The Persistency of Romanian Birth Beliefs

Adina HULUBAŞ*

Key-words: *folklore, birth customs, superstition, feminine rites*

1. Traditional memory and pregnancy practices nowadays

Family customs seem to move in concentric circles that enlarge in time and space. All life events like birth, wedding and funeral follow the pattern identified by Van Gennep in 1909: separation, transition and aggregation (Van Gennep 1996). Having a child is an act of creation with the help of unknown forces and this implies a long series of superstitions.

One of the main Romanian folklorists, Simeon Florea Marian, published in 1892 the only book of that time that mentioned fertility practices, although a few other books on birth customs were printed at the end of the 19th century. As we shall see, a large amount of the convictions noted by him can still be heard during field investigations. In fact, the great scholar had organized his work according to the scheme of passage rites, separation, transition and aggregation, almost twenty years before Arnold van Gennep published his famous book.

Amongst the magic fertility practices mentioned by Simeon Florea Marian there are charms against a disease called *mătrice* (also a folk name for the uterus). The information published in 1892 came from Mălini, Suceava (1995: 10–11), but the researchers from Moldova and Bukovina Folklore Archive, Iaşi found it in 1970 and afterwards in five villages from three other districts of Moldova. Thus, the belief is not only old, but also common and widely spread. In Rânghileşti, Botoşani, the disease is depicted almost as an entity: "*mătricea* eats the child from the womb". In fact, the infant is tormented even after birth by this affliction with symptoms that remind of infant colic.

The transmission of fertility from the prolific animals to the barren woman was made through a drink which contains carbonized genital organs of the rabbit (Marian 1995, p. 9). More recently, she eats horse (in Lunca Rateş, Iaşi), rooster or ram testicles (Vădurele, Neamț).

Even more common is the fact that a sterile wife sits on the upturned vat in which a newly baptized child has just had his first bath after baptism (Marian 1995, p. 168). This gesture can be seen today even in town environments, where usually an older woman takes the woman without children by surprise and forces her to sit on the vat bottom, sometimes by pushing her rather hard.

* "A. Philippide" Institute of Romanian Philology, Iaşi, Romania.

„Philologica Jassyensia", An VII, Nr. 1 (13), 2011, p. 73–82

BDD-A975 © 2011 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:41:24 UTC)

Sugar is able to induce a happy fate to the new born and Romanians continue to use it, even nowadays, as a ritual ingredient for *scălduşcă*, the bath given to the child a day after his Christianization. It is believed that sugar will make him sweet and loved by everybody, moreover, his mouth will be sweet also (Bețești, Neamț), which means the child will speak in a very pleasant and attractive manner[1]. Bread is often a ritual gift in our customs, but it is also able to influence the good temper of the child. Romanians say on a generous person that he is "as good as the fresh-baked bread". The two ingredients reappear in a belief from Udeşti, district of Suceava, where sugar and bread fastened in a corner of the kerchief the midwife tied on the head of the new born, in order for him to be as good as the bread and also a sweet kisser. Garlic and salt are obviously apotropaic, meaning they are meant to keep all the unseen dangers away from the two gentle beings (the pregnant woman and her unborn child).

The amulet powers of these ingredients are familiar to other cultures too. In Russia, during the baptism of her child, the confined woman wears inside-out clothes containing a piece of bread and some garlic for fear of the evil eye, elsewhere the baby's outfit also includes money, bread and garlic (which protects him from sorcery), while in Scotland the infant is protected along his journey to the church where he is baptized by bread and cheese placed inside his vestments. The same nutrients are wrapped inside the baby's swaddling in Germany (Franklin 2005, p. 160).

Also familiar in Romanian and international communities is the idea that a pregnant woman has to eat everything she desires. "This is a belief found all over the world and it is still vivid in industrialized countries" (Bartoli 2007, p. 102). The author found this conviction motivated the same as in Romania, as far as in the Peruvian Andes: unless the pregnant woman satisfies her food lust, she miscarriages. A greater sin is committed by the person who denies her the requested meal – his punishment comes in the same form it was imagined in 1892 (Marian 1995, p. 15): mice will cause damage to his home and food supplies, according the late 20th century villagers from Şendriceni and Rânghileşti, Botoşani, Prisăcani, Iaşi, Mihoveni, Suceava. If she cannot have the food she desires, and in order to avoid a spontaneous abortion, she must lick her salted palm (Moişa, Suceava), or lick it and wipe it on her posterior (Siliştea, Suceava) as a symbolic gesture of giving up her desires. In Pârjol, Bacău, women use to wash the beads of their necklace and drink the water so that they would not suffer from an unsatisfied appetite.

