Romanian Childbirth Beliefs in the Midst of the City

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The Romanian history of urbanization started no sooner than 1938, when the country became intensively industrialized and supposedly modernized (Ioan and Mihali 2009: 62). It was enthusiasm that brought people in standardized blocks of small flats and a new social class started to emerge. The second and most important wave of work migration took place early in the sixties, when the communist party forced the last land owners to give away their fields to state cooperatives and the young ones remaining without work and consequently lacking a secure future. Cities like Iaşi or Bucharest multiplied their populations with villagers drawn by the opening of large factories.

The same situation could be met at other nations of the Eastern Bloc, such as Bulgaria or Ukraine, to mention only the neighboring countries. The latter has already been discussed from the superstitions perspective:

> Unlike the 20th century idea of industrialization swallowing agricultural traditions, in Ukraine the traditional mentality and life-style are dominant in cities as well. As a result, people at all social levels become bearers of traditional knowledge, with education level having little effect on the transmission of folk demonological beliefs (Golovkha-Hicks 2008: 43).

The study aims to prove that rural characteristics survive in the urban context by an instinctive thorough selection that people make for situations they find themselves in. Not all superstitions maintain their cultural functionality though, and it is important to be able to understand that triggers traditional responses and when these data is starting to fade.

1. Rural Gestures in the Heart of the City

Romania is today in the point where the United States of America were seventy years ago, according to Louis Wirth:

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> our social life bears the imprint of an earlier folk society, the characteristic modes of settlement of which were the farm, the manor, and the village. This historic influence is reinforced by the circumstance that the population of the city itself is in a large measure recruited from the countryside, where a mode of life reminiscent of this earlier form of existence persists. Hence we should not expect to find abrupt and discontinuous variation between urban and rural types of personality (Lin and Mele 2005: 33).

The fact that Romanians react in a rural manner is obvious in any moment of the day, simply by standing next to a town church, in a "floating observation" (Péttonnet 1982: 39). The majority of people walking by, traveling in buses or even driving cabs would make the Orthodox cross sign, with three fingers from the right hand: they gently touch the forehead, then they go down on the abdomen, to the left shoulder and to the right shoulder[1].

More general arguments for the rural society refer to the social behavior that seems oblivious to the impersonal urban environment. For example, villagers still perform nowadays a gradual custom that intends to absorb vital energy from nature, in springtime[2]. This set of calendar-based gestures starts on the Palm Sunday and it ends on Whitsunday, but it has two more celebrating days: on the Ascension day and on the Saint George one. Following the natural order of vegetation growth, people take branches or grass and place them above their gates, or on the wall, next to the Orthodox icon[3]. On the Palm Day, people bring consecrated willow tree branch from churches, at Saint George they put a grassed piece of land on the gate pillar, on the Ascension Day peasants use walnut leaves to decorate their gates, while on the Whitsunday they place linden tree branches above the access from their fenced yard. All these vegetal forms are meant to magically induce power, health and vitality to the resident human beings.

After having witnessed this traditional behavior in 2006 in villages from Galaţi county, I noticed in Iaşi city too that people put leaves above the front door of their apartments built in the communist period. Nevertheless, not all of the four holidays are marked in this way; urbanized people only perform the custom on Palm Day and on Whitsunday, using willow, respectively linden tree branches. The image of the green leaves is frequent, and it clearly suggests that people living inside that apartment are a first generation of urbanites.

Another argument that qualifies Romania for the folk society status is the role of the traditional midwife in the childbirth rite of passage. Although they were banned to attend births fifty years ago, the direct entry midwives remained in the Romanian cultural memory as a mandatory ritual character[4]. Elena Botez[5] from Iaşi

[1] This pious trajectory is most of the times shortened but, nevertheless, the urbanites still perform it.

[2] The custom has been thoroughly analyzed by Varvara Buzilă (2004) in the Republic of Moldova, which was part of Romania until 1940 and by Ion H. Ciubotaru (1999: 189).

[3] In Romania, two cultural levels coexist harmoniously: pre-Christian customs are tolerated by most of the Orthodox priests, while religious gestures and rituals are carefully followed. Taking the branches inside, next to the family icon of Orthodox deities defines a more recent mentality though, since the authentic rite intends to transmit the force of vegetation to the gate the family passes through, and thus magic by contagion can be efficient.

[4] The child is considered to be heathen, hence impure before baptism. Only consecrated persons, such as the midwife and the future God-mother can touch him without placing themselves in danger.

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city told me about the ceremonial bathing of her granddaughter, which happened in 2011. This feminine gathering takes place one or three days after baptism and the Godmother washes the new Christian. Still, it is the "midwife" who prepares the water, as Elena Botez mentioned. The woman who accepts the midwife role puts milk, sugar, basil, an egg, flower petals, holy water, honey, a feather, money and bread in the water, all having precise magic purposes. A book and an Orthodox icon are placed under the bathing vat. Moreover, Mrs. Botez herself acted as midwife for a friends' daughter, a part that also implies carrying out the water to a fruit tree[6], shouting in a folkloric manner and pushing a childless wife on the upturned vat, so that she may have children, too. The midwife thus acts as an initiated persona all along the birth rite of passage and the respect she benefits from the entire witnessing group is proportional to her traditional importance.

