonia and Greece. In Albania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia Vlach has never been as strong as in Greece. (Stoianovich 1960: 234–313; Winnifrith 1998: 4).

Their economic and cultural centre was in Moschopolis, which is situated in today's Albania, where the major routes of international trade had intersected throughout the centuries. For a brief period, Moschopolis was the second largest city in the Ottoman Empire. Towards the end of the 18th century Moschopolis (Albanian – Voskopoje/Serbian – Voskopoje) boasted 22 churches, a college, a printing office and a population of about 60,000 inhabitants. At that time, the first Vlach dictionaries, grammars and primers were also published.

Almost all the inhabitants of Moschopolis were Tzintzars, but a number of them were Grecianized since they spoke Greek, were loyal to the Byzantine Orthodox Church and very proud of Greek history. That is the reason why this city was considered to be a centre of Greek culture and Greek national ideas in the 18th century. Besides the Tzintzars, a number of original Greeks and Slavs also lived in Moschopolis (Trifunoski 1990: 3).

However, in 1788 Ali Pasha Tepelena destroyed this flourishing Vlach town. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Vlach communities had established schools and churches, and enjoyed the full support of the government.

They established several settlements on the territories of today's Republic of Macedonia, but they built them high and hidden in the mountains and those settlements still exist but are mostly depopulated. The Moschopolis refugees also established their colonies along the Danube and Sava rivers, for instance in Belgrade, Zemun, Novi Sad, Zagreb and also in Budapest, Bucharest and Vienna. Some of these groups later became essential during the liberation movements of Serbia, Bulgaria and Macedonia respectively, as well as Albania and Greece (Stoianovich 1960: 234–313; Winnifrith 1988: 26–38).

It was during this time that they started being referred to as Tzintzars in Bulgaria, the future Republics of Macedonia and Serbia. They embraced this name in Serbia where they insisted on being called “Cincari”. This group has generally preserved its identity, culture and vernacular (which was largely based on the ancient provincial Latin) (Ružica 2006: 5).

3. The third group of Vlachs that used to live in the hinterland of the Adriatic Coast were called Maurovlachi or Morlachs, and Nigri Latini – all meaning the Black Vlachs. It seems that the Morlachs had migrated to the Adriatic hinterland simultaneously with the Ottoman Empire’s conquest of the Balkans and their Slavization was rather at an advanced level during the 16th century. The Ottoman Empire’s westward penetration caused the vast territorial migration of the Slavs and the Balkan Vlachs to today’s Croatia, Bosnia and Hungary which took place between the 15th and 17th century. The Ottomans used these Slavs/Vlachs as both transportation and military auxiliary units. Venetians and Austrians did the same and created special military structures along the Ottoman Empire’s border by incorporating these structures into the renegade or runaway Vlachs/Slavs as their core manpower (Roksandić 2003). The majority of Vlachs were, however, mainly assimilated by the Serbs and Croats in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Felix Kanic described the Vlachs as a very hospitable and cheerful people: *Their traditional costumes are very original and colourful. A Vlach can be recognized from a vast distance thanks to his big hat, a leather vest and white linen trousers tied below the knee. The Vlach women love the colourful embroidery on their clothes more than Serbian women. The Vlach women have softer and rounder faces than Serbian women, more sparkling eyes, and their body movements carry a special grace, which resembles the one found in Italian women* (Kanic 1986).

Branislav Bata Paunovic, the author of a book entitled “The Vlachs throughout the Ages” states: *The Vlachs are not Romans or Greeks nor Turks or Slavs. They are the descendants of the Illyrians who have inhabited the territory of Serbia since the Stone Age.*

It can be argued that after World War I, the traditional Serbian name “Vlasi” started being used for the entire Romanian population that lived within the territories between the rivers Morava, Danube and Timok.

The name “Romanians” was officially used for Vlachs in Serbia, while at the same time, across the river Danube, existed a country which had both a Serbian and an international name – Vlaska. However, after the merging of the provinces of Vlaska and Moldavia which took place from 1859 until 1862, this practice became reversed. The name “the Vlachs” started being imposed together with the systematic repression of the fact that these Vlachs have any connection with the Romanians and especially Romania (Dragić 2002: 11).

How Many of Them Are There and Where Are They?

It is estimated that within the Vlach communities on the territories of the Balkans there are around 86,000 Vlachs in Bulgaria, 250,000 in Serbia and 186,000 in Macedonia, around 0.7 million in Albania and around 1.6 million in Greece. These numbers are merely estimates, but they do form a sharp contrast to the official numbers that say that there are only 10,000 to 40,000 Vlachs in each of the aforementioned Balkan countries. However, the Vlach revival movement has been producing new evidence and/or new self-identification numbers. The best example of this has occurred in Albania, where the ‘original’ number of a few thousand Vlachs has risen, in less than a decade, to approximately 200,000 (Ružica 2006: 4).

