

**University of London**

**Democracy and Miracles:  
Political and Religious Agency in an ~~Orthodox~~  
Convent and Village of South Central Romania**

by

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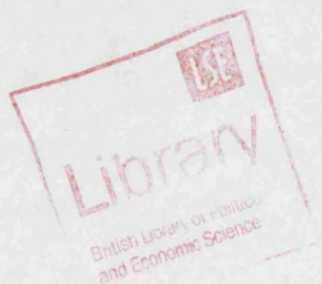


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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis investigates the strategic exercise of political and religious agency in a Romanian Orthodox convent and the village surrounding it, during the local and national elections of 2000. It examines how three groups living in an isolated river valley, Romanian peasants, Roma traders and Orthodox nuns, made use of two fields of social action newly opened by the collapse of socialism—democratic politics and religious devotion—in order to maximize their access to power and economic resources.

Using archival research, oral histories, interviews and extensive participant observation, the thesis traces the political life of Horezu convent, an important estate of the Orthodox Church, over its 300-year history, focusing particularly on the socialist and post-socialist periods. It examines the shifts in the convent population and monastic ideology, relations with the surrounding village and with political authorities.

Horezu convent became a focus of attention in post-socialist times when its founder, Prince Constantin Brancoveanu, was sanctified by the Orthodox Church in 1992. Linking religious and national symbolism, this sanctification was an expression of the efforts of the Church and of its allied political actors to distance themselves from associations with the socialist regime. During the socialist period, the community of nuns at Horezu had developed close relations with members of the Party elite, and they continued to rely on these connections when, after socialism's collapse, these elites re-emerged as important political actors.

Whilst the convent was able to thrive thanks to its privileged political connections, local peasant workers' living standards were severely deteriorating, due to the closure of former state-owned industry in the area. Increased competition over dwindling state resources, and a growing dependency on the local political elites who controlled their redistribution exacerbated tensions, leading to a growing separation between the three local groups, Romanians, Romas and nuns.



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## **STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS**

The thesis examines political change and continuity in post-socialist Romania, through the prism of relations between an Orthodox convent and outsiders, both elite politicians and local villagers. It focuses on practices through which the boundaries between the convent and the world, between spiritual and secular life, were being continually created as well as dismantled, as a result of ongoing interactions with a range of outsiders, attracted to the convent by its historical, artistic and (to a lesser extent) spiritual renown.

The first and final chapters frame the thesis by placing the convent and the village Lower Romani, which lay immediately outside its gates, within the broader local context. The three intervening chapters examine relations between the convent and the political realm, in greater depth and from a historical perspective.

The first chapter aims to show how relations between three local groups have been changed by the collapse of socialism. A second, related question is how each of these groups responds to the legitimacy-building strategies of national-level politicians, who use the convent as a stage for political performance. The convent provides a link between national and local levels of discourse, but it is also an ambiguous symbol, which resonates differently with different groups of people, so that 'official' rituals, stressing the symbolic links between Orthodoxy, the Nation and present day politicians, often achieve little relevance locally.

The second chapter is concerned with historical depth. It examines the relations between Romani and Horezu convent over the past 300 years, on the basis of documents from the convent's vast archive. It also traces how the church as an institution has interacted with a succession of political regimes, and how it has been affected by the emergence of the modern secular nation state. A third theme is that of changes in local patterns of ownership, and the ways in which the intrusion of powerful outsiders (including the state and, to a lesser extent, the convent) has tended to exert a divisive influence upon local communities.

The third chapter traces the fortunes of the convent during the socialist period—a time when the state, through a long-term restoration project, entered within the convent itself—effectively transforming it into a kind of socialist estate. Follow-

ing a radical restructuring of monasticism through socialist reforms, nuns understood their dependence upon party cadres, and began forming alliances with highly placed politicians, some of these lasting to the present day. Increasingly, during this period, the power of particular nuns within the convent community depended on their ability to mobilise resources from outside the convent (such as the help of friendly officials), and thus on circumventing the convent/world boundary. However, the younger generation of nuns envisions the relation between monasticism and the political sphere in a different way than the elder generation, whose priorities were shaped by socialism.

The fourth chapter further pursues the theme of the complementarity of convent and world, by examining how young novices, recruited after the collapse of socialism, responded to the realities of monastic life, and the discrepancy between these and their own expectations. It argues that a discontinuity in monastic life, produced by socialist reforms, has meant that young nuns must creatively re-invent monastic life, or face disillusionment. A range of strategies are brought into play, as the novices grapple with this problem. Significantly however, power within the convent continues to be closely linked with the ability to mobilise resources from outside the convent—whether friendships and connections, restricted knowledge, or scarce goods.

The final chapter mirrors the first through its focus on the village and its links with the broader, national context. It examines how local groups aligned themselves in the local elections of 2000, what their underlying motivations in choosing their leaders were, and how they perceived the process of democratisation from their situated point of view. It argues that the post-socialist period has brought not only a loss of economic security, but also a loss of access to power, as points of contact with the state, at which state power could formerly be converted into a personal asset (through informal practices) have disappeared from the landscape.



The geographical locations of Ramnicu Valcea and Romani.



Horezu Monastery and the surrounding villages.



## INTRODUCTION

# ORTHODOXY AND POLITICS IN POST-SOCIALIST ROMANIA

In 1992, shortly after the collapse of socialism, several Romanian national heroes became Orthodox saints. One of these was 17<sup>th</sup> century Prince Constantin Brancoveanu, the founder of one of the most renowned Wallachian convents, Horezu, the site of this research. Linking religious and national symbolism, these sanctifications were an expression of the efforts of the Orthodox Church and its political allies (many of whom were former Party cadres) to distance themselves from associations with the socialist regime. The ceremony, performed by the Patriarch at Horezu, was a high-profile affair, attended by a host of important ex-communist political figures, including President Iliescu. Thereafter, the convent received sizeable donations from state institutions and private business. These donations were mediated by friends of the convent who were members of the former communist nomenklatura, some of whom had been engaged in clientelist relations with the convent since socialist times. How had such enduring relations between nuns and former communists developed? How did ordinary villagers from the area respond to these public performances, and how did they see the alliance between the Church and political elites? Did they see these new saints as genuine sources of charismatic power, and did this newly created charisma translate into a new political legitimacy for the ex-communist leaders?

In 1931, Grigore Gaftencu<sup>1</sup>, a distinguished Romanian politician, wrote in his diary:

“When the task of the present seems too difficult, imagination often tempts us to look for a pleasant but deceptive shelter in the future. Listening to one financier’s plan for the regeneration of the country, I had the feeling that *I was listening to the inspired words of a prophet, promising us the kingdom of heaven*” (Gafencu 1991: 75, my transl., emphasis added).

Gafencu’s observations could have been made in the 1990’s. In 1931, he was worried by the growing influence, in Romanian political life, of charismatic leaders advocating radical solutions to the country’s problems. One of these was the mentor of Mircea Eliade, Professor Nae Ionescu, who argued that borrowed Western forms of political life were incompatible with the Romanian soul, which was essentially Orthodox. In his view, to the ‘divisive’ rationality of the Western Enlightenment, the Orthodox East opposed a ‘mystical synthesis’, exemplified in the ideal of the union be-

tween Church and State. In his programmatic early writings, the young Eliade envisioned the unique ‘spiritual itinerary’ of the ‘New Generation’<sup>2</sup> as the destiny to achieve the “actualization of religious reality inherent in true Orthodoxy” (Eliade 1992: 51, my transl.). This genuine state of spirit would become “the focal center of contemporary consciousness”, Romania's unique philosophical contribution to world culture (ibid). The idea of a mystically-fuelled transformation of political, economic and social life, led by the country’s youth (considered pure, uncorrupted) did not appeal only to intellectual elites. It later became part of the creed of the Legion of the Archangel Michael, Romania’s fascist movement. This utopian vision generated enthusiastic popular support for this charismatic movement and led, eventually, to dictatorship.

“My only consolation” Gafencu continued, “ is that the illusions and political mistakes do not begin with us. As long as our motherland has been a country and politicians ruled it, she has been constantly ‘on the edge of the abyss’, ‘confronted by an economic crisis of unprecedented proportions’, which requires ‘a great program for regeneration’, a speedy ‘re-entry into legality’ and *most importantly, that all this should begin anew, in a redemptive and glorious New Era*” (Gafencu 1991: 67, my transl., emphasis added).

The two vignettes above introduce, in different ways, the central theme explored in this thesis—the relationship between Orthodoxy and politics in post-socialist Romania, and in particular the role of Orthodox charisma (*har, harisma*) in legitimizing political action. The first vignette highlights how a potent blend of religious and historical symbols was used recently in attempts to generate renewed legitimacy for Church and political figures seeking to distance themselves from association with the socialist regime. The second vignette brings into view surface parallels between the post-socialist period and the period immediately prior to the onset of socialism, highlighting links between Orthodoxy and political charisma. Gafencu felt charismatic leaders could be dangerous and irresponsible because they lacked the endorsement of well-established, reputable political parties capable of ensuring their “respect for the country’s laws and institutions”. In 1990’s Romania<sup>3</sup>, a multiplicity of new charismatic leaders competed for power, and the parties they led were little more than “fleeting coalitions of friends, kinsmen, allies” (Verdery 1996b). As in the inter-war period, the Orthodox Church was relied upon to provide a symbolic endorsement for political figures.

The research for this thesis explored such themes at a moment of acute uncertainty surrounding the elections of 2000. This was a turning point at which Romani-

ans had to decide whether to opt for a charismatic leader who promised to end political corruption, or to continue to place their faith in the new democratic institutions which, from the “pig’s eye view” (Kideckel 1993) looked extremely unattractive, inefficient and corrupt. Disenchantment with democracy and market economy increased the feeling that the New Era of social justice was retreating further and further into the future. Romanians began increasingly to feel that what the country really needed was a new Vlad Tepes (Dracula), a ruler whose legendary cruel punishments of thieves and criminals had, at a point in the mythical past, made the country safer than it had ever been before or since. The term “*vladtepism*” entered into common usage, denoting a leader with a tough stance on corruption. At this point, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, an ex-court poet of Ceausescu who had founded an extreme right-wing political party and who promised to slaughter Hungarians with machine guns, became a worryingly popular presidential candidate.

However, as we shall see, although all the elements for the rise of extremist charismatic leaders seemed to be in place, none was elected—and I shall argue that this was partly because of the ways in which ordinary people responded to the politicians’ habit of building their legitimacy mainly on *symbolic* grounds. Socialism had made my informants deeply sceptical of symbolic means of building legitimacy.

A key area of my research has been to re-examine the links between the Romanian Orthodox Church, the politics of the nation state and processes of post-socialist democratization, as they appear in light of socialist legacies. These themes were examined in a local setting, through the prism of relations between the nuns of Horezu convent, members of the political and economic elites, and peasant workers living in Romani, the village surrounding the convent. The research focused on the ways in which people became engaged—intentionally or unintentionally—in the games of power surrounding the convent, a potential source of powerful symbolic capital. Its aim is to highlight how practices and discourses regarding ‘the political’ and ‘the supernatural’ were used by various individuals to conjure up power in the midst of the post-socialist state of flux and uncertainty.

The analysis focuses on the ways in which the boundary between the convent and the world has been, and continues to be created and contested through the actions of the State, the Church and particular individuals connected with the Valcea diocese and Horezu convent. I address this topic in the *longue durée*, documenting relations between the convent, state and village throughout Horezu’s 300-year existence, in or-

der to illuminate how some of the more enduring patterns in the convent's institutional practices both relate to and are distinct from the specific legacies of the socialist period.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. The first and last of these focus on how the convent is embedded into the 'wider world', while the three central chapters deal more specifically with life within the convent itself. Of these, chapters two and three examine how political, social and economic changes affected the life of the convent prior to and during the socialist period. Chapter four examines how monastic life is being re-imagined by new recruits, in the process of reconciling their chosen monastic vocation with desires and expectations shaped by the socialist period and its aftermath. It considers nuns not only in light of the ideal of monastic life, but more importantly as members of their generation, as individuals who understood their chosen vocation in relation to a series of expectations shaped by the socialist period.

This introduction is divided into five sections. The first introduces the setting of the research. The second outlines how I theorise the convent as an institution, and provides background on Romanian monasticism and its position within the broader Church institutional framework. The third section examines issues linking Orthodoxy, nationalism and the post-socialist project of building the democratic institutions which are being grafted on existing socio-cultural structures and conceptions. The fourth section attempts to sketch out how expectations of freedom after the collapse of socialism, became linked to ideas concerning charismatic power. The final section discusses issues related to my fieldwork.

## **The Setting of the Thesis**

### *The Village*

The small sleepy village Romani, nestled in the foothills of the Carpathian mountains, is four hours' drive north-west from Bucharest, towards Transylvania. Once you enter Oltenia, Wallachia's north-western region, the road winds in sharp serpentine curves up and down lush green hills, descending into the Valcea county's capital, Ramnicu Valcea (pop. 40 000). From here, a network of buses dating back to communist times, engines throbbing and spluttering thick black exhaust into the crystalline mountain air, can take you further north, towards Horezu. Inside the busses, you may notice the remnants of communist elegance, imitation brocade upholstery

and matching curtains in faded brown-grey shades, personalised to fit the aesthetics of each driver, with a profusion of colourful tree-shaped cardboard air fresheners, vases of plastic flowers, icons and pin-up posters. In the bus, you overhear snatches of conversation between villagers returning home from errands in town, about law suits over land, children's education or economic troubles, interspersed with the new *manele* songs, a fusion of Turkish, gypsy and disco influences with verses inspired by post-socialist realities, like "the patron is human too, he parties with his bodyguards" or "oh, Mary, I saw you behind the fence, you were dressed in tight blue jeans". When you get very close to the mountains, you ask the driver to drop you off at a junction with a rusty black and white sign pointing towards Horezu convent, a white fortress set high above the green river valley, against a backdrop of dark forests, at the end of a road flanked by tall rustling poplar trees.

Walking the 3 km towards the convent, through the village Romani, one chats with fellow travellers, pilgrims, villagers, or townspeople coming to visit their parents in the village. Curious gazes follow the occasional shiny Cielo, Audi, Mercedes, or tourist coach whizzing by towards the convent. Passing through Romani, one notices an occasional flicking curtain, as villagers assess the value of the cars and try to guess who the visitors might be. Most houses, built of brick after the 1950's, stand about 20 m back from the street, behind orchards. The gates are usually closed, and villagers guard their privacy, complaining bitterly that their intrusive neighbours are always trying to peer into their houses, or to invite themselves for coffee in a quest for new topics of gossip. "Why do the Olteni (inhabitants of north-western Wallachia) build cylindrical houses?", a joke asks. "So that their neighbours won't be able to gossip about them behind the corners".

The three regions of Romania, Moldavia, Transylvania and Oltenia retain quite strong identities. Of these, the Olteni are famous for their quick wit, commercial spirit and ability to turn any situation to their advantage (*sa se descurce*), as well as for shiftiness and double-dealing. A party song considered by Oltenians themselves an authoritative source on their character describes them thus: "If you get on my good side, I'll give you the coat off my back, if you rub me the wrong way, God help you, because I'm a snake".

The relatively new brick houses attest to the economic prosperity of Romani during the socialist period. This area was never collectivised, as the mountainous terrain was unsuited to mechanised agriculture, and villagers were allowed to retain

household plots of up to 15 acres, on which they practised subsistence agriculture, on the condition of selling a yearly quota of produce and animals to the state. Local crops consisted mainly of fruit and grapes used to make alcohol, corn for feeding pigs, cows, chickens and turkeys, and vegetables for household consumption. All the land in excess of the 15-acre plots was taken over by the state farm (IAS), which planted orchards (apple, peach and plum trees) and also operated an alcohol distillery (formerly privately owned), collecting fruit from the locals to make plum brandy.

The great majority of villagers did not depend on agriculture, but on cash incomes from day jobs in local industry: furniture manufacture, food processing, coal mines, forestry exploitation, rock quarrying and so forth.

The socialist period is remembered with considerable regret because after 1989 local factories began to close one by one, leaving the large majority of the villagers unemployed. Living standards plunged rapidly, and the area has been officially labelled as disadvantaged. The loss of cash incomes, with most villagers now having to rely only on modest old-age pensions or unemployment benefits, stifled the growth of new local businesses that might have provided new workplaces. People are increasingly turning to barter and buy necessities from the local shops on credit. Inability to collect on these debts has caused more local businesses, including the state-owned shop, to close.

Entering Romani, one passes a timber-cutting business which is almost always deserted, although mounds of sawdust testify to some occasional activity. Further up, a bakery employs seven villagers who work in 12-hour shifts around the clock, being paid well below the official minimum wage (about 30 USD a month). These are the only instances of post-socialist economic enterprise until we reach Rada's boutique and bar, a two-room corrugated iron kiosk in the middle of Lower Romani. At Rada's, men play pool and drown their sorrows in alcohol. As one villager remarked, "if a man doesn't have money, he won't go to the local shop to buy bread on credit, because the whole village will find out and gossip. He goes to the bar to buy vodka on debt and forget about the whole problem for a while". Next to Rada's the long, low building of the village crafts cooperative sits empty and shut, its door adorned with dried pine branches from the time it was used for Rada's son's wedding. "I spent my youth working here at the cooperative", a woman tells me as we walk together:

“The communists gave us some old weaving machines, discarded by a rug factory from Sibiu. They would break down, we struggled with them... But I was sad when, after ‘89, they were taken out and sold for scrap iron. What a waste! At least in those days we were doing something constructive”.

In the same courtyard, the graceful and large 1920’s-built school-house is slowly crumbling, and its roof has caved in. It was abandoned for a new, two-story rectangular concrete schoolhouse built by the communists across the street. Here too, there are signs of change: “in the first four grades, we have only eleven children, and in the first grade only one”, a teacher told me. “The parents live in town and send the kids to stay with their grandparents when they’re young, but when it’s time to start school, they take them back”.

A few houses further, at the rusty water purification plant, there is a crossroads with a new wooden bus shelter adorned by an icon of the Virgin, where those who commute to work assemble early in the morning. In a nearby kiosk, an elderly man keeps track of passers-by, sells fish, bread, and Chinese-made household items, and watches TV on a fuzzy set, chatting to a few of the poorest villagers seated around a plastic table, drinking beer. The left branch of the road leads to the villages of Upper Romani and Saliste, and the right, crossing the Romani river, curves toward Horezu convent.

Following the Upper Romani road, we pass a small makeshift plum brandy distillery, and a large construction site where the wealthy owner of the private firm that restored the frescoes at Horezu convent is building a fortress-like villa and a hotel with wine bar for tourists. Following the river valley, the proximity of Upper Romani is signalled by increasing numbers of pigs, goats, ducks and geese grazing lazily, or basking in the sunshine on the riverbank. A colourful icon marks the village’s boundary. Upper and Lower Romani were originally two moieties of the same village, but documents suggest they were developing separate identities as early as the sixteenth century. Upper Romani is now entirely separate from Lower Romani, with its own graveyard and church. A web of unpaved roads climb far into the steep wooded hillside. Many of the houses were built fairly recently, since the original village site had to be moved due to landslides caused by deforestation. This space is now a vast green hillside used for communal grazing, parts of it still bearing the names of the people who used to live there.

Alongside Upper Romani, there stretches the village Saliste, inhabited by a Roma clan called Rudari. Although separated only by a narrow river, Saliste is considered a different village. Its streets are much livelier than those of Upper or Lower Romani, with children playing football, piglets and dogs sleeping together in the sun, young men tinkering with cars, and entire families sitting on the wooden benches outside their yards and chatting. The Rudari settled here in the 1950's, when the local administration needed people willing to take on hard physical labour in forestry. A forester from a well-established local family encouraged a group of Rudari to settle, and more followed. They lived in tiny, 2 sq. meter shacks built of cardboard and scraps of wood, below the graceful white house of their forester patron. Some of these are still standing, inhabited by elderly people. In time, the village has spread and houses have grown larger, their quality indistinguishable from that of Romanians' homes. Although the Rudari were granted land rights by the communist authorities, this part of the river valley had formerly belonged to the convent and under the current restitution laws the nuns could reclaim it. Although the nuns have not reclaimed it so far, the land remains unclaimed and the village continues to grow, with more and more houses being built at both edges, on land of uncertain ownership. Saliste is the last settlement in this valley. At its northernmost extremity, the main road turns into a dirt track winding towards the forests and mountains beyond.

If, from the crossroads of the water purification plant one follows the second road across the river, one reaches the oldest part of Lower Romani. The houses here are built in the old style, one storey high and adorned by colourfully painted wooden verandas enclosed with a multitude of glass windows. A water fountain with an icon of the Virgin under an immense weeping willow marks another crossroad with Neagota, Romani's second street, which runs parallel to the main one. Local tradition says this is the area where the convent's freed gypsy slaves settled in the 1850's. The street's name, Neagota, comes from 'negrotei', which is a term similar to 'nigger'. Continuing towards the convent, we pass the former state-owned village shop, now converted into a bar where young men play table tennis. Across the street is the convent's tiny ancient water mill, built on stilts over a pond with ducks. A melancholy seventy-year old nun can sometimes be seen, on autumn afternoons, grinding wheat and corn for the convent.

Approaching the convent gates, we pass, on the left, the village church, built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century shortly after the convent. Across from it is the monument to the



village's WWI heroes—a statue of the Nation as a beautiful woman supporting a dead soldier with one arm, while holding a crown of laurels over his head with the other. A tiny elderly nun called Visalia may be seen lighting candles at the foot of the statue, in the memory of her father, wounded and taken to an Austrian prisoner camp, two fallen uncles and a few nuns who went to the front lines to tend the wounded and died there, alone, of typhoid fever.

In the early part of the twentieth century, life in Romani seems to have blossomed. Large houses were built, several local civic associations founded, and an annual fair was held near the convent. Visalia remembers how, in the 1920's, Romania's queen Marie would arrive at the convent, in an open-top convertible. She would stop by to sample the fruit preserves made every autumn by the nuns, in large cauldrons hanging over wood fires inside the main courtyard of the convent. "See, dear, our good queen wasn't afraid of being attacked, like these guys [today's politicians], didn't bring any escort, any policemen. Why are they afraid? Isn't it because they have made enemies of the people?" (Visalia, pers. comm.). Horezu convent was a favourite summer retreat of this queen, who kept permanent apartments here. A grand-daughter of Queen Victoria, Marie was the most charismatic and popular member of Romania's Hohenzollern royal family. In contrast to her more reserved German in-laws, she enthusiastically embraced everything Romanian, travelling through the country, mixing with ordinary people, helping with charities and, during WW1, nursing soldiers close to the front lines. A romantic personality, she enjoyed dressing up her children as Romanian shepherds for numerous posed portraits, launched a fashion for folk costumes among the aristocracy, and was prone to idiosyncratic gestures such as ordering that all the children at Bistrita convent's orphanage (15 km from Horezu) be fitted with Roman sandals<sup>4</sup>. She also founded boy-scout and girl-scout camps in Romani.

After the onset of socialism, Romani lost its administrative autonomy, being incorporated, along with five other villages, into the nearby town Horezu in 1968. Low grade coal had been discovered locally, and Horezu, a sleepy little market town 3 km away from Romani, was to become, according to the industry planners, one of the nation's modern mining centres. Modernisation meant that a number of concrete tower blocks were built in Horezu's centre, a first step in Ceausescu's plan to 'systematise the countryside', freeing up land for agriculture by moving villagers into blocks of flats. One man whose house was demolished refused to move without his

animals, and made his horse climb the four flights of stairs to the flat he had been allocated. Eventually, his family prevailed upon him to give it up, but the horse, terrified, could not be made to descend the stairs. Finally, five strong men succeeded in bringing it down, blindfolded. Fortunately, the systematisation plans were eventually abandoned, and they did not reach Romani.

Despite the remote location, historical and political events also made their mark on Romani, mainly through the influx of refugees and other outsiders who settled there. For instance, a few villagers were descendants of Italians who had come in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to help build railway tunnels, and had decided to remain. Local people (particularly shepherds) also have a tradition of migration in search of work and a better life, one couple having gone as far as Detroit in the 1920's. After the Russian take-over of Bessarabia (now Moldova Republic) at the beginning of WW2, refugees from this region also settled in Romani—including a group of nuns who found shelter at Horezu convent. One refugee who settled in the village later became notorious for providing love spells and aphrodisiacs and performing (illegal) abortions during socialist times. After the onset of communism, several nuns, having been expelled from the convent, also took up residence in the village. The last survivor of this group is Visalia, who still lives in a tiny house near the convent's gates.

During socialism, social mobility increased tremendously, with most young people moving to towns to pursue educations and careers. This means that Romani's population now tends to be elderly. Other changes brought about by socialism have been equally profound. An entire infrastructure of paved roads and water drainage systems was built, and water, electricity, plumbing, and access to frequent transportation provided. Now, however, only one state-owned enterprise remains in the village. This is the local Forestry department (*Ocolul Silvic*), which administers all the forests in the area. This agency is important to villagers because it sells firewood, an absolute necessity in winter, and provides occasional employment, although very badly paid. In the autumn, endless hours are spent by villagers trying to close private deals with the *Ocol* people responsible for the sale of firewood, in the hope of securing preferential access to supplies that are scarce and in high demand. Being owned by the state, the *Ocolul* forests are considered a resource open to exploitation by all, both employees and villagers. In recent years, the edible chestnuts from one forest have become the focus of fierce politics and informal trading, as villagers attempt to steal as much as possible of the highly valuable fruit.

## *The Convent*

In contrast to the village's 'new' look, Horezu convent instantly transports the visitor back in time. Through the ochre-painted arch of the lower gate, one glimpses the tall, austere white walls with dark wooden shingle roofs, and the row of carved stone columns of the terrace running the length of the right wing. Like many other parts of the convent, this is, in fact a newer addition, built around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As late as 1908, most of the convent was in such a decayed state as to be uninhabitable. More recently, the communists undertook a vast restoration project lasting a decade, and in post-socialist times a new guest house and mess hall were added in the lower courtyard, built with money donated by the National Bank, whose governor was a friend of the nuns. The buildings have grown organically, but efforts were always made to preserve the architectural unity of the compound, which is considered the best Wallachian example of late Romanian Renaissance architectural style, combining autochthonous, Venetian and Byzantine influences.

As soon as we enter the lower gate, we are surrounded by little gypsy children asking for money and cigarettes while their grandmother, twig brooms on her back, watches from a distance. Below the second gate, the local potters are displaying their colourful enamelled plates, bowls and jugs for the tourists. Past this, there is a spacious courtyard with grass and tall walnut trees, surrounded by very high, though partially crumbling, walls made of stone and brick. On the right are the convent's barn and new guesthouse. Young nuns are busily rushing about, while one or two may be chatting on the payphone near the gate. The third gate, four metres high, is made of thick oak plated with iron, bearing the indentations of bullet holes made by brigands who coveted the monks' gold in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The inner yard is a rectangle made up of buildings on three sides, with a very high wall on the fourth. In the middle is the main church, with depictions of heaven and hell on the sides of the entrance, its interior covered in colourful and well-preserved frescoes painted by Greek monks.

Most of the nuns live in rooms opening onto a gallery with columns which runs the length of all the buildings. In the summer, this is filled with flowers, fruit set out to dry and bits of furniture. The younger novices live two or three to a room, while the older nuns usually live alone—as senior nuns they are allowed greater autonomy. Nuns are allowed to keep private possessions (photos and cosmetics are among the most prized), and even furnish their own rooms with things brought from

home. Eating is, however, an important way to mark out the fact that this is a community, and nuns are expected to eat only at set hours and together. Nuns may keep food in their rooms, or stop by the kitchen for a snack between meals, but this is frowned upon as being anti-social. According to one elderly nun, in the convent's past, bids for greater autonomy took the form of refusal to eat "from the common pot" (Visalia, pers. comm.).

Officially, one is told, the convent has over sixty nuns, but during my stay there I met only 48. Of these, 15 were aged between 70 and 90, 8 were middle-aged, and 25 were younger novices, between 18 and 35, who had joined after 1989. Most of the novices had taken preliminary vows, becoming *rasofore*, which meant they could wear the habit, and were awaiting their final vows, when their names and statuses were to be irrevocably changed. Prior to taking the final vows, novices could still choose to return to the world without committing a mortal sin. During my stay there, six novices left (though two later returned). Such departures probably account for the discrepancy between the official population figure and the actual one.

The nuns wear a long black habit (*anteriu*) with long sleeves and reaching almost to the ground, tied with a belt around the waist. A round toque hat (*scufia*) covers the top of their head, and a black scarf is wrapped over the toque and around their chin, so as to cover everything but their face, which is framed by the edge of a white scarf appearing from underneath the black one. In addition to this, the full ceremonial costume also includes a long pleated tulle veil called the mantle (*mantia*), in which they are wrapped up for their burial. When working in the fields, however, most nuns wear long skirts, long dark coats and scarves on their heads.

Activities at the convent are divided between worship and work. Many of the elderly nuns were too feeble in health to be able to work. Their old age pensions were paid in to the convent for their upkeep, and their activities consisted mainly of attending services. Those who were able to work were, however, expected to—for instance, one was the convent's shepherdess, another was responsible for the mill, and so forth. The middle-aged nuns tended to occupy the highest tier in the convent's leadership, and they assigned younger novices their obedience tasks. Some novices had the same obedience task for many years (for instance, serving in the mess hall, or cleaning out the stables, running the gift shop, looking after tourists and guests), while others switched jobs by rotation, serving one week in the kitchen, one week on agricultural tasks, and so forth. All novices were responsible for preparing the church for a week,

when their turn came. In the summer, most of the jobs available were agricultural ones, such as gathering in the hay. In the autumn, much time was spent on making vegetable and fruit preserves, and in the winter most nuns worked on weaving traditional rugs and painting icons. On the whole, most of the novices' time was spent in carrying out tasks, and Sunday afternoons were the only time they really had to themselves, and which they could devote to meditation and prayer.

On weekdays, the first service is at 6 AM, followed by another service in the early afternoon (4 PM-6PM), and a later one after dinner (7 PM-10 PM). There used to be also a late night service, but when the convent ran an orphanage in the 1940's, dispensation was given by the diocese to forego it, and it has never been reinstated. Each day is dedicated to one or more saints, and during the services excerpts from their lives, and special prayers to them are read. As a result, the lives of saints are very familiar to the nuns (more so than the bible, in many cases), and serve as a strong inspiration and reminder of what monastic life could potentially be. In addition to the commemoration of saints, each day's prayers vary according to its place in the yearly religious calendar.

Services were held by the convent's priest (who was also a monk), and sung by the nuns. On either side of the altar, there were two singing stations, with lecterns around which nuns stood. The nuns at one station would sing the prayers, with the other side punctuating with answers (e.g. God have mercy, Amen). Singing was considered an important form of worship, and could lead to a great deal of competition. Only Sunday services were attended by all the nuns, and on other days attendance could be quite sparse, although most nuns, after finishing their daily work, would trickle into the church at some point during the late evening service.

When entering the church during service, nuns would first prostrate themselves to the main icons and kiss them, then join a singing station or stand aside by the wall. Commotion and whispering were an integral part of the atmosphere. Elderly nuns frequently stood up in the middle of the service and began circum-ambulating the main part of the church (from right to left) kissing the feet of saints painted on the walls, the icons and the silver coffer with saints' relics. They looked like tiny black ghosts in a strange theatrical performance. The atmosphere was intimate yet mysterious and strangely moving, as I knelt, in the semi-darkness, my thoughts drifting along with the turns of the oriental chants. When the service ended and all nuns stood before the icon of the Virgin singing the hymn, "Defending Lady" which captured the

feeling of being under her protection and expressed the desire to become one with her archetype, we all felt bound together by a genuine power and mystery. As the nuns came to chat with me afterwards, I felt grateful to be allowed to feel like a true member of their group.

## **Orthodoxy and Politics: Some Key Issues**

### *Religious and Political Regimes*

One of the main themes of this thesis is to examine how the Romanian Orthodox Church as an institution has been shaped, in the *longue durée*, by its relations with political power. While Greek Orthodoxy has been fairly well documented by anthropologists (Stewart 1994, Iossifides 1990, 1991, Kain Hart 1992, Danforth 1982) literature on Romanian Orthodoxy is extremely sparse, and to date there are no published studies focusing on monastic life. Most of the existing studies of Romanian Orthodoxy concentrate on its history, theology and political activities (Ramet 1988, Gillet 2001). Recently, Katherine Verdery (1999) has also offered a characteristically insightful ethnographic account of contestation over property between the Romanian Orthodox and Greek Catholic churches in Transylvania. All these studies, however, tend to deal with the higher tiers of the Church hierarchy, and reflect the unitary representations of doctrine and policy these agents present to the world. At this level, what is most apparent is the Church's essentialist identity and emphasis on tradition, ideologically produced and presented as an unproblematic, unchanging fact.

By contrast, the present analysis focuses on the interstices of life within the Church, where individuals continually attempt to produce and live out meanings of religious life that are relevant to their own experiences and expectations—and in the process contest the truth-value of others' interpretations. Yet, it is not only—or even mainly—through individual agency that change is produced within institutions. Dynamic patterns that exist in the relations between and within institutions usually play a constitutive role in producing such transformation. Hence, a conceptual framework is needed to theorise the fluctuating relations between various factions within the Church infrastructure and, on a broader level, between the Church as an institution and political authority. For this, I turn to the work of Mart Bax (1987), who applied insights drawn from Norbert Elias' *The Civilizing Process* (1994) to his examination of patterns of change within the Catholic Church.

Bax argues that processes of religion and state formation are different in important ways, such as their sources of power, but that they also have a great deal in common:

“Both fulfil important functions in the spheres of social organisation and cultural orientation. Both of them develop policies towards nation-building and community- building. Both contain structures for internal control and external defence: they are defence-and-attack units. Both types of regime are thus confronted with problems of internal cohesion and external confrontation; and both try to solve these problems by attracting resources, which they attempt to monopolise” (Bax 1987: 3).

By using the concept of a ‘religious regime’, Bax is able to meaningfully highlight the processes of differentiation taking place within the Catholic Church, and thus avoid treating the Church as an unitary, stable entity. He defines religious regime as “a formalised and institutionalised constellation of human interdependencies of variable strength, which is legitimised by religious ideas and propagated by religious specialists” (1987: 7). Religious regimes are dynamic systems driven to constant development by both external dynamics (relations with the worldly, political regime and with other, competing religious regimes) and internal ones (relations between dominant forces and dominated ones, within the same religious regime). This open conceptualisation makes it possible to discern the “complex constellation of rival religious [sub]regimes, each striving for expansion and consolidation” within a church (1987: 7). Like secular regimes (states), “religious regimes are also characterised by their expansionist tendencies; both strive to extend their territories and to exert their influence over other sectors of society”. The difference between secular and religious regimes lies in their sources of power: while states have secured effective control over the means of violence and taxation, most religious regimes have lost control over these vital power sources. Because of their shared characteristics (which cause their domains to overlap) religious regimes and states (their secular counterparts) can be seen as “antagonistically interdependent configurations” (Bax 1987: 3).

### *The Monastic Sub-regime and the Orthodox Church*

One concern of this thesis is to examine the relations between the political and Orthodox regimes by focusing more narrowly on how shifts in these affected the mo-

nastic sub-regime within the Church. Such an approach makes sense because the monastic branch has traditionally been essential to the reproduction of the Church as an institution, and whenever political regimes sought to increase their control over the Church and its assets, they have tended to target monastic institutions.

In Orthodoxy, monasteries produce all the higher clergy (since monastic vows are a pre-requisite for such appointments). They have also traditionally been the main administrators of the Church's sizeable estates, as well as running various charitable projects. Founded and endowed mainly by Romanian *voivodes* (princes) who wished to symbolically mark their political achievements, monasteries also acted as an interface in relations between political and religious power. They channelled financial resources from the princes into the hands of the Church, and provided a stage upon which clerics and princely patrons could forge closer relations. Because of these roles, all the shifts in relations between the state and the Church had a discernible impact on monasteries and convents.

Within the Orthodox Church, monastic and territorial branches are integrated and regulated by a single hierarchy, with monasteries placed under the authority of the territorial clergy (bishops). This structure differs from that of the Catholic Church, where monastic orders constitute 'extra appendages', independent of the territorial branches of the Church, with which they compete in the provision of the religious services to the faithful (Bax 1985). The Orthodox organisational model, which is oligarchic, is based on the writings of the Alexandrine Holy Fathers, who saw the world as an all-encompassing hierarchy (Sarris 2000). Only monks are upwardly mobile within the Church, whilst priests are required to marry before ordination and as a result cannot enter the higher clergy. In the centralised chain of command, monastic establishments are superior to but also separate from parishes. Monks and nuns do not compete with priests in the performance of the liturgical cult, and never perform life cycle rituals for the laity. Even when monastic structures exist within a parish (as in Romani), there is little incentive to rival the parish priest, as monastic establishments do not depend on local congregations for their income, which is derived instead from their own economic activities and contributions from the State and private patrons.

This lack of competition means that there is little incentive to find new ways of attracting worshippers<sup>5</sup>. Bax (1985) shows how in Catholic Brabant, as well as in Bosnia, acute competition between monks and priests working within the same locali-



ties generated an entire range of new charities, as well as leading to an increased differentiation between the parish and monastic styles of worship. In Brabant, while bishops and parish priests introduced an almost Protestant austerity to their cult, monks wholeheartedly embraced the devotional side of the faith, encouraging new mystical visions and reviving the worship of local saints. Orthodox monastic structures are far less dependent on and attuned to the tastes of worshippers (they are not subject to the 'tyranny' of consumers of religious services to the same extent). Instead, they tend to focus on cultivating 'vertical' relations with powerful and wealthy patrons within the religious and political hierarchies.

### *Knowledge, Power and Orthodox Monasticism*

The central premise of Orthodox monastic life is the possibility of the divinisation of human beings while still in the body, through the experience of mystical enlightenment. The theologians of the School of Alexandria, whose neo-Platonist influence pervades Orthodox doctrine, argued that the real meaning of scriptures was hidden and could not be understood by means of human reason alone (Remete 1996, Savin 1996). The crucial ingredient to acquiring both knowledge and power is divine charisma. Metaphors of energy and substance are both used to explain how charisma (*har, harisma*) works. For instance charisma, imagined as an 'energy' conveyed by the Holy Ghost,<sup>6</sup> can lift the ego onto the level of divinity, producing mystical enlightenment. Conversely, charisma imagined as a substance can permanently fill an ascetic's body (viewed as a container), making it immune to decay and miraculous.

Given the possibility of direct access to divinity, monks, like the Holy Fathers of the Church, are theoretically capable of producing new revelations (nuns can also, although they acquire charismatic reputations much more rarely). As Stewart observes, Orthodox Churches are keen to emphasise the charismatic nature of the knowledge they produce: "Orthodoxy is conceived to be a living tradition, a continuous hermeneutic interaction in which individuals are guided by the Holy Spirit toward consistent interpretations of both Scripture and the existing body of tradition" (Stewart 1994: 140). This view of revelation as the main engine in the production of religious knowledge constitutes a potentially weak structural point of dogma, placing a higher value on mystical connection with divinity than on theological correctness. However, revelations are restricted with the help of several several items of dogma.

First, mystical knowledge is defined as non-discursive and contingent on rigorous ascetic practice within the Church infrastructure (monasteries, convents). Second, novel visions and teachings are tolerated only if they accord with tradition. Third, miracles which do not involve teachings (tearful icons, etc.) are promoted over discursive revelations, and finally, uncomfortable revelations are open to the charge of having been inspired by Satan, and can thus be easily repudiated by the Church (Savin 1996). Thus held in check, mysticism and miracles become desirable proofs of charismatic power, enhancing the Church's claims of exclusive authority in the production and legitimation of religious knowledge.

It happens occasionally that monks claiming to be charismatically inspired produce novel revelations. For instance, one monk in the Valcea diocese recently elaborated a new therapeutic technique, linking Orthodox philosophy and novel forms of spiritual healing (Ghelasie 1994). In cases such as this, an official Church pronouncement is rarely made (the policy is usually to wait and see), but the source of the revelation remains in doubt until it is confirmed by official Church channels.

The idea that monastics may, through accumulated merit, gain access to the highest form of religious knowledge and power implies that they are theoretically capable of a more authentic religious experience than that of the higher clergy, whose administrative activities take them away from monastic endeavours. The Canon seeks to prevent conflicts by postulating a sacral differentiation between various clerical grades. Thus, different kinds of charismas (divine gifts) are said to be granted to each clerical grade through the ordination ritual. In this usage, charismas are the gifts given by the Holy Ghost to the Apostles, which have been conveyed within the Church, through an unbroken chain of ordinations, to the present day hierarchs. Each grade in the hierarchy receives one or more specific charismas (but not all of them)—for instance, only bishops and superior grades receive the 'charisma of scriptural interpretation', which means that priests and monks do not theoretically have it (Savin 1996).

A final point is that the distinction between the clergy and the laity is considered an absolute one. Investiture makes the clergy essentially different from ordinary persons, through infusion with charismas specific to their ordained status. Yet, in practice, the Church has occasionally tolerated challenges to its monopoly on charisma. In the 1920's and 30's, several peasant prophets gained widespread notoriety, partly through promotion by the Church, which published accounts of their visions.

Yet, at least two of these prophets were challenging the Church's monopoly of charisma. One girl claimed the devil had appeared to her dressed as a monk and asked her to stop preaching, while another prophet, a shepherd, claimed he had been invited by God to step into the sacristy, which is normally off-limits to laypeople (Urzica 1993 177-239). These prophets also founded monastic establishments or chapels, without incurring a Church pronouncement against them (Urzica 1993). Such tolerance on the part of the Church suggests that rules concerning access to charisma are quite fluid and negotiable.

### *Orthodoxy and the Politics of the Nation State*

In 1991, Patriarch Teoctist, dubbed in the media 'the Red Patriarch' (Mihaiu 1999) because of his alleged collusion with the socialist regime, attempted, unsuccessfully, to resign his position (Gillet 2001: 14). The main charge against Teoctist was that he had endorsed Ceausescu's decision to tear down ancient monasteries and churches in Bucharest, in order to build his grandiose Palace of the People. The decision to continue under this Patriarch's leadership brought accusations that the Orthodox Church had failed to break with the socialist past.

Whilst other religious denominations were banned during socialism, the Orthodox Church continued to function at the price of endorsing the government. Now, after fifty years of virtual monopoly in the religious field, the Church faced competition from denominations whose moral legitimacy rested on a record of opposition to communism (see Verdery 1999). In these circumstances, the Church sought to distance itself from the past by foregrounding religious personnel who had been persecuted under communism (usually monks), and by emphasising links between Orthodoxy and national essence. Orthodox mysticism was presented as the correct, authentic form of Romanian spirituality, and monasteries and convents were publicised as showcases of spiritual life.

The Church sought a real political role within the new order, arguing that it was duty-bound, on the basis of doctrine, to advise in matters of government and mediate between its faithful and the political elites. For instance in February 1998 the Bishop of Valcea assumed the role of mediator in negotiations which ended violent clashes between the government and protesting miners threatening to march to Bucharest (Mihaiu 1999: 3). There were also proposals for legislation to grant the Orthodox

Church the status of state church (placing it above other denominations), and to give higher clergy, bishops, metropolitans and Patriarch, permanent seats in the Romanian senate (Turcescu & Stan 2000: 1474-5)

Interestingly, these proposals were put forward by a (reformist) section of the former communist elite who had re-emerged during the revolution to found one of the most influential parties of the post-socialist era (PDSR, now PSD—the Party of Social Democracy). There were several reasons why the Church members of the former nomenklatura now became allies. First, they shared a distrust of international agencies involved in directing the course of the ‘transition’. The PDSR favoured a gradual approach to reform rather than the ‘shock therapy’ required by the IMF and World Bank, and the Church resented European Union demands for the lifting of a legal ban on homosexuality (HRW 1999). Second, as we shall see in chapter 3, during the socialist period at least some clerics, such as the Bishop of Valcea, had become participants in the clientelist networks of the former nomenklatura. Over time, such networks had generated mutual trust and solidarity based on longstanding relations of reciprocity.

Third, the Church and former Party cadres shared a common rhetoric strongly reminiscent of the official history developed during socialism, which heavily emphasised the sacrality of the nation, and the heroic struggle for national self-determination. The focus was on major historical figures, such as Prince Brancoveanu, rather than on unsung heroes and alternative histories now coming to light. This strand of post-socialist discourse now also began to increasingly emphasise the role of Orthodoxy in the national struggle.

This ideological configuration received concrete expression in the sanctification of a series of national heroes, among them Princes Brancoveanu and Stephan the Great (despite his six wives and solid reputation as a womaniser), and Valcea monk Antim Ivireanul (an early nation-builder and scholar). The sanctification of these heroes literally generated charisma and invested the charismatic power of these manifestly Romanian saints into the Nation, the Church and political patrons, the PDSR foremost among them. As Feuchwang and Mingming (2001) observe, the charisma inherent in a religious tradition’s expectations of the miraculous is an effective means of creating new legitimacy. Things did not go according to plan however, and the symbolism of new saintly heroes failed to capture the imaginations of ordinary people, attracting mostly cynical commentary.

Political analysts, both Romanian and Western, argued that by seeking direct political involvement the Church had failed “to accept the legitimacy of modernity” (Cassanova 139), and was an obstacle in the path of real pluralism. It was pointed out that in Central European states like Poland, the Catholic Church opposed the state, becoming a haven of civil society, while in Orthodox countries churches tended to cooperate with the socialist regimes (Cassanova 1993: 139-40). The Orthodox Church, by contrast, continued to adhere to the so-called ‘Byzantine model’, characterised by ‘cezaro-papism’, the close alliance of Church and State. As one Romanian MP put it:

“If the Catholic Church was an institution above all States, and if the Reformed Church started from a firm doctrine of separation from political life, the Orthodox Church was always an instrument of the State. Even under Communism it was used as a strong State tool. Many priests were also in the state services and not a few worked for the Securitate. Now they are operating independently; they make their own policy. But they will not easily give up the benefits or the connections they feel they should have to the state” (N.F. Tudose qtd. in HRW 1997).

Such a ‘forced union’ between spiritual and temporal powers<sup>7</sup> was declared suspect, and inferior to the Western model, predicated on the separation of spiritual and temporal dimensions (J. Kotek qtd. Gillet 2001: 8). Some scholars went further, blaming Orthodoxy for the developmental discrepancy between Central European and East European states after the collapse of socialism (Hasquin, qtd. Gillet 2001: 34). The implication was that the Church was an obstacle in the path of progress towards Western-style democracy (Gillet: 2001: 29).

However, like the Orthodox model of Church-state relations, the Western ideal-type model of the separation of Church and State is the result of specific contingencies. Asad (1993 : 67-79) reminds us that Western understandings of religion, developed in the context of the European Enlightenment, are unique in postulating an antinomy between the religious and secular domains. The idea that religion should be a strictly private, subjective commitment rather than a public ethical programme, or a representational practice concerned with providing meaning, rather than a constitutive aspect of social arrangements, is foreign to most other religious traditions.

It must be remembered that the Catholic Church redefined itself as a chiefly moral community, condemning violence and stressing the need for reconciliation, in

response to the loss of its worldly power. Vatican I, and the Church's acceptance of the separation of the religious and political spheres was a radical measure. While formerly warrior Catholic monks had crusaded on behalf of Christianity, now "the pacific Christ became a root paradigm for human conduct" (Bax 1987: 4).

Like the Catholic Church, Orthodox Churches have in fact also been forced to adapt to 'modernity' and find new means of surviving "under the canopy of the modern nation state"—to use Feuchtwang's phrase (2001). However, the solutions they chose were shaped by different historical contingencies, and reflected a specifically Orthodox configuration of church-state relations. The breakdown of the Ottoman Empire coincided with the disintegration of the Byzantine Church. A situation resulted in which the new nations aspiring to self-determination acquired new Orthodox churches, which also aspired to independence from the Constantinople centre (to the status of autocephaly). Thus, while the emergence of nation states forced the Catholic Church to withdraw from the political realm, Orthodox Churches, whose aspirations coincided with those of the nation states, embraced the national struggle, striving to secure a place in the heart of the new nations.

With modernising reforms, Orthodox Churches also lost much of their former political power and economic base, eventually becoming dependent on state funds. This meant that they were in a comparatively weaker position in relation to the states than Catholic Church branches were. In the West, Rome was still able to oppose state encroachment by exerting some counter-balancing political pressure, but in the East, Orthodox churches found themselves increasingly at the state's mercy. State agents were particularly interested in gaining power over two assets of the church: its economic estates and its value as a source of symbolic capital and legitimacy. The Church's argument that it was duty-bound by doctrine to advise the political leadership, allowed it some symbolic leverage in negotiating a more advantageous position in relation to the state. To abandon this doctrine in favour of an a-political stance would have been illogical, further weakening the Church's role vis-à-vis the state.

