

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL EFFECTS OF BANNING TRADITIONAL MIDWIVES FROM ATTENDING HOMEBIRTH IN ROMANIA

ADINA HULUBAŞ
PhD Researcher
Romanian Academy, Iaşi Branch
Bd. Carol I, nr. 8
Iaşi, 700505 Romania
e-mail: adina.hulubas@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Starting from 1960 traditional birth attendants were forbidden to deliver in Romania and pregnant women found themselves forced to give birth in hospitals. The highly respected village figure became a cultural phenomenon that made her more of a legend character. A village from Galaţi County experienced an uncanny event that activated the cultural information on midwives, as a continuation of the stories of her qualities. In hospitals, however, rituals are maintained under the intention of purifying nurses from unclean birth, while granny-midwife became a role, a character usually played by the mother of the woman in parturition. Customs evolve against the loss of this important social persona and we face an artificial scenario. We are now able to witness the last social effects of banning homebirth.

KEYWORDS: midwife • childbirth beliefs • confined women • Romania

In the last seven years, ethnological field research carried out in villages in north-eastern Romania showed an anthropological phenomenon related to homebirth and to the social institution of traditional birth attendants. The memory of both the familiar labour surroundings and of the practicing midwife has, nevertheless, dimmed out over the decades and gained a legend-like aura today. The analyses* carried out as part of the project titled "Childbirth Customs in Moldova. Typology and Texts Corpus", developed within the Romanian Academy, Iaşi Branch, recently ending with a book publication revealed an interesting phenomenon that transcends ethnology because of its social dimension. Thanks to the data stored at the Moldova and Bucovina Folklore Archive, from the A. Philippide Institute of Romanian Philology, Iaşi, I have been able to compare past information with recent field findings; the result further confirmed the traditional midwife's fundamental position in the social system. Moreover, I have recently begun a study of the traditional collective memory of urban people who moved in from villages fifty years ago or less. This way I can benefit from a larger perspective on the cultural patterns and its changes. Hence, it will be relevant to see what inhabitants of towns still remember and what they do in the city environment and how the old superstitions from home seem to them now.

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The context for mandatory labour in clinics presents similarities to some extent with the process described for rural North Carolina, US, where the population was torn between the 'granny midwife' and the officially imposed specialist. However, in 1960, when Romanian regulations were just beginning to alter the traditional system, the US diagnosis of the matter already reached a phase that has been characteristic to Romanian villages for the last fifty years: "Great segments of the population are not aware that the practice exists, and, where it is known to have existed, it is blanketed by an aura of folklore" (Mongeau, Smith, Maney 1961: 498).

I shall start by observing the cultural patterns of the shift from a living empirical midwife to a mythical character in rural settlements, and thus we will notice that homebirth related rituals have been transferred to the impersonal environment of hospitals. Moreover, ritual roles embodying the midwife appear during the critical ontological phase before baptism as an artificial scenario. Nevertheless, the degraded hypostasis of the ritual offers clues to the social importance the traditional birth attendant had in the past.

CULTURAL PATTERNS TO REPLACE A MISSING FIGURE

The first aspect that strikes the field researcher when asking about the old way women gave birth is the similar portrait the long disappeared lay midwives receive in the villagers' words. Obviously, the change from homebirth to labour in hospitals reached a final phase, after women had been forced to cope with the disintegration of this archaic institution. The striving for its maintenance was replaced by hyperbolas and mythical pictures deriving both from the great respect the midwife gained as healer and from unconscious cultural information.

Women between seventy and over ninety years old had their babies at home, helped by the *bunica* – the "grandmother" as they call it (initially it was their mother-in-law who assisted them). In her turn, the traditional midwife referred to the women she helped with the term *nepoate* – "granddaughters", and called the babies she delivered "grandsons". This kinship proves that birth at home was part of a set of beliefs and actions demanded by "an enduring, complex, integrated pattern of behaviour by which social control is exerted and through which basic desires or needs can be met" (Mongeau, Smith, Maney 1961: 498).

