

**THE ROLES THE WOMEN HAD WITHIN THE FAMILY,
IN THE TRADITIONAL ROMANIAN SOCIETY.
CONSIDERATIONS OF THE FEMININE HYPOSTASES
IN THE RITES OF PASSAGE**

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Abstract: From the great diversity of female roles, in the present work we have proposed to review some important aspects that define the role of women in the Romanian traditional family, with special attention to the important biological thresholds that man crosses throughout his existence his (birth, marriage, death).

It is known that in the essential moments of life, man undergoes a transition, a translation between two special existential modes, between two states or between two human conditions. These changes in the state of the man, within the family or the wider social group, presuppose an imbalance in the system of social relations. In this context, the customs, rites and rituals of the rites of passage have the role of restoring the affected balance and protecting the individual against the malevolent forces that are triggered during these periods. In practicing the ritual and ceremonial acts occasioned by these moments in human life, the woman has the essential role, and it is her responsibility to carry them out.

Keywords: traditional society, family, female roles, rites of passage, magical-ritual practices.

INTRODUCTION

The status of women within the society and her role within the family have been subjects of interest for a number of scientists, with preoccupations in various fields: sociology, anthropology, philology, psychology, linguistics, history, etc. Each of these disciplines brings its share of contribution to the definition of some basic notions regarding the feminine character and the role of the woman in the

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family and in society, to the construction of a more comprehensive image of the one that, viewed from complementary hypostases, constitutes one of the elements of steadfastness for the entire existence. The woman – symbol, perennial individuality, fundamental status of the family, landmark of civilizations – occupies an integrative role, of unification and uniqueness in the relations in the society, in general, and in the family, in particular.

From the diversity of female roles, in this paper, we propose a review of some aspects regarding the role of the woman within the traditional Romanian family, with special regard to the major biological thresholds that human crosses, throughout their existence: birth, marriage, death. We shall halt on the beliefs and the magical-ritual practices occasioned by these moments in the man's life, in which the woman is directly involved, her being tasked to carry them out.

THE FAMILY, IN THE TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

The family represents the fundamental institution in all societies, the oldest of the institutions of tradition, created by the human being and which, over time, has been as R. Popescu mentions, “a landmark, of stability in the lives of individuals”¹. According to the definition given in the Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language, the family is: 1. Basic social form, achieved by marriage, which unites spouses (parents) and their descendants (unmarried children); 2. The totality of people in a human community that binds through inbredness and kinship². The institution of the family is organized in the form of a system, being integrated into the social system. Similar to other social institutions, the family performs certain functions³: reproduction (through children, the family ensures the continuity of the group or society), the socialization of children (the transmission of the dominant cultural models in society), care, protection and emotional support, the conferral of a status (through kinship relationships, in particular, and other group relationships) and the regulation of sexual behaviour.

The family is among the first culturally generating human institutions “that seems to detach directly from the order of nature”⁴. Seen through the prism of religion, “the *family* is situated among the creational ordinances, that is, among *the supernatural organizations*; it was created by God himself at the time of Genesis...”⁵.

¹ Raluca Popescu, *Introducere în sociologia familiei. Familia românească în societatea contemporană*, Iași, Polirom Press, p. 13.

² For more details, see <https://dexonline.ro/definitie/familie>, website accessed on 19.08.2022.

³ Apud Raluca Popescu, *Introducere în sociologia familiei...*, p. 22.

⁴ Pierre Bonte, Michel Izard (coord.). *Dicționar de etnologie și antropologie*, Iași, Polirom Press, 1999, p. 243.

⁵ Ilie Bădescu, *Familia văzută cu ochii credinței. Triumful noologiei creștine*, in “Sociologie românească”, vol. III, no. 3, 2005, p. 14; also see Ilie Bădescu, Ozana Cucu-Oancea (coord.), *Dicționar de sociologie rurală*, Bucharest, Mica Valahie Press, 2011, pp. 178–184.

In the traditional society, the family had a special significance, being seen as a human microunit founded by marriage, which unites spouses and their direct descendants through biological, demographic, economic, spiritual, legal, psychological ties⁶. As Ernest Bernea points out, the family of the traditional Romanian village presents itself as a complex reality, with its own laws and purposes that “is more than a nation that perpetuates itself, more than an economic co-interest and a legal system of inheritance or distribution of assets, more even than all these together, which are elements and aspects which cannot explain the whole, either as a stretching or as a being or meaning”⁷. The existence of the Romanian villager’s family is also based on the inner need to live together, on the avoidance of loneliness, on the love of man, the consciousness of family and nation, etc.

