

## ‘She Read Me a Prayer and I Read It Back to Her’: Gagauz Women, Miraculous Literacy and the Dreaming of Charms

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### Abstract

This paper explores the polyvalent and gendered nature of the relationship between the practices of reading and charming and the Mother of God in the dream narratives of Gagauz women in the Republic of Moldova. The most widespread healing text used by this Orthodox Christian minority, *The Dream of the Mother of God*, is paradigmatic of this relationship being the principle ‘site’ where images of and beliefs about healing and dreaming meet with women’s reading and writing practices. Women’s knowledge of reading and charming constitutes dangerous knowledge and their dream narratives of literacy and healing represent an important way in which gender and identity are performed by this group of women. I argue here that although dreams with the Mother of God and her text represent transgressions of patriarchal religious boundaries, their ability to contribute to the reimagining or renegotiation of gendered social roles for these women is limited.

### Keywords

dreams; literacy; charming; healing; Gagauz; Moldova.

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It was as though she came to me in a dream. I went out from the house by the shed and she was there in the sky, with a great white cloth, the Mother of God with Jesus Christ in her lap. She said to me "What have you been doing? Have you been reading?" I had hidden it [up till then] but in case she would be angry I said "Yes, I read." She said "I will read you a prayer and let's see if you can learn it?" "I only had a little schooling, I only have up to fourth class, it is hard for me to remember the letters; I don't know books well." The Mother of God repeated "I will read you a prayer and let's see if you can learn it?" She read the prayer to me and as soon as I heard it I knew it immediately, I learned it that quickly! The Mother of God said again "I will read you another prayer, let's see if you can learn this one?" She read me another prayer and I read it back to her.

(Sofia Nikolaevna, 12 July 2009)

## Introduction

This extract from Sofia Nikolaevna's dream or vision narrative, which I explore in some detail below, illustrates the polyvalent nature of the relationship between literacy, the practices of charming and healing and the figure of the Mother of God, or *Panaia*, in the religious lives of Gagauz women. The text also points to broader issues of gender, agency and power in the local region. The Gagauz are an Orthodox Christian minority living in the Republic of Moldova, where they constitute 4.4% of the population (*Biroul Național* 2004). Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, the Gagauz were granted wide-ranging autonomy in the region of southern Moldova where they constitute a majority. This region is informally referred to as Gagauzia. As speakers of a Turkic language closely related to Turkish, the Gagauz have linguistic affiliations with Turkey and historically with the Ottoman Empire and the Islamic world but they also adhere to the majority Russian Orthodox faith. This combination of linguistic and religious aspects of Gagauz identity has intrigued scholars whilst also contributing to their marginalisation linguistically, economically and socially within Moldovan society. The Gagauz have historically, along with other marginalised groups within Moldova such as the Roma, displayed very high levels of illiteracy and semi-literacy, especially amongst women (Kapaló 2011; Livezeanu 1995). Minority status, poor literacy and poor command of either of the two dominant languages of public life and state bureaucracy has ensured that Gagauz women, and especially rural pensioners, are amongst the most economically marginalised (see Vaculovschi et al. 2011) in what is often cited as the 'poorest nation in Europe' (Keogh 2006: 2). Leyla Keogh, in her studies of Gagauz women's practices of labour migration highlights the 'economic resourcefulness' of Gagauz women in post-socialism and how these contest the 'gendered social order' in Gagauzia in which 'motherhood is the key' (Keogh 2006: 455). It is against this backdrop that I explore the relationship between women's literacy, charming and healing in the dream narratives of Gagauz women. I argue here that women's narratives of miraculous empowerment, via dreams and through the intercession of the Mother of God, is one way that these women attain a sense of agency and exercise creativity in narrating her identity and transforming her subject position. Women's practices of reading and healing have a powerful paradigmatic model in the popular apocryphal text *The Dream of the Mother of God*. This text and the practices that surround it represent an important site of women's agency

that transgress certain patriarchal religious boundaries, however, the power of the text to challenge the broader social order is unclear.

This paper draws on ethnographic research conducted in a number of villages in Gagauzia between 2005 and 2012. During this time I met and spoke with more than twenty Gagauz women healers and charmers and with numerous copyists and translators of religious texts. This article draws in particular on a number of dream narratives I heard from women in the villages of Avdarma, Beşgöz, Beşalma, Kazayak and Tomay in the Gagauz Autonomous Region and the village of Kurçu in Odessa Oblast, Ukraine. Some of the women have achieved local, national, and even international, repute for their healing powers, featuring in local newspapers, TV documentaries and radio programmes. Their status as recognised healers, or *ilaççılar* (sing. *ilaççi*), has brought them a degree of economic security, opening up a limited but at times vital income stream.

