

VOICES OF RUDARI WOMEN FROM FILIAȘI (ROMANIA) IN THE CONTEXT OF CONVERSION TO PENTECOSTALISM

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ABSTRACT. *Voices of Rudari women from Filiași (Romania) in the Context of Conversion to Pentecostalism.* The present article examines conversion to Pentecostalism among Rudari women in post-socialist Eastern Europe. The case study focuses on a Rudari ethnic community located in a small town in southern Romania and shows that Rudari women assume a dual role: one involves preserving the interplay between Pentecostalism and local culture, while the other entails initiating conversion among men. Women facilitate conversion through visions, dreams, or manifestations of illness, which position them as gatekeepers who translate Pentecostalism into the local cultural context. Furthermore, women serve as guides for men undergoing conversion, playing a vital role in bridging the gap between Rudari traditions and the Pentecostal culture. They demonstrate proficiency in interpreting Pentecostal ecstatic phenomena within their predominantly male community, with their voices serving as mediators throughout the conversion process (Brusco, 2010). Similarly, women act as “therapists,” facilitating men’s conversion and addressing issues related to the transformation of traditional notions of masculinity.

Keywords: *Pentecostalism, Romania, Boyash studies, cultural transformation, conversion narratives, gender, ethnography*

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REZUMAT. *Voci ale femeilor rudărese din Filiași (România) în contextul convertirii la pentecostalism.* Articolul de față prezintă convertirea la pentecostalism în rândul femeilor dintr-o comunitate de rudari în contextul postsocialismului est-european. Studiul de caz prezintă o comunitate etnică de rudari dintr-un oraș mic din sudul României. Argumentez că femeile rudărese au un dublu rol în comunitate, primul de conservare a dualismului dintre pentecostalism și cultura locală și al doilea de inițiere a convertirii în rândul bărbaților. Femeile alimentează convertirea religioasă prin viziuni, vise sau semne de boală. Toate aceste condiții prelabile au facilitat devenirea lor ca interprete ale traducerii pentecostalismului în cultura locală. Mai mult decât atât, femeile devin astfel călăuze ale convertirii bărbaților. Ele joacă, de asemenea, un rol important în medierea celor două lumi, tradițiile Rudari și noua cultură pentecostală. Ele sunt capabile să descifreze semnele extatice pentecostale într-un context comunitar dominat de bărbați, vocile femeilor devenind astfel un mediator în procesul de convertire (Brusco, 2010). În mod similar, femeile acționează ca „terapeute” în contextul procesului de convertire și transformare a machismului bărbaților.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Pentecostalism, România, studii asupra băieșilor/rudarilor, transformare culturală, narațiuni ale convertirii, studii de gen, etnografie*

Introduction

Interest in how Pentecostalism has impacted women and gender dynamics has been documented since the 1970s and 1980s (Brusco 2010, 75). While massive conversions were observed in South America, Asia, and Africa, it is essential not to overlook Europe, particularly Eastern Europe after the fall of communist regimes. In post-communist Eastern Europe, the Roma community has been one of the most active in terms of conversions. In Romania, numerous specialists have delved into this phenomenon (Fosztó 2006, 2009, 2012; Kiss, Fosztó 2012; Roth, Gog 2012; Gog 2007, 2009). Yet, there has been comparatively less focus on Rudari communities within Roma studies. Although Rudari self-identify separately from Roma, academic studies often include them as part of Roma studies. Recently, a volume entitled *Boyash Studies: Researching “Our People”* (Sorescu-Marinković, Kahl, and Sikimić 2021) has been published, exploring Rudari in Romania, Greece, Croatia, and Hungary, addressing history, identity, language, and religious affiliation.

At the European level, studies on Pentecostalism among the Roma have covered various themes such as gender dynamics and personal transformation (Gay y Blasco 1999; Roman 2017; Slavkova 2021), Pentecostalism’s relationship

with identity (Roman 2017, 2021), changes in the Roma community's status (Ries 2007), and ethnicity within Pentecostalism (Cantón-Delgado 2017). In Central and Eastern Europe, recent studies by Melody Wachsmuth (2023) in Serbia and Croatia have explored religious identity, gender dynamics, and health issues. Eva-Liisa Roht-Yilmaz (2020) analyzed Roma communities converting to Pentecostalism on the Latvia-Estonia border and focused on the role of Roma missionaries from Finland called Kaale and the narrative of demarginalization, while examining the relationships between converted and non-converted Roma, and between non-Roma and Roma converts. Less explored are Pentecostalism's effects on marginalized communities, particularly concerning women and their role in mediating and negotiating these transformations.