For the Romanians, the core family (nuclear, liberal, restricted, individual) was representative⁸. After marriage, the descendants of any parents, with the exception of the last born of the boys, left the parental home and built their own household, forming separate families, and the girls went to the household of the future husband. After the marriage of the last boy, the family switched to larger forms: parents, children, grandchildren. The parents, therefore, remained with the youngest son, to whom they left the parental house as property along with several other assets. Each family separated from the core family had its own property, which was always a condition of maintaining family unity.

In the traditional village, the family implied, in fact, a natural association that conferred authority on parents over their children and well-defined responsibilities to its members. Its internal structure was very rigorous, and the relations between its function members have according to old laws, inherited from generation to generation: “roles are distributed according to hierarchy, conformism and power. They define a family lifestyle that enshrines the superiority of parents over children, the elderly over young people, men over women, older siblings over younger ones, etc. Gender relations were asymmetrical, with the man holding the privileged position”⁹. Therefore, it is a network of gradual and organic relationships, and a precise hierarchy of all family members, in other words, a well-defined architecture on which the internal life of the traditional peasant family is based. At the same time, its members had a censored freedom in order not to reach anarchy, held rights but only to the extent of fulfilling their duties and showed an increased responsibility towards the prestige of the family. Viewed in the context of the public life of the village, as an integral unit of the village, the family also functions beyond its biological limits: “as in a skilfully woven cloth, rather sensed than seen, the family of the ancient Romanian village appears

⁶ Vladimir Trebici, Ion Ghinoiu, *Demografie și etnografie*, Bucharest, Scientific and Encyclopedic Press, 1986, p. 227.

⁷ Ernest Bernea, *Civilizația română sătească*, Bucharest, 1944, pp. 107–108.

⁸ Roxana Deca, *Familia tradițională în context european – origini, transformări și evoluție*, in “Drobeta”, Series Etnografie, XXVIII–XXIX, 2018–2019, p. 122.

⁹ Raluca Popescu, *op. cit.*, p. 29; Roxana Deca, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

connected to other units, some with concentric spheres of existence, others intertwined, some necessary, others accidental, some permanent, others ephemeral. The family life community is organically trapped in the extra-family one”¹⁰.

WOMAN – ROLE AND FAMILY STATUS

In the traditional family picture, the roles take countless forms, each role “having its power of rebuilding and defining the life that persists far beyond its boundaries. In family culture... the role is not a manner of behaviour, but a way of being; it is closely attached to the family status and, together with, it forms the identity, the constitutive capacity of the personality”¹¹.

The man is the one who has the authority over his family, authority born from the role of representing the family before the community¹². While the main roles in the public space are “allocated” to him, who is said to be a rational and active person, the woman, who represents the sensitivity, the emotional and the passive, has been “allocated” to “indoor”, family activities¹³, it was separated from public life and destined for household, marriage and motherhood. Regarding this aspect, the historical sources depict the woman from the traditional society in three main hypostases: “wife, family mother and administrator of the household”¹⁴. The opposition between the outer space of the community and the domestic space also implies, in fact, the binary opposition between man and woman¹⁵. If the man had the socio-economic activities carried out outside the household, in the field and in the forest, the woman got involved in everything connected to the household: “The house is reserved for the woman, and the field to the man. This distribution of roles is not only in relation to specific activities, but also to objects, tools or animals that belong to or are present in the two spaces. The scythe, the axe, the plough, the chariot, the shovel, etc. are tools used predominantly (if not exclusively) by the

¹⁰ Ernest Bernea, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

¹¹ Corina Bistriceanu, *Rolurile familiale tradiționale ale femeii în literatura etnografică românească*, in “Revista de sociologie românească”, new series, XXXII, no. 3–4, Bucharest, 2021, p. 134.

¹² Mircea Brie, *Familie și societate în nord-vestul Transilvaniei (a doua jumătate a secolului XIX-începutul secolului XX)*, Oradea, University of Oradea Press, 2008, p. 410.

¹³ Bonnie S. Anderson, Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of their own. Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, vol. II, London, Penguin Books, 1988, p. 143, apud Loredana Stepan, *Imagini ale femeii în literatura și presa românească arădeană de la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea și începutul secolului al XX-lea*, in “Caiete de antropologie istorică”, year II, no. 1(3), January-June 2003, p. 48.

