

# Valeriu Lucian Bologa and the Birth of the History of Medicine and Medical Folklore Chair at Cluj University

**Elena Barbulescu**

*Institute "Archive of Folklore of Romanian Academy", Romanian Academy*

E-mail: elena\_barbulescu@yahoo.com

**Abstract:** This article is making a summary of Valeriu Lucian Bologa's work in the field of medical folklore, as a subfield of research set right at the foundation of the University in Cluj-Napoca in 1919 in the frame of the Faculty of Medicine, one of the first four faculties that were initially forming the Superior Dacia University. During the interwar years he brought his contribution to the field through numerous articles of popularization where his main idea was that of verifying through pharmaceutical means the empirical folk healing methods.

**Keywords:** medical folklore, university, magic, healing practices, education

**Rezumat:** *Valeriu Lucian Bologa și crearea Catedrei de Istoria medicinei și folclor medical la Universitatea din Cluj* Articolul prezent face un rezumat al muncii profesorului Valeriu Lucian Bologa în domeniul folclorului medical ca subdomeniu de cercetare apărut chiar la fondarea Universității din Cluj în 1919 în cadrul Facultății de Medicină, una din cele patru facultăți care formau inițial Universitatea "Daciei Superioare". În perioada interbelică el și-a adus contribuția în acest domeniu prin numeroase articole de popularizare în care ideea principală era aceea de a verifica metodele populare de vindecare prin mijloace farmaceutice.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** folclor medical, universitate, magie, practici vindecătoare, educație

The situation of Valeriu Lucian Bologa is a classic case of a 'man of his time'. As he remembers in the volume *Rememorări sentimentale*<sup>1</sup>, (the preface is signed in 1970): "Historical events get sometimes a special meaning when they are remembered even from the small perspective of the ordinary man who passed them through. The flickers of a flame kept

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<sup>1</sup> Valeriu Lucian Bologa, *Rememorări sentimentale*, (București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1995), p. 9. (t.n.)

incandescent in the aged soul can give revealing blaze to the young who find out of the big events only from scholar historical books. They evoke the ardent living of a generation... And the certitude of the Great Union was molded into our souls." And he continues in the same key few pages later: "Our *offered* generation was made by fate to be the one that when the big mystery of passing from boy to man, when the mind starts to understand what is happening around it, to enter the epoch of inner preparation to fulfill the secret wishes of the forefathers. And this was exactly the big favour to us: we lived those times fully *aware*".<sup>2</sup>

In a short biographical note, we should mention that Valeriu Lucian Bologa was born at November 26<sup>th</sup>, 1892 in Braşov having origins in a "family of free peasants from Marpod, Sibiu County"<sup>3</sup> from his father side and he was also nephew (from sister) to the great linguist Sextil Puşcariu. He made his primary education in Paris and Leipzig and the high school in Wien and Braşov as his mother travelled a lot and took him everywhere, she went, doing this also as a strategy to make the child learn the main languages spoken in Transylvania and the languages needed for a scholarly career. He graduated the faculty of Natural Sciences in Leipzig and then attended courses at the Faculty of Medicine in Jena. As the war burst out, he was sent to the front in Italy. After the war he continued his medical studies at the Romanian Faculty of Medicine in Cluj. He was hired as budgetary *preparator* at the Chair of Histology on the basis of his studies in natural sciences done before the war. As he was witness in a conflict that appeared between a senior and a junior member of that chair, he made a choice in resigning from his job. Consequently, he continued his career by transferring to the Chair of history of medicine and medical folklore. This chair (that has many times lost from its title the phrase *medical folklore*) has been organized right from the beginning when the University of Superior Dacia was founded in the autumn of 1919. The members in the Commission of Organization were: Victor Babeş, Gheorghe Marinescu, Mihail Manicatide, Iuliu Moldovan and Iuliu Haţieganu. The first professors of this new-founded faculty were especially well-known personalities, invited from the universities in Iasi, Bucharest, Paris or Lyon. The holder of the new chair of history of medicine and medical folklore was Jules Guiart, considered to be the founder of the education in history of medicine in Romania if we make abstraction from the works in the same field of doctor Victor Gomoiu from Bucharest who did not enjoy the same recognition at that time. Further on, the phrase *medical*

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p.13.