In Filiași, a small town in southern Oltenia, Romania, the Rudari community resides on the town's outskirts, known as "Rudărie," which is mainly affiliated with the Neo-Protestant Pentecostal denomination. The town consists of three ethnic communities: Romanians, Rudari, and Roma, segregated geographically with Romanians mainly in the town center and the other two communities on the outskirts. Romanians, the majority ethnic group, adhere to Orthodox Christianity, and the Rudari in the Rudărie neighborhood who have not converted to Pentecostalism remain Orthodox. The predominant wave of conversions to Pentecostalism among the Rudari community occurred after 1989, coinciding with the collapse of socialism. While instances of conversion existed during the communist era, they were relatively rare due to persecution and a diminished religious milieu. Often linked with the Roma population due to skin color, the Rudari have historically been present throughout the Balkans. In Oltenia and Muntenia, they are known as "Rudari," whereas in Moldova and Transylvania, they are called "albieri" and "băieși" respectively. Their traditional occupation shifted from gold washing in early modern times to wood processing since the nineteenth century.

The conversion to Pentecostalism among Rudari has brought significant changes for both converts and non-converts, impacting identity, local traditions, dress, spirituality, gender dynamics, and corporeality. Both men and women convert, but their experiences differ. Some families have one spouse converted and the other not, while others have both converted. Women from Rudărie have detailed their conversion experiences and its effects, and although they do not hold formal positions in the Pentecostal church hierarchy—unlike men who may serve as pastors or elders—their voices have gained prominence in conversions among the Rudari. More specifically, they often serve as key intermediaries, establishing continuities and discontinuities between local and Pentecostal culture, on the one hand, and initiating and converting their spouses to Pentecostalism, on the other hand.

In the Pentecostal community of Rudărie, women outnumber men and have developed a deep understanding of both their own bodies and those around them, nurtured by local traditions and social dynamics. Rudari women wield significant influence in body-illness relationships. Pentecostalism highlights the connection between the body and the Holy Spirit, conversion signs, sin, and morality. Combined with local customs like the Gurban ritual, Pentecostalism has enabled women to become authorities on corporeal matters. They can decipher signs of illness and conversion, shaping these insights into pedagogical roles both within and outside the Rudari community. Their pre-existing knowledge of the body aligns with Pentecostal perspectives, sustained by informal healing practices prevalent during communist and post-socialist times, when they sought alternative medical services from priests in monasteries, local healers, and practitioners of the occult. Encouraged by shared cultural elements such as dreams, crises, prayers, and taboos, this expertise in illness and corporeality has merged with the Pentecostal framework, ensuring Rudari women's longevity as experts in illness and corporeality.

Despite their informal influence, formal roles within the Pentecostal church elude women in Rudărie; they are excluded from decision-making structures and are often patronized or even reprimanded by church leadership. Formally speaking, they appear to be marginalized by the church. However, their informal roles, especially evident in conversion narratives, significantly shape community dynamics within family contexts, and in relation to non-converts and local traditions. This prompts an exploration of the role Rudari women play in the broader context of mass conversion to Pentecostalism post-socialism. In this regard, two pertinent questions arise: (1) how do Rudari women navigate the interface between local and Pentecostal cultures during conversion, and (2) what impact does corporeality have on gender dynamics within the Pentecostal community?

According to formal church structures, women are perceived as spiritually deficient, necessitating intervention to rectify their perceived spiritual waywardness. However, ethnographic evidence contradicts this notion, indicating instances where men require spiritual guidance. This is exemplified in the case of Melisa's husband, whom she assists in the conversion process to Pentecostalism. Initial discussions highlight the local context and traditional healing practices such as the Gurban ritual. In this context, an illustrative case study comes from Lila, who undertakes a transnational endeavor to conduct the ritual for the well-being of her family members. The focus then shifts to Nora, whose journey involves conversion to Pentecostalism and an interplay between local and Pentecostal cultural frameworks. Following this, the analysis delves into the dimension of corporeality within the Rudari community, elucidating how women

interpret and navigate this aspect. Finally, attention is directed towards Melisa, who spearheaded conversion within her own family unit, serving as an example of how women can become informal initiators of this process. Her story is particularly noteworthy as it encapsulates instances of illness alongside the conversion narrative, wherein she actively facilitated translation, mediation, and interpretation of divine signs, culminating in her husband's conversion.

A common thread observed in the narratives of Nora and Melisa is the delineation of conversion signs, the intricacies of the conversion process, and the outcomes stemming from the interpretation of divine manifestations. Throughout these narratives, illness emerges as a pivotal factor, prompting distinct methodologies for interpretation and healing: one rooted in the traditional Gurban ritual and the other embedded within the Pentecostal paradigm. Furthermore, these accounts converge on moments of existential crisis within the believer's journey, underscoring the centrality of corporeal experiences. Ultimately, these narratives and the crises encountered therein serve to foreground the resilience, adaptability, and agency exhibited by women within informal settings.

