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Staying on the Mountain:

Women, Memory, and the Transformation of Remoteness

in Rural Romania

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the lived experience of women in a remote mountain community in rural Romania. From working as hard as the men to being the ones remaining on the mountain year long, they have been described as the ones who hold the community together. In a settlement that is simultaneously hard to reach and widely sought after by tourists and lifestyle migrants, these women manoeuvre restrictions and reclaim their agency through mutual support, resilience and (re)tellings of their life stories.

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Using remoteness as a lens, my research explores how it shapes everyday life and social practice. Drawing on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork, I examine how transformations are reflected in local women's perceptions of remoteness. As a relational and affective category, it is also present in how they remember, reinterpret, preserve, and perform their day-to-day realities.

Approaching this through the concept of matriculture, the study highlights how seemingly stereotypical social roles are generated, reproduced, and transformed, bringing to light the often silenced or under-acknowledged contribution of women to the community. Situated in the wider Eastern-European context, these preliminary findings highlight experiences of women in relation to cultural change and identity in post-socialist rural societies.

Keywords: Remoteness, lived experience, transformations, women's memory, everyday life

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Résumé

Cet article se penche sur le vécu des femmes d'une communauté montagnarde isolée de la Roumanie rurale. Qu'il s'agisse de travailler aussi fort que les hommes ou d'être celles qui restent dans la montagne toute l'année, elles sont souvent décrites comme celles qui assurent la cohésion de la communauté. Dans un lieu à la fois difficile d'accès et très prisé par les touristes ainsi que par des personnes venues s'y installer en quête d'un nouveau mode de vie, ces femmes contournent les contraintes et reprennent leur agentivité par le soutien mutuel, la résilience et la (re)narration de leurs parcours de vie.

En utilisant l'éloignement comme prisme d'analyse, mes recherches explorent la manière dont celui-ci façonne le quotidien et les pratiques sociales. À partir d'un travail ethnographique en cours, j'examine comment les transformations se reflètent dans la perception que les femmes locales ont de cet éloignement. En tant que catégorie relationnelle et affective, celui-ci imprègne également la façon dont elles se remémorent, réinterprètent, préservent et incarnent leurs réalités quotidiennes.

En abordant cette question sous l'angle de la matriculture, cette étude met en lumière la manière dont des rôles sociaux, en apparence stéréotypés, sont générés, reproduits et transformés ; elle révèle ainsi la contribution des

femmes à la communauté — une contribution trop souvent passée sous silence ou insuffisamment reconnue. S'inscrivant dans le contexte plus large de l'Europe de l'Est, ces résultats préliminaires éclairent le vécu des femmes face aux mutations culturelles et identitaires au sein des sociétés rurales post-socialistes.

Mots-clés : Éloignement, vécu, transformations, mémoire des femmes, Roumanie

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Introduction

One winter day in 2025, I was visiting a new resident in one of the remote mountain hamlets in which I conduct fieldwork. Amongst the larger discussion about locals and incomers, the interviewee emphasised that it was the women that hold the community together. That statement made me think of the deeper implications of remoteness on local women, as well as what gendered forms it might take.

Remoteness is, anthropologically speaking, a much broader category than just an expression of geographical distances and accessibility. It is relative and subjective; in other words, if one *feels* a place is a long way away from amenities they consider relevant or gives them the sentiment of being disconnected from their starting place, it may receive the attribute of 'remote.' Hence, remoteness can be interrogated as an affective category (Harms et al., 2014, p. 365), and its effects on inhabitants and visitors of places deemed remote assessed anthropologically. Remoteness is also social and embodied/experienced, as well as a contested category, since its meaning shifts depending on the actors involved (insider, outsider, what part of the remote/isolated experience affects them most, etc), matters on which I will touch below.

Keeping in mind affective remoteness as a modifier, this paper explores how local women manoeuvre and (re)claim their agency through mutual support, as well as remember, reinterpret, and perform their day-to-day realities in a mountain community that is both hard to reach and, now, sought after by tourists and lifestyle migrants. It does so by employing the concept of matriculture (Rowlatt & Guédon, 2025, p. 2), defined as "part or those components of culture that sustain, express, and welcome women's participation in the socio-cultural fabric, whether it sustains a matrilineal kinship system or not" (Guédon, 2020, p. 6). In this sense, it argues that matriculture, facing diminished avenues of transmission within the local patriarchal societal structure, concentrates on maintaining the status-quo, and binds women in place as anchors to the community.

Background

In my view, Romania remains a land of contrasts. At the last census (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2023, Table 1.22), about half the population registered as living in rural areas, which counted some thirteen thousand villages. These numbers hide vast variability, encompassing peri-urban wealthy communes all the way through to depopulating and emptying hamlets. As a result, a dichotomic view of prosperous urbanites versus somewhat backwards ruralities persists in both public and private discourse. A historic tendency to consider the rural a repository of tradition and authenticity contributes to the perpetuation of the opposition, despite scholarly dissent (Mihăilescu, 2017, pp. 179–180). At the same time, increased globalisation and outmigration gave rise to a counter-culture of revivalism and 'traditionalism,' which reverberates all the way to the most out-of-the-way communes.

Against this backdrop, I conduct field research in several mountain hamlets spread among the slopes of a calcareous mountain range in south-western Romania. Although not officially classified as remote,[1] these settlements are famous for their apparent isolation, partly due to a mid-2000s television documentary on hard-to-reach villages. Located at various altitudes, somewhere between 400 and 800 metres above sea level, no paved roads reach them. Access requires all-terrain vehicles, or horses and hours of hiking. Until recently, there was no electricity, except a few water-powered generators, and no indoor plumbing. Solar panels made some household appliances possible, but ploughing, harvesting, and animal husbandry are still mostly done by hand. To date, I am familiar with thirty households, summing around sixty inhabitants, not all of which live permanently on the mountain.

