

## THE CROSS-SHAPED TATTOO – SURVIVING CULTURAL SYMBOL AMONG VLACH COMMUNITIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

IULIA WISOSENSCHI, MIHAELA NUBERT-CHEȚAN

### ABSTRACT

Since ancient times, through tattoos, people have used their bodies to transform them into a source of effective magical force to master, control, and annihilate what was unknown to them. Tattooing gave a supernatural quality to the individual and the human body became stronger, in a ritualistic way, through painful techniques and procedures of pricking, piercing, stabbing, etc. The tattooing of the Aromanians is part of the Balkan tradition of Christian communities under Muslim rule, who tattooed their girls at a young age – according to formalized oral texts – in order not to be stolen and taken to the harems of the Turks. The result of direct field research in the Vlach community<sup>1</sup> in the Republic of Macedonia<sup>2</sup> (summer of 2006), the present study proposes, by the use of rigorous scientific methodologies and tools, a valorization of the ethnological field document on traditional tattoo, valuable in terms of identity and culture for certain groups of Aromanians/Vlachs.

*Keywords:* tattoo, body markings, field research, Christian communities, testimony, ritual practices.

The tattooing tradition among the Aromanians, sparsely documented in the specialized literature has so far remained outside the scientific interest of ethnologists concerned with historical Romanian communities in the Balkan region. Consequently, our attempt at both a descriptive and interpretative analysis has faced an initial lack of essential archival or published sources needed to formulate a comprehensive understanding of this complex phenomenon. In this regard, we could consider that the present study opens the way for a future commitment – both professional and moral – toward a thorough examination employing precise scientific methodologies. This would contribute to a better understanding of a visual symbol that carries deep identity and cultural significance for specific Aromanian micro-communities in the Balkans, who shaped and expressed their identity from within, using it as both a communication tool and a cultural code.

---

<sup>1</sup> In the Balkans, the Aromanians are known under the name of Vlachs.

<sup>2</sup> At the time the data was collected (and up until 2019) the official name was the Republic of Macedonia.

A manifestation of the visible, of what is intended for the eye and must be seen, tattooing functions in traditional communities as both a cultural practice and a visual strategy. In archaic societies, people used their own bodies to communicate through signs, drawings, and inscriptions marked on the skin – an encrypted alphabet, a kind of meta-language within a complex system of thought, relationships, and understanding of the universe they inhabited and sought to master.

The ethnological approach to traditional tattooing – particularly among specific Aromanian groups – reveals new interpretative angles, emphasizing how explicit bodily expressions reflect the intrinsic connection between underlying symbolic structures and the broader cognitive and practical dimensions of the communities being analysed.

The study of body tattooing as a practice, with the aim of defining its structural-functional components, origins, and evolution/dynamics, remains a challenging endeavour for researchers. Throughout human cultural development, tattooing has continuously absorbed diverse conceptual meanings, enriched with new cultural significances across various historical contexts. Covered with lines, circles and dots arranged in various figurative fields, often marked by chromatic excesses, the tattooed body acquired a new epidermis – a protective shell revealing to others a transformed materiality/corporeality. This alteration redirected the gaze, in an apotropaic sense, away from the essence of human nature and toward the appearance of its external forms (Stoichiță 2024: 124).

In modern hermeneutics research conducted by renowned anthropologists (Charles Gatewood, Alfred Gell, Didier Anzieu), who have comprehensively examined the practice of (female) tattooing in tribally organized societies across all continents, a key idea emerges: the subcutaneous marking of symbols falls within the realm of spirituality. This practice encompasses multiple aspects, such as ensuring a connection with ancestors, serving a prophylactic role (preventing the evil eye or interactions with malevolent spirits), having a curative effect (in cases of illness and bodily injuries), or being associated with puberty rites. These functions (at least the last two) still persist in various regions, such as among the highland women of Dagestan (Chencier, Ismailov, Magomedkhanov 2006: 31-32). From Japan, South America, North Africa, Taiwan, Borneo, Papua New Guinea, all the way to Iraq and the Balkans, the same motifs appear. Zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures, dots, lines, circles, triangles, and crosses are used as protection against the evil eye long before Christianity. These tattoos were traditionally applied by specialized women – hereditary artisans, shamans, or healers – either within ritualistic and ceremonial contexts or as part of everyday life (Krutak 2007: 167).

As part of a broader system of cultural symbols and shared understandings – often only partially consciously acknowledged by individuals – tattoos served as markers of identity, reinforcing unity and cohesion within certain groups. These groups recognized one another and shared common mental structures, behaviour, attitudes, and socio-cultural perceptions. By constructing a symbolic mechanism of

reinforcement, individuals conferred a supernatural dimension upon their identity while fortifying the human body through painful methods such as puncturing, piercing, and stabbing. The placement of tattooed signs directly on the bare skin – over visibly exposed and vulnerable areas like the face, chest, and hands (as observed in traditional tattooing in Southeastern Europe) – held profound apotropaic value in certain communities, functioning as a form of “prophylactic misdirection” (Stoichiță 2024: 124).

#### THE ETYMOLOGICAL EVOLUTION OF THE WORD

Regarded by ethnologists as a later development of primitive body painting, tattooing consists of embedding various inscriptions, figures, or patterns onto or under the skin, employing puncturing/stabbing techniques with indelible colouring materials. Reflecting on the shifting semantics of the term – significantly older<sup>3</sup> and occurring in semantic relation to the reference word – the term derived from the Greek root *stigma* (*stigmata*) originally denoted a bodily mark, created by branding with a hot iron to establish ownership over animals or humans. This was a common practice in antiquity, applied to livestock, slaves in the East, and fugitive slaves in Greece and Rome (Jones 1987: 139). In ancient Greek terminology, there was a perfect semantic overlap between two acts: branding with a heated iron and tattooing, both designated by the same word, through the verb *στίζω*. This overlap sustained a long-standing semantic confusion between the primitive technical procedure and bodily ornamentation, the latter often carrying a pejorative connotation (Caraman 1988: 191). Moreover, within the Roman Empire, the Greek term *stigmata* was gradually replaced by Latin terms such as *inscribo* (to inscribe, to engrave), *imprimo* (to imprint, to stamp), and *inuro* (to brand with a heated iron).

In Romanian, the word *stigmat* originally referred to the marks left by branding with a hot iron on slaves<sup>4</sup> and criminals. However, through its reinterpretation within the Christian religious tradition, *stigma* came to denote the marks corresponding to the wounds of the crucified Jesus, appearing on the believer’s skin as a sign of divine communication following a mystical ecstasy.

#### ANCIENT BODY MARKINGS IN EUROPEAN AREA

Regarding the origin and lineage of the phenomenon in the European space, researchers interested<sup>5</sup> in the practice of body tattooing have outlined several

<sup>3</sup> Etymologically, the Romanian language adopted the word from the French *tatouer*, which traces its roots to *tatahu*, a term introduced from Tahiti by the explorer James Cook. August Scriban’s *Dicționarul limbii românești* details the procedural nature of tattooing: “to paint the body with a dye inserted under the epidermis through punctures” (Scriban 1939: 1300). Prior to this, Lazăr Șăineanu, in his *Dicționarul universal al limbii române*, described tattooing as *marking one’s body with variously coloured figures* and illustrated its cultural application with the example: *the Negritos tattoo their bodies* (Șăineanu 1922: 646).

<sup>4</sup> “By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, the branding of slaves with a hot iron had already been replaced by tattooing” (Caraman 1988, p. 183).