This phenomenon is not specific to Moldova only, since in Oltenia, a southern region, a woman is appointed as midwife[7] and in the capital of Romania a priest gave the name of the so-called midwife to the baptized child, in 1967. Luminiţa Frăţilă[8] declared that the priest did not accept the name Luminiţa ("gleam of light" in English) and asked the woman impersonating the traditional midwife for her name. Since it was a Christian one (Dumitra, from Saint Demetrios), Luminiţa was baptized under this name, despite the fact that in her birth certificate she was called otherwise. The fact that the priest (representing a social class that fights more or less overtly with the pre-Christian customs) gave the name of the midwife to the child reinforced the social respect the traditional birth attendants held.

Furthermore, the threshold taboos are well known in the town, people avoiding to hug themselves or to give away food over the doorstep. Together with the taboo of taking outdoors the newborn who has not yet been baptized, the threshold interdictions disregard the fact that the communist standardized blocks of flats do not have a tutelary spirit of the house. The behaviour of the urbanites is unchanged though, as if they assume that the household deities have moved too,

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This is why today, both in villages and towns, an older woman plays the midwife role and carries the new-born to the church, where he is baptized (Hulubaş 2011).

[5] The recording was made in April 2012, in Iaşi city. Elena Botez is 58 years old, attended high school and a couple of other training courses, such as computer sciences or public relations. She has been living in Iaşi for 44 years, her native village being Tansa, from Iaşi county.

[6] The significance of all these elements is known by town inhabitants even today: the milk is expected to give the child a white skin for his entire life, the sugar will make his life sweet, basil will bring him luck, the egg will keep him healthy, flower petals will give him beauty and attractiveness, holy water will obviously deflect harm, honey can make the child sweet to the social environment, the feather will induce an easy life, while money and bread are used for future wealth. The book under the vat is supposed to make the child smart and interested of reading, while the icon is merely a Christian influence. Throwing the water out at the base of a fruit-tree implies growing up tall and beautiful as the tree and also having a fruitful life. Magic analogy characterizes most of the traditional worldview in urban and rural Romania.

[7] Dumitru Gălăţan-Jieţ mentioned the fact that in the city of Târgu-Jiu (which is not in Moldova region, but in the south of Romania) a woman is assigned the role of the midwife when the mother and her infant get out of the maternity clinic. She would carry the new born to his home and offer him an entire outfit. Further more the ritual midwife is the one that gives the new-born the daily bath for as long as six weeks after his birth (2011, 37).

[8] Luminiţa Frăţilă, age 44, was born in Bucharest and attended high school studies. The recording took place in April 2012.

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with them, in the city. The phenomenon is more obvious in the attempt to tame the impersonal residence: soon after villagers came to live in apartments, they brought and exposed traditional weavings, popular Orthodox icons and pottery. Even today, most of the buyers of traditional ceramic fairs are part of the third age segment of population, more exactly, they represent the first generation of urbanites.

The last example of rural mentality is closer to the childbirth set of beliefs. Birth signs or hemangiomas are generally explained by disobeying a magically prohibited act. While pregnant, women are forbidden to steal anything, even if it is some food she lusts at. Otherwise, the shape of the stolen thing will appear on the skin of the baby she is carrying in her womb, on the exact spot she first touches herself after having committed the theft. All of our urban subjects confirmed this superstition with personal examples of birth marks found in their families or at their acquaintances.

Moreover, hemangiomas are believed to be the effect of seeing great fires while pregnant. The future mother is now forbidden to touch her face in terror, for her baby will have red spots on his face, similar to the flames that scared her. Elena Mihai[9] is not even coming from a village, she has lived in Iaşi for all her life and she told us about such a misfortune that caused hemangiomas to her and to one of her neighbours[10]. We can now start to admit that performing ethnography either in the city or of the city may be insufficient. Still, before reviewing the main concepts, we should offer an answer to the following question: how is it possible for Romania to stay traditional in the age of globalization? From a sociological point of view, there are four main phases of urban development. Romania still experiences the first one, after the economic crisis has stopped the beginning of suburbanization. The Hungarian geographer G. E. Enyedi believes that the entire Eastern Europe lives this initial moment of urbanization, while Western Europe is characterized by an actual second stage of suburbanization and the United States of America already experience a third phase, defined by absolute decentralization and counter urbanization (Abraham 1991: 41).

Romania of today encounters some industrial and urban growth, the migration from the rural zone to the urban one continues and a great density of population is found in metropolitan areas[11], all representing arguments for the first part of urban development. Even if the number of people coming from villages to the cities can never equal the one from the sixties, it is important to notice that the phenomenon

[9] Elena Mihai was born in Iaşi, 63 years ago and attended 11 school grades. The interview with her took place in November 2011.

[10] On the other hand, when reality is no longer appropriate to the traditional worldview, people pursue their beliefs by adjusting them on the same magic grounds. In 2007, when I gave birth to my daughter who presents a hemangioma on her forehead, my neighbor Elena Nechifor told me that I must have been scared by the flame from my cook machine and I had been unaware when I had touched my forehead. This episode obviously had to happen in my pregnancy period, according to her full conviction. Superstitions persist as long as their cultural functionality is verified. Birth marks do not have a precise scientific explanation and people tend to fill in the gap with traditional knowledge.

[11] The 2011 census revealed that 297,541 people live in Iaşi, 301,761 in Timişoara, 314,513 and 1,628,426 in the capital of the country, Bucureşti. While in the district the first three cities are part of the urban population represents approximately half of the general number of inhabitants, Bucureşti holds more that four parts of the people living in the district of Ilfov.