The unborn child is vulnerable to the influence of the surroundings and women have to be aware at all times. The network of taboos, interdictions and prescriptions also serves a psychological purpose: the woman remains calm and confident as the time passes and pregnancy comes to an end, because she knows she obeyed the ritual rules.

[1] Sugar used to be sewn in the hem of shirt the woman in labour wore, because it was believed to shorten the expulsion efforts (Dobârceni, Botoşani), according to a piece of information from the second half of the 20th century. The same nutrient was buried together with the placenta in a pot (Păltiniş, Botoşani) as a related example of contagious magic. The child that was born in the placenta would grow up as sweet as the buried uterine membrane. In Udeşti, district of Suceava, the midwife put sugar and bread in a corner of the kerchief she tied on his head, in order for him to be as good as the bread, and a sweet kisser.

BDD-A975 © 2011 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:41:24 UTC)

2. Birth: a constant traditional perception

Romanians living in Bitolia (located today in Macedonia) believed in 1892 that nobody should know when the labour started, because the pregnant woman would deliver in great pains and after a long and tiresome attempt (Cosmulei 1909: 11). This piece of information was provided by an article on Macedo-Romanians, also (Burada 1892: 39), and it remains familiar even today. Various explanations are given in Moldova for the secrecy of the delivery date. People from Cerţeşti, Iaşi, stated at the end of the 20th century that the pregnant woman would be in prolonged labour, each person that found out about her giving birth causing her one more day of excruciating pain. The same pattern is familiar in Buhalniţa, Neamţ, but instead of a day, the woman with child is believed to suffer one extra-hour for every villager that has learnt about her labour. A more recent belief on the scale of cultural evolution says that the woman in labour takes over her the sins of the persons she confesses to, and this is the reason for her lengthen pain (Agafton and Mânăstirea Doamnei, Botoşani).

The midwife herself had to keep the secret of her destination when she was called for a birth (Berezeni, Vaslui), otherwise malevolent people could magically hurt the woman in labour (with charms meant to kill her). Although this occupation disappeared as imposed by legal forces, empirical birth assistance is still invoked by informants. In addition to actual obstetrical measures, the midwife had a tremendous psychological significance for the delivering mother. Birth in hospitals exposes the scared woman to a cold and unfamiliar environment, a space that opposes to the protective home where *geni loci* are watching over the family.

In January 2009, women from Nărteşti, Galaţi told us about an uncanny event that explicitly shows the midwife's leap into legend. A woman who was said to have helped a hundred wives give birth was unburied seven years after her death, as the ritual asks to. The hands that eased so many births did not follow the physiological process of decomposing, and turned into a white dust that crumbled when touched. The explanation has to be sought within the birth rituals and also, in the Romanian literary folklore, more exactly in carols and stories about Crăciuneasa, the archetypal midwife.

An old custom demands the confined woman to wash the midwife's hands and to offer her *sleeves*, more exactly a raw material that can be sewn into a shirt, a traditional towel and aliments, eight days after birth. Elena Sevastos wrote about this ritual at the end of the 19th century (1990: 186), and things have not changed much over the decades. The defiling blood of birth has to be cleaned and atoned for, otherwise the midwife will be all dirty in post-existence, in the realm of *the other world* as we were told on Furcenii Vechi, Galaţi, in 2006. Moreover, carol texts and fairy tales correlate the birth of Christ, in a rather heathen manner, to the *sleeves custom*. It is in these literary pieces that we find out about the abominable sin of touching the new-born, in this case, Jesus Christ. It is said that Virgin Mary was helped to deliver by Saint Nicholas's wife, against his wish. As a punishment for

BDD-A975 © 2011 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:41:24 UTC)

this impure contagion, the Christmas divinity cut off the hands of his wife, but Virgin Mary reconstructed them and made them out of gold, instead of flesh[2].