According to the doctrine of symphony (or harmony), the Orthodox dogma outlining the model for church-state relations, the temporal and spiritual orders, *regnum* and *sacerdotium*, ought to be complementary rather than separate. Ideally, an ever-closer union of the two realms would develop, with the state order following the superior divine ideal<sup>8</sup>.

Kharkhordin (1998: 956) also notes this, quoting Dostoievsky's Father Paissy:

“The Church is not to be transformed into the State. That is Rome and its dream. That is the third temptation of the devil. On the contrary, the State is transformed into the Church, will ascend and become a Church over the whole world—which is... the glorious destiny ordained for the Orthodox Church. This star will arise in the East!”

Taking such rhetoric of church-state partnership at face value, commentators (Turcescu & Stan 2000, Gillet 2001) tend to overstate the Church’s actual political influence. The fact that it *aspires* to the status of state church, to seats in Parliament, to influence over legislation and to religious monopoly within the nation, does not make it a powerful political actor: success in achieving these aspirations would do so, but so far none have been or are close to being achieved.

All Christian churches have political ambitions. Religious and political fields are engaged in a fluid, mutually constitutive interaction. States and rulers seek to ‘nationalise’ religion, making it subservient to their policies (as was the case with Orthodoxy during socialism, and even with the more recent sanctifications of national heroes). Its dependence on the state has forced the Orthodox Church to accept such compromises in the hope of gaining support for its political and economic agendas.

However, the Orthodox Church’s charismatic tradition has been an asset in such negotiations, because it was a source of legitimacy that could be accessed by political power. If we look at the Romanian revolution as a moment of charismatic explosion, then we can ask what happened to this charismatic tradition during the post-socialist period, and what role did Orthodoxy, as the main custodian of ideas about charismatic power, play in the context of these events?

## Revolution and Charisma

In 1989 Romanians anxiously watched the collapse of socialist governments across Eastern Europe. A sense of inferiority and powerlessness was generated by the fact that theirs remained in control. “What can you do? It is the Romanian nature (*fire*) to endure patiently and say nothing (*sa rabde*), it’s our fatalistic character”<sup>9</sup> people often sighed (C.M., pers. comm.). When, a few days before Christmas, Ceausescu was forced to flee his palace by helicopter after crowds assembled at a political rally drowned his speech in jeers, the news of the popular revolt spread like wildfire. The television station, occupied by a group of dissidents, broadcast the revo-

lution live, sparking spontaneous uprisings throughout the country. Patient endurance had come to an end, and by uniting against the regime people felt they were reclaiming their dignity. This moment of spontaneous mobilization came to symbolize the hope of a break with the past, of social justice and freedom for all. Suddenly, as one man put it, “the impossible became possible” and Romanians learnt that “it was their destiny to create their own destiny” (Gornoviceanu 1992: 4).

The fact that the socialist regime, so seemingly powerful and entrenched, crumbled so suddenly, gave the revolution the aura of a miraculous event, evoking the imagery of salvation. Orthodox rituals were one of the chosen means of consecrating the new order. In many towns, immediately after government buildings had been seized, priests were brought to perform a ritual blessing and drive away evil. This was not just a symbolic act: the charismatic power invested in them was being recruited on behalf of the revolution, in order to alter the course of history. These rituals were being performed *before* success became a certainty, and were thus a means to mobilise divine energies on the side of the revolution. Thus, Orthodox ritual became one of the means of expressing “the expectation of the extraordinary [...], of finding an agency through which a turn of fortune towards utopia will be brought about in historical time” (Feuchtwang and Mingming 2001: 172).

The concept of charisma may provide insight into mechanisms of social change during times of upheaval and crisis such as that following the revolution. As Feuchtwang and Mingming (2001) point out, charismatic authority plays a crucial role in Weber’s model because, whilst traditional and bureaucratic forms tend towards stasis, the charismatic type helps to account for radical creative change from within. Attempting to broaden the concept of charisma through a consideration of charismatic traditions in both Western and non-Western societies (Csordas 1997, Kapferer 1988, O’Brien 1988) Feuchtwang and Mingming (2001) conclude that charismatic movements do not necessarily depend on the presence of a leader with political aspirations (as in Weber’s model), and need not be tied to ecstatic communities and belief in a divine gift. Fundamentally, they depend on repertoires of stories capable of mobilising people behind the project of bringing about a utopian vision in historical time. They redefine charisma as follows:

“Charisma is the name for the innovative and restorative potential of tradition. It is a potential realised in explosions of social movement and invention when internal and external distur-



bances and dissatisfactions sharpen boundaries between a present that does not live up to traditional expectations which are ‘remembered’. What is remembered is a past when mythology says those expectations were really fulfilled” (Feuchtwang & Mingming 2001: 19).

What can such a view of charisma tell us about the impact of Orthodoxy in channeling expectations of a post-socialist utopia?

The collapse of socialism was accompanied by a widespread revival of popular interest in religious matters. As well as interest in ‘exotic’ and previously forbidden practices, such as Yoga, I-Ching divination, Daoism, various types of witchcraft and the like, there was great fascination with the Orthodox faith, and particularly its mystical ideology, portrayed by the church as the most authentic form of Romanian spirituality, and the one most compatible with the national soul. Books by and about Orthodox mystics flooded sidewalk bookstands, becoming instantly popular with people from a variety of social backgrounds, both young and old. Widespread awareness that the Orthodox Church had collaborated with the socialist regime did not seem at first to affect faith in the efficacy of church ritual and doctrine. New churches and cathedrals began to be built everywhere, Sunday masses were full, and pilgrimages to monasteries were organized on a regular monthly or (even weekly) basis. Many former communists of conviction also became ardent churchgoers, arguing that, apart from the issue of the existence of God, the utopian visions animating Orthodoxy and communism shared several common elements.

Charismatic expectations are often, but not always, expressed in the idiom of religion. Secular ideologies such as Marxism or modernism had also been the conveyors of stories of revolutionary moments and future utopias—and now people were looking for a new vision that could replace these in giving shape to the future. The intersection of the political cosmology of the Nation and Orthodox tradition was a vision that had formerly proved its appeal (e.g. in the interwar period). Now, it was called upon to perform the work of legitimacy by a section of the political elite who hoped it would do so again.

Orthodox imagery was not, however, alone in channelling and expressing charismatic expectations and hopes of a better future. It was competing against a series of other traditions, techniques and ideologies. Feuchtwang and Mingming (2001: 166) point out that “under the canopy of the modern [secular] nation state”, a kind of pluralisation and relativisation of charisma tends to occur. Also, if modern charis-

matic communities can proliferate more quickly (partly due to media, travel and so forth), they may also disintegrate more quickly, due to increased competition and the greater scepticism of followers. “Mass politics and a capitalist economy have multiplied the sources of charisma and spread expectations of exercising power over one’s life, whether the search for success is small or great” (ibid: 172).

Kaneff (2002: 102) observes that in some parts of Bulgaria, Orthodoxy gained great prominence after the collapse of socialism, but later, as “the curiosity value” disappeared, people increasingly seemed to prefer the informal domain of religious services, to more formalised religious institutions. She argues that “mystical—rather than formalized religious—practices are stepping in to mediate between the individual and the natural order”—fulfilling the role formerly assumed by the socialist state, who acted as a guarantor of the natural/social order (Kaneff 2002: 102). In her view, “turning to fortune-tellers is a public, though unofficial acknowledgement that natural processes are not within human control” (Kaneff 2002: 100). The Romanian case is both similar and different. On one hand, it is true that people turned to an entire range of spiritual practitioners, rather than one institution (the Church). On the other hand, however, unlike in Kaneff’s case, in Romania Orthodoxy did provide a source of charisma which people continued to tap into: the power of mystical monks, holy relics and other miraculous objects.

What is significant then, I would argue, is the way in which people accessed supernatural power at this particular historical moment. They seem to have preferred a kind of *flexible accumulation* of charismatic power, from an entire range of sources, whether Orthodox, alternative or even secular (as in the promises of democracy). This style of charismatic accumulation bears out Feuchtwang and Mingming’s (2001) observations regarding the multiplication of sources of charisma and the instability of charismatic movements in modern nation states. Thus, instead of one charismatic tradition, we would have to speak of the availability of many different charismas, none of which achieved exclusivity in claiming people’s allegiance.

## **Everyday Practices of Freedom**

The period immediately following the revolution allowed Romanians an imaginary glimpse of freedom in absolute terms. Freedom was one of the key notions in terms of which the post-socialist era was imagined by contrast to the un-free social-

ist one. Under socialism, it had been greatly anticipated, talked about, longed for and imagined in terms of the ability to do things that were at the time forbidden. Now people contemplated the possibility of taking advantage of new opportunities, unprecedented in their lifetime. Political action, religious activities, travel abroad, private enterprise, property ownership were all ways of exploring what it meant to be free, Western-style.

The socialist experience had not just reified freedom, but also produced specific ways of imagining it, and not all freedoms were equally valued. Perhaps the three most salient ways in which socialism had restricted the personal freedom of ordinary people were through limitations placed on consumption, property ownership and travel abroad. Consequently, these became the arenas in which expectations of change were most obviously concentrated. Katherine Verdery (1996) is right in pointing out that the paternalist socialist state's promise to satisfy people's basic needs meant that the state took control of defining what these needs were, and the state's definition of needs was very restrictive. The fact that on one hand regime policies reified consumption (the satisfaction of needs) as *a right* of all citizens, and as a source of legitimacy for the state, while on the other hand they severely restricted what people could consume, stimulated consumer appetites, "aroused desire *without* focalising it, and kept it alive by deprivation" (Verdery 1996: 28). At the same time, "the relative neglect of consumer interests made consumption deeply political" (1996: 27): "you could spend an entire month's salary on a pair of blue jeans, for instance, but it was worth it: wearing them signified that you could get something the system said you didn't need and shouldn't have" (Verdery 1996: 29).

Thus, socialism produced a very particular conceptual configuration, focusing desire around consumption while also linking consumption with the idea of citizens' rights and the legitimacy of the state. If the socialist state lost legitimacy because of the wide discrepancy between what it promised and what it delivered, post-socialist governments were subject to similar expectations, and also, as we shall see in Chapter 6, lost legitimacy by failing to deliver.

Ion Gornoviceanu<sup>10</sup>, who shortly after the revolution became a smuggler and author of a "brief monograph of smuggling" (published in 1992), provides an insight into how freedom was understood at the time by ordinary people. Immediately after the regime fell, passport offices were engulfed in a tidal wave of people eager to travel abroad, and soon official forms and passport booklets were exhausted. Many of

the people who obtained passports soon became smugglers “in order to pull themselves out of the economic misery in which they had been kept” (Gornoviceanu 1992: 17). They hoped to “pull off a coup [trading within the former Eastern bloc], to go to the West, and then return home riding on a Mercedes, Audi or Renault, the car boot filled with goods that at home shine only on the shelves of foreign currency shops” (ibid.). The capital thus generated fuelled a rush to open businesses, particularly shops selling foreign goods.

According to Gornoviceanu, having been “tied up for so long”, people now “wished to make up for the time lost”, “to travel, to see the world, to communicate”, and especially “*sa se realizeze*”, an expression meaning to arrive, to transform one’s potential into visible and solid manifestations. Thus, expectations of freedom were tied to a notion of self-realisation and the opportunity to achieve one’s latent potential. As new arenas of social action opened up, people sought to re-create themselves as new kinds of persons: community leaders, property owners, entrepreneurs, travellers and consumers of Western goods. “Utopia can be modest, an idea of social justice and the personal realisation of promises unfulfilled in the history of the present. Or it can be grand, the flash of a reality beyond the consensual acceptance of what is possible” (Feuchtwang & Mingming 2001: 172).

The discourse on freedom was linked to the notion of ‘re-entry into normality’, premised on the idea that, if Romanians had been subject to abnormal restrictions for almost fifty years, now they had the chance to do the kinds of things that ‘normal’ people in the West (as seen on TV) had been doing all along. Given the exacerbation of unfulfilled desire, one feature of late capitalism was particularly salient: the seduction of consumption. Bauman (1988) has argued that in contemporary modern (Euro-American) society, ‘seduction’ replaces repression as the method of social control, and consumer freedom moves into the place occupied at an earlier stage by work, becoming the focal link between systemic reproduction, social integration and individual action. Personhood and identity are defined through consumption and the poor are excluded by the fact that they cannot keep up (Bauman 2005). Although this argument is not entirely convincing (and not made in relation to socialism), it seems to capture an interesting aspect the particular post-socialist configuration of relations between consumption, needs, the state and individuals. Romanians had been seduced by images and narratives of freedom of movement and consumption, but later became frustrated and disenchanted because of their exclusion through poverty: the influx of

capitalism stimulated desires but at the same time, for most people, the means of fulfilling these desires were shrinking. The “seduced are poor” because “the happiness they are pursuing is expressed in an ever-growing number of possessions, and therefore constantly escapes them” (Bauman 1988: 96).

In his book *Seeing like a State* (1998) James Scott points out that Lenin was keenly interested in Fordism and introduced Fordist practices and ideological assumptions to the socialist system he was building. In light of its ambition to create a new, socialist kind of person, and of its totalizing claim upon individuals’ minds and bodies, socialism could be seen as a mirror image of Fordism. Gramsci’s observation that Fordism was “the biggest collective effort to date to create, with unprecedented speed, and with a consciousness of purpose unmatched in history, a new type of worker and a new type of man” (qtd. Harvey 1989: 126) could equally well apply to socialism. Furthermore, one could argue that Fordism and socialism had something in common with the Romanian brand of ethno-nationalism and even with Orthodoxy—they all make totalizing claims upon the individual, claiming an undivided allegiance to the parent-state, factory, nation or church. In other words, all these ideologies were predicated on categorical membership of the person as part of a greater whole, a monolithically conceived entity.

In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such categorical conceptions of identity have been increasingly breaking down—not only in the capitalist West, but equally, I would argue, in the socialist East. Why were people like Gornoviceanu (and there were a great many of them) so quick and skilled in taking advantage of economic opportunities on the margins of the law, by becoming smugglers? Socialism, I would argue, had produced its own style of flexible accumulation—on the margins, and in the interstices of the state-run system. The objective of this flexible accumulation was to use state power and resources for personal gain—as in the case of bureaucrats operating between the ‘officialized’ and ‘personalized’ public spheres (Yurchak 2002).

Gornoviceanu writes that if one wants to understand smugglers, one must decipher the saying: ‘book learning is useless if you don’t know how to untangle yourself from a sticky situation’ (*degeaba ai invatat carte, daca nu stii sa te descurci*). The reflexive verb *a te descurca* means literally to untangle oneself, and it denotes the ability to improvise in response to a given situation in such a way as to come out on top. This ability was essential to surviving under the socialist system, where people had to constantly find creative ways of circumventing state impositions, bureaucratic

procedures, economic shortages and so forth. By contrast, book learning stands in this saying for the ‘theoretical’ side of reality. In socialism, it was important to know the official version, what things theoretically ought to be like, but it was crucial to master the techniques of the informal realm.

Gornoviceanu was not the only one to seize on the relevance of informal economy skills to enterprise within the new market capitalist system. Andrei Plesu, the minister for culture in 1991, and a leading Romanian philosopher also felt the smugglers’ creativity should be seen as an asset:

“The imagination a smuggler (*bisnitar*) uses in order to obtain money is immense and particularly effective. I am, to say the least, saddened to see the crackdown against the *bisnitari*. Of course that morally or judicially, *bisnitarii* are dubious, but they have a quality that ought to become generalised: to obtain money in a context in which limitations and obstacles are dominant. It is very important for us to stress this financial imagination. Without it, we will not get out of the economic blockage” (Plesu 1991: 11, my translation).

The almost universal participation in the informal economy had made people flexible accumulators, socialist-style. While this thesis does not deal particularly with smuggling and informal economy techniques, it argues that socialist-style informal accumulation techniques were being applied also to the quest for greater power within the insecure post-socialist environment. Furthermore, I argue that because the chances of increasing one’s power (and thereby one’s control over the future) through political and economic means looked increasingly slim, people turned to the flexible accumulation of supernatural power, of charisma, as a means of compensation.

## Fieldwork

My maternal great-grandmother was born in Lower Romani. Her family, who owned and operated the village sawmill, were wealthy enough to send their daughters to finishing school. My great-grandmother did not attend for long: barely fifteen she became the wife of a young priest. They began their married life in lower Romani, where he taught religion at the village school and said mass at Horezu Convent. A few years later, they moved to the town Horezu (3 km away), where they built a house and founded the new church with donations collected over a period of 20 years. In the 1980’s, my great-grandfather was a tall, thin and deaf nonagenarian with the local

reputation of being a saint. Every morning, women from villages throughout the area would queue up at his door to request prayers for various personal problems. During the major fasts, he was busiest, as many people insisted on confessing and receiving communion from his hands, his absolution being considered especially powerful (although confession to a deaf priest could cause mirth among those within shouting hearing range).

The family's connections to Romani had been severed in the 1940's, when my great-great-grandmother, who still lived there, died. As a child, I became familiar with the universe of Romani and Horezu convent through my grandfather's recollections of his childhood adventures, written in a style reminiscent of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. In the mid-1980's, after my grandfather's retirement (as head engineer in a Valcea factory), we moved to Horezu for two years. Thus, I had a chance to directly experience what life in Horezu was like during the late years of the socialist period. In 1988, I emigrated to the United States with my family.

When I began my fieldwork in Romani, only a handful of elderly people remembered my great-great-grandmother, although my great-grandfather's charismatic reputation still survived. These local connections did not however, as it turned out, matter very much to most of my informants (for reasons I shall explain in chapter 1).

During the two years of this research (2000-2002) I lived in five different settings—three in Romani (including the convent), one in the town Horezu, and one in the county capital, Ramnicu Valcea. A native-level linguistic proficiency and familiarity with cultural background made it feasible to undertake multi-sited fieldwork, and I felt this would allow me to document and integrate several different perspectives pertaining to my research topic. In Romani, I stayed with two families. My first hosts were peasant workers who had been quite seriously affected by the collapse of socialism—both husband and wife had lost their veterinary assistant jobs on (now defunct) state farms and had found precarious employment elsewhere: he, on a surviving state-owned rock quarry, she at a privately owned bakery. The second family belonged to the village elite—the husband was a teacher at the Horezu high school, and the wife a clerk in the mayor's office. Prior to living in the village, and also on frequent occasions throughout my fieldwork, I also stayed at Horezu convent, at first as a paying guest and later stopping by informally, as a friend of the nuns. During the last year of research, I also lived in the town Horezu (3km away from Romani), with a family of retired accountants and in Ramnicu Valcea, where I interviewed urbanised

relatives of people from Romani, as well as frequently commuting to the convent for more research.

The fact that I was a returned emigrée had a much greater impact on how I was perceived, than my family links with the village. Often, it brought out frustration in people who felt they had been unfairly deprived of the chance to travel, study and live as I did. Some people expected me to provide expensive gifts or even help them obtain jobs and permits to work abroad. I even had several marriage proposals by young men wishing to leave the country. My inability to help was sometimes interpreted as bad faith. It was difficult for people to believe that an institution would pay for me to spend two years in their village engaged in idle occupations, and that, though coming from abroad, I did not have much money. My filming and photography sometimes gave rise to rumours that I was being paid to collect compromising information by an unknown source with sinister intentions. Such gossip never gained much credibility however, and I remained on friendly terms with everyone.

The fact that I was an independent agent rather than being attached to one family for the duration of the fieldwork helped me develop closer relations with the nuns, who sympathised with my atypical circumstances—unmarried, removed from my family unit and, as they saw it, and living alone in the midst of strangers. Many nuns felt that my ‘dis-embedded’ state was similar to theirs. Others saw my lifestyle as glamorous, and expressed curiosity about travel abroad, celebrities, dating, clothes, makeup and electronics. As some of them explained, such rumours helped relieve the boredom and monotony of monastic life.

At first, getting permission to carry out research in the convent seemed problematic. An interview with the Bishop was encouraging but inconclusive, and although his assistant offered help, she could do little about admission at Horezu, because of tensions between herself and the abbess. The abbess of Horezu was non-committal, saying that I could stay for a few days and should then ask for further permission to remain. I did so, and the further permission was then granted. Some nuns commented wryly that this reticence may have been due to fears that I couldn’t afford to pay, but I think that I was treated rather like a candidate for novitiate—being allowed at first only a temporary stay as a probationary period. However, since I had spent time at Horezu twice before, I was known to the convent’s former abbess, Gabriela, and to the convent’s administrator (second in command), Mother Marcia. It



was thanks to their support that I now gained permission to remain (the former abbess' word still carried a great deal of weight within the convent).

On the strength of these connections, I was given a back room normally reserved for relatives of the nuns. Located in the wing where VIP guests took their meals, this accommodation allowed me daily interaction with the nuns who attended to special guests. While helping in the kitchen, I developed close friendships with Cristina and Elena, the two young nuns responsible for looking after guests. The fact that I was baptised Orthodox and related to a local priest of unimpeachable reputation also contributed to my being trusted within the convent. Interestingly, there were never any serious attempts to proselytise me. Partly due to my family's Orthodox connections, it was felt that divine charisma was working in my life.

During my stay at the convent, I was not closely supervised by the abbess, and my relationships with the nuns became increasingly informal. Whenever I visited, I was offered a bed in a spare room or in one of their own rooms (sometimes Mother Gabriela, the ex-abbess, arranged for me to stay on her own initiative). I was able to sit up late with the novices and witness gossip, forbidden phone calls, arguments and outbursts against each other. My popularity with many nuns was due to my facilitating their access to things and people on the outside. I was occasionally asked to help them contact family members and friends, and more often to supply magazines, music tapes, makeup, sugar, medications, shoes and so forth. Their lack of money and their isolation made these services precious, but their requests were never excessive.

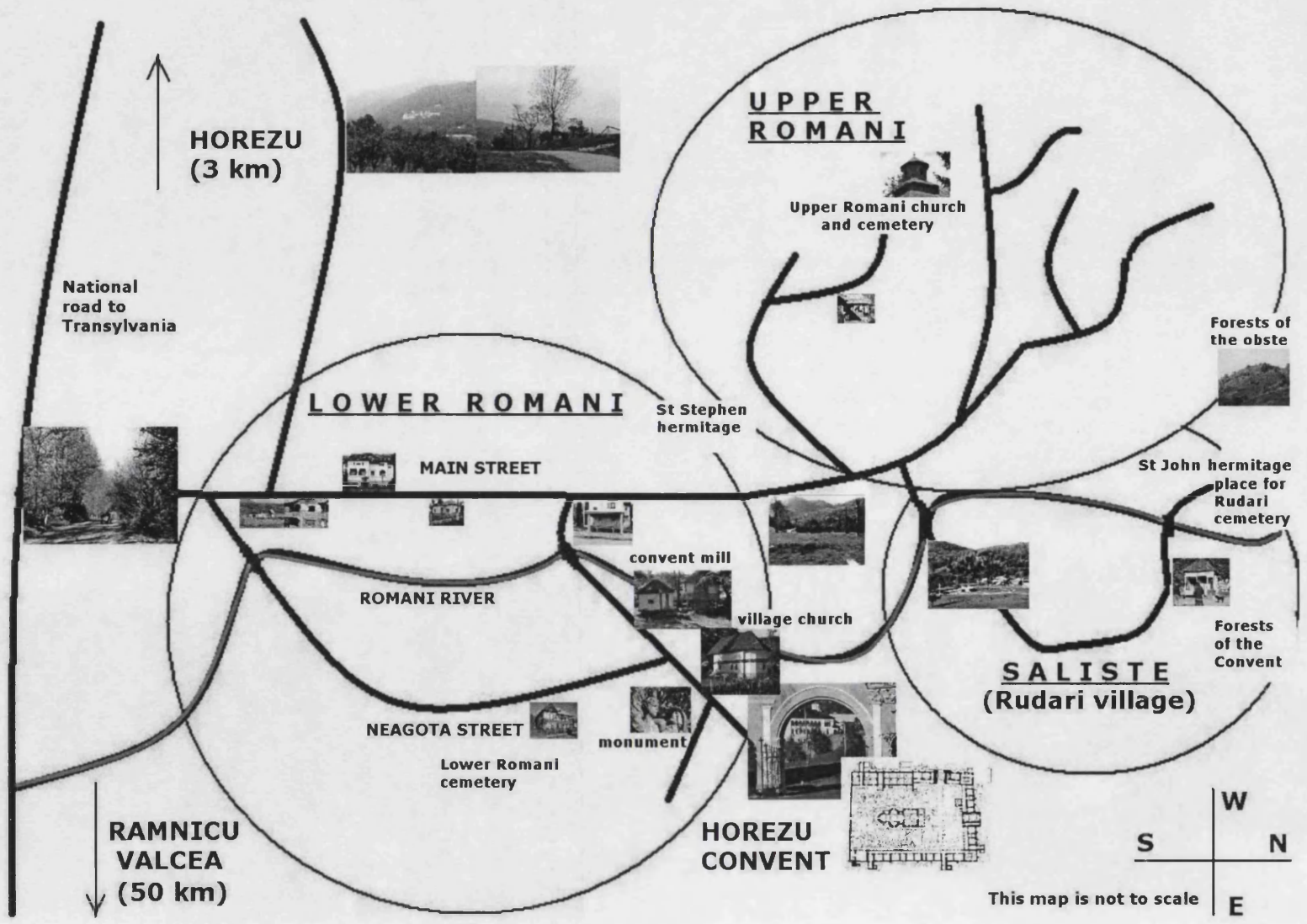
My position in the convent was ambiguous, as I was neither an ordinary lay visitor (who would be allowed little interaction with the nuns), nor a novice (who would be expected to follow a much stricter work and worship regime). I did not consider novitiate a viable option both because I planned to also carry out research in settings outside the convent and because I felt it would raise serious ethical issues. It was known to everyone that I was carrying out research, but the nuns, familiar mainly with the visits of art historians, continued to be puzzled by my research methods and concerns however much I explained my aims. Eventually, judgement was suspended on the strength of the evidence of my close friendships within the community. After the initial months, I was able to visit and stay at the convent without making prior arrangements, as an informal guest.

Most of the nuns tended to be discriminating in choosing with whom to associate. Several separate groups had emerged, based on intimate friendships and bound

together by shared secrets, which they sought to protect from “the abbess’ spies”. Often, there were animosities between the various groups, and avoiding being drawn into such antagonisms could be a delicate task. My strategy of being open and friendly with all eventually led to a situation in which several groups sought to recruit me to their side, and in the process disclosed a great deal of information about the history of internal tensions within the convent.

Unlike Sarris’ (2000) experience at Mount Athos (where rules are stricter) I had little difficulty in learning nuns’ life histories, although I never asked directly, as this might arouse defensiveness and suspicion. Nuns were expected to forget the past, and to keep all that was less than ideal within the convent secret (so as not to tempt lay people, for whom they were an example). However, they usually volunteered personal information quite freely in the course of conversations. Much information was collected while helping out with various tasks and listening to the ongoing conversations. Later, I would follow up interesting ‘leads’ by claiming to know more than I actually did. In time, this enabled me to piece together a fairly comprehensive picture of the history of relations within the convent.

The disclosure of information received during intimate conversations with the nuns has presented a serious concern throughout the writing of this thesis. There is an unavoidable conflict between the concerns of anthropological research and the ideology of secrecy surrounding life in Orthodox monastic establishments—dogma is quite clear on the fact that to disclose any shortcomings of religious personnel amounts to misleading the faithful (*sminteala*) and causing them to sin. The omission of data not conforming with the ideal of monastic life would have seriously prejudiced this study, but I have sought to protect informants by changing their names and by taking particular care to convey their words as closely and sensitively as possible.



Sketch of the relative location of various landmarks in Lower Romani, Upper Romani and Saliste.



**The road to Horezu Convent.**



**Horezu Convent.**





**A traditional house in Lower Romani.**



**The convent's old mill.**



**The Monument dedicated to local World War I heroes.**



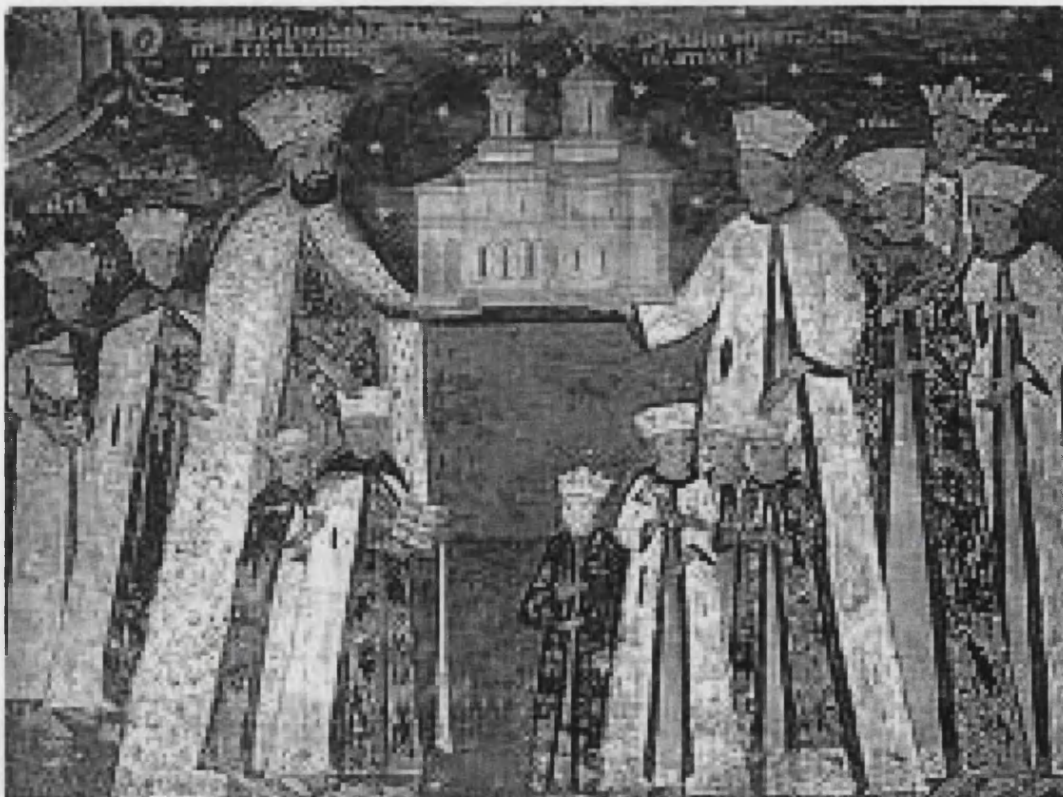
**The first gate of Horezu Convent.**



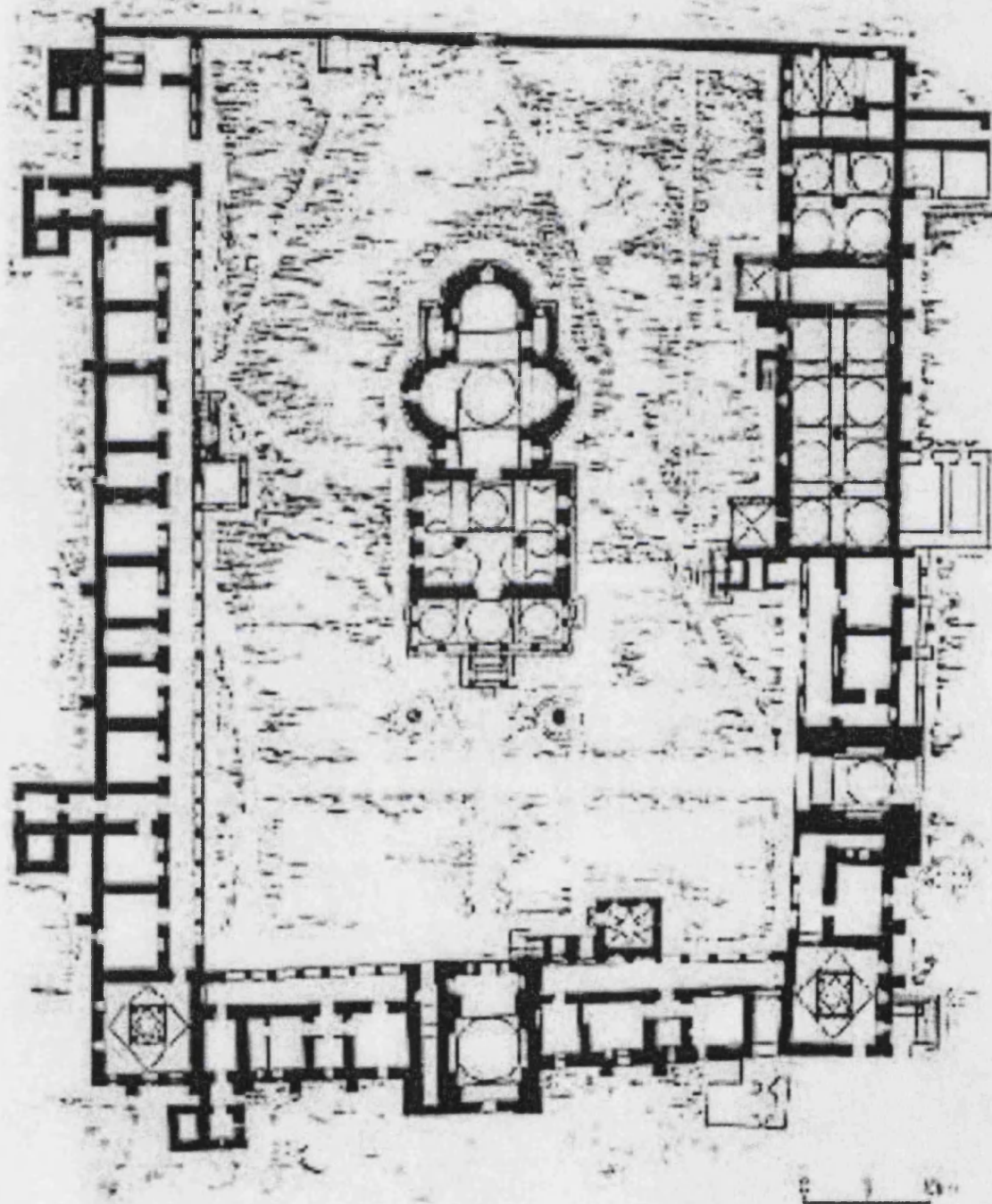


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**Horezu Convent seen from the air.**



**Voivode Brancoveanu and his family (fresco inside the convent).**



The plan of Horezu convent. The church is surrounded by a rectangle of buildings on three sides, and a high wall on the eastern side. The entrance is in the middle of the buildings on the southern side (right), flanked by the museum (right of the entrance), and the old VIP quarters and dining room on the left.



## CHAPTER 1

### **A SPIRITUAL AMUSEMENT VILLAGE**

One summer evening in 1997, an elderly retired geologist from the village Romani had a vision. In his own words: “Myself, my wife, Helmut Kohl and Princess Diana were standing on a tall precipice which was called the Golgotha of Horezu. Far below us, in the abyss, a great crowd wailed in terror. The Virgin Mary appeared in the sky and asked us to tell them they must try to save their souls (*sa se mintuiasca*). We began to throw them icons with the face of the Virgin and the Saviour” (Florescu, pers. comm.).

The vision inspired his conception of a grandiose project to transform a large part of the village Romani into an amusement park called “the Holy Place, the Village of Faith, Love and Liberty, Horezu-Romani”. Located near Horezu convent, a UNESCO world heritage monument which attracts large numbers of tourists, the Holy Village would be a place of pilgrimage for cultural tourists and devout Christians. It would contain the reconstructed sites of historical events linking Romani to the history of the Romanian nation and of the world. Upon entering, one would see the Berlin Wall being broken down by a Helmut Kohl mechanical puppet with a drill, whilst Gorbachev stepped through the break from the other side “for the salvation of this mad world” (Florescu pers. comm.). There would be a replica of the Istanbul palace where the Saint Prince Constantin Brancoveanu, founder of Horezu Convent, had been tortured and executed along with his sons, and of the Bosphorus strait, where their bodies were dumped. The park would offer tourists spiritual and physical healing at a spa with six mineral water springs, one for each Brancoveanu saint. There would be a chance to be baptised by someone dressed as St John the Baptist, monastic cells for meditation, sheepfolds, tents, as well as five star hotels, an airport and helipad, and access to the nearest mountain by cable car.

At the centre of the park, the ‘Holy Place’ would contain a pantheon of heroes, with the statues of Princess Diana, Mother Theresa, Pope John Paul II, King Ferdinand of Romania, Patriarch Justinian (who was leader of the Church during the com-

munist takeover), Horezu Convent's former abbess Furmentia, Mr. Florescu's father (a former mayor of the village), and I.G.Duca, a former prime minister of local origin, assassinated in 1939 by the Nazis. Further up, on a mountain called the Golgotha of Horezu, Mr. and Mrs. Florescu, Helmut Kohl and Princess Diana (the four visionaries) would be buried in a mausoleum with eternal flame. The village was also to contain the "Angels of Timisoara Cemetery" (for the dead of the Timisoara uprising, which started the Romanian revolution), as well as another cemetery of "unknown heroes of every nationality, Romanian, Jewish, American, English, Polish, Hungarian and Russian", reburied here "to save them from being defiled by their murderers" (Florescu pers.comm.).

Why transform an idyllic village into a post-socialist Hades filled with bodies of martyrs? Mr. Florescu saw this project as a fundamental necessity: not only as a tourist attraction but, more profoundly, as a means of spiritual and physical healing, of bringing peace to both the living and the dead. This would be done by re-appropriating religious faith, and inscribing into the landscape of the village formerly hidden, unauthorised histories, so that they could never be forgotten again. In her book *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies* (1999) Katherine Verdery observes that, in the post-socialist reconfiguration of spatio-temporal orders, the 'peripatetic dead', the bodies or statues of heroes, became political and symbolic currency in the contestation taking place among the living. The public reburial of dead heroes stands for their incorporation into a common genealogy—they become 'ours'. Such claims index not only inclusion, but also exclusion, and Mr. Florescu's choice of heroes suggests a re-writing of history that completely excises the communist period, joining the pre-communist era directly to the post-communist.

How did his sense of mission to transform the village arise? Mr. Florescu saw himself as a link between Romani's pre-communist past and the present. He was heir to one of the village's formerly prominent families, the son of a schoolteacher who had been village mayor for over 25 years in the 1920's and 30's, prior to the onset of socialism. During his father's time in office, Romani was frequently visited by Romania's royal family, as the queen mother, Marie, kept her own apartments at Horezu convent. On some of her visits, she was accompanied by her grandson, Prince Michael, who later became Romania's last king. Mr. Florescu claimed that, as the mayor's son, he had "grown up playing with Michael". Although this was probably an exaggeration, when the elderly king visited Horezu in post-socialist times, he met

with Mr. Florescu, and they were seen by the whole village walking arm in arm on the main street. This connection to Romani's pre-communist elite and to the royal family, Romania's pre-communist leaders, was the central stake of Mr. Florescu's claim to legitimacy as the person most qualified to help restore the village to its former glory.

As is often the case with novice anthropologists and their first informants, I soon discovered that Mr. Florescu was eccentric. I realised this, when he insisted I should bring Tony Blair to the village and convince him to buy his house (up for sale due to a bankruptcy), promising in exchange to make me Vice Chancellor of his project (the Chancellor was presumably Helmut Kohl). He also swore me to secrecy, explaining that the former Securitate was trying to frustrate his efforts to reveal the truth by undermining his health, having caused him to have surgery six times. Yet, despite their extravagance, Mr. Florescu's ideas were not particularly idiosyncratic, considering that public discourse in the wake of socialism was dominated by themes such as the need to rediscover historical truth, rehabilitate heroes and other wronged dead, and bring about religious revival and healing. These issues were constantly debated in the daily media (to which almost everyone in the village had access), and politicians routinely used historical and religious themes in their strategies to improve their image and discredit opponents. Like the madman from the Comaroffs' "The madman and the migrant" (1987), Mr. Florescu had created a bricolage of salient themes. His fantasies outlined sources of anxiety and contestation in post-socialist Romania, and his proposed solution was to settle these ambiguities by inscribing into the landscape the truth as he saw it.

The point that struck me was that Mr. Florescu's plan for the regeneration of Romani had a great deal in common with the symbolic gestures through which national elite politicians sought to create legitimacy. Yet, people in Romani seemed uniquely unimpressed—such symbolic actions seemed to strike no chord in them. Seizing on this discrepancy, this chapter seeks to provide an introduction to the village by asking what were some of the more deeply felt concerns of these people, and how these found expression in various attempts to symbolically restructure local life.

The planning of this symbolic village had been inspired by an important political and religious event that took place at Horezu convent in 1992—the sanctification of the convent's founder, 17<sup>th</sup> century prince Constantin Brancoveanu, as a martyr for the nation and faith. This highly publicised event was attended by top-ranking

religious and political figures, including President Ilescu, a Russian-trained former communist who had now publicly embraced Orthodoxy. Ilescu was not the only politician to seize upon the symbolic value of religious patronage, and during the nineties, the electoral strategies of rival party leaders were frequently reflected in their choices of churches in which to celebrate important religious days. Thus, in 2000, according to a media source (Dumitru 2000), Ilescu celebrated the Assumption of the Virgin at Horezu, “quietly, and avoiding political statements” (i.e. in ascetic retreat reflecting his devotion) while the Prime Minister Isarescu spent the day dedicating a new road leading to the convent Tiganesti, and Ilescu’s political rival, Petre Roman, went to the monastery *he* habitually patronised, Nicula, in Transylvania, to worship more publicly, alongside “200 000 faithful, who had been there for three days” (the subtext here was that Roman had deliberately chosen a Transylvanian monastery—Transylvania having a tradition of opposition and protest to the policies of the Old Kingdom of Wallachia, capital seat of Romania, where Ilescu’s chosen convent, Horezu, was).

The sanctification made prince Brancoveanu a valuable source of symbolic and political capital, and voices were soon raised demanding the reburial of his bones at Horezu convent, his intended final resting place, where his empty tomb stands inside the main church. The most direct claim to the new saint came (perhaps unsurprisingly) from the local mayor, another former nomenklatura member, who wrote in his preface to the history of Horezu: “at Hurezi monastery, the bells toll slowly of sorrow over the land, reminding of the empty tomb of saint Constantin Brancoveanu, martyr of Christianity and of his people, because of the failure to respect his last wish, to rest in the most beloved of his monasteries” (in Tamas 1995: 6, my transl.).

The interest of politicians and other members of local elites—like Mr. Florescu—in historical symbolism and particularly the public reburial of heroes suggests a desire to gain a measure of control over the past (as in the old adage coined during communism, “the future is fine, we know what it will be like, it is the past that keeps changing”). The collapse of socialism and accompanying attempts to define a new order in contrast to the old, corrupt one, meant that the past could be a source of political power and legitimacy, as well as legal grounds for the restitution of economic assets or compensation for suffering. On a more negative note, it could also (at least theoretically) be grounds for imprisonment. Yet, with the disintegration of the official line regarding historical matters, memory and history were increasingly revealed to be

elusive, corruptible and contestable. “If everyone already knows that history can be manipulated, then how can the authorities produce a truth effect? Dead bodies are particularly helpful in resolving this problem” (Verdery 1999: 113). They are concrete evidence, useful in glossing over the subjectivity of history and memory. Symbolic politics of this kind establishes a powerful analogy between the relics of saints and bones of national heroes. Verdery (1999: 114) goes on to observe that, “like saints, ancestors engage deep feeling when their biographies can be cast in that most common of all nationalist tropes: suffering. The revival of religion has intensified this imagery”.

In his preface to the local history, the mayor writes exactly as Verdery might expect him to:

“Our land is sacred through the bones of the ancestors, through the blood of heroes, through the sweat of those who have given life, colour and beauty to the clay. The Horezu folk ceramics represent that princely writ of the people’s noblesse with which we have made ourselves known throughout Europe” (in Tamas 1995, my transl.).

Thus, in two sentences, an identity relation is established between the holy relics of saints, the bones of martyr national ancestors and locally made folk ceramic plates and jugs. Yet, from my interviews with ordinary villagers in Romani, it emerged that such symbolic discourses and initiatives were uniquely ineffectual in performing the magic of stirring up strong feelings, mobilising voters and conjuring up legitimacy. The great majority of villagers ignored the mayor’s efforts to fulfil Brancoveanu’s last wish, observing that this was just an attempt to divert attention from his corruption and inefficiency. Their disinterest was further reflected in their failure to attend the yearly feast dedicated to the Brancoveanu saints, although they regularly attended the feasts of other saints in the area. Verdery (1991b) points out that during socialism, views that differed from those of the state were often expressed through non-participation and pertinent silences. I think the failure to attend Brancoveanu’s feast could be read in this way: the absence of the villagers who were otherwise keen to attend saint’s feasts spoke volumes.

If symbolic politics fooled few, and often attracted scorn, why did the majority of politicians continue to rely heavily on it, thus reproducing the socialist disconnection between political discourse and people’s real concerns? Verdery’s (1991a) work

on national ideology under socialism suggests a possible answer as to how such rhetorical habits were formed. Her argument is that, when the socialist economy began to collapse and living standards seriously deteriorated, the Ceausescu regime opted against liberalising reforms, fearing loss of control over the population. Instead, they decided to deny the problem and tighten their control over symbolic production, forcefully imposing their own interpretation of the situation. For this, they turned to the symbolism of Romania's centuries-long struggle for independence, portraying the country as still being, in the present as in the past, a small but proud nation besieged by larger empires with designs on its resources. Ceausescu then became the nation's heroic and principled defender against capitalist imperialism. In this process, history became the main source of metaphors for the official discourse's interpretations of the present, and historical symbols became a valuable currency in building legitimacy and grounding claims to power. It seems likely that, retaining the habit of their former training—as well as the 'wooden tongue' (as the stiff, formalised language of communist official discourse was ironically dubbed)—*ex-nomenklatura* politicians continued to rely on symbolic capital as the main building bloc of legitimacy (particularly as the economic situation was deteriorating). Their constituents, however, had become increasingly immunised to 'official' discourse and preferred to judge political performance on the more pragmatic basis of observable economic realities. "They all talk talk talk but nothing ever changes, except that they get richer", was a constant refrain.

During the socialist period, people reacted to the discrepancy between observed reality and its official portrayal by becoming increasingly sceptical and giving vent to cynical commentary through widely circulated political jokes. For example, staying with the theme of dead bodies, in one joke Khrushchev is trying to dispose of the body of Stalin, who had become an embarrassment. He calls up the leaders of all nations in an effort to find one who would give Stalin a resting place. Of all these, only Israel volunteers, but Khrushchev replies: 'no way, you can't have him! You already had another one who rose from the dead!' (ie Jesus).

Such jokes, routinely repeated in private, seem to fit James Scott's (1990) concept of the 'hidden transcript'. Briefly, Scott proposes that hidden transcripts are produced both by the powerful as well as by the dominated, and stand in contradistinction with the public transcripts of official discourse. The hidden transcripts of the dominated are covert or mocking forms of resistance to the ruling ideology.

However, Humphrey (1994) argues that the term ‘hidden transcripts’ presupposes a separation between the discourses of the powerful and those of the dominated (both of which would be relatively stable, enduring groups) that fits colonial and class situations more accurately than socialist ones. In Mongolia, most people had experienced both power and subordination to others, and repeated purges meant there was little opportunity for the emergence of stable groups with their own social space allowing the production of hidden transcripts. Hence, subversive discourses took the form of ‘evocative transcripts’—purposefully ambiguous, allusive sayings which were not really hidden, but rather a common resource available to all. Whilst ‘hidden transcripts’ derive their empowering effect from the fact that they are concealed from the other side, ‘evocative transcripts’ are effective because they subversively use the language that is the preserve of the other side.

Romanian jokes seem to fall somewhere between hidden and evocative transcripts. Like hidden transcripts, they were unequivocally satirical and pointed, for instance, satirising official workplace slogans, people coined their own subversive ones such as: “long and frequent breaks are the key to all success”. Yet, like evocative transcripts, they were widely available and known both to party cadres and ordinary people. Indeed, party cadres *were* ordinary people, and as Yurchak (2002) compellingly argued, the Soviet system, and I would argue the Romanian as well, were characterized by an extreme hybridity of personal and official roles, so that the official and the personalized, informal public spheres were so tightly bound together that they could not function apart from one another. This implies that most people were concomitantly part of the oppressive system and the oppressed population.

After 1989, Romanian intellectuals and dissidents argued that socialism had morally corrupted Romanians by fostering duplicity and the tolerance of lies (Mungiu 1995). This moral corruption was invoked as an explanation as to why ex-communist elites were voted back into power, particularly by rural and working class people. The only way to restore the moral uprightness of the population was to re-examine the past and face up to individual guilt (ibid). As we have seen, Mr. Florescu also saw the re-incorporation of the past into the present order as a means of healing. However, being educated and having lived most of his life in town, he was not a typical villager.