Apart from age and knowledge prestige, lay midwives also gained their respect in Romania thanks to the kind manner with which they approached the scared woman in labour. Informants of up to 75 years old had at least one birth at home with 'granny', while the rest of their children were delivered in hospital. It is exactly this type of intimacy they missed when following the influx to clinics. Traditional birth attendants used to speak with affection and braced pregnant woman up, according to villagers from various places in Moldova. She used "skilful words to give her courage", as people from Bijghir village (Bacău County) said, while in Sulița village (Botoșani County) peasants remember that she used to sing to the woman in pain and caress her. The untrained midwife even told stories during prolonged labour (in the village of Pălăniș, Botoșani County).

The magic customs surrounding birth, together with this emotional support had a positive effect on labour, since "folk customs knew consciously or intuitively how to

choose, to inhibit or to develop certain subjective or objective factors by trying to reach the contemporary desiderate – a painless birth” (Stoica Vasilescu, Maier 1974: 135). The comfort of a familiar setting (supposedly watched over by the ancestors) added one more element to the nostalgic image of homebirth.

The first cultural pattern that emerges from the interviews about the traditional midwife is the hyperbolic number one hundred, felt as a magic superlative. All the traditional midwives had more than a hundred grandsons (that is, delivered babies) in the recorded reports on their lives and activities. Not only did I hear it in all the villages I travelled to in Moldova, but also the number appears in all other parts of Romania. In the village of Sălișteana de Sus (Maramureș County), the ritual gathering of granddaughters (women helped by the empirical midwife) is said to have been held only after she delivered a hundred children (Chiș 2002: 262). Primitive thinking must have felt this number as maximal, as if infinity started afterwards. Its symbolic power was used by Persians, who said about beautiful, smart women that they had a hundred hairs on their head, by Chinese who depicted a complex doctrine as having a hundred flowers, while a leader of soldiers used to ask for a hundred warriors to complete a mission, according to *The Dictionary of Symbols*. The number one hundred is “an individualised entity that will have its distinct properties to confer a special efficiency in a wider context” (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1995: 284). A midwife was therefore legitimised as a good practitioner thanks to this old quantity-measuring proficiency. The respect she received was proportional. Even after people came to live in towns, they still speak highly of the midwife, as in the case of Moașa Maranda from Vulpășești village (Neamț County). Gheorghe Mihai,¹ who has been living in Iași town for the last 57 years told us about her: “everybody respected her tremendously, even children!” On these social premises myths and legends find the perfect conditions of oral transmission.

A more secluded archetype was revealed by an interview I recorded in Nărtești village (Galați County) in January 2009. A few years ago, during the ritual exhumation of the lay midwife,² villagers made a stirring discovery. Apparently, the entire body followed the decomposing process except for the hands, which turned into a white dust, up to the elbows. When touched, this substance crumbled easily. It is necessary to invoke here a birth custom whose transformation we are able to see today in hospitals from Romania and Bulgaria. In addition, a brief parallel with fairytales, legends and carols about the birth of Christ will show how the loss of a highly respected occupation is reflected through lenses provided by the collective unconscious.

The image reportedly seen³ in the midwife’s grave reminds us of a popular saying published in 1913: “The one that delivers babies has golden hands up to the elbows” (Pop 2007: 113). Romanian Christmas carols also contain this poetic image as one of the miracles performed by the Virgin Mary. After being helped by Saint Nicholas’ wife (*Crăciuneasa*), she reconstructed her midwife’s hands in gold, for they had been cut off by Saint Nicholas (*Crăciun*), who was angry that his wife had been defiled by the impure blood of birth. This part of the superior members is also the part that holds the baby immediately after birth, the baby being considered *spurcat*, unclean (as a pagan being), until christening. This motif also appears in stories and legends about the birth of Christ, showing an important connection with fairytales type AT 706 about a maiden punished by the amputation of her upper limbs for becoming pregnant. Since she had conceived immaculately (as the Virgin Mary), the injustice done to her would be redeemed at the end of the story.