While the focus of this paper and the space do not permit for an in depth look at socio-historical characteristics of the hamlets, it is worth mentioning that the events of the second half of the twentieth century were not experienced as major disruptions. The localities were never collectivised, owing to the difficulty of access and, presumably, their small population. As the locals recount, they were just subject to livestock quotas. As one participant remembered: "we used to take the calf over the mountain only to arrive and find out it hasn't reached the [prescribed] weight. And then back we came" (Interviewee, identity withheld, September 2025, day unrecorded). In this sense, similar to other mountainous areas in the country (Kligman and Verdery, 2011, pp. 396–399), many aspects of their lives remained largely unchanged. The local school was built in the 1960s and the valley road was widened and tarmacked in the 1970s and 1980s, allowing the younger generations at the time easier access to work in state owned companies. This

1 Under the 2021 census, *izolate* (remote localities) were those situated at 20km or more straight line distance from a national road or motorway (Institutul National de Statistica, 2021, online).

softer reach of the state means that their effective, affective, and perceived remoteness was a matter-of-fact, unnamed, aspect of their way of life, with neither communism nor the transition period registering with the interviewed locals as distinct periods in remembered stories.

Before we can explore further how remoteness reflects in matricultural spheres, one must first place the 'remoteness' of the hamlets in the existing literature. Firstly, the geographical constraint is ever-present. In the absence of paved, vehicle-accessible roads leading in and out of the hamlets, resources and infrastructure are limited. Considering these were lacking to begin with, and only more recently began to improve (i.e. access by well equipped off-road vehicles and quad bikes), the villages are less 'emptying' (Dzenovska, 2020, pp. 10–11), and more closely related to Driessen's "rural voids" (2018, pp. 63–64). That is to say, they have not fallen into a post-communist gap in resources due to the political economy, but continued in their relative obscurity until an outside force (the television documentary which featured them) plucked them out of their anonymity and opened the doors to (re)imagining and touristifying outside influences. It could be argued that they remain marginal, tucked away at altitude, in a county that generates around 11% of the West Region's gross domestic product and 1% of the national total, ranking last within the region by contribution to regional GDP (Comisia Nationala de Strategie si Prognoza, 2024, p. 5). To further illustrate that, the nearest hospital is a one hour car-ride from the nearest paved road, which is either one hour of off-roading in good weather or a hike of two to three hours, depending on your start and end point of access. There are no general practitioners and no veterinarians close by, and there is only one larger supermarket available, with a couple of smaller markets in neighbouring towns and villages. The region relies heavily on tourism, forestry, and some industrial output, though the latter is concentrated in the north of the county.

Despite the constraints of the landscape and the external label of *izolați* (isolated), which in Romanian serves in meaning as both remote and isolated, incorporating the duality of far-away and disconnected, the hamlets are, in fact, part of an extensive kinship network that extends to the nearby town, the mother-village across the mountain, day-labourers from across the valley, and beyond, and the inhabitants are actively constructing new networks with visitors, researchers, returning tourists, and newcomers. While they do not lack social and economic connections, the locals do feel remote/isolated, having taken up the identity following their feature in the documentary. In my view, this validated them and gave a name to what they regularly refer to as the 'hard life up the mountain,' presenting them with a neat word that encompasses all: where they live, how they live, how they feel generally, and how they feel about the place itself. It stayed in use because there is also a certain uneasy feeling: since the community is thinning, nature feels like it is threatening to engulf them and what remains is the relatively new identity that now

carries the promise of a future as a touristification catalyst. In this sense, the hamlets' isolation is close to what Drazin (2018, accepted manuscript, pp. 3, 10) brings to attention in his ethnographic work in Ireland: isolation is understood through people's engagement with places in particular social events. In Drazin's observed communities, the isolation is, in his own words, a bogeyman, but in the hamlets it has become a point of pride and a marker of resilience and of belonging.

While it appears that remoteness is their primary characteristic, one must also take into account that the settlements started as a form of chosen remoteness (Scott, 2009, pp. ix–x; Schweitzer and Povoroznyuk, 2019, pp. 246–249). That is, they grew out of temporary shelters and sheep folds in the later years of the Austro-Hungarian dualism, and, drawing from historical maps and secondary sources available to me (Munteanu, 2007, vol. II, p. 200; Bolovan and Gräf, 2023, pp. 327, 329; Tîrcovnicu, 1970, pp. 70–73, 164; Rusnac, 2025; Stoica de Hațeg, 1981, p. 301), relocations following land scarcity, and natural disasters.

The hamlets are in a process of depopulation, gentrification, and touristification, with each of these reshaping how remoteness is perceived and (re-en-)acted, by both male and female residents.[2] Their future remains an unknown, with some locals fearing being engulfed by the forest, while others are keen to lean into the tourism economy and small-scale eco-farms. This socio-economic background places the hamlets firmly in line with Podjed and Peternel's observations in Slovenia and Croatia (2024, pp. 9–10, 13), which highlights that isolation is a neutral descriptor which can be perceived and experienced both negatively and positively: some associate it with loneliness, difficulty, or marginalisation, while those who actively seek it tend to view it as a driver of more meaning. The similarity is especially strong to what Podjed and Peternel documented concerning remote villages, where these two valances co-exist. Their discussion highlights both economic challenges and benefits such as peace and strong interpersonal bonds (Podjed and Peternel, 2024, pp. 12–13): locals identify with some negative aspects, but also recognise the good ones, and newcomers identify and seek the positive aspects, while being aware of the challenges.