¹⁴ Alin Ciupală, *Femeia în societatea românească a secolului al XIX-lea*, Bucharest, Meridiane Press, 2003, p. 49.

¹⁵ Ioana Dăncuș, *Femeia – performer al practicilor magice în perioada duodecimesei*, in “Acta Musei Maramoronsiensis”, I, 2002, p. 113; also see Masson Danielle, *Les Femmes de Breb (Maramureș – Roumanie)*, in “Etudes et documents balkanique et méditerranéens”, Paris, 1982.

man. The loom, the hoe, the rake, the dishes, the oven, the broom belong to the female. The horse, the ox or the dog are animals that accompany the male. The poultry, the cows, the goats, the cats or other animals that are raised inside the household and are not used for field work are in the care and attention of the woman. Then, the male children accompany the father, and the girls the mother"¹⁶.

The authority of the husband was complete, as previously mentioned, and the inferiority of the woman was recognized by everyone. For example, from the accounts of the foreign travellers who visited our country, one can draw the image of the woman inside the domestic setting, humble before her husband. Thus, we learn that women did not sit down at the table with their husbands, but ate after they had finished, always stood up and took care of other household chores at the same time. Moreover, the subordination of the woman and the respect shown to the man is found in her daily behaviour: "all women follow the habit of not crossing the road cutting off the path of a man, even if he were a long distance before her, or if he were a beggar, but they stand still until it passes away, giving as a reason that it is the woman's duty to show men all honour, respect and attention"¹⁷.

Nonetheless, the female dominates the household space, and her most valuable quality is the *motherhood*. Emphasizing the importance of this attribute, in a landmark study, Traian Herseni stated that, in the primitive society, when there were no lasting relationships between men and women, the children knew only their mother, the father being impossible to be identified. Therefore, mothers were "the first category of functionally differentiated persons within the crowd", thus appearing "the first guiding idea, capable of polarizing and systematizing the social organization and the spiritual culture of the mankind: the idea of motherhood"¹⁸. Subsequently, in the conditions of the social evolution, as a result of the development of productive forces, the kinship of blood, the one that gave the cohesion and form of the collective closely connected by permanent work, had the woman as basic element: "the blood kinship, which becomes a primitive principle of organization of the social life, has as exclusive basis, in this phase, the woman, in her capacity as a mother"¹⁹.

Later, the woman would remain the fundamental principle in the establishment and the organization of the family. But, in addition to the family roles with which she is vested, the woman creates statutes and gives roles for the other members of the family: "thus, in the traditional culture, the man is the one who has a woman (a wife), the sons are the ones who have a mother, and siblings

¹⁶ Mircea Brie, *op. cit.*, p. 414.

¹⁷ *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, vol. VIII, volume edited by Maria Holban (editor in charge), Bucharest, Scientific and Encyclopedic Press, 1983, pp. 357–358.

¹⁸ Traian Herseni, *Forme străvechi de cultură poporană românească*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia Press, 1977, p. 291.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 292.

are considered those who have the same mother. Even in societies considered models of the patriarchal family and social order, this foundation of the family through the woman is visible”²⁰.

Towards the end of the 19th century, the woman inside the house was seen, most often, as an asexual being, she is identified as a housewife, raising children, caring for the male and the house. Moreover, she was also carrying out activities in the field with her husband, at the same time. The phenomenon is illustrated in the descriptions of foreign travellers who visited our country. Thus, the doctor Ernst Anton Quitzmann notes that “More hardworking is the woman who not only takes care of household needs, but must help her male in the field and in the forest”²¹, and Johann Lehmann (Christopher Seipp) records that Romanian women are submissive and very hardworking, they are in charge of raising children and caring for the house, weaving for the needs of the house, distaff spinning while riding the cart and, at the same time, they also work in the fields²². The role of the woman in the household economy is equally important: she grows the vegetable garden, raises poultry, spins, weaves canvases, paints, sews clothes, etc.

But this inequality, established in ancient times, between woman and man, has significantly restricted its sphere of influence in our day, with the positive evolution of the mentality.

THE WOMAN – PERFORMER OF THE MAGICAL-RITUAL PRACTICES IN THE RITES OF PASSAGE

If the man held the supremacy in the social life, the woman was involved, as mentioned before, in everything that means domestic life (the mother-woman, the woman-wife, the woman-housewife). Also she is the one who, based on the experiences transmitted from generation to generation, is involved in the performance of magical-ritual practices in the cycle of rites of passage (birth, marriage, death), ordaining the destiny of the family and of the wider nation.