Methodology

The field research took place in the Rudărie neighborhood of Filiași, focusing primarily on individuals affiliated with the Pentecostal faith. Multiple discussions with specific individuals over time were conducted, notable in Melisa's case, where a trusting relationship was established, allowing her to generously share several events related to her conversion journey.

A combination of individual and focus group interviews was conducted. Additionally, discussions were held with individuals residing outside the neighborhood to gain insights from other perspectives, particularly from Romanians. However, interviews were not conducted within the Roma community.

Rudari women demonstrated a readiness to participate in discussions regarding their experiences of converting to Pentecostalism and elucidating the link between local and Pentecostal cultures. Women from various age groups and social backgrounds were approached, with both men and women often taking part in focus groups. The ethnographic work commenced in 2013–2014, with the most extensive phase of the process occurring between 2015 and 2016. Interviews, structured and semi-structured, were conducted with participants. In instances where recording devices were not feasible due to subjects' discomfort, key points were noted and later transcribed into a field journal, with detailed indexing throughout the research process.

Conversations were also carried out with religious leaders from the Pentecostal community. By attending religious services, I observed the dynamics of organization, church structure, and the roles of men and women within the congregation. Notably, it was the women who delved deeper into and articulated themes concerning morality or corporeality in the Pentecostal Rudari community, aspects of significant interest for the study at hand.

In summary, rather than being subjected to aggressive proselytizing efforts, I encountered narratives that shed light on the intricacies of gender dynamics within families and the roles of women in the conversion process, the pre-conversion state, emotional experiences, and the challenges faced throughout. All names mentioned in this study are fictitious to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

Pentecostalism and local culture

A significant aspect of the changes occurring during the post-socialist era and the adoption of neo-Protestant beliefs is the interaction between Rudari culture and customs, and Pentecostal values, morality, gender dynamics, and machismo. The Rudari people serve as the architects of this dialogue, showing a readiness to reinterpret and negotiate cultural elements to redefine their communal identity when necessary. From this standpoint, specific research directions (Robbins 2010, 161-162) explore how Pentecostalism sets itself apart from other denominations. Their focus is on examining how other religious traditions engage with cultural elements, the manner in which this interaction leads to tensions, and how these clashes tend to ease over time. Conversely, Pentecostalism thrives on and is sustained by cultural tensions.

To comprehend how Pentecostalism becomes ingrained in the Rudari community, I must delve into the content and structure of conversion narratives. These narratives serve as intermediaries, illustrating both the personal changes accompanying conversion to Pentecostalism and the communal shifts. The personal, cultural, and eschatological dimensions, reflecting the broader adoption of Pentecostalism, draw from the work of researcher Joel Robbins (2010, 161). However, in presenting these aspects within the Rudari community, I also aim to shed light on other specific elements of the Rudari culture that Robbins did not explicitly address in his general model.

Within the Rudari community, at a personal level, there is a struggle between the “old self,” i.e., the unconverted, and the “new self” or the converted. There are trials sent by God to test faith, battles with the Devil, and efforts to resist the temptations of the “world.” On a cultural level, there is an interplay between the ancient thaumaturgic traditions specific to Rudari customs such

as the Gurban ritual and the novel healing techniques represented by Pentecostal practices. This cultural exchange occurs within the context of illness, a central theme for the Rudari, linking the personal, cultural, and eschatological dimensions. On an eschatological level, the transformations brought about by Pentecostalism indirectly depict the continuous efforts of the converted Rudari to prepare themselves before divinity, striving to be “saved” and redeemed. Robbins suggests that ruptures in the personal, cultural, and eschatological dimensions appear not only at the ideological level of Pentecostalism but also in terms of everyday practices of the converts. According to him, this is due to the significance attached to ritual practices in the daily lives of converts (2010, 161). These ritual practices, termed “rituals of rupture,” encompass various processes such as the rites of deliverance, prayer, waiting, purification, conversion rituals such as baptism and speaking in tongues, as well as the rituals of spiritual warfare (Robbins 2010, 161).

In discussing the challenges posed by these ruptures in the lives of converts, a crucial concept is dualism. This notion, examined by renowned scholars of Pentecostalism, Joel Robbins and André Droogers, underscores the dual nature in the “duplex culture” of Pentecostalism, which encompasses Pentecostal beliefs and principles on the one hand, and the beliefs and principles of the converts, which they employ to construct their identity, on the other. Droogers emphasizes this dualism in analyzing the external repertoire of Pentecostal communities, highlighting how the denomination “oppos[es] the community of the saved to the sinful world” (Droogers 2014, 210).