It is now more than obvious why villagers from Nărteşti, Galaţi, had the impression of seeing sacred hands on a rotten body. The midwife statute is highly respected in all traditional communities. The Inuits from the Artic Québec even place her next to the hunter on the social hierarchy (Bartoli 2007: 129), a position that speaks about their important role in the effort of surviving as a race. In Romania, the gratitude has a Christian expression, since it is often said that one should write the name of the midwife on the diptych they pay to be read in church. Another important clue on the great importance midwife played for the ritual setting is the fact that today, in villages and in towns, an old woman (usually the mother of the confined woman) pretends that she is the midwife and carries the baby in her arms to the church where he is baptized. Although there have been no more empirical midwives in Romania for about half a century, their figures turned into legend and ritual masks, thanks to the collective consciousness. Even more so, nurses from maternities often receive bars of soap and towels from their patients. Being in an institutionalized place for giving birth does not cancel this important gift, for the mothers are more or less aware of its importance. They especially know it is a severe sin not to obey the belief, even though the explanation has been lost.

The basic technique to ease the birth consists in massaging the pregnant womb in numerous traditional societies over the world. Lise Bartoli mentions India, Maroc and South Algeria and details the obstetrical movements during labour (2007: 129–130). In Romania contagious magic is added to this quasi-medical procedure. The massage used rabbit grease for the mother to give birth as quickly as the female rabbit (Sevastos 1990: 157) or for the baby to jump out of its mother, like a rabbit (Şerban 2002: 9), according to villagers from Gorj.

In fact, analogies seem to define most of the magic birth beliefs and they are even more powerful when involving direct touch. In Vulpăşeşti, Neamţ, the pregnant woman feeds cows with flour from her lap, while saying to herself she will give birth just as easily as the cow. Mimicry of the fast delivery is mainly used during the last period of the pregnancy and most of the times it is centred upon the inferior part of the body, as an anticipation of the baby's expulsion. Another example in this respect is a custom from Heci, Iaşi, meant to induce a short labour. Here the pregnant woman takes out the garbage in her own lap and throws it out while thinking she will give birth in a similar way, with the smallest effort possible. Hens also provide the pregnant woman with the magic ability to "lay" without difficulty, through their gizzard. The pregnant wives from Arbore, Suceava, use this organ to prepare a tea, made out from the dry skin they have peeled from a gizzard.

The persistency of archaic beliefs was confronted with the mandatory birth in hospitals. Still, the disappearance of magical gestures that intended to help the woman in labour (kicking the threshold, drinking water from the midwife's palms,

[2] See Gh. Pavelescu, *Cercetări folclorice în Sudul judeţului Bihor*, in "Anuarul Arhivei de Folclor", VII, Sibiu, 1945, p. 92; Tudor Pamfile, *Crăciunul*, Bucureşti, Librăriile Socec & Comp. şi C. Sfetea, 1914, p. 111–116.

BDD-A975 © 2011 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:41:24 UTC)

loosening all knots) did not change the confinement rules. Today the community obeys the same old restrictions that require specific time and space for the new mother.

Her condition fits the analysis undertaken by Sir James George Frazer: "the holiness or the magical virtue in the man can be discharged and drained away by contact with the earth which in this theory serves as an excellent conductor for the magical fluid" (2009: 594-595). The taboo of touching the ground after birth is probably the most familiar in rural environments. In her work published in 1889, Elena Sevastos organized confinement interdictions in relation to the period of time passed from birth. In the first three days, the woman used to lie on straws (1990: 185), she wore the same long shirt she gave birth in for eight days in a row (1990: 186) and it was forbidden to walk over furrows (the soil turned unfertile) or on the cattle path (caws became sick), and also to look at the sun (1990: 218). Nor was she allowed to take water out of a fountain, otherwise worms would contaminate the source (Cristescu-Golopenția 1944: 48) or the spring ran dry (Ciaușanu 1914: 380).

