

# SPIRITUAL ITINERARIES: MYTHS AND TRADITIONS REINTERPRETED

## ROMANIAN TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS. MIDWIFERY\*

Anca CEAUȘESCU\*\*

**Abstract:** In the villages from Oltenia, the entering into the world of the living of a new member of the family is supervised by the midwife, the great initiate. The midwife is, above all, a *mediator*. At birth, she performs the sacred and the profane acts, meant to bring into this world the new-born child, to integrate him into the family, kin and community, to guarantee the mother and child's health. Her attributions are complex: she assists the woman for the delivery, the midwife takes the baby away from the mother, tells the father the sex of the child, cuts the umbilical cord, gives the baby the first ritual bath, lays the table for the fate fairies, she takes care of the food and hygiene of mother and child.

The competences of the midwife do not cease in the moment of birth, where she has certain ceremonial roles: she gives the child a new set of clothes, she carries the baby until the Church, she brings the baptising water, she kneels when the priest blesses the "midwife's water".

**Keywords:** Oltenia, the traditional village, institution represented by the midwife, mediator, ritual acts.

In the villages from Oltenia, as in the entire Romanian space, the entering into the world of the living of a new member of the family is supervised by the midwife, the great initiate, representative of the kin and collectivity. The midwife performs complex ceremonial roles, in which Christian elements are superposed to the pagan ones.

Participating to all the rituals, of birth, marriage and funeral, she had a well individualised part in the entire assembly of ceremonies "We have to take into consideration that in the traditional life of the village, the midwifery owns a position, an honorable status, it is not just a profession in the established meaning of the word and, she was committed to the fulfillment of the ritual, and between her, the

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\*\* 3<sup>rd</sup> Degree Scientific Researcher, PhD, "C. S. Nicolăescu Plopșor" Institute for Research in Social Studies and Humanities of the Romanian Academy, Craiova; Email: [anceausescu@yahoo.com](mailto:anceausescu@yahoo.com)

women and the children that she assisted, it was established a social connection that involved obligations”<sup>1</sup>.

As referring to the traditional form of the birth customs, the pregnant woman benefits by a double assistance: a “professional” assistance, provided by the old women, who know the old practices of the traditional medicine and pharmacopoeia, solicited only in case of problematic deliveries, and a mandatory assistance, assured by the midwife (for the moment of giving birth there were asked to come “old women and the midwife”)<sup>2</sup>.

In the traditional village, each family has their midwife. She only assists the mother, from the first delivery pains and remains beside her, until the performing of all the magical-ritual acts, which carry out for three days, after that visiting her periodically. Therefore, there is a *midwife of the village*, a woman who *performs this as a profession*, specialised in gynaecological issues, who helps for the delivery and whose mission completes once with the delivery of the baby, and *the family midwife*. A recent mention from the village of Dârvari, Mehedinți County, is of great importance in this situation: “It used to be a woman in the village, who would know how to help the woman to deliver. The midwife who used to help the women at birth, was not the same with the one who laid the table for the fate fairies. Later, women would give birth to their babies at the hospital, assisted by the midwife of the commune”<sup>3</sup>.

We can place the information from the village of Bratuia, commune of Dănești, Gorj County, in the same category: “The woman used to give birth assisted by skilful women. The midwife came and cut the umbilical cord. Each lately confined woman had a protective couple (*moș* – approx. patriarch, and *moașa* – approx. midwife). Most of the time, they were relatives... It should not be confused with the midwife of the village. Nowadays, it is still chosen a midwife (a protector)... After the delivery, it was called the hereditary patriarch, each family having a protective couple for all the children, in order to cut the umbilical cord..., who then was tying it...”<sup>4</sup>. In other villages from Oltenia too, the delivery was assisted by a specialised midwife and by that of the family, as, for example, at Cetate, Dăbuleni, Galicea Mare, Dolj County and Brănești, Gorj County, where: “there was a midwife who would help with the delivery and one who would cut the umbilical cord”<sup>5</sup>. At Bistreț and Bulzești, Dolj County: “The midwife who cut the umbilical cord was called *moșică* (a diminutive from *moașă*). She was different

<sup>1</sup> Mihai Pop, *Obiceiuri tradiționale românești*, Bucharest, CCES, 1976, p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> Florica Lorinț, *Obiceiuri de la naștere din Oltenia de Nord*, I, in “Revista de etnografie și folclor”, Bucharest, volume 13, no. 6, 1968, p. 524.

