Vâlva Băii – Link from Folklore to Societal Structure of the Mining Community in Apuseni Mountains, Romania

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Abstract

This paper explores the figure of *Vâlva Băii*, a female spirit from Romanian mining folklore, as a tool for social regulation and moral codification within the isolated communities of the Apuseni Mountains. Drawing on anthropological theories of folklore, mining cultures, and visual anthropology, the study positions the legend as a governing system in a microsociety historically shaped by extractive labour and social marginality. Further, it reflects on how documentary cinema may act as an ethnographic method to visualize and archive these immaterial systems of belief. Through an analysis of field research and cinematic representation, this study articulates how *Vâlva Băii* serves not only as myth, but as mechanism—at once regulating, punishing, and preserving the moral order of mining life.

Keywords: Vâlva Băii, Romanian folklore, mining communities, oral law, visual anthropology, cinema, Apuseni Mountains, societal structure, subterranean myths.

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Deep within the mountainous regions of Romania, amidst the labyrinthine passages of long-abandoned galleries, a whisper persists—the voice of the *Vâlva Băii*. Often envisioned as a spectral guardian of underground wealth, this female spirit embodies a uniquely Romanian manifestation of a broader anthropological phenomenon: the use of legend and fantasy as mechanisms for social regulation in microsocieties. These mythological figures, found not only in the Apuseni Mountains but also across global mining traditions—from the *El Tío* of Bolivian silver mines to the *Mistress of the Copper Mountain* in Russia's Urals—do not merely populate the imaginative world of miners; they regulate, discipline, and bind these marginal yet deeply cohesive communities.

Fig. 1. Vâlva Băii – reenactment

The *Valva Băii* is said to reveal veins of gold to the honest and punish the greedy, her shifting presence a warning embedded into the very rhythm of life underground. Similar to the "knockers" in Cornish mining lore or the harsh guardian spirits in Guyanese pork-knocker culture, these legends function as symbolic scaffolding for behavioural norms. In perilous, liminal environments like mines—where official oversight is scarce and existential risk ever-present—myth becomes law, and the supernatural becomes a moral enforcer.

Anthropologists have long observed how oral tradition and localized mythologies encode systems of ethical conduct. William Bascom argued that

folklore acts as a form of social control, enforcing values through narrative dramatization of reward and punishment (1954). In mining camps, these stories develop into cultural codes that influence everything from generosity to safety rituals, often reinforced through collective memory and fear (Tietjen, 2022). Such beliefs are not irrational remnants but serve structural functions: they translate moral conduct into cosmological terms, according to Douglas ”the laws of nature are dragged in to sanction the moral code” (1966, p. 3).

These microsocieties—temporarily bound by extractive labour, economic precarity, and spatial isolation—develop autonomous belief systems that render invisible norms visible through the invocation of spirits and taboos. As Ballard and Banks note in their anthropological overview of mining cultures, risk, isolation, and resource competition often give rise to mythic systems that maintain a degree of social order—“moral orders in which extractive capitalist developments are embedded [...] symbolic practices and institutions evolve in contexts of volatility and contestation” (2003, pp. 289–290). These legends thrive in oral cultures where law enforcement and state presence are minimal, but where social cohesion is vital for survival.

Thus, to understand *Vâlva Băii* not only as a ghost story, but as an invisible architecture of rule—rooted in fear, morality, and shared belief—means reconnecting folklore to its original anthropological function. She is both trace and symbol, a spirit etched in the silence of the mine and in the collective psyche of the miners who once walked her tunnels.

The *Vâlva Băii*, as collected through oral history in the Apuseni region, operates under a tripartite moral code: secrecy, moderation, and obedience. The first rule dictates that one must never speak openly of having encountered her—an enforced silence that shields the sacred from profanation. The second instructs miners to take only half of what is offered, reinforcing a principle of ethical restraint in environments where greed can mean physical or moral collapse. The third rule compels those who find wealth through her blessing to use it in service to others, a command often tied to communal responsibility—helping elders, sharing meals, repairing local infrastructure, or investing in education. These rules are not arbitrary; they constitute a tacit ethical system. Their observance confers legitimacy within the community, while their violation invites spiritual or physical retribution, often described in the form of fatal accidents or sudden disappearances.

This behavioural code aligns closely with William Bascom's functionalist interpretation of folklore, wherein myths and legends do not merely entertain but enforce social norms, regulate taboo, and reinforce communal values through dramatized storytelling (Bascom, 1954). These stories are pedagogical: they teach through fear, memory, and symbolic equivalence. In mining contexts, where the risk of collapse, explosion, suffocation, or poisoning looms over each act of labour, folklore becomes a parallel system of moral instruction. The mine becomes not only a site of extraction but of initiation, wherein the *Vâlvă* acts as a threshold guardian between safety and death.