The reification of the past implied by this ‘psychoanalytical’ construction seemed strange to the villagers from Romani. Unlike intellectuals of urban extraction, they tended to attribute psychological afflictions to spiritual causes (evil eye, magic,

even demonic possession), and the assumption that reliving past traumas might have a healing effect, simply did not make sense to them. There was little discourse in Romani on the injustices of socialism, and no local vendettas. For instance, no one brought up the past of a local communist, known to have informed on, bullied and threatened others, nor did they accuse him of hypocrisy when he became devoutly Orthodox. This was because they felt there was nothing to be gained by resurrecting old grudges. As we shall see, the Romani villagers had their own moral discourse concerning the 'right' or 'natural' order, but this did not take socialism as a central reference point.

While intellectuals, many of whom came from families disenfranchised by the communists (like Mr. Florescu's), viewed the socialist period as an aberration and wished to symbolically excise it, linking the present to the pre-socialist order (Verdery 1999) villagers from Romani had a shorter timeline: the locally remembered past consisted mainly of events that had happened during socialism. Moreover, most villagers had benefited from the socialist regime by being assigned land, jobs and given the chance of higher education, so that they did not feel socialism should be unequivocally condemned. Furthermore, some feared attempts to restore pre-socialist arrangements, because the land on which their houses lay, or parcels they had worked all their lives, could now be reclaimed by pre-communist owners.

In this context, opinions concerning Mr. Florescu's idea of the Holy Village were divided. Some of his neighbours, thought him crazy. "Don't write what that guy says, he'll make us the laughing stock of strangers!" one woman cautioned me. His Holy Village project was considered impractical, not least because it was to be located on land on which various people had their homes. Hence, it did not proceed beyond the stage of a document adorned with an impressive array of stamps and 'experts' signatures (apart from Mr. Florescu and his wife, none of the signatories were from the locality). Yet many villagers saw him as an authority on local history and traditions, insisting he was the ideal person to provide information for my thesis. In light of my own family's cult for the past, it was surprising to me that, when asking villagers about the history of local landmarks or about events that occurred earlier than the 1950's, I was invariably referred to 'official' sources—local intellectuals like Mr. Florescu and books. More distant local history seemed to have been relegated to the domain of official knowledge.



The main reason for the sparse knowledge of more distant local history lay in the accelerated social changes and dislocations brought on by socialism. The task of remembering local history and genealogies was traditionally the province of women, but the marriage pattern in the village was exogamous. Prior to socialism, Romani men usually married women from the area, who would have been familiar with local history, but increased mobility after socialism meant they tended increasingly to marry women from remote regions of the country.

Although until 1950, a branch of my family had been among Romani's best-known inhabitants, now only a few very elderly people remembered them. While my local connections did little to recommend me to my informants, they occasionally aroused fears that my real objective was to reclaim land that had formerly belonged to my family. Although a few village families, like my own, had lost land to the communists, most had gained, being assigned plots for cultivation and houses, and these plots were now subject to reclamation by previous owners. Long kept at bay by the socialist insistence on a single official version, history, now plural, had begun to haunt people, threatening the security of some, and promising riches to others.

My requests for accounts of the past were met similarly at the convent, an establishment that appeared, on the surface, to be steeped in history. In addition to the fact that historical value was central in legitimising the convent's importance (as a particularly valuable historical monument), I had expected that nuns would be keenly interested in the recovery of the past because monastics had been persecuted by the socialist government. This was not the case. While most nuns currently at the convent were not originally from the local area, and had joined only from the 1980s onwards, the large majority of the previous community had been expelled in 1952, although several, now in their 70's and 80's, had recently returned. The younger nuns who now ran the convent were not interested in these elder nuns' stories however, and felt little allegiance to their experience of the socialist past. Mother Visalia who had been a nun for 80 years, saw their lack of interest in the past as a betrayal of the convent's ethos. The convent, she felt, and by extension the Church, were an accumulation of past lives that mattered because they were lived in light of a commitment to create a certain tradition, to set a precedent. All this was now being ignored:

"Nobody knows anything any more. Ask them (the nuns)—they've made a historical introduction for tourists that makes me cross myself when I hear it. Nobody asks us any more, nei-

ther of the past, nor of the present. The present, we go along with it, stumbling, either it comes towards us, or it surpasses us; this is how we walk, as if we were blind, in today's life".

The long memories of people like Mother Visalia, who had educated herself by reading historical documents in the convent's archive, suggested that the generation that had come to maturity before socialism (and to which my grandparents also belonged) had valued local history for itself. This long-term orientation seems to have been lost in Romani during socialism.

Given that post-socialist policies and discourse had reified the past, during my stay in Romani, local anxieties and conflicts were often expressed and legitimated in terms of a re-imagined history—since histories had become valuable, people creatively engaged in producing them. Even if little was known of the past, current projects were portrayed as restorations of a previous 'true' order. However, the motivations behind these projects tended to be rooted in more recent, post-socialist developments.

## **Dracula in Romani**

The idea of turning one's village into a theme park may seem odd, but in post-socialist Romania it made sense. Throughout this period, politicians, intellectuals and ordinary people were debating the most effective ways to attract international tourism and change Romania's poor image abroad. Tourism was important not just as one of the few developing areas of a collapsing economy, but also as a way of persuading the civilised world to include Romania and Romanians in its fold. The dilemma was how should the country's heritage be packaged so as to make it attractive to foreigners? Some argued for an emphasis on 'authentic' cultural heritage (including convents such as Horezu). Others focused on commercial value, arguing that appeal to Western clichés about Romania, most notably the Dracula myth, would be more profitable. Certain Transylvanian towns had already been forging ahead in this direction by developing their supposed connections with Vlad the Impaler (alias Dracula). For instance Bran castle, an impressive and well-preserved fortress without any connection to Dracula is being 'sold' to tourists as Dracula's castle. Eventually, ambitious plans were drawn to build a massive Dracula Park, the Balkan answer to Disneyland. Interestingly, this amusement park bore remarkable parallels to Mr. Florescu's (which predated it). For instance it was to include an extensive 'Vlad the Impaler' health spa,

attracting equally the thrill-seekers and the health conscious, and the park was to be attached to a historical world heritage site, Sighisoara, a medieval fortress in which Vlad the Impaler was born. The advocates of authentic heritage objected that this was in bad taste, and even Prince Charles (of Wales) was drawn into the contestation, when he successfully campaigned to bar the park's being built near the Sighisoara fortress on the grounds that it would damage world historical heritage.

These issues were of immediate interest to the Romani villagers, living, as they were, in the shadow of Horezu convent, which attracted large numbers of foreign tourists. Their problem was how to contrive to benefit from some of this tourism influx. The main obstacle was the fact that the convent, having built a new guest hotel on its grounds, was able to successfully provide for all of the tourists' needs, feeding and housing them—and making it unnecessary for the visitors to descend into the village.

In August 1999, a full solar eclipse reached its apex directly over the Romani area. The influx of tourists from as far as the U.S. and Japan, and the prices they were willing to pay for whatever accommodation they could find in the village, provided a tantalising foretaste of prosperous possibilities. Hoping this was just the beginning, many villagers immediately signed up with the local tourist accommodation office, and one even built a new guesthouse. Agro-tourism was considered another possible selling point (when I attempted to work alongside villagers in the fields, they joked I should pay them for the privilege). However, all these forms of accommodation remained empty in subsequent years. Every summer, the villagers were daily treated to the sight of large coaches and expensive cars driving up to the convent and back, without stopping in Romani. It is not difficult to understand their frustration, which was sometimes expressed in conspiracy theories. For instance, when a German eclipse watcher spent a whole summer in the village, claiming to study the impact of astral events on people's behaviour, his strange questions and long walks through the countryside gave rise to suspicions that the Germans had sent him as a spy to look for something hidden near the village, possibly mineral wealth.

The sanctification of Brancoveanu had helped raise the profile of the convent, but the nuns monopolised his symbolic power for their own use. Thus, a second saint's day feast was celebrated in honour of the Brancoveanu saints every year, but during the time I was there no villagers actually attended the feast, and the nuns told me they had not been invited, because there weren't enough places at the table. There

were too many VIP guests. The villagers countered by arguing that Brancoveanu was not a real saint, but rather a political device, and many preferred to attend the feast of another convent's saint (St. Gregory), although it was further away. For at least 100 years, in times of drought (most recently in 2000) St. Gregory's relics were carried through the fields to make rain. People prayed to him for help with personal problems, made him gifts and lobbied hard to receive sanctified items of his clothing, when it was changed by the nuns (once a year), before his feast day. These were considered powerful talismans. Thus, the cult of saints was vital locally, but the Brancoveanus had not been assimilated into it.

Mr. Florescu's plan had been one attempt to link Romani with the Brancoveanu saints, in order to divert tourism its way. Although this failed, he made villagers realise that, if they wanted to attract tourists, they had to stress Romani's own historical assets, and he also reminded them of what some of these assets were. Thus, he revived a local legend linking Dracula to the origins of Romani. The legend was inspired by the earliest manuscript mentioning Romani, a 15<sup>th</sup> century deed of ownership in which prince Vlad the Monk, a brother of Vlad the Impaler (alias Dracula) confirms ownership of the village to a man called Roman (hence the village's name), acknowledging receipt of a horse, the customary property tax (qtd. Marinescu 1995: 36). I traced the legend to a local schoolteacher from the 1920's, who had told his pupils a more romantic story. According to him, Vlad the Impaler was passing through Romani on his return from exile (in Transylvania), to reclaim the Wallachian throne, when his exhausted horse collapsed. Roman gave the king a beautiful white horse, and was granted the village as a reward (cf. Vamesu 1972: 56).

Inspired by Mr. Florescu, another village retiree called Mr. Badoi, initiated a plan to rebuild the ruined St. John hermitage at the northernmost end of the village. Enlarging upon the Dracula legend, he argued that this was the site where the meeting with Roman had taken place. When I left the field, he was still campaigning to raise money, and had sought diocese approval for the project. It must be pointed out that there were already two functioning hermitages near the convent. However, these were owned by the nuns, and villagers took little interest in them. The ruined St. John hermitage became an issue because it was abandoned and could be appropriated by various groups in different ways, helping to re-configure the village's spatial order according to several specific points of view. The fact that none of the main actors

knew much about the hermitage's history meant that each group could freely invent its own story to suit its interests.

Old nuns (Visalia pers. comm.) thought the hermitage had been destroyed more than a century previously, by a biblical flood lasting 40 days and 40 nights. Although only the foundations remained, both nuns and villagers felt the site was still sacred. A nun told me how she had defended herself from the devil (in the form of a pig) with a sliver of stone from these foundations, and I also saw villagers, including a teacher, take such stones, saying they were holy. It was this sacred status that made the hermitage a focal point of controversy, where latent tensions between local groups, nuns, Rudari Roma and Romanians, came to light.

The controversy arose when a poor Rudari family built their house near the hermitage. Since then, they had been afflicted by misfortune and narrowly escaped death. As Mother Visalia told me,

“Their kitchen burnt down, their car burnt down, their barn, everything they'd earned and saved up, they barely managed to rescue the little children. And more will happen... But they should have known better than to build a home there, because in that place there used to be an altar, *an altar of sacrifice!*” (pers. comm.)

It was not only disrespectful to settle so near the site, but also dangerous. She thought it was the responsibility of local authorities to stop their settling there, adding: “you see, if the mayor did not take any action to prevent it, this Badoi elected himself to rebuild that hermitage” (Visalia, pers. comm.). Thus, significantly, reinstating the hermitage according to Badoi's plan would serve to mark out the territory as belonging to the Romanians, a reminder that they had been first on the land on which the Rudari had now settled. This was the tip of an iceberg of anxieties about the rapid growth of the Rudari population, and spread of their village on land of uncertain ownership. Before going further, let me briefly explain the history of the Rudari's situation.

## Local Anxieties

The Romani river valley is inhabited by three groups that see themselves as distinct: Romanian villagers, Rudari traders and craftsmen and the nuns of Horezu convent. Although each group claimed to be independent of the others, beneath the

confusion of daily life one could discern the contours of a structured economic pattern engaging each group in a different way, and drawing them into a well-choreographed ballet. For instance, the Romanians' surplus of fruit and walnuts was bought by the Rudari to be bartered for grain in the plains area. The grain was later sold for cash to nuns and Romanians. This was not the choreography the communists had intended. Seeking to monopolise the distribution of resources, the socialist government had banned private trade and even confiscated the Rudari's horses. However, the enforcement of this prohibition relaxed in the late 1970's and 80's. The obvious failures of the state redistribution system brought about a revival of informal trade, and local policemen accepted a cut of the profits to look the other way. Now, it seemed to me that I was witnessing the full reassertion of an older and more resilient local system of exchange. However, the story was more complex, and the pattern not as old as it appeared.

The Rudari had settled in Romani only after WWII, having returned from the Ukraine, where they had been deported by the wartime pro-fascist government (see also Crowe 1994: 134-5). The word 'Rudar' comes from a Slavonic word for mine, and the Rudari Roma clan seem to have been originally gold miners in Transylvania. Some authors suggest that when the gold mines were exhausted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they turned to woodcrafts and trade (Marushiakova & Popov 2001: 84). The socialist government pressured the Rudari into a settled, 'romanianised' lifestyle in dress, speech and customs (see Pons 1999, Crowe 1994), and these efforts had been largely successful, since no one spoke Roma language or followed any Roma traditions, although they retained their crafts and trade occupations. During the 1950's, several Rudari families were encouraged to settle on empty land at the northernmost tip of Romani by the local administration, in need of labourers for the local forestry industry (Marinescu, pers. comm.). Despite its geographical proximity to Upper Romani, this settlement was considered by everyone a distinct village, called Saliste.

The tensions between the Romanians, the Rudari and the nuns were partly caused by the post-socialist government's land allocation policy—that of restituting land to its pre-communist owners. This meant that the Rudari's entire land, as well as that of some Romanians, could be now reclaimed by the Convent, its former owner, putting them out of their homes. The nuns insisted that they had no plans to reclaim this land, as they could not guard it, and feared conflict with the Rudari. Already, frequent incidents occurred between nuns and Rudari. For instance, Rudari youth broke

into one of the convent's hermitages, stole fruit from the orchards, and begged at the convent's gates, harassing visitors.

"Today there were eleven little beggars" Mother Visalia complained. "No use talking nicely to them. One went near the monument [to fallen WW1 heroes] and took a shit. I told them nicely not to do that, and they spat on me, on my clothes. I wrote to the police and said I would pay for their petrol if they came up here to deal with the problem. I am upset with the police. 'You've let things disintegrate', I wrote them" (Visalia, pers. comm.).

On another occasion, the nuns phoned the police, who set up a roadblock, and when the Rudari beggar children tried to escape, a nun chased them cross-country with the jeep, seriously frightening them (Iulia, pers. comm.). Later, a group of young men were threatening towards a nun caught grazing the convent's cows near their village. As Visalia told me,

"Mother Andrea went up the river valley with the cows, and the Rudari youth threw rocks at her and hit a cow on the head with a wooden stick. They were yelling that the convent is theirs, that it was built by the hands of gypsy slaves and therefore it was rightfully theirs" (Visalia, pers. comm.).

To return to the St. John Hermitage, a version of the Rudari's claim that the convent was theirs focused on this, arguing that the hermitage had been its original site. "By the way, were you a nun when the convent was up the valley, [at the hermitage], *in our Romani, the Rudari's?*", Flora, a Rudari woman, asked Mother Visalia. This version of history reconfigured space, assigning to 'the Rudari's Romani' a central rather than marginal position, as the original site of the most important local historical landmark. Thus, while the Romanians saw the hermitage as a marker of their original claim to the land (some pointed out that the hermitage *pre-dated* the convent), the Rudari reinterpreted it as proof that the convent was first on *their* land. Chapter 2 describes how similar tensions over land had existed, prior to the communist period, between the convent and Romanian villagers, leading to nuns' having to carry firearms when walking about their estates, and even firing after intruders!

It is interesting to note here that the Rudari did not seem to remember where they had come from. When I inquired about the deportation, no one seemed to know, and I was directed to the oldest man in the village, who was senile and could tell me

nothing. I only discovered their story accidentally, from an old shepherd who had worked with some of the Rudari elders and known them well.

“Those Saliste Rudari have come from the Bug river. Antonescu sent them there to conquer Russia all by themselves [he joked]. They don’t talk about it, but if you ask, do you remember your father was at the Bug, some of them know. The young ones don’t know it, though” (Mos Corbu, pers. comm.).

While their deportation to the Ukraine was not spoken of—Michael Stewart (2001, in manuscript) argues convincingly that the apparent lack of concern with the past among Roma people should not be equated with forgetting—gypsy slavery, which ended in 1856 (see Crowe 1994: 107-27), was being publicly remembered. This was the basis of the claim that it was their ancestors who had built the convent, and that it was rightfully theirs. As far as I could ascertain, this idea had come about after the Rudari began to attend a new Gypsy Fair initiated in post-socialist times and held 15 km away from Romani. This fair was an occasion for all the best Roma families in the country to meet, party and do business, but also for political and cultural activism, with speeches concerning the Roma minority being made by politicians, intellectuals and other community leaders. As a result, the Rudari’s identity was becoming politicised.

## **Economic Tensions**

While the Rudari worried about the convent, Romanians worried about the Rudari, noting anxiously the spread of their village and growth of its population. They disliked the fact that, within the county, Romani was reputed to be a mixed Gypsy and Romanian village. “What could you possibly want over there, among those gypsies?”, one engineer from Ramnicu Valcea exclaimed, upon hearing I was doing research there (Cornel, pers. comm.)<sup>11</sup>. This reputation seemed to be due to the proximity of the Rudari village—as one man told me, “the further up the road [towards Saliste] you live, the more people assume you are a Rudar. Horezu people say Lower Romani people are Rudari, these say the Upper Romani are Rudari, Upper Romani say only the Saliste people are”. As we shall see, great pains were taken to refute this image, not only by claiming that the Romanian settlement was separate from the Ru-



dari's one and by downplaying intermingling, but also by insisting that the Rudari were, in fact, not Roma at all.

Although there can be little doubt that the Rudari are a Roma clan, and we have seen that they sometimes subscribed to a Roma identity, as their claim to be the descendants of the gypsy slaves who built the convent shows, local authorities insisted that: "there are virtually no gypsies here, in the Horezu area" (S.P., pers. comm.). According to the secretary of the mayor, only three families had declared themselves Roma in the 1992 census, and they were not local (S.P. pers.comm.). Even more surprisingly, the mayor's secretary insisted that the Rudari were in fact descendents of the Dacians (the tribes which populated Romanian territories prior to the Roman conquest in 105 AD), and that they were different because they were unspoiled by modernity.

"They used to live in remote valleys and you can see they kept the old Dacian traditions, their costume, their accent, their crafts, all come from their Dacian past. The only thing is, they have this disorderly way of life, they multiply fast and don't tend to get legally married" (S.P. pers. comm.).

Undoubtedly, the secretary's point of view reflected the official embarrassment over the Roma, perceived as reflecting backwardness and underdevelopment (Pons 1999). However, considering the near-sacred status, to Romanians, of their Dacian ancestors, this assertion seems an odd device for turning the Rudari from a liability into an—at least symbolic—asset. Michael Stewart (pers. comm.) has also come across some Roma groups who themselves assert this Dacian identity, which would suggest that this theory was not invented by the Horezu authorities, but used more widely.

As I probed further, there seemed little doubt that most local people, and even their educated and urbanised relatives, were positive that the Rudari were Romanians rather than Gypsies. This was surprising, considering Romanians' obsession with blood as the carrier of a person's essential qualities. For instance, I have often heard people exclaim, when upset with someone known to have a gypsy ancestor, "oh, that gypsy, no matter how he lives or what he does, the gypsy will always show up in him!" According to this ideology, even a tiny amount of gypsy blood makes one a gypsy. Now, this essentialist notion of personhood seemed to be competing with a different one, according to which people can transform themselves into something

else through their lifestyle, language and customs. This latter ideology had been endorsed by the socialist government, which did not include Romas among ethnic minorities, and pressured them to settle down and abandon their customs (Pons 1999). This official line was the one taught in the Romani school—as one schoolgirl told me, citing her teacher as a source “they are not gypsy, they are Rudari, that is something different. They don’t speak a different language, only have a different accent, and they don’t keep gypsy traditions, aren’t musicians, don’t sell their daughters; they are Orthodox”. Authorities also upheld this “lifestyle” ideology of ethnicity, even when confronted with evidence to the contrary, as is shown by a somewhat humorous debate between the mayor’s secretary and an old shepherd who derived his knowledge of the Rudari from having worked and talked with some of them:

Secretary: Rudari are something totally different, they don’t have a language, only a different accent.

Shepherd: Yes see, they don’t know another language like the *laieti* [nomadic] gypsies, those ones know another language, Hungarian!

Secretary: Well, those are Hungarian gypsies, yeah, they had to learn Hungarian... These [Rudari] never have and never do declare themselves Gypsy, not even in their documents or the census. And they aren’t gypsy, I don’t consider them Gypsy. [...] They don’t even behave like Gypsies, they don’t have Gypsy traditions, to sell their daughters. And they aren’t musicians, they don’t sing!

Shepherd: But those Rudari from Romani have come from the Bug. Antonescu gathered *the gypsies* and sent them there...

Secretary: The Gypsies yes, but not the Rudari—let’s not confuse them

Shepherd: For example, now it seems they call them all Roma

Secretary: The hell with the Roma, now they’ve eternalised themselves!

Shepherd: Still, for example in the past, if he was a Gypsy, they used to say, look, this guy’s a Gypsy. Even if he was ‘romanianised’ [settled and behaving like a Romanian] they would still remember it”.

This discussion suggests that the old shepherd subscribes to the older, essentialist ideology, assimilating the Rudari to the larger Gypsy identity, while the secretary is stressing the lifestyle ideology. To return to the issue of memory, the point that struck me about most of the Romanians to whom I spoke is that they simply did not know, nor care very much about, what the Rudari were, apart from insisting they were not gypsy.

“No, they are not gypsies, they live like us, they are Romanians!”—they would insist. ‘But what makes one a gypsy?’—I would ask. “It’s their lifestyle. The craftsmen, who work in metal or wood are closer to being gypsy, but the real gypsies are those down-trodden ones who travel, live in tents, speak Romani and have a different religion, they are closer to nature. Their religion says: ‘the gypsy who works is cursed. God gave man everything he needs, so he shouldn’t work, straining nature’” (M.V. pers. comm.).

‘Really, how do you know this’, I would ask. “Oh, we saw it in *Satra* [a popular film about Russian gypsies]” (M.V. pers. comm.). Thus, there seemed to be a spectrum between Romanian and gypsy, along which the various Roma occupational groups are ranged, but whether or not they live a settled lifestyle and spoke Romanian seems to be the main line of demarcation.

While exploring ideas about the Rudari, I discovered that they were not the only Roma group to have settled in Romani. The convent had owned a number of Roma slaves (*robi*), and these were freed by the state in 1856. Since they were sedentary (*vatrasi*), they received land and settled in the village, where they intermarried with the locals and became Romanians (Rautu 1908). Their assimilation took a long time—a monograph published fifty years after their emancipation by the local diocese blames them for blasphemous behaviour:

“Around Horezu convent there were several little churches, but such was the barbarian nature of the local people, mixed with the emancipated of blood and morals [gypsy slaves] that they took sacrilege to the point of making these churches shelters for animals, as only the Turks did during their invasion” (Rautu 1908: 14).

Everyone I questioned regarding the descendants of these slaves said they were now respectable members of the Romanian community, and that only their names, like *Dezrobitu* (lit. freed slave), pointed to their ancestry. “You can’t call them gypsies to their face, they would get upset. Only among themselves, when angry with each other, they call each other gypsy”, said mother Visalia. Nevertheless, the street on which most of them (about 13 families) live is called *Neagota*, derived from ‘negote’ or ‘negrotei’, a term roughly similar to ‘nigger’. Interestingly, *Neagota*, had a reputation of being full of sorcerers. “Down this street, every other house is involved in

magic”, Mother Visalia told me. “Don’t accept any food or drink if you go visit any of them. I know a girl who did and lost her mind”.

The Rudari were now being subconsciously assimilated to these earlier Roma settlers, replacing them as targets of suspicion. Apart from one woman, a refugee from Basarabia who made an income from magic spells, those accused of sorcery were invariably Rudari, or people of Rudari ancestry. Thus, two or three Rudari women were rumoured to have stolen Romanian men from their wives by putting spells on them, or even by inducing the men themselves to put spells on their wives in order to cause them illness or death (Visalia, pers. comm.). Another woman who was a serial litigator, having sued all her neighbours and even the mayor of Horezu (over a few square meters of land), was also remembered to have a Rurdar ancestor, and there were rumours that she used magic to augment her chances of winning trials or to get revenge on her opponents.

Whether Roma or not, the Rudari were unanimously considered different and assumed to be in an economically inferior position. Their main characteristics cited by Romanian informants were that they were poor, uneducated, had too many children, did not marry legally and did not behave in a civilised manner. Well-off Romanian families and the nuns often hired Rudari women for a day’s work, and saw this as doing them a favour. There is evidence, however, that this situation was changing, and that the Rudari were in fact quickly becoming more economically successful than the Romanian villagers in the new market economy.

During socialism, Romanian villagers were well-off by national standards, combining wages from day jobs in local factories with subsistence agriculture (the area was not collectivised). Economic well-being had accelerated urbanisation, with the majority of Romanian youth seeking higher education and jobs in towns. By contrast, the Rudari population, initially very poor, had remained almost entirely rural. The retention of this rural economic base led to anxieties, in post-socialist times, regarding the growth of the Rudari population, vis-à-vis the decline of the Romanian. While the Romanians, having lost their jobs, were barely able to make ends meet, for the Rudari, market economy had brought about an intensification of trade, and revived demand for their crafts. With bars opening everywhere, wooden tables and stools were now in great demand, and orders were pouring in to the Rudari craftsmen. This economic growth, rather than a population explosion, was the reason behind the spread of their village, as more and more successful individuals built new, bigger

houses. Significantly however, until I went to Saliste, I did not hear anything about the well-to-do Rudari. The poor minority were spoken of as representative of the whole group.

In the Romani area, the Rudari were the only people (apart from shepherds) with a tradition of trade, and during the post-socialist period their marketing abilities stirred up the resentment of Romanians who wished to sell their agricultural produce but felt out of their depth regarding how to do it. In the autumn of 2000, a copious crop of edible chestnuts brought economic tensions between the Romanians and Rudari into the open. Romani was perhaps the only village in Valcea county to produce edible chestnuts, because the heat-loving trees, otherwise unknown in the region, thrive in the valley's warm climate. They had been planted by Greek monks in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but now they were located on state lands administered by the local forestry board (*Ocolul Silvic*)—the only remaining state-owned economic patron in the village. *Ocolul* depended on local labour, but could only afford to pay derisory wages, in this case 7pence per kilo of chestnuts collected. As an extra incentive, since workers were badly needed, *Ocolul* promised a bonus of one carload of firewood for every person collecting over 100 kg of chestnuts. Since firewood was scarce and expensive, this inducement proved effective and three tons of chestnuts were collected. Seeing that too many people had exceeded the quota, *Ocolul* later retracted the promise and none received the bonus.

At this point, stealing and informal trade in chestnuts began in earnest, carried out by both the *Ocol* foresters and by villagers who, early in the morning or late at night, began illicitly collecting chestnuts in the hope of selling them directly to private traders for a better price. In the village, it was felt that stealing was a kind of resistance, “a brave thing to do” (Mari P., pers. comm.), but it also became a source of enmity when one woman who was caught told of all the other people whom she knew to be stealing, “just so that she wouldn't be the only one fined” (ibid). Those caught or suspected received a fine in the mail, and Mari told me they were afraid to contest these fines, because they thought *Ocolul* was paying Rudari to spy on them, and that these Rudari were willing to testify against them in court.

As people sought to increase their profits, the fault-lines between groups became increasingly apparent. The general feeling was that the Rudari supported the *Ocol* in taking unfair advantage of the Romanians. This feeling against Rudari was fuelled by the fact that many Rudari traders drove door to door, buying chestnuts at an

only slightly higher price than the *Ocolul* paid, and selling them in town for four times as much money. Mari, one of my Romanian friends thought seriously of taking the chestnuts to town herself, but two considerations prevented her. First, she felt she lacked the know-how to organise such a trade operation:

“In order to make a profit you have to have money to invest in the trade, to get a seller’s permit, to buy a lot of chestnuts cheaply, to travel to Bucharest, where prices are high, to have a place to stay while you are selling them. We aren’t used to it. We should do like the [people from the neighbouring village Pietrari]. I heard that every year they buy walnuts locally, sell them in towns and keep the money to invest again next year, and so on, getting rich. We just spend any money we have right away” (Mari pers. comm.).

Second, she thought the market was rough and dangerous: “you run into some gypsy and can get everything stolen and get beaten up”. Her frustration was directed against the Rudari informal traders: “I would rather feed the chestnuts to the pigs than sell them for five thousand lei (about 10 pence) a kilo. That gypsy (trader) is sneaky, he tells you the market is not going well, and that he can only pay you ten pence. That’s how he gets rich”. Thus, the Romanians envied the commercial skills and enterprise of others, and particularly singled out the Rudari for criticism, accusing them of getting wealthy through unscrupulous economic practices. As we shall see in the next section, such resentments also found expression in the context of local ritual life, where similar accusations were invoked as the reason for efforts to exclude, or at least limit the Rudari’s ability to participate.

## Separating the Dead

If villagers like Badoi wanted to rebuild the St. John hermitage for its historical value, the priest from Romani wanted this hermitage to serve as a separate chapel for the Rudari, with a cemetery for their own dead, so that they would have less excuse to attend village feasts elsewhere. As a guest at village saints’ day feasts, I was surprised by the open display of animosity manifested against the Rudari by the local priest (who served in several villages). “Did you notice that here the Rudari do not sit at the same table with the Romanians?” the priest remarked at the Upper Romani feast. He noted approvingly that the Rudari who did not find a place at their separate table were made to wait standing until one was vacated.

“This priest here knows how to handle them, in Lower Romani they take the places of the Romanians at the table! And at Father Vintila’s (in another village) it’s downright gypsy-style (*bulibasala*), it’s terrible, they take the food from your table, they assault you and crowd you out. Father Vintila is their ‘*bulibasa*’ (gypsy big man), their bishop!” (Father C., pers. comm.)

Another priest replied:

“In my village (Bogdanesti) it’s nice, order. This year on the Saturday of the dead I made two of my men stand guard at the cemetery gates like the Archangel Michael, and bar the Rudari from entering. I made them wait in the courtyard. When we finished the blessings, each [Romanian] took their basket and went in the courtyard to hand out the food [alms which are given out in memory of the dead]”.

The wife of the Romani priest chimed in:

“I can’t stand them, I can’t... at the *parastas* [remembrance ritual for the dead], it drives me mad when they come and grab the ‘*pomana*’ (alms) from your hand just like that! They walk on the graves, and when you refuse to hand over the food, they curse you saying ‘damn you with your food and your dead’, they are mean, evil, evil”.

Another man joined in “I often can’t even hold *parastas* for my wife because of the Rudari, because they sin by stepping on the grave. I wanted to fence the grave, but can’t afford it”.

This desire to separate the Romanian and Rudari dead seemed to me a symptom of the growing distance between the living. By excluding other local groups from participation in communal rituals, group boundaries were being reinforced. Thus, it seemed that the path to guarding the living against intruders was to segregate the dead according to kinds in different cemeteries.

If Romanians wanted their dead separated from the Rudari’s, the nuns wanted the Romanians excluded from their cemetery. For example, one village family was descended from a convent priest, who had rights to burial in the convent’s cemetery in perpetuity. Recently the nuns had sought to annul this right, arguing that their cemetery should be off-limits to villagers. When the husband of a woman from this family, who had been on friendly terms with the nuns, died after a prolonged and painful illness, the convent leaders opposed his burial at the family gravesite. With the dead

man being kept in the house for several days, the family and nuns opened hostilities, going as far as to seek the arbitration of the diocese, which ruled in favour of the family. Nevertheless, the nuns insisted that, at least, the graves of all the family dead had to be dug up and moved to the back of the cemetery from their position at the front. The villagers considered this a serious affront.

During my time in Romani I was constantly struck by how atomised the village seemed. Everyone complained that their neighbours were envious gossips. Life took place behind closed gates and drawn curtains. Espionage was rife, and villagers hardly missed anything, car or human, passing on the main road towards the convent. Formerly, people would sit on benches outside their houses at dusk, exchanging gossip with or about passers-by. Now, only two elderly people still appeared every summer evening, and their benches remained empty when they passed away. In the mid-eighties, villagers held weekly football games on a field between Lower Romani, Upper Romani and Saliste, and all were welcome, but these had now ceased (C.P. pers. comm.). The socialist-built culture house (*caminul cultural*) was all but abandoned, and young people walked several kilometres to the Last Dollar disco in the next town for a night out with friends from their own village.

Weddings and baptisms, both requiring a sizeable cash gift, were attended by fewer and fewer guests in these economically difficult times. Their success depended on the fact that, although each guest had to make a sizeable cash present (about one month's average salary), this investment would be recovered when their own offspring married, helping to raise a lump sum to get the young couple started. This arrangement was now breaking down, and organisers often failed to recover even their original investment in the party.

Contrastingly, saints' day feasts, organised by each church or monastery on its patron saint's day, were the only kind of communal activity to see a remarkable growth in post-socialist times. After mass, all who attended were treated to a communal meal prepared by the host villagers with food and money donated by themselves (donations consisted mainly of produce from local gardens). Attending these feasts, I was intrigued to find that I always met the same people. A feast circuit had developed, and it had dedicated followers. They knew the feast schedule well and attended most feasts within a 20 km radius. Feast followers were both Romanians and Rudari, but the Rudari were singled out and often accused of living off these rituals. The resentment was partly due to the fact that, having no chapel in Saliste, they



did not hold a feast of their own. They were thus failing to reciprocate the hospitality of the other villages. Flori, a 14 year old Romanian girl, expressed the prevailing impression thus:

“With the growing poverty, more and more come each year to be fed. In Lower Romani we had 500 people for our church’s saint’s day, we nearly ran out of food. The entire school of Saliste [the Rudari village] was let out of class early so they could come down to our feast, 200 kids all in all”.

“Look at the Rudari, they’re busy today”, another Romanian woman remarked on a Saturday of the Dead, when each local church held remembrance services at which people handed out food on behalf of their dead.

“This morning they went down to Horezu, now they’re returning from uphill [from another village], they go to all the cemeteries. From Upper Romani, they come to our cemetery, because up there they don’t allow them to go into the cemetery because they behave disrespectfully. But don’t worry, they’re richer than we are!” (D.T. pers. comm.).

Even more than saints’ day feasts, remembrance rituals for the dead were the occasions on which community divisions most clearly came to light. These rituals are called *parastas*, from a Greek word translated by Sarris as ‘representation’ (2000: 334). They consist of giving away food, candles and other objects to strangers, who receive them on behalf of the dead person. The food always includes wine and a boiled-wheat cake (*coliva*) decorated with candy, walnuts, and cocoa, and sometimes individual bags with other food items. In the morning, a church service for the dead is held, and the food blessed. Then, everyone walks to the cemetery, where the priest performs a brief blessing at each gravesite, sprinkling it with wine. After this, the food is handed out to those who have come to receive. The alms are called *pomana*, which derives from the verb *a pomeni*, meaning to remember and mention somebody in a public manner (one would say ‘*te-am pomenit*’ to a friend if the friend was mentioned in her absence).

Although translated in English as commemoration (Kain Hart 1992), this kind of remembering does not focus on recollection, but rather on insuring the soul’s safe progress in the afterlife. When I asked a woman whom she was making her *parastas* for, she replied, “well, they aren’t really my dead, they’re my husband’s and I inher-

ited them, but what can you do, one must do one's duty to them". *Parastasuri* are the responsibility of women, although men will also hold them if no women are available. In Romani, elderly women normally held *parastasuri* for the family dead four times a year, on the Saturdays of the Dead. After a person's death, a gradually decreasing series of *parastasuri* is performed for up to seven years, to mark the soul's journey in the afterlife (9 days after the funeral, 40 days, then each year for seven years, on the anniversary of the death and for all one's dead, on the four Saturdays of the Dead)<sup>12</sup>. Apart from this, *parastasuri* are also held whenever one has a disturbing dream about a dead relative—for instance if they appear in rags, clothing must be handed out on their behalf.

The living are required to show compassion for the dead, who are helpless. "Things have to be done for the dead, who are in a predicament, because they are powerless to help themselves, although their soul continues to live and develop after death just like the soul of a living person" (M.M., pers. comm.). The dead soul's task is to complete his/her process of repentance, so as to be worthy of admission to heaven. However, the living do not attend to the dead only from compassion: it is believed that souls which have remained tied to this world, because of an unfulfilled desire, an unresolved conflict or a curse, can seriously harm or even kill the living—particularly members of their family, and especially children. I have often been told of dreams in which dead relatives turned malevolent, and one man claimed he had had surgery five times, each time after dreaming of his dead grandfather, and on all occasions no disease was found—the symptoms had been purely imaginary.

Verdery (1999) observes that public burials not only reaffirm the community organizing them, but also narrow and bound it, by marking out who is 'ours' and who is to be excluded from the community of mourners. The same applies for *parastasuri*. Now, the Romanian community sought to exclude the Rudari, who had been formerly included, from these rituals. The Romanians argued that this was happening because the Rudari failed to show proper respect for the dead (e.g. by stepping on graves), and thus jeopardized the good outcome of the *parastasuri*. Graves are seen as an extension of the house<sup>13</sup>, and stepping on them was a mark of disrespect to both the dead and the living—the entire kin group. It must be mentioned here that, although Romanians joke about almost everything, I have never heard them joke about the dead. Such reserve is not superficial, but discloses deeply felt ideas of propriety.

However, feelings against the Rudari were not just caused by the occasional impropriety (as it was claimed), but seem to have also been rooted in a subconscious perception of their essential otherness. Once, I happened to overhear a man from Romani telling friends about an intense dream he had, which incidentally, expressed differences between Romanians and different kinds of gypsies in terms of burial customs:

“In my dream, it was shown how people should be buried properly: the Rudari were to be buried lying at an angle (diagonally) and sideways, facing West, in order to see where they came from. The gypsies are to be buried facing downwards, on their stomach. The Bear-handler gypsies were to be buried standing up at the head of the Romanians, and the Romanians are buried in the middle of all these, on their back” (Minciuna, pers. comm.)

When I discussed this with others, they were less surprised than I expected, pointing out that it was common knowledge that gypsies were buried either standing up or face down. Since Romanians are buried only face up, the other positions constitute aberrations, and the horizontal face-downwards position is an exact reversal of the proper way to bury Romanians. If any Romanian were to be buried face down or standing up, this would be considered a blasphemy<sup>14</sup>. The manner of burying the Rudari in the dream, diagonally, was more peculiar, and I could not trace it to any existing customs. One interpretation, which seemed plausible to the dreamer, was that the Rudari were halfway between Romanian and Gypsy, as they were positioned exactly half way between each of the other three categories (not fully erect or horizontal but diagonal, not face up or down but sideways).

“Why people don’t die naturally any more?” is the title of an article in which Deema Kaneff explores how relations between individuals, the state and the ‘natural’ or social order have been changing after the end of socialism. This section, which explored how relations between two communities were expressed in terms of their relations to the ‘natural order’, might have been entitled, “Why people don’t decay naturally any more?” As one Romanian woman told me,

“From the earth we came, in the earth bodies are meant to decay, not in these cement crypts, these luxuries... There the body suffers and struggles to decompose. People don’t realise what they are doing. In the earth, the body decays best. It must decay in seven years. In

these crypts, after seven years you take him out the same as when you put him in, not even a bit rotted. Some are a bit dried up, that's all" (I.T. pers. comm.)

The focus here is on consumption, and on the conspicuous wealth the transition has brought to some (i.e. the Rudari and the nuns), but not to others (the Romanians). The cement crypts and 'luxuries' symbolise 'unnatural' uses of wealth, and its deleterious effects on the proper transformation of the body, and by implication, of the soul—whose progress in the afterlife is threatened by excessive attachment to 'luxuries'. As Humphrey (2002) points out, practices relating to objects in the context of funerary rites can be a source of insight into ideas of personhood and property. In the Romanians' case, the idea of immoderate displays of wealth was particularly linked to gypsies, and Romanians commented with bemusement mingled with horror on the rumour, that the king of the gypsies was buried in a crypt with three floors and several rooms, containing computers, television sets, and other valuables.

This mode of burial contrasted strongly with the way in which objects were dealt with in Romanian funeral customs where the ideological emphasis was on *sharing*. When a person dies, all their private possessions (including clothes) are given away to others—the objects that are most strongly reminiscent of the person to close family and neighbours, and less important objects to strangers. At *parastasuri*, more objects, sometimes valuable ones, such as sets of china, and even furniture, are given away, and received in the name of the dead person. Thus, the proper way of conveying objects to the dead involves 'recycling' them rather than keeping or burying them. This was ideologically opposed to the conspicuous consumption (made possible especially by success in the new, post-socialist order) which selfishly clings to valuable objects for personal use only. I do not mean to imply that the Romanians were not conspicuous consumers—they were—only that they expressed their grievances concerning others in terms of a failure to share.

Romanians often accused each other of selfishness (while at the same time trying to limit the claims of others on their time and resources), but they were also united in accusing the nuns and the Rudari of being selfish. The nuns were resented for failing to share the benefits of their wealth and connections with the local community, and the Rudari were accused of trying to take advantage of the Romanians' sharing practices for personal gain.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to pencil into the local landscape the configuration of local groups, the web of interests, concerns and contestations taking place beneath the seemingly placid village life. Like Mr. Florescu's bizarre amusement village, though in a less obvious way, each of these groups was engaged in spatially and temporally reconfiguring the village, and these practices disclosed how they envisioned their own and others' positions in relation to the 'natural' (or moral) order.

I argued that, in post-socialist times these three communities, thrown together by geographical proximity, have been increasingly detaching themselves from one another. This distancing has been precipitated by the uneven ways in which post-socialist reforms and an insecure economic environment have affected their welfare, altering former power arrangements. Yet the rifts between the communities were not only economic ones—they found expression in an entire range of social practices.

In particular, the Romanian community, which had lost its formerly privileged position, and was adapting to the new economic conditions less well than the nuns and the Rudari, sought to reassert control by increasingly excluding those considered outsiders from its ritual life. These outsiders, both nuns and the Rudari, were portrayed as predatory and as trespassing against the natural order. For instance, the drought was blamed on the fact that the nuns were being promiscuous, while the Rudari, as we have seen, were thought of as having an unnatural way of treating the dead.

Dissatisfaction with the nuns extended to the politicians who visited the convent, and their patronage of the convent was not viewed in a positive light. Rather than conferring legitimacy, their links with the convent were taken as confirmation of what people already thought. The us/them dichotomy, with politicians and nuns included in the 'them' category, an exclusive and corrupt club, was becoming increasingly entrenched. Not even a visit by Corneliu Vadim Tudor, a presidential candidate seen by many Romanians as a champion of the underdog and enemy of corrupt elites, succeeded in stirring the sympathy of Romani villagers, very few of whom went to his electoral meeting. For these reasons, symbolic visions such as that of Mr. Florescu or the mayor's attempt to recover Brancoveanu's bones, were bound to fall on deaf ears. Being so close to the convent, the villagers could watch the movements of the powerful, while knowing they were being excluded from their banquet table—literally, at

the Brancoveanu saints' feast (rather as they themselves wished to behave in regard to the Rudari).

The nuns' strategy of adapting to the insecure economic environment of the 'transition' has been to cultivate relations with elite political patrons and wealthy visitors, while limiting contacts with the local community. Thus, far from acting as a mediator between political elites and local people, the convent was using the social capital of political contacts exclusively in its own interests. On the other hand, however, the convent did not attempt to reclaim its former land, allowing members of the local communities to keep it. Thus, while the nuns have, in one sense, 'cut out' the local community, they have also refrained from doing any damage. Nevertheless, as we have seen, this had not entirely quelled fears that the land might be reclaimed, particularly amongst the Rudari community.

The next three chapters narrow the focus of the thesis further, and the Rudari no longer appear until the last chapter, which discusses their role in the local elections. There was a different village, and this research concentrated mainly on the convent and on Lower Romani. The following chapter discusses the convent's history, and its relations with the village Romani in the *longue durée*.

Mother Visalia...







**Young nuns carrying out household chores**

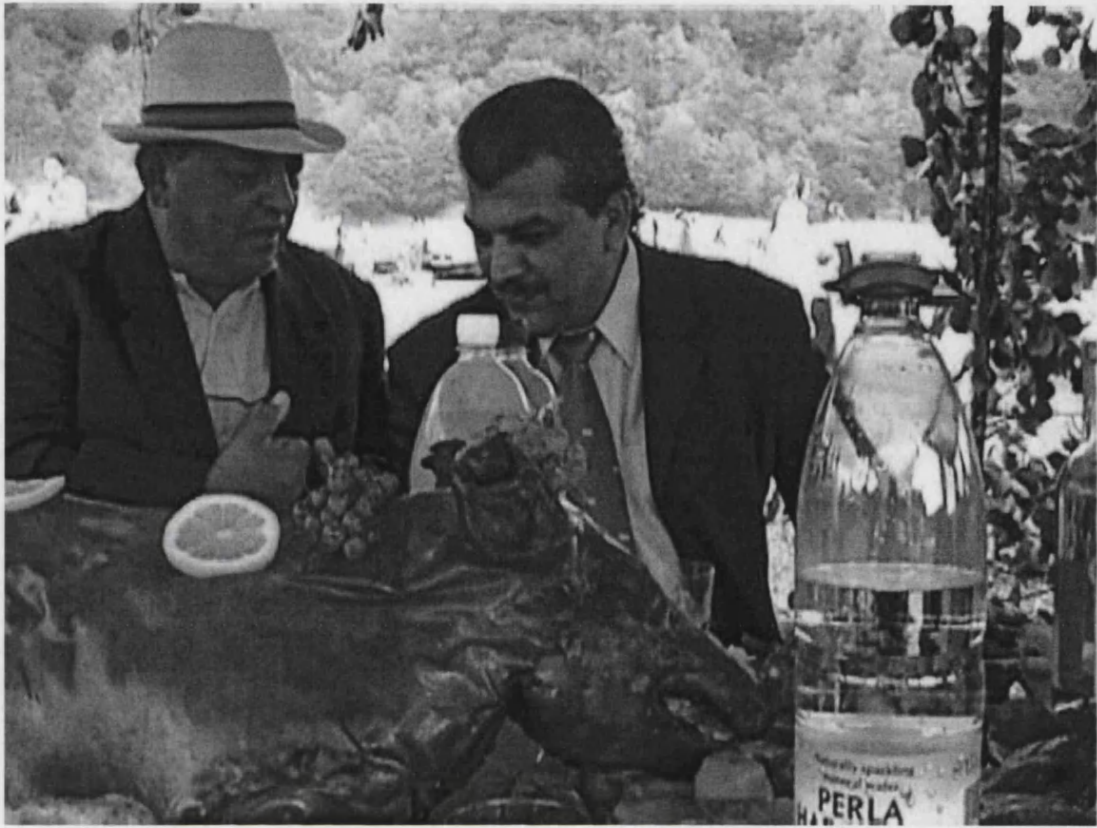


**An elderly nuns picking pears**



The gypsy fair at Bistrita...