<sup>3</sup> Inf. Vultureanu Lucica, 73 years old, Dârvari, Mehedinți County.

<sup>4</sup> Ion Ghinoiu (coordinator), *Sărbători și obiceiuri. Răspunsuri la chestionarele Atlasului Etnografic Român*, vol. I, Oltenia, edition supervised by Ofelia Văduva and Ofelia Pleșca, Bucharest, Enciclopedic Publishing, 2001, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

from the woman who helped at birth. The midwife who performed her profession, came only if she was needed and called”<sup>6</sup>.

In the popular tradition, the midwife has a special significance during the birth ceremony, “becoming the mistress of the mother’s and child’s faith”<sup>7</sup>. The midwife is the mediator between the two worlds, the world from which the child comes, pre-existence, and the world in which he enters, the existence. Her role is a “socio-family complex one, meant to ease the passing, to determine the forces of Good to be diverted towards the fulfilment of the Sacred existence”<sup>8</sup>.

“*To attend a child’s delivery as a midwife, means to help the child with his absolution from sins*”, as Gheorghe Iordache remarks in a study dedicated to the phenomenon of this type of birth assistance, at the Romanian people<sup>9</sup>. In the author’s opinion, the assistance does not imply only the concrete help provided for a woman who delivers, but the assurance that the new-born is properly received, by observing the traditional ritual, into “the white world”. Therefore, the midwife integrates the child, a nameless being, who came from the world of the fore-fathers, into this side world, into the family, into the kin, into the religious society, and into the community. Hence, in this way, the new-born is integrated into the generations in which there is still kept the belonging to *fathers, great-fathers, great-great-fathers*, the ascendants of the child<sup>10</sup>.

The notion of *moș*, with all its derivate terms, is, as I. I. Russu mentioned, of pre-Roman origin and belongs to the old Carpathian-Balkan autochthonous fond: “it is related to the Albanian form and is probably part of the Illyrian-Thracian-Dacian languages, therefore it belongs to the old Carpathian-Balkan autochthonous fond”<sup>11</sup>. Paul Stahl, in an ample study about the Romanian tradition of having birth protectors and godfathers, notices that for Romanians, the word “*moș*” is at the origin of other important words of our social life, “*moașă*”, the feminine form of the word “*moș*”, having different meanings, all of them designating an older woman: “For the Romanians, it lies at the basis some important words of the social life... Maybe the old meaning of these words, «*moș*» and «*moașă*», is the most interesting one, because «*moașă*» signifies an older person, a foremother, a grandmother, and a woman who helps the children entering this world”<sup>12</sup>. In the

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> Mihai Dăncuș, *Moașa – mediator între nou-născutul “necunoscut” și lumea “cunoscută”*, in “Memoria etnologica”, Year II, no. 2<sup>nd</sup> -3<sup>rd</sup> of February-June 2002, p. 265.

<sup>8</sup> Narcisa Alexandra Știucă, *În pragul lumii albe*, Bucharest, The National Centre for Preservation and Promotion of Popular Tradition and Creation, 2001, p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> Gheorghe Iordache, *Despre “moșitul” la români*, in “Arhivele Olteniei”, SN, no. 14, 1999, p. 186.

<sup>10</sup> Florica Lorinț, Constantin Eretescu, “*Moșii*” în obiceurile vieții familiale, in “Revista de etnografie și folclor”, volume 12, no. 4, 1967, p. 301.

<sup>11</sup> Vasile Scurtu, *Termeni de înrudire în limba română*, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing House, 1996, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Paul H. Stahl, *Moșitul și nășitul. Transmisia lor în cadrul neamului*, in “Revista de etnografie și folclor”, no. 5, volume 38, 1993, p. 428.

acceptation of the linguists, the general term, the feminine word, implies, besides the meaning of old person, a kinship connection too<sup>13</sup>.

In Oltenia, the word is used to designate the woman who assists the delivery, according to the traditional norms, and who has a kinship relation with the family of the new-born. In some regions of the country, for example in Maramureș, in the older customs, the grandmother was frequently called “moașă”, because she used to be the one who helped the woman to deliver<sup>14</sup>. As Florica Lorinț observes, “we consider that from this original meaning, it was gradually being made the transition towards the professional acceptation. In the past, the function of the term was a socio-familial one, among the attributions of the midwife (an old woman who used to represent the kin and the household) being also included that of attend to a woman’s delivery”<sup>15</sup>.