After the Ottoman census of the Smederevo Sanjak during the reign of Murat III, at the very end of the 16th century, a new census was not conducted for over a century, until the establishment of the Austrian authorities over Northern Serbia after the Požarevac Peace in 1718. Immediately after signing this peace treaty, two very important events took place in Serbian history – Najperg’s Census which was conducted in 1718 and the publication of Epšvilc’s map, published in the same year, both of which do not unfortunately focus nor mention the ethnic structure of the population. The church censuses which took place in 1733, 1734 and 1735 are somewhat more important. Unfortunately, there are almost no written sources which would help us find out something more about the ethnic structure of the population living in Eastern Serbia in the second half of the 18th century.

A question has been raised as to how the Vlachs have been listed in Serbia since 1846. In the 1900 census, people were listed according to their native language. The Serbian and Romanian languages were spoken by 32,556 people (904 in towns and 31,652 in the countryside) out of which there were 21,531

men and 11,025 women. There were 89,873 people who only spoke Romanian (3,568 in towns and 86,305 in rural areas), out of which there were 40,047 men and 49,826 women. If we assume that all those people who spoke Romanian or Serbian were Vlachs only, we get the information that 122,429 Vlachs lived in Serbia at that particular time. Out of the total number of non-Serbs living in Serbia, 63% of them were Vlachs. The percentage of the Vlach population was only higher in the Krajina, Požarevac, Morava and Timok districts (Đorđević 1922).

In official documents and serious studies that have been conducted in the last or at the beginning of this century, the Vlachs were labelled as Romanians – their self-sufficient name was respected within their own populations. Later, it went hand in hand with the process of “teaching” them how to declare themselves, accompanied by direct or indirect repression. This was particularly the characteristics of the last couple of censuses. A large number of them have “become” Yugoslavs, Serbs and Alterofon Serbs (over 100,000) whose native language is the Vlach language, as was mentioned in an article in a daily newspaper in 1991. Throughout the entire territory of former Yugoslavia, not one post-war census was fairly conducted as far as the Vlachs are concerned. That is why sometimes the number of Vlachs decreased until it reached the number of a single large Vlach village with a large population – for instance Zlot, Laznica, Ranovca, Jabukovac, etc.

However, there are over 150 Vlach villages and about fifty mixed settlements. The way to get out of this game of hiding is to use the same column during the census for both Vlachs and Romanians; and perhaps, even, to count the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia living between the Morava, Danube and Timok rivers under international supervision (Dragić 2002: 8).

Yugoslavia is a country with an official policy of encouraging its large racial minorities, though the number of Vlachs is so small that they sometimes do not figure in the Yugoslav census (Winnifrith 1998: 5).

According to the data of the Republic Bureau of Statistics, there were 40,054 Vlachs living in Serbia after the 2002 census. However, according to unofficial data, the actual number of Vlachs in Serbia is around 250,000. This estimate is based on the number of people who state that their native language is the Vlach language.

After the regime change in 2000, the new Serbian government passed a National Minority Law, which enabled the Vlachs to formulate their own political programmes. After much internal strife and conflict they finally

produced a Joint Declaration of the Vlachs/Romanians of Eastern Serbia in May, 2002. The Declaration's core elements are that the Vlachs should be regarded as a national minority whose native country is Romania (this means that they are not only an 'ethnic group'), that their standard language is Romanian, and that their church services are to be held in the Romanian language. They also expressed their needs for having their own education and schools, newspapers and the right to publicly communicate by using the standard Romanian language (Dragić 2002: 21).

During the time of Austrian rule, the migrations of Vlachs into the area around Homolje were recorded. These migrations had taken place in the 8th and early 9th century. Later, Vlach migrations were recorded in the 18th and 19th centuries and were of Romance origin. Difficult living conditions in Wallachia, Moldavia and Hungary caused these migrations.

The largest migration was recorded in the following settlements: Krepoljin, Osanica, Josanica, Vukovac, Suvi Do, Ribare, Žagubica and Laznica, in the periods 1723–1725, 1733–1734, 1818 and 1834. In the last two mentioned years, the following settlements were established: Bliznak, Breznica, Izvarica, Jasikovo, Krupaja, Milanovac and Sige. Some other settlements were small and rather sporadic.