<sup>5</sup> After early research on tattoos among the Catholic population of Bosnia and Herzegovina was published – thanks to 19<sup>th</sup>-century scholars such as archaeologist and art historian Ćiro Truhelka,

possible theories, based on testimonies and archaeological sources discovered across an extensive cultural area. One theory proposes that tattooing is an indigenous phenomenon within the European cultural space, emphasizing the robust tradition of female tattooing in the Balkans. This theory is supported by ancient documentary sources (Herodotus, Strabo, Martial, Caesar, Tertullian, Solinus, etc.) and diverse iconographic evidence. Many Greek vases from the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC illustrate Thracian women marked with tattooed dots and interconnected lines on their legs, arms, neck, chin etc.

According to the French researcher Luc Renaut, this tradition persisted until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Albania, and northern Greece (Renaut 2017: 259). Likewise, Croatian scholars, such as Ćiro Truhelka and Mario Petrić, advocate for the theory, asserting that the practice of combining small crosses, celestial motifs, and other natural symbols predates Christianity. Archaeologist and ethnologist Ćiro Truhelka puts forth the theory that the spread of this custom in the Balkan Peninsula resulted from the Scythians introducing arm tattooing along the Danube. In his argument, he cites the geographer Pomponius Mela, incorporating his accounts of tattooing practices among both the Agathyrsi (a Sarmatian branch, possibly of Scythian origin, fully assimilated into Thracian culture), and other Indo-European populations settled in the northwestern part of the continent (Truhelka 1896: 256). Ancient sources describe the nomadic Scythians and their neighbours (the Mossynians or Mossynoeci, inhabiting the southeastern shores of the Pontus Euxinus) as practicing tattooing from an early age, particularly among members of the local aristocratic elite.

Tattooing also functioned as a visual indicator of prestige and social rank among the Thracian tribes, as noted by the Greek historian Herodotus, who recorded that “to be tattooed was regarded as a mark of nobility, while remaining unmarked was a sign of plebeian descent”. The widespread nature of this phenomenon in Thracian society is further emphasized by the specialization of certain individuals as tattoo artists, who were in great demand in Greek-inhabited regions (Caraman 1988: 181). Regarding tattooed Thracian women, the French mythologist Perdrizet, analysing an epigraphic monument discovered near the ancient city of Philippi, sought to demonstrate that these women held a special status as priestesses dedicated to the cult of Bacchus. Their tattoos were not mere ornaments, but rather “mystical signs” integrated into a religious ritual (*Ibidem*: 182). In Thracian culture, as well as among the Illyrians – particularly the Iapodes tribe – tattooing was a well-established practice by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, requiring considerable technical expertise. Some ancient sources indicate that tattooing was not exclusively a female tradition, but was also commonly practiced by men

---

ethnographer Vid Vuletić-Vukasović, Austrian physician Leopold Glück, and French academic Guillaume Capus – the interest in the subject continued sporadically throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with input from Vejsil Ćurčić and Mario Petrić. In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, a remarkable revival took place. Monika Jukić, Toni Herceg, Timea Barabas, and Nataša Ilinčić revisited traditional tattooing from a range of perspectives, while Lars Krutak, in his chapter *Balkan Ink: Europe's Oldest Living Tattoo Tradition*, brings together earlier findings in the most up-to-date synthesis on body markings.

(*Ibidem*). Ancient sources indicate that the tattooing tradition was intensely practiced by Western European tribes of Celtic (Britons and Silures), Germanic (Harii), and Iberian origin. These designs, created through subcutaneous injection of pigments (featuring floral and animal motifs), were possibly combined with specific body-painting techniques, often employed to intimidate and terrify their enemies. Mapping the area where tattooing was practiced offers scholars valuable insights into a wider historical and cultural landscape, encompassing not only the Britons and the Picts (a Scottish people known for decorating their bodies with paint or tattoos), but also the Scots, the Pontic peoples, and various East Asian and North African civilizations.

Furthermore, the cross motif appears in Hallstatt-era paintings in Glasinac<sup>6</sup> and is documented in the tattoos of tribes inhabiting Bosnia long before the spread of Christianity in this region. Taking into account archaeological discoveries from the Butmir archaeological complex and the Nebo site, as well as Neolithic figurines, researcher Mario Petrić does not rule out the prehistoric origins (and continuity) of tattooing traditions (Herceg 2017: 355). Skin marking was also used in the military sphere, functioning similarly to soldiers “identification tags”, serving as a form of punitive stigmatization. According to ancient historians, this practice was characteristic of the Greco-Roman world, where “inscription” on the foreheads of prisoners of war (*estizon eis to metopon*) became common practice during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries” (Jones 2000: 34-36).

Facial stigmatization of convicts was practiced by the Romans until 316 AD, when it was abolished by the Christian emperor Constantine I. The growing reliance of the Byzantines on a large and permanent army led to the implementation of sustained and effective troop control measures. The military writer Vegetius described how recruits were marked with their unit names or numbers using permanent dots on their skin, facilitating identification in cases of desertion. Furthermore, an imperial decree from 398 extended this practice to weapon manufacturers, effectively treating both soldiers and arms producers as enlisted servants of the state (*Ibidem*: 41).

#### FOLK TRADITION IN THE BALKANS

Deeply rooted in the historical strata of humanity, tattoos and body markings represent expressions of individual psyche, through which people of ancient times used their own bodies to transform them into sources of effective magical power and an extraordinary ability to dominate, control, and neutralize – by their own means – the unpredictable and unknown manifestations of both the outer and inner world. The oral tradition of the Balkan Peninsula in recent centuries connects religious tattooing to the Ottoman world, through formalized narrative convergences (folk creations) that emerged within Christian communities living under Muslim rule. The Ottoman domination of the Balkan Peninsula over five centuries accelerated the emergence of unfavourable socio-political conditions – such as the blood tribute (*devşirma*) and

---

<sup>6</sup> A karst plateau situated in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina, on Mount Romanija, nestled within the Dinaric Alps.

aggressive Islamization – which threatened the ethnic and Christian identity of the inhabitants of these vast and heterogeneous territories. Throughout this lengthy period of occupation, Christians – especially the Catholic communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina – adopted the custom of tattooing crosses and other symbols on the hands, arms, and chests of their children, in order to protect the female



population from being forcibly seized by the Turks and placed into harems. The cross became a protective shield against the common Muslim threat, embodied by local figures of authority (beys, pashas, viziers) who targeted young Christian women. Often, through acts of abduction, these officials would take them into their harems, imposing upon them a non-Christian identity. Such occurrences often led to tragic outcomes with harmful consequences at the community level. This narrative structure, artistically represented through a wide array of oral variations infused with distinct ethnic nuances, covers almost the entire area inhabited by Christian communities in the Balkan Peninsula.

Figure 1: Croatian woman with tattoos (source: Ćiro Truhelka, 1896: 243)

Considering the aspects discussed previously, the distribution area of traditional tattooing includes northern Albania (within Catholic communities), as well as regions of Macedonia, Albania, Bulgaria, and Greece, surviving up to the present day within the Vlach community in the Balkan Peninsula. Additionally, field surveys have revealed tattooing practices among both Catholic Christians (such as Bosnian Croats and Albanians) and Orthodox Christians (specifically the Vlachs), as well as among Muslims (Albanian populations).

