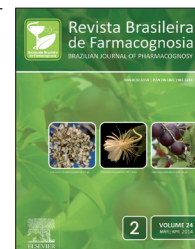




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### Original article

## Survey of traditional beliefs in the Hungarian Csángó and Székely ethnomedicine in Transylvania, Romania



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#### A B S T R A C T

Transylvania, part of Romania, has a long-standing culture of Hungarian ethnomedicinal practices. The aim of this study was to review the unexplored ethnopharmacological use of plants, animals and other materials, focusing mainly on the beliefs surrounding them; and compare them with traditional uses from other countries and with scientific literature. An ethnobotanical inventory was conducted among Csángó and Székely Hungarians in three areas of the country between 2007 and 2012. Questionnaires included medical and non-medical uses of plants, animals, and other substances with rational and irrational elements. Altogether 22 plants, twelve animals, and ten other substances had documented uses for various beliefs. The treatments utilize magical numbers, like 3 and 9, to define peculiar order, tools, and like-minded aspects. Plants were used for prediction (e.g. *Phaseolus vulgaris* L.), protection (e.g. *Corylus avellana* L.), and as symbols (e.g. *Arctium lappa* L.). In addition to the use of animals (e.g. *Salamandra salamandra* L.) or no longer used elements (use of *Lytta vesicatoria* L.), the employment of other substances (e.g. ash, milk) was also documented. The frequency of the documented uses is in continuous decline due to environmental and social changes, and the increased prevalence of conventional healthcare. Hence, the priority of their conservation is of pivotal importance nowadays.

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### Introduction

The traditional elements of the folk medical systems include materials from various origins such as plants, animals, minerals, human and other substances (Hoppál and Törő, 1975) that refer to rational and magical properties in the healing practices all over the world. Plants have been associated to unique beliefs and local ceremonial customs for human and veterinary medicine; as well as having religious and faith

healing qualities in several regions of the world (Hoppál, 1992; Green, 1998; Cavender and Albán, 2009; Muleady-Mecham and Schley, 2009; Sharma and Pegu, 2011; Campos-Navarro and Scarpa, 2013; Juárez-Vázquez et al., 2013)

Transylvania, a former part of Hungary, currently belongs to Romania. Hungarian-speaking natives using various dialects are the main inhabitants of this region. They abide in poor living conditions preserving the roots of the traditional ethnomedicinal knowledge more efficiently than

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the Hungarian inhabitants. Several regions of Transylvania began to be ethnobotanically and ethnopharmacologically explored at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the first field study was conducted at the Ghimes mountains (Rácz and Holló, 1968), with the summary work from several other areas by Borza (1968) and Butura (1979). However, several earlier folk medicinal investigations reported both rational and magical elements (Kóczyán et al., 1976; Antalné, 2003); most beliefs and rituals preferred by Csángó people. In contrast, the Székelys provide most rational and less magical healing practices, in Zona Călata (Kóczyán et al., 1977; Péntek and Szabó, 1985; Vasas, 1985), Trei Scaune (Péntek and Szabó, 1976), the old Bucovina (Grynaeus and Szabó, 2002), Moldova (Halászné, 1981; Halász, 2010), Ciuc (Miklóssy, 1980), Gheorgheni (Rab, 2000), Homorod (Gub, 1993; 1994), and Covasna (Rácz and Füzi, 1973; Papp et al., 2011a).

The discerned magical data are commonly based on longstanding experiences of the people and the insufficiency of rational medical methods. These magic and mythological rituals, spiritual beliefs, symbols, prayers, magical phrases, and incantations carry emotional and subjective aspects in the Transylvanian ethnomedicine. They have psychosomatic and healing effects (Gub, 1994), as well as preventive and protective roles. They are used not only to alleviate various ailments, but are protective against bad spirits, demons, ghosts, witchcraft, sorcery, and against local supernatural entities such as “lödérc” or “lidérc”, a supernatural being of Hungarian folklore (like genie), or “szépasszony”, the Fair Lady (a female demon who seduces young men and comes out to dance in storms and hail-showers) (Diószegi, 1982).

