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ANYONE FOR A MEAT PIE? ACCIDENTAL CANNIBALISM IN
ROMANIAN URBAN LEGENDS

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Abstract

Insecurity in the modern world is a prevalent theme in most urban legends. Urban maniacs, be they invented or inspired by real facts, make up a gallery of evil portraits: the maniac who places AIDS-infected needles in cinemas or stalks his victims in the shadow, foully attacking them, the maniac who kidnaps children and steal their organs for clandestine transplants, or the serial killer who murders helpless young women. Legends suggest that delinquents are to be found everywhere in our social environment and are all the more dangerous as nothing distinguishes them from the ordinary man. On the other hand, the ‘accidental cannibal’ legends (as the American researcher Jan Harold Brunvand calls them) have also a xenophobic feature, that is to say, the fear of foreigners or hatred towards the other. These are the anti-Semitic legends in which Jews abduct Christian children and use their blood to prepare the Easter bread.

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1. Introduction

Fear is inherent to human nature. Fear, as Jean Delumeau once said, is “an essential rampart, a guarantee against dangers, an indispensable reflex which allows the organism to temporarily escape



death” (Delumeau, 1986, p. 19). Therefore, the need for security is vital for the human being. Security is the equivalent of life while insecurity is the symbol of death. Urban legends reflect this fear of the immediate, human evil, fear of behavioural deviation, our anxieties about external forces that infiltrate into our familial or familiar universe, destroying its balance.

2. Problem Statement

Insecurity in the modern world is a prevalent theme in most urban legends. Urban maniacs, be they invented or inspired by real facts, make up a gallery of evil portraits. Legends suggest that delinquents are to be found everywhere in our social environment and are all the more dangerous as nothing distinguishes them from the ordinary man. The ‘accidental cannibal’ legends (as the American researcher Jan Harold Brunvand calls them) have also a xenophobic feature, i.e. the fear of foreigners, hatred towards the other. These are the anti-Semitic legends in which Jews abduct Christian children and use their blood to prepare the Easter bread.

3. Research Questions

A few questions underlie the following analysis: How come a legend such as that describing the ritual killing of a child could have emerged? And, furthermore, if this allegation was so ‘successful’ during the Dark Ages as to lead to mass expulsions or even massacres, why is it still being perpetuated even in our modern times? In what way is social, political or religious background relevant to the emergence and dissemination of xenophobic accounts?

The Canadian researcher Gail de Vos speaks about the so-called *ethnocentric* legends that give voice to xenophobia in modern society, to the antipathy towards and fear of an ethnic minority group. Negative ethnic stereotypes assume a view of the world which is opposed to the behaviour, values and characteristics of the majority group. Furthermore, the lack of communication between the prevalent group and the small communities, with their own rules and lifestyles, also results in threats that are dealt with by those narratives that de Vos calls *sociocentric*. That means that whenever a subgroup or subculture is perceived as a *threat* by the majority, they are “incorporated into contemporary legends as the *enemy*” (de Vos, 1996, p. 12), the stranger that prejudices the larger community. However, threat may be and, in most cases, it really is, a false perception coming from some kind of misunderstanding or poor communication with these subgroups, as we shall further see.

4. Purpose of the Study

What lies behind this study, which is a small part of a more extensive analysis of Romanian urban legends, is our view that folklore can be so powerful as to influence history and people’s way of thinking. In our endeavour, we have relied on a number of texts selected from the media, intending to illustrate how xenophobic legends have developed in time and what started them in the first place. In addition, legends about accidental cannibalism must also be understood in terms of the social and political context in which they (re-)emerged. They circulated in the communist era, in which the keyword was “lack” – the lack of food, of expedient commodities, of those things that were supposed to make up a normal living.

Such an approach has been deemed of interest to a very heterogeneous audience made up of students, teachers or urban legend researchers equally, in that it provides a starting point for further discussions on the topic. We truly believe that, in some form or another, contemporary, modern legends will always be told, retold, reshaped, especially for the mere reason that they are fun to tell and discuss.

5. Research Methods

The comparative approach employed in this study relies on the analysis of several variants of the same legend, which we have put into relation to other similar narratives, thus aiming to establish the constant and variable elements of them. Starting from the assumption that a text can also be grasped if the context of both narrators and audiences is examined and understood, we have employed a sociological method of analysis with emphasis on the social and economic conditions of society.