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continues. For example, Daniela Chelaru[12] came to live in Iaşi city in 2005. She declares that the urban environment often disappoints and alienates her, but she still behaves the way her grandmother taught her to. Both her and our older urbanites do not manifest any symptom of the "disruption of traditional forms of memory" (Lipsitz 2001, 6) that characterizes highly industrialized countries such as the United States. In Romania, Habermas's condition is fully respected: "traditions can retain legitimizing forces only as along as they are not torn out of the interpretative systems that guarantee continuity and identity" (Habermas 1975: 71). It is exactly this cultural functionality that was preserved in the slow evolution of the Romania society. Childbirth beliefs are only a small segment of the spiritual inheritance that can be used to prove this assertion.

Latency best describes the state of traditional information in the urban environment. Both pronunciation and "collective representations" (Durkheim 1915) are preserved through a retractile attitude when confronted with less familiar contexts. We first recorded our subjects in their homes from Iaşi city and then we followed them to their native villages, to interview their childhood friends and families. Soon after we arrived in the country we noticed that they started talking differently and became more relaxed than in Iaşi. Subjects are thus experiencing a hyper awareness of their double condition and the result is that they inhibit both the peasant manner of speaking and the assimilated rural culture. Hence "the Observer's Paradox" identified in sociolinguistics by William Labov (1973: 209) is relevant in ethnographic recordings, too. Nevertheless, the pressure exerted by the city is released and speakers give up their self surveillance in two situations: when they feel that people around them will not look down on their traditional behaviour and when ritual contexts impose intervention.

Gheorghe Mihai[13] has been living in Iaşi since 1964 and proved a very circumspect attitude towards the questions we addressed to him regarding childbirth superstitions. His discourse was filled up with neologisms, some used incorrectly. This linguistic phenomenon speaks about the inferiority complex of the informant who was facing not just any outsider, but one that was prying into his old cultural knowledge. Still, in a different context, when the digital recorder was not close by, he felt himself free to share with us a disenchantment used for "overlooked" (*deochiate)* persons. We playfully pronounced the first two lines of the text used to cure headaches[14] and he continued with one of the most complete variants we met while being on field investigations in villages from Moldova. This situation proves that traditional information is still viable in Romania, but it hides in a covert type of memory, opposite to the overt one we can witness in villages. Although this

[12] Daniela Chelaru is 26 years old and graduated a 10 years school (that specialized her as seamstress) from the commune she resided in, Bălţaţi, Iaşi district. We interviewed her in January 2012.

[13] Gheorghe Mihai is 71 years old, attended eight school grades and comes from the village of Vulpăşeşti, Sagna commune, Neamţ district. The first interview took place in November, 2011, while the disenchantment episode happened in April 2012.

[14] Charms used for the severe effect of being looked at with evil eyes are found everywhere in the world. In Romania being overlooked is believed to cause harsh headaches, nausea, trembling and dizziness. People believe that even death can occur to those who have been overlooked by persons weaned and then breastfed again.

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concealed spiritual inheritance is "not exhibited and harder to be identified" (Golopenţia 2001, 41), the Romanian society is rich in opportunities for the interested ethnographers.

Gheorghe Mihai is a perfect, but not unique example of such latent traditional structures, for we have asked all the urbanite subjects investigated so far if they would step out in a ceremonial context (for example at *scăldătoare*, when the baby is bathed after baptism) to "teach" the unknowing mother or Godmother how to use the magic ingredients. None denied the initiative, since the destiny of the child is more important than the awkwardness of this rural intrusion. Still, when we manifested interest on Gheorghe Mihai's disenchantment, he became evasive, pretended he does not know it well (although he has just recited it perfectly) and changed the topic of discussion. The rural person suddenly remembered he was not home anymore. Therefore, the arousal of traditional information is conditioned by the interlocutor and by the situation in which the well informed subject finds himself into.

Mainly rituals "trigger automatic responses that appear to be completely mindless (McCauley, Lawson 2002: 1). Thus we can explain why traditionally educated women would step out and let the protagonists of the ritual gatherings to perform properly, on magic grounds. "Rites of passage stand out from the mundane ritual background" (McCawley, Lawson 2002: 3) because they come to offer answers to the greatest mysteries man has to live with. Birth, marriage and death are crucial moments in life crises, as Balandier notes, when we turn to the sacred dimension of the world (1996: 13). It is the procedural and not the declarative memory (McCawley, Lawson 2002: 49) that helps the transmission of such gestures. Elena Botez remembered all the magic ingredients for *scăldătoare* by reviewing her own actions and not by trying to remember what her mother taught her to. Rarely does an ethnographer receive a different answer than "This is how it is done" or "This is the right way" to the "Why are you doing this" question. The symptom is characteristic for a rural type of community:

> The member of a folk society does not stand off from his customary conduct and objectively analyzes what one is doing. The meaning of his behaviour, as defined by his culture, is not questioned by a man from a folk society (Redfield 1947: 295).

Therefore, the Romanian traditional society is both latent and active, the only difference between the rural and the urban regions being the self allowed freedom of expression. If in villages people share popular beliefs carelessly, in towns they mimic an urban behavior, only to cease it on the right moment. This first "span of a generation" similar to that analyzed by Louis Wirth in 1938 "will adopt silently and docilely the industrial rhythm of life, but never on the whole" (Ioan, Mihali 2009: 63). It is their children who begin to be characterized by popular culture, in opposition with the folk one. Being born in an urban environment makes it easier for a descendant of a rural family to "adopt constantly and abandon fast the continuously changing ways of behavior, the models and whims of the material and non-material culture" (Mihu 2002: 86). More exactly, the traditional information is no longer stored in a recessive type of memory, since it only comes to knowledge as

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exotic and obsolete data. The referential value of superstitions starts to disappear and pragmatic dimensions take the place of magic perception.