Researching amongst this group of women was only made possible through the introductions, advice and assistance of local friends and host families in the villages of Gagauzia. As a man who researches women's lives I have to acknowledge the sometimes acute problems of difference and identity I faced both in the field whilst learning from Gagauz women and at home when *re-storying* their narratives. However, following Reid-Brown (2004: 198), I believe that men who listen to women have an important role to play in uncovering the workings of local patriarchies and helping to open spaces for the voices of marginalised women.

The women's names (in the form of Christian name followed by patronymic) that appear in this article are the real names of the women except where individuals requested anonymity, in which cases I have given a pseudonym. The majority of the Gagauz women I met were elderly, indeed several have passed away since our meetings, and in this sense this study represents a snap-shot of the cultural and religious world of a particular generation of women. Although younger women also practice charming and healing, they tend not to have the same status as their more senior neighbours. There are also some men, discussed briefly below, who have achieved renown as healers and charmers but significantly the dream motif and the role of figure of the Mother of God and her texts are missing from their accounts (Kapaló 2011).

The dream and vision narratives of Gagauz women, through a closely interwoven set of associations, speak of the miraculous acquisition of literacy and the otherworldly origin of charm texts and healing powers. A dream or vision is the principal conduit through which these women acquired special, previously elusive, knowledge and spiritual power. The experience of a dream or vision of the Mother of God often marks the beginning of a career as a charmer or healer and is also associated with a new relationship with the written word. The power and authenticity of the dream or vision experience in women's religious lives, I argue, is significantly enhanced by associations with the most highly valued vernacular language text *Panaiyanın düşü*, or *The Dream of the Mother of God*, an apocryphal legend in the form of a prayer that is copied and distributed in manuscript form.

## Dreaming with the Mother of God

In the Gagauz language the word *düş* is generally used to refer to sleeping consciousness dreams. However, in the women's narratives discussed here other

dream-like or vision experiences are recounted. These are closer to the type of 'imaginal consciousness' discussed by Barbara Tedlock (1987 and 2005). The opening narrative from Sofia Nikolaevna above, in which she refers to a dream-like state in the dead of night that is experienced as reality, suggests something akin to a vision or waking dream. Another noteworthy healer, Anna, described how she passes into a trance-like state to fly with the Mother of God. As a body of narratives, they do not fit neatly into the categories of either dream or vision, however, they all affirm a personal encounter and communication with the Mother of God that takes place in a different state of consciousness and therefore, as Keszeg et al. point out (2009), can be considered together in terms of their function for those that experience them. Moreover, the dreams or visions discussed here were each the vehicle for revelatory or empowering messages related to healing and literacy.

In the pages that follow, I focus on the transformative power of the 'manifest content' (Ewing 1990) of Gagauz women's visions and dreams. Katherine Ewing, commenting on the tendency for dream research to focus too heavily on 'disguised wishes and conflicts' – what is often termed, following Freud, the 'latent content' of dreams – argues that a dream 'must also be a projection into a culturally articulated future if it is to be transformative' (Ewing 1990: 56). In this article therefore, in line with Ewing, I focus on the way in which 'manifest dream content' relates to women's available cultural texts whilst also expressing the individual desires and ambitions of the dreamer (see also Kis-Halas 2012). I illustrate cases in which dreams draw directly on beliefs, narratives and texts about healing and the Mother of God, and through their transmission as dream narratives, come to constitute transformative 'cultural texts' for women's empowerment. The dream/vision narratives can be described as 'secondary process thought' (Tedlock 1987, 2005): they are logical and verbal, often containing dialogue with and discrete instructions and guidance from the Mother of God.

Charles Stewart points out that very often our primary, or only means, of access to the experience of dreamers, and indeed trance-mediums and visionaries, is through their post factum accounts and narratives (Stewart 1997). Stewart cautions against the tendency in anthropology, however, to deal with dreams solely on this level as in doing so 'we disregard them as experiences' (Stewart 1997: 878). It is not my aim here to explore directly the nature of Gagauz women's dream or vision experiences, however, in line with Stewart, I see the potential for dreams to reveal 'the continuities between the personal and social, the emotional and the cognitive' in ways that challenge these 'putative dichotomies' (Stewart 1997: 877).

Gagauz women's dreams move from the sphere of private experience to become public text; the conditions and process by which this happens, are primarily what interest me here. According to Olson and Adonyeva, the 'dynamic interface between the personal and the social, between individual experience and shared values, between tradition and the needs of the present moment' (2012: 11) is what characterises folk cultural processes. In this way, the performance of Gagauz women's identities through dream narratives and reading and healing practices can be seen as 'unique cases of individual expression' (Bowman and Valk 2012: 7) that are nevertheless formed through shared repertoires and

the traffic of symbolic acts, words and narratives that fit 'certain scenarios of expectation' in the local culture (Searle cited in Olson and Adonyeva 2012: 12).