Women between two worlds: Traditional culture and Pentecostal culture

The Gurban ritual stands out as the most deeply ingrained tradition among the Rudari community. Typically observed during Saint George’s Day or the Ascension, this ritual serves as a healing ceremony for a family member and draws the participation of both family members and neighbors. The ritual is governed by explicit rules dictating how it is carried out and the preparations required before its commencement, including spiritual purification, bodily cleanliness, and tidying of the domestic space. Central to the ritual is the sacrificial offering of a lamb dedicated to the divine, with the method of preparation—whether roasting or boiling—determined by the content of a dream. Renowned folklorist Ileana Benga provides insights into the Gurban ritual as practiced in a rural community in Oltenia, emphasizing the role of dreams in determining diagnosis and the duration of the ritual, which can extend from three years to a lifetime. Notably, the ritual involves ecstatic elements and is

conducted by specialized individuals. The Gurban ritual encompasses two cultural components, drawing from both folklore, particularly the depiction of divine figures known as “Saints,” and the Islamic culture, notably “Kurban Bayram” (2021, 75-77).

Bogdan Neagotă, an authority on Rudari studies, offers a folkloric depiction of the Gurban ritual in the Oltenia region, contextualizing it within the magico-religious domain (2021, 99-129). Conversely, Magdalena Slavkova delves into the experience of Pentecostalism from the viewpoint of a Rudari woman undergoing conversion. Her case study highlights the transformative impact of Pentecostal conversion on the lives of Rudari women in Bulgaria, often leading to familial tensions (2021b, 169-173). The case of the Rudari woman in Bulgaria is relevant for the study at hand, since Nora, one of the participants in my study, has reported tensions in relation to her grandmother, while Lila, unlike other members of the Rudari community in Filiași, still observes the Gurban ritual. Nora’s and Lila’s narratives serve as catalysts for exploring the intersection between the Gurban ritual and Pentecostal healing practices, shedding light on illness management strategies in Rudărie.

The enduring significance of the Gurban ritual is palpable in its solemn observance today, symbolizing a link between the present Rudari generation and their ancestors. Personally participating in Lila’s Gurban afforded me insights into the ritual’s protocols and its social and therapeutic dimensions. Lila, a Rudărie resident working abroad, embodies the phenomenon of labor migration, which emerged as a recurring theme through my field research, with a significant portion of the community mentioning that Rudari individuals often seek employment opportunities in France. Lila’s work takes her to Italy year-round, with periodic returns to her hometown in Rudărie during the summer months. Within the framework of migration, my objective in examining Lila’s case was to discern whether the behavior of migrants undergoes any discernible changes upon their departure for employment abroad. Lila, however, has not embraced Pentecostalism, nor did she express any inclination toward conversion during our discussions. I opted to present Lila’s case as it underscores the enduring presence of local customs, notably the Gurban ritual, amidst the backdrop of two post-socialist phenomena: international labor migration and the widespread adoption of neo-Protestant denominations following the events of 1989.

In terms of methodology, my involvement in the Gurban ceremony occurred during the second phase of my fieldwork (2016) in the Rudari neighborhood of Filiași, and I believe it played a crucial role in fostering trust within the community. It should be noted that participating in the Gurban ritual is quite challenging for someone from outside the Rudari community

due to its strict adherence to rules. However, through my participation, I gained deeper insights into how this tradition fits into Rudari culture and was able to objectively analyze various cultural aspects of the community. By the time of my second research phase in the Rudari community, I had become familiar with the Rudari and their identity struggles. They had begun to accept my presence in the neighborhood, and discussions about Rudari traditions flowed smoothly. On this occasion, a young man suggested visiting a family performing the Gurban ritual that day. Lila, who had traveled from Italy to organize the ritual for her son and husband, led the ceremony. Initially, there was some suspicion towards outsiders joining the ritual, which was reflected by the host's reserved attitude. However, having previously discussed Rudari history and traditions with the man who greeted us at the site, he and the young man facilitated my participation. Despite this, some reserve and suspicion persisted, stemming from the strictness of the ritual and the intrusion of an outsider into the intimacy of Rudari culture. The primary rule of the Gurban, emphasizing sexual abstinence before participation, was firmly emphasized by both the male host and Lila. Violating this rule could compromise the ritual's healing efficacy.

Lila's commitment to the Gurban tradition was evident in her organization of the ceremony, held twice that year on May 6 and June 9. Her adherence to these dates underscores the ritual's significance and effectiveness, as perceived by its practitioners. Lila mentioned that while some individuals organize the ritual for three consecutive years, she performs it annually for her son, a practice she has maintained for thirty years. During the Gurban ritual, prayers are offered to the "Saints," imploring their intervention for the healing of the afflicted. The prayer follows a specific structure: "O Saints, Merciful Ones, remember [the name of the afflicted person], grant them strength and vitality throughout their entire being, in their bones, their feet, their head, as they present offerings to you year after year—a plump lamb, an oven of bread, a vessel of wine. Amen." These supplications are repeated three times, with an additional plea on the third repetition, "May that which the elders prayed for come to fruition. Amen." An integral aspect of the Gurban rite involves the preparation of five loaves of bread in sand: two are inserted into the lamb's abdomen, while three are placed on the ceremonial table. In Rudari tradition, the lamb is the sacrificial animal.