**The Rudari village Saliste...**



**A Rudareasa woman**





**Rudari men returning from the forest**



**The northern end of the village near the St. John Hermitage's ruins and the Rudari house that almost burned down.**

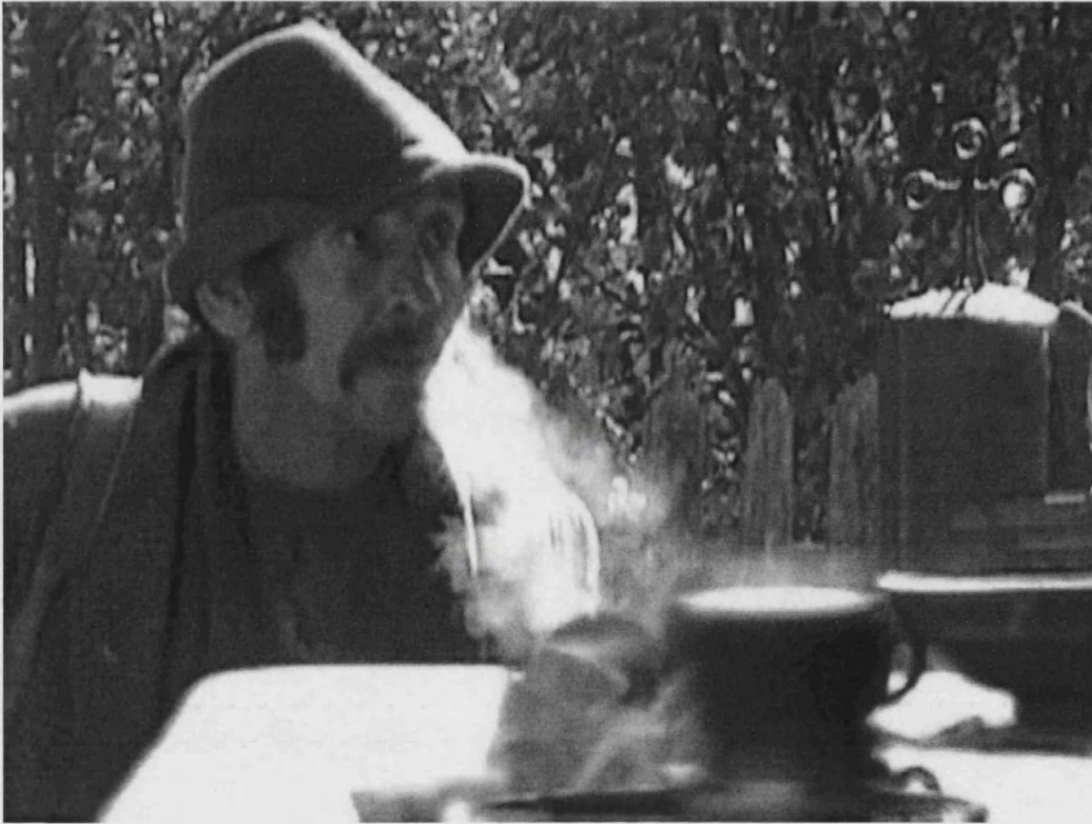


**One of the shacks of the earliest Rudari settlement.**



**At a Saints' day feast in Upper Romani...**





**A Rudar awaiting his turn at the table.**



**The feast's organisers watching one of them jokingly feeding a Rudar man (bottom left).**

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **OF MONKS AND MEN: LIFE AT HOREZU UNTIL THE EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

The period during which Horezu grew into one of the most powerful monasteries in Wallachia, is usually considered one of the darkest in Romanian history. According to Seton Watson, a respected historian of Romania, (1934: 127):

“It is impossible to conceive a more disheartening task than that of recording in detail the history of these hundred years (1714-1821) ...[in which] there are no really outstanding figures [among the rulers], the boiar class is degraded and subservient, there is virtually no middle class, the masses are sunk in ignorance and stupor”.

Yet, the documents concerning Horezu monastery and Romani reflect a remarkably different atmosphere—not of stagnation, misery and stupor, but of rapid economic and social change under the shelter of the Ottoman Empire, of an enterprising peasantry using the judicial system to defend its rights all the way to the highest court of the land, of monks engaged in education and art as well as well as running large estates, of growing trade settlements and generally peaceful inter-ethnic relations.

Horezu convent has accumulated a rich archive of documents pertaining to local life<sup>15</sup>. Excerpts from hundreds of these documents appear verbatim in three monographs about Horezu (Tamas 1995, Marinescu 1995, Vamesu 1972). One of these, written by a Valcea historian (Tamas 1995), consists almost entirely of quotations from documents. These documents, as well as personal histories, are used here to shed light on the pre-socialist history of the convent’s relations with the state and with local communities.

The over-arching theme of this chapter is the struggle between Orthodox monastic establishments, seen as a separate sphere of power and ownership, and the secular, state-run world in its various guises. Throughout its 300-year history, Horezu convent (founded in 1692) has interacted with a series of political regimes: the Wallachian feudal state ruled by autochthonous princes, the Ottoman Empire, represented



by the Greek governors appointed to rule Wallachia, and the Romanian nation state, first ruled by an elected prince, later to become a constitutional monarchy, followed by fascist and then communist dictatorships, and in the present, by a democratic system. Written in the *longue durée*, this chapter addresses two topics. The first is that of the relations between the monastic regime, as represented by the convent, and the successive political regimes prior to the onset of socialism. The chapter documents the progressive expropriation of the monastery/convent's resources by an increasingly intrusive state. The second topic is that of the relations between the monastery/convent and the local community, which began with the monastery's ownership of the enserfed village Romani. The main theme here is that of local contestations over land ownership, both between villagers and feudal-style owners (including the monastery) and between different groups of villagers.

The chapter's aim is to provide a backdrop against which present changes in local economic and power arrangements can be better understood. It is not a strictly chronological account, but rather a multi-layered picture focusing on key actors and events affecting Horezu's fortunes. The first section introduces the state of affairs prior to the foundation of the monastery, focusing on the villagers' earliest recorded contestations over land ownership, involving feudal lords and the state. It also introduces the activities of the Greek and Romanian monks who populated Horezu after its foundation. The second section examines the breakdown of communal patterns of ownership in the village (and the monastery's role in this), as well as local contestations over the intrusion of outsiders into local affairs (including those of the state in its various guises). The third section focuses on changes in monastic life after the seizure of monastic estates by the state, and examines how the convent transformed itself, adjusting to these conditions, through ongoing restructuring of ownership and forms of social organisation.

## **Vassalage to the Sublime Porte (1505-1714)**

At the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Romanian Principalities recognised the Ottoman 'Sublime Porte' as their suzerain. Having been annexed through voluntary agreement rather than military conquest, they enjoyed a unique special status within the Empire. This included political autonomy in running internal affairs, as well as religious freedom—no effort was made to introduce Islam north of the Danube. The

Porte reserved the prerogative of confirming rulers, required a yearly tribute in cash and goods as well as observance of imperial economic policies such as its monopoly on international trade. The provinces would also act as buffers, guarding the Empire's borders with the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires at no extra cost to the Porte. However, over the next century autochthonous princes proved exceedingly unreliable vassals, constantly seeking aid from the neighbouring empires (which they were supposed to repel) in order to overturn Ottoman domination. Horezu Monastery's founder, Constantin Brancoveanu, was the last Romanian prince to attempt such an overthrow, and paid with his life.

By the time Brancoveanu founded Horezu monastery, the village Romani had existed for at least a hundred years. It was first mentioned in a property deed issued in 1487, a few years before Wallachia became an Ottoman province, by prince Vlad the Monk, a half-brother of Vlad the Impaler (alias Dracula). Through this document, the prince confirms ownership of the "property of Hihurezu<sup>16</sup> [later Romani]" to a man named Roman (qtd. Tamas 1995: 34). We do not know who Roman was, on what he based his ownership claim, or even what exactly he owned. The document mentions only 'property', so it is not clear whether the villagers were enserfed at this time. Tamas (1995: 34) suggests this may not have been the case since, in his experience, documents of the period specify when they are dealing with transactions in people. In later documents we find that the village adopted the name of its owner, Roman, using it interchangeably with its older name, Hurezi (or Hihurezu).

In later documents, the two moieties of the village tend to distinguish themselves by adopting different names: present day upper Romani refers to itself as Romani, whilst lower Romani often calls itself Hurezi<sup>17</sup>. The settlement known today as Horezu appeared only at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as traders settled around the fairs held by Horezu monastery on the road to Transylvania. From another document we learn that by 1664 Romani had become a serf village (Tamas 1995: 85). Yet, the fact that, according to another document (qtd. Vamesu 1972: 90), a group of villagers referring to themselves as "the men (*megiesi*) of Hurezi", were able to legally sell a piece of land in 1680 and donate another in 1684 to neighbouring Bistrita monastery (in exchange for prayers), suggests that Romani was a mixed rather than a fully enserfed village, with at least one group of villagers retaining not only their freedom, but also their lands.

What exactly did serfdom mean in this case? In the Wallachian context terms like ‘serf’ and ‘feudal lord’ do not denote the kinds of relations associated with Western feudalism, because the notions of property held by both villagers and the gentry were, as we shall see, rather different. In the Romanian Principalities, the enserfment of villages by boyars occurred quite late, mainly after the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Frequently, boyars were content with rights to the fiscal exploitation of villages, rather than exercising outright control or assuming ownership of the land (Stahl 1980: 145). Even in cases when landlords asserted ownership of both land and serfs, they did not usually interact with individual villagers, but rather with the village as a single entity, known as *obstea satului* (the village assembly). Enserfment was also rather patchy. Many villages managed to remain partially or fully free until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and quite frequently villages enserfed at one point were able to later buy back their freedom from their owners, so the number of enserfed peasants constantly fluctuated. For instance in Valcea county, where Romani is located, over half (55.5 %) of the villages were listed as free in the 1722 census, declining to 51% in 1831 and to 46.9% in 1912 (Stahl 1980: 11).

At the village level, the prevailing form of land ownership seems to have been communal rather than through individual property rights. This corporate system of ownership (which certainly existed in Romani and neighbouring villages) was called ‘*proprietate devalmase*’ (property of everyone together), and it meant that all village land apart from household plots and gardens in the village proper (*salistea satului*) was held in common and administered by a village assembly of elders (*obstea satului*). This assembly had judicial powers, was responsible for collecting taxes and enforcing laws. In its dealings with landlord and prince, a village behaved as a single legal entity (Stahl 1980: 55). In fact, the *obstea* acted rather like a labour union, protecting the rights of its members as long as solidarity was maintained, for instance by using its leverage to negotiate more advantageous work conditions (e.g. fewer corvée days). Because of these communal land arrangements, even in villages fully owned by landlords, and as late as 1864, it was virtually impossible to establish who owned exactly which piece of land. As one boyar put it,

“The principal owner does not know definitely to what part [of the land] he has an exclusive property right; the peasants, on their side, do not know to what they have a right; both live in a

kind of perpetual common ownership and, in a sense, one can say that they are joint owners” (Golescu qtd. Stahl 1980: 84).

When feudal lords enserfed communal villages, two different forms of property, individual and communal, clashed. Villages like Romani continued to behave like single entities vis-à-vis their feudal landlords, dealing with them through the mediation of the ‘*obstea satului*’ (village assembly). Landlords, on the other hand, were keen, whenever possible, to deal directly with individuals, and thus exerted a divisive influence on the village collectives<sup>18</sup>.

Ownership matters were further complicated when individual villagers wanted to sell their share of the communal village land. This created two kinds of problems. First, it was necessary to determine how much of the village land was in fact their share—this was done by using genealogies, real or fictional, dividing the entire village land into shares, and assigning a number of these to each individual according to his position in the genealogy (Stahl 1980: 63-82). Second, sales of land shares to outsiders endangered village solidarity and the rights of co-villagers, because they introduced external interference in village affairs. For this reason, relatives and neighbours sought, whenever possible, to pre-empt such transactions, and their right to do so was recognised legally (ibid.). In the case of Romani, families or even the entire *obstea* often took outsider buyers to court, invoking the right of pre-emption seeking the cancellation of transactions that had been carried out without the assembly’s knowledge<sup>19</sup> (Tamas 1995: 103).

Another solution was for the assembly to partition some or all of the communal land into individual plots. One way of assigning land parcels (the method that seems to have been used in Romani) was to divide up the land in strips (*funii*) running across all the types of terrain held by the village—pasture, plowland, forest and so forth (Stahl 1980: 74-5). Each strip was assigned to a family lineage, which further subdivided it among its members (to the point where peasants joked that if you lay down across the width of your land strip, one neighbour would steal your hat and the other your shoes). In Romani, land for cultivation began to be parcelled out when individual sales became frequent in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Tamas 1995: 93), but the village’s mountains, forests and grazing lands continued to be corporately owned and administered by the *obstea*—and part of these remain so to the present day. In the present day

*obste*, each of the owners holds a number of shares and receives a yearly quota of firewood and money raised by renting the mountains out to shepherds.

Such organic property arrangements produced highly complicated and messy situations, where often (as we shall see) neither the landlord nor the peasants could determine what they owned. Encroachment over neighbouring land and all manner of outrageous claims were rife, and litigation seems to have been a sport engaged in by everyone. It was not until 1864 that individual ownership of land was introduced as the legal norm and village collectives (*obsti*) lost their status as legal entities (Stahl 1980: 83-91). The following section presents some of the more interesting legal tangles in which Romani villagers became involved.

### *The Villagers*

One of the most interesting documents concerning Romani, a princely ruling dated 1715 (qtd. Vamesu 1972: 92-5, Tamas 1995: 81-6) describes in detail the attempt of the village *obste* to buy back its freedom from an aristocrat named Lady Caplea, owner of the village. At this time, the village was enserfed, meaning that the landlady owned both people and land. The story began around the year 1664 (thirty years prior to the foundation of Horezu monastery), when Lady Caplea, needed to raise money to bail out her husband who had been thrown in jail for gambling debts. She met with Romani's assembly of elders, telling them they could purchase their freedom and estate from her for 450 *ughi* (Hungarian gold coins). This was an exorbitant price—the estate was later sold for only 333 *ughi*—and she probably approached the villagers because no boyar would have paid as much. The villagers decided to borrow the cash from another boyar, Dima Chiurciubasa (henceforth Dima) pending repayment in late autumn, when they could cash in their crops. They paid Dima an interest of 70 milk-bearing sheep in advance and also left with him as collateral Lady Caplea's deed of ownership. Dima gave them 200 *ughi* and promised to send the remainder directly to Lady Caplea. When, after several months, Lady Caplea failed to collect the remaining 250 *ughi* from Dima, she asked the villagers to pay her. The entire village then went to Dima to ask for the money, but Dima claimed that he owed them nothing more, that he had given the 200 *ughi* on behalf of the poor villagers only, and that the better-off should raise the remainder of the sum themselves, by selling their crops. Eventually, the villagers managed to raise the 250 *ughi*

and paid lady Caplea. However, their deed of ownership remained in the hands of Dima, who refused to return it unless he was repaid the originally agreed-upon sum of 450 *ughi* instead of the 200 he had actually lent them.

The villagers presented their case before a series of magistrates to no avail, the ruling being repeatedly postponed until, gradually, the village elders who had negotiated the deal with boyar Dima died, leaving the sons to pursue the matter further. After the death of the village elders, boyar Dima produced a forged document to the effect that the villagers had, in fact, sold themselves to him, and he forced them into serfdom once again. Following Dima's death, his widow, using the forged deed of ownership, sold Romani and its estate to boyar Constantin Brancoveanu, the founder of Horezu monastery. Soon after this purchase, Brancoveanu became ruler of Wallachia, and he donated the Romani estate and serfs to Horezu monastery in 1692. Possibly fearing they would not get a fair hearing from the person who had purchased them, the villagers of Romani took no further action in pursuit of their claims of freedom until a few months after Brancoveanu's death, when they took Horezu's first abbot to court.

Prince Brancoveanu, the last of Wallachia's Romanian rulers for over a century, retained the throne for 26 years, a record length during this unstable period, by using his great wealth (he was nicknamed the Prince of Gold) as well as a large part of the internal revenues to secure the backing of high dignitaries at the Porte. A yearly budget which has survived shows he spent nearly half of Wallachia's yearly revenues (46%) on bribes to high dignitaries, in addition to the tribute sent to the Sultan (27%), while a mere quarter of the revenues (26%) paid for home affairs, mercenaries and everything else (Seton Watson 1934: 134). However, when his treasonable correspondence seeking an alliance with Tsar Peter I of Russia fell into Turkish hands, he was invited to Istanbul, tortured and beheaded along with all male members of his family. His betrayal was the last straw for the Turks, and from this time onward, all governors of the Principalities were appointed from the ranks of the Greek elite called Phanariotes, after the quarter of Istanbul in which they lived<sup>20</sup>.

### *The Monks*

"Life is, in these times, horrible and troubled", wrote monk Dionisie, "when the frightening war between the Ottoman Porte and the Kingdoms of Russia and Aus-

tria, is blooming with horrifying flames, and being surrounded here, in the holy monastery, I submitted myself to ascetic trials (*m-am nevoit*) and I wrote” (qtd. Tamas 1995: 71). He expresses rather eloquently the difficulties faced by the young monastery in the wake of Brancoveanu’s death. Only 24 years after its foundation, it became a pawn in the war between Turks and Austrians (the Austro-Hungarian border was only about 50 km north of the monastery). Both warring sides considered it a valuable strategic objective because it was located in one of the main mountain passes into Transylvania, and they stationed their garrisons there. In 1716, Horezu was occupied by 600 Austrian soldiers who, the abbot wrote, took potshots at the faces of saints frescoed on the walls. Twenty years later, Mehmet Pasha moved in with 1800 Turkish soldiers (after torching the neighbouring diocesan town Valcea) and stayed for a year (Tamas 1995: 76-8). They brought along 70 Romanian ‘slaves’, mainly women and children captured from surrounding villages and, to their credit, local authorities wrote to the Prince requesting money to buy them back (ibid). Considering that, according to the Austrian census (qtd. Tamas 1995: 107), the village Romani had only 69 families, the soldiers far outnumbered the locals. Local legend, told to me by Mother Visalia, has it that when the Turkish army reached the gates of the monastery, abbot Pachomius and the monks escaped on ropes made of bedsheets from a back balcony, running into the mountains, where they lived in a hermitage they built under the shelter of a rock (it still exists, bearing Pachomius’ name). One of their main concerns seems to have been the rescue of religious valuables, but some of the gold had to be left behind. Amused, Mother Visalia told me how Brancoveanu had left the monastery a store of gold coins for emergencies, but had it hidden in a cache built high up within the wooden partition separating the altar enclosure from the church proper (*ikonostasis*) and during the rushed escape the monks could not get a tall ladder to climb up and retrieve it (Visalia pers. comm.).

Brancoveanu seems to have had grand designs to turn Horezu into a cultural centre of the Balkans. He was well educated—he left Horezu monastery his extensive library of classical works ordered in the West—and his love of art is reflected by his interest religious architecture (he promoted a new style with Italian influences, now considered the apex of Romanian ecclesiastic architecture). He also financed the rebuilding of most of the older monasteries in the area, and the restoration of their frescoes. His wife, also a remarkable personality in her own right, founded the first con-

vent in the diocese, as well as the first hospital in the area, at Horezu monastery (Tamas 1995: 44-69).

The first abbot of Horezu, a Greek monk from Mount Athos, had been chosen for his intellectual achievements, and he involved the monks in copying and translating manuscripts. Another Greek monk, Konstantinos, was placed in charge of training a group of novices in fresco painting. The Horezu team of painters, who developed a unique style, practiced first by painting the interior of several small hermitages built during abbot Ioan's time, and later moved further afield, painting churches throughout Wallachia and the Balkans (Tamas 1995: 49-53).

Although we have no information on the recruitment of monastics at this time, many of the novices who were being trained in writing or painting seem to have been, judging by their names, Romanians from the Valcea area, and Tamas suggests some might have been children of villagers from Romani (Tamas 1995: 70). They were probably members of middle or lower class families seeking upward mobility through careers in the Church. At this time, Valcea diocese already operated a printing press (since 1636), and Rafail, one of Ioan's apprentices, became its director. The monks' activities included the translation of Greek manuscripts into Romanian and also the copying of manuscripts, some ordered by monasteries as far as Moldavia (in 1700, a Moldavian monk commissioned a copy of the manuscript of 'Varlaam and Ioasaf' from Dositei, a well-known translator and calligrapher working at Horezu). Even documents as mundane as the lists of people to be prayed for at liturgy (*pomelnic*) were beautifully decorated (Tamas 1995: 69). The monks also ran more pragmatic, socially-oriented projects such as training scribes for government offices and opening a school for the children of local peasants. In addition to religious texts, they were interested in history, particularly that of Russia, perhaps because of their exchanges with Moldavian monks. Thus, Rafail copied the life of Peter the Great, which he had discovered, in Greek manuscript, at Valcea diocese (he later complained that "being full of mistakes, [the manuscript] gave me a lot of trouble and work"). Another monk, Lavrentie, copied "*The history of the origins of the Muscali [Russians]*". Most of the texts the monks translated came from religious centres in Greece, such as *Floarea Darurilor*, 'The flower of gifts', translated by monk Filotei from Horezu in 1700, from a text brought from Mt. Athos (Tamas 1995: 70).

The monks saw writing as an ascetic task, because it was exacting on the body and mind, and could be practiced while foregoing sleep (*priveghere*) which, according



to the Lives of Saints, is one of the main monastic *nevointe* (ascetic disciplines). “I often made night into day, to practice greater *nevoi* [lit. needs, meaning here the inducement of needs through ascetic exercise, in order to overcome them]”, writes Dionisie Ecclesiarhul, apologizing to his patron for mistakes he may have made in the manuscript. “As the stranger rejoices when he sees his homeland, so the writer of a book rejoices when he gets to the end”, (Dositei qtd. in Tamas 1995: 70).

Even during the Austrian occupation, cultural activities continued. In 1719, a synod (council) was held at Horezu and it was decided to open two schools funded by the monasteries and diocese, one taught in the Romanian language at Valcea (near the diocese) and one in Latin at Craiova (the metropolitan see). Given the dominant Greek influence in Orthodoxy, the use, in schools, of Romanian vernacular and Latin (the language of the Catholic Church) is remarkable, and can probably be explained in terms of the stirrings of national identity—Romanians had begun to themselves as a Latin people, and the Church promoted this image (Tamas 1995: 60). The monks also ran a school in the village, which was attended by the sons of peasants from the surrounding area. The pupils memorised prayers, learnt how to read, and keep rudimentary accounts. One monk, Lavrentie, insisted on having the *Octoihul*, a book of prayers, printed in Romanian “for the children of Christians, who struggle to learn” (qtd. in Tamas 1995: 71).

This section has sought to highlight two interesting themes that emerge from the documents. First, is the villagers’ readiness and persistence in using legal processes to fight the encroachment of feudal landlords. This suggests that the village *obstea* was, in this case, a well-defined and influential entity, capable of mobilising people to action. As we shall see in the next section, the *obstea* began to lose its power as the communal ownership pattern on which it was based disintegrated, due to increasing pressures from the state (through taxation) and from powerful outsiders (such as the Greek monks). However, it is worth mentioning that the *obstea*, in a more limited guise, has persisted to the present day: a large section of the Romani forests are still communally owned (on the basis of shares), and although *obstea* was abolished under socialism, it has been reconstituted in post-socialist times.

The second theme I wish to emphasise is that of Brancoveanu’s original vision of the monastery, as having a strong cultural and social role. As we shall see in the next section, a change in the political regime completely changed this emphasis—focusing monastic activities on economic expansion.

## **Hellenisation (1714-1860)**

As the monks' activities show, even during Brancoveanu's time Greek influence was strong in Wallachian cultural life. This trend intensified during the century following his death, as the Porte began appointing the governors of Wallachia from a Greek caste called the Phanariotes, after the quarter of Constantinople in which they lived. They were descendants of the Byzantine aristocracy who, after the conquest of Constantinople, had become powerful financiers, backing up politicians with loans. Gradually, they gained the trust of sultans and obtained important political appointments for themselves, at a time when Turkish dignitaries were becoming increasingly corrupt and unreliable (Seton Watson 1934: 130).

“They formed a close caste, from which came dragomans [i.e. translators], Grand Dragomans, diplomatic agents, spies, Bishops, Metropolitans, Patriarchs, high dignitaries of the ‘Great Church’ of Constantinople, logothetes, Skeuophylaks and finally Princess of Wallachia and Moldavia” (Iorga qtd. in Seton Watson 1934: 129).

From the Turkish viewpoint, they made reliable as well as economically astute governors of the Romanian Principalities, having every reason to remain loyal to the Sultan, on whom their appointments depended (Seton Watson 1934: 126-7).

The internal autonomy of the Principalities and the broad powers given to governors made ruling these provinces a particularly lucrative and coveted venture. In addition to collecting taxes, the governors were in the position to sell status and wealth-generating appointments, and even marriages into the Romanian aristocracy, whose members sought to regain access to political power by becoming Hellenised (ibid). Thus, the Principalities became a frontier land where great fortunes and exalted status could be attained overnight by Greek clients of the governors. Within the Ottoman Empire, they were the nearest thing to a “Greek state within [the Ottoman] state” (Seton Watson 1934: 130), a fiefdom of the old aristocracy of the Byzantine Empire.

A governorship was purchased through bribes to high officials of the Sublime Porte, and it might end at any moment, if a higher bidder turned up. Hence, the main objective of the governors was to raise the maximum profit for themselves as well as the Porte, in the shortest amount of time.

“They may be compared to a farmer holding insecurely by a short lease, who tries to extract as much as possible from the land, regardless of the laws of cropping and rotation, and so very quickly that he exhausts and ruins it” (Seton Watson 1934: 127).

Over the next century, this pattern of rule “plunged [the local population] in utter misery [...] till at the turn of the [19<sup>th</sup>] century it was unquestionably worse even than the completely subjected Bulgarian or Serbian population” (Seton Watson 1934: 134).

### *The Church during the Phanariote Period*

Although the Ottoman Empire had been founded on holy war and the expansion of Islam, in practice it was religiously tolerant, particularly towards Christians<sup>21</sup>. Non-Islamic communities were organised according to their religious affiliations in independent units (millets) under the leadership of their own highest ecclesiastical authority (Ramet 1988: 23). Shortly after taking Constantinople, the sultan sought a rapprochement with the Orthodox Church, realising that it controlled the majority of his subjects, and fearing it might, if threatened, turn to the West for assistance. As a result, on the whole, the Ottoman conquest may have actually enhanced the status and political influence of the Orthodox Church (Stewart 1994: 140), making it the custodian of the Empire’s large Christian population. This tolerant policy towards the Church was to the advantage of the Phanariotes who, through financial investments and kinship ties controlled the Constantinople Patriarchate. During the Phanariotes’ governorship of the Principalities, local branches of the Church, which held vast estates and wealth, were very attractive targets for Greek colonisation.

Greek influence had been strong even prior to this period, particularly because, in the absence of autochthonous schools, Greek theological and monastic centres provided a supply of clergy to the Romanian princes. For example, when new monasteries were founded, monks from centres like Mount Athos were brought in to organise monastic life according to the Athonite Rule, which was considered one of the most pure in Orthodoxy (Tamas 1995: 49). The relationship between the Romanian princes and the church of Constantinople was close. As an independent observer put it, “after the fall of Constantinople [1453] Romanian princes were the greatest benefactors of the [Mount Athos] monasteries”, endowing them with money, buildings and especially landed estates within the Principalities (Hasluck 1924: 64). In addition to donating estates, princes, and later, Phanariote governors of Moldavia and

Wallachia also began ‘dedicating’ Romanian monasteries and their assets to Greek monasteries. Dedication changed the status of monasteries from independent establishments in their own right to that of *metochi*, estates of the Greek monasteries. Dedicated monasteries sent two thirds of their revenues to their sovereign monastery in Greece, keeping only one third for themselves. As a result of such dedications and land bequests, by the mid 1800’s Greek monasteries controlled *a fourth of the total surface of Wallachia and a third of Moldavia* (Seton Watson 1934: 307, emphasis added).

Even if monasteries (like Horezu) had not been dedicated, it is likely that abbots of Greek origin sent surplus revenues to their *manastirea de metanie* (the monastery where they had taken their vows) in Greece. We know this to have been the case at least with the last Greek abbot of Horezu, Hrisantos Penettis, who regularly sent gold, disguised as cheese, to his monastery at Meteora. Thus, the monasteries, placed by the Phanariotes under the control of Greek monks, increasingly became a means by which the governors could collect sizeable revenues and convey them abroad.

### *Villagers versus Monks*

A few months after Brancoveanu’s death (1714), the village assembly and Horezu’s first abbot, Ioan the Greek took their dispute to the new king Stefan Cantacuzino (Vamesu 1972: 92). Stefan appointed a commission consisting of 24 boyars and the Bishop of Valcea to investigate the problem in greater depth. The number of witnesses appointed, 24, indicates that the litigation had reached the penultimate stage of appeal. Judicial procedure called for a number of witnesses (similar to a jury) to agree on what they considered to be the truth in a legal dispute. The number of witnesses increased in multiples of three with each trial, as long as the plaintiffs remained unhappy with the ruling. The last attempt involved 48 witnesses, and was resolved through a final princely ruling which could not be challenged (Tamas 1995: 78). The unpredictability and irreversibility of this princely decision<sup>22</sup> would often pressure the parties into agreeing to a settlement—as it happened in this case.

The 24 boyars returned to the prince, having been unable to reach unanimity because of Dima’s forged deed of ownership. The prince gave abbot Ioan and the villagers one last chance to settle before his final ruling, and they decided to ask the Bishop of Valcea to arbitrate a settlement. This choice of an arbitrator was not inci-

dental—in the Ottoman Empire, and possibly in Wallachia as well, religious agencies played a judicial role, and bishops acted as magistrates. The bishop’s legal role rested on his ability to determine the truth of a claim when all else failed—as it often happened, at a time when documents were scarce and spurious claims frequent. He did so by asking the contesting party to take a ritual oath (with the hand on the gospel) as to the truth of their version of events, and by issuing a ‘charter of curse’ which would affect them and their descendants if they lied knowingly (Tamas 1995: 34).

Re-examining all the documents, the bishop of Valcea asked the villagers if they were willing to swear that Dima’s ownership deed was a forgery, and they offered to do so before the bishop and 24 witnesses. He then asked what their demands were, and they replied they would be satisfied to receive the status of free men, agreeing to give up their estate to the monastery. Abbot Ioan accepted these conditions and the bishop decided that, all parties being satisfied with this settlement, the villagers would not be made to take the solemn oath after all. All the old deeds were returned to the villagers, along with a document confirming their status as free men (which was a guarantee against future enserfment), and that “the monastery would henceforth have nothing to do with them, but own the estate in peace” (qtd. Vamesu 1972: 92, my transl.).

This settlement was reached in June. By December, the villagers were again dissatisfied and pressed for further concessions from the monastery. Abbot Ioan “having many quarrels and issues (*pricini*) for estates and for other things begged the governor, who sent Radu vel Vornicul Targovistei to clear up things and set the boundary” (qtd. Vamesu 1972: 93, my transl.). Boyar Radu (who was no less than the minister of home affairs) explains in a document written by himself what next happened:

“As I wanted, following the custom of the land, to unite the Romani estate with that of the monastery, and the Romani villagers being unhappy about this, since it put them out of their homes and orchards, they fell with prayers to us and to his holiness the abbot that he may take the land [below the village’s southern boundary], leaving the land on which the village lay (*salistea satului*) as well as the grazing lands (*plaiul*) and the mountains to the villagers” (qtd. Vamesu 1972: 90-4, my transl.).

Abbot Ioan finally agreed to this latest concession, leaving the villagers free use of the land. Under this arrangement, in 1715 the village, though situated at the gates of the monastery, became entirely independent and free.

The villagers' de facto victory did not, however settle land issues for long. Shortly after the 1715 ruling, northern Wallachia was annexed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which held it for 20 years (1718 -39). The Austrians introduced reforms aimed at improving the situation of the peasantry (particularly of serfs), who were made responsible only to local territorial authorities rather than abbots and boyars. Landlords were required to prove ownership claims to the satisfaction of the new authorities (Tamas 1995: 93). In 1724 another commission of 6 boyars was sent to clarify how much of the Romani estate was owned by the villagers and how much by the monastery, taking into account sales and donations made by villagers to the monastery during the ten years since Vornic Radu's visit. Reading all the documents, the boyars discovered that the monastery owned ten households of serfs in Romani, along with their shares of the village estate—because these had been purchased in a separate transaction by an uncle of Brancoveanu. This transaction is shrouded in mystery—although documents had been examined several times before, it was never mentioned. Setting apart (by name) the serf households, it introduces a division in Romani which again becomes a mixed serf and free village.

To his credit, abbot Ioan had accepted the informal settlement of December 1715, recognising the full ownership rights of the villagers over the part of the estate which he left to them at their request (although he was not obliged by law to do so). However, the Austrian land survey taken ten years later shows he had recovered quite a bit of this land through sales and donations made by individual villagers to the monastery (Tamas 1995: 60). By 1724, the monastery owned two thirds of the Romani estate, and the villagers only one third. For instance, abbot Ioan purchased land in separate transactions from four villagers and also received a donation from a priest, of his share of the Romani estate (ibid). In addition, Mosul (old man) Ion, a villager who had become a monk and lived at a hermitage up the river valley (which pre-dated the monastery) had donated his share of the Romani estate, and his family had followed suit: his brother, a priest donated his, his nephew, another priest likewise. In addition to these bequests, Mosul Ion also bought land on behalf of the monastery from the *obstea* (assembly) of Romani (most likely the Upper Romani moiety, near which the hermitage was located). For these additions to the monastery's estate, the

abbot rewarded Mosul Ion by dedicating the hermitage where he lived to his namesake, St. John the Baptist (Tamas 1995: 61). This is the hermitage mentioned in chapter 1, which the villagers led by Mr. Badoi sought to rebuild in post-socialist times.

In addition to these disputes, the abbot Ioan also had lawsuits with the abbots of the two neighbouring monasteries (which pre-dated Horezu) both of whom had illegally fenced in more land than they owned, cutting into the Romani estate (Vamesu 1972: 100). In spite of these setbacks the monastery eventually prospered. If at the death of Brancoveanu, it owned only three villages, one hundred years later it had acquired no less than 73 different estates (each consisting of at least one village and its lands) and 11 vineyards, as well as rights to a tenth of the wine production of 19 other estates (Tamas 1995: 49-50).

### *Disintegration of the Romani Obste*

Unilateral transactions between villagers and the monastery suggest that the solidarity of the village *obstea* began to disintegrate very soon after their success in reclaiming their freedom and lands. Shares of communal land had occasionally been sold prior to this time (Tamas 1995: 104), but after the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, pressure to sell increased greatly due to an unprecedented rise in taxes introduced by the Phanariote governors. These trends are particularly noticeable in the lower moiety of the village (now Lower Romani), located between the monastery and the trade road to Transylvania. Lawsuits over land transactions in this part of Romani are always between individuals, while in upper Romani we find the *obstea* being routinely involved and protecting its rights (Tamas 1995: 93-105). Also, according to the Austrian census of 1722, lower Romani contained far more pawns and peasants without land than upper Romani did (Tamas 1995: 61). This suggests the upper moiety was more successful in preserving its independence and the solidarity of its '*obste*' (which still exists today), keeping communal ownership of the mountains and grazing lands. The difference may be put down to factors such as location and occupation (shepherding in upper Romani, cultivation in lower Romani). Whilst the lower Romani peasants tended to raise money by selling their lands, the lands near upper Romani consisted largely of forests and pastures which were difficult to divide among individuals, but also supplied a cash income through rents paid by shepherds, which could be spread around. During the Phanariote period, cash was essential to the preservation of

freedom, since taxes were ever on the increase. Stahl (1980) argues that the Phanariotes' taxation initiated a transition to a cash economy in the Principalities. In the demonetised rural environment, traders, landlords and monasteries were the main sources of cash. We know that the monks acted as money lenders to villagers from Romani, who often pawned their possessions at the monastery. For instance, one document mentions that the monks kept a vat for distilling moonshine which had been pawned (Tamas 1995: 63).

I think it is crucially important to point out that Romani's lawsuits were not directed only against landlords and abbots, but also against neighbouring villages. In fact, after the 1724 decision there were no further lawsuits against the monastery, but the *obstea* of Romani spent the next century fighting the *obstea* of the neighbouring village Rimesti over ownership of some mountains. Both villages were mentioned in Vlad the Monk's 1487 deed, Romani being granted to Roman and Rimesti to his brother-in-law, Vlad. The deed did not, however, specify what lands belonged to each. In 1724 the Romani *obste* took advantage of the Austrian occupation to increase their lands: they went to the authorities and claimed they owned all of Rimesti's mountains as well! The Austrians were content with six witnesses swearing that this was true, and gave all of Rimesti's mountains to Romani. The Rimesti villagers retaliated by going to the authorities and having 12 people swear that the mountains were rightfully theirs, so in 1727 they took them back (Tamas 1995: 75). As soon as the Ottoman Empire recovered northern Wallachia (1739), the Romani villagers again challenged Rimesti's ownership. The prince sent an envoy who, the document says, was not from the area and found it very difficult to understand the history of the dispute, so he was content to give the mountains back to Romani after they had 12 witnesses swear the mountains were theirs (Tamas 1995: 78). In 1747, the Romani villagers received notification that the Rimesti *obstea* had secretly gone to Bucharest and lodged a counterclaim to the mountains with the High Court (*Marele Divan*). When, in 1759, Oltenia's administrator and the Bishop of Valcea were sent to investigate the matter, they found Vlad the Monk's deed and decided that the mountains should be divided, giving one half to each village. They reinforced their ruling with the threat that if the villagers did not settle and make peace, the prince would confiscate the mountains for himself (ibid). Nevertheless, in 1779 Romani complained that the Rimesti villagers had sold a mountain including the part that belonged to Romani and was not rightfully theirs to sell. The Rimesti villagers countered that they used to



have a deed of ownership over that particular mountain, but it was lost during the Austrian occupation. The saga took a new turn in 1780, when the villagers of Rimesti and Romani together took over a mountain which in fact did not belong to them at all, but had been bought from a boyar by the villagers of Ursiani! It seems that in 1779, the Romani and Rimesti villagers had secretly called experts to re-measure their lands, and had appropriated this mountain as well (the authorities returned it to Ursiani). In 1783, the Rimesti and Romani villagers were again in conflict with each other. However, in the same year the two villages also united against a third village, Maldaresti, over the contested ownership of a mountain. The matter was settled again (in favour of Romani and Rimesti) by witnesses taking a solemn oath (Tamas 1995: 78).

During the same period, we also find litigation between the *obstea*, and individuals who (often spuriously) claimed shares of the common land. Thus, in 1715, a group of villagers, including the nephews of a priest, claimed they had rights to the common land, but the village assembly were able to prove that these people had previously withdrawn their shares of land from the *obstea* and sold them to Horezu monastery (Tamas 1995: 79).

From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, litigation tends to be mostly between individual parties, suggesting that much of the land had been divided up in individual plots. Nevertheless, families and neighbours continued to contest sales and lodge complaints invoking the right of pre-emption (which had been meant to protect communal ownership from abuses) (Tamas 1995: 95). By this time, however, only mountains still figured as common property of the *obste*. Some individual members of the *obste* tried to sell even these, without the knowledge of other villagers. In 1823 the upper Romani villagers challenged a local landlord's purchase of a mountain from a breakaway group of their *obstea*. They argued the proper *obstea* knew nothing of this sale and had in fact leased the same mountain to a shepherd, but their pre-emption claim was unsuccessful.

This data suggests that the dissolution of the Romani *obstea* was caused by broader political and economic changes associated with the Phanariote regime, rather than by exploitation at the hands of the monks. Abbot Ioan showed remarkable generosity and restraint in conceding their freedom and land to the Romani community. Nevertheless, the villagers' fortunes declined, while the monastery's wealth underwent a tremendous increase. This was because, as I have suggested, monasteries were

a good means by which the Phanariotes could extract wealth from the countryside. Rautu (1908) suggests it was common knowledge that, during the Phanariote period, the abbots of important monasteries like Horezu were appointed by the Phanariote governors themselves, and were often Greek monks who had been tutors to the Phanariotes' children, and thus trusted allies of the governors.

### *The Monks' Economic Activities*

The documents present a complex, 'warts and all' picture of the monks as well. By 1780, the number of Greek monks at Horezu had grown, and they had brought an emphasis on economic activities and trade (which, being an Ottoman monopoly, was almost entirely in Greek hands). The monastery began holding weekly and seasonal fairs near its gates and, since it was conveniently located near the road to Transylvania, they were a great success. Since the constant fairs interfered with monastic life, the fairground was moved 3 km from the monastery, on the main road, and soon a settlement formed around it. This was present-day Horezu which, thanks to its convenient location of the trade route grew into the administrative centre of the region. Its population was ethnically varied, consisting, in addition to Romanians, of Greek, Turkish and Vlach traders (Tamas 1995: 88-9).

Since customs taxes were collected at these fairs, they could not be initiated without princely permission, and it seems that in Wallachia monasteries were the main entities responsible for their organisation (several fairs held near monasteries survive to this day) (Tamas 1995: 88). Such occasions for merriment were, for the monastery, an important source of revenue, because it held a monopoly on the sale of wine on all its estates. The monks ran all the village pubs on their estates and forbade the sale of alcohol by anyone other than themselves.

"Let no one, neither the inhabitants of the [monastery's] villages, nor any district officials, inhabitants of other villages or strangers, dare to introduce or sell wine, brandy or beer on the monastery's estates, either in the days of the weekly market or at the fairs held over the year" (Tamas 1995: 63).

Thus reads an order of the Austrian administration, which confirmed the monastery's privileges. If anyone was discovered selling, his barrels were broken, and the alcohol spilled or confiscated. Since it was in a hill area, where the main crops, fruit and

grapes, are used to make brandy and wine, the monopoly over the sale of alcohol on all the monastery's estates (some of which were far away, in the plains area and could not make their own alcohol) was exceedingly profitable (Tamas 1995: 50-2, 63). An abbot's account presented to the monastery's administrative councillors in 1726 shows that the sale of alcohol generated nearly 60% (395 *taleri*) of the monastery's total income (683 *taleri*). The other 285 *taleri* had come from livestock-related activities: selling sheep, cows and their products as well as leasing pastures to shepherds (Tamas 1995: 63). There is reason to suspect that the monks were also flouting the Ottoman monopoly on international cattle and cereal trade—we know that in the early 1800's they were carrying on a flourishing illegal cross-border trade in livestock with partners in Vienna and Budapest (Rautu 1908). By 1800, as the monastery's landed estates grew, the sources of income changed. In that year, the monastery took in 1880 *lei*, mostly from leasing land but also the sale of alcohol and hay (Tamas 1995: 69). The monastery also had monopoly over fishing rights (which were leased out) and sole ownership of the mills that ground peasants' cereals in exchange for a tithe. One of Horezu's old mills still survives (and functions) at the monastery's gates (although now it has only two or three clients a year).

The monks faced constant difficulties in recruiting labour for the cultivation of their estates. It is true that hiring people was seen by one outraged abbot as almost unthinkable, but although most peasants' obligations were in fact relatively light, they seem to have continually sought to evade them. The monastery may have, on occasion, abusively enserfed free peasants who had no documents proving their status, or at least peasants feared this, as suggested by a request of the peasants of Rimesti to prince Brancoveanu for such a document to protect them from Horezu monastery (Tamas 1995: 66). However, serfdom was abolished by princely decree in 1746, so after this time the monastery had to rely on free (but landless) peasants called '*clacasi*', who were required to do *corvée*. The number of *corvée* days was not, in fact, very high—around twelve days per year, and abbots also seem to have been quite willing to negotiate with the peasants and yield to their demands in order to have workers at all. Thus, in 1749 the Romani villagers negotiated an agreement with the monastery to work only four days per year—three days hoeing and harvesting and one day for ploughing, with the alternative of buying their time back for 15 *bani* per day (Tamas 1995: 67). Thus, the peasants had the option of paying instead of turning up for work. In 1760, the number of *corvée* days was raised to twelve, and the workers

were ordered to allocate their days in such a way as to keep a constant supply of labour throughout the agricultural season. The peasants complained to the authorities that the abbot was trying to make them work more days than the legal limit. In 1786, an abbot complained to the prince that the villagers preferred to pay 1 zloty per year rather than work their *claca* days “and we are not complaining about the money, but about the workdays, having no one to work with on the domain as well as at the monastery”. The solution he would have liked imposed was that the peasants should be required *both* to pay the zloty and show up for work. The villagers of Romani do not seem to have been particularly intimidated by the monks. In 1748, abbot Dionisie asked the district authorities to help put a stop to the villagers’ plundering the monastery’s lands—cutting the wood from its forests and letting their animals graze freely everywhere. The authorities ordered the guilty to work three days for the abbot, threatening them with prison if they failed to do so (Tamas 1995: 67).

This same abbot Dionisie had serious troubles with the Turkish authorities in 1769 because of some villagers from nearby Ramesti, who had murdered three Turks and in a possibly malicious gesture left their corpses in front of Horezu monastery’s gates. Dionisie, by then an elderly ex-abbot recounted:

“What troubles I suffered in prison from October to November 1769, because Abbot Stefan [his apprentice] took care of himself and ran off during the night to Ramnic [Valcea], and I knew nothing and was seized by the soldiers sent here because of the death of the Turks that were killed in his [Stefan’s] abbacy, and they took me to Craiova [the regional capital], where I was imprisoned for a long time [about a month]” (qtd. in Tamas 1995: 90, my transl.).

He was saved, just in time, by the Russian invasion of Wallachia: “they had a revolt and we got rid of the Turks, and I found myself owing 467 *taleri* to Hagi Dinu, with an interest of 508 *taleri*” (an enormous sum, considerably more than the monastery’s income for a year) (in Tamas 90). Ironically, Dionisie seems to have hated the Turks himself, as suggested by his lawsuit against a local man who bought honey from the monks to sell to Turkish traders, whom Dionisie insisted on boycotting.

### *Anti-Greek Feelings*

“This holy monastery, built for Romanian monks, had become, by the middle of [the 19<sup>th</sup>] century, the cave of Greek brigands, a place for the spoliation of Romanians, of enrichment

for the riffraff of Greece and the Phanar, a place of corruption and promiscuity of the Greek snakes” (Rautu 1908: 37, my transl.).

This is how the head priest of Valcea diocese referred to Horezu, in his 1908 monograph on local monasteries. He continued: “such a long time the Greeks have sucked out the fortunes of this country, and so outraged was the local population, that on the portrait of I. Merisescu [an abbot appointed around 1850] it is written: ‘the first Romanian abbot’” (Rautu 1908: 37, my transl.).

Although in the documents presented so far, the Greek monks appear as rather benign figures rather than bloodthirsty exploiters of the peasantry, by the mid-nineteenth century resentment of the Phanariote rulers had reflected also upon them, and even well-meaning clerics like Rautu, writing in retrospect, saw them as an abomination. The controversy regarding the role of the Greeks is nicely reflected in the varied interpretations of the colourful figure of Archimandrite Hrisantos (1781-1851), the last Greek abbot who ruled Horezu monastery for several decades, dying just prior to the state’s seizure of monastic estates (1864). Rautu singles him out as the perfect example of all that was hateful about the Greeks: “the prototype of the beast-man, corrupt, thief and corrupting is subsumed by that sinister figure of the Gold Monk, the Abbot Hrisantos” (Rautu 1908: 40).

A Greek from Thessaly who had taken his vows in one of the Meteora monasteries, Hrisantos seems to have been pre-eminently a shrewd businessman, who greatly advanced the fortunes of Horezu. During his time, Horezu monastery owned no less than 71 estates throughout Wallachia as well as other concessions like tithes from the output of other domains (Tamas 1995: 49). Much of his income seems to have come from cattle trade with Vienna and Budapest, carried out in defiance of the Ottoman monopoly on international trade (by now the Empire had lost much of its control over the Principalities).

In addition to his economic enterprises, Hrisantos also became involved in the implementation of a government reform programme. In 1830 Wallachia had become a Russian protectorate, and a far-reaching modernisation programme aimed at reforming political and social institutions (called the *Reglement Organique*) was introduced by the Russian administrator, General Kiseleff. Hrisantos was appointed Director of Monastic Buildings, in charge of organising repairs to the buildings of monasteries and churches in the area (which were in bad condition). He took this job quite seri-

ously, checking over every detail—in the year before his death, for example, he had a row with a carpenter for not building the furniture for neighbouring Bistrita monastery according to his specifications (Tamas 1995: 120).

The *Reglement Organique* also introduced universal education for the first time. Schools were to be financed by local communities (state funding was scarce), and in the Horezu area, Hrisantos assumed the task of organising the local school. In 1838, he financed the building of the first proper schoolhouse in Romani<sup>23</sup> (the monks had previously run a school in some rooms near the monastery, where it was taught by a deacon). The school had five rooms (two classrooms, one for girls, one for boys) and the teacher's sole qualification was that he had attended three years of primary school (Vamesu 1972: 2). This was an improvement over the previous teacher who, "being Greek, could hardly speak any Romanian, much less read and write". This was, however, the only school in the area and pupils (mostly boys) came from all surrounding villages. The monks (and some villagers) offered accommodation to those who lived further away (there were 20-25 students), and taught them to sing in church. Ten years later the 1848 revolutions prompted the state to close such rural schools, seen as possible nuclei of revolt. Hrisantos refused to comply and the school continued to function. By 1853, there were 113 students registered at the beginning of the year (78 finished). Hrisantos was also charitable—in 1847 he donated a very large sum, most of Horezu monastery's yearly income, to assist the victims of two fires, in Bucharest and Valcea. He seems to have been, however, rather strict and, like today's nuns, used his influence with local authorities to get his way (Tamas 1995: 119). In 1842 he enlisted their help in confiscating 200 sheep on account of a debt two shepherds owed him for grazing rights on his mountains (*ibid*).

