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REMEMBRANCE?  
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IN RURAL MOLDOVA

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# Charity or Remembrance? Practices of *pomană* in rural Moldova<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In the Republic of Moldova, *pomană*, an offering of bread accompanied by other useful and symbolic items, is regularly given by mourning individuals and families in memory of their dead relatives. *Pomană* is widely described as a form of charity given to the poor and needy, but it is most often distributed to close relatives and friends to encourage remembrance. In the context of the rapid impoverishment of Moldova during the postsocialist period, distributions of *pomană* appear contradictory; the revival of popular and official religious practices means that distributions of *pomană* have increased, but without noticeably alleviating poverty in rural areas. During fieldwork, informants often explained this situation through the statement that ‘in the past’ people had been more religious and had distributed *pomană* more clearly as charity. An examination of ethnographic and historical accounts from the early 20th century, however, suggests that this is not true, and that the distribution of *pomană* in the past was always combined with other rituals that celebrated conviviality and reinforced the existing social ties among friends and relatives. The analysis of *pomană* as exchange reveals ideals and tensions surrounding the act of giving and a surprising concern for social memory.

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<sup>1</sup> Ștefan Dorondel, Stephen Gudeman, and Mihai Popa each encouraged my early interest in *pomană*. The first draft of this paper was presented at the workshop *Enacting Social Reform: Religion, Charity, and Social Movements (1850–1939)* held at the Centre for the History and Culture of East Central Europe, Leipzig, in June 2012, where I received several helpful comments from fellow participants. The revision of the original draft has benefitted most from being carefully read by Patrick Heady and Dina Makram Ebeid. The responsibility for any remaining flaws is mine.

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## Introduction

This paper has its origin in ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in the village of Răscăieți in the southeastern region of the Republic of Moldova in 2009–2010 as a member of the Research Group ‘Economy and Ritual’. The village has a single Orthodox church,<sup>3</sup> and about six weeks after I began my fieldwork, I succeeded in arranging a meeting with the village priest. The priest was a busy man, and it had taken some time to reach him. When I finally succeeded, one Friday morning, to talk to him by telephone, he explained his schedule for the next few days – on Friday evening he would have services at church; again on Saturday because it was a “Saturday of the Dead” (*sâmbăta morților*); on Sunday he would hold his own services as well as services in the neighboring village because it was their patron saint’s day (*hram*); Monday’s schedule was unclear; but early Tuesday morning he would drive the stacks of bread and other food brought into the church on Saturday to a hospital in the nearby town of Tiraspol. We could meet, he concluded, a little later on Tuesday – around 11 o’clock in the morning.

When we did meet, our conversation began where it had ended on the telephone – with a discussion of the bread received by the church on Saturday, and why the priest had taken it to a hospital in Tiraspol. Many priests, he said, take the bread received into the church on Saturdays of the Dead as donations to hospitals in the capital city of Chișinău. He and his wife had decided on Tiraspol, however, because they think people there are “more hungry” (*mai flămînzi*) than elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> On other occasions, they have taken food to orphanages or homes for the elderly.

### Is *pomană* Charity?

This discussion drew my attention to the problematic role of *pomană* in association with poverty. *Pomană*, an offering of bread accompanied by other useful and symbolic items, is regularly given by mourning individuals and families in memory of their dead relatives. Most *pomană* is distributed directly to other individuals, but an offering is also taken to the church when prayers are requested on behalf of the deceased. In both cases, *pomană* is widely described as a form of charity (*un fel de caritate*), ideally given to the poor and needy. Indeed, *pomană* is the only traditional practice I encountered that is regularly equated with charity.<sup>5</sup> Yet even though poverty (officially measured in terms of the ability to access food) is acute in Moldova’s rural areas, people rarely give *pomană* to the poorest or most needy individuals in their midst, preferring instead to give it to

<sup>3</sup> There is also a meeting house for a minority of villagers who are Seventh Day Adventists. I had no contact with their church leadership, but members continued to practice many of the Orthodox rituals related to the commemoration of death, explaining that their relatives ‘had been Orthodox’. In the weeks preceding Easter, for example, they also clean and weed their family graves in the village cemetery, serving those who visit them with bread and water instead of wine.

<sup>4</sup> The priest’s decision to take food to Tiraspol is an interesting one. On the one hand, it is a pragmatic decision as Tiraspol is much closer to the village than Chișinău, and the shorter trip saved the priest both time and money. On the other hand, the choice also has political implications and overtones. Tiraspol is the capital of the unofficial Transnistrian Republic, a separatist region within Moldova, with strong ties to certain factions within the Russian military, political, and economic sectors. The village where I conducted fieldwork has a border crossing into the region; until tensions erupted in the early 1990s, villagers had close relations with neighbors across the river, and many had studied, worked, shopped, visited, and married in Tiraspol and nearby villages. In the 1990s, people in Tiraspol were literally “more hungry” than their village neighbors a few kilometers across the Nistru River – many had jobs in industry, and as salaries were held in arrears, they came to barter industrial goods for vegetables, meat, and milk – but the situation is no longer quite so drastic. Other priests often criticize the Transnistrian regime, and I was almost certainly meant to hear that people in Transnistria could be “more hungry” for religious and political freedoms, and for Romanian culture and language.

<sup>5</sup> DEX (1998), the authoritative Romanian dictionary, only provides philanthropy (*filantropie*) as a synonym for charity (*caritate*), but some older Romanian dictionaries give *pomană* instead (e.g. Scriban 1939).

close friends and relatives. Nor do the poor in the village appear in any observable numbers to claim *pomană* that is distributed. Instead, the church receives so much bread that the priest must regularly make trips to nearby cities in order to redistribute it. The actual distribution of *pomană* seems to suggest that either the village has few poor and needy members, or that *pomană* is not primarily or exclusively a form of charity.

In the pages below, I explore my informants' accounts about what *pomană* should be, and analyze what their practices reveal it to be. *Pomană* is considered a necessary component of commemorating the dead because it generates a chain of prayer and remembrance that helps the deceased on his journey to heaven. It is considered most efficacious when given as charity to the poor and needy. My informants saw their own practices as falling short of the ideal, and claimed that 'in the past' people had been more religious and had distributed *pomană* more clearly as charity.

The bulk of the paper is therefore an examination of ethnographic accounts of *pomană* throughout ethnic Romanian communities and the history of charitable practices and institutions in Romania and the Russian Empire at the turn of the 20th century. In this examination, I asked whether it was possible that, before the socialist period, the giving of *pomană* had been practiced primarily as a mode of redistribution in rural areas from the wealthier to the poorer, and whether church teachings about *pomană* had ensured that the practice functioned as a religiously inflected form of social security (cf. Leutloff-Grandits, Peleikis and Thelen 2009). In other words, do current practices of *pomană* really fail to conform with the ideal because people in the postsocialist period are 'less good', less religious, or more burdened by economic hardship than they were in the presocialist period?