A significant common element highlighted by this research, relevant to the current investigation, is that these groups predominantly participate in economic activities, notably sheepherding (Petrić 1973: 176-177, apud Jukić 2013: 207).

#### FIELDWORK CHALLENGES. „CRUȚEA TU FRĂMTI” – RITUAL PRACTICES, MEANINGS AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TRADITIONAL TATTOOING AMONG VLACH WOMEN IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

The present study on traditional tattoos, based on direct fieldwork conducted among Aromanians in the Republic of North Macedonia, highlights the need to

overcome and extend the current research framework concerning a complex cultural phenomenon that so far has been treated superficially and inadequately in specialized literature. Spread across the regions north of the Danube during the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a an occasional, foreign influenced “fashion”, the peculiar inclusion of the term in dictionaries and lexicographic analyses supports the notion that tattooing was absent from traditional Romanian cultural practices.

Unique in Romanian cultural history is the doctoral dissertation *Tatuajurile în România* by forensic scientist and criminologist, Nicolae S. Minovici. Having a monographic approach and published under the auspices of the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Bucharest, the study is divided into two sections, examining tattoos from both an ethnic standpoint and a forensic–medical perspective. The opening chapter presents a concise ethnographic account of the historical development and geographical distribution of the phenomenon, along with its etymology, techniques, and application methods among various cultures. It concludes with a structured classification of tattoos according to their functional purpose, distinguishing them as aesthetic/ornamental, therapeutic, religious, war-related, professional, tribal (ethnic), secret society-related (esoteric/initiation), and familial (identity-based). Employing classical tattooing techniques by inserting mineral and vegetal pigments under the skin at different depths, Aromanian tattoos belong to the category of familial bodily markings, serving a distinct identity-related purpose. With paternal Aromanian roots tracing back to the Serbian region of Macedonia, Nicolae S. Minovici recounts a practice he was likely familiar with from his own family background – parents tattooing their children’s upper limbs (children who were often killed by the Turks) with their names and a cross, both as a means of identification and as a protective symbol of their Christian faith.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the German philologist Gustav Weigand travelled south of the Danube to study the Romanian dialects of the Balkan Peninsula, an endeavour that later led to the publication of several monographic works with an ethno-linguistic and historical focus – highly valuable contributions to (a)Romanian ethnology. Concerning the tattooing practices of the Farsharot groups, the author reports that, alongside women, men were also occasionally tattooed, albeit less frequently, with a cross or a “small blue star”. His account includes details about the traditional tattooing technique – piercing the skin with a needle during childhood. This custom appears to have been specific to the Farsharot groups, being “very rare among other Aromanians” and sharing similarities with Albanian and Greek traditions (Weigand 2014: 264).

A few years later, Constantin N. Burileanu, a graduate of the School of Colonial Diplomacy at the Royal University of Rome, conducted investigations into Romanian communities in Albania at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, focusing primarily on rural settlements, particularly “the small centres, especially those of the Farsharots, [which] no Romanian has ever set foot in, and no one even knows of their existence” (Burileanu 1906: pref. VIII). A keen observer of the Balkan realities he studied, during his two consecutive journeys among the

Romanian population “between the Adriatic and the Morava-Galichica Mountains”, the author provides a unique documentary account regarding the graphic motif of tattoos, noting that Farsherot women and girls tattooed a “small five-pointed star” on their foreheads, “so that it would never fade” (*Ibidem*: 184).



Figure 2: Farsherot women with tattoos, 19<sup>th</sup> century (source: Gustav Weigand 1894)

Dating back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a compelling account of body marking practices and techniques has come down to us through the article *Tatuajul la femeile din Belcamen*, in “Lumina. Revista românilor din dreapta Dunării”. This quarterly publication was issued by the teaching and clerical body of the Ottoman Empire, and the article was signed – probably under a pseudonym – by an individual named Grezdu. The author brings to the readers’ attention the widespread custom among young girls in the village of Belcamen, aged between seven and ten, of tattooing a cross in the middle of their foreheads after first outlining the chosen spot with a pencil. “After that, the entire area of the cross is pricked with a needle until blood appears. Gunpowder is sprinkled over the punctured area and then ignited, leaving a deep blue-black mark that remains until the person’s death” (*Lumina*, Year VI, no. 6, 7, 8, 1908: 50). Regarding its geographical spread, this custom extends over a wider territory, particularly in the Epirus region, and is practiced not only by women but also by men. The repertoire of graphic motifs covering larger body areas – such as the chest, arms, and hands – expands with a variety of enigmatic “designs”. Some are gender-specific, depicting battle weapons (swords, rifles, yataghans, pistols) and armed men in *fustanella*, while others are more universal: crosses, esoteric symbols, words and names of the tattooed individuals, monasteries, and more. A supplementary detail reinforcing the

idea that Christian men – most likely armed men, the *haiducs* – were tattooed with a cross is mentioned at the end of the text: “Brave Christians [authors’ note, bear a cross] on their right arm or above the thumb of the same hand” (*Ibidem*: 51). The protective, apotropaic function of the tattoo, emphasized in the text, seems to dominate other symbolic meanings of the cross, as it is deemed “absolutely essential for the well-being of the tattooed individuals and their household” (*Ibidem*). Regarding the origins of the custom, the author traces the emergence of body tattooing back to the early Christian period, when followers marked their allegiance to the new faith by engraving the symbol of salvation on their skin. Alongside the fish symbol, this served as a means of identification among believers. Later, when Christianity became the state religion, tattoos took on an ornamental role, adorning women’s foreheads (*Ibidem*).

Seeing tattoos as having a purely decorative role, Theodor Capidan – a well-informed expert on the Balkan region – writes in his book *Românii nomazi. Studiu din viața românilor din sudul Peninsulei Balcanice* that Farsharot women, “especially the younger ones, get tattoos”. He describes these body markings as ornamental accessories, decorative elements that enhance and complete their elaborate clothing. Without offering additional details, the ethnographic information – valuable in itself – reveals that, in addition to the cross-shaped tattoo, women had a wider repertoire of graphic symbols, as “they make all kinds of marks on their foreheads” (Capidan 1926: 86). As for the presence of this practice among the Farsharot group, the author suggests that tattooing likely originated in regions of contact with Muslim Albanians, serving as a marker of identity, and was also known among Christian Albanians. In *Macedoromânii, Etnografie. Istorie. Limbă*, the same author – of Aromanian descent – further enriches the ethnographic record on traditional tattooing. He notes that tattoos were applied to broader areas of the body, including the upper limbs (the arms), and that the cross placed on the forehead was “blue, to distinguish [the women] from Muslim Albanian women”. Regarding the origin of this custom, the author oscillates between considering it an indigenous phenomenon, inherited from the Thracians, or a borrowed practice adopted from the Albanians (Idem 2006: 32).

Important ethnographic data regarding the tattooing traditions of Romanians living south of the Danube has been preserved in the manuscript of professor and military writer N.P. Vaidomir. With the author’s permission, ethnographer Petre Caraman incorporated this material into his own study on tattooing among the Daco-Romanians. Having taught for several years at the Romanian school in Grebena, N.V. Vaidomir had direct contact with the Aromanian communities in the Pindus Mountains, from whom he gathered valuable ethnographic material up until the end of the Second World War, when he was compelled to return to Romania due to the closure of Romanian schools in the Balkans. While tattooing had once been widespread across all Aromanian groups, the author observes that, by the time of his fieldwork, the practice had largely persisted among nomadic shepherd groups – particularly the Farsharot and Sărăcăceani – and especially among women and some elderly men, being less common among the youth. In rarer cases, elderly

individuals with tattoos could also be found in villages across the Pindus Mountain region – such as Avdela, Perivole, Smixi, Laca Pași Băiasa, Breaza, and others. However, the custom was better preserved in the Veria area, particularly in the Farsharot villages of Gramaticova (notably Paticina and Fetița), as well as among the Megleno-Romanians in Oșani, Lumnița, and nearby settlements (Caraman 1988: 197).