What made him controversial was his penchant for dramatic displays, such as travelling in a large coach pulled by twelve horses, surrounded by an escort of monks on horseback. One of his favourite gestures was to shake a handkerchief full of gold coins, letting them fall on the ground and watching peasants scurry to get them. He also liked to observe local life, and would sit on a high veranda, watching the village dances in Romani and, Rautu (1908: 40) claims, choosing women he wanted:

"In the memory of elders, there are still fresh recollections of the horrors perpetrated by this devil in monk's habit, from whose claw no family escaped without being dishonoured, no girl

uncorrupted (*necinstita*). At Raureni fair, he sat in a special tent for the whole time the fair lasted and did not refuse any young woman that asked him” (apparently, for various favours).

If Rautu’s comments seem harsh, Hrisantos is treated even worse in a strange work of fiction written by Metropolitan Anania (1990), one of the best known (and most vocal) contemporary Church intellectual figures. This shocking story portrays Hrisantos as being plagued by an unusual virility, which causes him to rape laywomen and nuns alike. After his death, Hrisantos’ body, which had been buried under the floor of the church, emanates energies which excite women pilgrims, causing them tempt the monks sexually in church. This leads to the abandonment of the monastery by the confused monks<sup>24</sup>. Later, Hrisantos’ body is exhumed and found to be completely undecayed, confirming rumours that he was damned. The cause of his damnation turns out to be his incestuous relationship with his mother, who was trying to help cure his severe acne. Through a further chain of events, Hrisantos’ dead body comes to attempt to rape a nun, also dead but undecomposed, and who turns out to have been his daughter (Anania 1990: 230-77).

This story has never been censored by the Church, and Anania is admired in religious circles for his writings. This suggests to me that, the more recent friendship with the Greek Church notwithstanding, some animosities survive, and Hrisantos’ Greek origins made him a plausible target—it would be impossible to imagine the same being written of a Romanian monk<sup>25</sup>. Anania (1990) himself explains Hrisantos’ character in terms of his origins, claiming that he was in fact a Greek sailor who had run away from the law, hiding within the Church. On the other hand Tamas (1995: 121), who sees him as a great and enterprising abbot, a local figure to be proud of, ‘appropriates’ him, by arguing that he was in fact of Vlach origin (an ethnically Romanian group living south of the Danube).

When she read it, in 2000, Mother Visalia was incensed by the story, and wrote to Metropolitan Anania to complain about his distorted view of Hrisantos:

“They say Hrisantos was found undecayed fifty years after his death, but I, who am alive, have washed his bones. They discovered his remains buried under the church floor, when they changed the pavement. I asked to be the one to wash his bones, since I care very much about the Greek monks who were here before because they did something for the place. The place was crumbling, monks living in unhealthy conditions, and it was Hrisantos who erected the buildings that house the nuns nowadays” (Visalia, personal communication).

Hrisantos was undoubtedly more feared than loved. Even Visalia says that his portrait, now relegated to a dusty storeroom, had the uncanny ability to follow you with its piercing gaze wherever you happened to be in the room.

This section has outlined changes within patterns of ownership in the village, as well as a shift in the monastery's activities, which became increasingly focused on economic pursuits. As Stahl (1980) shows, free villages had always been targeted by powerful outsiders (usually boyars) who sought to exploit them. However, the fact that they were exploited mainly through taxation, allowed villages a degree of latitude in developing their own institutions, such as the *obstea*, and retaining communal property arrangements.

After the onset of the Phanariote period, exploitation of the peasantry became much more intensive. The need to raise cash to pay taxes led to the breakdown of communal patterns of ownership, undermining village solidarity and thus the ability of villages to mobilise in order to protect their rights. As a result, during this period patterns of contestation over land seem to shift: instead of villages acting against powerful outsiders (feudal-style owners), now most lawsuits are directed against other villages, breakaway factions of the *obstea*, or individuals.

Meanwhile, monastery wealth had been increasing greatly, thanks to princely donations of land, tax concessions and other privileges (such as monopolies on the sale of alcohol, or princely permission to organise fairs). However, the largest part of the income from this wealth seems to have been sent abroad by the Greek monks, who now controlled the monasteries (we should recall that the Phanariote caste did not only produce political leaders, but also the leaders of the Church—as they controlled the Constantinople Patriarchate). As a result, the intensification of the struggle for national sovereignty also led to a backlash against the Church, seen as a tool of the Greek governors. This led to the seizure of monastic estates immediately after the new Romanian state was formed.

## **‘Secularisation’ and Church ‘Nationalisation’**

“Energetic measures were taken against the corruption and dissipation of Greek monks who, in the shadow and under the protection of the boyars educated by them or even related to them, had become masters of all monastic estates in the country” (Rautu).



By the mid-nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was disintegrating and the Romanian Principalities had been placed under the protection of the Concert of Europe (France was their protectress). When, in 1859, they were allowed to elect their own rulers, both Moldavia and Wallachia elected prince Alexandru Cuza (see chapter plates), achieving de facto unification. The very first law Cuza introduced was the seizure of all monastic estates, which were then redistributed to the peasantry in a large-scale agricultural reform (see Stahl 1980: 83-93). The measure was directed against the Greek monks' power, and sought to annul the ownership of large swathes of Wallachia and Moldavia by Greek monasteries (Hasluck 1924: 64-6). All Greek monks were expelled from the country and the use of the Greek language in church banned. Cuza's agricultural reform was advantageous for the peasantry living on monastic estates, who received land and lost their master (one of my ancestors from Romani was among these). However, it proved harmful to the peasantry still living on seigniorial estates, because it introduced individual ownership as the norm and abolished the legal status of village *obsti*, which had successfully protected peasants' interests, negotiating with landlords on behalf of their members (Stahl 1980: 84).

After Cuza, a German prince, Carol I of Hohenzollern, was invited to become Romania's constitutional monarch, and following participation in the Crimean War, the Romanian Principalities achieved independent statehood in 1877. Although a Catholic, Carol sought to win the co-operation of the Orthodox Church by supporting its claim to autocephaly, raised by the nationalist faction of the clergy (Rautu 1908), and in 1882 the Romanian Orthodox Church achieved full autonomy from Constantinople.

The Church now became as strongly nationalistic as it had been international only a few decades previously. To be fair, Greek allegiances notwithstanding, the Orthodox church had in fact contributed a great deal to promoting the national cause, for instance by holding religious services in the vernacular, translating foreign books and running most of the country's printing presses, which produced volumes in the Romanian language (written in the Slavonic alphabet). It also encouraged the illegal traffic of Romanian books across the border into Austro-Hungarian Transylvania, stirring up ethnic identity there<sup>26</sup> (Balan 1982, Pacurariu 1996). As we have seen, the Greek monks at Horezu promoted the organisation of schools in the Romanian and Latin, a fact which, given the Orthodox resentment of Latin Catholicism, suggests that

Romanians had already begun to define themselves as a Latin people ‘in a sea of Slavs’, and that the Church actively promoted this identity.

Yet, however impressive the achievement of church autocephaly may have been, the Church’s estates were, at this time, in a pitiful condition. After the ‘secularisation’ (seizure) of monastic estates, monasteries were to be supported by state funds, but the state was poor, and most of its revenues needed for Carol’s vast and ambitious modernisation projects (Seton Watson 1934).

The state’s expropriation of the Church had disastrous effects on the monastic sub-regime. In Valcea diocese, six of the ten most prominent monasteries were entirely abandoned, several being in such a state of disrepair as to be uninhabitable. Horezu was among these, its population having declined from more than 200 monks in 1864, to none nine years later, in 1873, after the ‘secularisation’ (Rautu 1908: 60). One of the oldest monasteries had been converted into a prison for thieves and the bishop had to ask the Prime Minister’s wife to intervene on his behalf and request the prison be moved, and the buildings be put to more appropriate uses (it was then made into a hospital for injured labourers). Clearly, with the institution of King Carol’s political regime, clerics had lost a great deal of their former political influence.

### *Efforts to Revitalise Monastic Life*

A comparison, across Wallachian dioceses, of how monasteries and convents survived the ‘secularisation’, shows that Valcea was, undoubtedly, the hardest hit (the figures cited were compiled on the basis of an inventory of all Romanian monastic establishments, Vlasie 2001). Whilst in most dioceses only two or three monasteries were closed after the ‘secularisation’, later to be re-opened as convents, in Valcea no less than 11 were, all of which had been previously flourishing, wealthy establishments. If, until the ‘secularisation’, monks had by far outnumbered nuns in the overall monastic population, after this date, the ratio was reversed (ibid). At present, in the Valcea diocese there are 9 monasteries and hermitages inhabited by monks and 14 convents and hermitages inhabited by nuns (Vlasie 2001: 273-91). Before the ‘secularisation’, the ratio was 20 monasteries to 3 convents (ibid).

Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, princes and boyars, the main founders of monastic establishments, had preferred to found monasteries. It seems monks were considered better suited to the tasks of administering and defending vast estates—monasteries

were often attacked by brigands, and it was not unusual for monks to go about armed (Tamas 1995: 89). Convents were only rarely founded, by aristocratic ladies, as was the case with the two oldest convents in Valcea, founded or re-opened by Lady Mary Brancoveanu. Thus, in Wallachia (according to data compiled from Vlasie 2001), 116 monasteries were founded, to only 38 convents (of which most date only from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries).

However, in Valcea it was the convents that survived the ‘secularisation’ relatively unscathed—because their income came mainly from crafts, such as weaving and embroidery. The sharp drop in the monasteries’ population (for instance, at Cozia monastery, from 95 to 0) suggests that most of the monks must have been Greek and were forced to leave, because, however worldly, it seems unlikely that monks would have broken their vows and left the monasteries simply because they became poor.

This was the situation found by Ghenadie, who became bishop of Valcea in 1882 (until 1893), and set himself the task of saving the diocese from disintegration. “If when he was elected bishop [of Valcea] the diocese was in complete anarchy, if abuse and disorder reigned everywhere and in everything, at his death [it] was a model of order and honesty in everything” (Rautu 1908: 24). One of his strategies for re-inventing the diocese was to adopt an extremely nationalist stance:

“As a Romanian, he was fanatically nationalistic, for which cause he hated all that was foreign, especially in the church, and had a real cult for everything that was national. He introduced ‘national’ [folk] weavings and patterns in church vestments [and] church ranks, ordinations and all promotions were given only to priests who wore national [folk] weavings and fabrics, both in their church and civilian dress, and who dressed up their homes in home-made folk weavings. Even the diocesan palace was furnished entirely with folk weavings, from the curtains to rugs and from chairs to the upholstery of the most valuable sofas” (Rautu 1908: 28).

Incidentally, at this time, folk costumes and fabrics, which stood for authentic Romanian culture (as opposed to foreign borrowings) had also become fashionable among the aristocracy (see chapter plates). A few years later, the English-born Queen Marie also adopted folk fashions, as a way of showing her appreciation for Romanian culture.

Bishop Ghenadie’s second strategy was to populate abandoned monasteries with nuns who were now in a better position to survive—by relying on income from

crafts—and running charitable institutions. In Wallachia, while no convents were ever converted into monasteries, no less than 40 of the 116 monasteries were converted into convents<sup>27</sup>.

Thus, once again, the character and orientation of monastic life was quite radically transformed as a result of shifts in relations with the political regime. Brancoveanu had conceived Horezu as a centre of cultural activity, the Phanariotes had transformed it into a vast economic enterprise, and Bishop Ghenadie re-invented it as an establishment dedicated to charitable works.

### *Life in the Nun Community*

Social work projects had become important means of obtaining additional state assistance and improving the Church's image. Around the turn of the century, many of the convents (and some monasteries) began running hospitals (Cozia, Bistrita, Horezu), orphanages (Horezu, Bistrita) and theological seminaries (Bistrita, Horezu). Over time, different projects succeeded one another, fulfilling social demands as they arose. For instance, Horezu convent ran the first hospital in the area until 1916 when a new hospital building was built. During and after the World Wars the nuns ran orphanages, and in the 1940's they had opened a theological seminary for nuns (after 1990, there has been some talk of re-opening this seminary, but so far it has not happened). The nuns also had a weaving workshop, producing rugs and church vestments.

Although the first nuns came to Horezu from several other convents, later recruitment seems to have been mainly from among surplus children and orphans from the surrounding villages. The charity projects and the fact that many of the nuns were of local origin, led to closer relations between the convent and the local community. Nuns also engaged with the outside world by visiting the villages and offering prayers, door to door, in exchange for food and wine donations. Recruits from areas famous for particular resources (such as wine) were an asset to the convent:

“They would send two girls, one from around the area, who knew the people and how things worked. One received the wine and the other was writing all the time the *pomelnice* [lists of names to be prayed for]. Let's say, if they gave a kilo of wine. If they gave larger containers, they had the joy of their families being prayed for much longer” (Visalia, pers. comm.).

However, tensions arose when the nuns tried to fence in the convent's lands. Although a child at the time, Visalia was told by her aunts, who were nuns that:

“The nuns looked at the old maps and built fences around the remaining lands of the convent, but locals who were used to letting their cattle graze there, kept tearing them down. Whole years, 1926, 27, 28, until 1930 the nuns fought with the people, until they made the stone fences which finally lasted” (Visalia, pers. comm.).

The nuns, led by the convent administrator, the daughter of a general, responded by patrolling their land “with an axe stuck in the belt and a shotgun loaded with salt pellets” (Visalia, pers. comm.). This sparked hostility from the convent's neighbours:

“Nae Mateescu always let his pigs loose on the convent's lands. [Visalia's aunt] Elpidia didn't know they were his pigs when she met him walking around with his jacket on his back and his axe stuck in his belt. So she asked him to help her chase these pigs out. And he says, ‘but they are mine’. ‘Oh, really, all right, dear, that's all right then’. When he heard her talking so nicely to him, his meanness was calmed, because she thought he meant to attack her with his axe because she had dared try to get him out. And slowly, they became friends. The nuns would borrow wine barrels from him, and other implements” (Visalia, pers. comm.).

The fact that some of the nuns, like Visalia's aunts, had local connections eventually led to inequalities within the convent. The nun community was originally quite loosely organised (according to the idiorhythmic pattern<sup>28</sup>). Groups of nuns lived in separate households, growing their own food and eating separately. Over time, those with families in the area began to prosper, bringing hay and animals from home. Tensions between richer and poorer nuns led to efforts by the diocese to introduce a more tightly controlled community life (*viata de obste*). However, the nuns resisted “they would come together for a month or two and then separate again: they just didn't like eating from the common pot!” (Visalia, pers. comm.).

In the early 1920's, an energetic abbess gave the nuns a stark choice: either accept the new rules, or leave the convent and face excommunication. This led to open rebellion, and about 25 of the wealthier nuns (Visalia's aunts among them) moved into the village with their belongings. Eventually, most of them relented and returned, regretfully giving up “all their food, flour, oil, for which they had worked hard, and their animals, which they loved” (Visalia, pers. comm.). A few nuns, who

refused to return, settled permanently in Lower Romani, and the local priest (my great-grandfather) gave them shelter. They continued to dress in habit and made a small income from weaving rugs. Eventually, the family moved away and the house was sold. When they became homeless, the nuns returned to the convent and the abbess, after many objections, took them in.

Interestingly, Visalia speaks of the loss of her aunts' personal assets in terms reminiscent of peasants' stories about the communist collectivisation: "since the nun 'obstea' (community with pooled resources) was formed, it was hard for those who had to give up everything they had. When they lived 'la particular' [independently] it was better"—in common speech, when people refer to 'la particular' (in a regime of private ownership) it is opposed to 'la stat' (in a regime of state ownership).

"When we had to go to communal life, it was hard to feed, to clothe so many people. Communal life was very exacting, because you had little control over your life. The abbess gave us obedience tasks every day, decided how we were to dress (with thick hats and robes even in the summer heat) and controlled what we ate" (Visalia pers. comm.).

Thus, the expulsion of Greek monks and loss of monastic estates forced the Church to reconfigure its role vis-à-vis the state. This was done through a new emphasis on the Church's links with the Nation as a symbolic entity. The loss of prestige and economic assets also led to a new focus on charity work, and to greater involvement with the lay community. Nuns were considered more suited to these roles than monks and, while in the past they had been a tiny minority, now they became the majority of the monastic population. Although the nuns may be thought of as more vulnerable and less capable of imposing their authority than monks, the nuns at Horezu proved themselves energetic and independent minded (e.g. rebelling against the diocese, or shooting trespassers in the legs with salt pellets). As we shall see in chapter 3, this strength and enterprise continued to be an important characteristic of the nun community at Horezu.

## Conclusion

Over the monastery/convent's history, the documents mark a trend towards a progressive expropriation of its assets by successive state regimes. Throughout its 300-year existence, Horezu has been a high profile monastic establishment, an impor-

tant asset to both the Church and the state. Yet, the reasons for its importance have changed over time, as the monastic establishment adapted to political, economic and social contingencies, finding new roles for itself after each change of political regime, and each expropriation. As we have seen in this chapter, from its foundation, in 1690, until the seizure of monastic estates in 1865, Horezu's power derived first from cultural activities, and later from its economic wealth in land, pawns and gold. After the seizure of most of its lands and the replacement of monks with nuns, Horezu became once again important because of the charities it opened under the patronage of Romania's Queen Marie, who took a special interest in the convent.

From the point of view of the state, after the seizure of estates, the importance of the convent derived from its role as a repository for historical relics and an important artistic and historical monument linked to the Nation's history. Continuing the expropriation trend, religious valuables and document archives were gradually removed to Bucharest (*Veselia pers. comm.*). Eventually, the convent retained only assets that were relatively inalienable—its architectural, aesthetic and historical value. As we shall see, these assets enabled it to survive two more transitions, that to socialism and that to post-socialism. These resources were used mainly in cultivating relations with political elites and securing their patronage.

Horezu's relations with the surrounding villages are less easy to define. It seems that the monastery has tended to remain somewhat aloof from the community, although there usually existed a certain amount of involvement (the schools run by the monks, the nuns' charity projects and informal links with their families). However, such involvement in the community was far from equal to that of Catholic monastic orders (Bax 1985). The formal distance between the monastic institution and the local community seems to have always been maintained—often by practices on both sides.

The documents suggest that, in its lawsuits, Romani did not target the monastery more than other entities, whether feudal landlords or neighbouring villages. Perhaps due to its early and protracted court case with the boyar Chiruciubasa and his family, Romani seems to have developed into a particularly litigious village. No neighbouring community equalled it in the number of lawsuits, the willingness to appeal judgements all the way to the highest court, or the adeptness in using the system to its advantage. However, litigation seems to have been class-blind, and dictated by the economic interests of the moment (as the saga of its lawsuits against Ramesti suggests).

Such interests seem to have been linked to changing patterns in ownership arrangements, from communal land ownership, to individual. We have seen how the village *obstea* disintegrated under the pressures of increasing cash taxation, but the fact that it has not fully disappeared even in the present, suggests its usefulness in managing certain kinds of property, particularly forests and pastures (indeed, the *Ocolul*, mentioned in chapter 1 is also a kind of *obste*, although answering to state rather than local interests).

The case of the nuns' rebellion highlights the fact that, in a broad sense, both the monastic community (which is also called *obste*) and the village one have been shaped by tensions between communal and individual kinds of property, between the ethos of unity and the centripetal forces of divergent individual interests. In Orthodox monastic communities, such tensions have been a constant feature (Hasluck 1924). In the village community, they were re-introduced by socialism, and became once again a key area of concern with this regime's demise.





Romanian boyar (19<sup>th</sup> century).



A village school taught by monks (19<sup>th</sup> century).



Bucharest during the Phanariote period. Note the dromedary in the left corner.



Phanariote prince Mavrogheni who ruled between 1786-9, travelling in a chariot drawn by deer.





*Einzug des Soliman Pascha in Bukarest.*

Soliman Pasha in Bucharest, 1848.



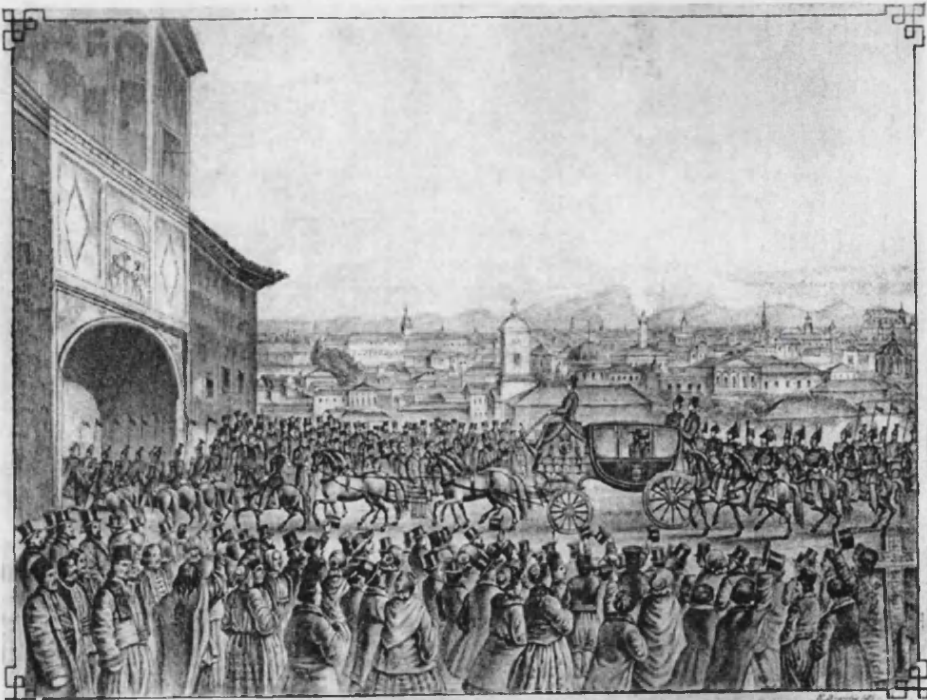
The assembly (*divanul ad hoc*) that elected Cuza as the Prince of Wallachia (1852). Note the prominence of higher clergy.



DEDICATA PRE SPIINȚII SELE ARHIEPULUI JERONIM VICARIUL EMINENȚEI SELE PRIMATULUI ROMÂNIEI.  
 Sergeiul Sf. Dumitrie Bassarabov, Patronul (Capitalii) României.

*Concepțiunea, executiunea și editarea acestui opuscul sunt datorate lui J. J. Bassarabov, care a avut în vedere să facă să se știe în toate părțile țării că în ziua de 14 Iunie 1864 s-a săvârșit în București o sărbătoare foarte frumoasă și interesantă, care a avut în vedere să se săvârșească în onoarea Sf. Dumitrie, patronului țării noastre. Acest opuscul este destinat să se distribuie în toate părțile țării, ca să se știe în toate locurile că în ziua de 14 Iunie 1864 s-a săvârșit în București o sărbătoare foarte frumoasă și interesantă, care a avut în vedere să se săvârșească în onoarea Sf. Dumitrie, patronului țării noastre.*

A convoy carrying St. Dumitru's relics through the countryside, to bring rain (19<sup>th</sup> century).



DEDİKATÛ ONOR D. D. DEPATÛTARLI KAPITALI BUKÛREȘTI K. A. POSSETTI.

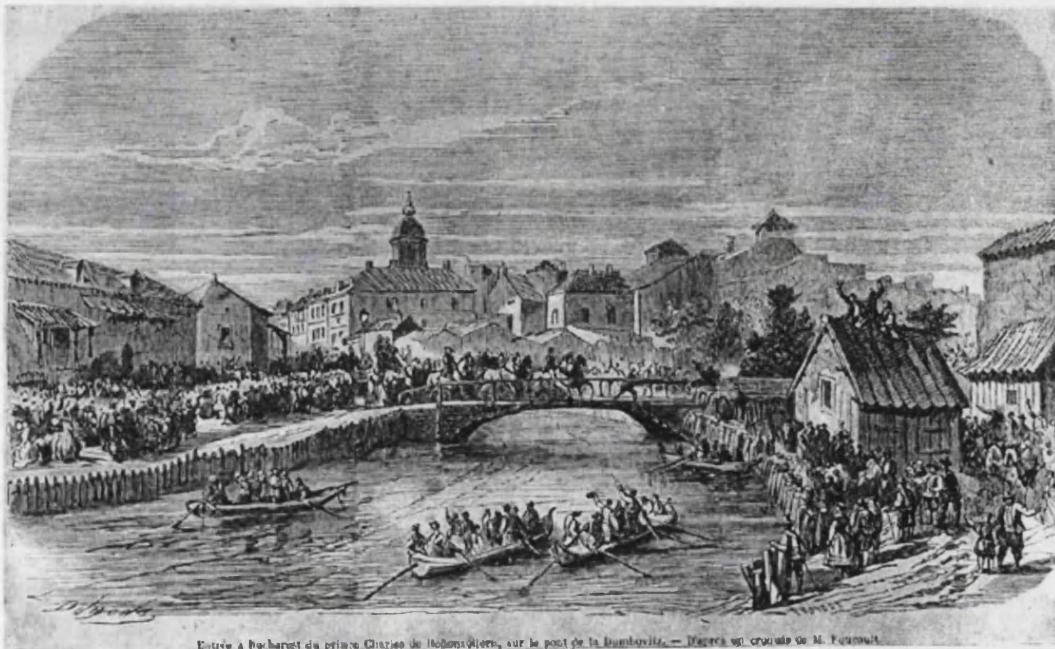
*Asupra concepțiunii, executiunii și editării acestui opuscul sunt datorate lui K. A. Possetti, care a avut în vedere să facă să se știe în toate părțile țării că în ziua de 14 Iunie 1864 s-a săvârșit în București o sărbătoare foarte frumoasă și interesantă, care a avut în vedere să se săvârșească în onoarea Sf. Dumitrie, patronului țării noastre.*

Prince Cuza's triumphal entry to the Bucharest Metropolitanate, in 1860, to open the Chamber of Deputies. In 1864, he would introduce his 'secularisation' reform, seizing monastic estates and expelling Greek monks.

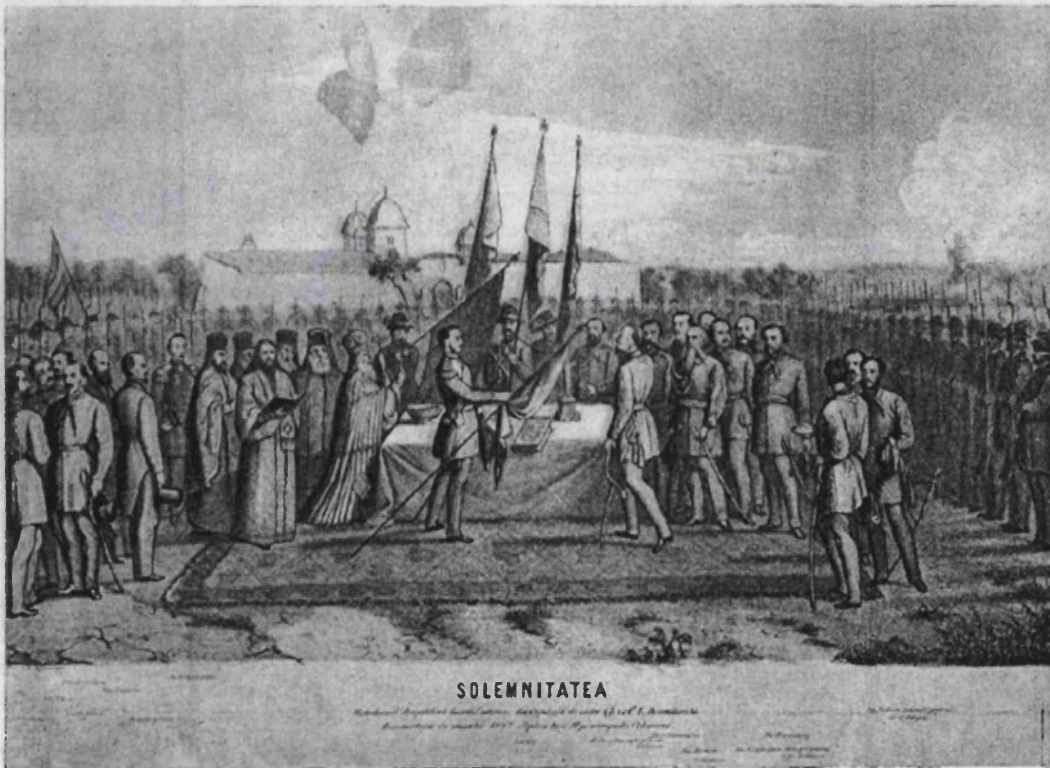




**The carriage of King Carol I of Hohenzollern's carriage (drawn by eight horses), passing through the countryside.**



**King Carol I's entry into Bucharest (1866).**



King Carol I receiving honours from the citizens' guard. Note the highly visible role of higher clergy in such state rituals.



Zur Orientreise des Kronprinzen-Paares: Der Ball im Bukarester National-Theater.

A fashionable ball in 1884—the aristocratic ladies are wearing folk costumes.





**Queen Marie and the princesses in the traditional dress of the Romani area.**



**The Prime Minister I. G. Duca's son and Princess Ileana (in folk costume), with Mother Visalia's aunt, at Horezu convent (1920's).**



**Nuns in the main Horezu church. Note the ostrich eggs hanging from the chandelier—rarities ordered by Brancoveanu at great expense (1920's).**



**Mother Visalia (left) and her two aunts who raised her in the convent (1930's).**



## CHAPTER 3

### NUNS AND THE NOMENKLATURA

At 6 o'clock on a cold dark winter morning, I found myself standing in a queue in front of the American Embassy, with Cristina and Elena, two of Horezu Convent's brightest and most able young nuns. They had left against the abbess's order, complaining that greed and political ambitions overshadowed spiritual concerns in the life of the convent. Now, with the help of a rival church faction, they were planning to start an authentically Orthodox Convent in Upstate New York. Their disobedience to the abbess had in fact augmented their position within the Church, opening up new possibilities for advancement. They achieved this by manipulating power struggles between rival factions at the diocese and metropolitanate.

My original research hypotheses seemed to have been oddly scrambled. I had expected to find political life concentrated mainly outside the convent gates, and spiritual life inside. Now, finding myself deeply embroiled in a web of intrigue involving the abbess of Horezu, the Bishop of Valcea, the Metropolitan of Craiova, and a rivalry between the Orthodox Church of Romania and the Romanian Orthodox Church in the United States, I reflected that the reverse was probably closer to the truth. The convent seemed to be a hub of political activity. It enjoyed privileged access to powerful politicians, diplomats and entrepreneurs who frequently visited it and arranged for generous donations. "This convent is dedicated to VIP political visits" (*aceasta e o manastire de protocol*), young nuns often remarked. The ironic phrase '*manastire de protocol*' invoked memories of the socialist era's staged 'official visits' of members of the Party elite. "Too much catering to VIP guests and too little monastic life", complained Cristina and Elena, who had been in charge of looking after the VIP guests. "We don't even have time to pray any more, between attending to guests".

I had chosen Horezu as a research site because politicians and clerics had made this particular convent a stage upon which the reconfiguration of the Church's image and relations with the state would be publicly performed. This was apparent from the guest list for the 1992 sanctification of prince Brancoveanu, the convent's founder, and from fairly regular subsequent visits by politicians. As I later discovered, politics had been an important part of the life of the nuns of Horezu throughout

the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the convent's relations with some of the current political elite members stretched back in time to the socialist period, when these politicians and entrepreneurs had belonged to the communist Party elite.

The alliance between the Church and former members of the communist nomenklatura may seem counter-intuitive, but from the onset of socialism, there had been strong reasons to cultivate a positive relation with the Party. The Romanian Orthodox Church is a self-run (autocephalous) ethno-national church which has been structurally and economically dependent on the state since the seizure of most of its economic assets in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, rather than follow other denominations into illegality (or semi-legality), church leaders agreed to endorse the socialist government in exchange for financial support, freedom to continue to operate, and the status of State Church. The 1948 constitution abolished church autonomy from the state, placing the institution under the authority of the department of Cults. Absolute dependence on state funds meant that all religious personnel and clergy became effectively state employees. The government thus gained the power to influence clerical appointments, and candidates sympathetic to the regime were quickly promoted into key leadership positions. Such was Patriarch Justinian Marina, appointed in 1948, who had been an ordinary priest in Ramnicu Valcea only a few years previously. According to rumour, he was a personal friend of Gheorghiu Dej (the first communist president of Romania).

This Patriarch produced twelve volumes of essays and speeches arguing the fundamental compatibility of communist doctrine and Orthodox theology (Gillet 2001: 37). He blended Marxist Leninist social analysis and Orthodox theology into a doctrine called Social Discipleship, which spelled out the role of the Church within the new state as one of assisting the revolutionary communist party in its progressive social reforms (*ibid*). Oleg Kharkhordin (1998, 1999) argues that, in developing the model of the soviets (collectives), Russian communists borrowed some of the technologies of self and power used in Orthodox coenobitic monasticism. These included public confession (the injunction to bear witness against oneself), and 'circular surveillance'—a technique that produced collective discipline through the monks' duty to constantly observe and admonish their brethren so as to improve their behaviour. Such techniques were also used in Romania, and many of my informants, both nuns and former communists (many of whom became devoutly Orthodox in the wake of socialism) remarked on the similarity between the utopian visions of Orthodoxy and

communism (while the basic incompatibility of atheism and Christianity was allowed to fade into the background). Thus, to some extent, Orthodoxy and communism spoke a common language concerning ethical behaviour and the means of transforming the individual into a moral person. As we shall see, nuns intuitively used such common points to gain the trust of communist authorities.

The concessions to the communist regime were successful in preventing anti-religious drives on the scale of those in other socialist states. They did mean however, that stark compromises were imposed upon the Church. Monastic establishments were most seriously affected by these. The communists saw these institutions in a negative light for three reasons. First, they were expensive to maintain, and monks and nuns would be more useful if they were reabsorbed into the labour force. Second, they were potential sites of resistance. Since monks and nuns enjoyed strong legitimacy in the eyes of the faithful who saw them as spiritually closer to God than all other clerics, they were in a position to challenge the actions of higher clergy, whom the government now sought to control. In the 1930's, monks had indeed initiated charismatic movements of renewal within the church (Galeriu 1997), and such movements often revealed right-wing political sympathies. These monks were arrested by the new authorities and sent to labour camps and prisons. Finally, by operating charities, monastic establishments competed with the government, challenging its monopoly of the distribution of services and resources to the population. Hence, all church charities were closed soon after the communist take-over, and in 1960 sweeping reforms of monastic establishments were introduced, expelling most monks and nuns between the ages of 18 and 55.

A number of trends affecting present-day life at Horezu are, arguably, consequences of this reform. The first was the polarisation of the convent population between elderly nuns, in their 70's and 80's, and young nuns (between 18 and 35). The fact that there had been practically no monastic recruitment between 1960 and the mid-1980's meant that middle-aged nuns were scarce. As a result, the apprenticeship system, which is, theoretically, the backbone of the monastic system, had been all but abandoned. Traditionally, this system of apprenticeship, whereby each novice was 'adopted' and trained by a senior sponsor, establishing family-like connections and obligations, helped to create continuity in the transmission of knowledge, as well as integration across age barriers in monastic communities. The second trend was a loss of continuity and close links between generations—now, elderly nuns were too frail to

undertake the training of novices, and the few middle-aged ones were fully occupied by administrative positions they held within the convent. Most young nuns felt no obligation to look after the elderly nuns who did not have their own apprentices. As Visalia put it, “the young nuns now stick together and behave as if they were in a boarding school. In our day we were a family” (Visalia pers. comm.). The breakdown of apprenticeship impaired the transmission of knowledge, both regarding the history of the convent and about monastic practice itself.

Third, as a consequence of the reform, monastic populations were reshuffled, severing any previous links with people from the local area. At present, the convent’s population is largely drawn from other regions of the country, and its leadership dominated by nuns originally from Transylvania. There is almost no recruitment from the local area, and as a result the few elderly nuns of local origin feel marginalized. “Our local women go [to convents] far away, and the Transylvanians come over here, because here life is easy, there’s much laziness and food”, complained Mother Visalia, 83, one of the last remaining nuns of local origin.

Finally, the convent leadership seems to have retained priorities that had been established during the socialist period. Highest among these was the continued work on improving the convent’s buildings and especially the cleaning and restoration of the frescoes inside the main church. This restoration work had become a priority during socialist times because of the high value that regime placed upon national history and heritage (Verdery 1991a). As we shall see, the convent had continued to function (albeit with reduced personnel) because its leadership shrewdly stressed the importance of the convent as a monument, and recast themselves in the role of its guardians. Continuing to see herself as responsible for the upkeep of the historical monument, the abbess explained her efforts to cultivate close relations with important political and economic figures as a selfless action, necessary in order to secure enough donations to complete the restoration project. Contrastingly, no effort was made to reopen charity projects closed by the communists.

This paper examines the strategies used by nuns in successfully steering a course through two transitions—the first to socialism and the second, after 1990, away from it and into the post-socialist period. The convent world is described by nuns as being (at least theoretically) in opposition to the lay world. Nuns say that they are constantly striving for greater insulation, to keep the world from being allowed “to come into the convent” (Elizabeta, pers. comm.). Yet, as also shown in

chapter 2, political and economic contingencies have made it impossible for nuns to remain aloof. In practice, the boundaries between the convent and the world are porous and shifting, allowing the two worlds to interpenetrate in complex ways.

## The Communist Takeover

On an August afternoon in 1944, the 25-year old Mother Visalia was driving a horse cart on the main road when she met a Russian army column. Frightened by the tanks, the horses ran amok and she jumped down to cover their heads with her robes. The Russian convoy seized all of the convent's hay, and the nuns had to sell all their cattle that autumn, as there was nothing left to feed them. Visalia's stories of this period circle around the theme of the difficulty of negotiating everyday tasks in the treacherous, brutal and uncertain conditions of the war and its aftermath. In addition to their own difficulties, the nuns were confronted with the arrival of various groups of refugees who were, somewhat reluctantly, offered shelter. Among these was a group of nuns from USSR-occupied Bassarabia (now part of Moldova republic), and a group of Catholic nuns, eventually expelled by the communists.

Horezu nuns first came into contact with the communist authorities through searches and arrests. Between 1945 and 1961, as the Party consolidated its power, monasteries and convents were suspected of harbouring 'enemies of the state' such as resistance fighters who had retreated to the mountains, where many of these establishments were located. One of the most exhaustive searches took place a week after Easter in 1946, in the middle of an important feast (*Izvorul Tamaduirii*) when water is blessed and distributed to the faithful<sup>29</sup>. A week earlier, two resistance fighters had attended midnight mass at the nearby Bistrita convent and one of them collapsed, exhausted and ill. The nuns had to call in a doctor and the authorities were informed. Thereafter, roads were blocked and all convents in the area were locked and searched. Anyone overheard speaking of this was interrogated. Mother Visalia, who was convent cashier and had been at the diocese in Valcea during this search, was arrested and interrogated for an entire night, when a passer-by overheard her in the street, discussing the search with two acquaintances.

In her early contacts with the socialist authorities, Visalia says she drew on her experience of representing the convent in her various official appointments—she had worked as convent secretary and guide to visitors. Her strategy was to relate to inter-

rogators as fellow-bureaucrats, stressing the similarity between her position and duties to her institution, the convent, and theirs within their institutions. In the year of her first arrest she also had a confrontation with a group of communist leaders who were visiting the convent, taking them to task when they refused to comply with proper procedures.

“One time, in 1946, we had a visit from four men from the Central Committee [of the Communist Party]—some said later that Salajan (one of the Communist leaders) was among them—I don’t know who he was, I just know him by name. I was historical guide, and we had strict orders from the Party to keep records of the identity of all visitors. I said to the guests, please come to the office to present your identity cards and give us the car registration number, but they said, ‘later, first talk with us for a bit’” (Veselia pers. comm.).

“What do you want to talk about, we have orders to check your identity!” she countered. When the visitors saw a door and asked if it was a secret gate into the convent or a secret room, she replied:

“It’s no secret, it was made so the nuns can go out to work in the fields without passing through the kitchen, because they kept grabbing food on their way out and there wouldn’t be enough food left for the meals... and what business is it of yours? Or are you spies—because I know from the Bible that’s how spies behave—or are you interested in something-or-other with young nuns? You don’t want to tell us who you are, but I’ll tell you what I think! *Remember that, because how do I know what are your intentions? If one of you sneaks away and goes into the convent’s offices, or even puts a bomb somewhere? You could be terrorists! Remember I told you this*” (Veselia pers. comm.).

This thrust of argument shrewdly turns official rhetoric about the threat of terrorists against the officials themselves, holding them to account.

“When they went back to see the Bishop, they told him ‘that little nun at Horezu grilled us so hard that we didn’t know how to get away sooner!’ With people like this you have to be strong. You see, then (in 1946) the communists had just come to power, and right away they came to the convents to stick their nose in our business” (Visalia, pers. comm.).

Visalia retells the encounter ironically, only displaying animosity only when she mentions how the visitors’ inquiries concerning the nuns and especially herself became indiscreet and intrusive:

“I started to explain to them the history, and they’d interrupt to ask me, ‘are there many young girls here in the convent? Why did you join, did you have a deception in love?’ I got angry: ‘are you here to visit the convent or to spy on us? And as for my supposed deception in love, I’ve been here since I was three. We have no youth or old age here, we are all for one and one for all” (Visalia, pers. comm.).

At this point, she counter-attacked by bringing up religion, although she did not see this as a serious attempt to convert them, but rather as a way of putting them in their place:

“Then I started to tell them about the saints painted on the walls: ‘see this saint how black he is? He is from Africa, he’s an Indian. He was the son of an emperor, but went to join the monastery. Why don’t you join a monastery too? As you ask why we joined... you can too if you leave your sinful life behind! I was bullying them with religion and they were passionate communists!” (ib id).

Throughout interviews with her and other nuns, I was struck by the haughty self-confidence displayed in dealing with and speaking of outsiders, however powerful or important. This sense of security seemed to be linked to their membership in the monastic collective, a constant reminder that, by taking their vows they had, in a real sense, become extra-ordinary people, and stepped outside the ordinary existence—to which all others were still bound. On the nuns’ territory outsiders, even communists were expected to submit to the order of the convent. So secure was this order felt to be, that the collapse of this institutional protection and nuns’ expulsion from convents caused acute and enduring feelings of disbelief, trauma, injustice and rebellion. Referring to her continuing exile from the convent, Visalia, who had been expelled along with most nuns in 1962, said:

“When I left the convent, I felt half of our life evaporated. I felt emptied of something sacred. My parents brought me as a *gift to the convent*, since I was three years old, I did not know the life of the world. It’s a sin on the soul of Gabriela [the abbess at the time] to force me to live in the world. Don’t you see, we have lapsed into laxity, with our behaviour and our thoughts... Still, I would not return now. I have got used to being independent”.

## **Internal Power Struggles and External Authorities**

After the war (WW2), Visalia had been in a favourable position to become abbess. Members of her family (aunts and grandmother) had been part of the convent community since the turn of the century, and her aunt had become abbess for a brief period. Visalia herself held various official appointments within the convent and, given the scarcity of such positions, this experience marked her out as being in line for advancement. Furthermore, she was popular with the nuns from the area, who made up the greater part of the community, and could expect to be eventually selected as a leader (the selection of an abbess is subject to agreement between the community and the bishop).

Her advancement was, however, suddenly checked when a rival for the leadership, Mother Gabriela, became abbess in 1951, and allegedly filed a 'denunciation' against Visalia with the communist authorities, requesting her arrest. In contrast to Visalia, Gabriela was a Transylvanian who had come to Horezu to teach at the theological school that operated there until 1944. She was ambitious, well-educated (having obtained a degree in Economics prior to entering the convent), and proud of her heritage (her father, she told me proudly, was 'a church builder with studies in Budapest'). It seems Visalia and Gabriela were initially drawn to each other by a common passion for knowledge, but Visalia claims that after she had followed her aunt as abbess, Gabriela may have felt threatened by her. She claims to have overheard Gabriela ask another nun: "How do we unhinge Visalia from here?" and soon after Visalia was offered a place at a theological seminary for nuns in another town, but, fearing she would not be allowed to come back to Horezu, she refused.

Tensions between the two nuns surfaced one evening in a public argument. All nuns had been called out to help store away a large transport of potatoes for the winter, but Visalia's apprentice had dislocated her ankle and could not work. Gabriela complained the girl was acting like a lady and threatened to remove her from Visalia's guidance and give her "a real monastic training". Visalia, who saw the girl as a daughter, took her side: "she is doing more than she can, really, and we have raised her with great hardship, it's hard to take care of a child in the convent, so don't get upset". Next day, Visalia believes Gabriela went to the local branch of the secret po-



lice and made a statement accusing her of being in secret contact with resistance fighters and requesting her arrest.

At the police station, the officer told Visalia, “you have been denounced”, and she replied, “I think I know what this is about, but it shouldn’t have reached you, it’s an internal Church matter”. Thus, she immediately introduced the argument that her membership within the Church meant she was first subject to discipline through the proper channels within her own institution rather than the secular authorities, whose jurisdiction over her she called into question.

“Then he read me the denunciation: ‘Comrade Commandant, in our institution is hiding Visalia I., a so-called nun, who engages in propaganda against the regime, and is inciting young women against the government. I ask you to strip her of her monastic robes and arrest her because she is an undesirable element’ (Visalia pers. comm.).

The language of the accusation suggests it may have been made by a nun, because of the mention that Visalia be stripped of her robes before being prosecuted. Visalia continues: “when he said, ‘so-called nun’, I said, ‘what do you mean?’, and he gave me the paper to read for myself”. She replied:

“Please don’t be angry, but I am being framed (*eu sunt turnata*)! I’ve worked in the convent’s offices and I know the handwriting of all the nuns, and this is the writing of a man!’ Then the officer said the denunciation claimed I came from a ‘great family’” [*neam mare*, meaning a wealthy family, a background which would have been enough to justify arrest as an enemy of the state]. Not a great family, I said, a large family, but we are all peasants! I know who made this denunciation’, I said, ‘but it shouldn’t have reached you. *Like you, I have taken a vow of allegiance to my institution, and I am under its jurisdiction first. I am to be judged by them, we have our own courts of judgement, they should not have turned me in to you. After I said that to him, he asked if he could kiss my hand* [the customary gesture of respect towards monastics or clerics]. *Why kiss my hand, I said? I am here as a condemned person, aren’t you going to arrest me?*” (Visalia pers. comm.)

This exchange suggests that nuns and state authorities shared certain fundamental assumptions about what constituted legitimate authority. Visalia points out to the commissar that their positions in their respective institutions, Church and Party, are similar: having taken a vow of allegiance, each is bound to obey institutional rules and subject to internal disciplinary measures in the first instance. She frames the church

and Party as parallel bodies by virtue of their being institutional structures with their own procedural rules. However, when he cursed the Patriarch, she cautioned him:

“Don’t get angry, but we’re an Orthodox country, we’re all Orthodox, you as well! Didn’t you fill in your forms when you got your job? There’s a slot on the form where you have to declare your religion. Because you’re neither Catholic, nor Islamic, nor Adventist or whatever, you are of Orthodox religion, you can’t just throw it off, because the Patriarch is the leader of us all!” (Visalia pers. comm.).

Thus, she implies that Church authority is higher than that of the party (the Patriarch is the leader of us all). Orthodoxy is represented by her as a corporate form of membership, acquired by all Romanians through baptism, which is virtually universal, even among Party members. Instead of challenging this contention, the commissar recognises the Church’s legitimacy by assuming a layman’s respectful attitude towards a religious, and asking to kiss her hand. The matter ended there, and Visalia remained in the convent until the expulsion.

## **Strategies of Coping with Expulsion**

Sixteen years after the onset of socialism, in 1945, the largest portion of the monastic population was expelled. Although half-expecting it, convents continued to receive recruits until the last moment, hoping the government would relent. Mother Domnina, now assistant to the bishop, remembers how nuns at her convent hid new recruits and openly mocked state inspectors sent to her convent. She herself threatened to drown one inspector when, while she was ferrying him over a lake in a boat, he asked whether she had joined the convent because of a deception in love, and whether she would not like to put on a red dress and be normal.

When expulsion became inevitable, nuns began to look for loopholes in the legislation. Some obtained doctors’ certificates that they were mentally ill. Others, like Visalia, wrote to the Bishop and Patriarch asking to be given jobs as care-takers of hermitages (as only nuns appointed to official positions were allowed to stay). Their letters remained unanswered: better-connected nuns obtained these jobs. Domnina was among these, and her uncle, later the Bishop of Valcea, took her as his personal secretary. When her pleas within the church failed, Visalia turned for help to a sympathetic member of the Party bureaucracy: “I asked engineer Dimitriu, the director of the convent’s restoration project to intervene on our behalf to the Valcea mu-

seum administration (to which Horezu, classified as a monument, was now attached) to let us stay at the Troian hermitage, but someone else had got the job”.

Next, Visalia turned to her family for help, but soon after joining her bachelor brother in Bucharest, she left again, resenting his treatment of her:

“He was always rude and critical towards me, and criticised my cooking, so I said, ‘no, I am not putting up with this!’ I don’t know how women put up with abusive husbands; if that were me, I would rather kill him and then turn myself in” (Veselia pers. comm.).