Mary Douglas's seminal work on pollution and taboo helps articulate why these beliefs persist. In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas argues that taboos operate in societies to establish order and define the boundaries of the known world (1966). The *Vâlvă* serves this exact purpose: she polices the invisible boundaries of morality and greed in an environment where conventional policing is impossible. Her presence sacralised the mine, turning a space of mechanical labour into one of existential stakes and moral reckoning. Gold, in this context, becomes more than a resource—it becomes a covenant.

Fig. 2. O. Bolunduț, miner in an 100 years old mining tunnel

Interviews conducted between 2021 and 2024 in villages surrounding Roșia Montană and Abrud reveal a polymorphic ontology for the *Vâlva Băii*. She is variably described as a young maiden, a translucent canine, a wizened old woman,

a breeze that extinguishes lamps, or a wolf that appears at dawn. This fluidity of form is not a weakness but a strength—it allows the legend to remain adaptive, translatable, and emotionally resonant across generations. In one field recording from June 2023, a retired miner recounted: "She was even a dog, a cat, a wolf, an old man or woman, but mostly a young woman that would fall in love with the miner". This statement reflects not only belief but affect. The *Vâlvă* is emotionally entangled with the miner's psyche. She represents conscience, temptation, blessing, and judgment in one spectral figure.

These encounters are not always spoken of in rational terms. Dreams, accidents, gut feelings, and unexplained gusts of wind are all understood as her communications. In one notable testimony, a miner confessed to surviving a collapse only because "a whisper in my ear told me to leave the tunnel early" (Interview, 2021) This phenomenology of perception—where bodily intuition is spiritualized—suggests a community wherein the senses are heightened by danger and mediated through myth. The *Vâlvă* is felt as much as she is seen. Her presence intensifies the sensory field, transforming the mine from a merely physical space into a symbolic one, charged with ethical voltage.

Her legend is further complicated by gender dynamics. Historically, women were not allowed into the mines after their first menstruation, under the belief that their presence would enrage the *Vâlvă* and curse the gallery. Yet this prohibition coexists with the centrality of a female spirit to the moral order of the mine. This contradiction reveals what scholars call the "regulatory feminine," wherein female-coded figures are denied official power yet wield significant symbolic authority (Creed, 1993). The *Vâlvă*, much like the Virgin Mary in Catholic cosmology, governs the internal world of the masculine psyche—her absence from the physical site of labour does not negate her omnipresence in its ethical scaffolding.

Comparative mythology suggests a possible Slavic influence. The Mistress of the Copper Mountain, a similarly punitive and seductive spirit, appears in Russian folklore as the guardian of minerals and miners. She too tests men, appearing in dreams or during moments of moral crisis. The historical migration of Slavic and Sarmatian populations into Transylvania between the 6th and 9th centuries, alongside patterns of colonization under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, supports the theory that the *Vâlvă* is a localized synthesis of pre-Christian Eurasian mythologies (Historical Interview, 2020). This cultural layering is not accidental; it reflects the migratory, extractive, and syncretic nature of mountain societies,

wherein beliefs converge, clash, and crystallize in response to shared existential conditions.

In addition to gender, the myth of *Vâlva Băii* intersects with local economic stratification. The mining communities of Apuseni were divided into legal miners, landowners, and *holongeri*—unofficial or illicit diggers who worked on abandoned or hidden shafts. While criminalized by the state, *holongeri* were often respected within the community for their bravery and knowledge. As one interviewee put it: "They are not thieves. They are men who know the mountain, who speak with it. The ones who steal from the carts—those are the thieves" (interview, 2022).

Fig. 3. Baciul Simionuț, retired miner. Holonger between 1940's

This moral distinction highlights the role of risk as a legitimizing force. Extractive labour in these societies is sacred labour, and proximity to danger confers not just social capital but spiritual significance. The *Vâlvă* is said to appear more frequently to these illicit diggers, reinforcing their status as chosen ones, not outlaws.

The Romanian state, over its shifting imperial and modern iterations, often stood in an uneasy relationship with mining communities. The gold beneath the mountains was alternately claimed by the Hungarian Crown, the Austrian Empire, and the Romanian socialist regime, yet none fully succeeded in assimilating the cultural autonomy of the miners. Smuggling networks, informal taxation, and ritualized bartering persisted alongside official structures, regulated not by state

law but by the invisible economy of the *Vâlvă*. In this system, legitimacy is moral, not legal. The miner is accountable to the mountain, not the minister.

Local miners maintained that their relationship with the state had always been transactional. Gold was recognized as a strategic material, and its exchange was controlled via official intermediaries. Yet informal trade, including smuggling, bartering, and localized forms of taxation, persisted under the protection of unwritten laws. The state's control of trade was mirrored by *Vâlva*'s control of behaviour. These two orders—formal and spiritual—ran in parallel.