In emic terminology, the Aromanians do not use the term *tattoo*, but instead refer to the phenomenon based on what is visible and what results from the act of marking the body – namely, the cross (*cruțe* or *căruți*<sup>7</sup> in Aromanian). This term enters into semantic association with the word *semnu* (from Latin *signum*, meaning *mark* or *sign*) – as in *a face semnu* (*to make the sign*). This contrasts with other Balkan communities, such as the Catholics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who refer more directly to the act of tattooing itself, using the term *bocce*<sup>8</sup>.

Another word situated at the intersection of tattoo and stigma is *damcă* – a dot drawn between the eyebrows during childhood, particularly on children with remarkable physical traits (such as beauty), meant to protect them from the evil eye. Of Turkish origin and derived from the word *damgha*, *damcă* entered the spoken register of the two South–Danube dialects – Aromanian and Megleno-Romanian – through the Bulgarian linguistic channel. It is recorded in Tache Papahagi’s dictionary with the meaning of *seal*, preserving the memory of a common Ottoman practice in which imperial subjects were marked with a hot iron on the right hand by administrative representatives (*janissaries*). The basic meaning survives in contemporary usage in the Romanian expression *a-i pune dangaua* (*to brand*), referring to the act of marking an animal’s ear or body with a hot iron.



Direct field research among the Aromanians (Vlachs) in the Republic of Macedonia<sup>9</sup> was carried out in July 2006, as part of an inter-academic exchange at the “Marko Cepenkov” Institute of Folklore. The program took place under the framework of a bilateral agreement signed between the Romanian Academy and its partner institution, the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts (MANU) in Skopje. As part of a vast system of cultural meanings and symbols – one whose code we are still striving to decipher – cross-shaped tattoos, as well as those adorning the hands and arms of Aromanian women like protective bracelets, arranged side by side up to the elbow, were not mere decorative motifs. These

<sup>7</sup> Alongside the word *semn* (*sign*), Aromanians also use *nișane* (from Turkish *nichân*), carrying the same core meaning of a distinguishing mark. The term has deep etymological roots in the Turco–Persian world of southwestern Asia, where high-ranking dignitaries were tattooed as a symbol of status and authority.

<sup>8</sup> Traditional tattooing – once widespread across much of Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially among the Croatian (Catholic) population – was known under various names, including *pocanje*, *pokkanje*, *čančenje*, and *sičanje* (commonly used in western Herzegovina). In some regions, other local terms were also used, such as *drojane*, *šaranje*, nd *krisma*. See: Monica Jukić, 2013: 197–218, 205.

<sup>9</sup> The official name until 2019, later changed to the Republic of North Macedonia.

tattoos, observed during my fieldwork in the village of Tri Češmi (near the city of Štip) two years prior<sup>10</sup>, were not *nyrăpsite* (inscribed) for aesthetic reasons alone, despite the fact that this was the explanation invariably offered to me. The wealth of kinship names (father, mother, uncle, brother, sister), along with images of snakes, trees, birds, flowers, branches, circles, broken lines, dots, and so on, pierced the shielded gaze of the contemporary observer, compelling them to search for meaning and message within the spirals of time and the tumultuous history of the Balkan lands. Thus, the growing desire to capture in vivid lines and colours the pictorial image of these mysterious body markings led us, in the summer of 2006<sup>11</sup>, to include within the broader framework of our academic project<sup>12</sup> the documentation and scientific investigation of ritual-traditional tattooing practices among Aromanian (Vlach) communities in the Republic of Macedonia.

In keeping with the academic tradition of institutionalized research<sup>13</sup>, the 2006 fieldwork began in the city of Skopje, between July 15 and July 17. During this period, we had the opportunity to meet with Anastasia Kostova – known within the community as Sia Pušuticu – an elderly woman from the Gramostean group, affectionately called *maia Sia*, whose insights have been incorporated into the present study. The second part of the fieldwork, conducted between July 18 and July 21, 2006, took place in the city of Bitola (Aromanian: Monastir) and its surroundings, where we recorded testimonies from Sofia Pulevska, a Farsharot woman from the village of Nižopole, and from the married couple Slave and Anastasia Sterjovska, Gramosteni from Târnova – localities that once had significant Vlach populations. Alongside the Pindenii, Farsharot, M(i)uzăcheari, and Moscopoleni groups, the Gramostean Aromanians originate from Mount Gramoste in Greece – a mountain ridge that forms part of the Pindus range and stretches from the southern and southeastern regions of Albania to the northern part of the Peloponnese Peninsula.

---

<sup>10</sup> In 2004, while conducting a prospective folklore investigation, I met several tattooed women belonging to the Gramostean branch of the Aromanian community.

<sup>11</sup> In 2004, I was accompanied by ethnomusicologist Marian Lupașcu, a colleague from our institute, on a trip to Skopje to complete the documentation for the bilateral scientific cooperation agreement between the Romanian Academy and the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts (MANU).

<sup>12</sup> The academic project was broadly centred on researching Vlach communities in Macedonia, known for preserving elements of Eastern Romance culture, with the intention of studying them over an extended period of two years.

<sup>13</sup> Archival research has highlighted the consistent interest shown by the institute's specialists in Romanian communities throughout the Balkans, beginning with their settlement in New Dobruja – in villages located in the former Durostor and Caliacra counties. The earliest field recordings from New Dobruja came from the village of Aidimir (Durostor) in 1935, followed shortly by those in Regina Maria and Bazaurtul de Mijloc (1937). These were captured using the recording technology of the time – phonograph cylinders – by folklorist-musicologists Harry Brauner, Constantin Brăiloiu, and Ilarion Cocișiu, all participants in the Gusti School's monographic research campaigns. In 1972, research conducted by ethnomusicologist Ghizela Sulițeanu among the Gramostean Aromanians in the Kruševo area of Macedonia significantly enriched the archives with a wide array of musical genres, including wedding songs, pastoral laments, and epic narratives. More recently, in 2018, ethnographers Emil Țircomnicu and Cătălin Alexa conducted further research among the Gramostean Aromanian communities in the Republic of North Macedonia.

The Gramostean group in Serbian Macedonia, predominantly located in the Ovče Pole<sup>14</sup> region, practiced a form of semi-nomadic<sup>15</sup> pastoralism, following traditionally established routes across the mountainous areas of the Balkans. Some would settle with their flocks of sheep in the Mocra Mountains (Aleaghița, Cadana–Reca toward Skopje), while others led their herds toward the cool heights of the Cital and Lișnița mountains (near Vinița), on the slopes of Punicva, Lopeani, and Curmina. Still others moved southward to the Caimaccealan and Muza mountains, near the city of Bitola (Aromanian: Monastir) (Cuvata 1998: 13).

Under Ottoman rule, during the wintering season (*arniu* in Aromanian), the flocks (*tutiputa*) were taken to the milder climates of the Thessaloniki region and, in many cases, much farther south. After the borders were redrawn following the Balkan Wars, the pastoral area became restricted, limited to the fertile plains along the Vardar River (the ancient Axios), the Strumica (*Strumița* in Aromanian), the Bregalnica (*Brigalnița* in Aromanian), and others.