Ordinarily, such claims should be treated with skepticism. Narratives about the moral decline under conditions of modernization, industrialization, and Soviet rule are pervasive in all sectors of Moldovan society (e.g. Cash 2011; van Baar and Commandeur 2012) and, for the most part, can be interpreted as "purely mental historical outlooks", which cannot be equated with "actual historical trends." (Zerubavel 2003: 16) But the actual closure of churches and interdictions on religious practice during the Soviet period, combined with the religious revival during the postsocialist period, lend a greater plausibility to informants' claims that their observance of official and popular religious practices, including *pomană*, might have been significantly changed during the Soviet period. The evidence thus far gathered suggests, however, that while gifts of bread helped prevent the annual starvation of many families in the presocialist period (Hitchins 1994: 339–341; Lindenmeyr 1996: 56), the giving of *pomană* was also always combined with other rituals that celebrated conviviality and reinforced the existing social ties among friends and relatives. Thus, the 'problem of *pomană*' is more complex than is otherwise suggested by the dominant narrative of a charitable practice that has been corrupted by moral decline.

From a comparative perspective, it is not surprising that a charitable practice turns out to incorporate other forms of economic exchange dominated by self-interest and expectations of reciprocity. All other anthropological accounts suggest that *pomană* could not really be charity, unless charity itself is reconfigured as devotion (Benthall 2012: 365) or sacrifice (Westermarck 1909: 565, cited in Benthall 2012: 361; Silber 2000). Otherwise, charity – as all gifts – always elicits a return, and can only be experienced as possible when people succeed in convincing themselves and others that they have given without self-interest (e.g. Douglas 1990; Laidlaw 2000; Mauss 1990; Parry 1986). Like practices of 'charity' elsewhere, *pomană* can be approached as a

practice whose analysis reveals the local ideals and tensions that surround the act of giving, and which distinguish giving from sharing, sacrifice, redistribution, and exchange.

*Pomană*, however, does reconfigure charity as both devotion and sacrifice, and is therefore unlike most forms of charity. In defining giving as prayer, *pomană* is a ritual through which the domains of economy and religion are intricately linked. The link between economy and religion is made through rituals related to death, and future research might well foreground the themes of commemoration and social memory. Ethnographic studies of *pomană* based on research conducted in Romania during the 1970s and 1980s have connected *pomană* to an elaborate “cult of the dead”, through which rural cosmology imagined a vividly materialistic life after death, and in which supernatural beings and maleficent forces could harm both the living and the dead, and in which ritual was regularly invoked to manage such potential harm (Kligman 1988; Mesnil and Popova 2002: 109). My data for Moldova, to the contrary, reflects little fear of death, the dead, or maleficent forces which intercede in the relations between the living and the dead, but foregrounds the problem of memory, remembrance, and commemoration as vitally necessary but inherently fragile and fleeting. I briefly address these themes in the conclusion, but maintain the overall focus of the argument on the issue of charity, and how generosity in the face of death provides insight into local economic practices and models.

### **Poverty, Charity, and the Church in Postsocialist Moldova**

The Republic of Moldova became an independent state with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. During the past twenty years, its politics have been most noticeably marked by fierce debates about the country’s national identity. The questions debated include whether ethnic Moldovans and ethnic Romanians constitute a single nation; what the native language spoken by ethnic Moldovans should be called – Moldovan or Romanian; what rights ethnic minorities should have in the domains of public language use, education, and political representation; whether the country should eventually unite with Romania; and how close its ties with Russia and Romania should be (King 2000). Despite the prominence of identity questions in national politics, ethnic relations ‘on the ground’ have been remarkably peaceful, with the exception of two brief armed conflicts in the early 1990s. Analysts have identified several factors that seem responsible for relatively low levels of antagonism and conflict, including: high rates of intermarriage (Fisher 1980); the predominance of ‘pragmatic’ approaches to interethnic and interlinguistic exchanges (de Martonne 1919; Neukirch 1999: 54); evidence of common political views and values (Crowther 1998); and the predominance of Eastern Orthodoxy among all ethnic groups (Chinn and Roper 1998: 90).

In the second decade of independence, however, Moldova’s sharp economic decline has generated greater public concern and international attention than have the politics of ethno-nationalism. During the 1990s, Moldova rapidly became the poorest country in Europe. By 2000, between one-fifth and one-fourth of the country’s population had left for work abroad (OSCE 2003: 9; IOM 2003: 4); in 2009, informal reports and statistics from local administrators indicated that as much as half of the country’s working-age population is actually working abroad. The remittances that Moldova’s migrants send home are substantial; they contribute approximately 1/3 of the country’s GDP, the fourth highest percentage in the world (World Bank 2011). Importantly, a substantial portion of these remittances is spent on food and other basic needs (IOM 2009). During the 1990s, the percentage of individuals who could not afford the ‘minimal consumption

basket' increased until it peaked at just over 90% during 1999–2000 (Laur 2005).<sup>6</sup> Most urbanites with regular salaries can now afford the 'minimal consumption basket', but the situation in rural areas remains bleak. Neither salaried work in agriculture, fishing, forestry, or hunting, nor the farming of private land, is sufficient for bringing rural households across the poverty threshold (Laur 2005; National Bureau of Statistics 2011).

In the midst of both national movements and economic decline, Moldova has also experienced a thorough religious revival. Churches are being renovated, rebuilt, or newly built in nearly every village; and the observance of religious holidays and popular religious practices (including the giving of *pomană*) is steadily expanding. At the institutional level, Moldova's religious revival is partly motivated by the jurisdictional battles between two Orthodox churches. Because Moldova is only a recently created state, there has been no historic autocephalous Moldovan Church. Instead, the Orthodox churches in Moldova have been alternately subordinate to Romania and Russia, following shifts in political dominance.

Since independence, most of Moldova's Orthodox churches have remained subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate as members of the Metropolitan of Moldova. A small number of churches, most of them newly built, have joined the Metropolitan of Bessarabia, which is subordinate to the Patriarchate in Bucharest. Conflicts between the two churches' jurisdictional rights have resulted in legal cases taken before the European Court of Human Rights (Stan and Turcescu 2003), but the conflicts rarely affect parishioners' religious beliefs or practices. Both churches perform the liturgy in Romanian unless the parish is in a minority community. The only perceived difference between the two churches relates to the calendar: the Russian Church continues to use the Julian calendar while the Romanian Church uses the revised Julian calendar. For the most part, parishioners following the Julian calendar do not mind that they celebrate most religious holidays thirteen days later, but they do mind that the Russian Orthodox Church celebrates Christmas on 7 January after the secular New Year holiday. Many people would prefer to celebrate Christmas on 25 December, as does the Romanian Church, before the secular New Year holiday.

Given the historic role of the Orthodox Church in alleviating poverty and suffering, both through the institutionalization of charity and promoting charitable acts by Christian believers (Kizenko 2003; Marker 2003; Thyret 2003; Wagner 2003), one might expect that the religious revival would be accompanied by the emergence of new forms of charity in response to Moldova's stark impoverishment.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, new NGOs and sources for channeling international aid have appeared in urban areas, but few charities have taken root in rural areas where poverty is more acute

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<sup>6</sup> Like many countries, Moldova tracks poverty by calculating a 'minimal consumption basket'. The basic components of the basket were established in 1993 by the Moldova Market and Marketing Institute and the Moldova Research Institute for Preventive and Clinical Medicine of the Ministry for Public Health; the National Bureau of Statistics is responsible for the ongoing calculation of the basket's cost (Laur 2005: 1). The cost of the basket – which comprises set quantities of 46 basic foodstuffs (to a combined total of 2282 kcal per day), utilities, and other basic goods and services – reflects the government's calculation of a minimal individual income necessary for basic health. Different baskets are calculated for gender, age, and rural/urban areas; the baskets calculated for rural areas assume some self-provisioning from private land.