The cut off hands represent in fact an artistic transfiguration of a folk custom found in Romania, Ukraine and Bulgaria. In Moldova, a region situated in the north-east of Romania, people are familiar with the name *mâneșile moașei* – the midwife’s sleeves – for this custom, a detail that stresses the hands once more. Eight days after birth, the midwife used to give a bath to the confined women she had helped, and in return, the traditional birth attendant received a gift of cloth meant to be sewn into new sleeves for her (the old blouse had been stained with blood), a towel, soap, food, and some money. But first the mother poured (holy) water on the midwife’s arms and asked her for forgiveness. In Ukraine, the action was called “washing the hands” (Listova 1992: 136) or “water pouring” and it was a mandatory phase: “she was even forbidden from attending a different pregnant woman until she had ritually cleansed her hands together with her previous client” (Boriak 2002: 39). All explanations are similar: the bloody hands of the midwife were a great sin for the woman she had assisted at birth and purification was demanded on a spiritual level. Most of the reasons from Romania and Ukraine invoked an afterlife with unclean hands for the midwife, unless this ritual is performed.

The uncanny event from Nârtești village (Galați County) is clearer in a cultural context. In the eyes of the entire village the midwife had miraculous hands for she had saved so many lives. Since legal regulations had stopped her from performing, the lay midwife became an even more captivating figure for the community, with the aura of a victim. After her physical disappearance, the empirical midwife entered the local pantheon and the general expectation was for a miracle to happen during the ceremony of exhumation. The cultural data was activated by excitement and affection for a dear person: “In the *individual*, the *archetypes* appear as *involuntary* manifestations of unconscious processes whose existence and meaning can only be inferred, whereas the myth deals with traditional forms of incalculable age” (Jung 1990: 153).

A CLINICAL ENVIRONMENT FOR ANCIENT BELIEFS

Leaving home for a hospital birth did not greatly alter the traditional perception of the moment. Apart from anxiety driven by the fact that the pregnant woman was no longer watched over by the household deities (located in the hearth or beneath the threshold), collective consciousness calls for some rituals to move into the new, though totally profane, setting.

Today we are still able to witness the prolongation of the sleeves custom because the shift from homebirth to the maternity ward is relatively recent, in comparison with Western countries from Europe, such as the UK, where The Midwives Act was issued in 1902 (Fraser, Cooper 2009: 85), or even Russia, where the change from home births began in 1917 (Belousova 2002: 50). Starting in 1950, trained midwives were sent to deliver babies (*moașa de plasă* was responsible for up to forty villages in Romania), but direct entry midwives did not stop attending women in labour, because authorised medical staff was too far sometimes and they could not be reached in time. It was no sooner than 1960 when traditional midwives were forbidden to deliver anymore in Romania, under the threat of incarceration if something went wrong.

Many Romanian mothers still used to offer a bar of soap, a towel and money after they have recovered from the labour in order to purify the medically trained midwife from the uncleanness of birth blood. On Internet forums there are numerous statements

on this topic from Suceava, Iași, Galați, Buzău and Constanța, all towns with important urban development situated in the eastern half of the country. Moreover, in Buzău town the gift is multiplied by three, since the woman in parturition offers soaps and towels to the gynaecologist doctor, to the midwife and also to the hospital attendant. This is a deteriorated hypostasis of the ritual, since the midwife is the one supposed to suffer 'defilement' of the hands by obstetrical procedures. Even more so, the midwife is the first to hold the heathen baby, who is supposed to come from an unknown world according to traditional thinking.

In hospitals from Constanța town the chief midwife reminds mothers about this mandatory gift, and sometimes even resident members of the medical crew make sure that tradition is not forgotten. The phenomenon is hence characterised by an inverse movement. Instead of a gesture motivated by folk knowledge, we see a persistence of the ritual based on doctors' expectation, as they seem to be convinced of its efficacy. We cannot state that nurses and doctors are familiar with the explanation of bloody hands in the afterlife or that they actually believe in it, but we can notice a certain attachment to the old beliefs.