Uusitalo and Assmuth (2013, p. 62) note that we have yet to see the definitive demise of some villages predicted to cease to exist (Knuuttila and Rannikko 2008, p. 16, cited in Uusitalo and Assmuth, 2013, p. 62). Whether or not the locals' fears come true, the perception of remoteness shapes the identity and life-worlds of the inhabitants. It does so in a gendered way by tethering women in place through their domestic knowledge and authority, while men and youth are more mobile, being expendable in the domestic

2 To my knowledge, there are no residents that identify as a differently gendered than the ones mentioned above.

sphere. This prompts the present look at how women in the community navigate this perception.

Methodology

In order to successfully cover as much of the hamlets as possible, considering their considerable spread distance-wise, I employ the multi-sited ethnography approach (Marcus, 1995, p. 96). Furthermore, as the potential participant pool is limited and I am interested in exploring perceptions of remoteness, I also follow locals' social connections outwards, tracing how remoteness is experienced through interactions with kin, tourists, NGOs, and more distant contacts. I use 'studying through' (Shore and Wright, 1997, p. 14) to describe this movement across connected social settings. The authors coined the term to indicate following a concept through institutions, policies and processes that influence them, in opposition to containing one's research to a bounded geographical area (i.e. one field site location).

Finding my residence in the hamlet also proved a challenge. With limited long-term hosting available, as houses usually have two or three rooms at most and locals prioritise accommodating tourists, especially in summer, I had to apply what Günel and Watanabe call "patchwork ethnography" (2024, pp. 131–133). This more flexible framework (shorter visits over a longer period, rather than one uninterrupted stay) differs from the long-term residency of classical anthropological fieldwork, but still allows the 'slow thinking' of longer immersions and preserves the relationships, familiarity, and partial insider status obtained by the researcher, while also reducing the pressure on the hosts and community.

The main research methods include participant observation and unstructured interviews. My approach also makes use of "engaged listening," and the "democracy of the senses" (Hockey and Forsey, 2012, pp. 71–72) to yield the richest data available. Participant observation remains the main form of engagement, allowing me to be a part of activities within the home (cooking, cleaning, preparing for visits, evening chats, watching TV), but also of communal labour (haymaking, foraging, ploughing).

Access is shaped by gender and my role as an anthropologist. I am mostly allowed in the women's sphere, with some entry to the men's when local women are also included or, on occasion, due to my outsider and researcher status. My access was also facilitated by my age, which is close to some of the women's own children. On some occasions, this dynamic gave me the impression my interlocutors were advising and treating me like a (proxy-)daughter, which supported the creation of a rapport hard to replicate in other circumstances. It should also be noted that, in part, serendipity also mediated the events and situations I was able to witness and participate in.

On the matter of interviews, I found that participants shy away from formal interviews, and only sometimes reply directly to targeted questions. Furthermore, they are uncomfortable being recorded, so I rely on extensive fieldnotes and thick description (Geertz, 1973, pp. 6–7), which I write as soon as possible after the interactions and on occasion, with longer term participants, while we are talking (if we are not also engaged in some form of work). To supplement, I use (historical) maps, family trees, and sketches to document the spatial and relational realities of the hamlets.

Strictly pertaining to the present article, the data draws from my current fieldwork (2025-2026), across two hamlet sub-clusters, and includes accounts and observations of fifteen women, a dozen of which were local, two incomers and one married into the hamlets. Not all live permanently on the mountain.

As Izabella Agárdi (2022, p. 27) notes there may not be room for a lot of objectivity when one researches people and their lived experience. However, in contrast to her work, which documents life stories among Hungarian-speaking women in Eastern Europe, my data comes from mostly unstructured interviews and fragments of day-to-day conversations about life in the hamlets, captured in the context of researching perceptions of remoteness. Within these interactions, participants were narrating and remembering events from their own point of view filtered by their memories, their experiences, and, potentially, through the self-image they wished to project when facing me, the anthropologist. In doing so, the local women also brought to light aspects of their lives that can be attributed to and discussed through the lens of matriculture.

In the following sections, I will be referring to all the collected data that pertains to matriculture, though the main focus will be on three older women. These three recurrently steered the discussion towards how the community functions, what they believe is the best way to go about certain tasks and interactions, and, generally, provided information on the (inner) workings of their lives and the community. Note that to best preserve anonymity I have opted to present a composite portrait of the local women and have decided to change certain biographical details to make situations and individuals less identifiable.

Findings

Local portraits

Imagine a high altitude mountain basin, with high, rocky peaks surrounding it from two sides, while the third one is closed by more mellow heights covered in woods. The fourth side is narrow and opens to the opposite mountain range, more than three hours hike away. Here, towards the end of the hamlet, or at least what is visible of it to the hiker, one can find Participant A's house. We will call her The Host. Her house was built by her grandfather, with rocks carried on his back or by horse from higher up the mountain. She and her husband hosts hikers, cyclists and tourist groups, which keeps her very busy, but also makes her life up the mountain more meaningful. "Here it feels like all you have to do is work," she says on one of my visits (Interviewee, identity withheld, 8 May 2025).

More than two hours away, in a different hamlet, among more mellow peaks with lots of pastures, fruit trees, and a lovely vista of high mountain ranges into the horizon, one finds Participant B's house. She is significantly older, having raised her children, who now have adult children, who also have children of their own. Participant B is one of the oldest residents and we will call her The Granny.

Somewhere, maybe mid-way between the two, one can find a more modest house, with a vernacular cookhouse a few metres away where one finds the hosts during the day, unless they are foraging for livestock fodder or engaged in agricultural work. The hens are running about the yard, there are pigs, and cows in the pasture, clothes to dry, and a wooden table outside the house for summer eating. The lady of the house is about the same age as The Host, and was born in The Host's hamlet, but married here. We will call her Participant C, The Anchor, as she is my first contact in the community; I met her many years prior when I was just a returning hiker in the region.