<sup>7</sup> By the 18th century, the Russian population considered charity to be a distinct characteristic of Orthodox Christianity, and also believed that Russians had a 'culture of giving' that distinguished them as especially generous. As Lindenmeyr (1996) notes, this reputation is – to a large degree – an "invented tradition". But, studies of everyday religiosity and religious practice indicate a concern for charity from the middle ages, and pious women and female members of the royal family were, in particular, known for their giving to the poor (Thyret 2003: 163–165). Orthodox teaching and popular opinion, however, approached giving to the poor, needy, sick, and unfortunate as a matter of individual practice. Well into the 19th century, the high value placed on individual acts of charity was not matched by a corresponding development of charitable institutions. Priests and religious orders, however, led the way in establishing hospitals, almshouses, schools, and other charities throughout the 19th century (e.g. Kizenko 2003; Wagner 2003).

(Trombitsky 2006).<sup>8</sup> Rural areas of Moldova, as throughout Russia, also had few active charities in the presocialist period; villages and peasant communes preferred to continue traditional practices for assuring basic levels of survival for all members than to establish formal charities or other costly institutions (Lindenmeyr 1996).<sup>9</sup> Alongside mutual labor and rotating care arrangements, *pomană* helped ensure the basic survival of many villagers. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, starvation was a very real concern in the region that is now called Moldova (Hitchins 1994: 339–341),<sup>10</sup> and gifts of bread to needy households made a significant impact on both giver and recipient.<sup>11</sup> Bread was the most basic food and a richly symbolic component of the “base” of every village house (Gudeman 2008: 28–29). However, neither in the past, nor in the present, has *pomană* been only, or even primarily, ‘charity’. In practice, *pomană* has been connected to a wide variety of communal celebrations and commemorations of various scale; it almost always facilitates the strengthening of existing social ties; and it is also expected to function as prayer and memory. While religious authorities provide an explanation of how *pomană* can simultaneously function as charity, prayer, and memory, most people perceive a conflict between these three roles. In postsocialist rural Moldova, people uncomfortably prioritize *pomană* as memory, even as they claim that it should be charity.

As this brief overview suggests, any investigation of religious practices and beliefs in Moldova, both official and popular, should anticipate similarities with both Romania and Russia as well as divergences from each. In this paper, I have pursued a mixed strategy, giving greater emphasis to ethnographic accounts of *pomană* throughout Romania and prioritizing the institutional history of the Russian Church on the topic of charity. This approach is intended to capture the probable balance of popular practices to official church positions, but it also reflects the greater prominence of historical and anthropological scholarship on Russian to Romanian Orthodoxy. A much wider study of *pomană* would also need to account for its presence in other Orthodox communities in east and southeast Europe.

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<sup>8</sup> As of 2006, Moldova had approximately 4,500 registered NGOs, 3,500 of which are registered at the national level; only 1,000 are international or locally established NGOs. It is impossible to know how many NGOs are actual ‘charities’, as Moldova’s Charity Commission does not make its registry of charities publicly available. The Commission, established in 1997 and modeled after the Charity Commission of England and Wales, has the authority to recognize ‘public benefits organizations’ (i.e. charities), but there are few fiscal incentives for NGOs to undergo this voluntary certification as most NGOs are tax-exempt without the status, and other economic incentives for establishing or supporting a charity as such are poorly developed (Trombitsky 2006; Bourjaily 2004).

<sup>9</sup> The history of charity in Moldova should be similar to that of both Russia and Romania, reflecting the political and cultural influences of both places, but there is little secondary literature available on the history of charity in the Romanian lands. During the early modern period (i.e. throughout the 17th century), the legal status and responsibilities of the Romanian village commune (*obștea sătească*) vis-a-vis villagers and the state were similar to those in Russia, Poland, and Serbia (Costăchel 1957: 82–83). The village commune was responsible for all issues of local governance; it collected the taxes due to the state, adjudicated local crimes, returned fugitives to other communes, and ensured the basic welfare of community members.

<sup>10</sup> In the 1930s, budget studies among peasant households in Romania concluded that landholdings under three hectares were insufficient for supplying a household’s basic food needs (Hitchins 1994: 341). To survive, “households had to limit their consumption of food and be satisfied with inadequate clothing and substandard housing.” (ibid.) This reduction of ‘needs’, was clearly the response of the great majority of peasant households. At the same time, households with landholdings of 3–10 hectares also appear to have had difficulty ‘making ends meet’; though they produced ‘enough’ food for themselves, the costs of doing so outstripped the value of their production. Across interwar Romania, even the 5–20 percent of villagers whose landholdings of 10–50 hectares enabled them to comfortably self-provision usually supplemented their incomes with non-agricultural activities (Hitchins 1994: 339). Although these statistics are given for Romania as a whole, they also applied to the specific territory of today’s Republic of Moldova.

<sup>11</sup> In the decades before the Romanian budget studies cited above, peasant households across Russia gave generously to beggars and needy neighbors; even those with little to eat themselves would not turn a beggar away from their door without having given him a ‘crust’ of their own meager bread. Adele Lindenmeyr (1996: 56) cites one report from a *zemstvo* (district) investigator who calculated that a typical peasant household annually gave away some 500 pounds of bread, plus additional foods. The total monetary value is estimated at only 7.5 rubles, but the quantity itself is remarkable in the number of meals it represents.

## *Pomană* – A Range of Expressions

The Romanian word *pomană* derives from the Slavonic verb поменѣ (*pomen'*) (to remember), which in turn derives from an equivalent Greek verb (Mesnil and Popova 2002: 103). The term is used in Romanian-speaking communities, including the ethnic Moldovan villages in the Republic of Moldova, to refer to a variety of practices. At its broadest level, the term is used to describe the act of giving without the expectation of return. The phrase “*a da de pomană*” (“to give as *pomană*”), for example, covers a range of meanings invoking charity, sacrifice, and an unrequited effort (DEX 1998), thus reflecting a range of sentiments that a person might experience in having given something (valuable) with little or no possibility of an equivalent material return. When used broadly, *pomană* can refer to an almost limitless range of objects (though very often food, drink, or small gifts) that people give, almost as souvenirs of special occasions and times spent together. During fieldwork excursions with local ethnographers, for example, we are often given bread, wine, jams, and similar homemade products ‘to remember’ our visit to a house or village. These gifts are rarely accompanied by the explicit instructions to remember (or pray for) a particular individual, nor are they accompanied by the same verbal formulae that accompany ritual offerings of *pomană*. In many cases, however, hosts call their proffered gifts “*pomană*” to overcome or preempt a guest’s attempt to refuse the gift; *pomană* cannot be refused.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout Romanian speaking communities in Romania and Moldova, *pomană* is used to describe a more specific set of ritual objects or practices. In the southeastern region of Moldova, the most specific usage of the term *pomană* refers to a kind of bread baked only during *Paștile blajinilor* (the Easter of the Dead which is variously celebrated on the Sunday or Monday after Easter Sunday). This bread (see photo 1) is decorated with crosses made of twisted strands of dough and a candle for each deceased member of the family. The tips of the crosses point downward in an expression of sadness and grief. During the religious services in the cemetery held on the Easter of the Dead, the *pomană* is placed with four other breads (*colaci* – i.e. ring-shaped) on the grave to provide nourishment for the dead, while additional *pomană* are distributed throughout the cemetery (see photo 2, next page).