6. Findings

One remarkable investigator of this genre, Gillian Bennett, mentions a *cannibalization* of the body in organ theft urban legends, a term thus used in a broad sense, designating “the removal of body parts by force or stealth so that someone else may use them for his or her advantage” (Bennett, 2005, p. 189). In this case, emphasis is laid not on the ingestion of one person by another, but by using body parts to one’s own benefit, in other words, stealing and trading human body and organs for money, research or illegal transplants.

In Romania, alongside such narratives, there are versions in which the object of the criminal act is not exploitation of organs for medicinal purposes, but food consumption, therefore *cannibalism*¹ in its true sense:

“In 1981-1982, in Bucharest everyone was talking about sectarians. They would catch people that lingered in dark deserted places and murder them, then they would slice them and throw the parts all over the place. Some swore they had seen with their own eyes when the police had arrested the manager of Budapesta restaurant who was a sectarian as well and who had served homo sapiens liver as stew with *mămăliguță*”^{2,3}

The story of the “delicacies” prepared from human meat has circulated in Romania ever since the early 20th century. Legend has it that, in the 1920’s, around Manuc’s Inn, there was a pie shop famous for a particular specialty: meat pie. The recipe was a secret. But the macabre truth behind the mystery was the main ingredient, human flesh obtained through diabolical methods. In the toilet of the pastry shop, some kind of trap had been made in the floor, through which customers would end up in the basement, where they were minced, turned into paste and ultimately served as ... pie. The more famous the pie shop, the greater the number of missing persons. The story is a faithful copy of a legend that circulated in England

¹ Cannibalism is a folkloric motif in many cultures and one of the best-known examples is “Hansel and Gretel” (1812) recorded by the Grimm Brothers. Greek mythology abounds in episodes of cannibalism, such as the story of Cronos, the god who swallowed his children as he knew he was to be overthrown by one of them; Thyestes who unknowingly ate his two sons, murdered and cooked at the order of Atreus, his won brother; Thracian king Tereus, son of Ares, also ate his child that his own wife had killed and prepared in revenge for his raping her sister, cutting her tongue and keeping her prisoner. Romanian folklore has Muma Pădurii, a deformed old woman living in the forest who kidnaps infants and eats them.

² Traditional Romanian type of food, roughly similar to the Italian *polenta*.

³ http://forum.softpedia.com/topic/163103-legende-urbane/page__st__162 (accessed on February 23, 2012).

in the Victorian age, that of Sweeney Todd. There is still debate over whether he really existed or not. The fact is that he emerged as a fictional character in a so-called *penny dreadful*⁴, in the story entitled *The String of Pearls: A Romance* (1846–1847)⁵. Todd is a barber whose shop communicates with Mrs. Lovett's pie shop through an underground passage. He murders his customers and gives their remains to his accomplice who uses them as pie ingredients.

In addition to the 1920's story, we learn from the Romanian folklorist Constantin Eretescu, a similar rumour spread in the 1950's, after a long food crisis, according to which the Ciocârlia restaurant in Bucharest served grilled minced meat rolls (the famous Romanian *mititei*) made of human meat and several skeletons had been found in the basement (Eretescu, 2007, p. 189). The legend resurfaced, as mentioned before, in the communist period:

“I was very young back then, but I know that I saw freight vehicles parking behind the restaurant. I could not see what kind of meat it was, but my neighbours and I thought they were bringing liver and kidneys from the Institute of Forensic Medicine, located on the quay of the Dambovită river, for, in those times, there was a great famine and everybody was wondering why, at that restaurant, there was always meat, particularly organs. I would have never dared enter that place!”⁶

The source of the Romanian versions of this legend seems to be, according to Eretescu, the real case of the German killer Fritz Haarmann⁷, who, at the beginning of the 20th century, murdered several boys and young men, dismembered them and later sold them as pork on the black market (Eretescu, 2007, p. 189).

Cannibalism was also used as a tool to denigrate minorities, to compromise the *other*, namely the religious opponent. Groups seen as undesirable are demonized and blamed for the most reprehensible deeds. Here are two such examples:

“In Iași, in the 50's or the 60's, people say there lived a Jewish butcher whose shop was in the centre of the city. Rumour has it that, once in a while, the butcher would kill some (Christian) Romanian, usually a child, and mixed his meat with that of the animals and sold it. My father told me that the butcher was still alive when he came to Iași in the early 70's and that some children knew this story and would run for it whenever they passed the butchery. I'm sure there are people who know many details about this myth.”⁸

“Jehovah's Witnesses are devils without horns. Whenever you hear about Jehovah's Witnesses, beware that this is a sect funded by Jews in America with billions of dollars to separate the world from

⁴ Penny dreadfuls were cheap publications sold for one penny (hence the name), targeted especially at working-class teenage audiences, which featured gruesome stories.