The three major biological thresholds of life (birth, marriage, death), called by the French ethnologist Arnold von Gennep, “rites of passage”²³, have marked the human existence. Each of these suppose a transition between two special existential types or between two states, registering as stages of a becoming. It is

²⁰ Corina Bistriceanu, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

²¹ *Călători străini despre Țările Române în secolul al XIX-lea*, New series, coord. Daniela Bușă, vol. IV, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Press, 207, p. 543.

²² *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, volume edited by Maria Holban, Maria M. Alexandrescu-Dersca, Paul Cernovodeanu (editor in charge), vol. X, Part I, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Press, 2000, p. 559; also see, Mihaela Grancea, *Relațiile călătorilor străini despre statutul femeii în familia tradițională românească din secolul al XVIII-lea*, in “Caiete de antropologie istorică”, year II, nr. 1(3), January-June 2003, pp. 17–26.

²³ Arnold von Gennep, *Riturile de trecere*, Iași, Polirom Press, 1996, p. 32.

unanimously accepted that the changes in the state of the individual, within the family or the wider social group, imply an imbalance in the system of social relations, which must be restored. However, the traditions, the rites and the rituals occasioned by these moments have precisely this role. They include acts of a different nature: elements of ancient beliefs, practices related to magic (oriented towards the defence of man and his consecration in the new state) and elements of a social nature. In their performance, the woman holds the essential role, and they have the task of carrying them out, and this is because, according to tradition, it is the woman who manages all the elements related to the domestic life, the ceremonial and the sacred.

1. The first moment of the ceremonial complex that any individual goes through throughout his life is *the birth*, perceived, at the level of traditional thinking, as a transition from the “black world” to the “white world”, from an unknown world to a concrete world. From a traditional perspective, if the birth of a child is proof of sin and shame for the unmarried woman, for the married one it signifies “the supreme attribute of the wife”²⁴. The cult for a healthy and large family was very strong, because “the many of children, the Romanian’s wealth”. Moreover, the birth of children brings peace and balance to the family, constituting a blessing, whereas sterility is a curse.

Like the other important rites of passage (wedding, burial), the birth is a singular act in the existence of the individual, and, through the ritual practices occasioned by this moment, the first ceremonial inclusion of the individual in the family, nation and society is achieved. Within the ceremonial, the women have a primordial role; the mother, the midwife and the godmother are especially evidenced.

Once pregnant, the woman falls into the sphere of protective sacredness. From this moment on, she is in the “state of the gift” or in the “blessed state”: “The conception, the pregnancy, the childbirth and the motherhood put the woman – any woman – in the demiurgical position. In the biological and social positions, the woman reiterates the gesture of the *ontic creation*. It is true, in reality, the woman only reiterates the gesture of anthropological *creation*. But the natural expansiveness of the ego and the human sense of cosmicization make the anthropological or biological be projected (up to) the cosmic... From the point of view of human subjectivity, the mother remains a pure, divine, admirable and venerable creature, including the posthumous paradise remaining a metaphor for the return to the matrix-foetal condition. Being or functioning at the boundary between consciousness and the subconscious, between the personal abyssal and the collective unconscious, the «divinity» of the mother constitutes perhaps the only mystical reality – in fact the only one except for the death – precisely and convincingly within the reach of anyone, easy to be experienced publicly. The biological mother is (a kind of) deity to anyone, and

²⁴ Alin Ciupală, *Femeia în societatea românească a secolului al XIX-lea*, Bucharest, Meridiane Press, 2003, p. 34.

the Virgin Mary, the *Mother of God*, can constitute for any traditional-society mother a reference, an exemplary myth, a prototype or a model”²⁵.

As Roger Callois points out, gestation “establishes a new ordination of things, it is the cause of a change”²⁶. The state of pregnancy is a blessed state but, at the same time, one of great sacred instability, characterized by the vulnerability of both the mother and the foetus. Therefore, popular thought has formulated a set of “rules” of conduct, consisting of prohibitions, recommendations and prescriptions, based on the belief that inappropriate behaviour of the pregnant woman can have unpleasant repercussions on the child. From this perspective, the pregnant woman had to comply with unwritten “laws”; she was subject to taboo prohibitions, such as “not to do”, “not to look”, “not to say”²⁷. The whole system of prohibitions is aimed at protecting the woman, the foetus and, later, the child. And this is because, in the ceremonial of birth, considered “a ceremonial integration that marks the transition from an unknown world to a concrete world”²⁸, all actions taken have the meaning of ensuring the existence and destiny of the newly-born.