At the time of the field research, the cross-shaped tattoo – a spiritual cultural element on the verge of extinction – was found predominantly among elderly women. This circumstance required an applied and “urgent” study of the phenomenon’s complexity within its living context, specifically within the community of origin. The aim was to identify its connections and internal resources in relation to the broader cultural and social framework to which it belonged. Within the constraints imposed by the limited duration of the fieldwork, data was collected using a thematic questionnaire in order to gather relevant information on the origin and lineage of the practice, the cultural meanings and functions attributed by insiders, the techniques employed, the repertoire of graphic motifs, and, not least, the processual factors that have contributed to the symbolic disintegration of the tattooing system.

The actual data collection took place in the Aromanian dialect, at the home of the elderly woman in Skopje, who was living with the family of her son, Pusho (Aromanian *Pușa*) Kostov. The household included her daughter-in-law, Očka (Aromanian *Ocea*), and her two grandsons, Goran and Dejan (Aromanian *Deian*). The research was conducted in a favourable and relaxed working atmosphere, free from psychological factors of discomfort or adjustment. The insider status of one of the research team members, combined with a personal friendship with the grandson, Goran, contributed to a higher degree of trust and empathy, adding significant value to the fieldwork process. To ensure the effective conduct of the folkloric investigation, attention was paid to the behavioural patterns and emotional or fatigue fluctuations of the elderly woman. The conversational dynamic was subtly guided to stimulate and explore her emotional memory, which revealed

---

<sup>14</sup> In the area known as Serbian Macedonia, transhumant shepherds were mostly settled in the Tikveš and Ovče Pole regions.

<sup>15</sup> Historian Nicolae Iorga argued that the type of pastoralism practiced by Aromanian shepherds should not be classified as true nomadism, since their movements were seasonal – shifting between two climatically distinct regions – yet remained within a consistent territorial framework. See Theodor Capidan, 1926: 11.

valuable insights – rich in specific and essential details – regarding the complexity of the ritual and tattooing practices of the Grămostean Aromanians<sup>16</sup>.

Anastasia Kostova<sup>17</sup>, known as Maia Sia, was born on March 3, 1932, into the family of Saltir Nikolov (Aromanian Sutir) and Hajda Nikolova (Aromanian Haida, née Tsigar [Aromanian Țigar]), in the village of Teranci/Terantsi, located near the town of Kočani (Aromanian Coceani). She was part of a community of Aromanian shepherds who, during the summer, would lead their flocks to the highlands of the Kalin Kamen Mountains (Aromanian Calinl'i), near Kriva Palanka (Aromanian Palanga) – a meeting place for Aromanians from Štip, Veles, Kočani, and Kumanovo.



Figure 3: *Anastasia Kostova* (screenshot from field video, July 15, 2006)

As they used to say: *on the mountains, only Aromanians would gather; on Calinl'i Mountain, there were one hundred and fifty houses [...]*<sup>18</sup>. The use of storytelling to explain the origin of tattooing, as recalled during the interview with the elderly Anastasia Kostova, reflects the traditional way of folkloric communication. Typical of oral cultures, this approach gives meaning to exceptional elements or phenomena – rooted in daily life – through a framework shaped by expressive language and artistic imagination:

*It's a long story [...] A Christian man and a Turk were friends. The Turk fell in love with the Aromanian's daughter and wanted to marry her. The Aromanian agreed, saying: "If that's how it is, fine – we'll become in-laws, but I want an Aromanian-style wedding. You must come with your family to take her". And what did he come up with?! What could he do?! He tattooed a cross on the girl's forehead [...]. He placed the veil over her. And when the Turks arrived to take her and lifted the veil, they saw the cross – and turned back. Who knows when this happened... long ago! And from then on, they began marking us (authors' note, with the cross), since the Aromanians lived in the mountains [...] and the Turks feared the cross [...]*<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> To avoid distorting the meaning of the collected information and to ensure the scientific reliability of the field documentation, audio and video recording tools – such as a voice recorder, video camera, and photo camera – were used during the interview. This made it possible to capture the elements of folk culture being studied with both technical precision and acoustic clarity (Ispas, Coatu 2007: 135).

<sup>17</sup> We were informed by her grandson Goran that Maia Sia passed away peacefully, in the presence of her family, on April 24, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Pi munti s-aduna maș armăń; tu munti aco, Calinl'i iu earam, avea ună sută ńdzăń di casi, AIEF, file no. 5973 I a; informant Anastasia Kostova; collectors Iulia Wisosenschi, Mihaela Nubert-Cheńan; Skopje, Republic of Macedonia; July 15, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Easti pńrmit mari [...] crińtinlu cu turcu eara oaspiń. Ő-turcu i-avea hari multu feata ca s-u ia a armńnlu. Ő-armńnlu dzăsi: da, ghini, maca ahtari, aidi, va nń-nucscrńm, ma io voi s-fac numńa

The story belongs to the Balkan oral tradition of explaining such phenomena. Its narrative structure, consistent in its core elements, is shaped by the traditional cultural model embedded within the Aromanian value system. It includes specific ethnic colourings (which may vary), evident in the actantial roles (Christian host/leader versus Muslim guest/authority), in the contextual framework (in this case, a matrimonial setting), and in the functionality of conflict resolution – non-confrontational, as illustrated by the Turks’ retreat and the annulment of the marriage arrangement. One detail in the narrative offers a meaningful clue: this tattooing custom was specific to “nomadic” shepherd groups who *alăga tu munț* (moved around the mountains) – dynamic, quasi-hermetic microsocieties that lived in direct communion with nature, with the mountain world, and inevitably, with unpredictability, which often revealed itself through hostile and dangerous events or circumstances.

According to anthropologist Lars Krutak, especially in the Pindus Mountains, tattooing – generally a simple Greek cross placed at the centre of the forehead, between the eyebrows – served as protection against the evil eye and illnesses caused by spirits that could be encountered while herding sheep. Thus, this traditional tattoo’s protective function was later complemented, under Ottoman rule, by an identity-related and religious role, linked to the Orthodox Christian faith of the inhabitants (Ilinčić 2004: 44).

Following the same approach while remaining within the realm of working hypotheses and speculative elaboration – we suggest that this expressive visual means of asserting Christian identity represents a relatively recent addition. It appears as a form of renewed reinterpretation, characteristic of the process by which traditional cultural phenomena are updated and functionally adapted to a new social context. This reinterpretation draws upon a solid foundation of magical and religious practices (apotropaic, protective, prophylactic/therapeutic, identity-based, etc.) that once governed the life of pastoral communities in the Balkans. In this way, the valorisation of a powerful Christian symbol – by inscribing a cross between the eyebrows<sup>20</sup> – became a highly effective ritual weapon for neutralizing the perceived threat of a Muslim (Turkish) outsider, understood as the latest and most tangible embodiment of Evil.

