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MEDICINAL HERBS IN FOLK MEDICINE OF THE AROMYNS IN MALOVISHTA (NORTH MACEDONIA): ETHNOLINGUISTIC STUDIES

Abstract: The paper analyses the phytonyms of medicinal herbs in the linguonym of the Aromyns in Malovishta (*opshtina* Bitola, North Macedonia) and their conformity with languages of the Western Balkans: Bulgarian, official language of the republic of North Macedonia, Serbian, Croatian, Modern Greek, Albanian, etc. The main topics of the study are folk medicine and ethnobotany. The linguistic and ethnological data are based on the materials of fieldwork in Macedonia in 2017.

The Aromyns are famous among their ethnic neighbors (Macedonians, Albanians, Serbs, Roma, Turkish, etc.) as good healers and perfect specialists in the sphere of medicinal herbs and plants. In recent years, after the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, the healers' practice among Aromyns continues old Balkan traditions and has innovations and new forms determined by language, cultural and social contacts with other ethnic groups.

We have fixed local denotations of the herbs and plants which have a huge role in healers' practice among Aromyns in *opshtina* Bitola, as well as their medicinal properties:

'mint' L. *Méntha*, Arom. *gjázmǎ*, Mac. dial. *мѐнта*, Serb. dial. *нáне*; in literary languages: Mac. *мѐнта* ('mint', 'mint tincture'), Serb. *нáна*, Bulg. *мѐнта*; Alb. *mënd/ër, -ra*, Mod. Gr. *μѐντα*, used to calm stomach pain, "opens the appetite", etc.

'Melissa' L. *Melissa*, Arom. *matócina*, Serb. *мáтичњак*; in literary languages: Bulg. *мáточина*, Mac. *мелуса*; used as a sedative, "for good health", Mod. Gr. *μѐλισσα*, Alb. *bári i blëtës, bar bléte*, Croat. *Melissa*, etc.

'St. John's wort' L. *Hypericum*, Arom. *kantarión*, Serb. dial. *нáвалич*; in literary languages: Serb. *богородична трава (богородично цвеће 'lily')*, Mac. *жолт кантарион*, Bulg. *жълт кантарион*; Alb. *lúlja e balsámit, lúle balsámi*; used to normalize blood pressure, cardiac activity, etc.

In conditions with limited resources for healthcare, medicinal herbs and plants have become an inextricable component of the medical practices of doctors and healers. These plants are perceived by many of our informants as an effective and unquestionable cure-all. Even properties not acknowledged by either traditional medicine or herbal healers are frequently attributed to them. The new trend towards consumption of ecologically clean products (called *bíó* in North Macedonia and Albania) increases demand for popular medicinal herbs, which are perceived as traditional and correct.

Keywords: Aromynian, Balkan languages, phytonyms, medicinal herbs, folk medicine, healers

Ethnolinguistic fieldwork studies have been organized by the author in the Aromynian-speaking settlement Malovishta (*opshtina* Bitola, Republic of Macedonia / from February 2019 – Republic of North Macedonia) in 2017 (Новик / Novik 2017: 48-56). The main topics of the expedition were folk medicine and ethnobotany (phytonyms, xeno-denomination, cultural stereotypes, etc.). The Aromyns are famous among their ethnic neighbors (Macedonians, Albanians, Serbs, Romas, Turkish, etc.) as good healers and perfect specialists in the sphere of medicinal herbs and plants (Stublla 2007: 418-432).

I. PEOPLE AND TRADITIONS

The settlement Malovishta has around 100 inhabitants which consider themselves to be Aromyns, with an abundance of symbols and markers of ethnic and ethno-local identity (idioms, orthodox Christianity, family rites, ethnic architecture, traditional clothes, local cuisine, etc.). The residents of this village continue to engage in agriculture, in crafts, to work in the different companies of neighboring city Bitola, etc. We can ascertain that the traditional way of life is preserved very strongly, even though this area is a part of the National Park Pelister, so there are a lot of local and international tourists every year in this region of Macedonia.

In the years following the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, and in the period of Macedonian independence (1991 — present), the healers' practice among Aromyns continues old Balkan traditions and has innovations and new forms determined by language, cultural and social contacts with other ethnic groups (Papađagi 1963; Saramandu & Nevaci 2014; Новик / Novik 2017: 50-56; compare Јашар-Настева / Yashar-Nasteva 2001: 31; Поленаковић / Polenakovich' 2007; Витанова / Vitanova 2014: 32-33; Николова / Nikolova 2016: 693-702; Витанова / Vitanova 2017: 156-162)². These processes can be characterized as global information influence from a new standpoint — that of a changing but very strong tradition.