A similar behaviour can be found in Bulgaria, where the 'midwife's sleeves' ritual or the 'washing of hands' is repeated on a special day (called *Babinden*), dedicated to grandmothers, *id est* the once traditional birth attendants. Not only do medical midwives receive here "a towel as an acknowledgement of the nurses' part in taking care of the mothers and their newborn" (Stavreva, Quek 2008: 67), but also a traditional holiday is established as the national professional day for obstetricians and gynaecologists. On January the 8th (21st according to the Gregorian calendar) both grandmothers who were supposed to be traditional midwives and physicians are celebrated as an example on how old convictions manage to survive in a society ruled by scientific discoveries. Water is poured on the nurses and grannies' hands on the same day, as if hospitals only represent a changed background for the same sacred action of giving birth. Medical staff and the retired granny midwives become homologues of the original birth attendant suffering from the impurity of lochia.

In the Romanian town of Iași, doctor Dorina Postudor, a neonatology consultant, 56 years old, declares herself more than familiar with women offering a towel and a bar of soap to nurses and believes that the custom is ancient. Nevertheless, she associates it with religious beliefs, when obviously we are dealing with a pre-Christian ritual that had to be tolerated by priests, like so many other cultural inheritances. This female doctor vaguely invoked a cleansing after birth, without being sure of the connotations. She reported that both rural and urban women maintain this custom while giving birth at Cuza-Vodă maternity hospital, Iași. Despite this, nurse Oana Tarnaru, 30 years old, from the same hospital in Iași town, believes that the custom is rarer each day. She noticed that mainly women having their second or the third child still offer the purification gift, and usually those who come from villages in Suceava, a county lying north of Iași.

The urban mothers we spoke to declared that they gave this gift to the medical midwife 15 years ago (two subjects) and 5 years ago (one subject), when they had their babies. Sorina Gușă⁴ also offered a bar of chocolate, a coffee package and money. The only explanation she had was "it is customary to give it". We can easily see in this example how vernacular information mingles with profane gestures (the habit of giving small 'attentions' to doctors in order to be better treated) and modifies the traditional contents of the ceremonial gift, all under the universal justification of being customary.

Another characteristic of the spiritual gap created by the displacing of birth is given by the attempt to find a logical explanation for the socially imposed gesture. Cerasela Munteanu, a resident doctor, 33 years old, from Iași town, knew that the towel and the soap was supposed to magically assure the cleanness and health of the baby's skin, but when she gave birth she limited her gratitude to the midwives to offering some money. Soon, the newborn developed pyoderma and all of her family accused her of disregarding the ritual. Obviously, this is a case of subconscious guilt using a traditional key to explain a hazardous turn of events. It is more important here to notice the strong conviction that inherited usages must not be overlooked and that punishment for ritual disobedience follows immediately.

When asked about the reason for her gift to the midwife from Cuza-Vodă maternity hospital, Iași, Daniela Chelaru⁵ replied: "This is what I knew should be done!" She learned about this rite in detail from her grandmother: she even asked for forgiveness from the midwife, and was familiar with the formula *dai di mâneci* – "you offer it as sleeves". Daniela Chelaru also told me about the old way of performing this ritual, by pouring water on the midwife's hands (which she did not do in the clinic). However, the meaning she gave to this custom was that the midwife is thus "watching over the child" with a greater interest. Only after I had asked her about cleansing the midwife did she admit that the gift also has this purpose.

Although the ritual explanation is not acknowledged by these people (whether they are doctors or patients), all are sure that the custom has a pragmatic meaning. Magic information is lost and people tend to replace it with utilitarian justifications, as happens in some other cases from urban societies that preserve fragments of the traditional outlook on life.

On the one hand, birth in hospitals provoked a slide into cultural patterns, and altered memories and actual sightings of the midwife. On the other hand, it changed the background for the same old ritual. Neither the new mother, nor the medical staff finds it peculiar to offer or to receive a bar of soap and a towel in the midst of a sterile environment. Nurses do not refuse the gift at any time, although most of them are not familiar with the mythological implications. The fact that the real traditional midwife left an active role vacant in the social configuration of birth customs led to the appearance of the appointed characters, asked to perform specific gestures throughout the baby's first months. Obviously, the localisation of these gestures proves that the ancient rituals were sometime ago performed there and that the population has been clinging to the cultural past.