It was noted that according to where they came from, the Vlachs were divided into Ungureni (coming from Hungary – Transylvania/Transylvania and Banat) and Carani (coming from Romania – Wallachia, Moldavia).

Their immigration affected the substantial increase in the number of homes in Homolje, so that in 1718 there were 80 homes and in 1733 that number increased to 155. Throughout the 19th century, the Vlach population arrived and settled in Homolje.

Vlach settlements were mainly in the mountains and their houses were mostly built out of wood, especially hand-trimmed lumber filled with short logs rolled in mud. A typical house was covered with mud, it had two rooms and the roof was made of wooden boards. Vlach villages in Eastern Serbia looked like that until the 20th century. During the 1970s, there were large migrations to Western Europe, comfortable houses were built, characterized by richly decorated facades and yards (usually empty and locked up), because a substantial number of Vlachs never returned, which led to a significant population decline in all of the aforementioned settlements and the emergence of a growing number of elderly households which usually only had one or two members.

Magic Present in Folklore Spiritual Creativity

Folklore represents a form of folk art that is spontaneously developed as part of traditional spiritual culture. Folk heritage that is closely related to tourism can be seen in various forms, from architectural remains, through spiritual arts and crafts as well as fine art. In addition, dancing and music events, traditional and many other events can be included in this category. There are no professional schools where such types of creative expression can be learned. Ordinary people are the creators of this knowledge and their experience in doing that is predominantly acquired through heritage. The knowledge is passed down as a tradition or comes into being during particular conditions, stimulated by certain inner urges. It is and has been the subject of extensive studies and as such may be of interest to tourism, which is now classified as cultural tourism.

Generally speaking, depending on the circumstances and ways of creating folklore goods, they can be divided into two categories: folklore material and spiritual creativity (Tomka 1998: 228).

On the territory of Eastern Serbia, traditional spiritual culture is represented by family and personal customs of the Vlachs living in the area. Their coexistence enabled a noticeable acculturation of the spiritual culture, and also the conservation of the practices as parts of their own cultural identity. Birth, growing up, pre-marital life, marriage and death are all parts of the lives of these people which are determined by certain ritual and magic-religious practices (Ivkov Džigurski et al. 2011: 64).

Customs represent the norms (rules, regulations, procedures, behaviour) which have been imposed, over time, by various events and circumstances. These phenomena occur in one group at first sporadically and occasionally, but when conditions persist, and one of them occurs more frequently and becomes repetitive, it is considered as being something regular and commonplace. Customs, as well as norms, rules and procedures are imposed by various events and circumstances and people adopt them because they believe that they can help them fight off any potential troubles and problems. Traditions can be characterized as the rules that show conscious and practical efforts of people in various circumstances.

Many customs are still present in a modern, civilized environment, but today they are generally exercised unconsciously because their original purpose has been forgotten. For less educated people, these customs which

are sometimes exercised in the tiniest details represent a kind of sacred and obligatory ritual.

If someone is governed by such common standards, he or she does not need to think how to act in different situations and simply does what people are doing, what their ancestors did and that certainly contributes to mental tranquillity.

It is a well-known fact that many things that a simple man (of average education from rural places) could not and cannot explain, happened and are still happening around him. The man has eventually spotted the correlation between different phenomena, but was unable to explain the nature of this relationship. Some beliefs date back to that period. As time passed, the man began to believe that he was able to affect the course of certain events, with his hard work and effort, and that he could trick, force or beseech the invisible forces to fulfil his wants and needs. In this way, people began to practise some of the actions that we nowadays call **magic** or **magia** (Ivkov 2007: 49).

In the prehistory and history of Balkan civilization, there has not existed a single cultural milieu or people who did not believe in magic, or theoretical-scientific circles which have not pursued research on mythology, rites or rituals.

Many scientists studied magic because the link between magic and science and their mutual relationship has a specific position in connecting the supernatural and real scientific world of science.

One of the most important examples of research on magic is associated with James Frazer and his work *The Golden Bough*, published in 1921. Frazer's purpose was to prove that magic was a mistaken mode of thinking: *magic is a spurious system of natural law as well as a fallacious guide of conduct; it is a false science as well as an abortive art* (Frazer 1921).

According to Susan Greenwood in her book *Anthropology of Magic* (2009:47) for Frazer, the human mind that thinks magically employs two different misapplications of sympathetic magic: homeopathic magic was founded on the association of ideas by similarity, whereas contagious magic was based on the association of ideas by contiguity – the assumption that things that have once been in contact with each other are always in contact.

The significant research is, definitely, associated with Bronisław Malinowski, the well-known Polish anthropologist who dedicated himself to studying anthropology after reading Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.