In other regions, the most specific usage of the term does not refer to a particular bread, but to a limited number of holidays when food is shared or exchanged widely throughout a locale. Ștefan Dorondel (2011), for example, describes *pomană* in northwestern Muntenia (southern Romania) as the celebration of *Moșii de Vară* (lit. Summer Ancestors; coincides with Pentecost), a single occasion during the year when households take plates or baskets of food to the households that



Photo 1: *Pomană* baked on Easter of the Dead in southeast Moldova.

<sup>12</sup> Ludmila Cojocari, personal communication, 17 September 2010.



have helped them most with agricultural labor during the course of the year. The exchange of food on this occasion is reciprocal, and Dorondel interprets it as a means for re-affirming and strengthening existing social ties, which in turn contribute to the maintenance of necessary, but informal, economic relationships of mutual aid and support. In the same region, Monica Heintz (2004: 14–15) describes *pomană* as a feast, held in the village churchyard, that is held on three occasions during the year – the most important of which is the church’s *Hram* (Name Day, or Patron Saint’s Day). Just as Dorondel describes, households bring food which they display, share, and exchange with other families during the feast. In both cases, the event serves to reintegrate households into the community.

In both Romania and Moldova, the most common usage of *pomană* is neither at its broadest nor most specific levels. Rather, the term refers universally to the items that are given by mourners on specific occasions related to the commemoration of the dead. During commemoration, mourners take some *pomană* to church as one of three parts of the *jertfă* (sacrifice) that is required for a priest to pray on someone’s behalf, and distribute other *pomană* in the community.<sup>13</sup> The *pomană* given for prayers in church should include bread, wine, oil, wheat (often now given as flour), a small piece of cloth or linen, and a candle. Each of these items has significance: the bread as well as the wheat represent the body of the Savior; the wine represents His blood; the oil serves as a reminder that His body was rubbed with oil. The symbolism of the cloth is less clear, but it is often traditionally held to serve as a reminder that His body was wrapped in cloth.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the candle is included because the Orthodox always pray with light, never in darkness. *Pomană* that is distributed in the community consists of bread, and is normally accompanied by a candle, a piece of cloth (e.g. handkerchief, hand towel, headscarf, or large towel), and sometimes a cup or other dish. More elaborate *pomană* are distributed at funerals.



Photo 2: *Pomană* left on graves during Easter of the Dead.

### The Commemorative Cycles

As in Romania and Bulgaria, *pomană* is given by mourning individuals or families on two commemorative cycles – one for deceased individuals, and the other for all the deceased members of a family (Mesnil and Popova 2002). The cycle of commemoration for a deceased individual in

<sup>13</sup> The other two parts of the sacrifice are a fee paid to the church and ‘something in the priest’s pocket’.

<sup>14</sup> Local ethnographer Ludmila Cojocari (personal communication) notes that the cloth also serves a very practical role in other rituals requiring bread (such as weddings) of keeping one’s soiled hands from touching sacred bread.

Moldova lasts seven years,<sup>15</sup> but the second cycle continues indefinitely. At each commemoration in the first cycle, in addition to graveside rites, the family of the deceased takes *pomană* to the church and holds a feast (*praznic*), at which all guests are given *pomană* (cf. Bernabé 1980: 143–147). The second cycle relates to what Mesnil and Popova describe as a commemoration of ancestors.<sup>16</sup> In this cycle, families commemorate all their deceased members on specific days throughout the year; most notably, Saturdays of the Dead and annual or semi-annual holidays, such as the *pomană* described by Dorondel on *Moșii* and by Heintz on the local church's *hram*. As in the first cycle, family members take *pomană* to the church and hold a small feast at home, at which all guests are given *pomană*.

In a household that fully respected both cycles, commemoration would be nearly continuous, occurring as often as every Saturday. While the first cycle of commemorations for individual dead is universally observed, I found that few households consistently marked the commemorations of the second cycle for a variety of reasons.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the church's stipulations force commemoration into a position of priority over secular schedules. Priests will make prayers for the deceased before the actual calendrical commemoration, but not afterwards. Thus, one can anticipate the commemorative act, but cannot commemorate retroactively. In this way, the church requires people to prioritize commemoration of the dead over other secular responsibilities and desires. At the very least, during the first seven years after a family member's death, a mourning family must plan ahead to cook and attend church services, even if they schedule the commemorative feast in their house for a more convenient time after the official date for commemoration.

### **What is Exchanged with *Pomană*? Bread, memory, and forgiveness**

Church publications and officials do not consider the giving of *pomană* a necessary expression of faith. For the Church, *pomană* is a form of charity that also functions as a form of prayer which is the essence of commemoration (Răducă 1998: 200–203). Priests and religious specialists whom I interviewed explained how charity and prayer are linked through *pomană*. Emanuil Brihuneți – a priest who has held administrative responsibilities within the Moldovan Metropolitan and is also a researcher at the National Museum for Natural History and Ethnography – for example, told me that *pomană* is a *milostenie* (lit. mercy). *Pomană* is “a gift given without the expectation of return”, and “you give it and then you forget that you gave it”. Moreover, the person who has received *pomană* is obligated (*a datorit*) to remember (*a pomeni*) the person who gave it. If he does not remember, then he sins. Similarly, the female *dascal* in Răscăieți, who is responsible for organizing the church choir and for some religious instruction and guidance, explained that *pomană* is best given to someone who cannot return the gift, either the poor or a stranger. Human tendency, she

<sup>15</sup> The observances are all calculated from the day of the death, and occur on the 3rd day (i.e. the funeral), 9th day, 40th day, half year, one year, and subsequent annual observances through the 7th year. In some villages, the 20th day is also observed, but this is according to local tradition, not church teachings. The church explains the significance of these dates in both physical and spiritual terms that have to do with the body's decomposition and the spirit's ascent into heaven.

<sup>16</sup> The term “ancestors” is misleading if applied to Moldova because the living rarely commemorate anyone older, or more distantly related to them, than their own parents. Commemoration is thus very much conducted within the line of the nuclear family, including deceased parents, spouses, and children.

<sup>17</sup> With the exception of major holidays like Easter of the Dead, the second cycle of commemorations is observed haphazardly depending on whether the female head of the household wants to observe the commemoration; is able to undertake the additional cooking and baking necessary; and whether or not she participates in the church service. Other holidays (such as name days) sometimes serve as substitute occasions for commemoration if a household has missed one of the Church-set dates.

said, is towards reciprocity, “if you give *pomană* to someone who can give it back to you, he will; one day you eat at my house, but the next day I eat at your house.” *Pomană* given to someone who cannot return it is thus especially efficacious because it helps the body and the soul of the recipient who – being poor or away from home – certainly needs food, and the sincerity of the recipient’s thankfulness and prayers actually help his own soul and that of the deceased.

