

Beyond the Household

An Overview of Romanian Ethnobiological Research and the Problem of Traditional Food Foraging

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A Short History of Ethnobotanical and Ethnozoological Research in Romania

ETHNOBIOLOGY is considered by some researchers as being a field within cultural ecology¹ or the ethnosciences² that studies the complex relationship between traditional human communities and the local biota of their environment.³ Ethnobotany and ethnozoology are the main fields of study in this branch of ethnoscience, and as the name implies, ethnobotany is the complex study of the knowledge, perception, classification and multiple use of domestic and wild plants by local communities,⁴ whilst ethnozoology is the study of the relationship between human communities and the local fauna of their landscape focusing on folk names, perception, classification, empirical use, but also on spiritual importance.⁵ The term ethnobiology was also used by some Romanian researchers who considered it to be synthetical science concerned with the convoluted relationship between human society and the plant and animal world, thus including both of the abovementioned branches.⁶

The interest of Romanian intellectuals in the folk nomenclature of plants is dating back already to 1861, when the first call and program was launched by G. Barițiu for systematic research on this topic, among other ethnographic and historical subjects related to the everyday life of the Romanian peasants living in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.⁷ The first systematic studies on this topic, published as a series of articles in the magazine *Familia* (The Family) was done by Simeon Manguica in 1874. He was advocating for the urgent collection of ethnobotanical data, seen as an important source of evidence for the origin and history of the Romanian people.⁸

Another folklorist who laid a ground stone for Romanian ethnobiology, both ethnobotany and ethnozoology, was Simion Florea Marian, who started by publishing several ethnobotanical studies in various cultural and literary magazines. These articles were

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published mostly between 1878 and 1907, and included titles like: “Alunul” (The hazelnut tree), “Busuiocul” (Basil), “Bradul la români” (The fir tree with the Romanians), “Mătrăguna și dragostea la români” (Mandrake and love with the Romanians), “Plopul” (The poplar), “Scumpia” (The smoke bush), “Sora-Soarelui” (The sunflower), “Iarba lui Tatin” (Confrey), “Usturoiul la poporul român” (Garlic with the Romanians), “Socul” (Elderberry), etc.⁹ After 40 years of research dedicated to Romanian folk culture, which included folk botany, his death occurred in 1907. His lifetime work *Botanica poporană română* (Romanian folk botany) was left unpublished and remained an extensive manuscript of 12 volumes (12,000 pages), 8 of them in final form, which also included a herbarium. This important manuscript was published only recently (2008–2010), in three volumes, by the Romanian Academy.

After World War I, ethnobotanical research in Romania was practiced mostly by biologists or by ethnographers with training in botany. Many extensive studies, but also some monographs were published during the interwar period, the most influential researchers in this field being botanists Zaharia C. Panțu,¹⁰ Emilian Țopa¹¹ and Alexandru Borza.¹² Borza was one of the most prominent and most active researchers in this domain.

During the communist period, ethnobotanical research continued in Romania, with Alexandru Borza publishing his major work titled *Dicționar etnobotanic* (Ethnobotanical dictionary),¹³ while Valer Butură published his *Romanian Ethnobotanical Encyclopedia*.¹⁴ During this period, many ethnobotanical studies continued to focus on vernacular plant names and their medicinal use.¹⁵ However, the medicinal use of plants by the Romanian peasants was a direction that was encouraged even by the communist regime. For example, G. Rácz from the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Târgu-Mureș clinically tested the effectiveness of folk remedies that he collected or found in ethnobotanical studies.¹⁶

Another noteworthy researcher in ethnobotany during and after the communist period was Maria Bocșe, who focused her studies especially on the traditions of peasant herbalists from the Bihor Mountains and other areas from the Western Carpathians.¹⁷ After 1990, ethnobotany was still being published in various journals¹⁸ or as monographs of different areas of Romania.¹⁹ A very well studied region from an ethnobotanical perspective is Southern Transylvania, which has been studied by professor Constantin Drăgulescu, starting from the early 1980s²⁰ until nowadays.²¹

Ethnozoology has a long intellectual tradition within Romanian ethnobiological research. The first ethnozoological research can also be linked to Simeon Florea Marian, who published an impressive and extensive work in two volumes in 1883, entitled *Ornitologia poporană română* (Romanian folk ornithology),²² containing different folk names, beliefs and many legends related to the birdlife found in the major historical regions of Romania. In 1903, Simeon Florea Marian published another ethnozoological monograph focused on the folk names, legends and traditions regarding insects.²³