What does it mean to be a fifty-plus years old woman in the hamlets? As per my research, it usually means one is responsible for a household with livestock, usually cows, pigs, hens and other fowl, dogs, and cats, a vegetable garden to tend, fields to sow and harvest, pastures to which animals must be herded, and anywhere between one and three or four children. Older generations might have had more children, but with land being scarce and subdividing meaning smaller and smaller households who would not have enough land to feed themselves, families have come to prefer fewer children in order to keep the land in the family as much as possible. The running joke in the wider Banat area is that locals only have one child, since having half of one is impossible; this directly results from a preference to keep property undivided and passed on to the (preferably) only child, who is expected to provide and care for their parents as they age.

Returning to our female resident, we might find that she married an incomer, if no local men were available, or was married off across the mountain only to return to her native area and re-marry after suffering violence. She married around eighteen years of age or in

her early twenties, not too young, but not leaving it late and risk being looked down on by the community. She might have had her children at home or in a neighbour's home if she didn't make it over the mountain to the communal maternity ward, many hours hike away. Our archetypal resident may or may not have gone to school. If she did, she completed only around four years of schooling, as for more they would have had to be hosted by relatives or pay for live-in tenancies in the valley; it was not unheard-of for parents to stop their children's schooling for fear they would move away and deprive them of support in their old age.

Even if she married into the next hamlet, family would not be too far away. They are all used to navigating considerable distances by foot or on horseback, and she would have had help from neighbours and kin during peak times (harvest, animal slaughtering, giving birth, family deaths) and would have helped them in return in due course. When younger, she would routinely meet up with other local women to sew, spin, or embroider, as well as travel with produce to the market or go over the mountain to village fetes, weddings, christenings, and burials. She carried heavy loads on her back when needed and travelled distances with little complaint. She tended sheep with her husband and kin, helped mend fences, sowed, harvested, cut hay, made haystacks, took the cattle to graze, tended to the goats, but mostly cooked and cleaned, tended to the animals, and her garden and land. Of course, she raised her children and provided them with the best upbringing, education, and opportunities she could (we will discuss this in detail below). She is helped by her daughters(-in-law), if there are any. Perhaps, now, in older age, with the children having left, her husband helps with cooking, but not routinely. She observes the religious holidays, though she may not be particularly pious. After all, the local church was build around the same time she had her children and the priest only comes at major holidays. Some may say she or others dabble in some unsanctioned practices and witchcraft, but this is considered a serious misgiving and not commonly brought into discussion.

Contrastingly, the younger generation, her daughters or daughters-in-law, married at similar ages, but had fewer children, left the hamlets, or live only seasonally here. Nevertheless, they are similarly hard-working, they sewed their own dowry, and manage(d) their own households and livestocks. They may have attended school for longer, settled in town, and perhaps ran their own businesses. With the second generation, there is more variability, some of which I am not able to refer to, in order to keep the participants' anonymity.

Incomer women are roughly the same age as the younger generation, though, as with the age of my main interlocutors, there is a significant margin. The incomers are the least represented currently in my research, due to their smaller numbers, as well as limited access to date, so it is difficult to give a general picture. However, it could be said that they

usually chose to come to the hamlets with their life partners, mainly because of its famed picturesque surroundings, remote location, and what they perceive as opportunity for clean living. They are, usually, lifestyle migrants: former urbanites using their resources to build a 'slow life' (Honoré, 2004, pp. 14–15) closer to nature. They learn to rear animals, plant and harvest local crops, they sometimes act as a support network to the local folk, but they can also be a point of contention and perceived as a (temporary) source of income.

The matriculture of remoteness

Having painted a general picture of the relevant participants, let us take a look at how remoteness shapes these women's participation and roles within the hamlet community.

Firstly, I must note that Romanian society remains patriarchal, with higher relevance given to men, who, more often than not, occupy positions of power, though this tends towards more egalitarian practices in urban spaces. It is also mostly patrilineal and patrilocal, especially in the more rural contexts; however, there are increasing exceptions, especially as the preference for nuclear families is increasing from what I consider a combination of higher mother's age at first birth and decreasing birth rates.

The hamlets are not exempt from patriarchal practices. Most of the older participants moved to their husbands' houses and lived with their husbands' family, usually under the authority of the mother-in-law until older age limited their power and the bride took over as head of the female sphere. Traditionally in this area, the household would be passed on to the youngest son and his wife, but in the hamlets it is also dependent on who decided to settle on the mountain as opposed to afield. This situation changes if there is only one child, in which case, regardless of gender, they inherit the parents' household. If the child is a woman, she may seek or prefer an incomer husband, so that they can continue to live on her land, usually alongside the parents until their deaths. Similarly, childless couples may adopt a child from their relatives, who then comes to inherit their land and keep it in the wider family. So far, I have encountered four cases of locally decided adoptions in the hamlets, in almost all of which the adopting couple did not have any children of their own. Three of the adoptees were women who went on to inherit their adoptive parents' house and land. In this case, the preference to keep the land within the family, as opposed to being sold to outsiders, dictates how succession is brokered. The third option, if a family has no living descendants or they have decided to move away permanently, is to sell to neighbours, so the land remains in the community. It's also not uncommon for neighbours to be more distant kin, or kin by marriage, which is thought of as a better alternative than selling to newcomers.

As with most patriarchal societies, the women are relegated to care-giving and household management roles, as well as being keepers of moral norms, especially those pertaining to the female universe. As a result, the participants report staying local and taking care of the household as their primary role. Many a time have they highlighted the burden of their constant work in our chats: "*e greu traiu aici*" ('life is hard here;' Interviewee, identity withheld, 5 May 2025), "*aici dacă nu munceşti (într-una) n-ai*" ('up here, if you don't (constantly) work, you have nothing;' Interviewee, identity withheld, 5 May 2025), "*aici dacă stai 30 minute ai stat prea mult*" ('if you sit around for 30 minutes, you've sat too long;' Interviewee, identity withheld, 5 May 2025), and my personal favourite *"zborul e toporul," w*hich is rather cryptic if one is unfamiliar with the local dialect, and can be roughly translated to 'idle chatter is a time thief' (Interviewee, identity withheld, 20 July 2025). All of these show that the main concern is completing the household chores, the weight these tasks carry importance-wise and the (time) anxiousness they create for the local women. Additionally, but dependant on their age and the time of their life they reference, they would occupy themselves with crafting (sewing, spinning, etc.).