All these taboos are as alive as ever in Moldova today. In Dolj, the explanation for confinement on straws was, a hundred years ago, that Virgin Mary gave birth to Christ like this and the pattern must be followed (Laugier 1910: 50). Nowadays, we heard the same reason in Moțca, Iaşi, where women believe that hay assures an easy labour. In five out of eight districts from Moldova we encountered subjects familiar with birth on the ground, in the middle of the room or right next to the hearth. When birth on straws was no longer practiced, the expression "the midwife comes to lift you up the hay" (Barcea, Galați) kept circulating, as a linguistic memory of the custom.

The first circle magically drawn round the woman lately confined ends eight days after the birth. Until then, she is not allowed to go anywhere outside her house because the earth "burns underneath her steps", meaning she destroys its germination powers and desecrates it. It is even more severe to touch the ground with the bare foot (Barcea and Bălțăreț, Galați), because the impure nature of the new mother drains directly into the soil, destructing it. In Drăguş, Braşov, people believed that even the rocks stepped over by the woman are set on fire (Cristescu-Golopenția 1944: 48) by her defiling statute. Her energy is dangerous for everyone who walks on her tracks, and consequently various means of purification were used. In Nărteşti, Galați, the midwife used to coat with clay the floor of the room she walked through, whereas the yard was sprinkled with holy water (Păltiniş, Botoşani). Today, the old women in the village give a piece of their mind to any mother that walks out of her yard before the 40 days of confinement end (Gohor, Galați), which means that collective knowledge still acts as a traditional censorship.

Hearth divinities seem to be acutely perceived by traditional sensitivity. The main coercive measure for the woman lately confined is not to come near the fire in order to cook. In a similar way to the neophytes from initiatory rites, she is not allowed to touch the kitchen instruments or the food, because she defiles them. Even more so, her proximity to the sacred space of the domestic fire is followed by a harsh punishment. People believe that the child will get burns from the kitchen range, which consists in a stove, most of the times (Bira, Neamț), because his own mother has magically caused him an attraction to fire (Mogoşeşti-Siret, Iaşi and Ruginoasa, Neamț). In Dolheştii Mari, Suceava, villagers say that the baby falls on

BDD-A975 © 2011 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:41:24 UTC)

the hot stove, when his mother disobeys the fire taboo. Another side effect consists in a dermatological affliction called *focuşoare* (small fires) that are believed to constantly torment the little child (Bârjoveni and Rocna, Neamţ).

It is easy to see that fire correlates both the taboos. On one hand, there is a fire of impurity which makes creation in any form impossible, on the other hand, we have the fire meant to protect and help the family. The later takes its revenge, as a heathen God would, for the unclean contagion with the birth blood. A burning energy would also draw off springs and fountains as it is believed in numerous villages. This magic phenomenon happens when the wife passes over water courses or takes out water from a well, before her 40 days prayer in the church. Until then she is not even allowed to water the house plants, because this gesture makes them wither (Rediu, Botoşani). The same negative implication of fire convinced people that milking the cow while in confinement would make the animal run out of milk (Ciauşanu 1914: 380).

Things have not changed dramatically over time since a comment written by Piotr Bogatârev on the population that lived close to the Carpathians in 1929 is just as true today: "If the woman has not gone to church after childbirth, she must not go to work on the fields, for she is unclean" (1998: 97). Even though some blame this dangerous phase on the defiling blood meant to "clean off the bad things" (Mihoveni, Suceava), the woman lately confined owes her distinct figure to a more complex relationship with the setting.

Her connection to the natural rhythm starts as early as in her nubile period, when tradition asks maidens to grow flowers and aromatic plants in front of her house. In profane Christmas carols such as IV, 90 *The Arrival of the Suitors*, the maiden appears all covered in wild vegetation, growing even out of her bosom. This image gives a clue on the fertile powers a woman masters, since

> earth fertility is one with the feminine fecundity; therefore, women become resposable with the richness of crops, for they know the "mystery" of creation. It is a religious mystery, because it governates the origin of life, food and death. Land is assimilated with the woman (Eliade 1981: 41).

This becomes obvious in rain customs, and also in the ritual attempt to make trees bear fruit. The pregnant wife ritually defends the threatened tree and hugs it, because this contagion will make the fertile energy travel trough the "useless" woody plant[3]. The confinement period is nothing but the other side of the coin for the powerful figure of a fertile woman.