RITUAL ROLES IN A PROFANE WORLD

The traditional midwife was deeply involved in all activities relating to the woman lately confined and her baby. Since the new mother was considered impure and was also physically restrained from doing housework, the midwife would remain for a week in the house, to wash the woman and her child, to cook and clean the home. In Russia the midwife used to spend three to nine days with the woman in parturition, for the same reasons (Listova 1992: 126). Magic protection and promoting good for the years to come were constant preoccupations for her. She set the table for the Fates ritual (*Masa*

Ursitoarelor) and interpreted the signs on the child's future the day after. It was the midwife's duty to carry the child to the church in order to be baptised and sometimes she even brought him home, gave him to his Godmother, and the latter would return him to the mother. The midwife prepared the ritual bath a day after the Christianisation, took the small tub out and threw the water on a fruit-tree for magical purposes. She prepared the meals for the feast and presented the baby to the guests for their gift of money.

She was glad to receive gradual recognition in return: the sleeves ritual represented personal gratitude from the woman she had helped, then she was rewarded by all the women present at the child's first bath after baptism, performed by the Godmother, and, in the end, the whole community acknowledged her abilities. When the christening dinner ended, the midwife came with a loaf of bread called *pupăză* ('hoopoe') and everybody stuck coins in it for her effort. Cereal porridge had the same ritual meaning in Ukraine and Russia, being used to collect payment from the guests. Each year the midwife was celebrated on a special day, called the Gathering of Granddaughters, which was on the second day of Christmas, on January the 8th or on the first Thursday after Easter. The fact that it became a professional holiday (in Bulgaria) proves once more that society backs up transformation and evolves constantly by replacing key figures.

All the parts the lay midwife used to play in the birth customs process left voids according to the social perception of the moment. Although the traditional midwife no longer performed her obstetrical tasks, her role had to be played by someone else for the sake of the baby and child, but also for impurity reasons. The midwife is believed to be the only one who can manage the unearthly energy of the heathen baby, and she can safely touch him before the moment of Christening, when the child 'gives up Satan' as the religious ceremony demands.

In Romania an elderly woman is appointed to carry the baby in her arms to the church for baptism. Usually, the child's grandmother will be glad to have this part. A century ago, it was the husband's mother who helped the wife give birth and took care of other matters. If the mother-in-law could not attend the labour, it was believed that "if you keep the old way, you choose your midwife from the father's relatives" (Lorinț 1967: 128). Hence, tradition is still respected regardless of social change. Some sort of information on the unclean baby must have remained on a passive level of traditional knowledge and everybody agrees to this 'pretending' to be a midwife.

Moreover, there are conservative regions from Romania where the ritual transformation goes even further. In Oltenia, a region situated in the south of the country, pregnant women from urban settlements choose a friend to act as a midwife when the time comes. This means that the woman will come together with her husband to take the baby from hospital and carry it home. The so-called midwife has to bring an entire outfit for the child as a gift. She will help with the baths afterwards and will take the baby to the church dressed in other clothes she has bought, receiving the money placed in the baby's tub by the women present at the bath after baptism. The fact that a couple is called to act as *moși* ('grandparents' also meaning 'midwives') relates this recent custom to the old social network from the region under discussion. In Oltenia the husband of the midwife was equally respected and honoured on the specific holiday (ibid.: 131).

The Romanian population residing south of the Danube River, in Bulgaria, respects the same custom. In Balei village (Vidin County), a woman declared that she chose her midwife in the person of her cousin who was a pharmacist (*Sărbători* 2010: 59). A

similar phenomenon was noticed by Tat'iana Listova in the western area of the Smolensk Oblast, where women are also asked to act as midwives for their confined neighbours. "[I]n Krasninsk and Roslavl' regions, after returning from the maternity clinic, an elderly woman, on occasion the grandmother, is invited for the child's first bathing. The person invited will bring a belt, swaddling clothes, handkerchiefs" (1992: 138–139). Although there is such a great distance between Bulgaria, Oltenia and Smolensk, the resident populations developed compensational traditions, to make up for the lost custom. This proves the tremendous social importance midwives used to have in the rural world.