Dream narratives, relatively neglected in Central and Eastern European folklore and ethnology (Keszeg et al. 2009), have been categorized by Judit Gulyás into three types determined by the degree of text formation. The first category represents the impromptu recounting of a dream experience. The third category, being the most developed, constitutes dream narratives that appear within folklore genres. The second, which is the category explored here, are 'memorate' type dream narratives. These are the type most easily available to the fieldworker being the result of several retellings in which the narrator has developed the text to include antecedent events and circumstances, personal interpretations and conclusions (Hesz 2012: 143). I did not explicitly solicit dream narratives from Gagauz women, they emerged in the course of informal interviews and observations of healing practices. They are very common and in the local culture, as this article seeks to demonstrate, represent an important way for women to say things to enhance the authenticity of their words and experiences.

Dreaming of and with the Mother of God, the most powerful female figure available in Orthodox Christian culture, is a central element of women's narrative scripts and is linked to the attainment of agency. Feminist theologians have debated if the figure of Mary contributes to women's liberation, and if so in what way (see Beattie 2002; Schüssler Fiorenza 1995; Warner 1983), questioning 'the roles and images imposed on women through Mary' (de Haardt 2011: 173). As Maaïke de Haardt (2011: 169) affirms, Mary is a complex and polyvalent figure 'full of meaning'. For theologians, meaning is derived from the biblical text and centuries of accrued dogma. This has led some feminist theologians to search for a historical Mary to alleviate the alienating and oppressive aspects of the 'dogmatic mystification of Mary' (de Haardt 2011: 173). The concerns of Western feminist analysis of Mary, however, are often different from those of marginalised, poor and illiterate women (Beattie 2005). In the case of Gagauz women, the apocryphal legend *The Dream of the Mother of God*, discussed in some detail below, is perhaps the most revered source of knowledge about Mary's identity. One of the factors highlighted by scholarship on popular Marian devotions in women's 'lived religion' is the significance of Mary's 'presence' for believers (see de Haardt 2011; Orsi 1997, 2002; Vuola 2011). This 'presence' is often centred on concerns such as childbirth, motherhood and marriage (Beattie 2005) and is rooted 'in the everyday experiences of ordinary women' (Vuola 2011: 494). Amongst the Gagauz, as is the case with the Orthodox Karelian Marian poetry explored by Elina Vuola, 'folk prayers are always clearly defined, relating directly to practical concerns and anxieties of women' (Vuola 2011: 499). My exploration of the relationship between the Mother of God, her principal text *The Dream of the Mother of God*, and Gagauz women's healing, charming and reading practices attempts to elucidate the way that the text and women's concrete praxis define this presence and harness her transformative power.

Before I explore Gagauz women's dream narratives, I first describe the cultural and historical setting of 20th century Gagauz society, beginning with a discussion of language use, literacy and religious practice. I then go on to discuss the centrality of the text *The Dream of the Mother of God*. The final section of

this paper is dedicated to two women and their dream narratives, illustrating the narrative construction of the healer's identities and the gendered nature of the religious field within which they are embedded.

## Language, Literacy and Religion amongst the Gagauz

In this section, I explore the cultural context of Gagauz women's reading and writing practices, the significance of the hierarchy of languages in Gagauz society and their relationship to women's dream narratives. Gagauz women's relationship to literacy, especially literacy in the mother tongue, is central to the cultural complex outlined in this article. Literacy is a socially embedded practice imbued with different meanings in different cultural and social settings (Harries 2001). In certain contexts 'the very process of becoming literate involves taking up new positions and becoming a different sort of person' (Merchant and Carrington 2009: 63). The ability to read and write is embedded within many Gagauz women's narrative representations of the acting self. The Gagauz are an ethnic and linguistic minority in a largely Russian and Romanian speaking region. Despite the official status of Moldovan – a variant of Romanian<sup>1</sup> – the prestige language in post-Soviet Moldova continues to be Russian. The Russian language facilitates inter-ethnic communication between the minority populations of Gagauz, Bulgarians and Ukrainians and is also the principal language of administration, education, business and public life. Despite the high prestige of Russian, 92.3% of Gagauz regard the Gagauz language as their mother tongue (*Biroul Național* 2004). The strength of the Gagauz language in everyday use is contrasted with exceptionally low competency in Moldovan, the official language of the state, with only just over 7% declaring that they can 'freely speak' in the language. The complex linguistic terrain in southern Moldova, as well as compounding its economic and geographical marginality, has, through the 19th and 20th centuries, also impacted on education and literacy. The Gagauz have historically recorded exceptionally high levels of illiteracy placing them alongside the other traditionally 'backward' rural elements of the Moldovan population (see Livezeanu 1995: 94). Literacy in the 19th century and for most of the 20th century meant reading and writing Russian (Murgoci 1920: 54). The 2004 census demonstrates not only the continuing high levels of illiteracy and semi-literacy amongst the Gagauz, but also the startling gender differential; 62% of those with no education and 79% of those declaring themselves illiterate are women (*Biroul Național* 2004).

