

BIRTHLORE AND CHILDHOOD IN ARCHAIC AND MODERN EUROPEAN CULTURES: AN INTRODUCTION

Irina Sedakova

*Sc.D., Head of the Department for Typology and Comparative Linguistics
Institute for Slavic Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia
irina.a.sedakova@gmail.com*

Nina Vlaskina

*PhD, Senior Research Fellow
Southern Scientific Centre, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia
nvlaskina@gmail.com*

This issue is dedicated to a topic which has always been and will be of utmost interest to scholars of many humanitarian and social disciplines as well as of medical science. At the heart of this subject is an event which is both physical (natural, ontological) and symbolical in nature – the miracle of childbirth. It denotes and alludes to the origin and beginning of life, initiation and acquisition of a new status. As such it has been thoroughly studied by ethnographers, ethnologists, cultural and medical anthropologists, historians, sociologists and theologians, linguists and folklorists, psychologists and pedagogues from various countries. In the twenty-first century, with the advent of new technology and research methods, together with huge advances made in medical care for women, academic studies of childbirth and early childhood became multidisciplinary. Even so, the canonical works and traditional worldview concepts – mostly typical for rural spaces that had been introduced by classical scholars such as Victor Turner, Bronislaw Malinowski, Arnold van Gennep, and many others – are the backbone and foundation of any study. Archaic views on pregnancy, delivery, and the baby's initial socialisation, which do not seem at first glance to be applicable in the most modern urban settings equipped with modern medical and scientific facilities, prove to be amazingly stable. Parallel to this continuation of tradition is a new attitude to the personal life and emotions – a “new sincerity”. This contrasts with the popular principles of secretive behaviour of the mother-to-be. Many stories about women's experiences of delivery posted

on the Internet give scholars new insight into the material and open it up to a multidisciplinary analysis.

We aligned the articles according to the methodological principles and the kind of material the authors have used. The first two articles, one by **Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė** (Lithuania), “Rituals of social legitimization in the Lithuanian childbirth customs system: Traditions and innovations”, and the other by **Tatiana Agapkina** and **Andrei Toporkov** (Russia), “The structure and genesis of one type of magic spell against children’s insomnia among Slavic peoples”, use diachronic methods. Though the first article covers the ritual practice of Lithuanian regions, and the second one sheds light on Slavic charms, the authors of the two studies start their research from old written texts. Then they compare them with corresponding oral versions and their modifications documented in modern times. Such a method allows the researchers to define the genesis of certain elements of the rituals or texts, to draw parallels inside the tradition(s), and to detect most stable points in the whole corpus.

Irina Sedakova (Russia) in her article “Unlived life: The death and funeral of a child in Slavic traditional culture” employs the ethnolinguistic approach, investigating the central theme – the premature death – with the help of linguistic, folklore, and ethnographic data. This complex methodology shows the tragic event as part of the family scenario and as a result of intricate reasons: God’s will, the fate, the verdict of the Fates, parents’ ban on the rules and lack of veneration of the saints, black magic, the evil eye, curse, etc. The dead child is seen as a small deceased human being who has not passed through all the stages of life, as an angel and as a kin’s patron, one of the ancestries.

The next series of articles focus on modern narrations and narrative style. **Oksana Labashchuk**, **Halyna Derkach**, and **Tetiana Reshetukha** (Ukraine) and **Lena Marander-Eklund** (Finland) have put down interlocutors’ stories about the experience in giving birth. The authors explicate different possibilities of the methodology of these texts-clichés. The Ukrainian scholars concentrate their attention on the child to be born and then the newly born baby. They find archaic themes and parallels in the modern depiction of the movements of a child in the womb and its appearance, which prove that the fundamental ideas have survived until nowadays. Lena Marander-Eklund highlights dramatic narrative means and stylistics; she describes the transformation of emotions during the interview, and portrays the anthropological vision of the body. Similar aspects are at the heart of **Natalia Gramatchikova**’s study: showing the structure of the narrative and body experience, she touches upon other social issues like aggression, pain, and helplessness of the women in the maternity medical system. The scholar investigates different types of narratives – they are not a dialogue or an interview, but are mostly monologues, posted on the Internet for various

reasons as self-expression and auto-reflection. These articles exemplify different research strategies as related to the material. Lena Marander-Eklund focuses on the narratives on childbirth, analysing deep interviews with 14 mothers who have had their first baby. She interviews them several times before the labour and after it, comparing their emotions and perception of the processes. Oksana Labashchuk, Halyna Derkach, and Tetiana Reshetukha have compiled a base of 500 non-structured interviews, which allows them to unravel the most frequent motifs and stable elements of the narratives. Natalia Gramatchikova also works with 'big data'; she does not communicate with the authors of the narratives, who are geographically dispersed in the Russian cities and in migration. Even more, it is difficult to determine the location. The major aim of these narratives is to verbalise the events, to mentor those who do not have this experience and knowledge of the Russian maternity hospitals.

Two articles by **Alexander Novik** (Russia), "Rite of male circumcision among the Muslim population in the Western Balkans", and by **Natalia Dushakova** (Russia), "A local midwife or a doctor? Two systems of knowledge in birthing practices of Russian Old Believers", discuss the transformation of the traditional culture under the pressure of the medical developments. Alexander Novik examines the shift of traditional ritual practice of circumcision from the jurisdiction of religious officials to the hospital, since circumcision is now performed by surgeons. He places the rite of circumcision in a broad cultural and geographical context and shows how the traditional Muslim society adopts technical progress and legitimises it. Natalia Dushakova's focus is on the issue of transition from home birth to hospital birth. She examines the symbolic and pragmatic functions of a midwife, the modern transformation of her role due to the fact that women are taken to hospitals to give birth, and the adaptation of the community to the new system of maternity care. The author collected her field material among Old Believers – the Slavs who today live in Moldova and in the Danube Delta in Romania.

Romanian material is presented in the following two articles by **Adina Hulubaş**, "Taking hold of the future: Active childbirth practices and beliefs in Romania (in the home country and in migration)", and **Anamaria Iuga**, "Coming into the world: From spirits to the Spirit". The first childhood museum in Romania". These two authors demonstrate how the topic of childbirth can be studied and exhibited in the city. Adina Hulubaş analyses the ideas and practices related to pregnancy and the first year of a child's life (baptism, first bathing, fortune-telling about the future during the first haircut). Her interlocutors are Romanian women who live in the homeland or abroad. She identifies traditional rural symbols and patterns of behaviour in the life of city dwellers. The issue ends up with the article by Anamaria Iuga, who literally shows to

the readers the museum representation of Romanian rituals of childbirth and early childhood. This experimental exhibition aims to embody intangible objects in material form. These ideas, beliefs, and ritual acts make up the 'fabric' of the birthlore and appeal to the emotions and feelings of the audience. Similar to other articles in the issue, this study proves that emotions and experiences are central to the episode of childbirth in many ways.

We hope the issue will provide new material and methods to the readers and will inspire them to work on similar topics.

Irina Sedakova, PhD, Sc.D., is Head of the Department for Typology and Comparative Linguistics, Institute for Slavic Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences. Her fields of interest are Slavic and Balkan studies, ethnolinguistics, sociolinguistics, folklore, childbirth and calendric customs.

irina.a.sedakova@gmail.com

Nina Vlaskina, PhD, is Senior Research Fellow at the Southern Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Her research interests primarily concern traditional culture of the Don Cossacks and Old Believers of the Southern Russia.

nvlaskina@gmail.com