Although *pomană* is most often described as a ‘free gift’, it clearly embodies several types of exchange. On one level, the objects given as *pomană* are ultimately meant to reach the deceased. In some cases, *pomană* is meant to reach the deceased in its material form; the best example of this appears when there is no clear living recipient for the gift, as when *pomană* is left on graves. Ethnographic material drawn from Romania reflects a particularly high degree of concern for the material needs of the dead, and Mesnil and Popova have concluded that

“at the base of this system of ‘transfers’ [from the giver to a third person], exists the belief in a veritable ‘transubstantiation’ of those objects from which the living who receive them benefit, while the dead enjoy them.” (Mesnil and Popova 2002: 104, my translation)

My ethnographic material from southeastern Moldova reflects a much lower degree of concern for the material needs of the dead, however, and the deceased are rarely described as ‘enjoying’ any of the *pomană* that their family members offer. Instead, *pomană* as I found it being offered involves several simultaneous exchanges, enacted through the transformation of *pomană* (as an object) into a series of actions linked to remembering (*a pomeni*).

Barraud et al. (1994) have argued that most anthropological analyses of exchange have over-focused on the relations between the “nouns” of exchange at the expense of the “verbs” of exchanging. The result, they claimed, is that the relations between the giver, the object, and the receiver have been well documented and theorized, but what *happens* in exchange, and what exchange is able to effect, are far less clear. This critique is particularly apt for understanding the exchanges involved in the giving and receipt of *pomană*, because the possibility of exchanging bread for the forgiveness of sins rests on the transmission of memory between several actors.

In the giving of *pomană*, the objects given perpetuate a cycle of remembrance, prayer, and ongoing commemoration. The verb *a pomeni* (to remember, to remind, to call to mind, and to commemorate) is marked by the sense that remembering is a temporary and fleeting experience, and that memory is neither enduring nor permanent. When *pomană* is given, remembrance is initiated by the giver, who first remembers his or her deceased family member; the act of remembering is then transferred with the gift, to the recipient, who should further continue the cycle of remembrance in prayer which turns God’s attention, very briefly, to the deceased person. The effects of prayer are incremental, and prayer and remembrance (with or without the tangible distribution of *pomană*) must be continuous for the full forgiveness of sins to be effected (cf. Mahmood 2005). In this account of *pomană*, there is thus a double, or even triple, exchange; the first exchange occurs at the material level, in which a needy person receives necessary bread; the second exchange broaches the division between the material and spiritual realms through the needy person’s prayers to God; and the third exchange occurs in the spiritual realm between God and the deceased.

If all three exchanges are transacted, then the original gift of *pomană* is returned as intended. Bread is exchanged for the forgiveness of another’s sins. In an ideal exchange, *pomană* simultaneously, diachronically, and synchronically fulfills the bodily and spiritual needs of

individuals, families, and communities. But this chain of exchanges is fragile and uncertain, and if either the needy person or God fail to make their expected return, then the original gift does become ‘free’. It represents a material loss for the giver that has produced no spiritual compensation for anyone. The evidence from fieldwork – self-ascriptions of moral weakness and decline, piles of uneaten bread at church, and the distribution of *pomană* to close friends and family – suggests that the full chain of exchanges is only rarely, if ever, completed. Indeed, informants justified their preference for giving the major *pomană* associated with funerals to close friends and relatives by explaining that the *nepoți* (grandchildren, nieces, and nephews) will remember the deceased while strangers will not.

### ***Pomană* in the Past – Early 20th Century Ethnography**

Based on informants’ statements about past practices of *pomană*, I initially thought that older ethnographic accounts might reveal it to have been a clear example of the kind of mechanism found in other rural areas for addressing the needs of the poor and unfortunate without the establishment of formal charities. Although practices related to the altruistic distribution of food, especially bread, often prevented starvation in rural areas of Romania and the Russian Empire, there is no evidence that *pomană* was ever given exclusively or primarily as a form of charity. Rather, past practices seem to have been as varied as those of the present.

Two Romanian ethnographers, Simion Florea Marian and Tudor Pamfile, published between them five volumes covering the traditional celebrations found across Romania at the turn of the 20th century. In these volumes, *pomană* is mentioned repeatedly, and its significance clearly shifts in relation to other elements of a celebration. In his attention to the connection between popular customs and the liturgical cycle, Marian (2001 [1898, 1899, 1901]) finds numerous examples of *pomană* that was taken into church, especially on saints days. He notes the minor variations in its components to reflect the connections to the particular celebration. In contrast, Pamfile’s (1997) examples are more restricted,<sup>18</sup> but also more richly detailed in processual and social terms. For example, Pamfile describes how *pomană* was used to end the New Year’s masquerade undertaken by village bachelors. After wending their way through the village, performing vignettes involving stock figures at each house, the group’s final performance ends with the figure of an Ottoman Turk being shot and falling to his death; the figure of the priest refuses to perform Christian burial services until the other characters convince him otherwise; and the Turk is then carried back to his house, where the female head of house is organizing, with the help of village girls, a *pomană*. Each girl has brought food, which is spread out for all to eat on a table; after the meal, the girls disperse and the mummies change out of their clothes (Pamfile 1997: 375). In this case, it is clear that *pomană*, as the ritual funeral feast, is merely a device used to bring closure to another ritual. Similarly, Pamfile refers to the communal meal and gifts of meat given to people who help slaughter a pig as *pomană*, indicating a widespread understanding of the term as a collective meal occasioned by a death – either real or fictitious, of a human or of an animal. But, importantly, it is also a meal that recognizes – at some level – that the hosting household depends on the good will, help, and material support of others to provide the party at all.

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<sup>18</sup> The 1997 publication reproduces three volumes that were originally published separately as *Sărbătorile de vară la români* (1911), *Sărbătorile la Români. Sărbătorile de toamnă și Postul Crăciunului* (1914), and *Crăciunul* (1914). All three were published by multiple publishers including Otto Harrassowicz: Leipzig.

Pamfile (1997) also describes the flow of *pomană* between households on the Saturday before Pentecost (*Duminica Mare*) as a festival of movement and exchange. While all Saturdays are considered appropriate days for giving *pomană*, this particular Saturday is the most important, and is referred to under a variety of traditional names including *Moșii de Vară* and *Moșii de Rusalii* (ibid.: 18). In the Romanian province of Moldova, housewives filled newly purchased dishes with various foods (soups, rice boiled in milk), wine, or water, decorated them with flowers and breads, and took them to “all their relatives, and all their neighbors,” (ibid.) from whom they also received *pomană*. The distribution and exchange of dishes could last for up to three days, and anyone going to another village during this time almost certainly traveled with *pomană* to distribute. So extensive was the exchange that Pamfile says that households rarely buy new dishes for themselves, and that an expression exists to the effect that one can wait until the next *Moșii* to receive something that one needs or wants.