A concrete detail outside the strictly formal framework of the narrative refers to the practice of tattooing boys with a cross at a young age – a vestige of an

---

armănească, s-yiñ cu cuscri'l'i s-u iai. Ş-ţi îi tâcâni d-apoea aţâlui?! Ți s-adară?! Îi adară a featil'ei căruți tu frămți [...]. Îi băgară zăvon. Ş-cându viniră turți s-u ia ş-u dizviliră, ş-vidzură cruța și s-turnară turți. Ațea caști ți etă eara...că eara di multu... Ş-di atumțea, d-apoea, ahurhiră ca s-nă bagă (n.n. cruce) [...], că armân'l'i a noci alăga tu munț [...] ş-turți'l'i fudzea di cruți [...]. AIEF, file no. 5973 I a; informant Anastasia Kostova; collectors Iulia Wisosenschi, Mihaela Nubert-Chețan; Skopje, Republic of Macedonia; July 15, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> In her early 20<sup>th</sup>-century research, British anthropologist Mary Edith Durham documented the presence of cross tattoos – framed by other motifs – on both men and women of the Catholic faith, typically located on the back of the hand and/or the forearm. She also noted that among Muslims, tattoos often featured elements inscribed in the shape of a triangle, sometimes accompanied by Arabic signs. Cf. Durham 1908: 129.

ancient archaic substratum deeply rooted in local beliefs and folk representations. This allows us to broaden the scope of interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon: *my father was a man, and he too had a cross*<sup>21</sup>.

Following tradition, Maia Sia was tattooed with a cross on her forehead and on her right hand at around the age of five or six, by an older girl from the community named Lena. As for the technique used to inscribe the design onto bare skin<sup>22</sup>, the traditional tattoo was created by pricking the skin with a needle dipped in a mixture of soot or charcoal powder (and sometimes even gunpowder), blended with liquid solvents – such as water, milk, brandy (serving a disinfectant role), honey, oil, or even saliva. The needle was inserted repeatedly along a previously traced pattern on the hand, causing bleeding. The tattooed area was kept covered for several days without being washed, until the scab fell off. The bluish hue resulted from the mixture of blood and pigment seeping into the skin through the punctures. In some instances, the powder was not mixed with any liquid but used solely to draw the design onto the skin.

*We would pour in a little țuică (a type of local plum brandy) and stir it with a small stick; afterward, we prepared the paste, dipped the needle tip into it, and began tattooing by pricking the skin*<sup>23</sup>.

In the Aromanian community, tattooing – understood as a complex phenomenon involving elements of a rite of passage – was performed on girls at puberty, between the ages of 5 and 10-15, by adult women<sup>24</sup> from the family or neighbourhood. These women were custodians of tradition and well-versed in the techniques and procedures of body inscription and healing. Later, in adulthood, women would have additional tattoos applied to broader areas of the body, featuring new visual elements (designs) that enhanced visibility to the observer: the hands, forehead, forearm, between the fingers, finger joints, the bridge of the nose, wrist, chest, and even the upper arm.

Thus, the physical body and the graphic markings became components of a subtle mechanism of symbolic defence, “capable of withstanding any assault device” (Stoichiță 2024: 157). Linked to the nubile age of the girls who received them, numerous scholars who have examined the phenomenon of Balkan tattooing – among them Mary Edith Durham, whose informants unanimously cited the tattooing age as between 13 and 16 – have put forward the hypothesis that it represents the survival of an ancient pubertal rite (*op. cit.*: 104).

As for the particularities of the custom among the Aromanians, the tattooing of the cross (between the eyebrows) remained the central element, conforming to

<sup>21</sup> Tată-ñiu bărbat eara și iel avea căruți. AIEF, file no. 5973 I a; informant Anastasia Kostova; collectors Iulia Wisosenschi, Mihaela Nubert-Chețan; Skopje, Republic of Macedonia; July 15, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> In central Bosnia, tattooing is referred to as *bocanje*, while in western Herzegovina, the term *sicanje* is used, both referring to the technique of tattooing through punctures (cross-piercing). See: Jukić, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

<sup>23</sup> Adunam fum dit cireap [...] ș-băgam niheam arăchii ș-u minteam cu un lemn; d-apoea u adăram cisea (?), u muiam, u adram ș-cu acu. AIEF, file no. 5973 I a; informant: Anastasia Kostova; collectors: Iulia Wisosenschi, Mihaela Nubert-Chețan; location: Skopje, Republic of Macedonia; date: July 15, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> While there are documented cases of tattooing preschool-aged children, the practice was most common among those aged 13-16 years (Truhelka) or 10-15 years old (Petrić). See: Ilinčić 2004: 25.

the requirements of what may be interpreted as a pubertal or initiation ritual. It observed spatial and temporal constraints, age restrictions (nubile age), the involvement of specialized agents, and so on. In contrast, other additional tattooed elements – of vegetal origin (branches, trees, flowers), personal names (of the father, siblings, uncles, mother, etc.), or featuring animal motifs (snake, bird), as well as the year of birth – served distinct functions: social identification, aesthetic or decorative purposes, or signifiers of recognition and belonging. These could, therefore, fall outside the ritual framework and be carried out in ordinary, non-ritual circumstances.

The cruciform tattoo was always performed in accordance with the ritual's spatial and temporal rules. It took place on major feast days<sup>25</sup> (like St. Peter's, Midsummer, or the Assumption), *when no work was allowed*, and always in sacred or symbolically meaningful locations – quiet, hidden places, such as behind trees or in secluded parts of the home: *you hide the place so that no one see you*<sup>26</sup> – especially family – can find you and interfere. It was often done at twilight to avoid being seen or drawing unwanted attention that could cause harm, or as they put it: *so they don't stare and ruin it*<sup>27</sup>.

As previously described, the tattoo's protective function was directly linked to the gaze – particularly the malevolent eye – which intruded upon the intimate and sensitive space of the individual body at a liminal moment of heightened vulnerability: the initiation of a young (nubile) girl within the ritual framework marking the transition to puberty. Moreover, as both a survival strategy and a means of individual (and collective) self-protection, in the dual confrontation with supernatural forces (the evil eye) and/or with threats from mundane reality (such as the Turks), the cruciform tattoo among the Aromanians functioned as a complex cultural marker. It simultaneously unified and differentiated, drawing on a dual referentiality – of sacred verticality and human horizontality – to express a specific *modus vivendi* characteristic of mountain/pastoral civilizations.

The collection of graphic motifs found on Maia Sia's tattooed body is arranged as follows: *on the forehead* – a simple cross (barely visible), tattooed around the age of five; *on the right hand* – a cross in the centre of the hand and the name of a brother, Geogea, inscribed on the forearm; *on the left hand* – at the wrist, the name of another brother, Nasi, alongside a small branch (Aromanian *lumachi*);

<sup>25</sup> In Catholic Croat communities, the practice of tattooing was strictly tied to the calendar and was only performed in the spring, around major Christian holidays like the Annunciation and Easter (Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday). One feast that stood out was Saint Joseph's Day (March 19), just before the spring equinox – a time rich in fertility beliefs. In Croatian folklore, Saint Joseph is closely linked to nature: vegetation, forests, flowers, and farming. In the Senj region, for instance, people believed that as Joseph walked through the woods, he struck the trees, causing the sap to surge – captured in the saying *Josip kuc, drvo puc* (Joseph knocks, the tree bursts). Because of this, people were warned not to enter the forest then, as trees might fall. However, this timing was not always attributed solely to sacredness, but also to medical reasoning, as wounds were believed to heal more easily in spring. Cf. Jukic, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Tu acumtu locu, ca s-nu yinã vãr ca s-ti mutreascã. AIEF, file no. 5973 I a; informant: Anastasia Kostova; collectors: Iulia Wisosenschi, Mihaela Nubert-Chețan; location: Skopje, Republic of Macedonia; date: July 15, 2006.