Malinowski retailed the old Frazerian distinction: magic is routine formulas that are supposed to work in the real world, but by supernatural

mechanisms. Science is pragmatic knowledge based on observation and experience. Religion is high-flown, systematized belief, involving supplication rather than routine instrumental manipulation (Anderson 2008).

Malinowski's most significant work *Magic, Science and Religion* (1948), was a turning point from which the tendency was to sink "magic" into religion, or even ignore it, and not much theorizing about it is being done today.

Defining and studying magic and mysticism, was also dealt with in the work of Hubert and Mauss. In 1902, they concluded that magic is *any rite which does not play a part in organized cults – it is private, secret, mysterious* (Mauss 2001: 30), then McGinn (1991), Underhill (1993), Borchert (1994), Kourie, (1992, 1993, 1998), Turner (2003), Noll (2003), Znamenski (2007), Anderson (2008), Greenwood (2009).

In Serbia, a great contribution to the study of magic was made by the well-known ethnologist Mirko Barjaktarević who divides magic into:

1. *Initial* (certain action begins with this magic)
2. *Apotropeic* (the goal is to remove and prevent, some kind of evil or the influence of an evil force by using a different kind of action)
3. *Verbal* (the goal is to drive away some kind of evil or gain what is necessary by using words, prayer, curse)
4. *Love* (by using different kinds of words or actions, the person tries to inveigle certain people to fall in love)
5. *Medical or preventive* (applied in order to maintain health or regain it for ill persons)
6. *Agricultural* (ensures good yield and wealth)
7. *Meteorological* (the goal is to influence natural phenomena)
8. *Military* (the goal is to prevent man from getting injured in war or to win a battle) (Barjaktarević 1968).

However, contrary to what Frazer and others thought, we can find the presence of magic, religion and science simultaneously in modern Western societies and in the thinking of individuals within these societies. People often blend scientific with magical thinking, as the sugar-poison experiment shows (Greenwood 2009). The first global conference about magic and the supernatural took place in 2010 in Oxford, where many perceptions, interpretations and the role of magic and the supernatural in the most different aspects of life, were considered and a special accent was put on the rapport between magic and science.

In Serbia today, there are still many old customs which are practised and follow the life of man, from birth until death.

When talking about magic in the strict sense of the word in Serbia today, ethnologists make a distinction between various psychics and healers who are springing up daily throughout Serbia and the Timok region. For, as some may say, the magic of Eastern Serbia is not a new creation.

Vlach Magic – Reality or Not?

Many ethnologists, historians, scientists and researchers have studied the Vlachs during the 20th century. The research of Thomas John Winnifrith (U.K.), Mirdite Zefa (Albania), Orestes Tafralia, Nicolae Iorga (Romania), Tihomir Đorđević, Jasna Jojić Pavlovski, Paun Es Durlić, Gordana Živković, Slobodan Zečević, Dragoslav Stojanović, Ljubomir Reljić (Serbia) and many others can be found in the literature on the Vlachs, available today.

The entire Vlach culture represents an inexhaustible source of spirituality, which makes the whole region of Eastern Serbia exotic and mysterious, because the Vlachs are mostly a closed (endogamous) population not blending with people of other nationality. The Vlachs of Eastern Serbia are quite closed in terms of cultural heritage, because they hardly allow those who are not Vlachs to attend their traditional rituals, especially those containing elements of magic, even speaking about this unwillingly.

Intensive ethnological research, the purpose of which is to obtain knowledge and information data directly within a village community, can become a significant input for the cultural dimension of local citizens (Michalička 2010). A Vlach village with an integrated group of people with their past and present peculiar manifestations, contains many features constituting the subject of interest of the ethnological research. The task of the ethnological field research of a village community as a scientific gnoseological source of information is to understand certain specific facts on the principle of direct contact with people.

The phenomenon of shamanism, based on the cult of the ancient deities of the Thracians, Greeks and Romans, and the cult of ancestors can be singled out among some other phenomena as having a special ethnographic value. This part of the spiritual culture of the Vlachs represents the most ancient form of spirituality in the whole of Europe (Stojanjelović, Miljković, Stepanović 2008: 99–101).

Vlach magic in the 20th and 21st centuries, as Jojić said, is a miracle or is miraculous, when looking at how long it has been present, its unique rituals,

beliefs, shamans and spells. Instances of Vlach magic can be seen in the Timok area, all over Eastern Serbia and across its borders. The opinion of many ethnologists is that Vlach customs, unlike the customs of other people, are based on some natural rather than supernatural phenomena.

