

# **ISFNR COMMITTEE ON CHARMS, CHARMERS AND CHARMING CONFERENCE “SYNCRETIC ELEMENTS IN THE PROCESS OF CHARMING”, BUCHAREST, ROMANIA, SEPTEMBER 24<sup>TH</sup>–26<sup>TH</sup>, 2025**

Held in Bucharest between 24 and 26 September 2025, the conference “Syncretic Elements in the Process of Charming” convened scholars from over a dozen countries to explore the constitutive elements in the construction of charms and the performative processes of charming. Organized by the ISFNR Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming, as the 17<sup>th</sup> conference, in collaboration with the “Constantin Brăiloiu” Institute of Ethnography and Folklore and the “Iorgu Iordan – Alexandru Rosetti” Institute of Linguistics, the event invited researchers to “investigate the syncretic features of charms, as they manifest both in the actual processes of charming and in their reflections as documents preserved in archives” (call for papers), across three days of panels chaired by prominent scholars such as Mare Kõiva, Jonathan Roper, and others.

The conference opened with Emanuela Timotin’s introductory paper on Romanian linguistic contributions to charm studies, setting the stage for the discussions on Romania’s long-standing engagement with charm scholarship. Daniela Răuțu, Oana Niculescu, and Carmen Radu’s presentation discussed the charms identified among the documents from the Phonographic Archive of the Romanian Language (AFLR), founded in 1958 within the Centre for Phonetic and Dialectal Research in Bucharest, which has become part of the Institute of Linguistics. Mihaela Nubert-Chețan’s study investigated recordings of incantations from southern Romania, performed by young girls, focusing on the formal structure, rhythmic articulation, and musicalized chanting. In the second part of the session, Anca Maria Vrăjitoriu examined the meaning of plants as ritual props in Romanian charms. Based on fieldwork conducted between 1987 and 2019, Kira Sadoja’s paper examined the use of magical objects in East Slavic healing rituals in the Ukrainian Carpathians, performed by folk healers (*znakhari*) alongside incantations.

Over the following two days, participants explored the structure of charms and particularities of charming within distant cultural traditions. Papers examined the composite nature of charming in rural North India, as it manifests in three domains – oral performance, material scenography, and scribal culture – (Nidhi Matur), the structure, symbolism, and linguistic characteristics of Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian magic formulae, which have been recorded since the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Andrey Toporkov), the Belarusian manuscript tradition of charms as an intermediary form between oral and written culture (Tatiana Valodzina), and the historical sources that reference and describe charms within the territory of modern Latvia, noting their use and performance not only by Latvians but also by members of other cultural and linguistic groups (Aigars Lielbardiš). The Armenian corpus received particular attention, with Davit Ghazaryan analyzing amulet scrolls with a focus on a scroll written in Bulgaria in 1752, consisting of 46 prayers, and discovered in the National Archives of Romania.

Davor Nikolić's presentation discussed how the textual complexity of charms (multi-layered intratextual and intertextual connections) has been approached in the most relevant scholarly work. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Lithuania and among the Lithuanian community from Belarus, as well as archival and published folklore sources, Daiva Vaitkevičienė's paper explored the symbolic, material, and functional roles of water in Lithuanian verbal charm practices, focusing on their syncretic nature and ritual dynamics.

Beyond the textual and musical investigation, the conference also enjoyed the analysis of audiovisual materials through the screening of the film *Pusul cinstelor*, from the Multimedia Folkloric Archives of the "Constantin Brăiloiu" Institute of Ethnography and Folklore. The document-film, presented by Sabina Ispas, was made in Hunedoara, Romania, in 1978, and subsequently updated with color sequences in 1997, and it presents the performing of a healing charm. Florența Popescu Simion presented a project of the same institution – *Sânzienele, Drăgaica – manifestări și practici în context național și european* (*Sânzienele, Drăgaica* – manifestations and practices in the national and European context). Contributions from Victoria Arakelova, Yaich Aisha, and Sandrine Bessis expanded the geographic scope to the South Caspian Contact Zone (Yezidis and Talishis), Late Medieval England, and the South Pacific, exploring the use of protective or veterinary charms as a means of safeguarding livestock, or as revealers of social status, and tracing historical charms within the Geomyth of Kuwae, Vanuatu.

During the first session of the third day, Laura Jiga Iliescu presented her work on the Mother of God's figure, in her capacity as an active character of the narrative plot in Romanian charms, emphasizing that the very nature of her involvement in the reparatory process is meaningful regarding the manner she is assumed, especially by woman, as their mistress and model. Mare Kõiva discussed archival texts and fieldwork materials, comparing Estonian (Finno-Ugric) data with each other and with data from Slavic and various European peoples, in order to address one of the parallels between Estonian and Baltic Finnic ethnic groups in the field of traditional word magic – the beliefs and practices of healing people and animals from a distance by means of charms and prayers. Luka Šešo's presentation focused on manuscript records of folk culture from late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Croatia, that describe magical practices and charms, arguing that the Croatian material proves more fluid boundaries compared to Julio Caro Baroja's four models of religious/magical efficacy, with clear distinctions between religion and magic. Using sociolinguistic interpretation, textual and rhetorical analysis, and cultural hermeneutics in an attempt to distinguish between innovative and traditional discursive strategies and staging practices, Cristian Gașpar's presentation explored an imprecatory text produced, disseminated, and recorded in 2022 in Lugoj, Romania.

One of the final day's sessions brought attention to prominent figures as charm collectors like John James Lyons, a Philadelphia-based scholar born in Ireland, collector of oral prayers, folklore, and charms, among the members of the Irish immigrants living in Pennsylvania (Nicholas Wolf), and Otto Räsänen, school-teacher and award-winning folklore collector from Tuusniemi, Finland (Ilona Tuomi), or Vladimir Dodig Trokut, artist and co-founder of the Anti-Museum from Zagreb, Croatia, where numerous items used for diagnosing and treating illnesses from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day can be found (Suzana Marjanić). Within the same session, Maria Troshchilo, presented a handwritten notebook with a collection of verbal charms, discovered in 2024 during field research conducted under the auspices of the "Propp Center" NGO in the Pinezhsky district of Arkhangelsk Russian region.

Based on materials from the electronic archive Russian Everyday Life, collected in northern Russia since the 1980s, Liubov Golubeva and Sofia Kupriyanova explored the performers, scenography, and props involved in the ritual of the physical and symbolic inclusion of the newborn into the family and the structure of ancestral relationships. Also based on field research, Tünde Komáromi's paper investigated the

complex materiality of the agents of charming/bewitchment in the Arieș river valley from Transylvania, Romania, with a special focus on their syncretic nature and the problematic demarcation of the magical from the religious, comparing the results of the research with earlier ethnographic studies on magic and the witch trials from in the same region.

Danilo Trbojević and Mladen Stajić's presentation, based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in rural communities across Serbia, explored how traditional ways of interpreting reality through a magical perspective persist and adapt within contemporary village life, while Inna Veselova's closing paper explored the magical use of technologies, objects, genres, and media that preserved the archaic forms symbolically called *plus quam perfectum*.

During the conference, the participants had the opportunity to visit the archives of the two organizing institutes. The Bucharest meeting thus reaffirmed the ISFNR Committee's crucial role in shaping an integrated field of charm studies.

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