Undoubtedly, the most valuable quality of the woman is the motherhood. However, the woman does not only have to give birth to babies, but also to help other women in childbirth. And, in the customs that accompany the birth ceremony, this is the *midwife* – the one who, following a specific ritual, ensures the newborn’s entry into the “white world”. Her role is a “complex social-familial one, meant to make the passage, to determine the forces of the Good to go towards the fulfilment of the existence calibrated by the Sacred”²⁹.

²⁵ Sabina Ispas, Nicoleta Coatu (coord.), *Etnologie românească. Folcloristică și etnomuzicologie*, vol. III *Nașterea și copilăria*. Partea I: *Fenomenologia natalității*, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Press, 2011, pp. 118–119.

²⁶ Roger Callois, *Omul și sacrul*, added edition, Bucharest, Nemira Press, 1997, p. 30.

²⁷ Some are related to the quotidian gestures of the pregnant, which, according to the principle of sympathy, can cause marks on the child, others related to food, based on the principle of the transfer of the food eaten by the mother on the baby, others regarded the sex of the child or ensured a normal course of the pregnancy. Also see: S. Fl. Marian, *Trilogia vieții (Nașterea la români)*, Bucharest, Cultura Națională, 1892 (reed. 2000, Bucharest, Saeculum Press); Artur Gorovei, *Credinți și superstiții ale poporului român*, 1915; Narcisa Alexandra Știucă, *În pragul lumii albe*, Bucharest, Centrul Național de Conservare și Valorificare a Tradiției și Creației Populare, 2001; Ion Ghinoiu (coord.), *Sărbători și obiceiuri. Răspunsuri la chestionarele Atlasului Etnografic Român*, vol. I, Oltenia, edited by Ofelia Văduva and Ofelia Pleșca, Bucharest, Encyclopedic Press, 2001; A. Hulubaș, *Obiceiuri de naștere din Moldova: tipologie și corpus de texte*, Iași, “Al. I. Cuza” University Press, 2012; Romulus Antonescu, *Dicționar de simboluri și credințe tradiționale românești*, pp. 245–248, available at <http://cimec.ro/Etnografie/Antonescu-dictionar/Antonescu-Romulus-Dictionar-Simboluri-Credinte-Traditionale-Romanesti.pdf>; Sabina Ispas, Nicoleta Coatu (coord.), *op. cit.*; Anca Ceașescu, *Rituri de trecere în societățile tradiționale. Nașterea*, Craiova, Universitaria Press, Bucharest, Pro Universitaria Press, 2014, *passim*.

²⁸ Mihai Pop, *Obiceiuri tradiționale românești*, Bucharest, CCES, 1976, p. 185.

²⁹ Narcisa Alexandra Știucă, *op. cit.*, p. 69; also see Joel Marrant, *The Ritual and Economic Basis of Women’s Power. In a Romanian Village*, in “Acta Musei Maramoronsiensis”, VI, 2007, pp. 22–29.

The first midwives were the mother of the woman who had given birth, the grandmother, the aunt or a woman of the kin, those who protected the newly mother, brought her food and some pieces of clothing. Gradually, the role of the midwife was taken over by one of the blood relatives of the child's father, the oldest in the family, also known as the "kin midwife".

The midwife was the one who, in addition to the role of assisting the birth, performed all the sacred and profane ritual acts in connection with it: she helped ease the birth, received the child when they came into the world and gave them to the mother, took care of the food and the hygiene of the mother and the child, using practices and knowledge of empirical medicine. We are talking, here, about the "kin midwife", but, in the traditional communities there was also the "village midwife", a woman by profession, specialized in gynaecology problems, who helped with childbirth and whose mission ended with the arrival of the child in the world.