It is interesting that, for example, Indian Vedas talk about the existence of three worlds, and Vlachs also believe that there are three worlds: a higher one, a middle one and an underworld and this specific belief has been passed on from one generation to another for centuries (Jojić Pavlovski 2009:15).

Within Vlach culture, the village as a socio-religious community treats shamans and conjurers as the central figures. They are mysterious figures, who have some specific ritual and custom features and are familiar with mystical knowledge. In addition to being familiar with various magical skills used for the prevention and treatment of diseases, the shamans are mediators between the supernatural "divine powers" and the souls of ancestors (Stojanjelović, Miljković, Stepanović 2008: 99-101). All holidays celebrated in Vlach households are accompanied by a series of rituals, many of which are pagan-based. The Vlachs are extremely committed to their beliefs which accompany them from the moment they are born until death.

According to village residents in the Homolje region, there is a custom to avoid passing next to an abandoned mill or military fortifications (mostly Roman) at night, especially if these buildings are located at the crossroads. If they ever find themselves in such a situation, they always bring a dog with them because according to their beliefs, animals can sense the presence of evil spirits and demons.

According to Vlach belief, the area in front of the door is considered to be where the souls of ancestors reside. The roads are considered to be sites of strong magical powers. Vlach magic shows that at the intersections there is a risk of being exposed to black magic. White Vlach magic is believed to fight against black magic. People do not talk publicly about the rituals and ways of removing black magic. It remains a secret kept within the family.

According to people involved in this issue, Vlach magic is one of the most powerful types of magic in the 21st century. It is a well-known fact that it remains in the family and is passed down through the woman's side of the family. A Vlach woman can only take part in some ceremonies and rituals after a certain age. Most rituals are based on the burning fire which burns throughout long rituals which are mostly performed late at night. The shamans go to the streams or water mills, they must not look back or trip over. All the rituals are accompanied with incantation and singing in the Vlach language.

Women have a special place within the process of implementation of this cult. These are the so-called shamans and they function as priests. Women were given this specific role since matriarchy is rather pronounced.

It is interesting that people dealing with magic, always remain isolated at the end of the rituals, because during rituals they emphasize the fact that they are carrying this out together with the mother Mary¹.

During rituals, the shamans and conjurers address the sun, moon and stars as deities, and during the rituals they use the energy of these celestial bodies. With their enchantments they help the people to overcome illnesses or accidents and they try to prevent the fraudulent ones in their intent to get some sort of revenge.

Vlach conjurers transmit various messages through ritual actions and appeals and with the help of some stars and other celestial bodies. The rituals are performed in order to drive away evil forces such as accidents and illness and to attract happiness and health. The conjurer's messages are mostly heard and every wish is granted.

The women called Rusalje are particularly interesting. These are Vlach women, who are considered to have a special gift – they lose consciousness and fall into a trance (a sandy kazut lumja lalta – which in the Vlach language means “to fall into the underworld”). It is believed that while in this condition, these women acquire supernatural powers and are able to talk to the dead. According to local villagers, they talk about things that they had never been able to find out before because those things are usually only known by the closest family members. They even have the ability to predict the future. When they wake up from the trance, they are unaware of what they had talked about and what happened to them. Then, they claim that there are other worlds that they have seen and through which the souls of the departed must travel after death. On special days assigned particularly for this purpose, Rusalje (ghosts) perform a special traditional dance. They sing the following words “*epša ša, jara ša*” and they send a message to the underworld. Rusalje are believed to become the means of communication between the two worlds. People who are present touch them with their hands and through their thoughts they send messages to their loved ones who are no longer alive. Rusalje carry the messages and wishes in two ways (Stojanjelović, Miljković, Stepanović 2008: 99–101).

¹ *Holy Mary.*

The Survey

The very type of research, its objectives and aim defined the methodological approach to this research. In order to obtain relevant data for further analysis, we used the method of survey research with a random sample.

The data acquired after the survey were processed in the SPSS statistical programme. The software package SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) is one of the most widely used statistical packages and is used in almost all fields of research (Vuković et al. 2002).

The usage of this statistical programme represented a significant relief in the area of data analysis and the interpretation of results in graphical form. The SPSS programme enables spreadsheet calculations, as well as the comparative usage of this computer programme and its integration with some other programmes, such as database programmes and others.

The survey was conducted in 2011 using the random sample method in order to analyze and review the knowledge of and opinions of people living in Branicevo about the existence of Vlach magic, their beliefs and previous experience in using the services of those who deal with it.