II. PEOPLE WHO HAVE SPECIAL “KNOWLEDGE”

To this day, a visit to people who have special “knowledge” of how to cure is a traditional way to deal with illness in children and adults. Healing and witchcraft skills are mostly passed on from women to women. Men have rarely been involved in such practices (the same situation is usual among Vlachs, Greeks, Macedonians and other ethnicities and ethnic groups in this part of the Balkans) (Усачева / Usacheva 2004: 215-220; about Bulgarians see: БНМ / BNM 2013; Кирилова / Kirilova 2013b: 286).

There are three main methods used by healers for treating people for an illness (compare Георгиева / Georgieva 2013). The first method is a treatment with “medicine” — any substance which is considered panacea (e.g. Albanians in Ukraine use *çivít*, *ma çivít* (Alb. dial.) — a solid chalk substance with a dark blue color,

moreover the word *çivít* also means ‘dark blue’ in this Albanian lect < Turc. *çivít*) (Çabej 1976; Dizdari 2006: 176; Новик, Бучатская / Novik, Buchatskaya 2016: 65-67). Healers in Malovishta use chalk, etc. as “very strong medicine”. An important part of the treatment is “whispering” special speech formulas. This speech procedure was accompanied by spreading “medicine” on a patient’s body .

Using wax is the second treatment method (compare Кирилова / Kirilova 2013a: 127). This alternative way is considered to be more effective. Healers resorted to wax in cases when “whispering” and “medicine” were ineffective. Technically, the process of healing by wax has been organized in different ways. But most often the melted wax was poured out in cold water and solidified³.

The most common method presently is to use medicinal herbs and plants. This approach will be described in detail.

III. HERBS AND PLANTS IN FOLK MEDICINE

We have fixed local denotations of the herbs and plants which have a huge role in healers’ practices among Aromyns in *opshtina* Bitola, also their medicinal properties:

‘mint’ L. *Méntha*, Arom. *gjázmă*, Mac. dial. *мѐнта*, Serb. dial. *нѐне*; in literary languages: Mac. *мѐнта* (‘mint’, ‘mint tincture’), Serb. *нѐна*, Bulg. *мѐнта*; Alb. *mënd/ër, -ra*, Mod. Gr. *мѐнта*, Rus. *мята*, used to calm stomach pain, “stimulates appetite”, etc. (Meyer 1891; Cioranescu 1958; БЕР / BER 1971–; ЭССЯ / ESSJa 1974 –; Skok 1971, 1972; FGJSSH 1980: 1110; Sejdiu 1989; Elsie 1998: 163-200; Orel 1998; Vrabie 2000; БДА / BDA 2001; FEB 2003; Susuri 2006; Šugar 2008; Beekes 2010; Cunia 2010; Çabej 2014; Lloshi 2010: 213-214; Sulaj 2013: 201-203; Домосилецкая / Domosiletskaya 2015: 297-308);

‘Melissa’ L. *Melissa*, Arom. *matócina*, Serb. *мѐтичњак*; in literary languages: Rus. *мелисса*, (Rus. dial. *мяточник*, *лимонная мята*, *лимонная трава*, *медовка*, *роевик*, *пчельник*), Bulg. *мѐточина*, Mac. *мелиса*; used as a sedative, “for good health”, Mod. Gr. *мѐлисса*, Alb. *bári i blétës, bar bléte*, Croat. *Melissa*, etc. (Младенов / Mladenov 1941; Mitrushki 1955; Cioranescu 1958; БЕР / BER 1971–; ЭССЯ / ESSJa 1974 –; FGJSSH 1980: 96; Sejdiu 1989; Elsie 1998: 163-200; Orel 1998; Vrabie 2000; БДА / BDA 2001; FEB 2003; Susuri 2006; Beekes 2010; Cunia 2010; Lloshi 2010: 508; БНМ / BNM 2013; ERHJ 2016);

‘St. John’s wort’ L. *Hypericum*, Arom. *kantarión*, Serb. dial. *нѐвалич*; in literary languages: Serb. *богородична трава* (*богородично цвеће* ‘lily’), Mac. *жолт кантарион*, Bulg. *жѐлт кантарион*; Alb. *lúlja e balsámit, lúle balsámi*; used to normalize blood pressure, cardiac activity, etc. (Cioranescu 1958; БЕР / BER 1971–; ЭССЯ / ESSJa 1974 –; FGJSSH 1980: 1021; Sejdiu 1989; Elsie 1998: 163-200; Vrabie 2000; БДА / BDA 2001; FEB 2003; Susuri 2006; Cunia 2010; Lloshi 2010: 483);

Arom. *kantúria* – “Vlach collection of medicinal” with St. John’s wort; is popular in the treatment of various ailments, a means of so-called widespread use (compare Домосилецкая / Domosiletskaya 2018: 74-86; Домосилецкая / Domosiletskaya 2019: 320-345).