⁵ Available at http://www.victorianlondon.org/mysteries/sweeney_todd-00.htm (accessed on February 23, 2012).

⁶ See the article “Misterele Bucureștiului: Ficat de om în meniul restaurantului Budapesta din Capitală”, published in *Adevărul* newspaper, available at:

http://www.adevarul.ro/locale/bucuresti/MISTERELE_BUCURESTIULUI_Ficat_prajit_de_om_in_meniul_restaurantului_Budapesta_din_Capitala_0_347365342.html (accessed on 23 February, 2012).

⁷ Also known as the Butcher or the Vampire of Hanover, Friedrich Heinrich Karl “Fritz” Haarmann started his killings in 1918, in a time when Germany was going through an economic crisis and acute famine. He was arrested in 1924 and convicted of 24 murders, though he is believed to have been responsible for the death of more than 40 people. Haarmann would kill his victims by biting their trachea and then sell their personal objects or body parts as smuggled goods (see the article “Fritz Haarmann: The Butcher of Hannover”, available at http://www.crimelibrary.com/serial_killers/history/haarmann/5b.html). Following these revelations, the entire population of the city adopted a vegetarian diet (Eretescu, 2007, p. 189).

⁸ <http://mituriurbane.vira.ro/mituri-urbane/111/macelarul-evreu/> (accessed on 23 February, 2012).

Christ and the Church. In some parts, Jehovah's Witnesses are said to eat children for Easter. This information spread in the early 90's."⁹

Such narratives are survivors of the blood libel legend according to which, around Easter, the Jews would kidnap a child, most often a boy, kill him on Good Friday, ritually reproducing the tortures that Jesus was put through before crucifixion, and use his blood to prepare the Easter bread.

Throughout history, not only Jews were accused of practising such fierce rituals. It was a way to defame and compromise the 'other', i.e. any religious opponent, be they Christians (in the Roman Empire), witches (accused by the Inquisition of murdering their own children in order to ritually consume their flesh and blood) or various heretic Christian sects (persecuted by the Church in the 18th-19th centuries on the grounds that they were killing children to use their body fat to manufacture candles (Oişteanu, 2012, p. 465). However, the legend about the ritual infanticide practised by Jews had the longest existence and the bloodiest consequences for this community. To the European mind, the Jew was the prototype of the *stranger*, playing at different times the part of the scapegoat. Not baptized, the Jew is certainly a victim of the devil, hence the association with demonic figures (Oişteanu, 2012, p. 365). The legend according to which Jews stole and killed children for ritual purposes gave rise to collective psychoses that led to executions, massacres or expulsions of entire groups.

Analyzing the origin, evolution and survival of the clichés that make up the portrait of what he calls the *imaginary Jew*, Andrei Oişteanu finds a "notable discrepancy between the generally negative portrait of the *imaginary Jew* [...] and the usually moderate image of the *real Jew*" (Oişteanu, 2012, p. 13).

One of the first documents attesting a blood accusation dates from 1144, at Norwich (England). In the hagiographic work *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich*, Thomas of Monmouth mentions the kidnapping and killing (by the Jews) of William, a 12-year-old Christian boy. Thomas of Monmouth claims that, every year, Jews all over the world gather to decide in which country a child is going to be murdered around Easter, fulfilling an alleged prophecy according to which human sacrifice will help them regain rule over the Holy Land. The Jewish community was accused of torturing and crucifying William in a manner reminding of the passions of Christ. The story told by Thomas of Monmouth inflamed the anti-Semitic feeling in England which culminated in the expulsion of Jews from this country in 1290 (Bennett, 2005, pp. 254-263).

In Romania, ritual infanticide accusations are recorded in the 18th and the 19th centuries. Andrei Oişteanu chronologically follows these moments and the impact they had on the Romanian traditional mentality (Oişteanu, 2012, pp. 470-492). For instance, in Transylvania, the oldest document attesting it dates from 1714: a Saxon was accused of murdering a handmaid and selling her blood to the Jews; in 1791, four Jews were blamed for the killing, for ritual purposes, of a 13-year-old, but they were eventually acquitted. Furthermore, in Moldavia in 1710, five Jewish people were lynched and 22 others were chained for having kidnapped and killed a Christian child because they needed his blood for Easter. The charge was dismissed by the envoys of Prince Dimitrie Cantemir and the Jews released. In the 19th century, most allegations of this kind are attested in Moldavian towns, followed by violent turbulences

⁹ <http://mituriurbane.vira.ro/mituri-urbane/87/dracii-fara-coarne/comment-page-1/#comment-48700> (accessed on 23 February, 2012).

