

Medical Anthropology in Romania – Medical Anthropology on Romania?

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A discipline becomes established in a particular national context if it is institutionalised. This institutionalisation includes teaching courses and programmes, research projects, groups and institutes, as well as academic societies and conferences in the discipline.

Medical anthropology in Romania had the same difficulty in institutionalising itself at the national level as did social and cultural anthropology more largely. While, since the beginning of the 90s, the latter disposes of an academic society¹, of master's programmes and undergraduate courses offered at different universities around Romania, it still does not have a full undergraduate programme.

The situation of medical anthropology is even more precarious. No courses at any level are currently offered on the subject, and there is only one researcher, Valentin-Veron Toma, based at the „Fr. I. Rainer” Institute of Anthropology in Bucharest, who has developed, over the last twelve years, a number of research projects in medical anthropology.²

However, interest in medical anthropology topics has grown in recent years, as several PhD students have taken them up in Bucharest and Cluj universities.

1 Societatea de Antropologie Culturală din România, SACR (Romanian Society for Cultural Anthropology).

2 V. V. Toma taught a course in *medical anthropology* in 2002 in the Master's programme in Cultural Anthropology at the National School for Political and Administrative Studies, but the course was not subsequently continued. The same thing happened with his course in *Cultural psychiatry* from 2003. In 2004, Toma has also been invited to teach a course in *Applied Medical Anthropology in Health Promotion*, integrated in the *Health Promotion* module of the Course on Competency in the Management of Health Services, organized by the National Institute for Research and Development in Health in Bucharest. The „Fr. I. Rainer” Institute of Anthropology in Bucharest has a long tradition of research at the border between anthropology and medicine. Unfortunately, the dominance of biomedical theories and methodologies place most of the studies conducted at the institute in the realm of biological anthropology and population pathology, rather than in that of medical anthropology as it is currently understood internationally. We will concentrate in this article on research on health, illness and healthcare carried out from the perspective of social and cultural anthropology.

Moreover, interest in these topics has also grown among researchers and PhD anthropology students based in western universities. Through their collaborations with local researchers and PhD students, one can hope that they have started to build the institutional bases of medical anthropology in Romania.

Since the end of the 90s, these research projects have started to put medical anthropology topics on the map of the anthropology of postsocialism. The pioneers were Jack Friedman, with his study of anxiety among the Jiu Valley coal mining regions (Friedman 2003), Anamaria Iosif Ross, with her study of alternative medicine in Romania (Iosif 2003), but also Gail Kligman, with her study of reproduction during socialist Romania (Kligman 1998). The beginning of the 2000s saw the first local studies. Gheorghită Geană published a study on the value of health among Romanian peasants (Geană 2002). Moreover, Valentin-Veron Toma introduced an interpretive perspective in his studies of illness narratives and explanatory models (Toma 2003, 2007), cultural psychiatry (Toma 2003, 2005, 2009b), cultural competence (Toma 2009a), and, more recently, fieldwork studies based on the MINI interview guide (Toma and Ciuhuța 2012b). Collaborations between V. V. Toma and Sabina Stan also resulted in a study on informatisation in the Romanian healthcare system (Stan and Toma 2009). In the same period, Stan introduced the critical perspective in her studies on healthcare reform, marketisation, corruption and informal exchanges in the Romanian healthcare system (Stan 2007, 2012).

At the end of 2000s, a second wave of PhD studies on medical anthropology issues were carried out in Romania. Researchers based in western universities dealt with topics such as reproduction and sexuality (Pop 2011, 2012; Anton 2008a, 2008b, 2011; Kirkham 2012), infectious diseases and public health (Stillo 2010, 2012a, 2012b), ethnicity and health (Singh 2011) and aging (Weber 2009, 2012). Additionally, one of the most important American anthropologists studying Romania, David Kideckel studied labour, the body and working class culture in post-socialist Romania (Kideckel 2008). In the same period, research in medical anthropology started to be conducted by PhD students based in Romanian universities. Some of them are still under way, and their topics include illness narratives among cancer patients (Iacob 2012), pain communities and uninstitutionalized health practices (Dincovici 2012), coping strategies of organ recipients (Mihail 2012), and medical subjectivities in a health care direct selling company (Ionescu-Țugui 2012). Notably, most of these PhD studies are supervised by Professor Vintilă Mihăilescu, one of the main agents of the institutionalisation of social and cultural anthropology in Romania.

On the other hand, in the same period Toma turned to more macro critical approaches in his new research programme on cross-border healthcare in the EU and particularly on medical travel to Vienna (Toma, Ciuhuța 2012a). This is part of a larger trend in medical anthropology of increasing attention to transnational

healthcare practices (Nagy 2011). Since 2009, Stan has developed a research programme on the topic with a focus on Romanian migrants in Ireland (Stan 2012).

As a result of new collaborations between Toma and colleagues in London, in 2012 the first research project on private healthcare in Romania started to be conducted by an MA student (Tommaso De Santis). At the end of the 2000s and beginning of the 2010s, researchers at the Romanian Academy in Cluj carried out a major project on the way medicalisation was received in the countryside during the socialist period (E. Bărbulescu 2010, 2011; C. Bărbulescu 2011). Finally, the same period saw the publication of previous work by J. Friedman (2009) and A. Iosif Ross (2006); and, in 2012, a major textbook in the anthropology of alternative medicine.

The 2012 was also the year when the second conference on “Health in transition. Ethnographies of Biomedicine in Postsocialist Europe”, organised by Stan and Toma with the help of British and American colleagues, took place in Bucharest (7-8 June, see www.healthintransition.org). This helped to make visible research carried out - both inside and outside the country - on medical anthropology issues in Romania and also to place the discipline on the Romanian academic map.

The challenges of medical anthropology in Romania are numerous. On the one side, increased international collaborations help fuel medical anthropology studies by local researchers and PhD students as well as the visibility of the discipline at the national level. On the other side, the challenge is now to pass to the next stage of developing courses and programmes in medical anthropology in Romanian universities. An important preparatory element is increasing the number of publications by local researchers, but also the presence of both Romanian-based and western-based medical anthropologists in the Romanian publishing landscape. The other element is increasing the institutional grounding of medical anthropologists interested in Romanian topics through secure positions in the academic world in both Romania and abroad.

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