An enclosed survey was used consisting of 28 questions, divided into four parts. The first part consisted of questions concerning the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, the second part concerned the knowledge and interest of the respondents for Vlach magic, the third part referred to the religious orientation of the respondents and the fourth part to their opinion on the development of tourism in Branicevo.

The survey was conducted on the territory of Branicevo, on a random sample of 288 respondents, of which 52.1% were female and 47.9% male respondents.

In order to analyze the age structure, the respondents were divided into six groups. Most of them were aged between 26 and 35 (26%) and the lowest number of respondents were over 65 years old (4.2%). After analyzing the educational structure of the sample, it can be noted that the majority of respondents had secondary education (39.2%), and the smallest number of them had either an M.A or PhD.

As regards where they came from, 52.1% of the respondents came from urban and 47.9% from rural areas.

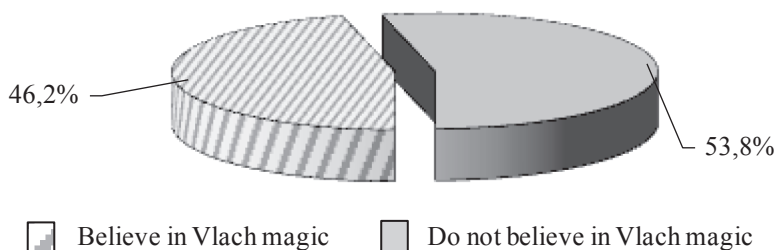
The process of surveying was done individually, by handing out the survey to the respondents together with a short written explanation of the rules of

filling in the survey, and then each respondent completed it individually and personally delivered it to the surveyor. Each survey was anonymous.

The questions in the survey which referred to the very concept of research were designed to start from the informational questions about the very concept of magic and then go towards the examination of attitudes and beliefs of the respondents and their past experiences.

As expected, 93.4% of the respondents had heard about Vlach magic, while only 6.6% had not. An astonishing 46.2% claimed to believe in Vlach magic, while 53.8% said they did not believe in it. We think that although the survey was anonymous, a certain percentage of respondents did not give the true answer to this question, and we believe that the percentage of those who do believe in Vlach magic is higher but the respondents simply did not want to talk about it.

Figure 1. The share of respondents believing in Vlach magic



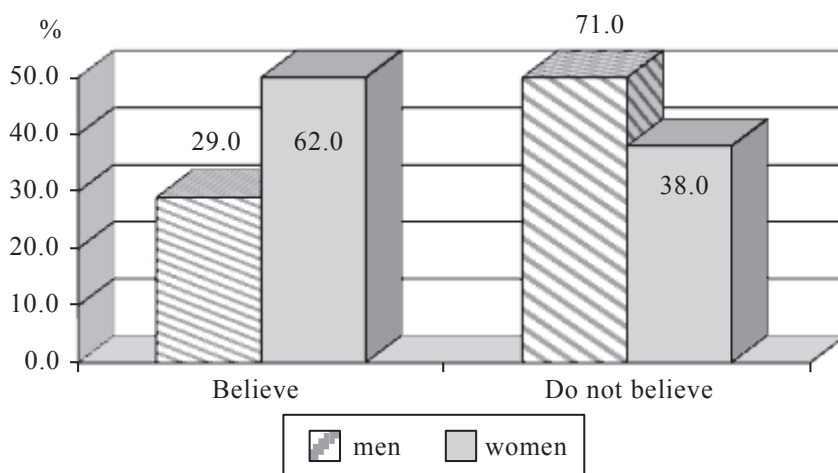
Source: Authors' own research.

The data analysis which consisted of combining the data related to gender, age, education structure and the belief in Vlach magic resulted in some rather interesting data. The results showed that more women (62.0%) than men (29.0%) believe in Vlach magic. The main problems connected with gender-related issues are women's unemployment, education, the participation of women in social life and decision making processes, their economic empowerment, the problem of ownership, as well as raising awareness of women's human rights. Women's contribution to rural development is often hindered by their lack of capital and dominant rural ideologies that not only determine rural women's roles and position but in turn present obstacles to women who want to fully participate in the public sphere (Sikić-Mićanović 2009: 77).

All this leads to Vlach women remaining less educated, which directly affects the share of the increased belief in magic, shamanism and supernatural phenomena.