The women discussed in this paper grew up in interwar Romanian Bessarabia, today's Moldova, or in the immediate post World War II Soviet Union. For these women education was accessed with difficulty and was provided in languages they comprehended and spoke poorly. This has resulted in a disproportionately high number of rural elderly Gagauz women who are illiterate or partially literate and who have poor or negligible knowledge of Russian or Moldovan. This has profound implications in terms of social exclusion with women lacking basic

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<sup>1</sup> In the opinion of most linguists these two highly cognate linguistic varieties do not constitute separate languages, however, for reasons of identity politics the use of separate signifiers is maintained by the Moldovan state.

competencies necessary to make the most of welfare and medical provision and to participate in public life.

The use of the Gagauz language was, until the early 20th century, confined to the family and the local community. This changed when the Gagauz priest, Mihail Çakir (1864–1938),<sup>2</sup> conscious of his people's inability to read scripture, created an alphabet and devised a literary form suitable for the translation of Orthodox Christian liturgical texts and scripture. In 1907 the bishopric in Chişinău began to print and distribute Çakir's translations to Gagauz parishes. From the 1930s, however, due to the Orthodox Church's policy of Romanianisation the use of these texts was limited. The 'canonisation' of the Gagauz language by Çakir, however, bound it to the Orthodox identity of the Gagauz and imbued the language with important symbolic religious capital (Kapaló 2010). The availability of official Gagauz language prayers and hymns that were preserved, copied and passed down through the generations during the Soviet period helped reinforce the Orthodox identity of the Gagauz. In post-Soviet Moldova, the Gagauz language has been reintroduced into the local liturgy and now represents one of the main uses of the language in the public life.

Parallel to this *official* history of writing and reading in the Gagauz language, and contemporaneous to the work of Çakir, a tradition emerged amongst ordinary lay Gagauz of translating and copying religious texts. This tradition comprised translations by anonymous translators and copyists of mainly apocryphal apocalypses, the kind of popular religious literature frowned upon and suppressed by the Church that circulated in chap-book form in the 19th and 20th centuries. The popularity of apocryphal texts is not unique to the Gagauz, such texts were popular across the region and would be copied and recopied 'by the segment of the population that was marginally literate' and they would be 'kept in great secrecy from the clergy and curious ethnographers alike' (Ivanits 1989: 33). In Gagauzia, these texts were collected together in copybooks, or *tetratkas*, and circulated widely amongst women. In fact, these alternative scriptures became ubiquitous on the religious landscape, particularly during the socialist period when women took on new roles in local religious life (Kapaló 2011). For a linguistic minority with poor command of the languages of the state and public life this literature became highly significant.

The advent of Soviet atheism in Moldova after 1945 brought about an enforced retreat on the part of the Orthodox Church from the public control of religious life. As Douglas Rogers (2008: 124) has highlighted, 'First, religious practice often slipped from public view into the spaces of the home; and second, believers began to domesticate religion, to claim for themselves some of the ritual and even theological competencies formerly arrogated to specialist clerics.' Older women in village society who, to a certain extent were 'outside Soviet control' and free from many of the pressures to conform to Soviet ideals, took on the role of religious 'culture-keepers' (Kononenko 2006: 48). When the clergy began to return to villages and churches reopened in the immediate post-Soviet years there was an intensification of competition between priests and local culture-keepers for religious authority; the main areas of contestation are the use of apocryphal texts and healing practices.

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<sup>2</sup> His name often appears in its Romanian form Mihail Ciachir.

Due to the factors I have just described, reading and writing culture in the mother tongue is largely orientated towards otherworldly concerns and religious life. This strong association between the Gagauz language, reading and writing practices and religion is apparent in the life narratives of women of this generation. There is only space here to give a couple of brief examples of how women's desire to participate in religious textual culture is represented in their life narratives and dream memorates.

Vera Dimitrievna was born in the village of *Tomay* in 1930. Having had no formal education and not being able to speak any language other than her Gagauz mother tongue, she taught herself to write by copying Çakir's Gagauz language Psalter into copybooks. Her writing steadily improved as she wrote, finally finishing her complete copy of the Psalter in 1997. Gergina Afanasieva's account is also representative, born in 1925 in the village of *Avdarma*, as a child Georgina spoke neither Romanian nor Russian and was not able to attend school, in the 1980s (when she was already in her late 50s) she taught herself to read from Romanian books that had been rescued from the local Church when it was closed by the Soviet authorities. Having taught herself to read and write Romanian, she then made copies of *The Dream of the Mother of God* for other women in the village. These two accounts and numerous others, link the acquisition of literacy with their desire to access religious texts, especially *The Dream of the Mother of God*.