She then returned to Horezu and together with other expelled nuns, bought a house in the village. There, she was joined by her friend from the convent, Varvara and several other nuns, also looking for a refuge. One of them was the secretary of the former bishop, who had fallen in disgrace and been replaced by Domnina’s uncle, the current bishop Gherasim (bishops are normally appointed for life, but bishop Iosif was not told of his demotion until it was an accomplished fact). Disheartened, his secretary “came to Horezu to die”. Of this tiny informal community, Visalia is the last surviving member. Ironically, they survived largely due to the help of Party cadres who gave them jobs and protection, rather than with assistance from the convent.

## **Horezu as a Socialist Estate**

Although nuns who remained in the convent were allowed to wear the habit and continue with religious practice, from the state’s point of view they were now defined as workers, and thus subject to the secular authorities just like everyone else. While other convents of no historical value were closed down, its national heritage value ensured Horezu’s survival. Ten or so jobs allotted by the authorities for the upkeep of the grounds (museum guide, church guide, librarian, administrator, secretary, and so forth). Each was issued with an employment book (*carte de munca*, a document which records, for official purposes, one’s work history) and, upon reaching retirement age, state pensions were paid in to the convent to cover their room and board. However, the convent had no income apart from state money, since most of its remaining lands were taken over by the local council, and its weaving atelier closed—the machines being given to the local crafts cooperative.

Since Church institutional protection had proved ineffectual, abbess Gabriela seems to have relied for her remarkable staying power (she retained her position for

almost 30 years) on the support of a closely-knit community bound by regional ties, and on cultivating favourable relations with the communist authorities. Horezu's prominence as a historical and artistic monument was a useful symbolic asset, and relations with scholars who could spread the convent's fame were actively cultivated. When I met Mother Gabriela she had, unfortunately, lost most of her memory, so I could not ask her about these events. However, she was still an extraordinary personality—witty, resolute and extremely astute.

As abbess, Gabriela had the power to choose which nuns could stay in the convent, and she chose mostly nuns from her own native area, Southern Transylvania. Thus, she used the expulsion to effectively eliminate the rival faction of nuns from the local area. Regional identities have been and continue to be an important element in determining loyalties within the convent, with nuns from different regions forming closely-knit groups that sometimes come into conflict with each other. As Visalia (pers. comm.) remarked, “each person cares first about her own people (*neam*)”. Later abbesses were elected from among Gabriela's apprentices, and continued the practice of promoting Transylvanian nuns to positions of leadership, and even employing their own family to do the more lucrative jobs at the convent. For instance, Gabriela brought her nephew to work on a restoration project, and her apprentice, Paula, later brought her brother in law as gatekeeper, and appointed a mentally disabled niece as guide to the museum visitors.

It is difficult to know for certain what happened between Visalia and Gabriela, but there is additional evidence that communist authorities were sometimes used to eliminate members of the monastic community who were considered undesirable by the leadership. Thus, during the abbotship of Gabriela's apprentice, Partenia, the priest-monk of the convent, Gherontie, was also allegedly denounced to the authorities and the diocese, and expelled as a result. The charges were somewhat nebulous, including both insinuations of political resistance, allegations of an affair with a nun, and suggestions that black magic was involved, but it seems that Gherontie, a Moldavian, had been the centre of a rival faction of Moldavian nuns, seen to threaten the authority of the Transylvanians.

After Ceausescu's ascent to power in 1965, funds were allocated for the restoration of historical monuments<sup>30</sup>, and Horezu was turned into a construction site for almost ten years. Floors and pavements were dug up in order to bring in electricity, water and plumbing (although there were rumours the communists were really look-

ing for gold) and more recent alterations to the original buildings were torn down, in order to make Horezu a showcase of authentic national heritage. This large-scale restoration project was led by a head engineer, whose powers eclipsed those of the abbess. For instance, he was able, against the abbess' wishes, to employ expelled former nuns such as Visalia. The abbess retaliated by withholding papers that proved Visalia's former employment by the convent:

“Gabriela did not succeed in driving me away from here, but, out of spite, she refused to give me the documents proving that I had been employed by the convent as secretary for eight years (prior to expulsion). She said there weren't any records. So I lost those years and got only a small pension” (Visalia pers. comm.).

Thus, although relations with Party elites were originally frosty and confrontational, eventually both the nuns who remained within the convent and those expelled came to depend more and more on the protection of friendly officials. Although Visalia did not succeed in staying inside the convent, the protection of the engineer enabled her to continue to work there—the next best option—and she counted this as a victory against the persecutions of Gabriela. She had given up the idea of moving away because she felt that, since the convent had been her home since childhood, it was her *right* to continue living there. To allow herself to be driven away by a ‘new-comer’ (Gabriela), would have meant surrender.

Although Visalia had occasional unpleasant experiences with socialist bureaucrats, one of whom once demanded sexual favours in exchange for a rations card, she stresses her debt of gratitude to the head engineer of the restoration project. When speaking to me of the communists, she was unexpectedly positive: “they brought on a lot of improvements here, built drains, roads. The only problem was that they were so bad about religion...”. Her sympathetic attitude seems due to the fact that generally she tended to have positive relationships with people in positions of authority, and she thinks this was so because she treated them just as she would have treated hierarchical superiors within the Church, being polite, straightforward and showing respect for their authority. Her friendship with the engineer's family earned her a promotion:

“When I was hired in constructions, in 1969, the engineer said, come on, we'll put you in charge of receiving and distributing materials [to the work brigades]. But when I saw how much was being stolen, that people went home with tools, cement, I said, no, I can't take the

risk of having to pay for these things out of my own salary, so I asked to be demoted to worker, loading and unloading materials” (Visalia pers. comm.).

Whenever possible, the engineer sought to protect her, by giving her easier jobs that made use of her social skills: “often they sent me up in the convent buildings, because all the time they had visits of official delegations from the Historical Monuments, and I arranged for them places to sleep, cooked and served them” (these were the ‘*protocol*’ visits). Thus, although expelled from the convent, and although the abbess did not want her there, she remained active in the life of the convent and was even placed in charge of attending to VIP Party guests.

In contrast to the sense of protection provided by the party, the Church appears as a hostile agent in her account. But this was mainly due to personal tensions between herself and her rival, Gabriela. In speaking of her suffering, Visalia’s bitterness was directed mainly against the Church, which she felt had failed to protect her: “I’m fed up, dear, I’m sick of ‘Church faces’, I’m fed up because they’ve harassed and upset me all my life” (pers. comm.). The animosity between herself and Gabriela remained unabated even when nuns were allowed to return to the convent, and she felt pressured to do so as well.

“The nuns kept nagging at me that Varvara wanted to return and I was preventing her. I don’t like it in the convent any more, but anyway, one time I decided to move back. A bishop from another diocese [in Moldavia] had heard about us, and told Mother Gabriela: ‘there are two old hags out there in the village, take them in’. And Gabriela had no choice but to say yes. But I took some time to make up my mind, and when we finally went, Gabriela said, ‘no, sister, it’s not possible, I can’t let you move back’. If she didn’t want, she didn’t want. So we came with all the luggage back to our house” (Visalia pers. comm.).

Horezu convent was an estate in Weber’s sense of “a proprietor of goods and prerogatives important to the state” (Weber 1946: 81). Its value during socialism was mainly cultural and symbolic, but the Ceausescu government made effective use of cultural politics, both in order to bolster internal ideological control, and to improve Romania’s image abroad (Verdery 1991). Through the restoration project, the state was able to interfere in the administration of this estate more than any previous state regime had. The fact that Horezu became a combined convent and construction site produced two consequences. The first was that the convent received frequent visits

from political elites, who became involved more closely with the convent because of the restoration programme. Over time, the proximity to Bucharest, the beauty of the convent's location and grounds and the hospitality of the nuns made this an increasingly popular destination for Party members in search of relaxation. This guest clientele included high government officials, some of whom I met during my stay there, as they continued a life-long habit of retreating to the convent for a few weeks in the summer. Indebted to the nuns for their hospitality, these political friends became useful contacts within the government.

The second consequence was that the economic activities linked to the reconstruction forged links between the convent and other estates of production (state-run enterprises) in the area, which supplied materials. In this context, the abbess' position, as the leader of the institution, could be seen as roughly equivalent to those of other enterprise directors, and enduring relations were forged on this basis. As Verdery explains (1996: 20-6) the socialist state had sought to monopolise the distribution of all resources, but this system soon began to break down, as informal practices became widespread. Lower-tier managers and bureaucrats hoarded scarce materials and began to negotiate directly with each other, bartering them for things they needed. As official records of production became increasingly divergent from realities on the ground, enterprises became more akin to personal fiefdoms of the directors, who formed wide-reaching informal clientelist networks. Horezu convent was also part of these networks, and relations with enterprise directors established during this period seem to have produced loyalties that persist to the present day. Thus, the father of the mayoral candidate the nuns supported in the 2000 elections was an enterprise director and long-term friend of the convent who, free of charge, provided materials to replace the convent's roof, when they could not be obtained through normal state channels. The nuns returned the favour by voting for his son against the orders of the bishop, who wished them to support his opponent, another ex-nomenklatura member with clientelist ties to the Diocese.

It is important to point out that the Bishop (who seemed to look upon the convent as an estate of the diocese) had also played his part in forging such links with the nomenklatura, by arranging for his political and economic allies to be received as special guests at Horezu. Thus, the convent became a kind of resort for the privileged elites. During my fieldwork, the bishop did not appear to be merely trying to placate

secular power, but rather conducted himself as if he himself was a full member of this elite, relating to the enterprise directors on equal terms.

Under socialism, Church prelates had not only a religious but also a direct political role. Thus, the Patriarch was also a high state dignitary, who had been a political activist before being elected to his position. As a bishop, he had served as a deputy in the Grand National Assembly, participated at Party Congresses, and was a member of Ceausescu's National Peace Committee (Turcescu & Stan 2000: 1469). Similarly, bishop Gherasim of Valcea's candidature to his position seems to have also been supported by the political authorities, who sidelined the previous bishop, although bishops are normally appointed for life.

## **The Transition to Post-Socialism**

The Orthodox Church's political ambitions and activities are often criticised. However, given this history of close relations between political and religious elites, it would be odd if Orthodox prelates were suddenly to relinquish their political partnerships, particularly when former partners are now re-emerging as important political and economic actors. Political scientists in the West and in Romania tend to assume that such connections make the church a political actor to be reckoned with. Statements such as, "the Church emerged as a powerful political actor and an uncontested source of moral strength" are common (Turcescu & Stan 2000 1467, 1471). I think this over-states the actual effectiveness of the Church as a political actor, because most of its political ambitions have remained unfulfilled in the post-socialist era. These included efforts to retain the status of State church, lobbying for a ban on homosexuality, and a demand was that higher clergy, bishops, metropolitans and the patriarch should be granted the status of *de jure* senators, a move which would create a sizeable (27 member) church faction in Parliament (Turcescu & Stan 2000).

This lack of success was partly caused by the clergy's visibly close associations with the ex-nomenklatura, which diminished their legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary people. For instance, everyone knew that the Bishop of Valcea was very close to a former Securitate commissar at the county level. "Look, here come Vladica and Vladoi", the nuns would laugh, making a play on words; Vladica is an endearing term for bishop, which shared the same root with Vladoi's name (vlad), however, the prefix 'oi', when tacked on to a noun or name, gives the effect of something ugly, ungainly,



the opposite of the prefix 'ica', which is a diminutive. In the early nineties, Vladica and Vladoi were involved in setting up the Valcea branch of the International Bank of Religions, one of the newly emerging banking institutions. The bishop lost legitimacy when this bank collapsed, swallowing the savings of many who had trusted his endorsement. To make matters worse, a reliable weekly (Ivanciuc 2000: 5) published evidence according to which the Bank was a money-laundering operation for the Ukrainian mafia.

This gave credibility to rumours of the bishop's libertine behaviour. One factory sub-director told me that on one occasion, the Bishop shocked even ex-nomenklatura directors. A party for enterprise directors from the county was being held a few days before Christmas, with the Bishop presiding (note that he was expected to participate in such events as a member of what Verdery (1996) might call the local 'power coalition'.

"The bishop was sitting at the head of the table, next to a director. It was during the Christmas fast, and this director had vowed to keep every fast since, many years earlier, he had very narrowly escaped death in a car accident. Looking at the Bishop's plate, he noticed it was laden with meats and, thinking it was an oversight said: 'please, allow me Your Beatitude, there's been a mistake'. At this, the bishop (who was drinking red wine from a teacup) gets up and says, above the din, 'just a moment please, allow me: God has given me license to suspend fasts, and I hereby give you blessing to eat whatever you like!' When I left, a few hours later, the bishop was still circulating, with his cane in one hand and the Napoleon cognac in the other" (Cristi M., pers. comm.).

When I told her this story, Visalia replied,

"I'm fed up with Gherasim, dear. Recently he tried to oust his adjunct, Irineu [his would-be successor] from the diocese. He wanted to send him away to Cluj (in Transylvania, a different Metropolitan See). But he stayed. Gherasim is a bit compromised (*spurcat*, literally, unclean) in the eyes of the world, he is quite badly seen now. He makes parties, takes money for all those houses [he had just built a new diocese library: a smaller replica of the White House]. He is stubborn (*capos*), if he's old, he does what he wants!" (Visalia pers. comm.)

Visalia felt that many Church hierarchs had become set in their habits, and that change would not come until they were replaced. "Irineu [the successor] is more quiet, more monk-like than Gherasim, who has let himself become this way: don't

you know that in youth you are one way, in old age another way". She thinks the main problem is his materialistic attitude:

"He caught the taste of money, if he takes from all, if all the monasteries give him money. They give to the Diocese... don't you see all these buildings (at Horezu) at his request were made. And he makes parties with whoever happens to be around. May God forgive him. If he saw Irineu, that he is more genuine, he wanted to drive him away. Lately at least he's quietened down a bit..." (Visalia pers. comm.).

Younger nuns also say quite openly that the bishop as well as their abbess are "old school", implying that they continue the direction and habits of leadership established under socialism, making relationships with powerful elites a priority, and allowing this to interfere with the quality of religious life at the convent. Cristina and Elena summed up the common opinion:

"[The bishop] thinks he is Ceausescu! He cares only about his legacy, he wants to leave grandiose projects behind, that's why he is building, building, building, instead of caring for the poor. All we can do is wait for him to die..., wait for the leadership of the diocese and of the convent to change".

Divergences with this leadership agenda caused Cristina and Elena (who incidentally were in charge of attending to VIP guests), to engage in open conflict with the abbess and leave Horezu. Interestingly, however, they also relied on astute political manoeuvres in order to negotiate a more favourable position, with prospects for travel and advancement, within the Church. Leaving Horezu, they went to Craiova, the Metropolitan See, to enlist the help of Elena's confessor, a highly placed cleric (Exarh), who is responsible for overseeing all monasteries in the metropolitanate. Theoretically, their act of disobedience should have brought severe reprisals or even expulsion (since they had not yet taken their final vows), but with the Father Exarh's support, another convent was found for them, and plans were made for their departure to the United States, as part of a group of Romanian nuns who were to start an authentically Orthodox convent in Upstate New York. Unbeknownst to most nuns at the convent, Cristina and Elena had been planning this move for a year, prior to their defection.

A year earlier, the Father Exarh had been contacted by a Romanian nun from the United States who wished to leave her convent there in order to start an authentically Romanian Orthodox establishment, which was to be funded by the Romanian Diaspora. At the time, the Craiova Metropolitanate acted as provisional head of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the United States. This body, formed only after socialism, had virtually no dioceses in the U.S. because the Diaspora churches were controlled by the American Romanian Orthodox Church, which did not recognise the Romanian Church's jurisdiction. The Romanian church argued that the U.S. Romanian Orthodox church had been infiltrated by members of Ceausescu's Securitate, sent there as clerics to spy on the Diaspora. Another charge was that it had been taking shortcuts with ritual, and introduced eclectic practices such as daily confession (disapproved of in Orthodoxy).

Since the collapse of socialism, the Father Exarh, now in his 70's, had been taking great interest in the West, and was teaching himself English in order to read bible commentaries unavailable in Romanian. He was enthusiastic about the idea. Cristina and Elena were strongly encouraged to join this convent. They were attracted by the possibility of travel and adventure, but also of forging a meaningful religious vocation for themselves, in a new environment. However, once they were in the United States, difficulties emerged and the project had to be eventually abandoned.

After September 11, Cristina and Elena returned to Romania and were, remarkably, received back at Horezu where, after a lengthy pilgrimage to Russia and the Ukraine, they took their final vows. On their return, they told me why they had decided to stay at Horezu:

“Here, at Horezu, however bad it may be, the very walls radiate sanctity, they are filled with the energy of many generations of people who lived spiritual lives. There, in America, everything has a different quality, the food, the houses, the places of worship, they all drain you, take you away from spirituality. We felt drained by those people, so eager to take charisma, energy from us, but we had no way of replenishing it. Here, you are filled just by being in this place” (Cristina, pers. comm.).

Two years later, I learned that while Elena had remained at Horezu, where she became involved in pressing for some changes that would bring spirituality more to the forefront, Cristina had been appointed to an important position at a newly opened Romanian diocese in Nuremberg.

## Conclusion

Cristina and Elena's story, like Visalia's in a different way, illustrates the fact that the particular Orthodox blend of politics and religion is very difficult to evade. Despite their resentment of politics within the church, they became deeply embroiled in this aspect of monastic life in order to pursue their own agenda. This agenda, however, differed from that of the generation of nuns produced by the socialist period. If older monastics had oriented themselves towards gaining some influence over the political field within the country's borders, this younger generation seemed more interested in the possibilities for expansion outwards, across international borders, as new religious fields among diasporas opened, waiting to be colonised. Thus, while relations with political elites remain an important asset for the 'old school' church leaders, young and ambitious nuns and monks are moving in new directions involving greater communication with churches and Diasporas abroad. Like the majority of young Romanians, nuns were also keen to travel and see the world (a desire stimulated by the enforced isolation of socialism), although they did so in order to visit new monasteries and convents, and the relics of saints located in places that had previously been impossible to reach (such as San Francisco). As another young nun put it, "everyone is infected with the fever of going abroad" (Raluca pers. comm.).

The stories of nuns suggest that both now and in the past the boundaries between the convent and the world have been porous and shifting, allowing the two worlds to interpenetrate in interesting and complex ways. The close association as well as competition between the Church and State, between religious and political regimes has meant these boundaries were constantly challenged and reconstructed, both from within and from without. It is here, at the boundary, that each of the two worlds was made aware of its difference, but it is also here that common points appeared. By taking their final vows, Cristina and Elena said they felt themselves to have become part of a different order, but this did not translate into a full-fledged rejection of their former selves. They felt transformed by the ritual of consecration, and obliged "to comply with their new statutory assignation" (Bourdieu 1991: 121), but they also continued, through their everyday actions, either open and public or intimate and secret, the practice of building up and dismantling oppositions between themselves and the non-monastic other.

On a larger scale, the boundary between convent and world is played out in the way the institution, through its leaders and other members, interacts differentially with various lay guests. Preference is manifested through the degree of informality allowed, and the privileged are allowed to look behind the screen of proper behaviour, to interact and engage openly with the individuals behind the robes. The cultivation of such interpersonal relations continues, as it has in the past, to translate into economic and political capital for the convent, and also into symbolic capital for individual nuns or groups of nuns, who use the leverage of these connections to manoeuvre themselves into positions of greater power within the convent. So in a very real sense, the power structure within the convent is altered precisely through the nuns' ability to mobilise resources, both human and otherwise (access to special kinds of knowledge not widely available and to scarce goods) from outside the convent, in other words, their empowerment depends on their ingenuity in developing strategies to successfully circumvent the convent / world boundaries. Conversely, their leverage in most of these relations with outsiders, what makes them desirable as partners in reciprocal exchanges, comes precisely from the fact that they are nuns and as such objects of strong curiosity, desire, respect or charismatic power.

I do not wish to reduce nuns' lives to a relentless quest for greater power and autonomy, but rather to point out that it would be difficult to understand them without taking this quest into account. Certainly, life within the convent is largely taken up with efforts to leave the world behind, to achieve a transformation of the soul and to reach communion with God. However, if it is true that convent life is shaped by its ideological opposition to the world it is no less true that the shifting complementary relations between convent and world have an equally constitutive effect on what the nuns become.

As I left Horezu for the last time, wondering what it might become under the leadership of the new generation, I went to say farewell to Mother Gabriela. In the past year, she had become senile, and the nuns had to lock her in her room, because she constantly tried to leave the convent. "I am on the point of leaving", she told me. "Next time you come to see me, don't come here, come and see me at the other Horezu, the real one!" I wondered what her "real Horezu" might have been like, had communism not intervened.

## **CHAPTER 4**

# **FROM HITCHIKING NUNS TO CHARISMATIC SUPERMONKS: ROMANIAN ORTHODOX MONASTICISM IN THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY**

Another point at which monastic and secular worlds encountered each other all too intensely was in the domain of the nuns' personal experience. My experience of "misbehaving" monastics began with my very first stay in a monastic setting, in the summer of 1997. The word 'misbehaving' as used here refers to certain actions of monks and nuns I knew, which would probably appear highly questionable or even immoral to a Western observer, and which contravened rules of monastic practice, sometimes very central ones. However, the monk and nun "perpetrators" often (though not always) felt they were justified in these actions and would not really consider them as misbehaviour—in most cases I witnessed there was certainly very little guilt involved. They talked about these exploits with shrewd auto-irony, and enjoyed recounting their humorous aspects in private. On this occasion, I was at the tiny hermitage Patrunsa, high in the Carpathian mountains. Accessible only via a 20 km ascent up a steep mountain on foot, the hermitage had a small church and a building housing the three monks and two novices. There was no electricity, and in the winter it was rendered entirely inaccessible by high snow and wolves.

On the second day of my visit, the monks, who had first kept their distance, came to look for me. They were interested in whether I could bake a cake with the few eggs they had managed to obtain from the village, and the cherries they were about to collect from their tree. As we were working in the kitchen, one monk began to teach me about God. He was using a metaphorical image of fish in an aquarium when I exclaimed that I had dreamt of this very image the night before, and recounted my dream to him. "Oh", he replied, "this means that God's charisma is working in you already. There's no need to tell you about it". He explained that divine mysteries are not easily conveyed in words, language being an inadequate tool for representing this kind of knowledge. Rather, they are best grasped on an intuitive level, although such intuitions (like my dream) can only take place when divine charisma is already at work in oneself. As the section on charisma in the Introduction suggests, this idea is not idiosyncratic, but quite accepted within the Church.

Following this incident, the monks stopped behaving in my presence as ‘church faces’—as they call the appropriate, formal behaviour of a monastic towards lay people, designed to avoid giving the wrong impression—and began quite freely disclosing their human side. They complained of the deadly boredom of the long evenings, and announced they had already more or less memorised the only book they had apart from their prayer books: a sizeable tome about the aliens, left behind by a visitor. “Quiz me!” one entreated, “I know what’s on every page”. Did I think aliens existed? What did they say about it in California, where I was living at the time? When I asked whether it was not against their faith to believe in aliens (since Church figures had spoken against it), they replied that Christ was the synthesis of all knowledge, and therefore religious knowledge should encompass rather than reject new, ‘foreign’ elements, integrating them into its framework—if aliens existed, they were also God’s creatures.

In the evenings, I had lengthy discussions about charismatic powers with the newest novice, a physics student who, having read the great Orthodox mystics, had abandoned university to become a hermit. More pragmatic in their outlook, the other monks teased him: “Yeah, now you think you’d like to live as a hermit in a hut up the mountain, but wait till the winter comes and the wolves are howling at the gates, you’ll forget all about it and come running back”.

For the remainder of my stay, the monks were in perpetual good cheer, climbing trees in their robes and competing as to who could jump from a greater height, setting out to carve a chess set that would help relieve boredom in the future, and listening to carols on the abbot’s disco-light flashing tape player. One could argue that, in allowing me to witness this less than religious side of their life, rather than performing their formal role as faces of the Church, these monks were misbehaving, but this was quite innocent. More serious misbehaviour occurred on my second visit to Patrinsa, which I shall describe below.

My interest in monks and nuns had been first sparked by my grandfather. Like many retired ex-communists, he had reacted to the failure of the communist project, in which he had fervently believed, by becoming a fervent Orthodox. It was from him that I first learnt (prior to my visit to Patrinsa) of the growing prominence of charismatic ‘super-monks’ (as I shall call them) who had acquired popular reputations for unusual insight, the power to prophesise and read thoughts and efficacy in prayer—all powers bestowed through divine charisma. They lived in remote moun-



tain monasteries, where they were visited by thousands of pilgrims seeking blessings and advice. The existence of such charismatic figures was not new to Orthodoxy. What was novel, however, was their unprecedented visibility, as a result of frequent TV and radio appearances and the publication of tapes and books containing their advice to the faithful. Novel also, though perhaps not unexpected, was the great popular interest in, and demand for these monks' services.

Most Romanians saw the collapse of socialism as the beginning of a period of unprecedented freedom, and they felt the need to symbolically mark it out as a time of spiritual renewal. During the 1989 revolution, after crowds of irate and inebriated citizens occupied government buildings on Christmas day, priests were immediately brought in to bestow their blessing (through a ritual similar to that carried out in private homes every Easter, to drive out evil spirits), thus symbolically consecrating the new order even before it was certain that the communists had been successfully ejected from power. If, as Feuchtwang & Mingming (2001: 172) define it, "charisma is the expectation of the extraordinary [...], of finding an agency through which a turn of fortune towards utopia will be brought about in historical time", then for Romanians, the period following their exit from socialism was a time when charismatic expectations were activated. It was a time of both innovative and restorative action, of remembering what could be and of recreating themselves as what they would like to be—in short, it presented a glimpse of absolute freedom. The new freedom was accompanied by great popular interest in spiritual matters, and publications ranging from yoga to aliens to Orthodox mysticism filled the bookstands that had sprung up on every pavement.

The Orthodox Church now found itself under pressure, both because of the proliferation of competing religious doctrines and practices, and because of the moral taint of the Church's former collaboration with the communist regime. The charismatic 'super-monks' provided a timely solution to the problem of restoring the Church's spiritual leadership (Romania is 80% Orthodox): they belonged to the section of the Church that had been persecuted under communism, and, through their lengthy monastic careers (most of them were in their 70's and 80's) they were reputed to have acquired the special charismatic powers, and even mystical enlightenment.

Hence, these monks were represented as the carriers of the authentic spiritual tradition of Orthodoxy, evidence of the Church's continued vitality. In particular, a form of contemplation called the hesychast prayer (or the prayer of the heart) became

the most potent symbol of this spirituality. Hesychasm is a monastic ideology centring on an elaborate theory of charisma, developed by the Athonite monk St. Gregory Palamas, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. According to some church spokesmen, these Athonite traditions had been brought to Romania in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and were kept alive by super-monks in their mountain retreats. The hesychast prayer consists of the continual repetition of a set formula, “Lord God, save me, the sinner”, so that it eventually becomes a continual refrain of the mind, repeated effortlessly and unconsciously. However, Father Cleopa, one of the ‘super-monks’ reputed to be the most accomplished hesychast in the country, remarked that he had had to go to Mount Athos in order to properly learn this technique, because it had been completely lost in Romanian monasteries. Archbishop Anania, another important Church figure, concurred, remarking that, apart from Cleopa, he had never met any practicing hesychast monks in Romania (Anania 1990). In fact, this was not entirely accurate, since many nuns I knew, including very elderly ones, told me they had learned and practiced the prayer of the heart in the convent, but added that nobody knew how to do it ‘properly’. According to Cleopa’s account, the true technique involves more than just repeating a formula. One has to learn how to focus one’s energy, using the rhythm of breath and mentally concentrating on one’s navel (hence the phrase navel-gazing), in order to succeed in making the prayer take root and grow in the heart.

Meanwhile, the popular interest in hesychasm gave rise to novel applications of this technique and philosophy both from lay practitioners and from monks. For instance, classes of hesychasm were offered to the urban public by self-styled lay hesychasts, and a monk from the monastery Frasiniei, reputedly one of the most powerful spiritual centres in Wallachia, as it follows a version of the Athonite *typikon* or Rule (including vegetarianism, rigorous physical work and ban on women entering the grounds), created a novel healing technique called hesychast sacro-therapy. Briefly, Ghelasie’s books provide a critique of both the foreign spiritual and healing techniques that had flooded the religious market—such as yoga, Daoism, New Age and so forth—and modern medicine. He argues that they both are ineffectual because they do not rely on divine charisma. According to him, the central cause of disease is a person’s separation from the life-sustaining divine charismatic energy. The solution consists in a diet that would restore contact with divine energies, consisting of raw, ‘living’ foods, colour coded according to the disease, and of hesychast bread, made only of ground wheat and water dried in the sun.

By the end of my fieldwork, in 2002, the spiritual reputation of Patrinsa—the site of my earlier visit—had grown to such an extent that it rivalled that of Frasinei. Many people in my village argued that the monks from Patrinsa were ‘real hesychasts’, more powerful even than the Frasinei ones (as well as charging significantly less for their prayers). Hence, I decided to pay the monks another visit. I travelled there with an acquaintance, Dora, a woman in her twenties who was a very dedicated pilgrim and thoroughly knowledgeable on the topic of super-monks—Patrinsa had several, although their reputations were still only local. It is worth recounting Dora’s story here, because many of the young novices who had joined Horezu convent (where I did my fieldwork) had been drawn to the faith in a similar way. Following the break-up of her marriage, Dora, a high-school teacher, had become increasingly drawn to Orthodoxy and, by participating in monthly pilgrimages to monasteries throughout the country, had become increasingly fascinated with the super-monks, whom she called Holy Fathers. Her goal was to establish a close personal relationship with such a monk (a kind of spiritual adoption was the ideal), and thus obtain a personal confessor of exceptional insight and power. This was proving difficult, because such monks were in high demand, and tended to wish to be left alone.

Patrinsa had changed a great deal since my last visit. A larger church and new dependencies were being built, all with donations from the faithful, and there were more than thirty monks, including several hermits living in huts further up the mountain. None of the former monks remained. The abbot I knew had been ejected from his post, reportedly through the political manoeuvres of a competitor, and died, some said, of a broken heart. The new abbot’s enterprising personality was generally credited with the rapid growth and new spiritual prestige of Patrinsa. When we arrived, the abbot was away for the day, but after a chat, his second-in-command invited us for coffee in his rooms, where we were joined by two other monks, an elderly peasant from Moldavia (a region renowned for its monastic life), and a young monk who had been at Mount Athos. When we asked his impressions, he confessed he had found the Athonite lifestyle very exacting, feeling faint most of the time because of the vegetarian food and the long hours of carpentry work in the midday sun. The monks’ only diversion, he said, had been a game to identify, by the sound of their engines, the types of American fighter planes flying overhead from a military base on the mainland.

After coffee, the monks, who had abandoned acting like church faces, revealed their hidden store of beer cans and several bottles of plum brandy, which they proceeded to drink from large water glasses. When conversation turned to a famous hermit living in their monastery, whom my friend had come expressly to see, the monks warned her, at first in a veiled manner and later openly, that “he demands sexual services from girls. Didn’t you see those two prostitutes who went up there earlier?” (we had indeed seen two rather scantily-clad women ascend the mountain). As inebriation set in, the monks’ jokes became more risqué, and they began boasting about the houses and cars they used to have while they were still in the world. Suddenly, the abbot’s second in command sprung up, nearly upsetting the table. He had remembered that he was supposed to officiate as priest in the evening service, which had started about an hour earlier. “Sit here, on my bed, and wait for me, he told Dora and myself, “I am going to do the service and then I’ll be right back”. When we refused and tried to retire to our room, he confiscated our key and threatened that, if we disobeyed, he would force us to confess to him. This threat made Dora and the two other monks extremely worried. In their view, it did not matter that he was abusing his power—the fact that he was an ordained priest and a monk meant that charisma worked through him, and as a confessor he stood for God. Any penance he might see fit to give us, however outrageous, would have to be executed. If he cursed us, it would be even worse. I attempted to make light of these fears, but to no avail. Negotiations for the key went on into the early hours of the morning, and he only gave in when I threatened to leave, to complain to the diocese and to write about him in my ethnography. On the way back, early next morning, Dora told me, shocked, that she had never imagined monks could behave in this way. “Until now, I always saw them as holy fathers, but from now on, every time an elderly monk holds my hand, I’m going to imagine he is having sexual fantasies about me” (D., pers. comm.). Nevertheless a week later, after speaking with her confessor, her faith in monks was restored.

The bishop’s assistant told me that they had had repeated problems with this establishment which, being so remote, tended to attract devious characters<sup>31</sup>. Stories of scandals were not, however, peculiar to Patrunsa. One young man, who had been a dedicated pilgrim in search of mystical insight, told me he had abandoned his quest after receiving sexual advances from a monk at Frasinei: “they are all homosexuals”, he told me bitterly (M. pers.comm.). A scandal involving sexual abuse at the seminary of the monastery Cernica also erupted during my fieldwork.

I do not wish to give the impression that most monks were inclined to ‘misbehave’—I knew many who certainly were not. It was only after some deliberation that I decided to relate the incident, because I think it can help introduce several facts about Romanian monasticism. First, it points to the fact that, while lay people like Dora, who visited monasteries frequently but had never become an ‘insider’, remained largely unaware of it, various degrees of misbehaviour were quite common in monastic circles, and young novices that once idealised monastic life, soon became aware of this and had to find ways of coming to terms with it. Second, although this was an extreme case, it had become plain that misbehaving, if mostly in harmless ways, was just as much a part of asceticism in Romania at this time as living up to an ascetic ideal was (if not more). Hence, I concluded that it must be important and should certainly not be played down as ‘inauthentic asceticism’, or excised from the ethnographic account. Why, I wondered, was misbehaviour so prominent in the lives of committed monastics? Third, the reaction of Dora and the monks to the threat of being made to confess suggested to me a kind of disconnection between power and morality in a Western sense (although the monk behaved immorally, the charisma invested in him remained effective). Could this not, I wondered, provide a clue as to the propensity to misbehave?

The incident also suggests that the ‘stardom’ of the super-monks did not fail to alter the balance of power inside the monasteries where they lived, causing envy in their less famous colleagues and increasing internal competition. On the other hand, the sudden growth of monastic prestige had also made it easier for monks with questionable motives to claim greater status (for instance by being in a famous monastery) and even abuse the power of their office. The diocese found it difficult to regulate such behaviour because, save in extreme cases, it could not deal with such individuals directly, but rather by tactfully negotiating a solution with the abbot or abbess. Lay people like my friend Dora were usually unaware of such internal problems, but the nuns were less naïve. When I told her about the incident, sister Vera replied:

“I know, nuns are as they are, but monks are actually dangerous. You should be careful. Now, the latest fashion seems to be monks with alimony payments! I heard about one the other day. He had a child with a woman, and they didn’t even kick him out [of the monastery]!”

## Freedom, Misbehaviour and Charisma

In his article “For an anthropology of freedom and ethics”, James Laidlaw (2002) observes that the continuing influence of Durkheim on anthropological discussions of morality has obscured the issue of human freedom. Durkheim saw the social group as the ultimate source of moral rules—“society is a moral being”. In this vision, “people can be caused to behave one way or another by placing them in appropriate social arrangements, and ethical rules are a seamless part of this broader causal system” (Laidlaw 2002: 314). The problem is that this framework, “so completely identifies the collective with the good that an independent understanding of ethics appears neither necessary nor possible” (Laidlaw 2002: 312). Laidlaw argues that this kind of sociology is not only “a charter for authoritarian corporatism”, but more importantly, it has prevented anthropologists from taking seriously, “as something requiring ethnographic description, the possibilities of human freedom” (ib.id). Laidlaw goes on to consider how the approaches of other theorists might help underpin a discussion of human freedom that would allow a focus on the ethical choices made by individuals instead of their conditioning by the social group. In this respect, he argues, Foucault’s approach to freedom can prove useful. In his later writings, Foucault elaborates on the relation between freedom and power, arguing that they presuppose one another: “if there are relations of power in every social field, this is because there is freedom everywhere” (Foucault 1997: 292). He distinguishes between two kinds of power situations, according to the degree of freedom they allow. Games of power are strategic games through which some individuals try to control the conduct of others. States of domination are “situations where power relations are fixed in such a way that they are perpetually asymmetrical and allow only an extremely minimal margin of freedom” (ibid). Freedom, Foucault argues, is not an a priori entity that can be achieved or discovered. Rather, it comes into being when it is exercised in one’s relations with others. “Human nature is perpetually reinvented through choice and action”, and the subject thus continually re-creates him/herself through the choices he/she makes every day (qtd. Laidlaw 2002: 323). This exercise of freedom, Foucault observes, has a moral or ethical dimension: by choosing how to act, one chooses the kind of person one wishes to become, and is thus actively answering the question of how one ought to live. However, the choices and actions of individuals are not always in harmony with what they wish to become. How can we understand ascetics who

have made a serious commitment to an ethical model, to becoming a certain kind of person, but then freely choose to act in ways that apparently contradict this ideal? Are we to assume that they are simply inauthentic or incompetent?

The highly idiosyncratic behaviour of the monks and nuns I knew, abounding in examples of how various ethical and moral rules were bent, subverted, temporarily suspended or placed in quotes and viewed ironically, means that it would be impossible to do justice to the ethnographic material by judging it in terms of an essentialised ideal of monastic behaviour as it is set out in the writings of the Church Fathers (the Orthodox canon, which describes what monks and nuns ought to do). To complicate matters further, it seems that the propensity to misbehave was not a novel development among Romanian Orthodox ascetics—I have found accounts in Church writings as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century that describe important church figures in the act of misbehaving. Also, elderly nuns could cite plenty of examples of misbehaviour they had witnessed and sometimes participated in during their own monastic careers. Contemplating this, I found myself forced to question whether, in assuming that monks and nuns should live according to the rules, I was not misunderstanding how these monastics related to their own ascetic ideal. What if, for them, the relationship between ideal and practice was not simply a matter of knowing the rules and living by them?

I would like to suggest, in studying asceticism, that looking at how rules are disobeyed can be just as revealing as looking at how they are obeyed. In other words, I think the space between a person's commitment to ascetic norms and values and the implementation (or otherwise) of this commitment in everyday practice should be problematised, because it is here that we can observe the exercise of personal freedom in Foucault's broad sense, which takes into account the perpetual reinvention of the individual through each new choice. Hence, rather than looking at asceticism only in terms of success in living up to an ascetic ideal or standard, I shall also consider it in terms of creative 'misbehaviour'.

I think such an approach, looking at both how rules are followed and subverted, is perhaps particularly well-suited to this case, because in Orthodox dogma as it is understood by Romanian monastics, rules are not considered to be entirely self-explanatory, and their application is subject to intuition rather than reason. This is because of the centrality of the principle of divine charisma as a source of 'true' knowledge, which can only be revelatory and intuitive. This means that the dogma acknowledges the subtle distinction between the strict observance of practices and



genuinely-enlightened understanding of their meaning, as a crucial one: *what matters is to understand and act according to the spirit rather than the letter of the rule*. This emphasis is due to the strong influence on Orthodox theology of the neo-Platonist Alexandria school of scriptural exegesis, which flourished in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD. Clement of Alexandria, one of the Church Fathers whose writings are included in the Orthodox canon, argued that just as God had given the Law to the Jews, so he had given philosophy to the Greeks as an instrument to lead them to Christ (Savin 1996). Both law and philosophy were rooted in God's eternal word (the logos). The Alexandrine theologians believed that, while the scripture had a literal, historical meaning that could be understood by all, it also had a deeper, allegorical one reflecting eternal truths. This true meaning (in the Platonic sense) was hidden and could only be understood by means of mystical revelation, which occurred when one was infused with the charisma of the Holy Spirit. This kind of knowledge was the only true knowledge (*gnosis*), in an absolute sense (ibid).

This ideology downplays analytical reason as a merely human, and therefore inferior, form of understanding. Reason is imperfect because it is divisive, confined to the intellect and discursive, in contrast to mystical or true knowledge (achieved through the charisma of the Holy Spirit) which is a holistic experience (involving all of one's senses) and is too complex to express in words. The important point here is that Orthodoxy privileges what it calls 'synthetic', experiential and non-verbal rather than analytical knowledge. By implication a legalistic and narrow understanding of the rules, which would rely on reason alone, is distrusted, because it is thought to lead to self-righteousness and thus to the sin of pride. Having caused Satan's fall from Paradise, pride is one of the most serious sins one can commit. This means that strict observance of rules is not necessarily a virtue, and their transgression is not necessarily such a serious offence as it might seem to a Western observer (particularly to those whose background knowledge of Christianity comes from Protestantism).

Another interesting fact that becomes relevant here is the absence, in Orthodoxy, of a monastic Rule in the Western sense. Orthodoxy has only one monastic order, which claims to follow the Rule of St. Basil, but this is a set of ethical guidelines rather than a proper Rule. Individual monasteries and convents are run according to a *typikon*, or set of rules, which differs from one monastery to another, and may be changed by the abbot or by higher clergy according to their needs. This does not mean, however, that there is infinite variety in how monastic establishments are run.

Tradition is very important in deciding what is and is not allowed, but it is also often stretched and interpreted to suit specific needs. For instance, Hasluck (1924) observes how at Mount Athos monasteries tended to be caught up in a cyclical pattern: rules would be tightened and strict community life enforced (e.g. no private possessions), but over time they would relax again, allowing greater autonomy (individual possessions, eating and living separately). This would often lead to a decline in the fortunes of the monastery (as monks began to work with less dedication), which would then again lead to a tightening of the rules. The two models, that of the coenobitic monastic community in which all individual autonomy must be surrendered, and that of the lone hermit whose quest is highly individual, coexist in Orthodox monasticism, and efforts must constantly be made to find compromises between them. Between these two poles, there exist two major forms of monastic organisation—coenobitic and idiorhythmic—one allowing less individual autonomy to its members and the other more.

The *raison d'être* of Orthodox monks and nuns is not that of carrying out good works, or of performing liturgical and other services for lay people (as in Catholicism) but rather that of achieving mystical enlightenment through a life of contemplation. The monks and nuns believe that, as a result of ascetic practices, a person can become 'divinised' while still in the flesh. This means that one's physical body and mind are infused with charisma to such an extent as to become literally of divine substance. This is why the bodies of saints, who have been thus infused, do not decay, and emanate a pleasant smell of myrrh. The super-monks we have been discussing were thought, by many of the faithful and clergy, to be in an advanced stage of this process of divinisation, although they were not considered to be divinised yet.

This individual access to divine charisma could occasionally provide a justification for the circumvention of rules—since intuitive, charismatic knowledge was superior to texts, it could legitimate new interpretations of these texts. Also, as in the case of the monk from Patrinsa, once received through ordination, charisma continued to work in a monk or priest even if he behaved in immoral ways—thereby making it easier to justify yielding to temptation. "I can sin", a monk told me, "and it's all right, because afterwards I confess and I'm absolved by my confessor". The emphasis on charisma and on intuitive understanding thus gave monastics a basis for interpreting the rules in their own way. At Horezu convent, this led to tensions, contestation and even marked displays of disobedience—for instance on a few occasions the

leaders of the convent refused to follow the orders of the bishop. Monks and nuns could behave this way because, although inferior in clerical rank, they had higher legitimacy among the faithful, to whom they appeared as more charismatic and spiritually advanced than church hierarchs (who were seen to devote most of their time to administrative tasks and church politics).

Despite the fact that mysticism (an ideology with a high innovative potential) is at the centre of its ideology, the Orthodox Church is able to maintain control over the economy of mystical knowledge and power (and prevent new revelations that might contradict the canon) through certain safeguards inscribed in dogma. The first is the requirement that all clergy must be monks. This means that hierarchs theoretically have the same access to divine charisma as the monks who spend their time in contemplation in monasteries. Second, dogma holds that true mystical insight is non-verbal, being too complex for words. Occasionally, monks are allowed to produce innovations, as in the case of Father Ghelasie (1994) and his hesychast sacrotherapy—as long as these do not contravene doctrine (in which case it is declared that they came from the Devil). Third, the Church ultimately claims a monopoly of charisma, arguing that this divine power and gifts have been passed on from person to person within the church from the Apostles, who first received them. The transmission of charismatic gifts occurs at the moment when one is ordained or takes monastic vows. However, not every member of the church receives all the charismas or gifts. Access to these is differential, and increases with one's position in the Church hierarchy—for instance, priests do not receive the charisma of scriptural interpretation, only bishops do.

These dogmas provide only general guidelines to the management of charisma, making it possible to rule whether a person's claim to charismatic power is or is not valid, in case the claimant becomes too much of a trouble-maker. However, such incidents do not occur frequently, because if one claims to be touched by charisma, he or she must also demonstrate it through one's behaviour. Monks prove their charisma through unusual displays of intuition, such as knowing what a lay person is thinking or feeling without being told, and giving the right advice. Many such stories circulate, such as one, told me by a friend, in which a monk read her thought that she really wanted a particular book, selected it from a large stack and gave it to her as a gift. Making predictions and efficacy in achieving results through prayer are other manifestations of the gift of charisma. Charisma was not just a power, but also a

transformative force supposed to work within the individual and change him/her. Let us now look at how this transformation of the self was understood by the nuns at Horezu.

## The Theory of Self-Transformation

Among the people I knew, nuns and monks were the only ones I heard using the word for self, *sinele*. Ordinary laypeople would use the term ‘*eu*’ or ‘*eu insumi*’ (me, myself). Monks and nuns had a very explicit theory of what the self is and how divine power ought to work upon it. The metaphor most commonly used to explain the self is that of a vessel. At baptism, which is the point of highest purity because this ritual absolves the young child of original sin, leaving him without blemish, the vessel of the soul is full of divine charisma. As the child grows, personal contents (memories, desires, thoughts, emotions, etc.) begin to fill this vessel up, and the pure grain, conscience, becomes smaller and smaller. The object of ascetic exertions (*nevointe*) is to empty the vessel of these personal contents, making room for divine charisma to enter and fill it. Thus, every nun was aware, at least theoretically, of the stages of self-transformation, and of the ascetic methods they must practice in order to achieve this.

Ascetic technique includes two means of purifying the soul: contemplation and the practice of ‘*nevointe*’, or ascetic disciplines. This Romanian word could be literally translated as non-wanting, and it is linked both to the concept of will (*a voi, vointa*) and, secondarily, to the idea of desire. In common language, the related word *nevoie* means literally ‘need’. I have only ever heard the word *nevointa* used by monks and nuns (it is rather archaic)—as both a noun (*nevointe*—‘non-wants’, desires) and a reflexive verb (*m-am nevoit*—I made myself practice the ‘non-wants’). Orthodoxy frowns on excessive self-immolation, because the body is not considered evil, but rather neutral, merely a vessel for the soul. Ascetic disciplines include fasting, foregoing sleep, genuflection (*metanoia*) and prayer. Of these, prayer is considered the most important, because it maintains the vigilance of the mind.

“I think a constant wakefulness or self-awareness [is] more important [than *nevointele*, ascetic practices]: do what your conscience tells you, not what the reason says” (Papacioc 1994). Thus, once again, we find strict observance of the rules de-emphasised in favour of the ‘spirit of the task’: “I am not partial to form (*tipic*, which

means following the letter rather than the spirit of an injunction), but I preach a state of continual self-awareness, of presence, of living in the moment”. Thus, the main task of the confessor of a nun (always a monk) is to teach her how to continually practice self-awareness.

Upon entering the convent, young nuns learned what kinds of transformations are supposed to occur inside themselves. This ideal type of spiritual transformation is described in the writings of the Church Fathers. This is how one monk described the operations he performed upon himself: in the first stage of monastic life—purification—(which can take many years), the senses must be crucified, by turning yourself inwards and gradually being overtaken by a deep apathy towards all sensory experience. This means that the eye of the mind is replacing the eye of the body. Detachment from the knowledge of the senses helps one avoid temptation and entrapment by the world.

Next, follows the night of intellectual thinking. The three main faculties of the soul—consciousness, memory and will—must be emptied of all contents. This emptying or voiding of everything that is already there is needed in order to clear out the space that will be filled by divine *charisma*. One must empty one’s mind of all pre-suppositions and intellectual reasoning: God is none of the things our intellect tells us he is. The purification of memory means ridding oneself of all worldly memories. The purification of will means detachment from any kind of feeling, affect, passion except the love of God.

The second stage is called enlightenment and symbolises the descent of the Holy Spirit and bestowal of seven *charismas*, or gifts: devotion, strength, fear of God, knowledge, understanding, faith, wisdom. When this stage is reached, divine charisma begins to manifest itself in the person, but purification (refinement) continues with its help. This results in the seven capital sins being replaced by the seven capital virtues (prudence, justice, strength, self-control, faith, hope and love).