In addition to the medical practices and the concrete help given to the newly mother, the midwife had the task of fulfilling the ritual acts of great significance: the *first ritual bath* – one of the first rites of integration –, and *the reception of the faith-fairies*. The ritual ceremony of the first bath was a special moment, when the water exerts its therapeutic and regenerating virtues. Like Fire, it holds a purifying role³⁰. The midwife prepared the bath by putting various ritual objects in the water, with a special symbolic significance, by their ability to transmit beneficial attributes or with apotropaic function: holy water, basil, money, a silver coin, flowers (to be green as a leaf and blooming like a flower), grains etc. The ritual bath was made in a wooden bath-recipient, and, after that, the child was swaddled in cloths, with a swaddling band consisting of two twisted cords (one white and one red). Although today it appears as an independent ritual, it is not excluded that initially it was integrated into a festive complex related to the cult of the Deities of Destiny, being the first moment of a period that lasted three days, until the "laying of the table for the faith-fairies"³¹.

Three days after the birth, the midwife laid the "table for the faith-fairies" – the ceremonial act of divination, meant to establish the future of the child, but also to influence it³². The faith-fairies, supernatural beings who decide the fate of the man at birth, had to be reconciled with food offerings prepared only by the midwife. They had to have their goodwill obtained, for their wishes to become auspicious. In this sense, in the room where the child slept, on a table, especially

³⁰ Maria Golban, *Apa și Focul – elemente fundamentale purificatoare și apotropaice în cultura tradițională*, in "Datina", Year XV, no. 52, March, 2009, p. 9.

³¹ Dumitru Mariș, *Tehnici de manipulare a destinului în mentalitatea populară*, in "Memoria etnologica", Year II, no. 4–5, July-December 2002, p. 490.

³² Anca Ceaușescu, *Câteva considerații cu privire la prima scaldă rituală și masa ursitoarelor*, in "Arhivele Olteniei", no. 17/2003, New series, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Press, pp. 273–278.

prepared for this moment, the midwife placed the round-shaped loaves (or the faith-fairies cake), basil, salt, a glass of water, one with wine and other objects with a role in determining the future qualities of the child: a book, a mirror, a flock of wool, household tools, etc. being the only one vested with this ability.

The midwife was very important in the traditional village, between her and the child being established a relationship of kinship, similar to a blood relationship. The midwife calls the child *nepot* – approx. nephew, and they call the midwife *moșică* – approx. auntie.

An important role is also played by the woman in the ritual of baptism. Fulfilling the role of *godmother*, she is the one who, continuing the role of the midwife, contributes to the integration of the newly-born in the community of faith and in the social group. During the baptismal service, which is performed at the Church by the priest, the godmother holds the child in her arms and she also takes him home, where she gives them to the mother on the doorstep, while uttering the formula: “You gave me a pagan, I brought you a Christian”.

As it can be noticed, the mother, from a ritual point of view, does not have an important role, in the life the child, in the immediate period following the birth, all the significant actions being performed by the midwife and the godmother. Only after the ritual of baptism, the bringing-up and education of the child will depend on the mother. From this perspective, in traditional societies, mothers raised their children alone, regardless of the amount of work in the household or in the field: “Her powers are those of service, yet not as a servant, but as the initiate of a cult inaccessible to any other member of the house”³³. At the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the next one, the romantic paradigm attributed to the mother “the role of agent in the first socialization of the children”³⁴. She had a duty to provide the basics in the education of children, to form their character, to cultivate their national, religious and good manners. Thus, the woman-mother is the first teacher, the one in the hypostasis of a role-model for her children.

2. The second major biological threshold – *the wedding* – is one of the fundamental rites of passage, marking the transition of young people from the state of girl and lad to the category of adults. From a traditional perspective, through marriage, the individual “enters into line with the world”, the ritual practices performed during this event being meant to give the two young people a new social status. It is through marriage that the family is born, of a major significance for the traditional man, because, the permanence of the kin being ensured. Nevertheless, the new family is not created and strengthened only through the legal and economic background, nonetheless, in the traditional conception, it has to be consecrated and defended by means of ritual actions. All of them have the role to defend against the forces of evil and to attract the beneficial forces that would bring in fecundity, prosperity, integration into the community.

³³ Corina Pantelimon Bistriceanu, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

³⁴ Loredana Stepan, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

In this ceremonial as well, women have an important role to play. If the man has a decisive word in making the decision, the ritual acts, specific to the nuptial ceremonial will be performed by the women. Thus, there are remarked in the ritual, as main performers: the bride, the mother, the mother-in-law, the godmother.