Another component of social mythology is a pronounced xenophobic anxiety. Interview data reveals that newcomers were often regarded with suspicion unless they adopted the oral laws and internalized the rules of *Vâlva Băii*. Those who could not trace their ancestry to the area were labelled *vinituri* ("arrivals"), and often excluded from local decision-making. This cognitive boundary reinforced the exclusivity of belief and underscored the legend's role as a form of cultural filtration. Even Slavic or Silesian colonists, once settled in the region, were required to "convert" mentally to the three rules of *Vâlva*, despite no formal ritual of integration. The adoption of the myth became a prerequisite for participation in the mining social order.

Fig. 4. Entering Baia Domnilor shaft, dating from Roman times

Also documented was a psychological structure revolving around death, fear, and perceptual superiority. Miners, often spending entire days underground, spoke of an enhanced sensitivity to environmental cues—distant sounds, air shifts, dreamlike warnings.

Many attributed these to *Vâlva*'s presence or intervention. This spiritualized perception tied the community closer to the land, reinforcing the idea that *Vâlva* was not an abstract myth, but a natural force. The darkness of the mine, the absence of light, and the constant proximity to danger bred not only stress but heightened mythic attentiveness. As one miner recalled: "We live in night, every day. The mind must make sense of it somehow." (interview, 2020)

In this microcosm, *Vâlva*'s rules coexisted with another, equally powerful law: the rule of the given word. One informant narrated: "If a miner promises his neighbour that he'll help mow the field tomorrow, and that neighbour kills his child before dawn, the miner still goes to mow before enacting revenge." (interview, 2020) In such stories, promises override vengeance, community structure overrides chaos. This ethical contract predates and exceeds formal institutions.

Despite the decline of mining, many of these codes survive. The mirage of wealth, the fantasy of overnight transformation, remains a social driving force. The allure of gold may have faded economically, but culturally it continues to mediate attitudes toward work, morality, and family legacy. This is reflected also in the mirage of education, particularly during the communist era. Before 1945, education was rare and expensive. Sending a child to school, even a basic one, required substantial gold. Even *holongeri* reportedly sought to fund education for their descendants. Ironically, communism achieved what these miners dreamed of—free education—but at the cost of massive depopulation. Once children left the valleys for urban centres, few returned. Mining communities dropped from thousands to mere hundreds within decades. The myth, however, remained.

Belief was not optional; it was performative. One had to demonstrate knowledge of the rules, observe taboos, and respect the invisible boundaries that structured communal life. This reflects what Victor Turner described as "communitas"—a form of social bonding that transcends contractual obligations and emerges from shared ritual, risk, and narrative (1969). The *Vâlvă* is the guardian of this communitas. She delineates the sacred from the profane, the insider from the intruder.

Fig. 5. Communist blocks in Abrud Town

Even with the collapse of mining infrastructure in the late 20th century, the legend persisted. As the state deindustrialized, and villages depopulated, the story of the *Vâlvă* remained a cultural anchor. It was repeated in lullabies, remembered in songs, and eventually re-emerged in a new form: film.

In the beginning of the documentary there is a build-up of the myth definition and how that affected the behaviour of past generations, most of the mystical stories are presented through recorded testimony specific for anthropological documentaries intertwined with 3D animations that illustrate different fantastic legends, so the expository sense of what the viewer perceives is to understand the real facts apart from the fictional part of the myth. Re-enactment shots of how *Vâlva* might have looked or behaved are also inserted between testimonies or as visual illustration to the testimonies as cinematic method of historic/scientific documentaries with the aim of creating and preserving a visual representation of the myth which in reality never had a real portrayal. Apart from that, some of these shots use VFX methods (rotoscoping, CG particles etc.) to recreate the attribute of omnipresence of the legendary character linked to the idea that it was a presence related to all the individuals of those mining communities.

In the next part of the documentary the testimonies are revealed recreating the deconstruction of the myth through real arguments like: altered or limited perception in the mines, the willing of different individuals to get rich overnight

etc.; leading to the real life of the community and why they adopted/obeyed the rules of that fantastic character.

On another level of constructing the documentary and obeying the linearity of cinema itself, the facts are presented chronologically from the oldest stories to the reality of the contemporary era, hinting historic milestones that are related to the behaviour rules given through myth and adopted by that society.

Cinema is uniquely equipped to preserve and reinterpret the legend of *Vâlva Băii* because it merges storytelling, sensory immersion, and visual anthropology into a single expressive medium. Unlike written folklore or oral transmission, cinema can render myth tangible—materializing the invisible, giving form to the elusive, and anchoring the ethereal figure of Vâlva into a specific cultural and geographical context. Through image, sound, rhythm, and atmosphere, film does not merely recount the legend—it restores its experiential weight and makes its social function legible to the viewer.