Finally, in the third stage, the person achieves mystical union with God and becomes a permanent part of Christ’s mystical body, being ‘divinised’ (*indumnezeit*). The actual substance of the body and soul, the Orthodox believe, are transformed by the constant infusion of divine energy (*asemanarea harica cu Dumnezeu*, meaning, literally, the charismatic resemblance with God), which explains why saints’ bodies do not decay (St. Ioan Scararul). The problem faced by young nuns lay in the discrepancy they perceived between what monastic life should ideally be, according to

the writings of Church Fathers and super-monks, and what it was for them. They knew the theory of self-transformation, but they were not quite sure how to translate it into practice. The remainder of the paper looks at their efforts to do so.

## **The Religious Education of Young Nuns**

The pattern of monastic education at Horezu had changed significantly, as a result of the demographic imbalance produced by the socialist ban on recruitment. Traditionally, each novice would be socialised into monastic life through a one-to-one relationship with a senior nun who became her monastic sponsor. In Visalia's time, such relationships were modelled on family ones. For instance, nuns often lived in couples and they adopted one or more novices (usually young children), whom they raised as if they were their daughters. Visalia herself had a life-long partner, a nun her own age, together with whom she lived throughout her life (both in the convent and in the village), and with whom she had raised several novices (who left and married after the expulsion, but still keep in touch with Visalia).

Most of the nuns of Visalia's generation had joined as children, either because they were orphans, or because their families had too many children. Visalia says that she was given up because her father, whilst fighting in the front line in WW1, vowed that if he survived, the next child he fathered would be given as a gift to God. It is also possible, however, that two of her aunts, who were nuns, asked her parents for a child they could adopt as an apprentice. She remembers how, at the age of two, her mother took her to the monastery:

“I went with her and met my aunts in the cemetery, because another sister of theirs had died and they were talking by her grave. Mother said, ‘I’m going to get some bread from the village, I’ll be back’, but she never returned. I cried and cried, and at night my aunts wrapped me in a duvet and laid me to sleep on the floor. The air in the room was full of dust from the wool they were weaving into rugs” (Visalia pers. comm.)

It seems her aunts, although they wanted her, weren't exactly sure what to do with such a small child. “There were no children to play with. I would sit alone on the stairs, rocking back and forth and singing to myself ‘God have mercy on me’, as I heard them do in church.”

“No one had taught me the meaning of directions... My aunts would chide me: ‘why did you go uphill? What were you doing downhill? But I didn’t know what uphill and downhill meant at all... Once I fell into a large pot with water, cut my knee on its edge and fainted. My aunts thought I was dead and called in a priest to prepare me for my funeral. It was he who noticed I was still alive, that I had a pulse, and told them to treat me gently when I awoke” (ibid).

Childhood in the convent could be traumatic:

“When I was old enough for school, they sent me to Bistrita convent (15 km away), where nuns ran an orphanage. All of us kids got lice, and the nun would wash us once a week, we were standing naked in the stone hallway in winter and being doused in cold water” (ibid).

The Bistrita nuns organised theatre plays, performed by the orphans throughout Wallachia, and a choir, of which Visalia was a member, which became famous throughout the country. In a typical romantic gesture, Queen Marie, ordered all orphans from Bistrita to be fitted with Roman sandals. Visalia, who at the time had a swollen foot, remembers: “I waited all summer for my foot to get better, so I could wear the Roman sandals too, but by then, the nuns had given my pair to another kid. I never forgot that”. When she was about twelve, she contracted an eye ailment and had to be sent to Bucharest for surgery. She did not return to the orphanage, but educated herself by studying the old manuscripts in the Horezu library. “I learned about history from Brancoveanu’s documents, and from the accounts and ledgers and papers left by the Greek monks. Later, they appointed me historical guide to visitors, and I was the only one who knew what was in those old documents.

Visalia relied on the family-like relationships she had witnessed as a child in order to deal with challenges in her own life. She cared for her aunts as long as they survived, as they had cared for their mother (who had also entered the convent in her old age). Sometimes, such family-like allegiances collided with the rules of the community—for instance in the dispute that sparked Visalia’s alleged denunciation by Gabriela.

For the generation preceding Visalia (as shown by her aunts’ experiences) such clashes had been even stronger. From the time they came to Horezu (1872) until 1922, the Horezu nuns had been organised in a loose community of separate households, each with its own animals and other possessions. As shown in chapter 2, efforts to reshape this community along the lines of communal living were strongly re-

sisted, and succeeded only after an open rebellion. After the creation of the *obstea*, drastic discipline was imposed. Mother Visalia remembers that the nuns were required to wear special 'obedience costumes' when working in the fields, even during the hot summer months, with cylindrical woollen hats pulled tightly over headscarves, long-sleeved woollen tunics and long skirts (see picture). The young *obstea*'s ethos centred on maintaining equality at all costs, and the abbess, who saw education as a source of pride leading to inequality, refused novices with higher education. The accent of this monastic training was neither on theological education nor on ascetic practices, but rather on obedience and work, either on the convent lands or in the weaving workshop. It seems that, in living history, the accent and stringency of monastic education of Horezu always depended mainly on the interests and personality of the abbess who in charge at any given time.

Thus, the lives and training of the cohort that pre-dated communism had been mainly influenced by relations with women, whether their spiritual sponsors, the nuns of their own generation with whom they had grown up, or the novices they themselves adopted. There had been occasional cases in which a nun developed a close relationship with the convent's confessor, but these were strongly condemned by the other nuns. However, the novices who had joined in the 1990's were now turning for spiritual advice and support to the confessors they had prior to entering the convent.

Many of these novices had been inspired to enter the convent by spiritual relationships they had developed with their confessors, usually elderly monks. Communism, and particularly its collapse, seems to have rendered the quest for the formerly forbidden mystical knowledge glamorous. All the younger novices (between 18 and 30) had joined the convent in the early and mid-nineties, but by the late 90's, recruitment fell abruptly and no new nuns joined during my two years there. More alarmingly, five novices defected, either to other convents or to get married and rejoin the world (one married the convent porter, who had allegedly fathered the baby of another nun, born during the same period).

Due to the scarcity of nuns who could oversee the training of novices, obedience, the first step of the monastic education, was largely reduced to the assignation of housekeeping and agricultural tasks (although, since the convent has lost most of its lands and also employs other labourers, these are not very exacting). There was an ongoing debate on the topic of obedience, and everyone had something to contribute. While younger nuns complained of being practically reduced to the status of unpaid



labourers, older nuns argued that the leaders had let discipline slip and were allowing novices to lead too easy a life, “with too much food and laziness”. “The [administrator nun] has even hired some people from the village to do the work around the convent. She says she’s afraid that if she works the novices too hard they’ll all leave”, Mother Visalia told me. She was also fond of exclaiming “if there was a late-night church service [as there used to be in her time], would [the novices] have time to sneak off to the discotheque?” Although I never found conclusive evidence, there were persistent rumours in the convent and in the village that two or three of the novices would occasionally change clothes and go dancing in the next village. “They have it easy here, and behave as if they were girls in boarding school, not nuns”, Visalia would complain, and it was true that the atmosphere within one of the cliques of novices reminded one of a boarding school—there was much giggling, secrecy, pranks and rule-breaking.

Sometimes, the strained relations between older nuns and young novices manifested themselves in more serious ways, such as accusations of sorcery (made against one elderly nun) and even an outbreak of demonic possession, which took place five years prior to my arrival. The latter incident was only rarely mentioned in very vague terms, but the broad outlines of the story are as follows. It seems that five novices suddenly began to curse and grunt like pigs in church (during the service), and had to be forcibly immobilised and carried to one of the convent’s hermitages, where they were kept in isolation. Whenever they heard the name of the Virgin Mary (the archetypical image of the nuns) or saw holy objects, such as icons or prayer books, they would begin to curse, grunt like pigs and writhe. One of them jumped into a well, but was rescued before drowning. She later blamed Mother Marcia, the convent’s administrator, saying it was fear of her overbearing personality that had driven her to attempt suicide.

The monk priests of Frasinei had been called in to perform two exorcisms. One of the possessed girls, however, was thought to still have recurrent episodes from time to time, although nuns saw her as somewhat mentally deficient, but harmless. Sister Vera travelled with this novice to visit a monastery in Transylvania, where her confessor lived, and told me that while there, Anisoara had a mild possession episode, and started to curse in front of the monks. “The monks didn’t know what to think! I was so so embarrassed! I’ll never take her with me anywhere again!” This incident was attributed by some of the young nuns to black magic done by an elderly nun, who

was quite unpopular in the convent, while other novices blamed the overbearing personality of the convent's administrator. These explanations seem to point to the fact that the novices saw relations with their elders as the cause of the disturbance and, through their possession, they seemed to be lashing out against the rules of convent life (doing the opposite of what was expected and proper). I could obtain no more information on this incident (no one would discuss it), but it does seem to suggest that relations between novices and leaders were an area of extreme strain in convent life.

## **Motivations for Joining the Convent**

When the younger nuns had a Sunday afternoon off, we would wander to the convent cemetery, at the edge of the forest, to sit among the flowers and chat without fear of being overheard. Once, sister Vera, who had been a novice for six years, joked:

“If I was abbess here, the first thing I'd do is to bring a couple of gorgeous young monks, with imposing robes, to say mass at our convent. Then you'd see what zeal for prayer and perfect church attendance we'd have. With this old Mr. Stutters [the convent's priest-monk], what can you expect? He doesn't even have proper robes, probably can't afford to buy fabric. Only Daniela [a middle aged spinster] is in love with him!”

Humour helped relieve Vera's feelings of entrapment, boredom and confusion, but many in the convent disliked her remarks, which were usually subversive as well as perceptive. On this occasion, she had indirectly hit upon an important problem for the young nuns at Horezu: the lack of inspiring spiritual direction. The convent's priest-monk was unpopular because he had a stutter and a bad temper. The abbess acknowledged this fact, and allowed many novices to continue to see their previous confessors. Since it required periodic travel outside the convent, this arrangement was very irregular.

The confessor had been the first person to interpret the signs of a genuine monastic calling in these novices. This calling started as a depression, which developed into a 'madness for Christ', meaning that the would-be novice was willing to withstand any ordeals testing her commitment to become a nun.

“If it is a calling and a madness for Christ, where do you go? What does a convent mean? A losing of yourself in order to find yourself, a final transformation, to give up your position, your human personality for the angelic one, giving up will” (Papacioc 1994).

Commitment was also further tested when trying to join the convent, through repeated rejections. As a result, it was quite uncommon for novices to join convents for reasons other than a genuine desire for a rich spiritual life. Even Vera, when I asked her why she chose to stay, replied that in spite of everything, her faith still kept her there (although at other times, when she was feeling depressed, she would say it was her lack of skills necessary to survive ‘on the outside’ that prevented her leaving).

Sister Raluca, who came from an urban intellectual background told me that, on finally being allowed to stay at Horezu, her first impression was that it was full of flowers and she felt she was living “in the garden of the Mother of God”. However, years later, realism had set in. “Why do you keep coming here?” she once asked me. At my reply that I thought it a peaceful, other-worldly place, she burst into laughter. “Ha, ha, that’s good! The only difference between living in the world and in the convent is that here you are stuck with the people you dislike and you will never ever get away from them”. For many of the strongly committed novices like Raluca, the initial depression interpreted as a sign of their calling had arisen from feelings that life in the world had nothing worthwhile to offer. They were longing to lead an extra-ordinary life, and cited the lives of saints, which they saw as heroic, as their ideal.

While Raluca had joined because of an interest in mysticism, a few other novices were attracted to spiritual life and the convent partly as a shelter from family and personal problems. These later left, saying that although at first they had been happy, as the years passed they felt increasingly plagued by loneliness, boredom and a lack of fulfilment. “You feel like year after year, until you die, you will be doing the same things, over and over again, like a robot”, one sister told me. Others, like Vera, wished to leave but felt trapped because, having no education or job skills, they could not see a way of surviving in the world. As a palliative, she developed a passion for hitch-hiking with Turkish trucks, and she never travelled in any other way (this was rather original for a nun, since it was the prostitutes’ chosen way to travel abroad). Every few months she would ask the abbess for permission to leave, claiming either the need of a medical check-up or to see her confessor. Then, as she described it, “I wait for a beautiful, shiny truck and hail it down. It never fails. I prefer Turks, be-

cause Romanian drivers ask you all kinds of questions, they are too nosey. With Turks, it's the other way around". She did not really make a secret of her adventures, and even claimed they had a moral side, enabling her to convert the heathen. Such was the time when her truck was caught in a heavy electrical storm in a mountain pass. The driver started praying to Allah, but she reprimanded him: "forget Allah, with him we'll end up in the river. Here, make the sign of the cross and you'll see we'll be spared". He did and they were saved.

### ***Duhovnicia* (the Task of the Confessor)**

"Each person has the duty to know who his is, that is, to try to know what is happening inside him, to acknowledge faults, to recognise temptations, to locate desires; and everyone is obliged to disclose these things either to God or to others in the community and hence, to bear public or private witness against oneself. The truth obligations of faith and the self are linked together. This link permits a purification of the soul impossible without self-knowledge" (Foucault 1997: 242)

In the essay 'Technologies of Self', Foucault argues that Christian monastic obedience was, in some respects, akin to the 'philosophical love' relationship between master and pupil in late Greco-Roman philosophy, but differed from this in what he considers a crucial respect: it "is not based just upon a need for self-improvement, but must bear on all aspects of a monk's life. There is no element in the life of the monk which may escape from this fundamental and permanent relation of total obedience to the master" (Foucault 1997: 246). He cites Cassian, one of the main architects of Western monasticism, invoking "an old principle from the oriental tradition" (the early organisers of Western monasticism drew heavily on insights acquired through journeys to study monasticism in the East): "Everything the monk does without permission of his master constitutes a theft" (Foucault 1997: 246). This kind of obedience, Foucault argues, "is complete control of behaviour by the master, *not a final autonomous state*. It is a sacrifice of the self, of the subject's own will. This is the new technology of self. [...] The self must constitute itself through obedience" (Foucault 1997: 246, emphasis added). Foucault (1997: 225) defines 'technologies of self' as:

“Certain kinds of training and modification of individuals to acquire specific skills as well as attitudes, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations upon their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves, in order to attain a state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality”.

From his analysis, it follows that Christians, and particularly monks and nuns, use such technologies of self in order to refashion themselves into Christian persons or selves. Although Foucault is discussing early and Medieval Christianity, rather than its modern forms, his theory of technologies of self can, and has been used in order to read religious ascetic practices in the contemporary world (Laidlaw 2002).

Yet how wonderfully clear and logical Foucault’s analysis of ascetic methods appears in contrast to the messy human relations that form the subject of this paper. The problem is that historical texts, on which Foucault bases his analysis, give only inadequate accounts of what ordinary monks and nuns were supposed to believe and do, seen through the eyes of the religious specialists who produced these accounts. The ideal type produced by Foucault generates interesting insights, but it remains an ideal type. If we want to understand how monks and nuns implement (or fail to implement) the technologies of self discussed by Foucault, it is important to look at the lives and choices of actual individuals, as I shall now do. In this section I shall examine two related themes. First, I shall look at how Romanian Orthodox confessors and nuns view the task of confession. Second, I shall examine what bearing this relationship has upon nuns’ understanding of their own selves.

Having entered the convent only to discover that life there fell short of their expectations, young nuns at Horezu often saw the relationships with their confessors as unique sources of solace and much-needed advice. They went to great lengths to cultivate these, even if it meant disobeying the abbess. Most of the time, this was not simply a subterfuge to gain a spell of freedom. Rather, many nuns told me their personal relationship with their confessor helped them keep their sanity and deal with the conflicts they were experiencing inside the convent.

I would argue that the Orthodox understanding of the task of the confessor, *duhovnicia*, is not as legalistic as the view of confession Foucault develops on the basis of Cassian’s writings. This is not just because Cassian is not part of the Orthodox Canon. St. Basil, who is the author of the monastic Rule, is also very strict and ap-

pears to be closer to Cassian in his views than to today's Romanian Orthodox confessors. Rather, it is possibly due to the way in which the interpretation of the Church Fathers has developed in Orthodox tradition—away from harsh penances and a focus on sins, and towards a more 'human' and long-term relationship which is reminiscent of psychotherapy. In discussing *duhovnicia*, I shall quote extensively from the remarks of Arsenie Papacioc, a well-known super-monk. However, his points are very consistent overall with the views of other super-monks (e.g. Cleopa, Paraian, Popescu, Galeriu, Popa & Parvulescu in Magdan 2001), and with what I was told by the nuns.

Some of the most accomplished Orthodox confessors describe their task as a psychological art. Its object is to intuitively find the right approach to making each person trust and respect him enough to sincerely repent their sins, and to inspire them, by word and example, to change their lives. This is one of the reasons why some of the charismatic super-monks, who possessed this art, were in such high demand.

Once a committed believer has been accepted by a confessor, the relationship is a long-term exploration of one's self. The confessor is not allowed to accord absolution until he has satisfied himself as closely as possible that all one's significant transgressions have been talked about. This can mean many visits, each of which is like a psycho-therapy session, in which one's family life, thoughts, aspirations and feelings are discussed at length. Sister Elena, whose confessor was considered exceptionally charismatic and gifted, had to undergo quite a lengthy such process despite being a theology student, and therefore presumably committed to the faith already. I have myself also undertaken confession with this same confessor, a highly placed cleric in his seventies who had been imprisoned by the communists and had an impeccable record within the church. Although this involved a discussion lasting over an hour, sins (in a narrow, legalistic understanding), were hardly touched upon. At the outset, I was asked to read aloud from a booklet a confession written for nuns, consisting of a comprehensive list of possible sins. Afterwards, I was asked about my family and past experiences in a manner that seemed aimed at probing what it was like to be me, subjectively. The focus was less on my faith, than on empathetic listening, and on probing for areas of conflict and suggesting possible ways of resolving this, to bring about closure. Father Exarh had no knowledge of Western-style psychotherapy and, from what I have been told, he was not unique in using such techniques. In the end, he concluded, "you have had a hard life", and recommended that, since I

had previously confessed only once, as a child, many more such sessions were needed before absolution could be given.

According to Arsenie Papacioc (1994), one of the super-monks,

“The hardest part of priesthood is *duhovnicia* (the task of the confessor). Very little of it is learned, *it depends on an inner gift*. The confessor has to have this intuition, to know what is in [the spiritual son’s heart]. You first have *to make yourself a brother to him, so as to get to some hidden, delicate things*. Confession is not just a moment, it is a permanent movement in our lives” (emphasis added). “A good confessor understands the spirit rather than the letter of the canon, and knows how to apply it according to the stage of repentance at which the sinner is”.

The confessor combines the two contradictory roles of judge, standing in for God, and of scapegoat who takes upon himself the sins of those he absolves. As a judge, his power is absolute: “I want the one who comes to me to truly see the unlimited power of the confessor” (Papacioc 1994). This power, however, comes with great responsibility: “We kill as many souls as we allow to condemn themselves. [...] The sin must be told with its taste and its essence, it must be deeply felt” (Papacioc 1994). The confessor assumes the pollution of all the sins of those he absolves. Once he has given absolution, all the sins of the person confessing are transferred upon him.

I would argue that as a result of their ‘psychotherapeutic’ relationship with the confessors, as well as the psychological stress of convent life (due to lack of privacy and freedom), young nuns were made more painfully aware of their own selves than they had been prior to entering the convent. To paraphrase Foucault (1997: 249), *they were compelled to decipher themselves in regards to what was forbidden*. However lax in practice, convent life forbade a great deal: freedom of travel was severely curtailed, privacy was only relative and always open to invasion by superiors, one was separated from friends and family and communication with the outside was very infrequent (they could visit their family once a year). Feeling lonely in the midst of the community was a common complaint. As one young nun, sister V. asked me, reflecting, I think, on her own desires:

“Don’t you wish you had a home? Somewhere to be, when you are hungry and tired? When you are sad? When you encounter mean people? Doesn’t it affect you? For example, if you had to be always around a colleague and saw their mean traits, and nevertheless, you had to stay there, and work with her as she is, to pretend you don’t see how she is... There are these

situations when you can't tell people what you think, because they can't take it, they would hate you more afterwards... I guess if you travel a lot you don't have to stay with the people you can't stand. That's an advantage".

"I have a hard time", she continued, "there are all kinds of stresses, I don't like it here any more. I don't know, now I think it was better if I had not left the world. Now it's more difficult [to return]". "You know how it is to be a stranger among strangers, you lack affection... it's not like your people, your family, parents... I miss something different". This nun's observations suggested to me that, while previously she had defined herself through her relations to other people (a relational view of the self), now she felt uprooted and forced to face the realities of her own individuality. Since she could not form close relationships within the convent, she was forced to become more and more individualistic.

Monastic life confronted novices with an extremely difficult dilemma: on one hand it made them increasingly aware of their own individuality, of unique needs and desires, while on the other it demanded that this individuality be suppressed and dismantled. The very things that had become increasingly precious to sister V. whilst living in the convent—her memories, her private thoughts and feelings (all of which reinforced her individuality)—would have to be given up. This contradiction between the twin processes of discovery and rejection of the self made monastic life particularly bewildering and stressful.

Restrictions and surveillance were ever-present, as one's dress, speech, gestures and actions were under constant scrutiny. "There goes the Securitate", Vera would joke, pointing out one of the nuns who were considered to be the abbess' spies. As a result, nuns told me they tended to become increasingly aware of a need of autonomy, privacy and ways to express their individuality. Thus, reification of the self increased the stress and conflict they experienced. Everyone felt this dilemma, but they responded to it in different ways.

One response, adopted by Sister Raluca and a few others, was to "keep your head down and do your duty and stay out of internal politics". These novices made an earnest effort to follow the process of self-transformation described in books, by giving up things they valued (Raluca gave up books, another sister, Irina, gave up singing in church, although she had the best voice in the convent), and practicing ascetic disciplines as well as they could.



Another response was rather closer to resistance, although many of the novices who adopted this strategy were committed to becoming nuns, and did not view their actions as resistance. These novices were trying to shore up their autonomy and sustain their individuality through secret, private practices and strategies of circumventing the control of their superiors. Two areas in which they were constantly trying to reclaim control were consumption and travel. In this restrictive and dis-empowering environment, humour and small individual actions provided temporary relief. For instance, most of the nuns greatly valued personal items that reaffirmed their unique individuality. Collecting and showing photographs of oneself, one's friends and family was a generalised obsession, as was the desire to obtain good cosmetics, undergarments and shoes. I once saw a novice, upon being paid her nominal salary by the convent, spend the entire sum buying things from the village store. Having a few pennies left, she was obsessively repeating, "what can I buy with this, what can I buy with this?" The saleswoman from the local store told me novices would also place orders for items of lacy lingerie. On another occasion, two novices asked me to buy them a whole box of chewing gum, since they were too embarrassed to do so themselves. "We do not use the gum", they explained, "we just need the Titanic stickers, because we trade them amongst ourselves". Some of the more 'devious' novices had crushes on Leonardo di Caprio, kept abreast of Britney Spears' latest exploits (I was asked to bring them magazines), listened to pop music (asking me to buy them tapes) and even used make-up, though only in private. Several novices and some seniors were also very interested in electronic gadgets and mobile phones (which of course allowed unrestricted communication with the outside world).

While this kind of consumption was against the rules, the consumption of religious objects (icons of saints, beads and crosses, blessed water and oil and so on) was acceptable, and nuns assiduously collected and traded such objects, most of which were brought from pilgrimages to sacred places, and thus scarce and precious. They also spent a great deal of energy developing plans to go on pilgrimages abroad, either with the help of wealthy sponsors who were friends of the convent and became close to particular nuns (as it happened in Mother Marcia's case), or, as in Cristina and Elena's case, with the help of their confessor who arranged their trip to the United States, or in Raluca and a few other novices' case, through their own private arrangements with a priest from the Ukraine. The ideal then, seems to be not to completely withdraw and repress one's desires, but rather to socialise these desires, aspirations

and individuality so that they were no longer 'of the world', but rather 'of the world of Orthodoxy'. Misbehaviour could be turned to positive uses because it allowed novices to creatively adapt to life in the convent, and achieve a measure of fulfilment. In doing so, they were then able to make a positive to the life of the institution, something which could not happen if they remained unhappy and depressed.

## Conclusion

My thesis focuses on the blurred boundaries and the mutually constitutive relationship between the convent and the world. The analytical gaze focuses on the ways in which boundaries are constantly challenged both from within and without, and reconstructed through daily practices on both sides. I have chosen this vantage point because I think that it is here, at the boundary, that each of the two worlds becomes aware of its difference, but it is also here that common points appear (not just a shared humanity, but also common interests that can form the basis of partnerships). Theoretically (according to monastic ideology) the convent world ought to constitute itself in opposition to the lay world, and strive for greater insulation, not allowing "the world to come into the convent", as one nun put it. This is not, however the case now, nor does it seem to have been within the living memory of my informants, the oldest of whom had spent 80 years in the convent. Instead, the relation was one of flexible, loose complementarity. By taking their vows, the nuns said they felt themselves to have become part of a different order, but this did not translate into a rejection of their former selves. They brought with them, within this new order, their own individual baggage. They maintained relations with relatives and friends, treasured individual possessions, both those with religious meaning and those with purely personal, sentimental meanings, and even owned part of their family land at home.

Thus, the shifting boundary between the convent and the world, which constituted the frontline in the warfare against temptation or for self-transformation exists inside the minds of individuals. Through their everyday actions, either open and public or intimate and secret, nuns are constantly building up and dismantling oppositions between themselves and the non-monastic other. Behaving appropriately in front of lay visitors (appearing as a monastic face) is considered important and proper, but in fact many nuns I spoke with set very little store on such appearances.

On a larger scale, the boundary between convent and world is played out in the way the institution, through its leaders, interacts differently with various lay-people, such as politicians, people who work for the convent, important visitors, tourists, pilgrims and so forth. Preferred visitors are allowed to see freely behind the screen of proper behaviour, to interact and engage openly with the individuals behind the robes. The cultivation of such interpersonal relations has in the past and continues to translate into economic and political capital for the convent, and also into symbolic capital for individual nuns or groups of nuns, who then use the leverage of these connections to manoeuvre themselves into positions of greater power within the convent. So in a very real sense, the power structure within the convent is altered precisely through the nuns' ability to mobilise resources, both human and otherwise (access to special kinds of knowledge not widely available and to scarce goods) from *outside the convent*, in other words, their empowerment depends on their ingenuity in developing strategies to successfully circumvent the convent/ world boundaries! Conversely, their leverage in most of these relations with outsiders, what makes them desirable as partners in reciprocal exchanges, comes precisely from the fact that they are nuns and as such objects of strong curiosity, desire or respect.



**Young nuns in the 1920's, wearing their 'obedience hats' and work uniforms, after the introduction of stricter community life. The oxen, called Leu and Simbotin, used to belong to Visalia's aunts, who regretted having to give them up to the 'obste'.**



**The nuns' weaving workshop (1920's).**



The nuns and the orphans they cared for (1944).

Visalia with her brother and sister in law.



A nun and her orphan apprentice.



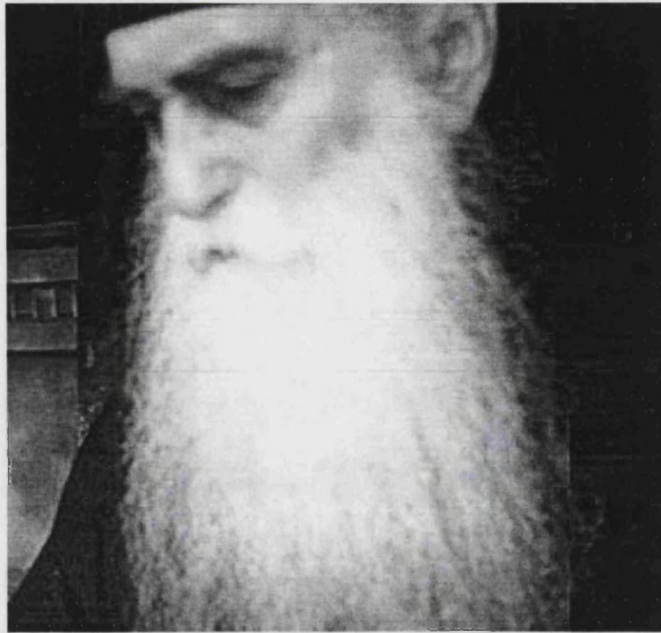




**One of Horezu's elderly nuns sitting in church during Vespers.**



**A monk and pilgrims visiting the relics of St. Gregory at Bistrita convent.**



**Father Arsenie Papacioc, one of the best known super-monks.**



NE VORBEȘTE  
PĂRINTELE  
CLEOPA  
14

**Father Cleopa, another famous super-monk, on the cover of one of his books.**

## CHAPTER 5

### **POTEMKIN DEMOCRACY? ELECTIONS IN A WALLACHIAN VILLAGE**

Discussion between two lorry drivers in a bar:

“Man, it was better before, now we’ve been invaded by capitalists! I went up the Olt valley, what do I see? About ten new villas!”

“What capitalists, you idiot? Who are these guys with villas over there? Don’t you see they’re still the communists, only now they’re called capitalists?”

At sunset on June 18<sup>th</sup>, the mobile urn for local elections arrived at Horezu Convent, stirring up great commotion during the evening service. The Convent’s administrator, Mother Marcia, a tall portly nun, rushed around the church, urging the nuns to go out and cast their vote. As a group of tiny elderly nuns limped outside to do their civic duty (grumbling that they no longer cared about this world’s politics), Mother Marcia was instructing one of them: “You say lost your identity card? Never mind! Here, take this ID, a woman forgot it here! Remember, now you’re called E. Popescu and are sixty-five! Go and vote for our candidate!” Intriguingly, in pressing the nuns to vote for Mr. Marin, the convent’s favourite for the mayoral seat, Mother Marcia was deliberately disobeying strict orders from the Bishop that they should vote Mr. Dumitru, the PDSR<sup>32</sup> candidate.

Why would Orthodox nuns take an interest in politics to the point of rebellion? Might they be spearheading a spontaneous pro-democracy movement, emancipating themselves and placing civic rights and duties before loyalty to Church hierarchy? That evening, while the nuns and I sat discussing Mr. Marin’s chances (with three radios tuned to different stations so as not to miss the election results) I remembered Ortner’s argument that the basic ‘otherness’ of monastics in Sherpa Buddhism (that is, their position outside the secular order) endowed them with the potential “to rupture the existing hegemony”. Monasticism, she pointed out, had “both a license and a charge to critique the existing order”, and also possessed the material ability and social prestige to bring about changes (Ortner 1989: 201). Could the nuns’ behaviour be seen in this light? At the same hour, in Horezu (the administrative centre of Romani), Mr. Marin’s competitor and mayor of eight years, Mr. Dumitru, was already in the



midst of victory celebrations. Why, I later wondered, had the villagers re-elected him, despite their seemingly deeply-felt complaints concerning his corruption and passivity during the two previous terms, and although his opponent appeared to be more technocratically oriented and credible?

In accounting for the surprises of the post-socialist transition, anthropologists and sociologists (see, e.g., Burawoy & Verdery 1999, Humphrey 2002) remind us that political and economic institutions are socially embedded, and that change does not occur in a vacuum, smoothly following a pre-planned course, but rather in a messy relationship with pre-existing arrangements and conceptions. This chapter investigates what the 'social embeddedness of the political' meant in the case of the local elections in Romani, and how this factor attained relevance in relation to debates concerning democratisation. The discussion explores what we might call 'socialist legacies' (e.g. clientelism, paternalism), as they occur in local praxis and discourse, and relates them to the changes brought on locally, as a result of the dismantling of the socialist system and of attempts to build, in its place, a diametrically opposed political and economic order. It is worth reiterating here the truism that common people are not acquainted with textbook models of democracy (focused on by political analysts and macrolevel planners). Instead, they draw their conclusions about democracy on the basis of direct experiences in their ongoing relations with political, administrative, judicial and economic agents operating in their immediate surroundings, from legislative measures affecting them, and the (often incomplete) information reaching them through media channels<sup>33</sup>. Thus, in order to interpret peasant workers' opinions and choices, as expressed through their voting behaviour, we must grasp what democracy and democratisation have come to mean, in light of the accumulated experience of the past ten years, from their perspective.

In examining processes of 'democratisation', we must keep in mind the inexperience of both professional politicians and citizens regarding how democratic institutions ought to function. The new political framework comes to life at local levels, such as the one examined here, through contestation between actors with different aspirations, expectations and understandings of what ought to happen. It is inevitable, in the absence of more developed expertise in democratic governance (and more consolidated institutions and procedures), that conceptions and relations of power in-habituated during the previous regime shall be brought into play within the new political structures. However, it is no less important to point out that the restructuring of

the political field has, in the years following the socialist collapse, produced significant novel dynamics of power. Examining local elections in Horezu/Romani sheds light on the ways in which new political features, such as the proliferation of political parties, or the ability of voters to mobilise and back preferred candidates are incorporated into local practice, replacing other political strategies, commonly used during socialism, but which are no longer practicable.

This chapter's aims are twofold. The first is to examine how the field of local power, in my research area, was structured under socialism, and trace some of the strategies people deployed in attempts to use this field of action to their advantage. The second aim is to explore how the configuration of political power has been changing locally: (i) how has the role of local administration shifted in relation to its subjects? (ii) how has the membership of the local elite changed, and how do the former occupations and political activities of elite members influence perceptions of their legitimacy? (iii) how are political parties conceptualised and incorporated into new power arrangements? (iv) what are voters' expectations regarding local administration and what strategies are emerging on the basis of participation in free elections?

I argue that the reconfiguration of political power, privatisation and the demise of most state-owned enterprises have led to an increasing economic and political dependence of peasant workers on the local administration. Accordingly, during local elections, both voters' choices and candidates' legitimacy claims centred on the ability to secure resources for local use (through party structures or personal connections) and promises of a more generous redistribution in favour of certain (targeted) groups. Because of these conditions, informal social and economic networks of exchanges impacted the choices of voters to a much larger extent than either ethical judgements (perceptions of the candidates' moral integrity), or party ideological identities. Negotiations between candidates and specific groups (the Rudari villagers, the nuns and Romanian villagers) showed that voters can and do mobilise to press demands, but competition between these groups also led to heightened tensions and resentments. The preoccupation with redistribution may seem a reversion to socialist patterns, but I argue it is as a direct consequence of post-socialist dynamics of power, which have manifested, on one hand, in an unprecedented increase of local administrations' redistributive power (through their responsibility for the restitution of land and forests)

and, on the other hand, in people's increased dependence on local authority handouts, due to a sharp decline of incomes caused by unemployment and high inflation.

## Socialist Power

Ken Jowitt (1998) has argued that Leninist regimes fostered a charismatic-traditional conceptual legacy which collides with legal-rational principles and impedes substantive democratisation. Let us explore, here, one area in which this observation seems especially relevant: clientelism. Clientelist relations were an unintended consequence of the structural make-up of the socialist system. As Verdery explains (1996a: 19-38), socialist systems were characterised by a fundamental tension between what was necessary in order to increase their power—the accumulation of resources—and what was necessary for their legitimisation—the redistribution of resources, so as to fulfil their promises to the population. This tension contributed to the emergence of an economy of scarcity. As a result of the state's chronic neglect of consumption, local economic agents, (and also local administrative structures) began striving to accumulate scarce resources on their own. In the process, the 'primary' economy was colonised by the clientelist networks of an 'informal' economy, responding to demands unfulfilled by the State. In this environment, local administrations legitimised themselves through their ability to obtain (through privileged connections) and redistribute scarce resources for local use. Such patterns of dependence are being reproduced within the current system because, although goods are now widely available, the financial power of the majority of the population has significantly decreased, producing a renewed dependency on handouts from the State.

How did these broader dynamics of socialism shape the role and techniques of the bureaucracy in mediating relations between the state and individuals, or, put differently, in allocating access to state power and determining how such power could be used? As Weber stressed in his analysis of bureaucracy, it is essential to the functioning of the modern (democratic) state that "the separation of the administrative staff [...] and of the workers from the material means of administrative organisation is completed (1946: 82). In other words, bureaucratic ethos implies the *segregation of official activity as distinct from the sphere of private life*. "Public monies and equipment are divorced from the property of the official" (Weber 1968: 68). The administrative (bureaucratic) staff must execute authority abstractly, regulating all matters (in

the interest of equality before the law) in conformity with impersonal rules and procedures. Bureaucratic rationality stands, for Weber (1968: 70), in “extreme contrast to the regulation of all relationships through individual privileges and bestowals which is absolutely dominant in patrimonialism”. If there is one point on which numerous studies of socialist and post-socialist systems dwell it is how informal practices and clientelar networks produced increasingly autonomous effects, effectively circumventing central directives (see, e.g. Yurchak 2002, Verdery 1996, Humphrey 1983, 2002, etc.). This can be seen as the turning of the bureaucratic ethos on its head: instead of the expropriators (civil servants) being expropriated by the state (an increasing separation from the means of administrative power which are the state’s rightful monopoly, expressed in the rule of law), in socialism the reverse pattern occurred: increasing *appropriation* of state power from below, and its dispensation according to patrimonial privilege. This means that although in theory the state reserved the power to regulate and control nearly all aspects of its subjects’ lives, in practice (given the chronic scarcity of resources) civil servants had every interest to appropriate the powers of office and conduct a brisk trade in ‘favours’. Consequently, subjects could recover a great deal of the control lost *a priori* as citizens of a ‘totalitarian’ state. In so acting, they did not openly challenge, but rather circumvented state authority and subverted the intentions of central planners.

To give an example from Romani, of how such freedoms were negotiated, I shall take the case, in the 1980’s, of the son of a local Rudari family who was getting married and needed to build a house. In order to obtain an allocation of land and construction materials, the family used their access to scarce resources such as meat, and their accumulated connections in the local bureaucracy. Using meat (a scarce commodity) as an object of exchange, they made informal arrangements with the meat collector to overlook the fact that their cow had just had a calf, which was then slaughtered and distributed informally among officials important to the project. The official in charge of land allocation found ways to grant them use of a piece of land. However, the only land available was set aside, in the official town development plans, for cultivation rather than house construction. Then, the man in charge of building authorisations was approached, and a loophole was found: it was legal to build barns on this category of land, though not houses, so the resulting construction was a barn on the ground level, and a house on top, being inscribed in official records as a barn. Similar transactions ensured access to construction materials through in-

formal arrangements with officials in state owned local enterprises. Thus, the inflexibility of central planning *fuelled demand* for the informal services of officials, and created the conditions for the power of office (invested by the state) to be turned against the state's intended aims, and serve the interests of subjects.

Socialist villagers were not free to elect representatives, express dissent, mobilise and openly lobby for changes, but they were free to negotiate, using the scarce resources they produced as leverage. This negotiation took place between the individual and officials within local estates of power, which I define, following Weber, as: "political associations in which the material means of administration are autonomously controlled, wholly or partly, by the dependent administrative staff" (Weber 1946: 81). The multiplicity, within one's immediate surroundings, of estates staffed by bureaucrats who appropriated the powers of their office, dispensing favours through informal arrangements, gave local people ample room of manoeuvre: in juggling many masters, they ultimately served themselves<sup>34</sup>. As my hostess said, "on two state salaries we managed to build a six-roomed house, take seaside vacations every year, and educate our kids. Now we have freedom and political rights, but our youngest (a doctor) has been unemployed for three years, and we can just barely scrape by from month to month" (N.T., pers. comm.).

## **New Power**

A major new development in Romani/Horezu has been the demise of many of the local estates—the state farm (IAS) and its various subsidiaries (constructions department, collection centres), local plants (producing dairy and meat products, bread, furniture), local crafts cooperative branches—all of which were unable to compete in the new economic environment, without state subsidies. In their final stages, before legislation regarding their privatisation was passed (for some, such as the IAS, this happened as late as 2001) such state-owned institutions were quite frequently 'plundered' by persons who were 'in the right place, at the right time'—occupying positions of authority within these estates—and could use the informal 'redistribution' of such resources as their office commanded as a strategy to increase their personal wealth and influence. As we shall see, several of the candidates for mayoral office had acquired wealth and enhanced their clientelar networks by such means.

The disintegration of socialist estates of production did not only result in skyrocketing unemployment, but also significantly altered patterns of local power. It meant the disappearance of the majority of the points of contact between the state and common people, of the loci where state power could formerly be converted into personal power and accessed by ordinary individuals to fulfil private needs. In the new post-socialist conditions, common people have lost much of their leverage for negotiation, because on one hand certain resources they could produce are no longer scarce and valuable (e.g. meat), and on the other hand, the loss of jobs in state-owned enterprises means loss of access to ‘job perks’ (which could be traded) and to cash. As a result, they feel disempowered in relation to local authority structures, and forced into a relationship of dependence.

Political and economic power overlapped in socialist local estates, and the possibility of advancement through Party membership was open to virtually all estate employees. In the post-socialist environment, this plurality of loci of state power has been eliminated, with political power being concentrated in the hands of local administration, and economic power in the hands of a few successful private entrepreneurs. The new local elite’s independence has increased because, with the removal of scarcity and pervasive state regulation, the networks of useful connections have been redefined, and now tend to spread laterally and upwards, towards other successful locals or elites above. All the ‘small people’ who wielded some power due to the scarcity of resources they could control (through their jobs or household production), and were formerly bound into these networks are now no longer important to the emerging elite. “Politicians have businesses, everything they want, and they have nothing to do with the rest of the population, with us. What do they care that I have to stand here in the rain [to sell pottery]?” (L.P. pers. comm). One exception to this rule is local politicians’ need of voter support. As a result, while during socialism individual connections and negotiation skills made all the difference in common people’s dealings with political power, now it is group mobilisation that can increase chances of obtaining concessions in exchange for votes. This reality was recognised by both candidates and voters in the elections I describe.

Assessing the post-socialist changes, a group of Romanian social scientists (V. Pasti, M. Miroiu, C. Codita) argue that what is emerging *en lieu* of substantive democratisation is a *subsistence culture* accompanied by ‘display-case’ (or Potemkin) democracy, which proudly exhibits the proper democratic institutions, while conceal-

ing the fact that these are being used only minimally (Pasti et al. 1997: 129). The metaphor of the 'display-case' (*vitrina*) invokes the practice, during socialism, of keeping foreign goods for display rather than use. Survival society and display-case democracy nurture each other, fuelling the following trends: (i) the separation of political life from social and economic realities; (ii) the strengthening of administrative authority; (iii) the decreasing influence of civic society in the public domain, civic minimalism and an under-structured public life. This 'minimal democracy' carries the risk of transformation into an oligarchic system, with a small number of elite groups using political power to protect their privileges. The question is thus, whether democratic duties, rights and freedoms tend to be 'shelved' in this manner, yielding their place, in everyday praxis, to more immediately useful (and less exotic) 'lived-in' arrangements.

## Power Coalitions and Political Identity

Like many Romanian political commentators, Pasti *et al* see the parties' failure to develop ideological identities, clear-cut doctrines and coherent strategies for dealing with current problems as a sign of dysfunctionality specific to post-socialist political life. They argue (1997: 137-8) that all post-socialist political parties have oriented themselves mainly towards the recuperation of some form of the past. This may occur either through the incorporation in political life of various sections of the former socialist nomenklatura, or through the legitimisation of parties via claims of continuity and restoration of the pre-socialist past (in the case of the 'historical' parties). This focus on the past as a source of legitimacy is interpreted as a symptom of the parties' "flight from the Future", that is, their utilisation of symbolic capital resulting from identification with legitimate traditions in order to compensate for serious deficiencies in dealing with current problems constructively<sup>35</sup> (Pasti 1997: 138).

In a yet unpublished essay, Katherine Verdery (1996b: 30) questions the usefulness the assumption that parties ought to have a political identity:

"Why [does] one need resort to the concept of [political] 'identity', when the only answer one can offer by using it is that people's political identity is 'defective', or they 'don't have any'? Would we not be better served by questioning ideas of political party and political behaviour that presuppose stable identities? What if political parties in Romania are not organizations with stable identities but fleeting coalitions of friends, kinsmen, and allies, coalitions whose composition

is continually in flux and whose aim is not to present and sustain a party 'platform' but to secure a loose structure of association aimed at garnering resources in a highly insecure environment. Perhaps this sort of 'party' is the form of political action more appropriate to a situation like Romania's, in which long-term insecurity breeds scavenging as the most viable strategy."

Weber suggests that patronage and opportunism are embedded in the nature of party politics—"the management of politics through parties means management through interest groups" (Weber 1946: 96). "*All* party struggles are struggles for the patronage of office, as well as struggles for objective goals" (Weber 1946: 86). It seems logical that, as power is reshuffled in the post-socialist context, there will be many interest groups (parties) competing for a bigger piece of the 'booty', and it seems also fair to expect that smaller parties will eventually merge with more influential ones in order to increase their chances in the competition for positions in government<sup>36</sup>.

The second point is that, for Weber, as for Gafencu in the introduction, the vocational politician is a political ascetic, obeying his own discipline of conscience and trusting in rational persuasion rather than demagoguery and charisma. Weber attributes stability and higher standards within the administration to an increasingly enforced separation of the civil servants from the political class. "According to his proper vocation, the genuine official [...] will not engage in politics. Rather, he should engage in impartial 'administration'" (Weber 1946: 94). As we have seen, this separation was emphatically not a feature of the socialist system, and it will take time and specific legislation to develop.

For the present, Romanian parties remain largely amorphous coalitions (for a discussion of local power coalitions in Romania see Verdery 1996a: 168-228) backing charismatic leaders in the competition for government positions (Verdery 1996a, b, Pasti et al. 1997: 139). Within party structures, it would seem that competition for power at central levels takes precedence over feedback from below and communication with the electorate, which are left largely to local branches and the administration. The pattern of power within party organisations, according to Pasti, tends to be rigidly hierarchical, with 'the territory' being maintained in a relationship of clientelist dependence to a paternalist centre. This emphasis on subordination generates tension between centre and territory and prevents lower-tier organisations from introducing local interests and socio-economic realities evident at their level into national policy, that is, blocks feedback 'from below' and accentuates the isolation of politics



from socio-economic realities. This suggests a trend towards centralisation of power: just as local people are increasingly dependent on administration, administration is increasingly dependent on central party structures, which, when in government, can control the redistribution of resources to local levels (and, as everyone in Romania assumes, favour mayors from their own party).

Thus, in the Romanian post-socialist field, at least for the moment, political and economic power seems to be migrating upwards, towards ever-narrowing elite circles, as the rules of the 'strategic games of power' (Foucault 1997: 283) are changing, and as common people are subjected to a new kind of domination: rather than repression, the simultaneous seduction of an ever-increasing range of goods and experiences on offer, and virtual exclusion from experiencing these new kinds of freedom because of shrinking economic leverage (Bauman 1988: 96). For these reasons, the issues of access to and projected redistribution of resources by the prospective mayor constituted the axis around which these local elections revolved. As we shall see, the leading candidates sought to convince voters of their ability to obtain privileged access to resources from the centre, and pledged a more generous redistribution in the interest of voters who grouped themselves along the lines of occupational, ethnic or institutional memberships, and negotiated privileged access to resources for their group, in exchange for votes en masse. This strategic use of group mobilisation suggests that although common people may, at present, be under-involved in public life, they are not simply passive recipients of central policies.

## **Local Elections**

The 2000 elections had a special significance for those interested in understanding popular perceptions of democracy in Romania. According to Soros Institute polls, by 1998, 51% of Romanians felt they had better lives under socialism (qtd. Roustel 1998). Regret over the loss of socialist entitlements was fuelled not only by the sharp decline in living standards for the majority of the population, but also by the rapid disintegration of the national health care, social security and educational frameworks, the insecurity of new enterprise, a rise in violence, and so forth. 'From below', it appeared, as one of my informants put it, that "Romania is developing an unique blend of the worst parts of both [communist and capitalist] systems" (A.T. personal communication).

The 1990's had brought political stabilisation, reasonably free and fair elections, formal democratic institutions and the first alternance of power (in 1996). However, some commentators questioned the assumption that the country was on a teleological course to democracy. In a provocative study, Pasti et al. (1997) argued that the emerging order was an oligarchic one. In their opinion, political stability had been bought mainly by means of the piecemeal redistribution of state-owned property (mainly favouring the clients of successive regimes), while there had been little commitment to modernisation and reform. This style of governance resulted in a mutually reinforcing combination of 'subsistence culture' and 'display case' (or shop window) democracy, in which democratic institutions were proudly exhibited to foreign agencies, but made little difference to the actual everyday running of political affairs<sup>37</sup>. They concluded that the various institutions responsible for the administration of public power were poorly co-ordinated and that there was a marked tendency to strengthen the authority of the centre at the expense of dialogue with the electorate (Pasti et al. 1997: 142). Political coalitions, often indispensable in order to pass legislation (since the great number of political parties meant none had majority) proved fragile and ineffectual, and political life seemed increasingly isolated from and impervious to socio-economic realities. At local levels, ordinary people seemed to be retaliating against the perceived corruption at the top through "scavenging behaviour", stealing whatever was left of the state assets, and even 'consuming' the infrastructure: in Moldavia an entire village came out to take the tarmac off the road with pick-axes in order to pave their yards, irrigation structures were dismantled for similar use, and there were constant reports of the tapping of petrol pipelines and even the theft of electricity cables.