Nevertheless, since this exit from the traditional world is only starting to produce itself, in times of life crisis, such as ceremonies of the passage rites, even the most circumspect sons of the city turn to the initiated persons around to find out what should be done. Meda Gâlea[15] told us that she was utterly disappointed by the fact that the book she borrowed from the library to find out what her obligations as a future Godmother are contained information on the burial of the placenta and nothing else more practical. The functional need of traditional superstitions is felt by the urbanites that had a direct or indirect contact (for example, as children of the urbanized rural persons), which creates the premises of cultural persistence.

The Romanian traditional society is undoubtedly dimming out, although people continue to come from villages to towns. The explanation consists in the economic change that has affected the rural zone, too, and in the number of migrants. Early in the sixties people from highly traditional societies moved to cities, while today most of the people from less archaic villages leave Romania to work abroad. It goes without saying that anthropologists may now benefit from the last generation of covert patrimonial memory holders. Ancestral information redraws to farther and farther hamlets, where the touch of progress is delayed.

2. In-Between Concepts

The Romanian worldview and even the architectural structures of cities seem to argument the rural characteristics of our society:

> Despite its modernizing project and partial achievements, the communism remains profoundly dependent on the traditional mentality, as related to space management (Ioan, Mihali 2009: 124).

Specialists have been rather firm in considering that ethnography can be done either in the city, or by following surviving traditional elements in the life of the city.

However, "all cities speak a mandatory common fundamental language: the ceaseless dialogue with the rural zone" that creates the reciprocity of perspectives (Braudel 1984: 266). The French historian went even further and considered that "the city is most of the times a peasant material, reworked in the hand and well kneaded again" (Braudel 1984: 301). The "shape" and "texture" of the urbanites may be thus modified, but the ingredients in the "dough" are the same – they were mixed before the social change and once in a while they become obvious. It can be more difficult than first presumed to state what is urban and what is rural in the socio-cultural behavior of the first generation of town inhabitants.

Since Romania has never passed beyond the first stage of urbanization, we cannot speak about a "return of the irrational and of the magic thinking" that is identified by Frédéric Lenoir in the technologic Western Europe (2005: 5). Régis

[15] Meda Gâlea is 39 years old and graduated from college. She lived in Bucharest for eight years before coming again to Iaşi, where she has been living for 14 years now, and her native village is Poiana Teiului, Neamţ. The interview with her was recorded in May 2012.

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Debray explains it through an anthropological equilibrium that is overlooked in industrialized societies:

> The magic is curiously resuscitated by the progress of rationalizing. The more the world modernizes its utilities, the more archaic it becomes in its reflexes. This reveals some sort of a thermostat of belonging: we cannot break the anthropological equilibriums without provoking a grasp for air (Debray 2005: 13).

This balance may be based on "the need for roots" that is acute in

> a culture very strongly directed towards and influenced by technical science, very strongly tinged with pragmatism, extremely broken up by specialization, entirely deprived both of contact with this world and, at the same time, of any window opening on to the world beyond (Weil 2003: 45).

All these diagnosed symptoms produce "invented traditions" as Eric Hobsbawn calls the effort of building a tradition of any sort:

> It is the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of the social life within it as unchanging and invariant (Hobsbawn 2000: 2).

On the contrary, some of the birth customs performed today in cities from Romania can be traced as far back as the 16th century, when chronicles and foreign travelers noted them. Romania is not returning today to the ancestral outlook on life, because it has not left it yet.

Our approach may seem to pursue ethnography in the city, since it apparently "reproduces the so-called «classic» ethnology" (Agier 2009: 20) in the search of "old problems or even «exotic», «rural» realities that are specific to ethnology" (Mihăilescu 2009: 32). Still, ethnography of the city is more suitable for societies which have already passed through at least two phases of the urbanization process. Romanian specialists[16] have been eager to apply the newer concepts to the study of the society, but the result was negligible, since demonstration disregarded the urban "complex dialectics, which is of contradictory" (Hayot 2002: 94). Beyond the subculture he embodies, each urbanite is the product of his cultural past, his life situations and of his own image on the urban attitude towards community.

Most of the people living in cities are uprooted (Bonte & Izard 1999: 683) and interdisciplinary analysis may allow us to see "what the links are from people we «know» to people we glimpse partially through documents and memories" (McDonogh 2000: 120). Not only are we dealing with the first generation of town dwellers, but their connections with the rural zone are also constant throughout the often visits they take to their native villages. Therefore, the cultural information is reinforced throughout these contacts. We cannot expect for the traditional "behavioral patterns associated with the family sum of rules" (Fox 1977: 4) to vanish immediately after the residential switch. They are more likely to suffer from a gradual selection according to their traceable functionality and verifiability. It will

[16] Nicolae Panea, Otilia Hedeşan, Vintilă Mihăilescu, Rodica Zane can be mentioned here for their interest in the Romanian urban society.

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probably take more than two or three generations of town born inhabitants until we can begin talking about an actual urban civilization in Romania.

The ethnography of the city as defended by Richard Fox (1972, 1977), Peter Jackson (1985) or John Gulick (1989) can reveal "the complex play of roles" (Hayot 2002: 96) that urbanites adopt. The most important duality they assume themselves is provoked by the inhibiting of the acquired traditional information. The social pressure is nevertheless ignored when the context demands it. If we approach customs and superstitions "in relation to the societies and cultures in which they occur" (Fox 1977: 4), we shall observe a continuity of beliefs and magic gestures, that is created by existential fears. The inherited patterns are efficient mainly at psychological level, allowing the urbanites to be confident on the events to come. As Ionela Vidreanu[17] declared, even when faith in superstitions decreases, people find themselves forced to obey them for fear something bad is going to happen otherwise. The conflict between the cultural subconscious and the urban conducted behavior was very well synthesized by Mrs. Vidreanu: "we want to ignore them [superstitions], but we know they exist, we have to keep them in mind, too". It is exactly the rural education that puts this high pressure on the minds of town inhabitants.