The intermediary person between the impure child and the Godmothers was kept in the collective consciousness, with the same function characterised by van Gennepe: "they are intended not only to neutralise an impurity or to attract sorcery to themselves but to serve as actual bridges, chains, or links – in short, to facilitate the changing of condition without violent social disruptions or an abrupt cessation of individual and collective life" (2004: 48). Still, it is only this part of the country that emphasises the role of the appointed midwife, in the rest of the villages and cities people reduce it to bringing the child to Christianisation. I believe that the anthropological explanation for this forced ritual behaviour lies in a symptom clarified by Simone Weil: "Every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for him to draw wellnigh the whole of his moral, intellectual and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural part" (2003: 43).

From a sociological point of view the conclusion of the study conducted in North Carolina fifty years ago is more than applicable to Romania: "processes are going on through which traditional functions are being lost, reduced, or shifted, new content is taking the place of old, structure is being rearranged, and traditionally important status positions are in the process of crumbling" (Mongeau, Smith, Maney 1961: 498). The syncope created by the disappearance of a socially active persona was filled by the decision to disregard the institutional setting and to act as if birth had been carried on in the familiar environment of the home.

While the cultural phenomenon of remembering the traditional midwife in terms of hyperbolas and archetypal images will last for a few more years – until the last women who gave birth at home perishes –, the 'acting as a midwife' seems to be more persistent, since there is a collective awareness of this critical moment. Nurses and doctors will still receive gifts of towels and soap without any clear explanation, and children before baptism will be handled by people who fit the traditional midwife profile. If magic purposes initially motivated these old rituals, today we have reached a spectacular phase explained exclusively by the search for a ceremonious context that does not care for the mythical significance of gestures. We are heading into a purely aesthetic period, the furthest period from the ancient type of living, when acts are only meant to satisfy individual or collective expectations and tastes, and not to protect the vulnerable being from being harmed by unseen forces.

In conclusion, the shift from homebirth to medically assisted labour in hospitals had socio-cultural repercussions in Romania. Women seem to have an active cultural memory of the symbolic implications of birth and choose to maintain the old rituals even in the corridors of maternity clinics. Once their hospitalisation ends, mothers feel more comfortable if someone close to them plays the role of the traditional birth attendant during the baptism ceremony or even before it. On the other hand, villagers reminisce

about the deeds of the lay midwives by reviving the cultural archetypes they have inherited. The phenomenon is still alive in Romanian society, since birth at home was banned only fifty years ago by local authorities. The highly respected status of the traditional midwife is now revealing its last social effects.

NOTES

1 Gheorghe Mihai is 71 years old, attended 8 classes and came to live in Iași after peasants had been forced to give up their lands and animals by the communist agricultural organisation. His native village is Vulpășești (Sagna commune, Neamț County).

2 Tradition demands that the dead are unburied in order to see if they were a *strigoi* (a human demon), since it is believed that people truly die only seven years after they are deceased. Priests perform ritual services at the grave and throw holy water on the bones. However, few people continue to actually exhume the body today, since the ritual was felt to be traumatising for the relatives. Religious services and ritual meals are now offered often without opening the tomb.

3 My informant was Marița Chetroni, aged 77 in 2009; she attended only the first four grades at school and bore seven children. Her story on the midwife's physical aspect seven years after her death emphasised the dazzling effect of the preserved hands by repeating the word *white* four times. The image hence becomes very similar to a golden hands reflection.

4 Sorina Gușă, aged 39, has been living in Iași for 14 years and came from Roșcani village, Iași County. She attended 12 classes.

5 Daniela Chelaru, aged 26, came to live in Iași when she was 20. She originates from Bălțați, Iași County and attended eight classes, followed by three years of professional training as a seamstress.

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