<sup>3</sup> Szamuel Iszak, Sandu Bologa, *Evocare monografică*, (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Miracolul Cuvântului, 1995), passim.

*folklore* in the title of the chair and also Valeriu Lucian Bologa's preoccupations in this direction are owed to professor Jules Guiart. Advised and also pushed forward by Sextil Pușcariu and Emil Racoviță precisely for his encyclopedic spirit doubled by the knowledge of many foreign languages, Valeriu Lucian Bologa became the assistant of Jules Guiart at the mentioned chair. Here he worked especially on topics of history of medicine in a classical style – such as works about who were the first physicians in Transylvania, the Macedo-Romanian physicians and the great personality of Ioan Molnar Piuariu -, and he let himself 'corrupted' by the interest Jules Guiart had for the French medical folklore (he was an assiduously researcher of medical folklore in Bretagne area in France) and tried to do the same with the Romanian medical folklore. We see it in the conferences he lectured at the universities in the country and some cultural societies: The Romanian Women's Group, The Society of Assistants and Medical Preparators, 'Astra' Society or The Ethnographic Society led by Romulus Vuia as also in few articles published in prestigious journals of the moment.

In 1932 he was named professor of History of Medicine and also director at the Institute of History of Medicine, Pharmacy and Medical Folklore. The topics of his courses in connection with the medical folklore included: *the physician and medicine in legends and linguistic monuments; primitive therapy; Romanian folk medicine; the real therapeutic element in Romanian folk medicine; the passage from folk medicine to scientific medicine; the evolution of primitive medicine towards scientific medicine, history of civilization and history of medicine.*

During 1949-1971, Valeriu Lucian Bologa was the president of the International Society for History of Medicine, and in 1971 he was a laureate of the National Medicine Academy in Paris. He coordinated initially with professor Jules Guiart, the Medical-Historical Library (works of the members of the Institute of History of Medicine, Pharmacy and Medical Folklore) and supervised Ph.D. dissertations in the same directions of research. He even made a bibliography of the Ph.D. thesis defended at the university with topics of history of medicine and medical folklore. He was endowed with Romanian Academy Adamachi prize for the work *The Beginnings of Romanian Scientific Medicine* in 1931 and the State prize of Popular Republic of Romania for the work *Contributions to the History of Medicine in Popular Republic of Romania* in 1957. He died in 1971 in Cluj-Napoca.

His articles that make a special reference to the field of medical folklore have few pages and seem to have more of a popularization role as we can notice it from their titles: *The therapeutic value of some practices in the*

*old women's medicine* in "Mișcarea medicală română. Revistă lunară de medicină generală, 1933; 'The spoiled flowers' of the folk medicine in the light of science in "Revista de obstetrică, ginecologie și puericultură", 1926; *Eugenesie, Charms, old women, midwives, today and in old times, and Browsing yellowed files. The beginnings of the fight against venereal diseases* in "Revista sănătății" 1921; *Fear of Hospital* in Revista sănătății 1922; *The history of variolization and vaccination in the Countries inhabited by Romanians* in Revista științelor Medicale, București, 1929; *Organes et humeurs dans la médecine populaire roumaine* in "Comuniques Knoll pour Medecins" 1931; and *The purpose of the medical folklore and ethnobotanics researches* as the Preface to George Bujoreanu's book: *Illnesses, remedies and curing plants known by Romanian peasantry*, 1936.

All these articles made of Valeriu Lucian Bologna a historian of medicine who evolved from a fervent critic and less understanding person with the old women's medicine towards a historian of medicine who tried to dissect like a naturalist what he considered to be efficient in empirical medical practices. According to this perspective he focused mainly on remedies belonging to the vegetal, animal or mineral kingdoms.