Even when medical education is followed, folkloric explanations are not completely forgotten. Dumitru Gălăţan-Jieţ details in his book the case of a pregnant woman that reaches the town hospital from Petroşani with acute symptoms of spontaneous abortion. Maria Daubner remembers how the doctor that was in charge of the maternity asked her if she lusted for food because he knew "about this thing, which can actually happen" (2011: 27). The belief that the future mother must eat everything she craves for, otherwise she will suffer a miscarriage is very frequent in Romania, but it also appears in the Peruvian Alps (Bartoli 2007: 102). Still, the fact that the medical specialist takes into consideration such magical causes offers recognition to the traditional worldview. Although this case took place in 1978, things have not changed much. Emilia Gârbea[18] worked as a medically trained midwife for 35 years in the city of Iaşi and yet she still offered us vernacular reasons for unexplainable pathological cases, such as the appearance of hemangiomas, of birth marks or the loss of lactation. Her discourse alternated scientific explanations with magic analogies that caused situations every time medicine does not provide an answer.

Therefore, the traditional data she acquired in her early years spent in the village of Roşcani, Iaşi county, come to fill in the gaps of pragmatic knowledge, superstitions supply for cognitive hiatus while magic gestures complete the actions which have to be carried out for the infant. Emilia Gârbea offered a few personal examples on the veridicality of superstitions as all the others informants use to do in

[17] Ionela Vidreanu said to us in September 2011: "I don't believe such stuff [the fact that kicking a dog while pregnant will provoke hyper pilosity to the infant], but when I was with child I never touched a dog!". She is 36 years old and graduated from high school. Her native village is Vânători, Iaşi district, but she also lived in Italy for three years as a working immigrant.

[18] Emilia Gârbea's age is 66 and she lived in Iaşi town for 45 years. She attended specialization courses as a trained midwife after highschool. In the present, she returned to her native village and sold her house from Iaşi. The interview was held in May 2012.

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order to be more persuasive. It is exactly this practical evidence of efficiency that assures the cultural functionality of traditional convictions and their social circulation.

Cerasela Munteanu[19], a postnatal doctor at "Cuza Vodă" Maternity, Iaşi, did not offer the customary soap and towel to the medical midwife and was afterwards convinced that her baby's pyoderma was caused by this infringement (Hulubaş 2011: 86). In her case we notice a first phase of the split from traditional reasoning, when the refusal of cultural codes is immediately backed up by a *hybris* awareness. The subconscious guilt excludes pragmatic causes of events and makes it clear that the rural society can still control its members, despite their incipient efforts to give up old beliefs.

The urban mask seems appropriate for the daily context, whereas traditional types of cognitive and procedural reactions are preserved for ritualized situations, when the urban behaviour is immediately abolished. The profane versus sacredness opposition may be also evidenced and the specialist should not confuse the behavioural patterns. Urban ethnography may thus need the "ethnography in the city" instruments, as Alain Hayot has already suggested (2002). Even so, the socio-economical process that shaped the Romanian recent history is relevant for the evolution of traditional relationships, and it is important to know what the model was in order to fully understand the mechanism of transformation.

Our project aims to use the perspective of a vantage point where circumstances of events are relevant for each individual perspective. "The collective identity consciousness" (Hayot 2002: 97) indicates a rural characteristic of the Romanian society, underneath a defensive latency. Therefore, ethnography in the midst of the town seems to better define our approach, since we focus our interviews on how much is remembered and done by the town inhabitants originating from villages. Their statements and gestures are contextualized in each life story and ethnographic zone that subjects come from. Since "collective memory is the picture of similarities" (Halbwachs 2007: 138) we shall see further on how much does the rural perception of birth resembles the urban one in order to better exemplify the Romanian traditional society.

3. First Conclusions of the Attempt

After six years of investigating birth customs in villages from Moldova, a North-Eastern region of Romania, I chose to continue the research of childbirth practices and convictions on the path many villagers took: in towns. I did not select my subjects based on the amount of traditional knowledge, the only criterion being the rural origin of their families. Until now I have spoken to eighteen people of various ages and educational background. The youngest informant is 26, while the oldest turned 71 this year. The shortest period of exposure to urban behaviour consists in 6 years (in the case of the youngest subject), and the longest is 48 (obviously the older informant stayed that long in the city). Ages vary from the

[19] Cerasela Munteanu is 33 years old and works as a resident doctor at the "Cuza Vodă" Maternity from Iaşi. While she was born and raised in Iaşi Town, her mother comes from Rădeana village, Bacău district.

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twenties, to the thirties, forties, fifties and sixties, and the fewest time spent in an educational institution is eight years. Five subjects graduated from college.

The method I used in these interviews does not resemble the ethnographic strategy that proved itself very helpful in the villages of Moldova. Urbanites are more reluctant towards their interlocutor than peasants, since they are familiar to both worlds. To a certain degree, they are too urban for the villages they grew up in and also too rural (mostly at a mental level, but also at a behavioural one) for the growing city. Interviews start in a rather tense manner, because urbanites avoid showing their traditional side before any suspicion of urban contempt vanishes. This probation the ethnographer has to pass through becomes shorter with an apparent strategy of "influencing the witness" from the rural scene. In fact, precise questions intend to set the mood and to provoke reminiscence.