Grigore Antipa can be considered the second major figure responsible for the development of ethnozoology in Romania. He collected folk names of birds²⁴ and especially fish during most of his expeditions.²⁵ Another major contribution is *Pescăria și pescuitul în România* (Fisheries and fishing in Romania),²⁶ which remains to this day a complex monograph on traditional fishing methods. Antipa also urged every scientist, no matter his domain, to start and collect the folk knowledge related to his field of research.²⁷

Another major figure responsible for the development of ethnozoology was Mihai C. Băcescu,²⁸ a member of the Romanian Academy, who published many ethnozoological articles²⁹ and also two extensive and complex monographs on the fish and birds that the Romanian peasants knew. Other noteworthy ethnozoologists are Zoe Stoicescu-Apostolache³⁰ and Alexandru Filipaşcu.³¹ After 1990, ethnozoological research in Romania has become less prevalent.

Ethnobiology is currently facing a comeback in Europe, not only in Asia and the Americas, since there is growing interest in both ethnobotany and ethnozoology in the academia and in general, with many extremely well documented scientific studies being published recently in both fields.³² A significant number of studies focus on both ethnobotany and medicinal plants,³³ but there is also serious focus on local food recipes that use wild plants from the local environment.³⁴

Materials and Methods

ALTHOUGH ROMANIAN ethnobiological research remains fairly unknown outside the national borders, compared to other European countries³⁵ or in some ways even to the North America,³⁶ it has a long tradition and it is a highly developed field of research.³⁷ The reasons for its development and tradition as a serious scientific discipline can be traced back to the involvement of major Romanian scientists (both folklorists and biologists) and also to the involvement of the Romanian Academy. In this paper we focus our attention on the topic of wild plants and animals used as food and their place within the major themes of Romanian ethnobiology: vernacular names and their origin, medicinal use, magical use and legends surrounding different species.

We reviewed the major monographs and also the main publications of the Romanian researchers in the fields of ethnobotany³⁸ and ethnozoology³⁹ in order to find information on the culinary use of wild edible plants and also on wild animals used as food. We wanted to highlight the importance of this topic within the traditional themes of Romanian ethnobotanical and ethnozoological research.

Results and Discussions

ROMANIAN ETHNOBOTANICAL research tradition has remained more or less the same from its beginning until nowadays. Since its beginning Romanian ethnobotany focused firstly on the linguistic importance (vernacular names and their origin), empirical and medicinal use, and the spiritual importance of plants (used in specific customs).

Simeon Manguica, the founder of Romanian ethnobotany, laid the main directions regarding the necessity and importance of a systematic study of the folk botany of the Romanian people.⁴⁰ He also gave important guidelines regarding the methodology of ethnobotany and criticized the use of translated plant names from other languages in

Romanian school books and scientific textbooks. As mentioned earlier, Mangiuca underlined the linguistic importance of Romanian plant names, highlighting their origin in the ancient Latin botanical nomenclature. He investigated many folk practices and beliefs regarding plants in order to connect them to ancient Roman customs and religious practices. Mangiuca did not mention any culinary use, apart from the magical and medicinal, but he had a very ambitious research program that was sadly halted by his death.

In the same tradition, Simeon Florea Marian continued the research model established by Mangiuca, mentioning several vernacular names of plants from the major historical regions inhabited by Romanians. Marian gathered extremely detailed information on legends, the use of plants in customs and specific folk holidays, but also on the magical and medicinal use.⁴¹ The culinary use is mentioned for many of the plants he described (if and how they were eaten and how they were used for food production, e.g. cheese etc.). Much attention was given to textile dyeing with the help of local tinctorial plants. Even when describing vegetables, Marian mentioned many medicinal uses of the plants grown in the peasants' gardens. However, we can consider Marian to be the first ethnobotanist who focused on the traditional culinary use of wild plants; although he does not give detailed information regarding cooking methods, he refers to many plants, the villages and regions where they were used as food.

Zacharia C. Panțu published one of the first extended ethnobotanical monographs *Plantele cunoscute de poporul român* (Plants known by the Romanian people),⁴² which includes mostly folk nomenclature from different regions of Romania, but has little information on the folk use of different plants and very little information on their culinary use.