Overall, their (self-)stories reflect a societal pressure to pay their dues to society, through hospitality and maintaining and perpetuating its rules, as well as undertaking community level roles at times, such as tending to the dead. They also have to teach by example, though not necessarily active teaching (*se fură [nu te învață;* 'skills are picked up by observing, rather than explicitly taught']; Interviewee, identity withheld, 4 April 2026). One interesting deviation, which does find parallels in accounts from other authors, as I will illustrate in the Discussion section, is that the women of the hamlets do sometimes go against the norm, and I would argue that this is facilitated by remoteness, at least in part.

The domestic sphere

As mentioned above, in the domestic sphere, the women of the hamlet are usually the uncontested authority, slightly dependant on their status within the family. They are central to the household, which includes a degree of practicality and necessity, but their position is also one of power within this sphere. The young wife of the family son will learn from her mother-in-law. The mother of the family is usually the decider. She takes this position of authority when the older generation passes peak working age and retreats into the background.

In the hamlets, this shift in role, from main household decider to older generation, is marked externally by referring to a woman as *babă*. Meaning literally 'old lady,' in regular speech it has a negative connotation, indicating an old-looking woman, an aged woman, being a derogatory term, similar to 'crone' in English. In the hamlets, being called or referred to as *Baba* [First name] is an indication of old age and, potentially, of widowhood.

I am unaware of currently still married women who meet the age criteria (seemingly over 75 years old). All but one woman referred to as *babă* are widowed and three live alone, with children and relatives living away from the mountain. The fourth is The Granny, who made her dislike of being called so very clear, asking me and other visitors to call her *buni* (granny) instead. Yet, her family routinely uses the appellative *babă/babo* for her, both in her presence and absence, signalling her reduced status, relevance, and the shift in authority.

While her authority is diminished in favour of her daughter-in-law, she still shoulders a significant part of the household chores, but mostly around the house: feeding the pigs and tending to the chickens, tending to the vegetable garden, the flowers in the yard. She is also afforded the relative luxury of showing hospitality and chatting with tourists stopping to buy refreshments or lunch, since the daughter-in-law is tasked with more physically demanding tasks: taking the cows to pasture at altitude and returning them, finding and catching the horses, cooking the large meals for tourists (sometimes with community help), hoeing, sowing, and hay gathering, and in high summer, getting water from streams uphill.

For these women, who closely follow the traditional norms applicable in the hamlets, the matter of passing on this behaviour is uncertain. Both have significant crafting skills, but their sons and nephews no longer favour local handcrafted decorations, tablecloths, and bedsheets, but prefer store and town bought goods. Moreover, the younger men of the family work abroad or in town, promoting their mother to worry that even if they marry, she will not benefit from having the support of a daughter-in-law. “Who would come here as my daughter-in-law, to tend the cows?!”, she lamented one time (Interviewee, identity withheld, 10 August 2025). In this phrase, she condensed both the perceived remoteness of the location, the hard, physical work involved, and the perceived less desirable status of living in a hard-to-access hamlet as opposed to the town nearby. One could also say that she included a nuance of grief as well, as it suggests that in the future the mountain house, which so many generations before kept going, will become a seasonal or vacation home at best.

Contrastingly, The Anchor has support from her unmarried daughter who still lives at home most of the time. More often it is the other way around: daughters are free to travel as needed, while the mother tends to the household, but the opposite is also true. The Anchor expressed a desire to visit a local landmark and to come visit my hometown alongside her husband, both of which would be possible in theory only because they have a daughter living locally to tend to the household in their absence.

At the opposite end sits a neighbour of The Host. Due to her health, she cannot stray too far from her house and, thus, is far more restricted than her peers, to the extent that she passed some of the household chores onto her husband.

Drawing from the above, we are looking at a community with a diminishing number of women, all of whom struggle to find kin to receive their knowledge and responsibilities. This restricts their mobility and increases the household's dependence on them.

Staying on the mountain

The women's uninterrupted living on the mountain seems to me a mixture of social expectation, ingrained habits, and personal preference, as well as circumstance. Not only are they limited by the geographical constraints, but also everyday responsibilities which demand their interrupted attention (cattle, guests, fieldwork). As interviews revealed, even with the promise of gender equality in the socialist society (Hurubean, 2015, pp. 9, 19–20), the women on the mountain had little room to pursue schooling or formal employment, since that would have meant disrupting the household. The Host was held back from further schooling to support her parents' household. In another family, the move of the woman-of-the-house to the valley resulted in the move of the entire household. As these examples illustrate, both in the past and at present, the women cannot overcome restrictions, since they are anchored in place due to limited support and established responsibilities with almost no one to take over even temporarily.

Granny and her daughter-in-law have not been to the valley in years. The son and the grandsons regularly go for work, supply runs, entertainment, etc. The Host has not gone to her son's house in the valley or, more relevant to her, the cemetery in over a year. The household, livestock, and tourist influx demand all of her time. Quite the opposite, family members come up the mountain to help her with larger tourist groups. The men, many of whom had jobs in the valley as foresters or in other industries when younger, have always been more mobile, presumably because they shoulder less of the household and hosting chores and therefore are more expendable in the home sphere.