In other women's narratives this association is strengthened by accounts that speak of divine intervention and miraculous events as instrumental in overcoming illiteracy. Varvara Mihailovna (see Figure 1) struggled for years to learn to read until she asked the advice of a local priest who advised her to 'wake at night between 12 midnight and 3 a.m., pray to God to help because heaven opens at that time. God will listen to you then.' She took his advice and gradually she learned to read during her nights of prayer. Since that time, she has dreams with the Mother of God in the early-hours of the morning advising her for whom and for what to pray.

Elena Haralampevna from the village of *Beşalma* was known for her large collection of copybooks that contained her prophecies and instructions from God and the Mother of God transmitted to her in dreams and visions. Born in 1880, she did not learn to read until the 1940s and only then following the miraculous event her family recounted to me.

One day she put some bread in the oven and the loaves came out with letters, Cyrillic letters like in the Church, raised on top of them in the crust. She took a piece of paper and placed it on the bread and traced the shape of the letters through the paper. [...], we kept them for a long time after she died.

Her granddaughter went on to explain,

She would write all the things that will happen, all the things from her dreams, each word separated by a cross, pages and pages full, all in Gagauz. [...] half the notebook was full of the dreams she had, what she saw and there was also a prayer of *Panaiya* [the Mother of God], and she went round the whole village to everyone that had a troubled soul, everyone that was ill, she read the *Dream of the Mother of God* and it brought them peace and good health.

These women's narratives illustrate the relationship between reading and writing practices, religious texts and the metaphysical realm, the final two



**Figure 1:** Varvara Mihailovna explaining her dreams.

examples introduce the element of dreaming. In many narratives, the significance of reading and writing is directly associated with the most highly prized text, *The Dream of the Mother of God*. I argue here that this text is a template for this cultural complex being the most frequently copied, translated and disseminated text and the principal site where the power of dreaming is brought into direct relation with women's reading and writing practices. The dreamer's individual concerns about literacy find expression in the manifest content of dreams, in part, through the inspiration of the text, *The Dream of the Mother of God*.

### ***Panaiyanın düşü – 'These are the Sweet Little Words of the Mother of God'***

The apocryphal legend *The Dream of the Mother of God* first appears in Italian literature from the 14th century and went on to enjoy considerable popularity across the Christian world (Timotin 2011). This text, and its oral folkloric permutations, has generated a body of literature dedicated largely to tracing its historical origins and route of dissemination from West to Eastern Europe (see Hain 1973; Kałużniacki 1888; Veselovskii 1876). The texts found amongst the Gagauz are the result of local translations from Romanian chapbook editions that began to appear from 1846 onwards (Timotin 2011: 218). Today, the text circulates both orally and in manuscript form in Gagauz. Some women learn the text by heart but today it is far more common for women to keep a copy in a notebook

The Gagauz variants of the text all comprise of three discrete elements. The opening scene is set on the Mount of Olives where the Mother of God falls

asleep and begins to dream. This is followed by a dialogue between Mary and Jesus when she awakes to find her son next to her. He asks 'Mother, my dear mother, when you slept what did you see in your dream?' The Mother of God then recounts her dream in which she saw the terrible events of the passion: the arrest, suffering and crucifixion of her son. Jesus then tells her that all that she has seen in her dream will come to pass and that it must be so in order for mankind to be saved, thus confirming the prophetic power of Mary's dream. The closing section of the text goes on to offer a wide range of indulgence-like promises or rewards to the disseminator or copier of the text:

*Whoever trusts in the Dream of the Mother of God,  
And passes it from house to house,  
That person will be healthy and well.  
Whoever copies the Dream of the Mother of God,  
In his/her house will rest the Holy Spirit,  
God's angel will protect  
this person from every bad place,  
From death, and from sudden death,  
From fire and from the sword,  
From hail and also from lightening.*

The text goes on to promise the forgiveness of sins and direct transmission of the soul to heaven at the time of death. The extravagant promises attached to the text are one of the reasons cited by scholars for its popularity and wide distribution (Erdélyi 1999, 2001; Orosz 1998). This text, as well as several others found in the *tetratkas*, explicitly encourages women's practice of writing (see Kapaló 2011).

The Church authorities in Moldova, in an effort to eradicate the use of *The Dream of the Mother of God* and other such texts, publishes booklets teaching of their danger. Elena Stepanovna, whilst explaining to me how she came by her copy of the text recounted that 'Our priest said that it is not correct, he said that it is from the past, the beliefs in it are not right.' Such priestly injunctions against the use of *The Dream of the Mother of God* are sometimes met with incredulity by Gagauz women.

I have heard the *matuška* [rus: wife of the priest] say we shouldn't use this prayer but I have no idea why. She didn't explain why. It is about Jesus and the Mother of God, what can there be wrong with that?

*The Dream of the Mother of God* is distinguished from other apocryphal texts because of its particular uses or functions. The text, with its evocative narrative account of the passion, is considered especially powerful, as the following testimonies show.