The story of Lila's involvement in the Gurban ritual and her commitment intertwines with Nora's story, who turned to Pentecostalism when her son survived drowning. Residing in the Rudărie neighborhood, 38-year-old Nora engaged in a discussion with me about her devout adherence to Pentecostalism and her religious experiences. While Lila's case demonstrates the continued observance of the Gurban tradition for three decades, Nora's story highlights

the clash between local customs and Pentecostal beliefs. This conflict became apparent several years ago when Nora and her grandmother discussed the historical healing practices of the Rudari community. This dialogue exposed differences in healing approaches between Pentecostal converts among the Rudari and non-converts, with Nora recounting her efforts to persuade her grandmother of the perceived ineffectiveness of the Gurban ritual.

For Nora, like many of the Rudari, the Gurban ritual serves as a link between the present and the world of their ancestors, who followed an ancient religion known as “the Law of Moses.” A snippet from my conversation with Nora is especially illustrative in this respect:

“‘They adhered to the Law of Moses.’

‘What did that entail?’

‘It involved performing the Gurban, slaughtering a lamb.’

‘I understand.’

‘If someone fell ill.’

‘Tell me more about the Gurban.’

‘Yes, they uphold this tradition, which is sinful. They don’t grasp the significance of Jesus coming as a lamb and sacrificing himself for us. My grandmother wasn’t aware of that; I tried explaining what’s written in the Bible, but she was old and struggled with it. She observed this Gurban.’

‘Why wasn’t she aware of it?’

‘She was unaware and couldn’t understand; she identified as [Christian] Orthodox, and she performed the Gurban when she was unwell, if her foot ached. She believed it would heal her: someone takes a lamb, slaughter it, remove its organs, skewer it, and eat it. She believed in the Gurban, and said “You Saints,” but she had her own phrasing, distinct from our Bible.’

(Nora, 38, Pentecostal, Filiași)

This notion of a connection between the Gurban and Judaism resonates widely among the Rudari. Nora’s narrative also underscores the divide between Pentecostals and Christian Orthodox Rudari, with the latter still observing the Gurban. This dichotomy gives rise to a paradox, echoed not only in this case but also in the accounts of other Rudari: the Gurban ritual is believed to have roots in or shares similarities with Jewish sacrifices to the divine. Such associations elevate the significance of this observance in the eyes of the Rudari. However, among Pentecostal Rudari, this reverence for the celebration is eclipsed by Jesus Christ, regarded as the true divine entity capable of healing. Furthermore, this context, viewed through a Pentecostal lens, elucidates the distinction between the “old world” and the “new world.” The “old world” is steeped in Gurban tradition, whereas the “new world” symbolizes the discovery of the true God.

Nora's words highlight this transition from Gurban tradition to Pentecostal faith:

“He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was on him,’ see ‘by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us,’ that’s why they did it during the time of Moses, they believed that if you took a sheep, sacrificed it, and offered it up in smoke to God, declaring it done, you would be healed, that’s tradition, you see, when Jesus Christ came for us, he abandoned these traditions, and said ‘I gave myself as a sheep, as a lamb.’” (Nora, 38, Pentecostal, Filiași)

When revisiting the conversation from a Pentecostal standpoint, Nora is careful to distance herself from the Gurban, accentuating its ineffectiveness compared to the powers of Christ. According to her, her son, aged around 10, was saved from drowning through divine intervention. Nora's viewpoint on the Gurban and Pentecostalism emerges most vividly from the following excerpt:

“And who provided healing during the Gurban?”
‘She remained unwell, and she died.’
‘No, but who, who was responsible for the healing?’
‘Well, there was someone.’
‘During the Gurban.’
‘There was someone, her husband, he had to maintain cleanliness, refrain from intimacy, abstain from any activity, she had to be pure to slaughter the lamb, in order to heal her from ailments like foot pain or skin lesions or various afflictions, and the enemy [Satan], tempting them into sin, said it’s enough to say ‘You Saints’, but they shouldn’t have said ‘You Saints’, they should’ve said ‘Holy Father.’”
“And who were these Saints?”
“They were nobody, I don’t know what those terms mean, because I don’t believe in such concepts, and my grandmother passed away. All my grandparents passed away, on both my father’s and mother’s side.’
‘No, I’m asking because I’m curious who they prayed to during the Gurban.’
‘Yes.’
‘To whom did they appeal?’
‘They invoked, ‘You Saints,’ that’s all I know, ‘You Saints, too pure, too enlightened, Saints,’ as for whom they were, I don’t know, who were the Saints, I don’t know.’
‘And where did these Saints derive their power from?’
‘From where, I don’t know, I know about Jesus Christ who possesses power, I know about Jesus Christ who healed my child, he rescued him from the slimy pit.’” (Nora, 38, Pentecostal, Filiași)