Alexandru Borza was not only one of the major researchers in this field, but also one of the main promoters responsible for its development before and after World War II. His first ethnobotanical study appeared as early as 1914, when he was a young researcher.⁴³ Borza was one of the first researchers who studied the plants grown by peasants in their home gardens (for culinary, medicinal and ornamental purposes), focusing on vernacular names and the enumeration of plants. Borza was also one of the first botanists to study and classify the different local varieties of fruit trees grown by the peasants in Romania. Another complex ethnobotanical and anthropogeographical study regards the cultivation of einkorn wheat (*Triticum monococcum* ssp. *monococcum*) an ancient cereal grown by Romanian peasants in the past, no longer cultivated nowadays. Through his lifelong research in the field of ethnobotany,⁴⁴ Borza shed light on the numerous plants grown in backyard gardens and on very many local varieties of fruit trees and traditionally used ornamental plants. His contribution is essential for a better understanding of the dynamics of local foods and traditional gardens. His extensive dictionary⁴⁵ focuses mainly on the diverse vernacular plant names found all over Romania.

Other major ethnobotanists, such as Emilian Țopa, Valer Butură and Maria Bocșe, focused mostly on vernacular names, medicinal and other empirical uses. Valer Butură's work includes, beside many interesting medicinal uses, considerable data on the magical use of plants, beliefs and legends regarding plants. The use of plants in rituals, folk holidays or magic was a direction of research that was not tolerated by the communist authorities. This is also the reason why the second part of Valer Butură's *Romanian Ethnobotanical Encyclopedia*, which included the abovementioned topics, was published

abroad, in Paris, by Paul H. Stahl in the late '80s.⁴⁶ The culinary use of wild plants is scarcely mentioned by Butură and not covered by Țopa and Boșe.

More recent studies and monographs, after the year 2000, start to cover the topic regarding the use of plants in the local diet, among other major traditional themes of Romanian ethnobiological research. For example, Anamaria Petrean in her ethnobotanical monograph of the Western Carpathians, includes a chapter on the traditional diet and the use of cultivated and wild plants in several villages and small towns from this area.⁴⁷ This chapter also contains interesting information on specific ritual foods prepared on certain holidays by the peasants from the mountains.

Another extremely detailed monographic endeavor, this time focusing on the ethnographic and historical region of Oltenia, includes a large number of plants that the locals use in their diet, among the detailed descriptions of plants used for medicinal and magical purposes.⁴⁸ Georgeta Nițu also gives examples of local recipes using wild plants in the Oltenia region.

For Maramureș, a region well known for its folk art and cultural traditions, an extremely detailed study was republished in 2004, focusing on the extensive plant knowledge of the villagers from Breb village.⁴⁹ The authors (L. Antal and M. Antal) show that the locals from Breb recognized a number of 435 species, a number of 274 being wild plants, whilst the other were cultivated and semi-cultivated. From the total number of species known by the locals, they used for culinary purposes a number of 87 species, 61 being cultivated.

Southern Transylvania is a region well documented not only from an ethnographical and ethnological perspective, but also from an ethnobotanical point of view. The importance of plants within local communities has been studied here in a holistic manner, including: local names, medicinal uses, economic uses, use in customs, religion and magic and culinary use.⁵⁰ Constantin Drăgulescu researched the use of wild and cultivated plants in traditional food recipes for this region, including those used as fresh snacks or as flavorings. These studies include the exotic plants or fruits that are used as food or spices by villagers from this region, commercially acquired. He identified a number of 179 species (cultivated, wild and some exotic) used for culinary purposes. The use of mushrooms in this region was also documented in an exhaustive manner, a total of 72 species being collected and prepared as food by the locals.

The use and consumption of mushrooms in Maramureș was also studied by Márta Béres, a mycologist from the region,⁵¹ who described a high number of species used and the methods of cooking or conserving the fungi.

Similar to ethnobotany, ethnozoology continued the tradition regarding the importance of vernacular animal names used by Romanian people in different ethnographic and historical regions. Simion Florea Marian, the first author of ethnozoological monographs,⁵² argued for the importance of ethnozoology, beside the ethnological importance of different beliefs and legends related to birdlife or other animals, for its practical importance regarding the development of modern biological education. As stated above, Marian was a fierce opponent of the translation of common names of animals and plants from international languages, like French and German, a trend that was common during his time. He urged for the inclusion of vernacular Romanian folk

names into modern biological education and textbooks. This position was taken over and developed by other founding fathers of Romanian biology like Grigore Antipa and Mihai C. Băcescu.