3. The new member of the society

Little is known about the world babies come from. Scholars have created the syntagma *the black world* with reference to the pre-existential state of the baby, as an antonym for *the white world*, which actually appears in traditional sayings on birth. Up to his baptism, the child embodies a powerful and mysterious force, even though he is more than vulnerable to exterior influences.

[3] See Petru Caraman, *Colindatul la români, slavi şi la alte popoare. Studiu de folclor comparat*, Bucureşti, Editura Minerva, 1983, p. 414.

BDD-A975 © 2011 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:41:24 UTC)

The first encounter with the "stranger" has the characteristics of a welcoming oblation which keeps being performed today, both in villages and towns. The gifts are mandatory and used to consist mainly out of food and drinks. In a more recent phase, people started to bring clothes for the baby and to offer him money, with a ritual gesture. All three passage rites, birth, wedding and funeral, ask for the money to be put on the chest of the neophyte. The bride dances with her guests after they have tucked in bills, whereas people present at wakes give money for the dead by laying them on an icon resting on his chest. The relation with the soul is more than obvious here and money transgresses the functional purpose, being meant to secure the passage from one ontological phase to another.

No time seems to have passed between the references on birth convictions from 1889 and today, if we think about the rules imposed to people coming to see the new baby. More than 100 hundred years ago the midwife forbid men or to enter the house (Sevastos 1990: 189), for fear the child would suffer from a dermatological disease, called *rocii*. Researchers from "Moldova and Bukovina Folklore Archive" found the exact belief in Băceşti, Vaslui. Apart from the "unclean" women whose access is constantly denied to the woman lately confined and her baby, newly weds (Urecheşti, Bacău and Pădureni, Vrancea) or widows (Corod, Galaţi) are not welcome, because of the impure contamination they may cause to the baby. Sometime ago, the midwife questioned roughly the guest: "Are you both clean of yourself and your man?" (Ruginoasa, Neamţ).

The only possibility for a woman to come near the child while being on period is to confess it to the baby. While the guest pulled the infant's nose, she said: "I am not clean, but you shall be clean" (Sevastos 1990: 189). A century later, the rule is still obeyed in many villages, because the public announcement succeeds in rendering void the bad influence. This censorship reveals two aspects: frailty of the unchristian and oblation. The later becomes obvious from the belief that gifts are brought as alms for the visitor's soul (Sevastos 1990: 189). In Moldova, this precise perception is widely found and can be sustained with various different statements. Some villagers say that you only have to offer "goodies" (Eşanca, Botoşani, Goieşti, Iaşi, Dolheştii Mari, Suceava), because the guest will benefit from it in his post-existence: "what you give is what you get" in the after life (Ruginoasa, Neamţ).

Once the baby is baptized, his vulnerability ends and he becomes a member of the community. The name is mostly decided by his Godparents even today, as sign of great respect for the institution of sponsorship. Besides an ornamented candle and an entire outfit for the child, the Godmother has the duty to give a kerchief called *crijmă*, after the Ukraine word *kryžma*, also found in Lithuanian, where it means "cross" and "to pass through". The later seems to be similar to the funeral use of sheets called *punţi*, "bridges", because both of these weavings help the being cross over a new ontological state. Apparently, *crijmă* entered our language through church service, which was performed in Slavonic language until the 18th century.

This piece of linen usually measures about two metres. If it is longer than that, the child will get married when he is already too old (Marian 1995: 122). The exact explanation survived for a century in Tătăruşi and Uda, Iaşi, but it was also heard in Agârcia, Neamţ and Hânţeşti, Galaţi with special reference to baby girls, who are

BDD-A975 © 2011 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:41:24 UTC)

supposed to wed earlier. Eventually, *crijma* becomes a shirt believed to protect the child from ordeals (Păltiniş, Botoşani) and to give him courage (Agârcia, Neamţ).

The midwife used to carry the baby in her arms to the church and she also brought him back home, then the Godmother took the freshly baptized child from her and handed it to his mother. Once the occupation forbidden, somebody else plays the role, since the future Godmother avoids touching the heathen creature before actual Christianization. Today two formulas are used when the baby is given back to his mother at home and we can restore the cultural evolution of this custom because of that. Some people say "I have taken a pagan and I give you back a Christian", while others use a phrase that obviously implies sponsorship: "A Godson from me, a Christian from God".