In his description of the various kinds of *pomană*, Pamfile provides some insight into their economic role. He tells us, for example, that some offerings are more or less expensive and more or less beautifully adorned, depending on the giver’s means. But he gives no sustained or overt attention to how *pomană* intersect with levels of greater and lesser poverty, even though he records evidence that in some regions *pomană* was specifically given to the poor. For example, he describes how during the advent to Christmas the poor gathered at churches in some parts of Ardeal (Transylvania) to receive bread given as *pomană*. Those who came to the church did not just eat the food that was offered, but brought special bags with them for collecting and carrying home several gifts of bread (ibid.: 393). In another note in passing, Pamfile notes that poor families received “bigger pots of milk and trays of cheese” during the grand exchange of *Moșii de Vară* in the district of Câmpulung (ibid.: 19). And in some areas, households with small children were especially targeted for the giving, although it is not clear whether the *pomană* were given more as novelties for the children or as vitally needed food for a young family.

In comparison to Pamfile’s descriptions, Marian’s attention to the economic dimensions of *pomană* in the late 1800s is even more restricted, though he does note that *pomeni* and *pomi* (small trees or branches hung with bread, sweets, cloth, and other offerings) were taken into church in some areas of Bukovina on the Thursday before Easter, and doubled as commemoration and as payment to the priest for the performance of the liturgy (2001 [1899]: 195). Although he recounts the story of St. Toader feeding poor Christians under attack, Marian says nothing about the use of *pomană* to feed village poor at the turn of the 20th century (ibid.: 50).

In short, Marian’s and Pamfile’s accounts indicate that in the past, as in the present, *pomană* was regularly taken to church for the poor, but that most gifts of *pomană* were made as gifts or reciprocal exchanges between neighbors and friends. Although it served as a device for the commemoration of the dead, *pomană* also enabled the living to provide each other with small gifts of food and crockery, to enjoy each other’s company, and to reaffirm social ties, including relations of interdependence and mutual assistance. In other words, *pomană* of the past functioned very much like *pomană* in the present.

### ***Pomană* in the Present – Charity or Memory?**

Although all discussions of *pomană* that I recorded tended to bring up the contrast between the ideals of charity and actual practices that favored remembrance, the contrast crystallized around the

issue of funerals. The distribution of *pomană* at funerals is the most elaborate and expensive of that given at any point in either of the two commemorative cycles. In addition to the ordinary combination of items that is taken into church as *pomană*, cloth, clothing, food and wine, household goods, and even small livestock are given away on the route from the deceased person's house to the cemetery. Twenty-four *pomană* called *poduri* (bridges) are given away as the coffin passes crossroads, bridges, and wells.<sup>19</sup> Most mourners receive and wear a piece of cloth (in recognition of their role as 'helpers'); cloth that is tied to the stands of church banners and to the door of the house is also given away; gravediggers receive *pomană* in the form of dishes filled with cookies and some money (as well as bigger pieces of cloth); and everyone who comes to the house following the funeral is invited to eat (and must taste each dish that is offered) and then given a large chunk of bread, if not a whole ring, to take home. Drinks of water and wine are also offered to anyone encountered on the path to the cemetery.

The observer has the impression during a funeral that the house of the deceased person is being emptied entirely of its contents. Yet, everything given away at a funeral is expected to be new, so the distribution of goods is also a dazzling display of wealth and plenty. People often collect the items of cloth and clothing to be given away at their funeral over the course of their lifetime. In the past, these items were stored in large wooden trunks.<sup>20</sup> Although the practice is said to be in decline, funeral costs are still substantially lowered by distributing goods that have been stored up over time. At a funeral I attended in January 2010, for example, the small white headscarf I received was printed with a design that had been popular some thirty years earlier.

Funeral processions, like those of weddings, are structured to anticipate the possibility that the procession will meet 'strangers' en route. In both cases, strangers are expected to make demands for payment or gifts which must be met. In the fall of 2009, for example, I had accompanied two wedding parties on their return from the church; both had been accosted by children and Gypsy families to whom they had thrown coins.<sup>21</sup> At a funeral I attended in January 2010, however, I was surprised to discover that the funeral procession was not met by any strangers, even though the route was nearly identical to that taken by the two wedding parties. Another funeral procession that I accompanied on a longer route through the busy administrative center of the village did meet strangers, but these individuals hurriedly veered out of the procession's path and did not demand (or accept) the *pomană* to which they were ritually entitled. In both funerals, like the many others that my informants told me about, all 24 *poduri* had been predesignated for family, friends, and neighbors who attended the funeral. Mourners did not anticipate giving the *pomană* as charity, and it would have been difficult for them to do so, even if they had attempted it.

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<sup>19</sup> In my fieldsite the name is interpreted as a literal reference to the kinds of places where the *pomană* must be distributed; elsewhere in Romania these locations have greater symbolism as points of crossing into the spirit world, and as points where maleficent forces may attempt to interrupt the progress of the deceased; the water in wells and under bridges is a powerful conduit of both positive and negative forces (cf. Dorondel 2004). Four of the twenty-four *poduri* distributed on the way to the cemetery are considered very costly items. The first *pod* is a carpet, given away at the doorway to the house. The second is the *masă* (table), given at the gates of the house; a real table is covered with a tablecloth and set with four places, and two chairs; hot food is served in the dishes (so that it reaches the deceased); and a *colac* (ring shaped bread) is placed at every corner. The third *pod*, also consisting of household items, is given at the gates of the church, and the fourth *pod* – a duvet and pillow – is given at the burial site. Each of these four major items is accompanied by bread. The other 20 *poduri* consist of two large ring-shaped breads with a bit of cloth and a glass of wine.

<sup>20</sup> When people talked about how individuals collected and saved the items to be given away at their funerals, they also engaged with an imagination of an economy in which people were very frugal; they gave, stored, and gave away again, apparently using very few of the items that they ever received or purchased.

<sup>21</sup> I use the term Gypsy instead of Roma because the Gypsy families in this village do not self-identify as Roma, nor do they speak Romani.

When I asked questions about the distribution of *pomană* during funerals, people explained the predesignation of gifts primarily in terms of cost. In 2009–2010, a funeral of middling quality ranged in cost from 7 to 10 thousand lei (435–625 €). This sum covers the cost of a coffin, payment to the priest, and the remaining *pomană* that have to be purchased. In fact, the majority of the cost rests with the *pomană*,<sup>22</sup> as the coffins used in rural areas are simple wooden boxes constructed from local materials and the fees requested by priests are nominal. Some of this reported sum also covers the cost of the funeral feast, but most of the food for the feast is prepared from the family's reserves and supplemented by donations from family and neighbors. While the costs are quite low by other European standards, they represent a significant sum for the deceased's family, all the more so because the full cost of bread given as *pomană* (more than 30 large rings) and food prepared for the funeral feast remains uncalculated, largely because family members and neighbors bake and cook from their household reserves. This sum also does not include the several large expenditures that must be made at least five times within the first year of the commemorative cycle, covering feasts, gifts for the pallbearers, *pomană*, and the redecoration of at least one room in the deceased's house.

Informants explain that these high costs are part of the reason that they give *poduri* in ways that they remain within the family's closest circle of friends, neighbors, and relatives. For example, when my hosts organized the funeral for their neighbor (a widower with no children), they gave one of their own tables (not quite new) set with new dishes to their university-aged son. I initially thought that they might have given these items for his future house, but my hosts explained that since their son is still unmarried, the entire *pomană* actually returned to them. Two of the other three major *poduri* were given to their 3-year old granddaughter and their marital godmother; the third was given to a very close neighbor who was also the daughter of the deceased's marital godparents. In some instances, families give to their closest friends in order to circumvent the problem of purchasing new goods. Although it could theoretically be used to transmit inheritance, I did not collect any examples of this happening; in any case, the transfer would be necessarily limited to the standard items of carpets, linens, dishes, and furniture. More frequently, giving to the closest is seen as a way of economizing when the high costs associated with hosting a funeral simply cannot be avoided. The cost of the gift is offset by its transformation into an item that is 'needed' by a close relation, or even oneself – much like Pamfile's (1997: 18) description of the distribution of new crockery on *Moșii*. Other families told of similar arrangements that allowed them to, quite literally, "keep while giving" (Weiner 1992).