The same feature of the 'simple man' - *conservatorism* - is treated by Valeriu Lucian Bologna differently in 1922 and 1936: 'Conservatorism is a typical feature for man, especially for the simple man. Hardly an idea reaches to the masses; and if it got roots, it is almost impossible to stop it even if it is obsolete and became irrational' in *Fear of Hospital*, 1922, and... 'people's medicine is extremely conservative. It maintains elements of old times scientific medicine that the modern science has long forgotten. Studying these elements is precious to the medical-historian because with their help he can reconstitute sometimes chapters forgotten from old medical science. More interesting it though that the physician' check with scientific methods the fair parts that have real value in folk medicine and to reintroduce them into scholarly medicine.' in the preface to the book *Illnesses, remedies and curing plants...*, 1936. He also brought here an idea that has been conflictual even nowadays regarding the relation between the patient and the doctor: 'A soul connection between physician and peasant will be better made only when the physician in the village will know to enter better in the medical thinking of the peasant, will know how to speak from the medical point in his language. A synthesis between scientific medicine and what is good in folk medicine can be a precious factor in the great work of popularization of hygiene and state medicine'. We notice here one of the stakes: going along the hygiene trend, the first 'battle front' in medicalizing Romanian society.

In his article regarding the 'spoiled flowers' as we see, keeping the folk denomination for menstruation, he is making a demonstration in a 'toxicological' key of the phenomenon: during menstruation women' skin is secreting substances called menotoxins that have effect upon fermentation.<sup>4</sup>

The antivariola vaccination practiced empirically in Ardeal and Banat is stirring his interest, and he is not the only one if we think at his collaboration with Iosif Ursan in writing the article or to the manuscript of another famous doctor, Gheorghe Crăiniceanu, who also described both the practice and origin of this type of vaccination.<sup>5</sup>

In *Charms, old women, midwives, today and in old times*, we have a short gender demonstration where the physician, certainly a man, has to fight with the irrational women, especially in the case of birth: 'one of the young physicians illuminated by the sun of the western medical science seems to have been at 1800s Ignatie Farkas in Elisabetopole *master surgeon and obstetrician*. And it seems that he was a man with a warm heart, enthusiastic and wishful of good things. In 1803 he writes in German a booklet of 16 pages where he makes a harsh indictment to the midwives of those times. Farkas complains that in the villages there are no learnt midwives and consequently women give birth alone, cared for only by the neighbouring old women. The help offered are mostly irrational and corruptible (...) The nursing mother exhausted, has no moment of tranquillity. All her neighbours stay around her, do a lot of stupid things to the mother and child, that they think necessary and force her to eat and drink continuously (...). For that they founded the medical-surgical school in Cluj in 1775. Short time after the beginnings of this institution we see that it works a midwife school attached to it. (...) Between 1832 and 1872 36 midwives graduated. (...) The deplorable things described by Farkas stopped in the towns but not in the villages. There you can find them even today.'<sup>6</sup> I should add here that this type of birth, unattended or attended by old women from the neighbourhood was still in use in the 1970s, in some villages from Transylvania, as most women in their 60s told us in the field researches done so far. What is interesting is the fact that all these women praise the homebirth and are scared or have a negative image of giving birth in a hospital.

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<sup>4</sup> Valeriu Lucian Bologa, "*Florile spurcate*" ale medicinei populare în lumina științei, în "Revista de obstetrică, ginecologie și pericultură", București, VI(1926), 4: 290-293.(t.n)

<sup>5</sup> Valeriu Lucian Bologa, Iosif Ursan, *Istoria variolizării și vaccinării în țările locuite de români*, în "Revista științelor medicale", 18(1929), 2: 137-151. Gh. Crainiceanu, MSS 363, AFAR (Institute Archive of Folklore of Romanian Academy), Cluj-Napoca.

<sup>6</sup> Valeriu Lucian Bologa, *Vrăji, babe și moașe azi și odinioară*, în "Revista sănătății", anul I(1921): 114-118.(t.n.)