The first ritual saying cannot be used by the person that sponsors the new baby, because of the general taboo of touching the unfamiliar being. Only the midwife had the magic force to resist the sacred contagion and even she had to be cleaned after birth, sometimes with holy eater. As an initiated authority, the midwife could manage the numinous powers coming from an unknown world; hence she had the mandate to safely carry the baby to his baptism. The fact that today we can still hear this centuries old formula when the child is returned to his mother proves that traditional memory is more than viable.

A day after, the Godparents come again to the child's home in order to give him a ritual bath, meant to consecrate the new member of the community. Religious service has purified the child from any malefic connotation and now, the social group welcomes him through a new symbolization of rebirth. "Coming out of water repeats the cosmogonical act of formal manifestations; immersion equals form dissolution" (Eliade 1995: 187). The gradual aggregation to the phenomenal world passes through this figuration of death, so that the new born might have a superior ontological state. Most importantly, the arrival of the new child in the community is guided by initiated figures, his Godparents, whose importance makes the biological parenthood fade.

The ingredients of the ritual bath, called *scălduşcă* have remained the same over time. Their purpose is to influence by contagion the future life of the baby. The aliments and the objects placed inside the vat propitiate health, beauty, skilfulness and wealth by magic. If the child is being born again now, he already has milk, bread, honey, books, pencils and money, which means his entire life will be the same. Belief in the magic power of an appropriate bath given after baptism did not decrease when people came to live in towns, therefore it is a common fact to notice how traditional this event still is nowadays.

Sometime ago the midwife received a ritual knot-shaped bread called *pupăză* (hoopoe) during the feast held by the parents. This signified the last and the largest form of gratitude towards her efforts, following other two. First come *the sleeves*, eight days after birth; the woman lately confined washed the defiled hands of the midwife and offered her blouse material and also aliments. Then, the midwife received money from all the women witnessing the ritual bath after baptism: the coins they placed inside the water belonged to her. The end of the feast brought general acknowledging for the midwife, since every person invited to *cumătrie* gave money for her.

BDD-A975 © 2011 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:41:24 UTC)

While as this custom disappeared together with the occupation of empirical birth assistance, Godfathers still have to be "paid" by parents, in order to magically take their child back. At the beginning of the 20th century, villagers from Satu-Mare considered the fancy bread they gave to the Godparents, next to pieces of clothing, food and drink, to be a gesture of "buying back" the child from them (Scurtu 1942: 43). Even today, in Moldova, this belief is widespread and parents are fully aware of the fact that "they owe it to the Godparents" (Borca, Neamț) and "unless it is given, the parents commit a sin" (Izvoare, Neamț). Baptism is hence an act of spiritual rebirth from other parents, and the baby "rather belongs to his Godparents, until his mother and father bring the ritual bread" (Ciomârtan, Suceava).

Disregarding this custom causes bad luck to the child (Tecuci, Galați) and stumbles in this life and the one after (Farcașa, Neamț). In addition to that, the real parents will not be able to meet their offspring in the after life (Parincea, Bacău), since they have not paid ritually to take him back. The Godfather himself will ask for what is rightfully his, once everybody reached post-existence. People believe that he stretches out his hands to receive the knotted bread (Vulpășești, Neamț), he demands it (Brăhășești, Galați) or he refuses to take it (Vlădiceni, Neamț) and the parent keeps trying to offer it to him. The ordeal becomes even more severe in the after life scenario that includes carrying heavy rocks on the back (Păltiniș, Botoșani) as a punishment for not having given *colacii*.

When the baptized baby is most of the time ill and in great danger to die, people say that the Godfather has to be changed (Pleșani and Șendriceni, Botoșani), because the first one did not have luck, a belief that was found a hundred years ago, too (Laugier 1910: 54). Apart from the popular custom of "selling" the sick child on the window to a parent with many healthy sons and daughters, a death tricking gesture seems to resist over centuries. The fable infant was taken to the cemetery and passed over the tomb of an unknown person (Laugier 1910: 54). In November 2010, only 13 kilometers away from a big town such as Iași, people were familiar with this magic method of restoring health. Tow cousins roll the baby on the burial place three times and give him to a maiden (Mânzătești, Iași) with the conviction that death will no longer threaten the child. Magic contagion mimics the burying in order to distract the attention of the disease which will lose interest on someone who has already been consigned to grave.