### **Communities of Memory**

Both church officials and ordinary people agree that *pomană* should be charity. It should be given freely, without any expectation of return, and forgotten once given. And, it should be given to those least able to return it – specifically the poor and strangers. But, *pomană* rarely is charity. People think that it was so in the past, envisioning villagers before the Soviet era as being more religious, more frugal, and more generous. And as the preceding examples suggest, they present a variety of justifications for their actual practices to explain their deviance from church teachings (e.g. that

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<sup>22</sup> Although few middle-aged individuals report deliberately reserving cloth, clothing, or dishes for their funeral, many people nevertheless have a reserve of cloth items that they have received as *pomană* and have not turned to immediate use.

funeral costs would be too high if they actually gave away all the new items that they are supposed to) and to show how they nevertheless ensure that remembrance occurs even without the distribution of charity (e.g. by giving to grandchildren). Villagers claim to be struck by the apparent inconsistencies in economic decisions and ritual behaviours that are manifest in the giving of *pomană*. How can the giving of *pomană* increase, and that given at funerals become more lavish, while families increasingly rely on migrant labor to cover living costs? How can the village feed hospitals, orphanages, and the elderly elsewhere, but not take care of the less fortunate in their midst?

At first glance, the ‘failure’ of *pomană* to be used as charity might appear to be a problem related to people’s understandings of, or adherence to, church teachings. Indeed, villagers and priests alike often suggest that this is the primary problem. Not only have people become ‘less good’ because they prefer to help their close relations, but they are reluctant to identify themselves or others, as ‘poor’ or ‘needy’.<sup>23</sup> Yet Church teachings on charity and other forms of social justice are actually comparatively scarce. In Moldova, priests admit that the jurisdictional battle between the Russian and Romanian Orthodox Churches has reduced the resources available to both churches for responding to new social problems. Even in Russia, however, the Russian Orthodox Church has not encouraged a self-reflexive discourse on the ethics of almsgiving and charity during the postsocialist period and cites historical precedent and theological arguments to officially distance itself from the explicit concern for social justice that characterizes other Christian denominations (Tocheva 2011; Köllner 2012).<sup>24</sup> This distance has enabled many neo-Protestant churches to build congregations throughout the former Soviet Union precisely through the development of new forms of charity, social engagement, and public outreach that address the specific needs of postsocialist society (Caldwell 2004). In contrast, the Orthodox Church encourages the revival and extension of religious practices with the argument that such revival will return morality and social unity to local communities and the nation (cf. Benovska-Sabkova et al. 2010).

Instead, the apparent failure to use *pomană* as charity must be explained in other terms, beginning with the recognition that some *pomană* really is given as charity: the stacks of bread taken to church on Saturdays of the Dead and other major commemorations are taken to real strangers who are perceived as particularly needy and ‘hungry’. At least one informant also told me of taking *pomană* to an Orthodox church in London while her husband was there for a conference that coincided with one of the scheduled commemorations of his grandmother’s death. This, she pointed out, was really charity; not only was it a substantial expense for them to offer the *pomană*, but they would never know the recipients. Their *pomană* was a gift freely given, all the more symbolic because it inverted national poverty lines; ‘poor’ Moldovans provided charity to the needy in wealthy Britain.

In practice, villagers distinguish their role from that of the church in the distribution of *pomană*. They give most responsibility for charity to the church; while they ensure the remembrance of the deceased. Both church and villagers, however, collude in relocating ‘real’ poverty and need outside the village. In this respect, the giving of *pomană* is one more ritual of self-sufficiency (Cash forthcoming a, b). When no poor within the village appear before mourners or in church to receive the food, clothing, and dishes, which are offered up in remembrance, then the emphasis of the ritual

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Köllner 2012 on shame and modesty.

<sup>24</sup> During the Tsarist period, the Russian Orthodox Church placed a disproportionately high value on individual acts of charity in comparison to its much lower attention for developing charitable institutions or engaging in social critique of structural inequalities and social injustice (see Kizenko 2003; Marker 2003; Thyret 2003).



shifts entirely to memory. Gifts of *pomană* commemorate the deceased and the community's own past, remembered as poorer and more pious than in the present.

### The Economy and Ritual of Poverty and Charity

Other anthropologists who have attempted to study collective memory in Moldova have found the task particularly difficult, and have suggested that the severity of political, social, and economic traumas of the 20th century have made people unwilling or unable to articulate historically conscious narratives of themselves and their communities (Cojocari 2007; Demirdirek 1999, 2000). The exception appears to occur in public memorial services for fallen soldiers and the memorials erected to them, where people do spontaneously articulate alternative narratives to those that appear in official state historiographies, and around which local identities coalesce (Cojocari 2007; Popa 2009). As in other ethnic Romanian communities (Kligman 1988), rituals related to death are awarded priority over other “frameworks of memory” (Halbwachs 1992) as a means for defining and re-binding communities of the living.<sup>25</sup>

It is tempting, therefore, to follow the shift in meaning from charity to commemoration that people themselves make in the distribution of *pomană*, and to conclude that the ritual's importance rests entirely outside the economic domain. Certainly, *pomană* and other rituals related to death can be examined for the ways in which they engender memory but also severely restrict it. The rituals of collective memory record little other than individual names, uttered by priests and close relatives for a few decades, rarely reaching beyond three generations.<sup>26</sup> Even at memorial feasts, whether at the funeral or in the seven-year cycle of commemoration, participants rarely tell stories, jokes, or anecdotes about the individual in whose name the feast is held. Silence during the meal is preferred, and the toasts given to begin and punctuate the meal are similarly limited to verbal formulae requesting God's forgiveness.<sup>27</sup> In this context, memories of the deceased remain highly personalized and contingent on individual relationships. Commemoration binds the community, but in highly fractured combinations of individual social networks centered, not on the deceased, but on the living. The experience of community, like memory, is fragile and fleeting. Yet is there a way to bring the theme of commemoration back into dialogue with charity? Do ideas about the fragility of memory and community also help to understand local perceptions of economy?

As a form of charity, however incomplete, *pomană* draws attention to the dynamic tension between economy and ritual at several levels (Gudeman and Hann 2010: 58–59). At one level, *pomană* is an example of a ritual that has changed in relation to the recent economic changes that

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<sup>25</sup> The emphases placed on a popular “cult of the dead” in Romania (e.g. Kligman 1988) and on the continuity of pre-Christian practices in Russia (Kaiser 2003) have tended to obscure the interface of official and popular Orthodoxy. Even official Orthodoxy interprets salvation as a (long) journey towards union with God, in which progress is made through individual practices (including prayer to saints for help and intercession, as well as prayers made by others on one's behalf). Since this journey is understood to continue even after death, prayers from the living for the dead help the deceased to continue drawing closer to God (Fairbairn 2002: 91–92). The discussions I found surrounding death and funerary rituals are much closer to what Thomas Tentler (2003: 270) has called “logical derivatives of orthodox doctrines”, rather than evidence of an alternate, pre-Christian or pagan view of death and afterlife. Even where the practices suggest the existence of such views, people strive to present their beliefs in alignment with church teachings or, at least, a secular logic (cf. Dorondel 2004: 71).