The significations that the notion of midwife had along the time (old woman, aunt, grandmother) gradually disappeared, and it was used preponderantly the meaning of *sage femme*. “The meaning of *sage femme* has been preserved since the times when only the old women, with their experience, professed as *obstretix* midwives. Defining, in time, as social function too, it broadened its sphere: the specialised meaning occupies the main place, the top position”, as Vasile Scurtu noted in a referential paper<sup>16</sup>.

The word “moașă”, having the meaning of a woman who helps for the delivery, is met in all the regions of Romania, the midwife having an important role in the customs that accompany the first moment of an individual’s existence.

Nevertheless, the midwife is a significant character in the social life of many peoples. It is met all over the European space, but differently shaped. At Bulgarians, the midwife is an old lady (a sorceress) because, in the belief of the population from here, the birth assistance represents a magical art and every old woman becomes a magician; in the Serbian communities, the traditional midwife is called “babița” – she is an old and “clean” woman, who protects both the mother and the child against the evil forces from the birth; she is different from the midwife who assists the maternal deliveries<sup>17</sup>.

The same situation is met at the Greeks too, the midwife is the main performer when carrying out the birth ritual. Mihai Dăncuș, citing Yvonne de Sike, noted: “the midwife is a mediator between life and death... being... an instrument of the divine grace, she is the character with a noble function and profession, both important and dread”<sup>18</sup>. The midwife had an important role, especially at the first

<sup>13</sup> Vasile Scurtu, *op. cit.*, p.12.

<sup>14</sup> Mihai Dăncuș, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

<sup>15</sup> Florica Lorinț, *Tradiția moașei de neam în Gorj*, in “Revista de etnografie și folclor”, volume 12, no. 2, 1976, p. 132.

<sup>16</sup> Vasile Scurtu, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Mihai Dăncuș, *op. cit.*, p. 268-269.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

birth, for the ones being called only in special cases, in order to help the women if the situation got unexpectedly complicated.

It is assumed that the midwives appeared during the period of the matriarchate, the first ones being the mother of the lately confined woman, the grandmother, a sister, a cousin, or an older woman from the family<sup>19</sup>. In the patriarchate period, the maternal midwife was replaced by one who came among the father's relatives<sup>20</sup>.

Generally, according to the tradition, the midwife is necessarily chosen among the blood relatives of the father, being therefore a mandatory of the patrilineal kin. The condition to be related to the father of the child, is indirectly realised by her, through her husband, who was considered a "moș" (forefather). Only in case of illegitimate delivery, the midwife was chosen among the mother's relatives.

As a particular aspect, Florica Lorinț talks about the existence, in the county of Mehedinți, of the tradition according to which, the birth assistance was assured by a man, a blood relative of the child's father, and not by his wife<sup>21</sup>.

Therefore, generally, the midwife was a replacer of the father's family, for the child. Yet, recent research do not confirm this entirely, anymore. There are field ethnographic evidences that show that at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the north of Oltenia, at Runcu, the midwife was chosen among friends, according to the preferences: "Around our places, each woman chooses a midwife that she likes. The midwife offers the child all the clothes that are necessary, baths him for three days and gives food to the mother, still for three days. And the child is called her nephew"<sup>22</sup>.

In the villages from Ialomița, the midwife was never part of the family, and the activity performed by her did not represent a social institution, with a significant position in the life of a society, as in Oltenia<sup>23</sup>.

Numerous authors mention the preserving of the *related midwife*, called, in Gorj, *hereditary midwife*, a term that implies the tendency of continuity, when choosing her, for several generations<sup>24</sup>, and it reflects, in the same time, the relation between the household of the midwife and that of the new-born child. A rich ethnographic material, attests the keeping of this tradition: "everyone had their midwife; she was hereditary, as the godparents; she assisted the delivery of all the children in a family"<sup>25</sup>. In the commune of Crasna, Gorj County, "The midwife was

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<sup>19</sup> Andrei Hîncu, *Geneza complexului riturilor de trecere*, in "Anuarul Arhivei de folclor", XVI-XVII (1994-1996), 1997, p. 160.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> Florica Lorinț, *Obiceiuri de la naștere ...*, I, p. 523.

<sup>22</sup> Xenia Costa-Foru, *Cercetare monografică a familiei*, Bucharest, Fundația "Regele Mihai", 1945, p. 70.