Historical and magical roles of plants, animals and other materials (in this work: substances of neither animal nor plant origin) have been described as earlier sacramental objects for the local healing practices. Sacramental objects include blessed or sacred objects used in ceremonies and rituals for protection and to deter supernatural entities, it is the case of the plants: *Helleborus purpurascens* Waldst. and Kit. (Gub, 1994; Halászné, 1981; Kóczyán et al., 1976; Péntek and Szabó, 1976), *Atropa belladonna* L. (Kóczyán, 1990), *Phaseolus vulgaris* L., *Hordeum vulgare* L. (Grynaeus and Szabó, 2002), *Triticum aestivum* L. (Hoppál and Törő, 1975), *Betula pendula* Roth. and *Salix* sp. (Grynaeus and Szabó, 2002; Gub, 1994), and the toad *Bombina variegata* L.

Based on earlier and recent data, Transylvania is considered as an important area in Europe encompassing ancient ethnomedicinal treatments used in the everyday life of the rural people. The aim of this study was to review the richness of beliefs and sacramental elements in three Transylvanian regions inhabited by Csángó and Székely people, focusing on plants, animals, and other materials used for medicinal and non-medicinal purposes.

## Materials and methods

### Study area

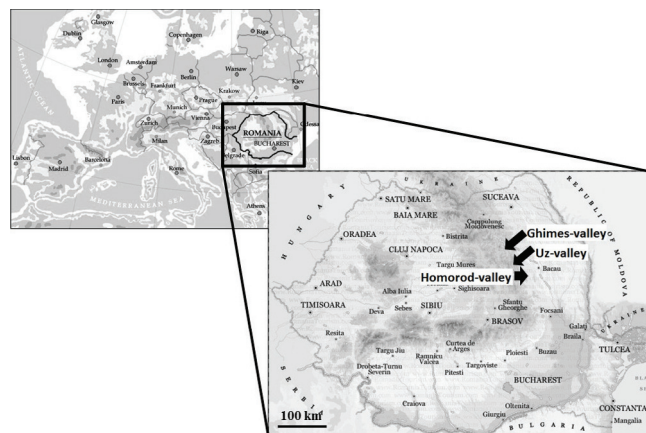
The Csángó and Székely districts, located within the Carpathian, are covered mostly by pine forests, pastures and

hayfields. This work was conducted in three regions of the Harghita County in Transylvania (Fig. 1), sparsely populated by Hungarian-speaking residents. These areas were selected according to their isolation, the large distance from major cities and the lack of infrastructure and communications. Most people work in agriculture (Table 1), cultivating *Allium cepa* L., and varieties of *Solanum tuberosum* L., and *Phaseolus vulgaris* as primary edible vegetables. Livestock production of cows, pigs, sheep and poultry, is of vital importance for their livelihood.

At the Uz-valley in East-Romania, Csinód (in Romanian: Cinod) and Egerszék (Egershec) villages, which are inhabited by Csángó people, were selected. In the Csángós' regions, the villages are divided into streets and named after the local name of the streams completed with the term “pataka”. In accordance, Csinód is divided into Katirésze-pataka, Őrház-pataka, Aklosbérce-pataka and Nagylenes-pataka. In these settlements, electric installations were introduced until 2000, and most households have no plumbing. There is no mobile phone coverage either. The nearest settlements with a permanent medical service and a hospital are 13 and 26 km away, respectively, that can be reached after travelling on roads in bad conditions (Báth, 2004). According to the lack of the medical attendance, there are healers specialized in different areas such as administration of injections, ethnoveterinary or dental medicine. Their work is accompanied by unique magic and mythological elements, incantations, and beliefs. Previously, midwifery had been a concern in the region, but this tradition has been finished for a long time.

Gyimesfelsőlok (also known as Lunca de Sus) by the Tatros river was the second Csángó area studied, in the Ghimes-valley. Although this settlement has its own pharmacy and an official medical service, the ancestral Csángó ethnomedicinal methods include magical elements still.

In the Homorod-valley, Lövéte (Lueta) is inhabited exclusively by Székelys. It holds an official veterinary service, its own pharmacy since 2008 and receives occasional medical and dental services from nearby settlements. In addition to official treatments, traditional treatments relating irrational and magical components were also ethnobotanically assessed.



**Figure 1** - Map of studied areas in Transylvania, Romania (<http://www.romaniatourism.com/maps.html>).

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