“Marriage, similar to death, involves radical changes in the individual and the collective self, both in biological and social terms, the most elaborate cultural schemes of the wedding refer to the multi-layered dimension of alienation, separation, death, as well as to honour and shame”³⁵. Symbolically, the place where they come together is *the bride*. She leaves her parental house and the group of girls and boys, and also she undergoes a physical transformation assumed by the loss of her virginity. The bride’s honour is a basic element for the honour of the community to which she belongs, because it represents the potential to give birth to a sacred life, ensuring the continuity of the family. Therefore, the bride polarizes around her the entire group of women involved in the ceremonial, all the rites performed involving her directly, because the sustainability of the newly created family is dependent on the young woman.

One of the most tensed episodes of the bridal ceremonial is the preparation of the bride, ritually marked by placing the wreath on her head. The moment is constituted as a threshold ritual, with a great emotional charge, being one that marks the young woman’s transition from one stage to another, within her existence. It is accompanied by a note of sadness, caused by the “alienation” of the girl who leaves not only the premarital entourage, but also the family and parental home. Next comes the moment of uttering the forgiveness, which belongs to the same category of separation rites. It is also an emotional sequence, when the bride cries. Although crying appears as a natural act, folklorists are of the opinion that “examined more closely, in the whole unfolding of the custom, the bride’s crying was a ceremonial fact that, in the traditional wedding forms, could not be missing even when the real emotion was missing. Good order and traditional decorum demanded that the bride weep”³⁶.

Another tense sequence, which marks the change of identity of the bride, takes place at her “unveiling”, when the replacement of the wreath with the head-scarf marks the definitive entry of the girl among the married women. The scarf proves to be, on a symbolic level, the bearer of all the difficulties existing within a couple.

On the wedding scenario, the bride is subjected, symbolically, to some fertility rites, also performed by women, either representatives of the girl’s lineage, or women relatives of the groom. For example, the mother, when the wedding-procession leaves, puts in the right shoe three cloves of garlic or, at the bosom, a

³⁵ Gail Kligman, *Nunta mortului. Ritual, poetică și cultură populară în Transilvania*, 2nd Edition, Iași, Polirom Press, 2005, p. 59.

³⁶ Mihai Pop, *Obiceiuri tradiționale românești*, revised edition, Postface by Rodica Zane, Bucharest, Univers Press, 1999, p. 172.

barrel plug³⁷. Extensive practices on fecundity are made when dressing the bride. After the godmother places the wreath on the young woman's head, she tears a large unleavened bread above her head, and throws the pieces to the participants of the event. The bride's round loaf, a symbol of fertility and fruitfulness, suggests the bride's duty in the new family that is being founded, that of having children.

The godmother occupies a special place in the structure of the nuptial ceremonial, she is a character with multiple implications, both during the ceremonial and, especially, in the period to come. She places the wreath on the bride's head, holds the candle during the religious wedding, changes the bride's wreath with the scarf, guides the young when they pass into their new state. As a rule, she will also be the godmother of the children of the newlyweds, so she will be present, along with the midwife, at their birth, as well as at their integration into the community of faith.

The mother-in-law, the mother of the groom, is also the protagonist of a certain ritual filled with significances. She is the one who greets the bride, after the religious wedding, performing certain magical-ritual gestures of accepting and initiating the young woman in the new marital space: "When she came from the church, the mother-in-law received the bride on the threshold. She had her step on a pillow placed on the threshold and gave her to eat bread with honey"³⁸, or "before entering (the bride with the groom) in the house, the in-laws, the groom's parents, received them with honey (or sugar) to have their life sweet"³⁹. The reception of the newlyweds with bread and honey, two foods with a strong sacred charge, has the significance of achieving an affective and spiritual cohesion, but also an apotropaic role.

3. A number of ancient practices also abound during *the funeral ceremony*. As a rite of passage to another ontological level, death concludes, on the human level, a physical existence, but, at the same time, it becomes "the supreme initiation and the beginning of a new spiritual existence"⁴⁰. The "departure" of a member of the community creates imbalance, so there is a heightened concern for upholding ancient norms. The fulfilment of ritual acts can have, according to popular beliefs, negative consequences on the living but also on the one who left. Perhaps it is also the reason why the traditional man continues to practice customs, rituals, often without having a meaning for himself, but only provides him with tranquillity, by relating to the model of the ancestors.

The main performers are, again, the women.

Having at its origins the belief in the continuity of the soul's existence and in the Underworld, the ensemble of magical-ritual beliefs and practices occasioned by this event aims, equally, at the separation, in complete safety, from this world, as

³⁷ Florica Lorinț, *Obiceiuri de la nastere din Oltenia de Nord*, in "Revista de etnografie și folclor", volume 13, no. 6, 1968, p. 520.