(such as those of Galați in 1859 and 1868), with people killed or wounded, shops and synagogues destroyed or plundered.

Blood libel rumours also circulated in post-war Romania, such as in Iași, 1946 (see the above-mentioned legend). Also in 1946, this time in Budapest, a rumour emerged of several people getting sick after eating sausages allegedly made of the flesh of Christian children. The state of penury and famine after the war was thus speculated in order to accuse the Jews of cannibalism and of making money from the sale of products prepared from human meat. It is possible that remnants of these events should have survived in the collective unconscious and re-surfaced in the form of the legend about the Budapest restaurant.

The social and economic context favoured the emergence of the legend. Here we are, in the 1980's, a period marked by terrible austerity in which food shortages are chronic. Supplies are rationalized based on ration books but they are never enough. Food crisis, along with the interruption of electricity, water or heat, force the population to live below the poverty line, create physical and mental discomfort to the ordinary citizen who leads a life of continuous incertitude. As the restaurant was well-stocked, served excellent specialties and, according to witnesses, was frequented by the high society of Bucharest, it fuelled rumours on the origin of merchandise and stirred the imagination of the hungry Romanian for whom staying in line, which provided him with the daily food, was a way of life. Furthermore, Eretescu states, the location – the Budapest restaurant – probably alludes to the relationships between Romania and Hungary at the time (Eretescu, 2007, p. 189).

It is also in such times characterized by shortages that the legends about the so-called “accidental cannibals” appear. The American folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand identifies such a narrative in Romania as well, a legend that had circulated ever since the 1940's (Brunvand, 2001, p. 357). Immediately after World War II, a family receives from America a package containing some black powder. They assume it is some instant drink or food or maybe some spice. After much of it is consumed, a letter arrives from the States in which they learn that the powder was actually the ashes of their grandmother who had emigrated and died during the war, but insisted, as a last wish, to be buried in the Romanian ground. There is, of course, a version circulating in the communist period, which the film director Cristian Mungiu collected and included in his extremely successful movie, *Tales from the Golden Age*, based on the best-known urban legends of the 80's.

According to Eretescu, the origin of these narratives is to be identified in the story “La viande séchée”, published in 1878, in *Sottisier de Nasr-Eddin-Hodja, bouffon de Tamerlan, suivi d'autres facéties turques, traduits sur des manuscrits inédits par J. A. Decourdemanche*, a collection of stories attributed to Nasreddin Hodja (Eretescu, 2004, p. 319). In short, a Jew gives a *cadi* travelling to Jerusalem two baskets which apparently are full of clothes, asking kindly to keep them until his return. In turn, the *cadi* gives them for safekeeping to one of his attendants. The latter realizes, by smell, that the load is, in fact, dried meat (*pastrami*) and, by the end of the voyage, he will eat it all. Never once does he suspect that, the whole time, he has been feeding on an old Jew, the father of the owner of baskets. Willing to fulfil his father's last wish, that of being buried in Jerusalem, the son came up with no other solution of transport than to smoke him so as to avoid putrefaction during the long journey (Decourdemanche, 1878, pp. 125-128). This anecdote inspired the Romanian author Ion Luca Caragiale to write the story *Pastramă trufanda*.

7. Conclusion

So, why do such legends continue to appear and reappear? What drives one to perpetuate them? The answer would be: fear. Such fear was once expressed in supernatural terms: ghost, devil, demon, who punished the unworthy that broke social taboos or created discord within the community. In modern-day society, to most of us, the “demon” has taken human form, being portrayed as the *alien* – the maniac, the sociopath, even the foreigner.

“Modern” aliens can easily infiltrate into the community and, as the media often report, can launch violent, chaotic, meaningless attacks, thus emphasizing, in the collective mentality, the idea that aliens are to be feared. “For each modern legend type, the principal question is seldom, ‘*Can* such an event take place?’ or even ‘*Did* such an event take place as described?’ but rather ‘*Whom or what can we trust?*’ ” (Lindhal, 1986).

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