The Dream is sung when a person is very ill, when they are barely breathing, this is when it is sung, chanted, read so that they may recover. If this does not save them they will die. (Dona Dmitrievna, Kazayak)

This old lady [indicating the woman sat before us] came to my father when he was dying. He was suffering terribly, his soul just wouldn't leave his body, he couldn't die. After she read *The Dream of the Mother of God* he just quietly slipped away. (Valentina Mihalovna, Kurçu)

Liubov Fedorovna, a healer in the village of Tomay, described how she had read the text for her own mother in order to help her pass away peacefully. Later her neighbours asked her to visit a local woman who had been bedridden for four years, 'because I have my virginity (*paklık*) if I read *The Dream of the Mother of God*, they said, it would allow her to pass away without further suffering. But I didn't go in the end because the family kept me away, they were afraid that the priest would consider it euthanasia if I read *Panaiyanın düşü*.'

Intimately connected with healing and death, *Panaiyanın düşü* is considered to be both powerful (*kuvetli*) and beautiful (*gözäl*); on several occasions women used the expression 'the sweet little words of the Mother of God' (*Panaiyanın lafçaazları*) to describe the text. The association of the text with the very words of the Mother of God strengthens the belief, despite clerical injunctions, that this is a 'good' text. Elena Stepanovna insisted, 'Such beautiful words are written there that it is not possible that these words are not good words, they are good words!'

The text of *Panaiyanın düşü* is paradigmatic, for Gagauz women it is the meeting place of three symbolically powerful elements: the written word in the mother tongue, the central narrative of Christ's victory over suffering and death and the Mother of God's prophetic and empowering dream. The text functions as a script to empower women to read, write, dream and heal. Significantly, both the text and women's healing practices, are a site of contestation, discouraged, prohibited and suppressed by the clergy. Some women in Gagauzia have attempted to maintain a portion of religious capital in the face of renewed clerical influence in post-socialism. One means of strengthening their claims to authenticity is through intervention of the Mother of God in a dream or vision.

### *Sofia Nikolaevna – 'She Read Me a Prayer and I Read It Back to Her'*

The dream memorate that opens this article, recounted to me on a warm July evening sat on Sofia Nikolaevna's porch, initially caused me some puzzlement. The extract comes from a detailed account of a miraculous journey that she experienced in the dead of night guided by the Mother of God. In this passage, the conversation between the Mother of God and Sofia Nikolaevna alternates between two meanings and uses of the verb *okumaa*, 'to read' and 'to charm'. This correlation, however, points towards a relationship between the two concepts and practices that is not merely semantic but also gendered.

The close link between magical, religious and healing power and the written word has been highlighted by anthropologists in diverse cultural contexts (Bloch 1998; Jacobson 2012; Tambiah 1968). In the Gagauz culture, this relationship has a particular resonance as the practice of charming and the activity of reading are semantically linked through the verb *okumaa*, which means both to read and to charm (Çobotar and Dron 2002). This conceptual and semantic relationship between reading and charming is not unique to the Gagauz language, equivalents exist in other languages such as Hungarian (Voigt 2013: 127). As already discussed above, reading texts was until recent times a male skill and in the native language and culture strongly associated with religion. It is also a domain defined by patriarchal power and authority. Women's knowledge and practice of *reading*, in terms of both the literal *reading* of texts and the *reading*

of charms is transgressive and dangerous knowledge, especially from the perspective of the Church.<sup>3</sup>

Sofia Nikolaevna's narrative alternates between the two meanings because the acts of reading and charming are, in this context, bound up together; the male skill of reading is a necessary technology for accessing powerful texts needed for healing. The relationship therefore goes beyond a simple semantic link. The Mother of God's first question, 'What have you been doing? Have you been reading?' refers to her charming activities which she had been keeping secret until then but at the time of her vision felt the need to confesses 'I said, Yes, I read.' The meaning of the verb *okumaa*, however, changes in the question and answer that follow: 'She said "I will read you a prayer and let's see if you can learn it?" refers to the activity of reading rather than charming.' This is clear from Sofia Nikolaevna's answer 'I only had a little schooling, I only have up to fourth class, it is hard for me to remember the letters; I don't know books well'. In the dream narrative, the Mother of God is transmitting prayer texts to Sofia Nikolaevna by reading them to her. Her past inability to access and learn these prayers is hinted at in Sofia Nikolaevna's response, namely, that her poor reading skills had prevented her from learning them. The Mother of God, by reading the texts to her, enables Sofia Nikolaevna to memorise the written texts, something that she would otherwise have struggled to do had she to rely on her literacy skills, and thus empowers her to become a healer. As in the examples cited earlier, poor literacy is a source of concern, but for Sofia Nikolaevna the link is made explicit between her dream experience and her ability to harness it in order to produce a new self-representation; she becomes a holder of powerful texts. She went on to become a renowned healer, generating an alternative source of income in very testing economic circumstances.