The women's irrational referred mostly to the magic practiced generally by women: 'Precisely illnesses and death so inexplicable to a primitive mind gave the most favourable field for developing the most bizarre beliefs. And slowly, the old remedies and irrational and corruptible witchcraft were added or superposed to the useful and good empiricism.'<sup>7</sup>

In *Eugenezie*, Valeriu Bologa, so much alike the medical trend that was just appearing beyond the ocean and whose main contributor was the Rockefeller foundation, puts the matter of hygiene in terms of war and we have terms like *fortification, weapons, barbed wire networks, guns*. In other words, microbes are the enemies against which the organism must 'fight'. This has been an idea with a long career in biomedicine. See for this all the advertisements for the new drugs where microbes are personified and transformed into *enemies*: 'It is just natural that a question was born if the hygienist could find for humankind the possibility that -just like the commander who re placed with his company above a ravine that the enemy could not even come close - it could resist the attacks of all the health enemies by developing a minimum amount of effort. This thing would be possible by systematically bettering through selection the force, solidity and capacity of human race. This is the target of *eugenezie*.'<sup>8</sup> Consequently, after explaining the causes of getting sick through a biological perspective: weak, disharmonic people in their bodily building, *minus-variants*, he offers in short a definition of what eugenics should do in theory: 'to study the law of evolution and heredity, to find the causes of the human species decadence; and in practice (...) it will stop - by seconding the social hygiene - all the evils that weaken and poison the human seed like alcohol, syphilis, tuberculosis etc. etc. It will support the healthy families with many children, it will contribute to maintaining a vigorous peasantry and it will tend to guide the proletariat of the towns towards a better and natural way of living.'<sup>9</sup>

A special perspective Valeriu Bologa offers in the article published in 1933 regarding the therapeutic value of the practices in old women's medicine where the argumentation is dominated by a positive key: 'For years the practices of the old women and healers in the villages were treated by physicians with discontent. They say it is about charms and void beliefs, obstacles in spreading the notions of rational hygiene! I beg your pardon but it is not like that! Just as in all the disciplines we come today more and more to the study of primitivism that we start to look at it differently than our parents, the same with the primitive medicine we realize more and more that

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem* (t.n).

<sup>8</sup> Valeriu Lucian Bologa, *Eugenezia*, în "Revista sănătății", anul I(1921): 79-84.(t.n.)

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

a millennial experience, inherited with continuous amplifications from father to son, cannot be just a piece of cake. Even what seems to be less medical in the folk practices, the chanting, charms, healing iconlets, seem to us today, in the era of psychotherapy under a different light. Let us take another example: all the old medical writers stressed in describing the old epidemics that those men who were not afraid of disease or who *remained hard in their belief*, did not get sick. It seems absurd, but today when we know the intimate correlation between psychic and physical, especially through the middling of the sympathetic, para-sympathetic nervous systems and hormones, we begin to understand these secrets. From this point of view, the icons of Saint Haralambie, protector against plague, of the saint doctor without money Pantelimon, Cosma and Damian, the *molifts* against cholera, start to have some interest for us not only from folkloric point of view but also from psychology of the patient and of psychotherapy point of views.<sup>10</sup> We should add that these secrets have remained forgotten by biomedicine for the second half of the 20th century as well. In the same eulogistic interpretive key, he includes *materia medica* (charcoal, garlic, different concoctions, plant infusions) and exclaims: 'how many therapeutic treasures of the medical folklore await to be verified! In the West this fact was fully understood and to some institutes of history of medicine there are today experimental sections where this work of control of folk pharmacy is done.'<sup>11</sup> Doubting that the primitives have reached randomly to this knowledge he is exclaiming again: 'the primitive observer (...) has a very precise intuitive empiricism!'<sup>12</sup> And considered necessary to bring here the results of one of his collaborators from the Institute of History of Medicine, dr. Victor Dragoș, that were scientifically verifying 141 procedures in the matter of 'the question of organ and organ humors therapy, that is the principle *similia-similibus*.'<sup>13</sup> Thus, Valeriu Bologa accepted the presupposition of a 'magic correlation between the organ given as a remedy and the organ to be cured' after a result of only 36,5% positive, that is less than a half.