The Romanian ethnologist Burghele (the author of the book of incantation), after extensive research in rural places, points out that the Romanian peasant, often illiterate, transmitted and kept his knowledge, through oral tradition only, waiting for the time when everything would be written and saved from oblivion. The woman is, mostly, the one who incants because of her privilege in the world of magic. Camelia Burghele explains that the woman is susceptible to suggestion and the belief in the supernatural, therefore she easily “receives” and learns about incantation. In almost every village, there is at least one old woman who knows incantation (<http://rumunskamagija.blogger.ba/>). Through field investigation in Eastern Serbia, a similar situation can be observed, which is not surprising because Romanians, Serbs, Vlachs and other people in that area developed in the same cultural circle, with approximately the same intensity and therefore have similar cultural characteristics. Studying certain phenomena in rural and semi-rural areas, recognizing educational and social problems, we have the ability to easily understand certain cultural elements which were lost in the urban areas. In urban areas, under the influence of modernization, there is a greater mixing of cultures which leads to the loss of local values, conflict and the formation of globalization.

Figure 2. The gender structure of respondents according to their belief in Vlach magic

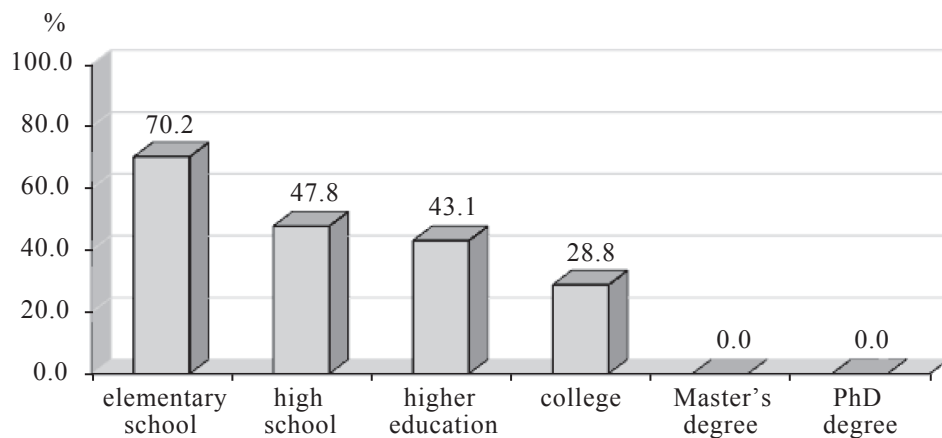


Source: Authors' own research.

In terms of age structure, as expected, the highest proportion of those believing in Vlach magic belong to the over 65-year-olds (83.3%) and the lowest proportion of respondents are in the 26–35 year-old group (26.7%).

The data acquired after the analysis related to the educational structure of the respondents was rather interesting. As expected, the lower the level of education of the respondents, the more they believe in the supernatural. Among the people with elementary school education, 70.2% of them said that they believe in Vlach magic while that percentage decreases as the level of education increases and with the people with M.A. or PhD degrees that percentage is 0%. It is disturbing that a fairly large proportion of those with a university degree do believe in Vlach magic, and 28.8% of respondents belong to this category.

Figure 3. The educational structure of respondents and their belief in Vlach magic



Source: Authors' own research.

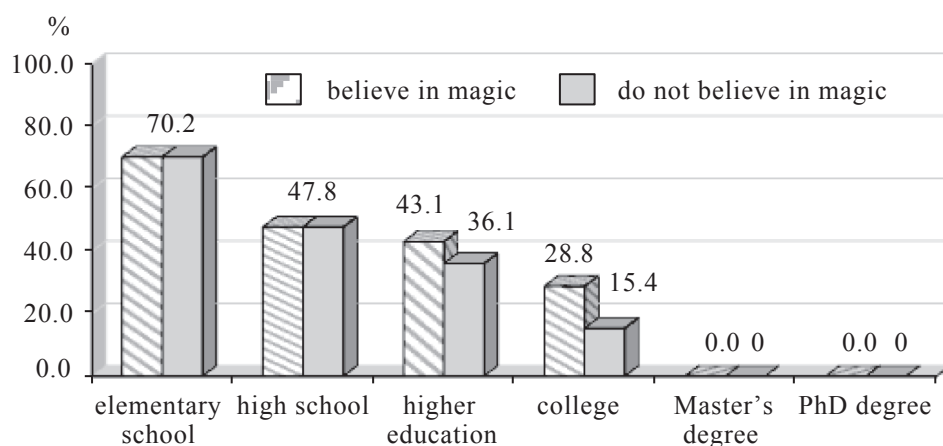
It was spotted that among respondents declaring they know someone who deals with Vlach magic, 71.2% of them are women. As for the age structure of the respondents who know someone who deals with Vlach magic, 50.0% of them are over 65 and the lowest age group among them are 17–25 (10.2%), which coincides with the age structure of those who believe in the same. Depending on the education of the respondents, the highest percentage of those who know someone who deals with Vlach magic only has elementary education (76.6%).