One of the women said that she will keep cows as long as she can, with no intention of giving that up yet, despite her family's wishes. Younger generations, though, acknowledge the limitations of this lifestyle. So do the older widowed women, since they cannot even visit the doctor due to livestock needing daily care. One incomer, who has taken up goat rearing and supplemented her available food sources by buying and keeping a cow as well as chickens, mentioned that she cannot leave her house even for a day or so as the animals need feeding and taking care of, and she cannot rely on any of her neighbours and she has no kin on the mountain. Her experience highlights two distinct aspects: the

importance of family and community support and community self-regulation, and the role of the matricultural sphere in regulating local-incomer interactions and upholding the local moral economy. Both throw light on how care, labour, and (dis)trust (Umbreș, 2022, pp. 60–65) shape participation in the community.

In a world where, until very recently, "all that one had was what one grew or made themselves" (Interviewee, identity withheld, April 2026), having a continuous presence at home meant that the household and its younger members were safe, tended, and supplied with any necessary produce and household goods. Being able to continue this way of life is a point of pride to many, at least as long as they are still able-bodied. Hence, in the face of diminishing numbers, this practice has become central to the long-term continuity of local families, becoming an aspect of the normal local matriculture. The practice has indirectly helped preserve local communities, despite hollowing tendencies, by reinforcing women's authority over the domestic sphere to the point where they are irreplaceable.

Upholding the moral order

The women share, with the men, the duty to uphold the local moral order, but are positioned more centrally in its perpetuation through their role as mothers(-in-law). While the men concern themselves to observing religious holidays ("We must not work today, it's a holiday that our grandfathers kept and it will bode ill" (Interviewee, identity withheld, 5 May 2025)), making sure they get fair pay for the various odd jobs they perform, and on occasion, defusing or solving conflicts, the women have a less visible, but more impactful role.

As caregivers to the next generation, they are expected to provide a positive example in all aspects of life. The Host and The Granny were most active as moral gatekeepers, with notable contributions from The Anchor, mostly in relation to my actions and some of her own family.

By far the most talkative among my interviewees, an attribute which, alongside her openness and friendliness endear her to her visitors, The Host is often concerned with her duty to society, her efforts to do things right, uphold morality and religious norms, and provide positive examples to follow for those around her. For example, in the early months of 2026, a female neighbour's death put her in a position to forfeit her duty to society due to a livestock emergency. That is, unable to leave the animals, she could not perform the rites that womenfolk would carry out when one of them passed on. Not only was she unavailable, but because of the diminished population and some animosities between the departed lady and her neighbour, there was no other woman to be called on to do these

tasks, which then fell on male kin. The Host saw this as very regrettable but unavoidable under the circumstances and, surprisingly, a result of the deceased's moral failings, as she was said to have driven family members away. In The Host's mind, this was, in a way, a divine punishment for failing to uphold the moral order and a direct result of her being a bitter, angry, resentful person during her lifetime: not only did she not have female kin around to help, but she did not have her neighbour's goodwill and the two other women who would have placed duty above judgment were unable to attend.

There are, of course, other situations for which The Host has readily available examples of how to conduct one's life in the appropriate, praiseworthy manner. She herself strives to be tolerant, to serve her community, and to be accommodating of her daughter-in-law, and she brings these attitudes up as benchmarks that she hopes - and strongly wishes - that others would apply as well. In one example, The Host emphasised the resilience, endurance, and hard-working attitude of a community leaver. Despite hardships and losses in the family, rejection from kin, and very reduced means, the person in question managed to set aside money to buy a house and even provided care for relatives although they did not show her the same grace.

The Host is also keen to make sure the hamlets, and local women especially, are represented correctly in my research. In one of our discussions, when I said I wanted to write on the women's experience in the village, she told me:

> Write that they have too much work, they don't have a minute to themselves —even when they cut the wood. They spin wool, clean wool, knit socks, mittens and sweaters, cook, […] and they tend to the animals. They use the loom, that is what you should tell them, no need to speak with everyone—this is what we do.
>
> Interviewee, identity withheld, 6 February 2026

This description, however, comes from an aggregated, idealised image of how a woman in the village should conduct herself, alongside what expectations are imposed on her and how these feel, based on The Host's own experience. While some (older) women still spin and knit, and some embroider, I believe none still weave (though quite a few did so in their youth), which shows how the ideal outlives the practice, in a similar way to how the feeling and identity of remoteness endures despite some improved access. Her dismissal of the need to ask others is also telling: she considers herself a knowledgeable source, experienced enough and legitimate enough to speak for the whole of the local women's collective in a way that ensures adequate representation. This translates into declarative gatekeeping that was never enforced in practice.

Contrastingly The Granny had negative examples to highlight, on occasion calling out what she believed was a norm transgression. Furthermore, it was not only that a norm was broken, but the resulting situation was not in any way advantageous to the nonconformist, hence making it to some extent a fool's errand. For reasons of confidentiality the accounts are not reproduced in this paper.

In somewhat more neutral terms, The Anchor once reminisced about solving a childcare issue in the absence of the mother. Under the circumstances, she took the necessary steps, resulting in the correction of what she thought was a situation that needed putting right. She now recounts it as a funny story illustrating the unavoidability of certain developmental milestones in childrearing.

There is, though, one aspect where the women were willing to bend the rules to some extent, and that is related to their children. For the most part, the children received the usual guidance in relation to morality, faith, keeping the community going, and not disposing of the land if at all possible. However, in some instances, it was geared towards ensuring a better future for them: having a choice, getting more education, seeing the world, or marrying well. These aspects are not always spelled out, but sometimes hidden beneath remembrances and half-regrets told as jokes. Despite the risk of having no support in later years, some of the women went against the grain by prioritising their children's wellbeing over local societal expectations, a pattern also present in other communities (Goina, 2024, pp. 94–95). The pattern indicates tension between wishing to ensure the continuity of the community and ensuring the next generation has more agency.