<sup>23</sup> Germina Comanici, *Contribuții privind cercetarea obiceiurilor de la naștere în județul Ialomița*, in "Revista de etnografie și folclor", volume 27, no. 2, 1982, p. 152.

<sup>24</sup> Florica Lorinț, *Tradiția moașei de neam în Gorj*, in "Revista de etnografie și folclor", volume 12, no. 2, 1976, p. 128.

<sup>25</sup> Inf. Tonciu Maria, 87 years old, Maglavit, Dolj County.

the midwife of the family, being maintained over generations”<sup>26</sup>, and at Ghioroiu, Vâlcea County “... If she had assisted the delivery of the first child, then she took care of the woman if she got pregnant the second, or the third time. The midwife did not change”<sup>27</sup>. The midwife appears described in connection with the father’s family and, moreover, the kin. Paul H. Stahl notices that the *kin midwife* is specific for Romanians, being met under different appellatives, on the entire territory dwelt by them<sup>28</sup>.

The tradition of keeping the related midwife is also appreciated by the doctor Charles Laugier, who noted, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: “the most important is, unquestionably, the custom – almost as an institution, of the *mother-midwife*. The role and the prestige of the midwife is brought to the position of relative and protector, and it is one of the characteristics of the Romanian people, and it would be of great importance if we could discover its origin”<sup>29</sup>.

According to the tradition, the obligations of midwife were transmitted from generation to generation. The place of the midwife, who reached the old age, had to be taken by a younger woman from the same family, usually her daughter in law or her daughter.

The midwife is, above all, a *mediator*. At birth, she performs the sacred and the profane acts, meant to bring into this world the new-born child, to integrate him into the family, kin and community, to guarantee the mother and child’s health. Her attributions are complex: she assists the woman for the delivery, helps the child, she takes care of the food and hygiene of mother and child, using practises and empirical medicine knowledge that only she knows. Actually, before the birth of the child, the midwife resorts to certain magical practices that have augural signification (she places near the bed of the woman who is about to delivery, objects as: distaff for spinning, an axe, salt, bread etc.) that would generate the diligence and the luck of the new born<sup>30</sup>.

Immediately after birth, the midwife takes the baby away from the mother, tells the father the sex of the child, cuts the umbilical cord, gives the baby the first ritual bath, lays the table for the fate fairies, advises the new mother about how to take care of her baby. Then, she makes sure that the mother carries out other ritual practices related to the moment of birth.

The symbolic act of taking the baby from the mother and the wishes made in that moment, referring to his future, represent, in fact, the receiving and the introducing of the new-born into the family and kin. The gesture in which the midwife touches the baby with the forehead against the low threshold of the door,

<sup>26</sup> *Sărbători și obiceiuri ...*, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> Paul H. Stahl, *op. cit.*, p. 419-437.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Laugier, *Contribuțiuni la etnografia medicală a Olteniei*, Craiova, Scrisul Românesc Publishing, 1927 (republished in 2011, Craiova, Aius Publishing House), p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Gheorghe Iordache, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

marks the moment in which the child enters, for the first time, in touch with the world, represented, at least for the moment, by the household universe.

The immediate moment after the birth is accompanied by magical practices, having augural and modelling significations. According to a piece of information from Runcu, Gorj County, “Immediately after the delivery, the child is taken by the midwife, who is expecting on the threshold, and is poured cold water over, to become hardened to cold”<sup>31</sup>. A similar custom was registered by the physician Charles Laugier in Dolj County, where “...the child is introduced to the father, who pours cold water on his head, from a new clay pot, well burnt and not enamelled... The baby is poured water on his head, to be resistant to cold in his life”<sup>32</sup>.

It is still the midwife who mediates the meeting of the new born child’s fates<sup>33</sup>. In the evening of the third day after the birth, she “lays the table for the faith fairies” – the most important divination ceremonial act, meant to establish the destiny of the new member of the collectivity. That moment, the child enters for the first time in touch with the Sacred. On the round, low, three-legged peasant table, having the function of an altar bearing offerings for the Fates<sup>34</sup>, the midwife puts the things with recognised valences: the round shaped bread (unleavened bread or the bread of the Fate Fairies), basil, a glass of water, one of wine, sugar and different objects: a mirror, a book, a needle, sewing thread, a padlock, a hoe etc. The preparations made for this event have the role to determine these super-human beings, representatives of the sacred, to be merciful with the faith of the new-born, to be benevolent and generous. Their benevolence has to be gained, for the things that the wish to be auspicious.