Instead of conclusions, I should mention that Valeriu Lucian Bologa was indeed a man of his time, perfectly framed in the scientific mainstream, the huge wave of western origin that succeeded in creating successfully a scientific vision upon the world and consequently to put the layers at the foundation of scientific disciplines. In this direction he is a central pawn in

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<sup>10</sup> Valeriu Lucian Bologa, *Valoarea terapeutică a unor practice din medicina băbească*, în "Mișcarea Medicală Română", Craiova, VI(1933),1-2:29-34.(t.n.)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

Cluj-Napoca in a new university but very well connected to the international mainstream. To believe you need to do the research! A reverse dictum to the biblical one, taken to the extreme in the concern to verify the folk remedies through pharmaceutical means. His interest in medical folklore is marginal not in a classical sense of a minor interest but in the direction that he is working strenuously to translate it and not adapting it to the scientific medicine, or 'state medicine' as he would call it at some point. By doing so he is fragmenting the medical folklore, its practices, their meaning, and by doing so taking it out of the context.

In the end it is about applying a procustian grid to the medical folklore, that presents interest as long as it can be subordinated to the medical science. He takes parts of it, useful parts but that lead to an apart image.

Looking at it retrospectively there are two levels of analysis: one is that of setting this chair of history of medicine and medical folklore and Valeriu Bologa's work in its service, marked by obvious positive accents: there were set the bases for some educational institutions on criteria relevant for the historical moment, that are still thriving nowadays. The second is more general and sends to few other coordinates: the necessity of creating educational institutions in the political context of that time; the French influence in doing this approach, that being also a result of the political context, influence manifested in the scientific pole through the transfer of French *know-how*: see for that the interest for ethno-medicine and medical folklore of professor Jules Guiart, a fervent researcher of this topic in regions of its own country.

We should also remark that during all this inter-war period of building and consolidating the university system in Cluj-Napoca, the Transylvanian ethnography under the direction of Romulus Vuia, founder of the first chair of ethnography at a university from our country and of the Ethnographic Museum of Transylvania, and who was also asserting the inseparability of the material and spiritual fields, that is of ethnography and folklore, his own concerns were not going at all in the medical direction but towards other topics. Undoubtedly, the bases set then in this discipline have influenced the field till contemporaneity: 'Romulus Vuia's inaugural lesson was not only an academic act but also a plead for the discipline he was founding and developing. It was an important moment in his strive for the autonomy of ethnography as a scientific discipline. The reference to the rich theoretical literature Romanian and foreign, the terminological specifications and delimitations of fields, the stipulation of the aims of each type of research and the unitary vision of researching the folk culture, large field of one single discipline that he called ethnography and that we today call it ethnology,



give to the inaugural lesson the character of an orientative act, guiding for all those who would deal with the study of the ungrammatized half of the Romanian culture.’<sup>14</sup>

The two personalities of Cluj-Napoca university knew each other very well, Valeriu Lucian Bologa held more than once conferences in the frame of the Society of Ethnography patroned by Romulus Vuia. Looking back, the researches of medical folklore (empirical healing practices) seems to have been well settled inside the medical education while the ethnographic researches have tried to tackle other topics like: social life, type of dwelling, villages, of living, occupations (spinning, weaving, shepherding). Moreover, Romulus Vuia, dominated by a special interest for field research, had each week a seminar of ‘Guidances regarding the making of village monographs and regional monographs.’<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Romulus Vuia, *Studii de etnografie și folclor*, (București: Minerva, 1975), p. XI. (preface written by Mihai Pop) (t.n)

<sup>15</sup> Anuarul Univeristății Regele Ferdinand I, Cluj, pe anii 1928-1929; 1929-1930; 1930-1931; 1931-1932; 1932-1934; 1934-1935; 1935-1936.