It is local practice to pay for the services of an *ilaççı*. The standard explanation for the need to pay is *ani ilaç olsun!* – so that the cure will work. Even when one healer insisted she never took payment 'because Jesus was never paid,' she still advised me that something small would be acceptable. On another occasion, a healer refused payment altogether. However, when I prompted her with the standard remark 'surely you need to be paid *ani ilaç olsun!*' she quickly conceded that I was right (Kapaló 2011: 171). The fact that money usually changes hands is also borne out by the ritualised practice of placing money for the healer on the floor as you leave rather than into her hands, a practice I observed on numerous occasions. Healing became a particularly lucrative income stream following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the resultant economic crisis. The quality and availability of state medical care in Moldova suffered badly. This resulted in a rapid deterioration of health indicators, which remain amongst the worst in the region. This situation increased reliance on the services of local healers. Some high-profile healers such as Sofia Nikolaevna might have queues of patients at their garden gate waiting for treatment (Kapaló 2011: 168).

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<sup>3</sup> Despite the historical influence of Turkish culture and linguistic practice on the Gagauz, the relationship between dreaming, reading and charming appears much more strongly influenced by Romanian, and more generally, by Balkan Christian practice. The future findings of the author's current fieldwork amongst Turkish Muslim women healers in the neighbouring region of Dobrodja in Romania may illuminate this question.

Many charmers in Gagauzia inherit verbal charms from their relatives and neighbours. Sofia Nikolaevna also knows such charms that she learnt from her grandmother. All of the male healers I met inherited their healing words in this standard way.<sup>4</sup> The healing words are secret and are often not revealed to others lest they lose their power. Sofia Nikolaevna did not reveal her words to me. Her dream narrative, however, indicates a process quite different to the usual mode of transmission. The texts she received from the Mother of God represent an alternative mode that relies on the dream transmission and refers to a written text and the skill to read and memorise. Later in her narrative, Sofia Nikolaevna inadvertently revealed something about the texts transmitted by the Mother of God that would explain this reliance on the written word: 'I got up, I was sitting at the back of the field, and I read back to her the two Dreams of the Mother of God, um,... I mean the two prayers...' Sofia Nikolaevna identifies, or at the very least associates, her texts with *The Dream of the Mother of God*.

Sofia Nikolaevna's encounter with the Mother of God, therefore, appears to facilitate her memorisation of this prestigious but long text, overcoming her poor literacy skills. Sofia Nikolaevna's dream narrative not only tells us about her relationship to the Mother of God and the text she is custodian of, but also points to the legitimacy and authenticity of dreams as 'true manifestations of the transcendental sphere' (Hesz 2012: 146) and their ability to be transformative. This transformative power draws on the 'culturally available model' (Ewing 1990: 58) found in *The Dream of the Mother of God*.

### ***Aunt Varvara – 'The Mother of God Came to Me in a Dream'***

My final example also points to a dream functioning as a means by which women acquire previously elusive knowledge and spiritual power as a precursor to a career as a healer. In aunt Varvara's dream memorate, however, the local Orthodox clergy also play an important role in the storying of her new identity as a healer. In periods of 'extreme cultural disruption and distress' dreams can take on particular significance (Wallace cited in Ewing 1990: 69). As highlighted above, following the collapse of the Soviet Union Moldova experienced extreme economic hardship and the near collapse of the medical and social welfare system. At the same time, Orthodox Churches began to reopen with priests returning to villages after an absence of thirty or more years. For the women 'culture keepers' in village society this meant a renegotiation of their role and authority.

I was only married for 16 years before my husband died. I had eight kids, three girls died one after another and I was left with five children. I was a single mother working on the state farm looking after pigs. When I got my pension, I carried on helping neighbours as a midwife and giving massages, I raised my kids and my hands became strong, they became healing hands. And it was then that she came into my head, *Panaiya* came to me in a dream and said that I should charm, she told me how I should heal. 'Wherever you place your hand, there will be a sign that that person will be cured, that person will rise up. Maybe they will mock you,

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<sup>4</sup> Male healers, also referred to *ilaççi*, are less common and often inherit their healing gift from their female relatives. For a fuller discussion of charming and healing culture in Gagauzia and the biography of a male healer see Kapaló 2011, 172–175.



**Figure 2:** Aunt Varvara demonstrates how she uses a piece of church chandelier in her healing practice.

they will beat you, but you shouldn't ever stop.' She said: 'God will send you a piece of iron, with that iron you will cure.' A few days went by and a priest came, he is from our village [...] and he said 'Mother [here used as term of endearment] I will give you a piece of metal.' Father Nicholas gave me a piece of metal from an old chandelier from the church. It is blessed, and you see, it came to me in the dream that I should heal people with this piece of chandelier. There is also a piece of cloth with which I heal. Great things have come from this! And then the children found a horseshoe. I took it to church at Easter and had it blessed, but I hid it in my bag so that no one could see. I also cure people with this. I have cured so many, so many!