In conclusion, birth rituals survive in Romania because of some particular situations. First we have to consider the sociological context they are performed in: people living in towns come from villages and they have brought their cultural inheritance to a new environment. On the other hand, the urban society they live in is not that different from the world they first knew, hence the cultural function of these beliefs is still viable. Moreover, only women are familiar with birth customs and their secretive attitude preserved them by not exposing the gestures to innovation.

BDD-A975 © 2011 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:41:24 UTC)

References

Bartoli 2007: Lise Bartoli, *Venir au monde. Les rites de l'enfantement sur les cinq continents*, Paris, Petite Bibliothèque Payot.

Burada 1892: T.T. Burada, *Obiceiuri la naşterea copiilor poporului roman din Macedonia*, in "Convorbiri literare", tom XXVI, nr. 1, Bucureşti.

Cosmulei 1909: Dumitru Cosmulei, datini, credinţe şi superstiţii aromâneşti, Bucureşti, Biblioteca de Popularizare Lumina.

Cristescu-Golopenţia 1944: Ştefania Cristescu-Golopenţia, *Drăguş, un sat din Ţara Oltului (Făgăraş). Manifestări spirituale. Credinţe şi rituri magice*, Bucureşti, Institutul de Ştiinţe Sociale.

Eliade 1981: Mircea Eliade, *Istoria credinţelor şi ideilor religioase*. I, *De la epoca de piatră la misterele din Eleusis*, Bucureşti, Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică.

Eliade 1995: Mircea Eliade, *Naşteri mistice*, Bucureşti, Editura Humanitas.

Franklin 2005: Franklin Rosalind, *Baby Lore. Superstitions and Old Wives Tales from the World Over*, West Sussex, Diggory Press.

Frazer 2009: James George Frazer, *The Goldem Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, New York, Cosimo Classics.

Laugier 1910: Ch. H. Laugier, *Sănătatea în Dolj. Monografie sanitară*, Craiova, Institutul Grafic "Samitca".

Marian 1995, Simeon Florea Marian, *Naşterea la români. Studiu etnografic*, Bucureşti, Editura "Grai şi Suflet – Cultura Naţională".

Muşlea, Bârlea 1970: Ion Muşlea, Ovidiu Bârlea, *Tipologia folclorului din răspunsurile la chestionarele lui B.P. Hasdeu*, Bucureşti, Editura Minerva.

Scurtu 1942: Vasile Scurtu, *Cercetări folclorice în Ugocea românească (Satu-Mare)*, in "Anuarul Arhivei de Folclor", VI.

Sevastos 1990: Elena Sevastos, *Naşterea la români. Studiu istoric-etnografic comparativ*, Bucureşti, Editura Minerva.

Şerban 2002: Alexandru Doru Şerban, *Naşterea, nunta, moartea la gorjeni. Credinţe, mituri, tradiţii*, Târgu-Jiu, Editura Scrisul gorjean.

van Gennep 1996: Arnold van Gennep, *Riturile de trecere*, Iaşi, Editura Polirom.

Abstract

The author uses a mirror technique to highlight the few change birth customs have undertaken over centuries in Romania and more specifically in Moldova villages. She invokes ethnographic work from 19th and 20th century and compares it to customs she gathered from actual fieldwork in the past years. Each phase from this passage rite seems to have preserved ritual patterns that help the new mother and her child adapt to a different ontological situation. Although technology and society evolution have exposed traditional thinking to change, birth beliefs remain the same and secure the neophytes, both on a psychological level and on a magic one. The study also approaches the figure of the midwife, although this occupation performed without professional training faced extinction. Women still remember her and the stories they tell on the midwife are close to legend. The overall impression on birth customs emphasizes the sacred nature of the woman able to give life and to propel germination or sterility to the surrounding environment. On his turn, the baby appears highly receptive to anything his mother thinks, acts or touches, also to the persons that come into contact with him before baptism. The midwife was in charge with the magic protection of the two and some of her mystical actions are now performed by the mother herself or by her relatives.

BDD-A975 © 2011 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:41:24 UTC)