For 40 days, in the tradition of the villages, the midwife will stay around the mother and child. She has the responsibility to help avoiding the eventual dangers, to which the couple mother-child was exposed, the hygiene of the two, the preparing of the food for the mother, the preserving of house cleaning etc. This time interval is a critical one, of passing, when the evil spirits manifest actively. In order to avoid them coming closer to the child, it is the midwife who does different preparing activities, a generally spread action being that to place next to the child protecting iron made objects, or other talismans with apotropaic role.

<sup>31</sup> *Sărbători și obiceiuri ...*, p. 22.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Laugier, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>33</sup> In the spirituality of the Romanian people, there are three Fates, having unlimited powers and certain tasks to fulfil as regarding the destiny of a new-born child. As regarding both the number and the origin of their duty, the Romanian Fates correspond to the Greek Moirai and the Parcae and with the Fata Scribunda of the Romans: “Romanians from the past had, as also the nowadays ones, three birth fairies ... they called them Parcae, from the verb pario-partus = to give birth, they were Parca, the fairy from the birthday, the second was Nona and the third Decuma, named after the ninth and the tenth month when the people were born) (Simion Florea Marian, *Nașterea la români – studiu etnografic*, Bucharest, Saeculum I.O. Publishing, 2000, p. 115). As a proof for their Roman origin we can mention the using by the Romanian people of the expressions: ”this is my faith”, “it is fated”, “this was my destiny/so it had been ordained for me”.

<sup>34</sup> Ion Ghinoiu, *Comoara satelor. Calendar popular*, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing House, 2005, p. 183.

Worthily to be mentioned is the preoccupation to revitalize, at each birth, the possibilities of fertilization of all the women. Thus, the midwife, the godmother and the wives that assisted to the first bath after the Christianization were going into the garden to throw the water at the root of a fruit bearing tree for the child to grow, to bloom and to be fertile. The midwife threw the water, turned up side down the trough and in the same time around her took place a ritual dance while they said the next words: “*The trough was turned over/ Long live the grand-daughter/ It was turned over one more time/ She shall have another daughter/ It was turned over on a leg/ She shall have a boy too*”<sup>35</sup>.

The ritual aimed both the fertility of mother and of the young wives who wished to have children. In a cheerful and joyful atmosphere the young people jumped over the trough while the midwife said: “ – *Come on, jump over the trough, / You shall have a daughter,/ If you jump higher/ You shall have a son*”<sup>36</sup>.

After the fulfilment of these ritual acts connected with the first step in life, between the midwife and the family of the new-born is established a kinship relation, of spiritual nature. The midwife calls the child nephew (niece), and the same way is called the mother (niece). The kinship relationship that begins, between the family of the midwife and the *nephews/nieces*, can be regarded as a blood relation, the terminology used in this situation (in Romanian, the words indicating nephew/niece, grandson/granddaughter, correspond: *nepot/nepoată*), indicating this fact: midwife – nephew/niece, patriarch – nephew/niece, similar to the consanguine relation: grandmother – grandson/granddaughter, grandfather – grandson/granddaughter. Moreover, “when the midwife belongs to the same family, the priority relation is that established due to the delivery assistance (*moșie*), as a consequence resulted from the ancient organisation of the family”<sup>37</sup>. From here, the interdiction of marriage between the members of the midwife’s family and her nephews/nieces, or between the nephew/niece’s children and those of the midwife.

The competences of the midwife do not cease in the moment of birth, where she has certain ceremonial roles: she gives the child a new set of clothes, she carries the baby until the Church, where she places the child on the ground, from where the godmother takes him/her, she brings the baptising water, she kneels when the priest blesses the “midwife’s water”. Moreover, the midwife has several obligation during the first years of the child. A tradition that is still present in Oltenia, is the touching of the child’s head against the upper side of the threshold (*datul la grindă*), a ritual that takes place for three or seven years, in the morning of the New Year.

Although it does not benefit from the privilege offered by the Church, such are the godparents, the institution of midwifery is presented in different firmly consolidated forms, expressed through the rites, which preserve obvious layers of pre-Christian, archaic culture.

<sup>35</sup> Simion Florea Marian, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 188.

<sup>37</sup> Nicolae Constantinescu, *Relațiile de rudenie în societățile tradiționale. Reflexe în folclorul românesc*, Bucharest, RSR Academy Publishing, 1987, p. 92.