These plants are fairly widespread in the south-west of the Balkan peninsula (primarily on the territory of North Macedonia, Albania, and Greece) (Sulaj 2013; Domosiletskaya 2019: 219-230). The residents of the Bitola *opshtina*, which have a mixed Macedonian, Albanian, and Aromanian population, often underscore the special role and exaggerated importance of these plants in their culture. Moreover, our Aromynian-speaking informants in Malovishta noted that in their village, the word *gjázmă* originally denoted “tea” — a drink prepared from this very common plant, and only later came to mean mint tea, unlike black, green, or herbal tea — which became popular relatively late (Новик / Novik 2017: 30, 55).

IV. FROM AN ETHNOGRAPHIC POINT OF VIEW

Medicinal herbs and plants in Malovishta mainly grow on rocky mountainsides, with the exception of mint and Melissa. They blossom at the end of July (as concerns the collection of medicinal herbs, all of our informants emphatically agree that due to changes in climate there is a shift in the blossoming time of plants. Because of this, there are currently no set periods of collection for St. John’s wort, sage, etc., as there were in the past, only a few decades ago. In the past, e. c. St. John’s wort was collected in Malovishta in July, and sage in August. Now, the plants blossom sooner, and in these days one can collect a great variety of plants as early as July).

The collection of the medicinal plants is traditionally considered to be women’s work. This tradition is very strong among Aromyns. (E. g. recent decades have seen changes in this process in the Balkans: teenagers of both genders collect ‘mountain tea’ (*L. Sideritis Herba*), which they rely on for a certain amount of income. During our 2015 expedition to Himara (South Albania), we established the following fact: local Greek women from Palasa (Alb. *Palás/ë, -a*) have practically stopped going into the mountains to collect plants, for this activity has lost prestige.) (Joseph et al. 2019: 69-78).

In Malovishta, tinctures with mint, Melissa etc. were traditionally drunk in a variety of situations. In the summer, they were used also as a tonic which concluded the meal and facilitated better digestion of one’s food, in the winter — as a warming beverage; in the event of cold or other minor illness it served as medicine⁴. In any case, local residents attribute the wide use of *gjázmă* to its preventative properties against all possible ailments (for comparison see ИДР / IDR 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

After summarizing our findings in the field, we can make the following conclusions.

1) To this day, a visit to people who have special “knowledge” of how to cure is a traditional way to deal with ill children and adults among Aromyns. Healing and witchcraft skills are mostly passed on from women to women. 2) In the Western Balkans — as in the other parts of the peninsula, actually — a fairly stable culture of use of medicinal herbs and plants in folk medicine has developed. 3) Mint and Melissa have successfully occupied a niche in the tradition of hot drinks, like coffee

or tea consumption. This is thanks, primarily, to their accessibility and cheapness. 4) These two plants have been organically incorporated into the system of customary practices (first and foremost, of their code of behavior) and etiquette, and also into the rather stable hospitality customs characteristic of many different ethnicities, ethnoreligious and local groups in the Balkans. 5) In conditions with limited resources for healthcare, medicinal herbs and plants have become an inextricable component of the medical practices of doctors and healers. These plants are perceived by many of our informants as an effective and unquestionable cure-all. Even properties not acknowledged either by traditional medicine or by herbal healers are frequently attributed to them. 6) The new trend towards consumption of ecologically clean products (called *bio* in North Macedonia and Albania) increases demand for popular medicinal herbs, which are perceived as traditional and correct. These formerly ordinary products (which were originally used due to the inaccessibility of other foreign products such as coffee and foreign tea) suddenly gained extraordinary properties of health and importance.

A final motivation for the above-described phenomena and mechanisms of maintaining traditional foods and beverages and medicinal herbs in the diet, and medicinal herbs in folk medicine, is found in the rationality of utilizing existing natural resources.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is supported by the Russian Science Foundation under grant № 19-18-00244 (“Balkan bilingualism in dominant and equilibrium contact situation in diatopy, diachrony and diastraty”).

NOTES

² See very important project of the Institute of Bulgarian Language: (ЕРБНМ 2019 / ERBNM 2019)

³ For a detailed description of this tradition, see: (Новик, Бучатская / Novik, Buchatskaya 2016: 13-150).

⁴ Compare the use of other medicinal herbs and local nominations: (Кирилова / Kirilova 2017: 39-49; Николова / Nikolova 2019).

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ABBREVIATIONS

Alb.	Albanian
Arom.	Aromynian
Bulg.	Bulgarian
Croat.	Croatian
Lat.	Latin
Mac.	official language of the Republic of North Macedonia
Mod. Gr.	Modern Greek
Rus.	Russian
Serb.	Serbian
Turk.	Turkish
dial.	dialect

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