Asking these well-dosed questions implies having a thorough knowledge of traditional culture, and even of the regional background informants come from. This would be one more reason to speak about ethnography in the midst of the city, and not merely in the city. As exponents of their civilizations, the subjects can easily evaluate the ethnographer that intrudes into their most intimate identity. Each urbanite is miniature village that pulsates silently in the heart of the city, and being able to take its pulse request an accurate tuning. More exactly, the interviewing technique deals with two aspects that aim to relax the informant and thus to obtain as much information as possible. The first one is a linguistic approach: the questions are stated in a formal style in the beginning and then I gradually use regional phonetic variation of words and ask for a confirmation.

For example, the Romanian urban term for "pregnant" is *însărcinată* (from the Latin *sarcina*), but few peasants use it. *Gravidă* (also from the Latin *gravid*) is more frequent. But the authentic rural term would be *groasă*, which means "thick", a word that obviously refers to the dramatic change of the feminine silhouette during pregnancy. In the end, most of the conversation would be carried on using regional pronunciation and word. "The Observer's Paradox" (1973, 209) hence partially dims, at least on ethnographical grounds. In fact, it is easily noticeable how the pronunciation transforms itself, from an assumed formal sound and vocabulary, to a rather folkloric one. I often encounter involuntary funny expressions caused by an improper use of neologisms. This linguistic artificial behaviour arises from the pressure of an unfamiliar interlocutor, and usually disappears when I begin using regionalisms. The urbanite gradually ceases to feel the town environment and takes a mental trip to his native whereabouts.

Secondly, the questions refer to precise segments of the rites and to superstitious interpretations of customs. Since I have conducted ten field investigations in various villages from Moldova, I am able to bring remote cultural facts to the mind of my subjects, more exactly to change the state of their latent traditional knowledge. They react with a stir and enjoy remembering things their grandparents and mothers told them. The natural context in which these data are activated is mainly ceremonial (and baptisms or when the child turns one and he has his hair cut by his Godmother), but it also conveys family moments when traditional knowledge is passed through generations (for example, when the daughter or the daughter-in-law is pregnant the urbanite mother draws her attention on baneful gestures or sights).

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A specific characteristic of urbanites is the loss of traditional reason for a certain behaviour which they usually compensate with pragmatic reasoning. Viorica Vişan[20] declared that "it was a shame to ask" about anything and her mother would not speak about giving birth. This patriarchal type of society is based on the authority of the elder, as Robert Redfield stated (1947: 298). For the urbanite, two are the consequences of this "folk society" feature: firstly, he feels alienated from a community that seems to have lost any sense of value. This would be more of a sociological reaction to the pressure put on by mass-media and marketing strategies (both exhibiting too much of the feminine body and life). The women I spoke were intrigued by the present day transparency towards birth and resented the fact that urban neighbours disregard confinement rules. The conflict with a world without sacred rules induces and nurtures the latency of traditional knowledge. Still, all my informants declared that, in critical moments, when the future of the baby is at stake, they did and would overcome again their so-called rural complex and react by suggest a magical behaviour.

Moreover, television or the Internet data base (as we shall see below) turns rituals into mere shows and thus influencing these more or less traditionally untrained viewers. For example, beliefs in the Fates (Romanian: *Ursitoare*) and the special meal that is laid out for them on the third night after birth are rare and some of the informants declared that they heard about these deities from T.V. Unfortunately, most of these television casts are undocumented and transform the practice into kitsch. The same happens with the American influence exerted by Tooth Fairy, who tends to eliminate the dental offering for the crow[21] in urban settlements.

The second disadvantage of a non-communicative rural community is obviously cultural. Since traditional rules were transmitted without any kind of explanation, some urbanites feel the void with a logic on practical causes and effects. Meda Gâlea even depicted the one year after birth ceremony in disdainful terms, as a consequence of the distrust she has in the magical force of this event. Once the baby turns one, his Godparents come to his house and they cut the first lock of his hair in a ritual manner. Afterwards, the baby is presented with a tray of various objects. It is believed that whatever he picks up first reveals his future occupation: if it is a comb, he will be a barber, if scissors, the baby will become a tailor and so on. Meda Gâlea disregards this ritual and interprets it as "another occasion for the adults to have fun" and expalins the baby's choice on the fact that it is the first time he sees and is able to touch that object, hence his curiosity.

Still, urbanite pragmatism is never complete. While answering one question after another, the subject will nevertheless prove that they admit many magical causes. Meda Gâlea is fully convinced that breastfeeding the child after weaning will make him capable of killing other beings just by overlooking at them. Stela

[20] Viorica Vişan is 54 years old and came in iaşi city 36 years ago. She graduated from high school. I recorded her in June 2012.

[21] When a milk tooth falls out, tradition demands that it would be thrown on the house while addressing a crow with the following words: "Crow, crow, I give you a bone teeth, and you will give me a steel one!".

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Troia[22] denied having respected the pregnancy taboos she had just mentioned to me during the interview, and added that she does not believe in them. When I started asking about the superstitions, one by one, she admitted that she did not break any. Even more so, the predictions regarding the sex of the fetus proved to be correct (if it moves on the right side of the womb the first time, it is a boy, on the left side – a girl). Thus, the researcher should not be misled by an evasive attitude of the urban subject and use all his knowledge and the hints from the recorded answers to diagnose the exact level of stored traditional knowledge.