The topic of the animals used in the traditional diet of the Romanian people is covered explicitly by later Romanian ethnozoologists like Mihai C. Băcescu;⁵³ however, it also appears implicitly due to the nature of the topic dealt with in the monographs of Grigore Antipa.⁵⁴ Antipa focused his research on the species of fish of major economic importance, recording valuable data directly from the fishermen. In his second monograph on fishing and fisheries, Antipa describes most of the traditional fishing techniques practiced at that time in Romania. The economic importance and the use of fish in the diet of the locals is conceived by default due to the nature of the research topic. Băcescu, however, expands the topic of the fish known and used by the Romanian peasants. His monograph (1947) is full of remarkably detailed observations not only on the different folk names of fish species, but also of ethnoecological observations of peasant fishermen, the culinary uses and even local recipes with different fish species. He noticed that in many cases the small fish, ignored by professional fishermen, are the most important for the occasional peasant fishermen.

Băcescu recorded very valuable information on how certain fish species are eaten in some regions, while not consumed in others. For example, the spined loach (*Cobitis taenia*) known in some regions of Romania as *zváruga*, is not consumed in the villages near the Danube, but preferred in areas closer to the hills and mountains. Some very interesting ethnographic information is also recorded in this monograph, for example: in most villages there are 2–3 people specialized in plants and terrestrial animals, but all villagers had detailed knowledge about the fish found in the local waters. He also noticed that, on many folk holidays, when agricultural work is prohibited, most peasants are out fishing with traditional tools, together with the women and children. In his second ethnozoological monograph regarding birds (1961), he focused mostly on different folk names found all over Romania but also on some interesting folk beliefs. In one of the chapters he lists several traditional traps made by peasants to catch birds, for example. He records that in mountain areas small birds are caught in order to prevent damage to the crops but also because they are consumed by the locals. This is one of the few sources of information regarding the trapping and consumption of small birds by peasants in Romania (excluding the bird species that are traditionally hunted). In one of his last ethnozoological contributions, Mihai C. Băcescu⁵⁵ mentions some frog species that are traditionally consumed in some areas of Romania.

Zoe Stoicescu-Apostolache carried out several significant ethnozoological studies, focusing also on local folk names and especially on the medicinal use of different products, parts of the body or animal organs.⁵⁶ She mentions some species of snails (*Cepaea vindobonensi*, *Helix pomatia*, *Helix lucorum*) that are eaten in the south of Romania⁵⁷ with no further information on the recipes. To compensate, she recorded several medicinal foods derived from animal organs, used to treat different diseases.⁵⁸

Conclusions

ROMANIAN ETHNOBIOLOGICAL research has a considerable tradition as a scientific discipline with its own very specific research topics, due to its development over a long period of time. A major topic in both ethnobotany and ethnozoology was the use of local vernacular names and their origin, but also the way Romanian peasants perceived plants and animals and their empirical use. The use of plants and animals in medicine, customs and rituals was another major research topic. It was not, however, the main interest of Romanian ethnobiological research, thus the use of plants and animals as food was not studied by all the researchers involved in these domains, but some researchers did study it in very a complex and holistic manner. Detailed information on local foods can be found in the monographic efforts of Simion Florea Marian, Constantin Drăgulescu, Georgeta Nițu and others. Due to the nature of the subject, ethnozoological research also included the issue of wild animals that are an important food source in the extensive studies of Grigore Antipa and especially in Mihai C. Băcescu's extremely detailed monograph of fishes as seen by local peasant fishermen. □

Notes

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41. Marian, *Botanica*.
42. See note 10.
43. Petrean, 51.
44. See note 12.
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49. See note 18.
50. See note 21.
51. See note 38.
52. See notes 22 and 23.

- 53. Băcescu, *Peștii*.
- 54. See notes 25 and 26.
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- 56. See note 30.
- 57. Stoicescu-Apostolache, “Moluștele gasteropode”.
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Abstract

Beyond the Household: An Overview of Romanian Ethnobiological Research and the Problem of Traditional Food Foraging

Ethnobotany and ethnozoology have a considerable history as scientific disciplines in Romania. The first systematic studies date back to the mid-19th century, when folklorists and biologists started gathering vernacular plant and animal names from different ethnographic and main historical regions of Romania. Ethnobotanical research regarding the culinary use and the knowledge of wild edible plants has been studied by a limited number of ethnobotanists, but in great detail. In the same tradition, Romanian ethnozoological research has been firstly focused on the linguistic importance of the local names for different taxa, but due to the nature of the subject it also included some extremely detailed information on the culinary use in different regions of Romania, especially regarding fish species.

Keywords

ethnobotany, ethnozoology, traditional food, nomenclature of plants, methodology, Romania