In aunt Varvara's narrative, the priest plays a crucial role in conferring legitimacy on her healing practices and confirming the truth of her prophetic dream. Healers I spoke to in Gagauzia often explained how they had to negotiate their relations with the Orthodox Church in the face of continued denunciations in sermons and the use of sanctions, such as refusing *komka* or Holy Communion, directed at healers. Aunt Varvara's narrative, however, indicates that the relationship with the official church was not unequivocal; she uses the figure of the priest and his explicit support of her practice to assert her legitimacy as well as demonstrating, through her surreptitious acquisition of a blessing for her horseshoe at Easter, how she appropriates and transfers religious capital from the Church in order to 'consecrate' her own practices and identity as a healer (see Figure 2). This script is strengthened later in her narrative when she describes successfully healing a nun and a priest both of whom then endorse her practice. After treating the priest, she recalls him saying, 'The words of God have come to you in your dream! Don't ever give up [healing].

Aunt Varvara's dream narrative tells how she received her instruction to heal, the implements she uses, and the words with which she heals directly from the Mother of God, 'Nobody taught me, I can't read, not a single letter! And I don't know any Russian or Romanian, nothing! [. . .]. The prayer comes from Allah, from me myself and from Allah.' These closing words from Aunt Varvara

reiterate once again the crucial link that exists for this generation of Gagauz women between the written word, their status as a marginalised linguistic minority and the empowering role of a dream of the Mother of God. Both Aunt Varvara and Sofia Nikolaevna are able to harness the dream experience in order to produce a new self-representation and thus alter their subject position. This is done, however, in the face of clerical opposition. The intervention of the Mother of God in a dream or vision, and access to her texts for reading and healing operates as a powerful script to help counter clerical authority.

## Conclusion

In Gagauzia healing, charming and reading are sites where women transgress certain patriarchal religious boundaries whilst also confirming certain other social roles as mothers, carers and domestic providers. In the examples I have given in this article, Gagauz women's dream narratives function to confer legitimacy and authority on women's dangerous practices of healing and reading. In such cases, as Olson and Adonyeva point out with regard to Russian women's folklore practices, we observe 'a tension between freedom and determination' (Olson and Adonyeva 2012: 14). Gagauz women link events from their lives with the scripts laid down by tradition, their personal concerns and anxieties with the communities shared imagination. Happenings in lives, as Bruner explains, become 'converted into more or less coherent autobiographies centred around a Self acting more or less purposefully in a social world' (Bruner 1991: 18). This is possible in the case of the dream narrative corpus presented here because for women 'dreaming' is considered to be an authentic means of communication with the divine and to have prophetic power. This template or script has a powerful source in the text, *The Dream of the Mother of God*. In time, these narratives may 'accrue' into a corpus that is able, in the form of 'received tradition,' to provide new permutations of scripts. This is what Margaret Somers refers to as the process of 'emplotment' (Somers 1994), part of the process of creative identity construction that make sense of what has happened in ones life on the basis of 'projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, religious and cultural narratives' (Somers 1994: 614).

The narrative template that was available to this generation of Gagauz women allowed for certain transgressions of patriarchal religious boundaries, namely the translating and copying of apocryphal texts and practices of charming and healing. It also allowed for limited transformations of women's subject positions and life circumstances in the form of enhanced religious authority and improved economic wellbeing. Women's dream narratives, however, constitute a culturally recognised script that aligns the divine presence of the Mother of God with a powerful image of caring, motherhood, dreaming, suffering and healing. In this sense, the women are not free to dream anything; they dream of the *Dream of the Mother of God*. Indeed, their dream narratives are pragmatic and readily interpretable as logical solutions to particular life challenges; this is what makes them effective in transforming, to a limited extent, life situations.

Katherine Ewing, in discussing the transformative power of spiritual initiation dreams amongst Pakistani Sufis, goes further, asserting that 'When an

individual dreams a culturally prescribed dream, he [sic.] alters, however slightly, the culturally transmitted dream form and its associated social institutions, just as individual narrators transform a myth in the telling' (Ewing 1990: 69). In the case of Gagauz women's dreams of the Mother of God, the model for personal transformation found in the paradigmatic text is closely aligned with the women's existing concrete life concerns and circumstances, namely their roles as carers, healers and mothers and is therefore, I argue, limited. This is further constrained by the repressive power and stigmatising sanctions employed by the Church to undermine the authority of healers and prohibit or limit the use of the text. Leyla Keogh, in her study of Gagauz women's international labour migration, based on a younger and economically more mobile generation, concludes that 'motherhood is the key to the social order' and that positioning oneself as a 'better mother' is the way for Gagauz women to expand 'their imaginations and desires, and even help them construct new lifestyles' (Keogh 2006: 455). For the older generation of Gagauz women, likewise constrained by their traditional domestic social role as carers, the process of re-imagining and narrating their identity relies on a transcendent model of motherhood, suffering and dreaming.

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