<sup>27</sup> S-nu s-aurã, di nu s-fați bun. AIEF, file no. 5973 I a; *ibidem*.

further up, her mother's name, Haida – barely legible – tattooed at the base of the fingers; *on the fingers* (middle phalanges): her own name, Sia<sup>28</sup>. These tattoos were added gradually, over time, and thus at different stages of her life. According to the elderly woman, tattooing graphic symbols on both hands – always under the watchful guidance of female elders – did not follow rigid rules such as left versus right or top versus bottom. Each woman chose the placement freely, with no specific order (*nu avea aradă*), and the process was often a mutual exchange of help. Tattoos on the left hand were usually self-applied, while those on the right hand required assistance from close companions (*soațe*), cousins, neighbours, or ritual specialists – women seen as guardians of deeper, life-giving knowledge. Over time, at unspecified ages, many girls would tattoo the names of their brothers, sisters, parents, and uncles, in order to express, at a deeper level of understanding, their integration into and belonging to a vast and protective kinship system. As a complement to the names, the date of birth was also frequently tattooed.

While some scholars view the tattooing of names and birth dates as a relatively recent development – linked to the wave of literacy introduced to traditional Balkan communities after World War II – this bodily practice of inscribing “mnemonic markers”, which became widespread within communities, served as a means of strategic cultural communication, encoded through traditional symbols and meanings (Ilinčić 2004: 122).

Maia Sia's testimony, in which she recalls tattooing her brothers' names during a significant life transition – specifically the month she got married, at age 17 – offers strong support for the idea that this act held deep cultural meaning. She explained that she did it out of pride (Aromanian *di hari*), emphasising its symbolic value, though that meaning may now be blurred by the passage of time.



Figure 4: Detail – the name of Anastasia's brother, Nasi, tattooed on her left wrist; (video still; July 15, 2006)

<sup>28</sup> The graphic motifs identified in Bosnian communities have been extensively studied and classified into five categories by researcher Mario Petrić: a) the simple Greek cross, tattooed on the finger, forehead, or arm, separate from other motifs (sometimes adorned with a dot at each end, straight or slightly slanted lines, gently descending, or curved sickle-like lines, with combinations of these three variants); b) circle and grid (the circle typically contains a cross in the centre); c) bracelet (simple forms, a line decorated with small dashes, or richly ornamented with decorative elements covering up to 10 cm in width); d) a branch or twig, applied to the lower arm, below the elbow; e) various other forms such as stars, moons, or suns. To summarize, Bosnian tattoo designs primarily consist of circles, semicircles, and crosses decorated with branches and lines. Tracing the lineage of these designs in Albania, Mary Edith Durham describes the cross motifs as resembling the “sun wheel”, the cross interspersed with crescents, and one whose arms end in small circles, similar to those on Byzantine coins. See: Durham 1910: 121.

In some cases, the tattooed hands of women in the family – especially mothers and sisters, where blood ties were central – carried the names of deceased loved ones, often a son. These tattoos embodied a powerful link between memory and forgetting: *the name was not to be lost* (s-nu-s chiară numa) – a deeply symbolic act of remembrance.

For the Aromanians, the tattooed cross was simple in form, resembling the Greek cross, and typically placed between the eyebrows – or, in some cases, higher on the forehead to ensure visibility. It also appeared on hands, fingers, and forearms. Some women, according to elders, even chose to tattoo two crosses on their foreheads for aesthetic reasons.

The tattooed body, shaped by ritual and rich in symbolic meaning, was decorated with images like hearts, the *mandra* (a traditional female figure), life scenes, skeletons, snakes (*năpărtică* in Aromanian), etc. – often extending along the entire arm. Among the Megleno-Romanians, the forehead cross was placed centrally, in the middle of the forehead, unlike among the Aromanians, who more commonly placed it between the eyebrows. Aromanian men also tattooed their chests, in addition to their hands and foreheads (Papahagi 1902: 116, apud Caraman 1988: 199).

#### CONCLUSIONS

The preliminary stage of our research on the traditional tattooing of the Aromanians, limited by scarce documentary material and a lack of specialized information, currently commits us to a cautious hermeneutic approach, avoiding the formulation of axiomatic conclusions or hypotheses.

Based on our analysis and interpretation of field records, traditional tattoos – driven by a kind of “psychic force” – once played a meaningful role, mainly as a form of protection, carried out in ritual contexts (possibly related to puberty or initiation), especially within pastoral communities. Though this complex cultural practice was already vanishing at the time of its recording, the layout of tattoo designs reflected a range of cultural meanings and functions – some forgotten, others still relevant – that continued to preserve their original coherence and symbolism.

As an integral part of everyday life, traditional tattoos served multiple functions that changed and became prioritized over time. Most prominent were their protective, apotropaic roles—meant to guard individual integrity and, by extension, that of the whole community and its livestock. These were complemented by functions of belonging (to a family or clan), remembrance, ethnic and religious identity, and also by aesthetic purposes or personal adornment.

Although some meanings – such as apotropaic, belonging, or commemorative – could no longer be recognized by the bearers of these bodily markings during interviews, with identity and aesthetic functions prevailing, the fieldwork analysis revealed, with notable recurrence, a deep-rooted fear of the “evil eye.” This destructive visual force, imbued with the energy and spirit (pneuma) of the onlooker, was believed to have the power to harm people’s health

and diminish the vitality (mana) of the sheep herds. To reiterate the points made above, and considering we are at the beginning of our interpretative process based on field data, we currently lack enough information to fully identify the local stylistic traits of the tattoo motifs – such as group-specific (among Aromanians) or gender-based patterns (male/female), their area of distribution, or the complexity of their functional roles. The decline and eventual abandonment of traditional tattooing coincided with the major social and political shifts of communist-era Yugoslavia – changes that deeply affected the Vlach pastoral communities in Macedonia. In the new social context, removed from the way of life that had once given it purpose and cultural meaning, the tattoo took on – or regained – a role associated with stigma and social exclusion. When confronted with a collective mentality shaped by a different cultural frame of reference, the tattoo came to be viewed in a disparaging light and became a subject of mockery. As a result, many women removed their crosses or marks (*cruțile/ seamnili*) using lye, in some cases causing deep wounds and lasting scars.

The changes brought about by shifting social dynamics, along with the Yugoslav assimilationist policies during the communist period, contributed to the disappearance of traditional ritual tattooing practices. While the display of ethnic and religious identity was not explicitly forbidden, it was certainly not encouraged. Beginning in the 1960s, the Vlach shepherds from the mentioned region were compelled to establish settlements in the lowlands and adopt a sedentary lifestyle, thus coming into direct contact with the Slavic population (*văryară* in Aromanian).

As livestock was confiscated and the pastoral way of life was replaced by employment in collective farms and state enterprises, the symbolic and functional meanings of tattooing lost their relevance in society. Its practical role disappeared, and even its traditional cultural significance gradually faded, leading to its abandonment. Yet Maia Sia never wished to erase the cross from her forehead, nor any of the tattoos on her hands – even when urged to do so by those around her. She took pride in this ancestral tradition of her people, believing that, now more than ever, it could still be expressed and honoured through the most powerful and uplifting symbol of Christianity: the cross.