Discussion

Based on the above examples, I propose that the narratives and actions of my participants are forms of matricultural transmission, through which the women exercise their agency and navigate remoteness in their everyday life within the wider constraints of what remains a patriarchal, traditionalist society. Following from these remembered, retold stories and participant observation, the hamlets are communities where women, despite acting within a patriarchal society, function as household and moral anchors, as well as agents of change when warranted. Their experience of remoteness, which changes throughout their lives, shapes these roles sometimes subtly, sometimes more prominently (as in their efforts for their children), indicating how frictions between socio-geographical circumstances and applied agency shape their world. It is also far from neutral in its effects, clearly laying a heavier burden on women, whose role, power and influence in the community it shapes. This leans the balance both ways: it keeps them dependent and

contained, but also gives them more power and influence in the domestic sphere and women-related community issues.

The women's act of staying on the mountain is what enables the community to endure. If one removes their quasi-permanent presence, what remains is seasonal living, maybe labour-related temporary housing, not unlike how construction workers sometimes sleep on site. The families would come seasonally to plant, harvest, and forage, but they would most likely not keep animals, other than potentially sheep (considering the origins of the settlements). This is reinforced by the return to seasonal living for some younger generations in the hamlets: they mainly stay in the village spring to early winter, sometimes even spending days away regularly in season. They do not keep livestock anymore. Furthermore, I encountered one situation where a family almost sold their house on the mountain, as they expected the wife to move to the valley when their youngest started school, showing how her long-term physical absence from the property renders it potentially useless. To my knowledge, the only example where the wife was away and the husband was on the mountain was in the case of the teacher. However, the schoolteacher was accommodated in the school and there was no actual household to tend to, since their main residence was in the valley.

The women's fundamental role in ensuring continuity is similar to what Goina (2024, pp. 77, 80–85) and Agárdi (2022, pp. 188–191, 245–249) document in Arad county and the wider East European region, respectively. Agardi routinely illustrates how women subvert authority to ensure their families wellbeing, work hard, take on the breadwinner role with diligence if needed, and ensure their children are raised as confident, self-reliant individuals. Similarly Goina's participants start from a place of domestic responsibility, being housewives and mothers, but as times change, they become heads of households and carers to younger siblings. Even if some stories include temporary displacements or travel for school, the women tend to return to their family home, and almost always focus their efforts on its continuity, as much as possible, marking it as central to their *raison d'etre*. This aspect is also visible in how they emphasise prioritising their own household (and its continuity) above all else, to the extent that they will say that "*fiecare cu grădina lui… numa la câmp facem cu rându*,"('each is concerned with their own garden;' Interviewee, identity withheld, 5 April 2026) and mutual aid only comes into play in the season for fieldwork (tilling, planting, harvesting).

Nevertheless, continuity tends to break down when parents allow children to pursue further schooling and when matricultural transmission is disrupted: if the daughter moves away for schooling or marriage, and there is no daughter-in-law to take on the role, there is no-one to whom the mother of the family can directly pass her knowledge. Depending on the circumstances, if there is no kin to move permanently into the house, it will be

inhabited only seasonally or abandoned. As covered above, The Host recounted how she was kept from further education so that she would be local and help her parents, a common rural practice (Goina, 2024, p. 87). Her education and her wishes were sacrificed for the sake of the extended family, and subsequently, the community. Directly following from this adverse experience, she made every effort to ensure her children had a wider range of choices and supported them through schooling and moving away. In the process, she forfeited having permanent help with the household, which potentially makes her the last generation in her family that conducts a traditional, mostly self-sufficient lifestyle based on subsistence agro-pastoralism. Hence, in some cases, adverse experiences causes the women to go against the norms,[3] which can result in the dissolution of continuity owing to the women's role as anchors of the household.

Most of my participants were at an age when they identified more with their role as mothers and grandmothers and less with their role as daughters. Furthermore, since the established rapport was often based on my being perceived as a proxy-daughter, the data reflects this angle and looks at matricultural transmission between the generation of my interlocutors and their daughters(-in-law). Even so, some ascending mother-daughter interactions could be read through the lines, but there is considerable variability owing to the small number of accounts. The Host mentioned that her mother "taught her nothing" (Interviewee, identity withheld, 4 April 2026), for skills are meant to be stolen (self-taught by observing others), and, as mentioned, was not supportive of her educational aspirations. The Granny mentioned that her brother was left in charge of burying the parents, but no other notable mentions of them arose in our conversations. The Granny's daughter-in-law and her mother, though, had a closer relationship and I was told they spent many hours sewing for her dowry. They visit each other when the mother comes up the mountain, and alongside the sister-in-law to Granny's daughter-in-law, help each other whenever possible and especially around hosting larger tourist groups. The Anchor's relationship with her mother seemed more fraught, especially following her mother's remarriage. The Host's neighbour was also close with her mother, but due to mobility issues and her mother's illness, she had to devolve the care to a more able-bodied sister.

Following from the above, the data suggests that on average, despite leaving home upon marriage, the daughters maintain a close relationship with their mothers and remain responsible for at least some of the caregiving in the parents' old age. Even more, the gold standard, as derived from The Host's examples, is that a woman should be always hard-working and caring even towards those that might not deserve it. Nevertheless, the transmission between mother and daughter seems to slow after marriage, as, with

3 I also acknowledge the influence the larger socio-economic context and the changing attitudes towards education and salaried work have on this shift, but its exact mechanisms will be the object of future research.

patrilocality, the daughter-in-law takes over upon the son's marriage or the daughter moves to her husband's house and becomes part of the transmission chain from her mother-in-law. Of course, these are not rigid structures and with the availability of mobile phones there is considerable contact and continued transmission, but a significant shift happens when the women moves from the natal to the marital household.