Nora's stance on the inefficacy of the Gurban, compared to the potency of Jesus Christ and the Bible, clashes with Lila's narrative. Both Lila and Nora turn to different belief systems for healing, each finding success in their chosen paths. Lila's faith in the Gurban stems from thirty years of practice, particularly for the sake of her son. Conversely, Nora adheres faithfully to Pentecostalism, attributing her son's rescue from drowning to Jesus Christ. Contrasting Lila's and Nora's stories sheds light on the significance of the Gurban and its relationship with Pentecostalism.

Their narratives also highlight conflicting beliefs within the Rudărie neighborhood. Nora argues for the Gurban's inefficiency compared to prayer and Pentecostal practices, while Lila, who routinely returns from Italy to Romania, to her neighborhood of Rudărie, specifically to conduct the healing Gurban ritual for her ailing husband and son. Her recurrent visits to the country for this purpose, along with her meticulous observance of the regulations surrounding this healing tradition, showcase Lila's belief in this practice. This dichotomy suggests that healing approaches within the community vary between the Gurban and Pentecostalism. Despite this, there is an interplay between these healing modalities. For instance, there are similarities in the divine signs sent to individuals for decision-making or indicating healing. In the Gurban practice, dreams serve as a signal that one must undertake the ritual. Conversely, in Pentecostal tradition, healing or directives for healing often come through dreams, which serve to reveal the will of the Lord. While dreams in the context of the Gurban inform individuals about potential healing, in Pentecostalism, they are interpreted differently, sometimes involving consultation with church elders or church specialists in dream interpretation.

The evolution of the Gurban presents a paradox. Post-1989, its practice has declined, and nowadays it is often done merely out of "love for tradition" rather than necessity. Practicing "out of affection" implies that the ritual occurs without the prerequisite of someone being ill. According to the Rudari, factors contributing to the decline in the Gurban practice include the migration of Rudari individuals abroad and conversion to Pentecostalism. However, Lila's case presents an exception, suggesting that migration and exposure to new cultures abroad do not always result in a disconnection from old local traditions. Typically, globalization tends to uproot individuals from their cultural heritage, but in Lila's case, this was not the case. Furthermore, her commitment to the Gurban ritual for her husband and son underscores her belief in its efficacy. Lila's dedication also plays a role in preserving local traditions by setting an example for the community to follow.

In conclusion, Lila and Nora's experiences illustrate how the Rudari approach illness from both Pentecostal and Gurban perspectives. While Pentecostalism rejects the Gurban, local Christian Orthodox beliefs tolerate it.

Both narratives offer insights into illness management typologies. Despite lacking a conversion narrative, Lila's commitment to the Gurban mirrors Nora's faith in Pentecostal practices.

Body, Pentecostalism, and family

In the context of Pentecostal conversions, Rudari women frequently delve into discussions concerning the body. Often, the focus lies on an ailing body, either bewitched or subjected to trials during the conversion journey. Candy Gunther Brown, whose research focuses on corporeal dimensions, coined the term "the body's role in a spirit-centered cosmology" (2011, 12). In Rudari cosmology, a steadfast belief in spirits, both benevolent and malevolent, has endured, encompassing superstitions, witchcraft rituals, spells, incantations, and notably, the Gurban ritual. In the Rudari worldview, bodily suffering prompts appeals to supernatural forces for relief. Moreover, the body serves as a conduit, linking the Rudari's traditional cosmology to the Pentecostal cosmology they have embraced.

From a Pentecostal standpoint, the body assumes significance as an intermediary for divine signs. Frequently, these signs manifest as illnesses, symbolic of a spiritual journey that individuals must traverse. Illness is a sign, and the process of healing symbolizes the struggle against sin and the cooperative effort with God to overcome it. Many Pentecostal Rudari recount illnesses as tests of faith sent by God, contrasting with the belief that illnesses stem from the devil. The body also has an important function for the Rudari because it receives divine signs both pre- and post-conversion. More specifically, it becomes a battleground before conversion and during conversion, yet in most cases, it is pre-conversion that the Rudari individual has a liminal experience, usually illness, which triggers the religious transformation.