<sup>26</sup> As the giver of *pomană* hands it to the recipient, the giver explains in whose memory it is given. There are only a few variations on what is said. The most common wording I encountered in my fieldwork is “*pentru sufletul lui ...*” (for the soul of (name)). The recipient kisses the bread as he receives it, and responds, “*Dumnezeu să-l ierte*” (God forgive him), “*Dumnezeu să o ierte*” (God forgive her), or “*Bodaproste*” (God forgive).

<sup>27</sup> Before initiating a drink, the mourner says of the deceased, “*Dumnezeu să o/l ierte,*” and guests respond by repeating the same phrase, “*Dă-i Doamne*” (fig. Mary, let it be so), or similarly formulaic requests for forgiveness.

have accompanied postsocialism. During the postsocialist period, the practice of giving *pomană* has generally increased; the church's redistribution of *pomană* reflects changes in the social groups and institutions that are considered needy; and direct gifts of *pomană* within the village are increasingly given to close family members and friends. None of these three correlations reflects a direct equation in which increased economic hardship reduces ritual activity; nor do any of the three reflect an inverse equation in which increased economic hardship produces ritual efflorescence. Rather, in each of the three cases, the ritual giving of *pomană* involves the reconfiguration of economy itself, thus revealing a second level of tension between economy and ritual, when the two domains are mutually constitutive. At this level, *pomană* redefines poverty and need in ways that raise the material and social status of all villagers vis-à-vis the institutionalized poor, sick, unfortunate, and orphaned outside of the village (see also Cash forthcoming a).

At a third level, *pomană* also provides an example of the tension that arises from economy's position as one ritualized domain of activity among many others in human social life. The common explanation, given by villagers and priests alike, that *pomană* should be charity rests on the possibility that a ritual can be converted into an economic act. Or, rather, as the expanded explanation of how a gift of *pomană* is 'returned' makes clear, all operations of 'exchange' are rituals. Through *pomană*, economy becomes embedded in social relations on temporal and atemporal planes, between humans and with the divine or supernatural. A gift of *pomană* embeds multiple rituals related to gifts, prayer, memory, commemoration, and penance, which operate on the living and the dead, individuals and their close acquaintances, close social circles and strangers, the local community and the nation, the nation and the Christian fellowship. In *pomană*, the domain of human affairs that can be considered 'economic' shrinks to a set of rituals that is only meaningful at its point of assimilation with prayer, memory, commemoration, and penance. Thus, *pomană* points directly to the tensions surrounding the practical and theoretical difficulties of defining an economic domain that is distinct from 'ritual' and independent from other arenas of social life, all of which have some ritual dimensions. Despite the vision of social life as fully embedded in ritual that *pomană* makes possible, Moldova's villagers nevertheless repeatedly make distinctions between prayer and charity, the religious and the economic, their close acquaintances and needy strangers.

Finally, on a fourth level, the ritual of *pomană* also provides an illustration of what Stephen Gudeman (2008) has described as economy's basic 'tension' between principles of interdependence and autonomy. Gudeman distinguishes different levels of economy (i.e. house, community, market, and finance) in terms of the emphasis placed on mutuality relative to self-interest, calculation, and competition. At the levels of house and community, principles of interdependence dominate, while the levels of market and finance are marked by those of autonomy. Yet Gudeman argues that mutuality is crucial to all levels of economy, because it "provides the rules and norms" (2008: 27), even when its importance is unrecognized or denied. Economy's basic tension therefore consists in the alternating importance of mutuality and autonomy in economic activity, as well as social practices (including rituals) that facilitate the misrecognition or denial of the importance of one or the other principle. The narrative of moral decline, which prompted my investigation into *pomană*'s historic role as charity, is one such example of how the ritual of *pomană* itself contributes to distinguishing kinds and forms of economic behavior. Charity, a form of behavior that is defined by the absolute absence of self-

interest and the exclusive presence of mutuality is imagined as theoretically possible through *pomană* in the past, even though it is recognized as impossible to achieve in present practice.

Interestingly, even as villagers attempt to subvert their practices of giving *pomană* to a maximizing logic, they fail. Funeral costs are socially set at a level that requires all households to extend beyond their own resources. Even if their existing reserves enable them to build a coffin from locally available planks (and this village has two small forests that are regularly combed for wood), cook all of the food for the feasts, bake all of the bread for *pomană*, and give away items that they have stored up over the years, they are still expected to spend an average of about 500 € in cash on a funeral, and much more in the seven years that follow a funeral. As with wedding costs, funeral costs have inflated over time to remain just out of reach for a household's normal budget. The cost is set at a level lower than the market value of all the items that must be distributed, but higher than a level that could reasonably be saved or diverted from ordinary sources of income. Families must therefore find ways to lower their costs to within the socially acceptable range of expenditure; and they must quickly access and spend the right amount of cash. They must combine work, debt, mutual aid, and the reduction of their own consumption to properly commemorate the dead. In giving *pomană*, self-interest becomes subverted to social norms that are heavily influenced by Orthodox visions of the extreme temporality of material wealth and earthly existence, even as the Church claims little influence over the practice. The meaning of all forms of economic activity is subtly shifted through this ritual, so that making a living occurs perpetually in the midst of death.

### **Conclusion: charity, prayer, or memory – tensions of community**

The preceding pages have shown several of the questions prompted by the expansion of popular religious practices, and specifically of *pomană*, during the first two decades of postsocialism in Moldova. The expansion of popular religious practices has occurred during a period of overall religious revival, which has, in turn, intersected with a strong ethno-national movement and jurisdictional battles between two competing Orthodox churches. The religious revival has also coincided with a period of stark economic decline, felt most strongly in the deep impoverishment of rural areas. The coincidence of all these currents of change has resulted in a series of contradictions perceived by villagers and anthropologist alike: the expansion of the practice of giving *pomană*, which historically helped to forestall some of the worst effects of poverty, has had little impact on contemporary poverty. While villagers take ever-increasing stacks of bread to the church, they also leave in increasing numbers to work abroad and support their families. *Pomană* is described as charity, but it is most often given to close relatives and friends.

These contradictions reveal tensions within the community over the balance of autonomy and mutuality that individuals and houses want to recognize. When people shift their practice of *pomană* to memory over charity, they deny one equation of mutuality and interdependence (articulated in economic, social, and spiritual terms) in favor of another. Yet, the tension still remains. In rural Moldova, despite strong ideals of self-sufficiency, individuals and houses depend deeply on their social relations with others for material well-being, sociability, identity, and respect, but – particularly in the context of long-term historical poverty, political instability, and recent economic uncertainty – these social relations are also fragile and fleeting. *Pomană*, whether offered as charity, prayer, or memory, counters this process of social fracturing through the invocation of religious idioms.

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