A cinematic project focusing on *Vâlva* can employ documentary interviews with miners, elders, and local historians as testimonies of lived belief, grounding the supernatural in real, everyday experience. These interviews serve as crucial evidence of how legends operate not only as entertainment or superstition, but as ethical frameworks in communities marked by danger, isolation, and hardship. The belief in Vâlva often governs conduct underground: warnings are heeded, rules are observed, and violations are punished not by law, but by myth. This internalized discipline is precisely what cinema can reveal—by juxtaposing personal narratives with re-enactments, the viewer gains insight into the psychological and moral role of the legend.

Filming on-site, in abandoned or still-active mines across the Apuseni Mountains and other lesser-known locations, adds a layer of spatial authenticity. These spaces, rarely accessible to the public, hold the memory of generations and resonate with the presence of the unseen. In such environments, re-enactments become more than performance—they become ritual reconjurings of belief systems, visualizing how the legend continues to inhabit the space and influence those who enter it.

Ultimately, cinema acts as both archive and explanation: it preserves the legend of Vâlva not as a static relic, but as a living, evolving phenomenon. It allows the viewer to grasp how myth and behaviour intertwine, how fear becomes structure, and how folklore functions as an invisible architecture of social life. Through its multimodal power, cinema transforms a local ghost story into a

universal reflection on how humans give shape to uncertainty and negotiate survival through narrative.

While mining legends like *Vâlva Băii* emerge from the oral traditions of marginalized mountain communities, cinema offers a powerful contemporary medium for decoding, documenting, and preserving these living belief systems. More than just artistic representation, film—particularly ethnographic cinema—can translate myth into memory, belief into behavior, and silence into testimony. In the context of mining microsocieties, cinema becomes both a lens and an archive, allowing researchers to witness how fantastical narratives operate as instruments of informal law in communities shaped by isolation, danger, and precarity.

As anthropologist and filmmaker David MacDougall argues:

> Filmic images provide a sensuous bridge between observer and subject… recording not only action, but the spatial and sensory context of culture, especially where verbal explanation fails. (1998)

Through visual ethnography, the invisible rules of belief-based behavior—such as taboos around greed, sacrificial rituals, or gendered exclusions from mines—are rendered observable. In documenting interviews with miners or visualizing sacred mine spaces where the *Vâlva Băii* is said to appear, cinema can externalize internal cosmologies, making accessible those aspects of a society that remain elusive to text-based anthropology.

In Romanian contexts, especially in the Apuseni Mountains or Maramureş regions, ethnographic documentaries capture more than folklore: they film the very embodied performance of myth. Ritual gestures, pauses in the narration, and spatial arrangements within the mine indicate that the legend of *Vâlva Băii* is not merely narrated but performed, continuously shaped by the collective ethos of its bearers.

French filmmaker and anthropologist Jean Rouch highlighted this duality: ”Cinema is not a mirror but a magnifying glass—it doesn’t reflect reality; it reveals structures invisible to the eye.” (2003)

Indeed, when used as an anthropological tool, cinema functions as a secondary witness, one that not only documents belief systems but also becomes a vector for their transmission across generations. In communities where written transmission is rare or mistrusted, the camera captures visual testimony—the haunted glances, the hesitation before uttering a taboo, the trembling when

entering forbidden gallery passages. These gestures materialize collective fear, and with it, the informal codes that hold the group together.

Furthermore, as cultural theorist Vivian Sobchack notes, cinematic images are uniquely able to mediate between embodied memory and shared myth: "The cinematic experience enables a sensual memory of the other, creating a temporal embodiment that text alone cannot provide." (1992)

Thus, in documenting legends like *Valva Băii*, film does not merely archive a narrative. It reconstructs a world, one where the boundary between the rational and the spectral is porous. Film sustains the emotional texture of belief. It reveals how rules—who enters, who prospers, who dies—are encoded not in written laws but in shared silences, warnings whispered in tunnels, and in the tremor of a candle extinguished by something unseen.

In this regard, the documentary approach itself becomes an ethnographic ritual, one that balances presence and reverence. By recording the supernatural as a cultural fact, film does not debunk the *Vâlva Băii*—it dignifies her, preserves her, and recognizes her role as the miner's silent lawgiver.

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Annex 1 – Additional Figures

Fig. 6. Old processing ore equipment

Fig. 7. Old mining equipment

Fig. 8. Bucium county

Fig. 9-11. Aerials of Bucium Valley

Fig. 12. The legendary Ravens Rock at Rosia Montana

Fig. 13. Aerial of Rosia Poeni exploitation lake of CupruMin S.A.

Fig. 14. Anghelinei Rock on White Valley , part of Bucium Valley

Fig. 16. Aerial of Abrud Town