The body is likened to a sanctuary requiring care akin to nurturing the soul. Rehabilitation from the effects of alcohol and smoking is necessary, underscoring Pentecostal doctrine prioritizing the soul's salvation. If the soul repents before God, salvation and entry into heaven are guaranteed. The body requires modest sustenance and attire, adhering to behavioral and dress code practices in line with Pentecostalism. Additionally, the body serves as the vessel for verbal and non-verbal interactions with the world, simultaneously housing demons and receiving the Holy Spirit—a paradoxical reflection of Pentecostal dualism, which manifests throughout the convert's life.

Dreams often feature prominently in Pentecostal Rudari narratives, particularly regarding the body. Directly associated with illness is the occurrence of healing through dreams, a phenomenon I came across among Pentecostal

Rudari. In a specific instance, Dominica, a 68-year-old Pentecostal woman, recounts how God appeared to her in the hospital during the night in a dream and cured the ailment in her throat. She vividly describes Jesus approaching her “with a scalpel and tweezers” to facilitate her healing. This narrative exemplifies the attribute frequently mentioned by the Rudari in their accounts of healing, portraying God as the ultimate physician.

Raluca Bianca Roman’s study within the Roma (Kaale) community in Finland sheds light on this corporeal aspect of conversion, elucidating phenomena such as individual transformation, the body’s significance post-conversion, and the manner in which the convert navigates relationships within the community and in relation to non-converts (2017, 256-273). In the Kaale community, Pentecostalism plays a role in standardizing and regulating both body and spirit (Roman 2017, 263). Similarly, among Pentecostal Rudari, their denomination fosters a standardization of both body and spirit, with women playing a significant role in transitioning elements from the old spiritual framework to the new Pentecostal one. Specifically, they take the lead in facilitating communication between these two frameworks, adapting as they progress and establishing connections between traditional bodily experiences and those of Pentecostalism. They become experts in the informal Pentecostal practices.

It is interesting to see how the Pentecostal Rudari approach their bodies and their experiences through a Pentecostal lens. This analysis is built upon the notion that “examining believers’ bodily experiences allows us to gain insight into the dynamics of becoming and remaining a religious convert. Exploring how converts learn to read and experience their bodies, which involves feelings of doubt and success, provides tools to understand the appeal and limits of religious movements in our time” (Klaver & van de Kamp 2011, 424). The practice of understanding the body was already present through rituals such as the Gurban or superstitions the likes of interpreting witchcraft practices. While I will not delve into the phenomenon of witchcraft in this analysis due to its complexity, elements of it surface in Rudari narratives as origins of illness or attempts at healing. This acknowledgment helps paint a broader and more comprehensive picture of the cosmological intersections within the Rudari universe. The body emerges as a recurring theme for Rudari when discussing illness and its significance. Illness and the body intersect, but the process of understanding one’s corporeality and deciphering its meanings through signs received from traditions (e.g., from the “Saints”) or from the Christian Orthodox faith tradition has made the transition to Pentecostal interpretation of the body intriguing. Why? Because illness, the body, and their meanings held significance in traditional Rudari culture even before conversion, thereby establishing a knowledge base for the relationship between the individual and their body.

Healing holds prominence in Pentecostalism, as does the individual endowed with the gift of healing. Nonetheless, Rudari women should not be deemed meritorious only if they perform miracles or heal according to the formal dictates of the church. Women in Rudărie ought to be acknowledged for their roles as interpreters, guides, therapists, and facilitators of the transition between local culture and the Gurban. They should not be marginalized or rendered formally invisible, as their contributions are vital to the social fabric of the community. They bolster the emotional well-being of families during their own conversions and those of other members, navigate interactions with the “world” of the unconverted, elucidate the phenomenon of conversion, and serve as moral beacons within both their families and the community. The emotional aspect is pivotal in the conversion process, with women displaying heightened sensitivity to it compared to men and demonstrating an aptitude for distinguishing between “clean” and “unclean spirits” (Slavkova 2021a, 263-264). Rudari women embody this aspect, not only detecting these forces but also adeptly interpreting them. They have operationalized such concepts, displaying a willingness to engage in detailed discussions on the subject owing to their experiences with informal medicine even prior to conversion. Furthermore, during the process of receiving the Holy Spirit, women often exhibit greater fervor than men and in certain cases even regard God as their “husband” (Slavkova 2021a, 263-264), which represents a pinnacle point in the outcome of conversion.

In Slavkova’s study on Roma women in Bulgaria, she highlights how the church imposed certain restrictions on women, such as refraining from singing certain folk songs, giving up dancing, avoiding certain foods cooked during Christian Orthodox and Islamic holidays, or abstaining from “kurban soup” (2021a, 265). Among Rudari women from Filiași, there is a fond recollection of their pre-conversion “worldly life,” which included activities such as going to the movies, as exemplified by Melisa. Another scenario involves a woman who finds that influences from the non-converted world can hinder conversion. She expressed a desire to participate in the festivities and have fun like the “worldly people” at her son’s wedding. Here, we see a situation where a potential convert is torn between family obligations and societal expectations.