Expectations of freedom and social justice, which had been brought to boiling point in December 1989, were slowly frustrated throughout the 1990's, as subsequent developments failed to justify hopes of a clean break with the past. To use an image suggested by Jowitt (2000: 237) after the fall of socialism, Romania was like the flag of its 1989 revolution: the Leninist centre had been removed, but a great part of its institutional and socio-cultural legacy remained in place. This was not because the socialist experience was so conceptually "corrupting" as to make Romanians resistant to democratisation and a market economy (Verdery and Burawoy 1999), but rather due to inexperience and poor co-ordination in implementing economic and political reforms.

Macroeconomic policy in the 1990's was characterised by inconsistency, a short-term, crisis management orientation, and faltering commitment to reform, as successive governments shifted from a gradualist approach to shock therapy and back again, in an attempt to appease both voters and the IMF, on whose loans the country was now dependent (E.I.U. 1998: 14-19). While at the end of socialism Romania had no national debt—Ceausescu had fully repaid loans by selling food and raw materials abroad (the main cause of the legendary shortages of the 1980's)—by 1998 it had acquired a debt of 10 billion USD (E.I.U. 1998: 14). The IMF and World Bank made the release of further loans dependent on the implementation of economic measures such as fiscal austerity, price liberalisation, speedy privatisation and the reduction of state subsidies and tax breaks for agriculture and small business. These policies dealt a series of successive blows to the lower middle class, working class and rural<sup>38</sup> populations, who were in the process of re-orienting themselves in the new economic environment. Many private enterprises went under as a result.

Many of the new entrepreneurs had been victims of the dramatic rise in unemployment, as industrial and agricultural sectors contracted following the privatisation of state-owned enterprises. The official unemployment figure in 1997-98 was 8.8% of the workforce (E.I.U. 1998: 18), but this should be qualified by mentioning that roughly 50% of the population was retired (many of those who were laid off had taken early retirement on meagre pensions), and that there is a high proportion of 'unpaid agricultural workers' unable to claim unemployment because they did not have a previous job. The medium salary for the economy was around \$ 110, but this figure hid wide income inequalities (E.I.U. 1998: 18)—many top-level business executives earn \$ 10 000 a month—suggesting that significant numbers of employees were paid nearer to the minimum salary for the economy (\$50).

Consumer price inflation fluctuated wildly in the early 1990's, for example from 300% in 1993 to 28% in 1995, to 56% in 1998 (E.I.U. 1998: 19)—remaining roughly steady since then. This led to the constant depreciation of real wages and old age pensions<sup>39</sup> vis-à-vis steadily rising prices for foodstuffs, electricity, gas and other necessities (in my experience, utilities prices rose roughly every two months by as much as 15-20%). Just the cost of basic utilities for a flat in one of Ceausescu's tower blocks amounted to roughly two thirds of the minimum salary for the economy (\$ 50) in the summer of 2001, while during winter (adding heat) it came up to a full salary<sup>40</sup>.

Adding expenses for food, clothing and other basic necessities, as well as rent, the difficulty of month-to-month survival becomes obvious.

In agriculture, land reform has concentrated the majority (80%) of agricultural terrain in the hands of private owners (E.I.U. 1998: 28). This redistribution of state-owned property fragmented land into small plots, re-creating the pre-socialist pattern of subsistence agriculture. Agricultural production fell from 75% of the GDP in 1954 to 30% in 1997 (ib.id). The nearly total lack of mechanisation and unavailability of funds for private investment in technology (only 20% of all agricultural technology is in private hands), the unwieldy state-controlled system of agricultural produce redistribution, coupled with adverse weather conditions compounded rural poverty (ib.id), producing, Pasti argues (1997: 56-62), a regression to conditions characteristic of the early twentieth century. These dynamics, combined with IMF pressures to end the State's agricultural subventions, led to the demonetisation of agriculture which generated poverty for all the other rural occupational categories, seriously undercutting the development of local private enterprise (ibid). In my research area, the only enterprises breaking even or making occasional profits were bars, food shops and bread bakeries.

In addition, the judiciary, financial sector and other state agencies (particularly those responsible for privatisation) were linked to a series of corruption scandals. During my fieldwork, the collapse of the International Bank of Religions (which was, according to a credible report, a money-laundering operation of the Ukrainian mafia) and the National Investment Fund (a private institution that had been endorsed by the state, but whose administrators ran off with all the money), robbed thousands of the already disadvantaged (pensioners, minimum wage workers) of all their savings, prompting intensive nation-wide protests. In industry, unions claimed that the Fund of State Privatisation (the agency responsible for privatising state assets) commonly tried to bankrupt state-owned industrial firms—by co-opting their managers—before privatising them at derisory prices to government clients. Constant strikes by the disenfranchised workers had little effect on the government.

Thus, a great many people felt that the positive aspects of socialism, which had been built with so many sacrifices by ordinary people, were being speedily eradicated, and that the new political and economic order brought mainly insecurity and exploitation. Understandings of democracy, from a local point of view, were of course very different from textbook models of democracy (focused on by political

analysts and macrolevel planners). People drew their conclusions about the new system on the basis of direct experiences in their ongoing relations with political, administrative, judicial and economic agents operating in their immediate surroundings, from legislative measures affecting them, and the (often incomplete) information reaching them through media channels<sup>41</sup>. Democracy and market economy came to be equated mainly with economic decline, the disintegration of public services and the exclusion of the impoverished majority from the freedom promised by the Revolution, whether seen in political and economic terms. The only area of freedom still to be considered is religion.

The tendency was to blame the political elite for not doing their job. For instance, a priest who looked remarkably like President Constantinescu was frequently approached in the street by irate people who remonstrated with him: “why don’t you stop wasting your time walking around here, and go back to Cotroceni Palace and do your job?!” In view of this context, I expected to find quite radicalised forms of one or more of the following reactions: nostalgia and a desire to bring back socialism, or the development of a moral discourse concerning political action and political elite members’ involvement with the former regime, political apathy and low voter turnout, or, alternatively, mobilisation around ethnic or religious issues. I think the vote outlined below reflected a more sophisticated and moderate judgement than might have been expected.

### *Who were the candidates?*

No less than eleven political parties (and a pottery maker who ran independently in every election) competed in the Horezu mayoral race. Few of the parties had local branch offices, most meeting informally in the park or at the leader’s house, and communicating by word of mouth. Ordinary villagers perceived them as the personal cliques of one or another of the more prominent locals. For instance, when I asked a woman what she thought of the local Peasantist party (the leading party in the CDR coalition, which was forecast to lose in the election) she replied: “the ‘Peasantists’, ah, I know them, they all went to Ionescu’s wedding, they’re Bunescu’s group and he was the godfather of the bride!” (P.P., pers.comm.). In general, I found that people who lived in the town Horezu (the administrative centre) were more interested in joining political parties than the villagers of Romani. Some of the Romani village notables,

however, were party members: a few former communists, elderly men who were now retired, had joined the PDSR, and several of the local teachers had joined the centre-right (pro-reform) national liberal and democratic parties (PNL and PD). When I asked why they did not join a party, many villagers replied they did not have the time, and it was not worthwhile unless you had a real chance of getting something out of it. I noticed that the Romani people who had joined were either pensioners or people who were involved in public life through their jobs, such as teachers or trade union members (who worked in the few remaining state enterprises). No candidate from Romani competed for mayor—all candidates were residents of Horezu town.

One incentive to join a party, villagers told me, was the chance to gain a seat on the town council because, “you get free money [about 50 US dollars a month] to sit in on meetings and do crossword puzzles” (D.M. pers. comm.). Each party that ran in the election proposed a list of fifteen councillors and was assigned seats in proportion to the number of votes received in the first election round. Although the job of councillor was coveted, villagers believed the seats would go to people who were close friends of the party leaders, part of the inner clique, and they did not think ordinary people had a fair chance. Indeed, the party leader decided the order in which council nominees were listed, and thus their chance of getting one of the assigned seats, and everyone believed this was done on the basis of ‘subjective criteria’ such as personal connections. Although council meetings are supposed to be open to the public, in Horezu they were not, and I was denied access to one by the worried mayor<sup>42</sup>. When I related this, villagers laughed and said he probably didn’t want me to witness how the PDSR councillors (his group) were bickering with those from the other parties. Party politics was seen by the villagers as a concern of the idle (i.e. pensioners) or those who had a real chance to gain something (i.e. an extra salary) because they already occupied a position in local networks of power, which would give them enough leverage to get to the top.

Despite this pragmatic outlook, mayoral candidates were judged by villagers according to ethical standards, and those who were seen to have joined their parties ‘because of conviction’ rather than calculation were regarded more sympathetically. The main criterion used by my informants to evaluate conviction was their perception of the candidate’s integrity as a person, formed through personal interactions. For instance, the only woman in the race for mayor, a middle-aged teacher, received 99 votes, coming in third of the twelve candidates, because people whose children she

had taught considered her an upstanding person. Despite the tendency to evaluate candidates on ethical standards, character alone, or a history of persecution during socialism, were not enough, as we shall see. Her success was also due to the fact she ran for the Greater Romania Party which, due to its outspoken anti-corruption agenda, was seen by many locals as a supporter of the underdog and therefore a promising alternative to the parties that had already been in government and “not done much” (S.P. personal communication).

Twelve political parties, spanning the ideological spectrum nominated mayoral candidates. Keeping in mind the fact that ideological identities were fuzzy, we can approximate that in the running were: four right wing to centre right parties, Greater Romania Party (PRM), Right Wing Forces' Union (UFD), Alliance for Romania (ApR), and National Romanian Party (PNR); three left wing parties, the Socialist Party (PS), the Socialist Party of Labour (PSM), and the Socialist Democratic Party (PSD “CTP”); the Humanist Party of Romania (PUR), which is difficult to categorise, but generally described by people as “more nomenklaturists”; two ‘centre’ parties, the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the Democratic Party (PD), the governing coalition, the Democratic Convention of Romania (CDR), and one independent candidate. I shall now outline some of the candidates' background, mentioning whether they were seen by villagers as members ‘of conviction’ in the parties they represented, whether, during socialism, they were involved in local politics or occupied privileged positions in economic structures, and whether they were known to have taken personal advantage by ‘redistributing’ state resources for profit in post-socialist times. In parentheses, I include the number of votes each candidate received in Romani in the first round (according to Primaria Horezu 2000a,b)<sup>43</sup>.

The candidate for PRM<sup>44</sup>, an extreme right-wing party, was the only woman in the race (99 votes). A teacher, she was seen as a convinced PRM supporter, and was not involved in politics before 1989. The Right Wing Forces' Union candidate (8 votes) was a schoolteacher, the former assistant mayor of Horezu during socialism. Thus, he had been a member of the communist party, but according to general opinion, was even then opportunistic rather than convinced. The National Romanian Party candidate (6 votes) had formerly worked for the local agricultural association (IAS), where he ‘redistributed’ state resources, becoming wealthy. The Socialist Party (11 votes) candidate was, intriguingly, a former priest, whose father-in-law had died as a result of torture by the Securitate (this personal suffering did not seem to influence

voters). The Social Democratic Party (3 votes) was represented by the former mayor of Horezu during the socialist period. A tractor driver, he had been promoted to power by the Communist Party, but, as the votes show, had now lost all public support. The Humanist Party (PUR) candidate (26 votes) belonged to a well-established nomenklatura family. During socialism, his father held an important position in the state agency collecting meat and produce from farmers, where he 'redistributed' quite a bit of meat during times of scarcity and acquired great wealth. The Democratic Party (18 votes) nominated a younger man who works in the administration of the local coalmines, and was not involved in politics before 1989. The National Liberal Party nominee (22 votes) was a paramedic nurse, the leader of the local labour union of health-care workers (Sanitas). He was considered a passionate PNL supporter and had not been in politics prior to 1989. He had made his fortune from informal cross-border trade with goods from Turkey and former Yugoslavia, in the early nineties. The Democratic Convention (CDR) candidate (24 votes) had worked, during socialism, as an engineer at the local constructions *regie autonome* (a self-governing state monopoly), where, people stressed, he had extensively 'redistributed' construction materials to personal advantage. Finally, the independent candidate (3 votes) was a potter who ran in every election, and his candidacy was taken as a joke.

Now, we shall turn to the two candidates that distanced themselves clearly as a result of the first round, Mr. Dumitru (PDSR, 389 votes), already mayor of Horezu for two terms and Mr. Marin (ApR, 215 votes), the nuns' favourite, a wealthy entrepreneur. Both candidates had belonged to the socialist elite. Mr. Dumitru, former principal of the school in Romani, re-entered politics in the early nineties, joining PDSR (a party that absorbed a section of the nomenclature). He is not an entrepreneur, but people thought he had certainly used political influence for personal gain (for instance, to obtain profitable jobs for his sons). If Mr. Dumitru was a consistent PDSR supporter, Mr. Marin's attitude towards party politics was quite openly pragmatic. Thus, in an interview on local television he declared that he had been approached by several parties, and chose to run for ApR because of the higher eventuality of coalition with PDSR, which was forecast to win. This choice assumed voters would be swayed (as indeed happened) by the consideration that a mayor from an opposition party was much less likely to receive resources from central institutions. If, however, he ran for a party that was likely to enter into coalition with PDSR, his chances to be elected increased. Mr. Marin had worked as chief-engineer in the local state-owned



construction company which was led, for many years, by his father. The family became very wealthy as a result of the 'redistribution' of building materials. Their close relationship with the nuns of Horezu convent had developed when they provided the nuns with materials for a new roof, free of charge. Later, Mr. Marin obtained an influential position in the Bucharest central agency overseeing mine closures. He is now retired and—a fact salient to my informants—owns six flats and houses in several towns.

### *The First Round Vote*

Despite their disenchantment with democracy-as-it-appears-from-below, voters in Romani were not as apathetic as might have been expected. People dressed in their Sunday best and went to vote, the total number of votes cast in the first round of elections being 831, with 1439 persons on the electoral lists (Primaria Horezu 2000a,b). This turn-out of 57.7% roughly equalled the county average, but was over 10% greater than the national average (the overall Horezu turn-out in the first round was 58.3%). As a result of the first round vote, the following parties received seats on the city council (Primaria Horezu 2000d): PDSR (5 seats), ApR (4 seats), PRM (2 seats), PUR (2 seats), PNL (1 seat), CDR (1 seat), PD (1 seat). The vote clearly reflected disapproval of the governing parties (CDR, PD, PNL), and support for the opposition (PDSR, ApR, PRM). The allocation of council seats (considered most representative of the electorate's sympathies) suggests this was a *reactive vote*, reflecting the de-legitimation of the CDR coalition because of its poor performance. This conclusion was overwhelmingly confirmed by my informants, whose pet subject was frustration with the Coalition. Yet, despite disappointment with the advocates of economic liberalism, socialist parties were not considered a viable alternative, although most people felt that living conditions were better "under the communists". Instead of choosing radical solutions that would imply new risks, people opted for parties likely to endorse gradual economic reform and better social 'safety nets'. Rather than being superficial or confused, this vote reflects what, from the situated viewpoint of peasant workers, appears to be the best option, in light of the disastrous consequences of market reform on their standard of living: conservatism. This judgement is perhaps born mainly of a short-sighted, crisis-management orientation but, as Burawoy and Verd-

ery (1999: 2) note, “because the postsocialist moment means constant change in the parameters of action, actors tend to strategize within time horizons that are short”.

I was surprised to notice that there were seven mayoral candidates with communist nomenklatura backgrounds, to only four not involved in politics before 1989. Nomenklatura background alone did not seem a decisive factor in determining the level of support candidates received: for example, the former mayor received only three votes, while the two leading candidates (also nomenklatura) received votes in the hundreds. This supports voters’ explanations to me that what made a difference was not so much the past, but one’s current position. Not all of the former elite had adapted with equal success, some, like the former mayor, being left behind and forgotten. However, personal wealth and connections were not enough to secure support, nor was one’s character and standing in the community—for instance, the PRM candidate was very well liked and respected, and though she received 99 votes, it was not enough to compete against the leading two candidates, despite the fact that their characters, everyone seemed to agree, were less than unimpeachable. What seems to have made most difference in this round, paradoxically, are: (i) the parties’ chances to win power in the national elections, and (ii) the candidates’ reputed ability to obtain resources from central levels (either through party or personal connections). Everyone knew that the PDSR would most likely win by a landslide—the prediction proved right, as PDSR alone took an estimated 32 counties out of 52 in the first round of the local elections (Almasan 2000: 1). As the party was expected to win in the national elections, PDSR mayors were expected to have the advantage in the distribution of resources under the future administration. Therefore, the votes went to the PDSR and ApR candidates, since ApR was expected to join PDSR in a governing coalition. The large margin between these two and the other parties, as well as my interviews with villagers, suggested that expectations about the national elections were foremost on voters’ minds. The extreme right PRM also had some local support, largely due to its standing out as an alternative to the political establishment that had already been in power (PDSR and the CDR coalition members). Conversely, CDR, the ruling coalition at the time, was largely ignored, while PNL and PD, which were members of the coalition but had developed some loyal local memberships, each received one council seat.

## *Campaign issues*

All the party programmes revolved around the general, standardised set of promises described by Pasti et al. (1997: 135) in their discussion of the 1996 elections: (i) stopping economic decline and fostering recovery; (ii) developing the infrastructure; (iii) attracting investors in the area and fostering private initiative in order to create more jobs; (iv) providing subsidised loans for agricultural development (e.g. purchase of technology); (v) a better quality of education; (vi) retraining programmes for the unemployed; (vii) raising salaries and pensions to compensate for inflation; (viii) more honesty and professionalism in the administration, and so on. The actual focus of the campaign in Horezu was, as Verdery puts it (1996b: 27-8) “the battle over resources from privatisation” (the projected redistribution of state farm lands and forests) and on pragmatic local “modernisation” issues, such as: (i) hook-up to water pipes for the outlying villages, and to methane gas lines for the entire town; (ii) fostering tourism, attracted by Horezu Convent and the fame of local traditional ceramics, (iii) the creation of jobs in the area, (iv) road repairs, (v) measures to protect and improve the environment. The two issues that clinched the elections were hook-up to water pipes and the projected redistribution of land and forests (which were valued because wood for constructions and fuel was expensive). The first problem was explicitly addressed, while the second remained entirely implicit, fuelling rumour and speculation. Both problems converged on the voters’ implicit considerations regarding which of the candidates was more likely to carry out the redistribution of resources in their favour.

## *Underlying dynamics (socially embedded politics)*

My first meeting with a mayoral candidate was startling. I was staying at Horezu convent and the nuns asked me to translate the historical introduction to a group of German tourists. Upon joining the group, an extremely jovial man (with unbuttoned shirt and toupee) threw his arm around me and pinched me (though, to his credit, he abstained from doing the same to the nuns). He was the Right Wing Forces’ Union candidate (formerly assistant to the mayor during socialist times) and had brought the German tourists in an effort to demonstrate to rural voters his foreign connections and ability to foster the local market economy through tourism. Less than impressed, Romani villagers shrugged and complained about the tourists’ adop-

tion of a stray dog, who was taken, with passport, back to Germany: “why didn’t they take me instead?” they wondered wryly.

To be seen as generous and well-connected benefactors was the path to legitimacy preferred by the leading candidates, but the question of whom they were seen to benefit could also work against them, as jealous groups of voters competed over resources. For instance, Mr. Marin, the runner-up, was seen as favouring mainly the nuns of Horezu convent (he had sponsored extensive repairs of the monument), and, because of the latent competition between the nuns and Romani villagers over some of the convent’s former lands, on which villagers had built houses during the socialist period, this connection proved a disadvantage. In addition to the nuns, his main support base was among the people who lived in the administrative town Horezu. This section of the voters felt that, although Mr. Dumitru had been a ‘good’ mayor, he had failed to improve local conditions and was even less likely to deliver now, as he was drawing close to retirement. They wanted a mayor who was younger, more motivated and technocratically oriented, who would take charge, bring investors into the area, promote tourism and re-development of the closed state enterprises, which were standing idle while people had no jobs. The fact that Mr. Marin’s attitude towards party politics was quite openly pragmatic tended to be seen as an asset, suggesting to voters that his allegiance would be to the locality rather than to party power coalitions.

Although Mr. Marin came within 200 votes of winning, his chances were hurt by his failure to appeal to voters in the five outlying villages. “I don’t know him, why should I vote for someone I do not know?” was a frequent refrain in the of village. His attempt to win the vote of the Rudari villagers, by bringing a truckload of used clothing to the convent and asking the nuns to distribute these among the Rudari, also backfired, as Romanian villagers resented the privileged attention given to the Rudari, the Rudari complained that the nuns kept the best clothes for themselves and gave them the rags, and all villagers complained about his using the convent as an intermediary.

Mr. Dumitru, two-term mayor and the winner of the election, took advantage of both the distrust caused by Mr. Marin’s connections to the convent, and his failure to meet with villagers. Thus, before the second round of the elections, relatives of Mr. Dumitru were telling people that “if they voted for Mr. Marin he would give the river valley (the contested land) back to the Convent”. In fact, there was no indication

that the convent might want to reclaim this land, but people tended to be swayed by these rumours. In addition to using rumour, Mr. Dumitru actively targeted voters in Romani where he had, over time, built substantial personal connections, having been headmaster of the village's school during the eighties. His job as a teacher meant that he had given private lessons, over the years, to a great many local young people preparing for university exams—since university exams were extremely difficult during socialist times, teachers were commonly hired for private lessons during the last few years of high school, and this resulted in very close connections between teachers and the pupils and their families. This kind of social capital might provide an explanation why, at least in Horezu, so many high school teachers ran as mayoral candidates. Thus, Mr. Dumitru's strength was his local origin and visibility as former school director, mayor and prominent member of the community (he had numerous godsons and goddaughters). Many voters felt a sense of 'obligation' to him—they told me they felt they *owed* support to Mr. Dumitru in virtue of their history of relations with him.

He also relied on extravagant promises regarding resource allocation. For instance, water pipes had been laid during his previous administration, but the cost for connecting individual households to the line were prohibitive, especially for the poorer Rudari families. Mr. Dumitru's promise to subsidise poor households' water hook-up fees (lowering the tax from 800 000 *lei* to only 200 000 *lei*) won him the Rudari vote, which was decisive in the election. More than any other local group, the Rudari engaged in negotiations: "the representatives for various parties used to come from town and promise the stars and the moon to the Rudari, give them food and drink, and the Rudari would say, 'yes, we'll vote with you'. Then others would come and the same thing would happen. In the end they voted Dumitru because of the subsidies he promised. They say he sent jeeps to bring them into town to vote!" (C.M., local teacher). However, soon after winning office he revoked the subsidies, reinstating the original taxes. "But isn't he worried he will lose his legitimacy?" I asked. "No, because after this term he is retiring anyway, so he doesn't care!" (L.P. pers. comm.).

People knew that Mr. Dumitru had, in the past, failed to keep his promises. For instance, around 1996 money was collected to bring in methane gas pipes, but, with the change of government, the Horezu-friendly prefect who was going to arrange the transaction was replaced, and the value of the collected funds fell with inflation,

so people expected they would have to pay again. Resentment for Mr. Dumitru's lack of interest in local concerns was expressed in rumours that his son had received the contract to repair the roads after the water pipes were laid in, but pocketed the money. Just prior to the elections, lorries dumped a quantity of rough rock bought cheaply from a local stone quarry, on both sides of the main road in Romani (as a gesture towards repair). The piles of rock lay there for some time, being minced and spread around by passing cows. Villagers laughed at this belated gesture towards repairs. One man, who works in the quarry, commented: "as if I'm not completely sick of seeing rocks all day at work, now they've dumped them in front of my house too".

The re-election of Mr. Dumitru despite awareness of, and complaints regarding his broken promises suggests that the ethical dimension of a candidate's life was, for many of the poorer people, less relevant than pragmatic interests in the pending redistribution of subsidies, land and forests, which was to be carried out by the local administration during the next term in office. The number of former forest owners in the area was large, and forests were considered especially valuable assets, providing much-needed (and otherwise expensive) firewood, and construction materials free of charge. While townspeople were more interested in the development of local industry and supported Mr. Marin, villagers were vitally interested in having a mayor personally acquainted with them, rather than an outsider, in charge of the redistribution. As best I could ascertain it, their line of reasoning was as follows: if all politicians are corrupt (generally accepted premise), then it is better to elect one of your people than a stranger without ties in the community, because as a member of the community, he has been immersed in the local networks for a lifetime, and such informal relations represent valuable means of obtaining access to the mayor when needing to resolve one's individual problems. The finer implication here is that the ascendancy of the mayor, a powerful official personage, over the community is mitigated by the community's detailed knowledge and personal relations with him and his family, as well as by his inclusion in networks of exchange within the community. These two assets act as equalising factors in the increasingly uneven power relation between the *official* circle of local administration and ordinary people. This compensatory mechanism is essential to strategising in an environment where, as Jowitt (1999: 233) suggests, the basic inequality of the leaders and the led has long been axiomatic. In this context, a candidate's political and economic activities during the socialist past, as well as his

current 'private' dealings, even if questionable, do not constitute a deterrent for voters.

Although villagers felt Mr. Dumitru was the safest bet in view of their short-term interests (in property redistribution), uneasiness about his victory was expressed in the rumour that a voting stamp had disappeared during the second round vote in Romani, suggesting the vote might have been rigged. I assume that, had this been the case, Mr. Marin would have contested the election, and he did not, but this rumour might be seen as a social mechanism compensating for a kind of guilt by association, felt at re-electing Mr. Dumitru in spite of strongly-felt complaints regarding his alleged corruption and passivity. After the election, people would say: "Mr. Dumitru, damn him! He was elected only by the Rudari and the old people (*mosnegii*)! And he tricked them! Serves them right" (C.P. pers. comm.). Adding to the mystery of the stamp, when I sought documents on the election, I was told that all the individual voting sections' reports documenting the second round had somehow disappeared from the mayoral office, so I was unable to learn the turn-out in Romani, or how many votes were cast for each of the candidates. This information could have added a valuable dimension, considering that the nuns voted at the Lower Romani section, and most of the Rudari population at the Upper Romani one. According to the second round cumulative report, which was available, Mr. Marin received 1724 votes, and Mr. Dumitru 1914 votes (Primaria Horezu 2000c), with an overall voter turnout of 61%.

## **Group Interests and Mobilisation**

People's tendency to evaluate local administration on the basis of its redistribution of state-administered resources in their favour has been actively encouraged within the post-socialist system. In the past ten years, the local elite with access to political power (e.g. Mr. Dumitru's group) was able to control the redistribution of most of the formerly state-owned resources that were privatised. This created a broad field of action for local administration, increasing its influence by raising its redistributive power in an unprecedented manner. The trend continues, as the local agricultural association (IAS) entered liquidation proceedings, and the redistribution of forests was pending. By contrast, villagers feel less empowered than during socialism, because the balance of forces has changed: instead of many masters, one, local administration;

instead of leverage power, only sentiment, shared history and audiences with the mayor: “I, who have never in my life gone to beg for something, now went in audience to the mayor to ask for social assistance” (N.T., pers.comm.). Though the villagers tended to vote for Mr. Dumitru, they had, as we have seen, serious reservations.

The Rudari were the group most able to mobilise, although, as we have seen, ‘they were tricked’. Their ability to negotiate as a group may be due not only to the fact that they were targeted as such by the candidates, but to an increasing awareness of the possibilities of ethnicity as a basis for mobilisation, fostered, in recent years, by the fact that a very important Roma fair is held yearly on a site about ten kilometres from their village (Bistrita). This fair is attended by all the Roma leaders and their families, by politicians (government MP’s) and scholars, and the speeches and other cultural activities held there may have provided an impetus to the instrumentalisation of identity.

Returning to our initial question, what are the implications of the nuns’ resistance to Diocese orders to vote Mr. Dumitru? The nuns’ action resulted from a conflict of interests—the Diocese’s to support its PDSR allies (the Bishop is a member of this local coalition) and the convent’s to support a wealthy donor. However motivated, such an open challenge to hierarchical authority has the potential to rupture the ‘feudal’ logic of clientelar subordination (Pasti 1997: 146). In this sense, it points to the vulnerability of formerly consolidated alliances and allegiances in the pluralistic power environment that has replaced the communist Party’s monopoly. The nuns were in a more favourable position than the villagers to challenge entrenched local power, due to the Convent’s prestige and high political connections, which meant they were safe from retaliation from the local administration. This fact did not escape Romani villagers, who reacted with suspicion to the news of the nuns’ stance, arguing that it was motivated by economic greed. Their evaluation evokes the ‘us’/‘them’ polarisation (between the common person and the privileged elites), only this time with reference to the Convent itself, which is placed in ‘their’ camp.

## **Conclusion**

If we review these local elections, we can see some key points emerging. Firstly, conservatism and caution regarding economic reform are desirable options to that section of the electorate that cannot afford the further losses and risks required by



economic reform. Loss of faith in the political, administrative and legal structures exacerbates reliance on local informal networks and clientelar relations grafted onto the existing institutional structures. This remains the most successful problem-solving strategy in the present institutional environment, and it depends on maintaining influential and well-connected local persons in the key administrative positions. Such candidates are usually former nomenklatura members who have successfully adapted to the new system.

Second local administrations find themselves in a position of dependence on higher tiers of the administrative and party organisations, being unable to initiate dialogue within these structures, and effectively pursue local interests. Co-operation and communication within and between institutional structures are obstructed, and therefore, access to resources is ensured through clientelar relations. Pasti links the persistence of paternalist logic to a “deficit of governance” (1997: 141-9), resulting from the elites’ inexperience in implementing and managing the new political structures (as well as unwillingness to commit to change), which is compensated through a reversion to the familiar socialist patterns, within the new system.

Hence, and thirdly, the local elections presented here organised themselves around the generative principles of resource access / redistribution and clientelar relations. The final candidates in these elections ranked highly on both axes, clearly distancing themselves from those lacking such credentials. A novel development was the mobilisation of voters in groups which negotiated support for candidates in exchange for preferential redistribution. The most clear such cases are that of the nuns, and that of the Rudari villagers, and the resulting configuration in the vote was nuns and townspeople favouring risk, versus Rudari and Romanian villagers who, however reluctantly, felt they had to (conservatively) vote for the local candidate. The choices and strategies evident in these elections indicate that far from being apathetic or unable to understand the possibilities of the new political system, voters are actively exploring some of the avenues of political action, and making logical decisions in light of their circumstances and interests, but that their experiences often turn out to be negative and discouraging.

Lastly, while during socialism, ordinary people (at least in this non-collectivised area) had some leverage and several options in negotiating access to state power and turning it to private uses, nowadays they have far less. The growing inequality, paternalism, clientelism and focus on redistribution suggest that, as a result

of their intersection with market deregulation and liberalism, some key patterns generated during socialism have been enabled to fully blossom! It remains to be seen how the repertory of political rights provided by the new regime will be further explored by voters, and whether they will find ways to counterbalance the odds.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Recently, Romanians have voted again, and covering the elections, the Economist (2004) observed that however fragile the new democratic system may be, it is working, and Romanians are keen to explore all its possibilities. Visiting Romania again, I was surprised to notice subtle, but unmistakable changes. There was a surge of optimism and confidence following the election of Mr. Basescu, a ‘dark horse’ candidate (in the sense of not being a member of the former socialist elite) whose legitimacy derived from his strong leadership as mayor of Bucharest and his steadfast insistence that, should anyone be able to make a case of corruption against him, he would immediately resign and face prosecution. This attitude contrasted with that of Corneliu Vadim Tudor and others, who hid from corruption charges behind their parliamentary immunity from prosecution.

“It’s great”, Cristi M. told me, “everyone in Basescu’s government is a multi-millionaire! So they’re not going to try to get rich by exploiting their state jobs” (pers. comm.). The choice of Basescu confirmed my impression, based on the previous national elections, that voters wanted a leader with strong charismatic qualities, but also with a committed anti-corruption stance. The symbolic politics of the 1990’s had failed to make an impression, and the ideological conjunction of Orthodoxy and national pride had proven largely ineffective as a legitimating device. Ironically, however, the promising prospects of accession to the European Union seemed to have reawakened national feeling and led to new anxieties:

“How can they [the European Union] think they can ban us from slaughtering our own pigs at Christmas, and stop us from making moonshine? For 2000 years, Romanians have made their own moonshine [the national drink, *tzuica*, is never bought in shops by Romanians—real *tzuica* is always homemade] and slaughtered their pigs at Christmas” (M. M., pers. comm.).

There were also new grievances against the Hungarians: “Can you believe it? They’ve tried to copyright *palinka* (double-distilled *tzuica*) as a brand! But that is a drink everyone’s been making around here for thousands of years!”

This thesis has examined Romanians’ perceptions of democracy and market economy through the prism of religious revival and the instrumentalization of religious symbols by political elites. This angle has thrown light on the complex rela-

tions between the Church, political elites and ordinary rural Romanians, but it has disclosed mainly the latter's distrust of political processes, their caution and reluctance to engage. In this rural setting, it seemed that local political elites were becoming less interested in engaging with ordinary people than they had been in socialist times. Both themselves and the nuns tended to concentrate on cultivating relations with equally or more powerful others, while 'cutting' the local people out of such networks.

I have also sought to highlight how the shifting and porous boundary between the convent and the world allows nuns to flexibly relate to their environment, and actively pursue their aims, while excluding undesirable outsiders from interfering with their affairs. This boundary was an effective means of excluding the villagers from sharing in the convent's privileged access to resources. On their part, Romanian villagers (although internally divided) sought to surround their own community with a similar boundary, to be used as a means of deterrence against the Rudari, who were felt to be a threat to the 'natural', Romanian-centred, local order (because of the post-socialist reversal of fortunes, the Romanians' having declined, while the Rudari were prospering)—witness, for instance, rumours of their uncontrolled birth rate and worries about the expansion of their community.

Like the symbolic gestures of elite politicians, which emphasised the more distant history of the nation (relegated, in the eyes of villagers, to the realm of official discourse), Mr. Florescu's amusement village plan failed to connect with local concerns, and hence gained little support. However, it suggested to the various local groups new ways of tackling these concerns, such as for instance the rebuilding of the St. John hermitage, or trying to attract tourism by building fictitious links to characters like Dracula.

The convent remained aloof from such local strategies, relying on its own relations with political and economic elites in order to steer its course through the insecure post-socialist environment. Chapter 2 highlights the monastery/convent's remarkable adaptability to radical shifts in political and economic conditions, and the fact that, in its 300-year history, it had survived an impressive number of 'transitions'. Throughout its history, this monastic establishment had never relied on the faithful to supply its income, always depending on patronage from highly-placed political and clerical figures. Monastics living here, both monks and, later, nuns, have tended to be

quite protective of their independence, both in relation to the diocese and to the local community.

It is important to point out that, given its power in relation to the local community (which it originally owned, and later dominated) the monastery/convent tended to show restraint and generosity. An ethic of 'live and let live' seems to have been that preferred by the monks, and later the nuns, although, as mentioned earlier, a certain distance from the local community was always maintained. The nuns I knew explained this as the proper role of the convent: it was a separate institution, and its identity derived from its aloofness—its concerns were manifestly different from those of the world around it.

However, the monastery/convent was particularly vulnerable to intrusions from the state. Increasingly, the convent's assets have been expropriated by political elites in search of legitimacy (from Prince Cuza's redistribution of monastic estates, to the present politicians' exploitation of the convent's reputation and history). During socialism, the survival of monasticism was itself threatened, and the convent survived mainly as a result of the intelligence and ruthlessness of its leaders. Many of the nuns I knew, including Visalia and Gabriela, whose presence dominates chapter 3, tended to be strong and secure characters. I felt that their security was reinforced by a feeling that, as a result of their choice to live monastic life, they had become 'extraordinary persons', and by the fact that they were the 'faces' of an institution (the Orthodox Church), with a long and impressive history. Charisma played an important, though not readily apparent role in this, because it gave them the confidence that, in speaking to outsiders, they were speaking not just for themselves, but rather, they were expressing the views of God.

Thus, although Horezu became a kind of socialist estate under communist rule, the nuns did not feel intimidated by their powerful visitors, but rather managed to commend both respect and gratitude for their hospitality, building up lasting relations based on links of reciprocity and friendship (several former communist friends, though now retired, continued to come to the convent for a yearly retreat).

This particular blend of Orthodoxy and politics was difficult to escape for young nuns who wished to reorient convent life towards different goals. A large portion of the convent's population consisted of novices recruited after 1990, most of whom were dissatisfied with the 'old school' orientation of the present leadership. Yet, nuns like Cristina and Elena discovered that the power structure within the con-

vent could best be altered with the support of powerful outsiders—in their case, their confessor. Thus, young nuns' ability to mobilise sources of power from outside the convent (by circumventing the convent-world boundaries) was essential, if they wished to change life within the convent.

Chapter 4 further underlines this complementarity of the convent and the world. Through both intimate and public actions, nuns were constantly building up and dismantling oppositions between themselves and the non-monastic other. Their ability to command resources from outside the convent, whether these were restricted knowledge, scarce goods, or friendships with influent outsiders increased their ability to influence conditions within. So, in a real sense, the power structure within the convent was altered by the nuns' ability to mobilise resources from outside. At the time of my research, a change in the convent's priorities seemed to be occurring: while the older nuns, who were the leaders, continued to rely on relations with politicians, younger nuns were interested in transcending national boundaries, and engaging with churches and diasporas abroad.

The final chapter returns to the issue of democracy, and to a panoramic view of the Horezu area. The redistribution of scarce resources was a key issue in these elections, even more important than corruption, which was the issue that dominated the national elections. While the Horezu townsmen and the nuns were willing to take risks, and favoured a new mayoral candidate with a technocratic background, the Rudari and Romanians aligned behind the current mayor who, although ineffectual and allegedly corrupt, would be, it was hoped, more receptive to the community's needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Gafencu had been raised and educated in Switzerland, served as a pilot in the French forces during WW1 (being decorated for bravery), and was one of the rising young stars of the leading opposition party at the time (the Peasantist Party).

<sup>2</sup> This term referred to the generation of intellectuals who had come of age after the unification of the Romanian kingdom with Transylvania, a long-held national aspiration. The generation included philosophers Emil Cioran and Constantin Noica, and playwright Eugen Ionesco.

<sup>3</sup> In Romanian history, the period of the 1990's bears interesting parallels to the 1930's. Both periods followed the fulfillment of deeply-felt political aspirations—the achievement of full territorial unity after the annexation of Transylvania through the Versailles Treaty, and the end of socialism in 1989. Both were marked by accelerated transformation, economic and social chaos that led to widespread disenchantment with political life, and yearnings for a charismatic leader capable of realizing the utopian promise of a new era. During both periods, Orthodoxy became highly visible in the political arena as a source of legitimacy.

<sup>4</sup> Visalia, who was at school there at the time, still remembers her delight at this gesture.

<sup>5</sup> Since (with a few exceptions) Orthodox Churches have traditionally held virtual religious monopolies within the states with which they overlapped, their missionary activity is nowhere near as well-developed as that of the Catholic Church.

<sup>6</sup> It must be noted here that the 'energy' metaphor is quite old within Orthodoxy, having been developed in the Middle Ages by St. Gregory Palamas. Recent spiritual practices also claiming to manipulate energies (such as New Age, Yoga, etc.) have struck a chord with Orthodox faithful partly because they were already using the energy metaphor themselves.

<sup>7</sup> The injunction to "give to Cesar what is Cesar's and to God what is God's" is interpreted to mean that the Church must respect the authority of the Cesar which, whatever its manifestations, was instituted on earth in accordance to God's will.

<sup>8</sup> The Medieval Catholic Church seems to have had a similar outlook on the matter. As Pope Boniface wrote in 1296, "*both are in the power of the church, the spiritual sword and the material.* But the latter is to be used for the church, the former by her; the former by the priest, the latter by kings and captains but at the will and by the permission of the priest.... If therefore the earthly power err, it shall be judged by the spiritual power" (qtd. Johnson 191, my italics).

<sup>9</sup> People often compared themselves to the shepherd hero of a folk ballad, Miorita, considered a symbol of national essence. Although aware that two other shepherds are trying to murder and rob him, the hero of the ballad accepts this fate serenely, doing nothing to prevent it. The implication was that although this was an adaptive response developed through the many periods of foreign domination and oppression in their history, it, now became an obstacle to fervently longed-for change.

<sup>10</sup> Little is revealed about the author's background, but his vocabulary and style, abounding in official terms and formalised phrases which are often misused, taken together with references suggesting he was quite well-off during socialism, suggest he may have been a minor employee in the state administration, possibly in an area of law enforcement.

<sup>11</sup> The reputation for miscegenation is not due to the name of the village, as the term 'Roma' has only recently entered everyday speech in Romania and 'Romani' is not used at all.

<sup>12</sup> The soul's journey after death is described in the writings of various church Fathers. Beliefs regarding what happens to the soul after death are propagated along with the elaborate rules for the performance of *parastasuri*, which mark the major moments of transition in the dead soul's existence. According to St. Makarios the Alexandrine, immediately after death, the soul begins its ascent to heaven, for the first of three meetings with God. During this ascent, evil spirits try to impede the soul's progress, and the soul has to pass through 24 tribunals or border customs of the sky (*vamile vazduhului*), each dealing with a particular category of sins. Evil spirits are the customs officers who interrogate the soul. This stage of the journey is completed on the third day, when the funeral service is performed to secure safe passage and the resurrection of the soul. After this, the soul is taken by angels to visit Heaven for six days, and on the ninth day it prostrates itself before God for the first time. On this day, a *parastas* is performed. Then, for the next 30 days, the soul is taken by angels to visit hell, and on the 40<sup>th</sup> day, it is brought back to prostrate itself before God again, and receive God's judgment regarding where the soul will reside. This is the most decisive day until the second resurrection, when God makes his final decision. The *parastas* on this day is crucial because the prayers of the living help the dead soul, who is now powerless to do anything further to help him/herself.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, this symbolic connection can be seen in an incident in which a family from a neighbouring village accused another family of desecrating its gravesite, and threatened to tear down the offenders' house in retaliation.

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<sup>14</sup> Anxieties about proper burial were also expressed in the horror of Romanians from a village mentioned in a newspaper article, at the ways in which gypsies living next to them buried their dead, for instance, sitting down in an armchair, in front of a television set, in a glass vault, so they could be seen from the outside. These villagers complained that the gypsies' mode of burying the dead was unsanitary, and asked the authorities to ban these practices.

<sup>15</sup> This archive is now in Bucharest, but due to time and bureaucratic constraints I was unable to gain access to it myself. The study of such an extensive archive would have been an extensive project in itself, and I think that the documentary evidence that has been published has provided sufficient material for the purposes of this thesis.

<sup>16</sup> The word derives from the folk name for a small owl (*huhurez*) a profusion of which seems to have lived in the area. Later, this name was taken on by Brancoveanu's monastery (founded 1692), and by a new settlement, located 3km from Romani, which has become present-day Horezu.

<sup>17</sup> The two names are also used interchangeably however, as shown by 1684 deed in which the villagers refer themselves as: "we, Hurezii who call ourselves Romani" (qtd. Vamesu 1972).

<sup>18</sup> Such actions appear in several documents pertaining to Romani, for instance when a boyar 'forgives' ten villagers of their serfdom, setting them free while the rest remain serfs, possibly in order to weaken the collective, which was at the time contesting his ownership of the village in court (qtd. Vamesu 1972: 91).

<sup>19</sup> Still, sellers found ways to circumvent the right of pre-emption, for instance making themselves blood brothers with the buyer, and thus conferring upon him a fictitious place in the genealogy (Stahl 1980: 75).

<sup>20</sup> During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, all governors of the Principalities came from 12 families, all Phanariote Greeks except for two, which were Hellenised Romanians married to Greek women (Seton Watson 1934: 127).

<sup>21</sup> The Q'uran itself acknowledges the validity of other monotheistic faiths, treating Christians as 'people of the book'.

<sup>22</sup> One prince told the parties to find a solution or have the land in question confiscated for his private use (Tamas 1995: 34)

<sup>23</sup> This was part of the official initiative, under the *Reglement Organique*, a Russian-initiated reform programme, to make schooling a state institution and to foster the creation of local schools following a standardised teaching programme. The schools were financed by the private sector (monasteries, village assemblies, churches) rather than the state (Vamesu 1972: 2).

<sup>24</sup> The monastery was actually abandoned some time after Hrisantos' death, but it was due, rather, to economic reasons: an utter lack of income following the State's confiscation of all its estates.

<sup>25</sup> Satire directed at the Church does occur in Romanian literature. In one of the funniest stories (which seems to me entirely plausible, since I have myself witnessed similar though lesser exploits) some monks are preparing to have a great feast, but they have a dilemma: a guest monk has brought along a horse, and they do not want the horse to get lost while they are partying. After some drink, they get the idea to make the horse climb in the belltower, as the only place they could think of from which it would certainly not run away. Getting it back down turns out to be trickier, and they have to get it drunk and passed out first.

<sup>26</sup> Though its motivation in doing this seems to have been a desire to support the Orthodox Church in Transylvania, which was weak (Pacurariu 1996). Yet here, once again, the aims of the Church and that of the Nation happened to coincide.

<sup>27</sup> Such changes in population took place mainly during three major periods of political upheaval affecting monastic estates: the 1864 'secularisation', the 1952 communist reform of monastic establishments, and the 1990 collapse of socialism. After 1990, all but one of the new establishments founded in Wallachia are convents (23 convents to one monastery) (Vlasie 2001).

<sup>28</sup> This is a pattern of organisation of monastic life which allows members a relatively high degree of autonomy (such as ownership of personal possessions and even private incomes). This is contrasted with the coenobitic pattern, in which, ideally, all possessions are shared within the community.

<sup>29</sup> It is used to drive away evil, to cure headaches and other ailments.

<sup>30</sup> Due to Ceausescu's nationalist and non-aligned political stance, aimed at distancing Romania from Soviet control, history became a privileged area of cultural politics, and museums and monuments received substantial government funding.

<sup>31</sup> On another visit to a hermitage a few kilometres from Patrunga, I had myself met a novice who turned out to be an escaped convict (as he himself told me), although the monks did not know this. According to the bishop's assistant, Patrunga had also sheltered a homosexual monk, who had come from Moldavia, until his reputation reached the diocese and he was ejected.



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<sup>32</sup> This party then led by Romania's current president Iliescu was expected to win the elections by a landslide. PDSR has also cultivated close relations with the Orthodox Church.

<sup>33</sup> Romani, the village discussed here, had no newspaper stand, and access to only a few public television channels.

<sup>34</sup> Katherine Verdery pointed out to me the analogy between this strategy and that employed by Romanian princes, who, through shrewd negotiations, manoeuvred the interests of several empires with expansionist ambitions in the region in order to maintain and maximise their states' independence (see Verdery 1991).

<sup>35</sup> This is partly because, in the past, parties that tried to introduce more developed positions have lost points in the polls, but this is not, Pasti argues, because voters prefer demagoguery, but because the parties' lack of communication with the electorate led to programmes that were unattractive and unconvincing (Pasti et al. 1997: 136-7).

<sup>36</sup> This has already been happening, as, for instance, the PDSR (now PSD) and PRM have 'swallowed' some of the smaller parties

<sup>37</sup> The metaphor of the 'display-case' (*vitrina*) is particularly interesting if one is acquainted with the common practice (especially during socialism, but continuing today) of displaying luxury goods of foreign provenance, (soaps, perfumes, cans of Coca Cola and cigarette packs) in glass cabinets, alongside dainty porcelain figurines. The question is thus, whether democratic duties, rights and freedoms tend to be 'shelved' in this manner, yielding their place, in everyday praxis, to more immediately useful (and less exotic) 'lived-in' arrangements.

<sup>37</sup> For example, in the first half of 1997, when the government removed artificial price controls on staple products, real wages fell by 30% (EIU 1998: 18).

<sup>38</sup> According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, as much as 45% of the country's population was rural, and this figure is likely to have increased in the meantime (1998: 18).

<sup>39</sup> For example, in the first half of 1997, when the government removed artificial price controls on staple products, real wages fell by 30% (EIU 1998: 18).

<sup>40</sup> Many retirement pensions of the elderly are well below the minimum salary.

<sup>41</sup> Romani, the village discussed here, had no newspaper stand, and access to only a few public television channels.

<sup>42</sup> I did, however, attend some meetings at the district level, and they were almost exclusively devoted to voting authorisations for various private construction projects.

<sup>43</sup> All figures quoted were obtained from the reports filed by voting sections with the Mayoral Office, Horezu, which are listed in the bibliography.

<sup>44</sup> In the November presidential elections, the PRM's leader, C. Vadim Tudor went as far as the second round, winning notoriety for his colourful vision of 'machine gun democracy'.

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