As the community became of interest to outsiders, my participants became proxy mothers and grandmothers, feeding, hosting, and guiding visitors, resuming matricultural transmission in a new form. However, at this stage, further research is needed to ascertain whether the fragility of the matricultural transmission system leads to quicker integration or higher tolerance of newcomers. If newcomers are at odds with the community, the women have the authority, as longstanding residents of the hamlets and participants in its social life, to use their experience and worldview to highlight where the visitors are transgressing: perhaps being too nosy, seen as overly demonstrative in religious practices, or even not knowing how to properly tend to animals. The same happens when locals step out of the norm, with unwanted behaviours being brought up as negative examples. The situation is illustrative of how those tasked with transmission are also (self-)tasked with regulation. Moreover, this authority extends to all community members, regardless of their length of residence.

It must be recognized that the women's authority only operates within the larger patriarchal tradition. Men in the community are not only more visible, owing to their wider mobility, often in pursuit of paid employment, but are deferred to as decision makers and even storytellers in relation to visitors and tourists. Gendered authority is subtly embedded in everyday life: it is still the women who prepare and serve most of the meals, and while they help with more demanding physical work, it is usually the men who decide when it starts and how it is undertaken. Overall, gendered hierarchies are part of the social atmosphere of the hamlets, with unpartnered women often thought of as unable to thrive in the community, especially without male or kin support. The local matriculture framework is subordinated to this wider context, but also to the restrictions of remoteness.

The difficulty of access has long impacted life in the community. As noted, it started as a chosen attribute; my research, though, revealed instances where locals wished they could relocate, but were prevented by the low value of their (relatively inaccessible) properties. Furthermore, as families were larger in the past, many successions are not settled, making selling difficult even in the higher demand environment of today. With an increase in opportunities in the valley beginning in the last decades of the past century, as well as the dissolution of communist era employment structures, the hamlets depopulated, first because people had the means to relocate and then due to the need to search for

employment further and further afield. The remaining scarcer local population, still faced with the downsides of geographical remoteness, rely, in part, on the women's role in the household, resulting in a friction between increased authority and constraint. It is the women who usually make sure tourists benefit from attentive hospitality (meals, accommodation, storytelling). As one local once told me when approached for help with some tea on a wintery hike, "Please go to the next house over, there are two women at home and they will surely be of more help than me" (Interviewee, identity withheld, 30 December 2016). The reliance on women's labour does strengthen their importance, on one hand, allowing them authority within this sphere and increasing the likelihood of matricultural transmission, but further restricts their mobility, on the other: they have to be home not only to tend to the household and animals, but to be able to act as hosts for tourists and visitors.

Women also perceive themselves as remote, as demonstrated by Granny's daughter-in-law, who is painfully aware that her place of living prevents her from benefitting from the help of her own daughter-in-law. The Host and her neighbours also cite the length and difficulty of travel, besides the risks of leaving the household and animals unattended, as the main reason for their lack of mobility. Participants who moved away felt this more acutely and cite the difficult life as a reason to never go back to living on the mountain. However, the opposite is also true: all my research participants, including the women, pride themselves in their identity as *isolați*, which they merge into a sense of belonging and a shorthand for resilience and exceptionality.

All of my participants routinely emphasise the amount of work they need to do, which they state directly results from where they live, as, for the most part, unless the men bring supplies from the shops in the valley, they only have what they grow and preserve locally. They are keenly aware that the hollowing-out of the communities means there is less support, fewer women, fewer kin connections to rely on, and increased responsibility. While incomers can fill some gaps, including - as I have shown above - in acting as new links in transmission, it does not remove the added pressure on local women or reduce the fragility of the system. Thus, remoteness, while it does not radically alter the content or mechanisms of matricultural transmission, recontextualises how it operates. It restricts women's mobility and makes them central to the localities' existence in their current form. They are quite literally the glue that holds the community together. At the same time, remoteness-derived processes such as depopulation and touristification introduce a growing fragility to the matricultural system, exposing it to an increasing risk of dissipation due to the reducing numbers of permanent (female) residents.

Conclusion

In the above, I have explored matricultural practices in the mountain hamlets that form my field site, with particular view to lived experience, narratives, and resulting responsibilities of the local women. Following on from the situations encountered, matricultural transmission covers common elements, such as values and skills, but is also concerned with community wide social norms. The women act as the main authority within the household, but also concerning socially acceptable behaviour in the community, making them a less visible, but still notable counterpart to the traditional patriarchal authority of the men.

Matricultural transmission is not fundamentally transformed even when operating within Romanian remotenesses, with considerable similarities to other rural areas as discussed in the previous section. Even so, the remoteness adds additional pressure to a system already transforming as a result of larger socio-economical circumstances (globalisation, commodification, increased international mobility). With decreasing population, remote Romanian women have fewer avenues for unloading their responsibilities and insufficient relief via the attraction of newcomers, creating an atmosphere of fragility. More notably, remoteness places at odds the mothers' efforts to expand their children's opportunities, especially through education, with their own needs, thereby reducing their own mobility and making them indispensable to household survival.

My findings attribute the endurance of the community to the direct efforts and sacrifices of local women, sustained through the meaning and significance they themselves attribute to *womanhood*. They offer a snapshot of the community where the women actively choose to stay on the mountain, despite the personal difficulties it entails, due to the responsibilities they have accepted as wives, mothers, and daughters. While their immobility can be actively attributed to external pressures and expectations, the women have shown they are willing and able to exercise agency and go against the grain when they decide to do so, which is why I propose that acting as anchors to their households and community is a conscious, willing act, not just an inertial taking on of handed-down responsibilities. These Romanian women living in remote hamlets have an active matriculture for which they have made personal sacrifices and in which they take substantial pride.

Biography

Oana is a social anthropologist, focusing on remoteness and isolation in rural Romania, post-socialism, nostalgia, and memory. A Goldsmiths, UoL alumna, she is currently a third

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