After the data analysis, it was noted that the majority of respondents answered that they have never been associated with Vlach magic (87.5%). However, we believe that this percentage is much lower, since as we have previously mentioned, Vlach magic is something that most people are reluctant to talk about and its mysticism and the belief people have in it can be found in its mysteriousness. 36 of the 288 respondents stated that they practiced Vlach magic. Although only 12.5% of all the respondents said they practised Vlach magic, there is a significant difference between men (6.5%) and women (18.0%) if we observe the share of the total number of respondents of a particular sex. The largest percentage of those who practiced it are over 65 (66.7%) and this percentage decreases the younger the respondents. Only 2% of the 17-25-year-olds stated that they had practised Vlach magic.

After the analysis of the educational structure and the use of Vlach magic we came across some rather interesting facts, even though a substantial number of college-educated respondents declared they believe in it, none of those in this category have practised it. The largest number of respondents who declared that they practised Vlach magic have elementary education (53.2%).

Interesting results were also obtained by analyzing questions related to the belief in Vlach magic, on the one hand, and belief in God on the other.

Figure 4. The educational structure of the respondents and their belief in God and Vlach magic



Source: Authors' own research.

It was observed that 46.2% of respondents believe in magic, and 81.9% in God, but 44.1% of the respondents said they believe in both. This result is not surprising because many of the Vlach magic rituals are related to religious holidays and refer to the dual-belief of these people. The higher percentage of those who declared they believe in God belong to the female sex (55.5%). As far as age is concerned, the highest percentage of those who declared positively are over 65 (91.7%). There were 127 respondents who said that they believe in both God and Vlach magic. Again, the higher percentage of respondents belongs to the female sex (52.0%). Depending on age, the highest percentage of those who believe in both God and magic are over 65 (83.3%). The largest number of respondents who declared their belief in God and in magic have elementary school education (70.2%), but it is interesting that even though 28.8% of university graduates said they believe in Vlach magic, only 15.4% in this category believe in both God and magic, which indicates that as many as 13.4% of university-educated people only believe in Vlach magic, but not God.

Conclusion

The Vlachs as an ethnic community, with their interesting and impressive cultural characteristics, are extremely interesting to study. Relatively little is known and written about them, maybe because of the fact that in recent history, a significant number of them declared themselves as Serbs, although preserved their language and customs and respected and nurtured their traditions.

Their settlements are mostly away from the main roads, and the closest houses are often miles away from each other. This does not mean that they are detached from modern life. On the contrary, they have brought the advantages of modern life into their villages and homes. Their architecture is still interesting and characteristic, even though in a quite different way. In their large yards they have often kept their old family homes where they once lived together with huge new buildings, with which they want to show how much they have gained and earned throughout their lives. The Vlachs have, in many segments, assimilated the Serbian population, and accepted their way of life that is introduced with the modern age. However, they have also transferred some of their traditions and beliefs of those with

whom they coexist. Thus, in this region, a unique conglomeration of various cultures made up of many interesting and unique customs can be found. Magic, shamanism and rituals are very much part of the everyday life of local residents. The so-called conjurers are present in most Vlach villages and they say that they are visited by people from all over Serbia. However, often the women who are not conjurers know certain songs, popularly known as “bajalice”, which are used to drive away undesirable evil forces. They are mostly sung to infants and young children in various situations (usually when they cry).

Great attention is focused on the cult of the dead, and the rituals associated with burial ceremonies are characteristic of the Vlach population. Some villages do not have cemeteries, because family members are buried at home, at a place where there is a nice view of the house and property.

Even though the Vlachs are Orthodox, the Orthodox Church does not have as significant a role for them as it has with the Serbs, but they respect all Orthodox practices which combine well with their own Vlach pagan customs.

Talking about Vlach magic leaves no one indifferent, whether or not one believes in it. Those who do believe in it often point out that it is „one of the strongest magic in the world”. Results of the research presented in this paper show to what extent the belief in magic, or even the fear of it, is present in the lives of people living in this region. It was noted that many people did not want to publicly state whether they believed in it or not, and in some cases, due to superstition, they do not even want to talk about it.

Vlach culture intertwined with pagan customs and interesting rituals, makes the municipalities in Eastern Serbia mysterious places, because they are not explored enough and are mostly closed.

It is more than obvious that ethnologists find it extremely interesting to study, since ethnology emphasizes the need to conceptualize social values and cultural wealth both historically and spatially. Due to Vlach magic and everything that it brings, many people from different parts of Serbia have visited these parts which opens the door to the development of tourism in the area.

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