³⁸ Ion Ghinoiu (coord.), *op. cit.*, p. 123 (Scornicești, Olt County).

³⁹ *Ibidem* (Ghioroiu, Vâlcea County).

⁴⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Sacral și profanul*, Bucharest, Humanitas Press, 1992, p. 182.

well as the integration into the world of the ancestors. The preparation for the “great road” involves, first of all, “ritual washing”, then “dressing-up” the deceased in the best clothes and putting on all the necessary to ensure a quiet road and a favourable reception in the other world. They are actions that involve, as a rule, women, those who know certain patterns and ancient ritual practices, some well preserved in the popular mind.

Beyond those practices, the great separation is a moment of pain, first and foremost, for the family, suffering expressed, among other things, through sad songs. During the three days when the dead man remains in the house, women sing laments, or, in some regions, *the Dawn song*. The mourning of the dead, the lamenting is not, however, only a manifestation of sadness, but also presupposes the fulfilment of a social obligation⁴¹. Manifesting itself as a spontaneous expression of the loss of loved ones, the mourning takes the form of a dialogue, which involves a continuous conversation with the dead man. Its content is adapted to the concrete situation of the deceased, usually describing aspects of the deceased’s life, the regret of his departure, the family’s pain, the empty place left behind him, etc. Unlike laments, The songs of Dawn are performed in a group, by mourning women. Because it is necessary, in this ritual, the condition of full cleanliness, the Dawn was interpreted only by “forgiven” women (women menopausal), the old women of the village, the same ones almost all the times, at the dawn of the mornings preceding the funeral. These songs are dialogues conducted with mythical representations from the other world or, similarly to the laments, with the deceased. In the popular mind, the Dawns appear as ancient embodiments of beneficent characters who come to show the main moments of the great journey to the other world. “It is said that the *Dawn-Fairies* are three sisters, who, at sunrise, seek the souls of the dead and lead them to the other world. *The dawn* thus becomes the correspondents of *the Faith-Fairies* and have the role of preparing the way of each of us to the other world. These mythical beings must be included in the wider magico-religious category, of Fairies, they can at the same time enter the category of malefic or beneficial characters”⁴².

The permanent communication between the present world and the departed is done not only through poetry / ritual songs, but also through alms, this activity also being the responsibility of women. “The leaving” to the other world does not mean a definitive death, but the “soul of the dead” continues its existence in the underworld, and, through alms, the relations between the two worlds are regulated, both as a form of “taking-care” of the deceased and as an attempt to maintain a permanent collaboration between the world here and the world beyond. Exclusively a female activity, alms are performed at different terms after the funeral (on the third day, the ninth day, the fortieth day, at three months, at six months, at one year and then every year on the day of death until the seven-year anniversary). At the same time,

⁴¹ Mihai Pop, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

⁴² Delia Suiogan, *Simbolica riturilor de trecere*, Bucharest, Paideia Press, 2006, p. 198.

alms is given to days of the Saturday before the Whitsuntide, celebrations dedicated to the Dead, usually the Saturday preceding the great holidays marked in the Orthodox Calendar. Alms actually involve offering food, in particular, loaves of bread or round-shaped loaves that, in this context, acquire magical valences.

CONCLUSIONS

The traditional Romanian family was a conservative community, had a rigorous internal structure and implied a certain type of relations between its members, relationships that functioned according to old laws, inherited from generation to generation. Within it, even if there was a mutual understanding in the husband-wife relationship, the man was the one to whom the authority over his family rested, he was the one who represented the family in the public space and made the decisions in all the important issues that arose. The woman was “assigned” to the household, marriage and maternity. She dominated the domestic space, having an important role in the foundation and organization of the family. She was a wife, a mother, a housewife.

On addressing the ritual and the ceremonial practices occasioned by the essential moments in the man’s life (birth, wedding, burial), the woman held the main role, and they had the task of carrying them out. From the first moments of the coming into the world of the newborn, when the main performer is the midwife, then the godmother, continuing with the bridal ritual, when the bride, mother, mother-in-law, godmother come out of the ceremony, and until the last moment of the human existence, all the rites performed involve the woman and this because, according to tradition, it is the woman who manages all the elements related to the domestic life, the ceremonial and the sacred.

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