#### REFERENCES

- Sabina Ispas, Nicoleta Coatu (coord.), 2007, *Etnologie românească. Folcloristică și etnomuzicologie. II. Metodologie. Arhive. Instrumente de lucru*. Partea 1 (Romanian Ethnology. Folklore Studies and Ethnomusicology. II. Methodology. Archives. Research Tools. Part 1), București, Editura Academiei Române.
- Beaulieu, Marie-Armelle, 2019, “Like a Seal in Your Arm. The Tradition of Tattooing among Jerusalem Pilgrims”, in *Institute for Palestine Studies, Jerusalem Quarterly*, 78: 86-92.
- Burileanu, Constantin N., 1906, *Dela Români din Albania* (From the Romanians of Albania), București, Lito-Tipografia L. Motzâtzeanu.
- Capidan, Th., 1926, *Românii nomazi. Studiu din viața românilor din sudul Peninsulei Balcanice* (Nomadic Romanians: Insights into the Life of Romanians in the Southern Balkan Peninsula), Cluj, Institutul de Arte Grafice „Ardealul”.

- Capidan, Th., 2006, *Macedoromânii. Etnografie. Istorie. Limbă*. Ediția a II-a, cu o postfață de Hristu Căndroveanu (Macedo-Romanians: Ethnography. History. Language. Second edition), București, Editura Fundației Culturale Aromâne „Dimândarea părintească”.
- Caraman, Petru, 1988, „Tatuajul la români după creațiile lor folclorice” (Romanian Tattooing as Reflected in Folkloric Traditions), in *Studii de folclor* (Folklore Studies), II. Ediție îngrijită de Viorica Săvulescu, studiu introductiv și table cronologic de Iorgu Iordan. With a summary, București, Editura Minerva.
- Cuvata, Dina, 1998, *Noi armânji machidunite. Folclor grămustinescu di la Armânjlji di Ovcî Pali (Ovce Pole). Republica Machedonia* (We, the Makedonian Aromanians. Gramostin Folklore from the Ovcî Pole Aromanians). Unia ti Cultură a armânjlilor dit Machidunii, Biblioteca Natsională Armănească „Constantin Belemace”, Colectsia „Pericle Papahagi”, Scopia.
- Durham, Mary Edith, 1910, *High Albania and its Customs in 1908*, London, Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.
- Greco, Giovanni, 1992, “L’aquila e l’aquilone. Il tatuaggio dalla tradizione rituale alla modernizzazione” (We, the Makedonian Aromanians. Gramostin Folklore from the Ovcî Pole Aromanians), în *Proposte e ricerche*, 28 (1): 220-231.
- Herceg, Toni, 2017, “Tetovaže katolika u srednjoj Bosni-simbilički ornament duha i tijela”, în *HUM*, XI (17-18): 342-367.
- Ilinčić, Nataša, 2016, *Il tatuaggio tradizionale femminile nei Balcani Jajce, un caso studio in Bosnia ed Erzegovina* (We, the Makedonian Aromanians. Gramostin Folklore from the Ovcî Pole Aromanians), doctoral thesis, Antropologia culturale, etnologia, etnolingvistica, percorso storico-geografico, Università Ca’ Foscari di Venezia.
- Jones, C.P., 2000, “Stigma and Tattoo” in Caplan, Jane (ed.), *Written on the Body. The Tattoo in European and American History*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press.
- Jones, Christopher P., 1987, “Tattooing and Branding in Graeco-Roman Antiquity”, in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 77: 139-155.
- Jukic, Monica, 2013, “Tradicionalno tetoviranje Hrvata u Bosni i Hercegovini – bocanje kao način zaštite od Osmanlija” (We, the Makedonian Aromanians. Gramostin Folklore from the Ovcî Pole Aromanians), in *LUCIUS, Zbornik radova Društva studenata povijesti «Ivan Lučić-Lucius»*, XII (18-19): 197-218.
- Krutak, Lars, 2007, *The Tattooing arts of Tribal Women*, London, Bennett & Bloom, Desert Hearts.
- Maundrell, Henry, 1817, *A Journey from Aleppo to Jerusalem at Easter 1697*, published by Richard Edwards, London.
- Minovici, Nicolae S., 1898, *Tatuajurile în România* (Tattooing in Romania), București, Stab. Grafic J.V. Socecu.
- Ousterhout, Robert, 2015, “Permanent Ephemera. The ‘Honourable Stigmatisation’ of the Jerusalem Pilgrims”, in *Between Jerusalem and Europe. Essay in Honour of Bianca Kühner*, editori: Renana Bartal, Hanna Vorholt, Leiden, Boston, Brill Publisher.
- Papahagi, Tache, 1981, *Grai, folclor, etnografie* (Speech, Folklore, Ethnography). Editat and prefațat de Valeriu Rusu, București, Editura Minerva.
- Papahagi, Tache, 1974, *Dicționarul dialectului aromân general și etimologic. Ediția a doua augmentată. Dictionnaire aroumain (macédo-roumain) général et étymologique. Deuxième édition augmentée* (General and Etymological Dictionary of the Aromanian Dialect. Second Augmented Edition), București, Editura Republicii Socialiste România.

- Renaut, Luc, 2017, "What to Make of the Prehistory of Tattooing in Europe", in *Ancient Ink. The archeology of Tooting*, editat de Lars Krutak, Aaron Deter-Wolf, Seattle, Whashington Press.
- Scriban, August, 1929, *Dicționarul limbii românești* (The Dictionary of the Romanian Language), Iași, Institutul de Arte Grafice „Presa Bună”.
- Stoichiță, Victor Ieronim, 2024, *Despre trup. Anatomii, redute, fantasme* (On the Body: Anatomies, Defences, and Fantasies), tradus din franceză de Ruxandra Demetrescu și Anca Oroveanu, București, Humanitas.
- Șăineanu, Lazăr, 1929, *Dicționarul universal al limbei române* (The Universal Dictionary of the Romanian Language), ediția a VI-a, Craiova, Editura Scrisul românesc.
- Truhelka, Ćiro, 1896, *Tetoviranje katolika u Bosni i Hercegovini* (We, the Makedonian Aromanians. Gramostin Folklore from the Ovci Pole Aromanians), Glasniku Zemaljskog Muzeja.
- Weigand, Gustav, 1894, *Die Aromunen ethnographisch-philologisch-historische. Untersuchungen über das Volk der sogenannten Makedo-Romanen oder Zinzaren* (We, the Makedonian Aromanians. Gramostin Folklore from the Ovci Pole Aromanians), Leipzig.
- Weigand, Gustav, 2014, *Armânii. Cercetări etnografice, filologice, istorice asupra poporului așa-numiților macedo-romani sau țințari. Țară și oameni* (The Aromanians. Historical, Philological and Ethnografical Studies on so-called Macedo-Romanians or Tsintsari. Birth place/ Country and People) Relatarea autorului despre călătoriile sale în sud-vestul Peninsulei Balcanice, însoțită de trei anexe științifice, o ilustrație de titlu, opt tabele, opt fotogravuri și o hartă etnografică. Vol. I. Traducere din limba germană și note de Christian Bandu. Ediție îngrijită de Mariana Bara (revizia traducerii în limba română, studiu critic, note, bibliografie), București, Editura Tracus Arte.
- Grezdu (pseudonym), 1908, „Tatuajul la femeile din Belcamen” (Tattooing Among Women in Belcamen), in *Lumina. Revista românilor din dreapta Dunării* (1908), anul VI, nr. 6, 7, 8 (iunie, iulie, august), p. 50-51.
- [no author], 1936, „Crucea în frunte” (The Cross on the Forehead), in *Revista ilustrată* (1936), 9 septembrie, nr. 503, p. 12-13.