Many actual life facts are invoked by informants to sustain superstitions. Traditional culture still manages to create a certain expectation of unwanted events as it happened in the case of Cerasela Munteanu, a maternity resident doctor. When she gave birth she did not obey the custom to offer the midwife soap and a towel (so that she could be magically washed of the impure blood), and limited her gratitude to offering money. Soon, the infant developed pyoderma and her entire family blamed her infringement for that. In this case, the original meaning of the custom is lost and the ritual obligation persists. According to traditional precepts, the gift has to be made for the mother to be redeemed after having sinned, while the infant's dermatitis is believed to be caused by his contact with impure visitors (menstruating women or people who had sexual intercourses the days before coming to see the newly born).

Another medically trained subject, Elena Gârbea, offered personal examples for the validity of superstitions: "what I can say is that it is a little bit verified", she declared when telling the story of a birth mark her niece has. As it is believed in Turkey, too (Bartoli 2007: 95), the object stolen by the pregnant woman appears on her child's skin, on the exact spot she touched herself after the theft. This example of seeing and believing appears in every single one of the interviews, because this superstition is just as valid today, as it was almost two hundred years ago, when the first folklore collections were made.

Informants invoke their own life experience in numerous cases and do not acknowledge any logic breakage when speaking about magic appearances. Both Gheorghe Mihai and Mihai Zvâncă[23] are sure of having witnessed different materializations of buried unbaptised children. The first lived next to the village cemetery in Vulpăşeşti, Neamţ district and heard their cries, said to demand Christianization, while the latter experienced an even uncannier event. When he was 11 years old, he was returning at midnight from a village ball, together with eight other lads, all in their twenties. The bridge they had to cross back in order to go home was occupied by some balls of thread that were rolling over from one side to the other. The next day, Mihai Zvâncă's godfather, together with some soldiers dug out two newly born children from the earth underneath the bridge. Although he has

[22] Stela Troia is 59 years old, originates from Satu Nou, Botoşani district and she has been living in Iaşi for 42 years. The intervew with her took place in March 2012.

[23] Mihai Zvâncă is 58 years old and grew up in the town of Iaşi. Still, he benefited from summer vacations as a child and teenager in Orofteana village, Botoşani district. I recorded him in November 2011.

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been living in Iaşi city for more than 50 years, Mihai Zvâncă does not hesitate over the magic nature of what he saw that night.

Examples of irrational explanation of events are numerous, each interview containing some, which are naturally intermingled with circumspect attitudes. The boundary between superstition and pragmatism is consequently traced by personal experiences, otherwise the urbanite being tempted to declare, as Stela Troia did: "they say so, but I did not see such cases, how could I say I did", when talking about the possibility to heal birth marks. When the native village was not a rich ethnographic zone or the family did not transmit traditions intensively, the urbanite only maintains his belief in what he actually saw happening, and practical reasoning would fill the emptied cultural spaces.

Another attitude towards active superstitions that have lost their magical explanation is a sudden verbalized wander. After she admitted having kept the dried umbilical cord from her child, Viorica Vişan asked herself rhetorical questions: "But what should be done with it, why did I keep it, what happened to it…" This apparent anxiety is in fact caused by my intrusion into a set of rules that have been lasting for a long time. Before answering to the questionnaire, subjects do not have any intention of analyzing and interpreting tradition; they would simply perpetuate it as it was transmitted to them. As an outsider demanding answers, the ethnographer provokes a change of reflection on his subject, forcing him to look at traditional beliefs in a manner that is unnatural to him. While doing fieldwork in villages, researchers often come across explanations such as: "this is how it should be done", "it is not right to act otherwise" or "this is what the elders say". Urbanites tend to have the same reactions of passive assimilation and obedient action until confronted with an artificial context such as an interview. It is only then that they seek explanations for familiar gestures, even from the ethnographer.

This attachment to the traditional world is not only cultural, but also emotional. Meda Gâlea participated as a child to the ritual visit that is paid to the newly born and his mother, soon after birth, in Farcaşa village, Neamţ district. It is customary there to offer bitter cherry jam and a glass of cold water to the guests. Even though she welcomed her visitors in Iaşi city, Meda Gâlea insisted to serve the same menu despite the general reactions that she "acted crazy: «What is it with her and the bitter cherry jam»". In fact, this custom is not even traditional; it can be an urban influence from the interwar period when the Romanian high class used to welcome their guests in this manner. What is relevant here, though, is the cultural resistance of the urbanite who seems indifferent to the background change, as a nostalgic effect of the rural childhood.

Still, this latent knowledge is expected to fade with each generation raised after the work migration. All of out subjects declared that they pass the superstitious information on to their children, but society changes and many of them become obsolete, gradually. Practices meant to induce an easy labour or ritual gifts offered to the empirical midwife are such examples. As in the case of immigration, it will take about two or three generations for this rural behaviour to be forgotten and by that time Romania will be facing the second phase of urbanization, too.

The first symptoms of this process could be noticed at a ritual child bathing party I attended in Vrancea district. All the important characters in this ceremonial

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(the mother, the Godmother and the supposedly midwife) were people with ages between 27 and 32, who grew up in the town of Focşani. When asked about how she found out about her Godmother duties, Geanina Găluşcă[24] declared that she had searched for information on Google, but she had also asked her mother about everything she could not find on the internet. Her attitude towards traditions is visibly different from her mother's whose thorough attention on the ritual details even annoyed Geanina Găluşcă during the bathing called *scăldătoare*. Some beliefs seem to her sheer nonsense, as it was case of the interdiction to have the finger nails of the newly born cut by anyone else but his Godmother. Both her mother and her grandmother warned her about this rule, but when she heard the explanation that the baby would be caught stealing as an adult, Geanina immediately shortened the nails the baby had already scratched his face with. The hair and the nails of the infant come from a world we know nothing about, and all precautions imply a supernatural force residing in them. It takes an initiated person, such as the Godmother to handle this type of energy safely.