The desire to break free from the “worldly life” and the routines that contradict Pentecostal principles often emerges in conversion stories. This is evident in Melisa’s case, who had a passion for cinematography. Melisa, a middle-aged woman from Rudărie, experienced crises and illnesses, much like Nora and Lila. She sought medical help for her illness, but her focus was supporting her husband’s conversion. Before his conversion, her husband indulged in drinking and smoking, common behaviors among non-converted men. The turning point for Melisa was when their children fell ill. She interpreted this

as a sign from God urging her husband to convert. Despite her encouragement, he initially refused. However, when he fell ill himself shortly after, a pivotal moment appeared. Melisa interpreted it as a clear sign for him to convert and break the cycle of illness in their family. Despite his initial reluctance, her husband eventually converted, influenced by the illness and Melisa's guidance. Alongside supporting his conversion, Melisa helped him transition from his old social circles, where he exhibited traditional masculine behaviors, to the new social norms dictated by Pentecostalism.

Elizabeth Brusco, a specialist in analyzing gender relations in Pentecostalism, conducted research on this topic in South America. A quote from one of her contributions analyzes the dynamics of machismo and the role of women in the family, which also sheds light on the nuances of gender relations in Rudărie:

“[M]en often state in their testimonies that they were led to convert as the result of having been healed of an illness. Machista culture, with its premium on individual independence and physical prowess, makes no provisions for illness, and in fact physical disability is anathema to it. When a man gets sick he must withdraw from his usual activities and return home so that his wife (or other female relative) can nurse him. He becomes dependent on his wife and family in a way that would be unthinkable if he were well. He is also physically suffering, and his fear of what is going to happen to him and his dependence on his wife and family combine to render him uncharacteristically receptive to their counsel. If his wife has already converted she is armed with the logic of the church to argue that his illness is the result of his *vicios* (vices) and that only by giving them up will he be well again. The spectacular aspects of evangelical worship (e.g., speaking in tongues and other displays of ecstatic worship) provide further fuel to convince him of the power of the new religion.” (2010, 89-90)

Melisa interpreted her children's illness as a consequence of her husband's reluctance to attend the Pentecostal church. The situation took a turn when her husband fell ill himself. Following this event, he gave up his vices and started attending the Pentecostal church. Melisa played a pivotal role in incorporating the church's teachings into how she explained her husband's illness to him and its origin. Consequently, she became a decisive factor in his conversion to Pentecostalism. The couple underwent baptism and conversion on the same day. In this instance, Melisa served as the female intermediary figure in the Rudari man's conversion journey. This enabled the Rudari woman to take on the role of guiding conversion both within the church and the family.

Within the family dynamics, Melisa became a symbol of her husband's departure from his machismo.

Conclusions

Both Lila and Melisa take a keen interest in the well-being of their families, prioritizing the protection of their children and husbands. This shared commitment is evident throughout their life stories. Both women actively address illness and corporeality through informal means, while also standing up against the threats posed by illness. Lila's case stands out due to the rarity of the Gurban ritual celebration within the community. Nonetheless, her perseverance and dedication to the ritual, performed for the benefit of her family, underscore the practice's significance despite its decline. Regarding the corporal dimension, discussions involving both men and women occurred, with women often providing clearer articulations, shedding light on the new interpretations of the body following conversion to Pentecostalism. The individual's relationship with their body within the Pentecostal framework exhibits both continuities and discontinuities within the locally framed spiritual phenomenology. This syncretism presents an intriguing opportunity for women to assert themselves in decoding and mediating these phenomena based on their experiences.

The family serves as the primary arena for gender transformations, encompassing interactions between mothers and children, husbands and wives. Field data show that women wield informal influence over family affairs, with cases such as those of Lila and Nora testifying to their active involvement in maintaining family health. Similarly, Melisa consistently prioritizes her family's well-being. In the context of conversions, Rudari women often engage with corporeality and healing in the dialogue between Gurban and Pentecostalism. Women predominantly narrate their conversion experiences as journeys of bodily and thaumaturgic self-awareness, which also manifest in the way in which they relate to the world. Although men also experience self-awareness during conversion, women tend to recall it in more intricate detail, emphasizing elements such as dreams interpreted through a Pentecostal lens and conversion signs. They bridge the gap between local traditions and Pentecostalism, while their understanding of the body and illness facilitates the conversion process for men. The case studies represented by Lila, Nora, and Melisa serve as a consistent narrative highlighting the pivotal role of women within the community. While men often hold patriarchal roles within the family unit, the domain of illness and corporeality is predominantly shaped by women.

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