Oblivion also characterized her reaction to birth itself. When she had her child, she forgot to offer a towel and soap to the hospital midwife, although she was taught to do it. A rural education would have made this impossible, since the traditional worldview structures life on patterns of behaviour, every failure to follow them being synonym to chaos taking over. Moreover, Geanina Găluşcă limited the amount of magic ingredients that are added to the bath (an egg, milk, salt, pepper, a feather, gold) in order not to irritate baby's skin. In fact, every single gesture she did respect was made according to a rather obedient attitude to traditions, not with the belief that it will have repercussions on the infant's future.

Her performance was immediately noticed and considered improper by Mărioara Ardeleanu[25], an urbanite from Focşani. She blamed the hasted washing of the child on the fear the Godmother experienced and then she gave me a specific example of what happens if the Godmother does not clean the child thoroughly. Although Mărioara Ardeleanu has been living in the town for 39 years, she did not stop believing that all kind of skin afflictions and body odors are caused by the fact that the Godmother did not wash the child well at *scăldătoare*, and did not blow basilica and sugar into the baby's mouth and his other anatomical parts[26]. On the other hand, Anca Mazilu[27], the child's mother, did not mind any of the Godmother's slip outs and declared that her daughter cannot smell badly in the future, as long as she washes herself. Therefore, both the young informants reveal a pragmatic thinking and seem to accept childbirth beliefs, without actually assimilating them. Anca Mazilu even mentioned the fact that she disregarded the rule that forbids unclean women (having their period or having recently slept with men) to see the

[24] Geanina Găluşcă is 32 years old and was born and raised in Focşani town. She graduated from college. The interview was held in May 2012.

[25] Mărioara Ardeleanu is 56 years old and has been living in Focşani town for 39 years. She graduated from high school. I recorded her in May 2012.

[26] Tradition demands that, once the bathing is complete, the Godmother chews basilica and sugar and blow into the baby's mouth, for his breath to be pleasantly scented.

[27] Mazilu is 27 years old and lived all her life in Focşani town. In the present, she attends college classes. The interview took place in May 2012.

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newly born before Christianization. Even though the baby did suffer from a skin rash (called *rocii* in Romanian), she still does not believe there is any connection between the medical condition of her child and the guests. The so-called midwife proved herself to be more attached to the traditional worldview. Veronica Dogaru[28] declared that she was very proud to have played the midwife role, since it is an important one. She knew that it takes an older woman to act as a midwife from her mother, who had also taught her about her ritual obligations.

Rural mothers represent a constant reference for the urbanites that are sometimes tempted to follow what they see it is done in the city. While living in Bucharest, Doina Popa[29] saw that people used to offer cakes instead of the ritual bread that is meant to ransom ritually the child from his Godparents. Her mother insisted that bread should be offered and Dorina Popa finally gave both two cakes and two breads to the Godparents. Obviously, this type of behavior reveals the beginning of the rupture from the traditional rules.

Having The Folklore Archive of Moldova and Bucovina[30] at our hand, we can easily check the exact level of folk information that the migrants left in their native hamlets. The second comparison is made through direct field work. By going in each of our subjects' villages and asking the same questions to the family and childhood friends still residing there, we are able to notice what kind of traditional beliefs lost their cultural functionality in the city and why. Therefore, our demonstration has three different markers: what was known 40 years ago in the village the urbanite left, what is still familiar and done in the village now, and how much does the town inhabitant remember about childbirth convictions, what he still performs and how he feels about it. So far, I have investigated five villages and the answers I received from the relatives and friends of my main informants were very similar to what I had already recorded in towns.

In conclusion, Romania is passing through a cultural phase that can be fertile to ethnographical research, both in villages and in cities. The method though has to be adapted in order to diagnose correctly the exact level of traditional knowledge. Childbirth beliefs offer a good example of the vitality these rural practices have, since it benefits from a smaller exposure to the public. Weddings and funerals have been taken over by professional entertainers and most of the rites become obsolete in this context. Birth is a more intimate event and this allows the preservation of superstitions and archaic practices. Urbanites manifest a certain attachment to the old values and pass them through to the next generation hoping that some of them will be respected. As the socio-economic coordinates change, many of these convictions fade and are forgotten from one generation to another, but whenever science has no answer to an event or fact, magic thinking will take over.

[28] Veronica Dogaru is 27 and graduated from college. She spent all her life in Focşani town. Her mother was born in Şiviţa village, Galaţi district. I recorded her in May 2012.

[29] Doina Popa is 55 years old and has been living in Focşani town for 34 years, after another 3 years in Bucharest. She was born in Boloteşti village, Vrancea district and graduated from high school. The interview was held in May 2012.

[30] The Folklore Archive of Moldova and Bucovina was founded in 1970 by professor Ion H. Ciubotaru and it holds more that 300.000 registered ethno-folkloric documents from 800 villages.

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Abstract

The article uses ethnographic methods and sociological data to explain the particular case of the Romanian society, which proves itself to be mainly rural. When people started coming from villages to live in the communist towns, they brought along their traditional worldview, too. Childbirth beliefs are used to demonstrate this cultural retention since this segment of the passage rites is less exposed to innovation than weddings or funeral ceremonies.

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