

BIRTH AND DEATH IN THE ROMANIAN FOLK BELIEF

Joanna Kretsu-Kantsyr. Chisinau, Moldova

Romanian traditions and customs, which accompany the important events of life have been and still are under investigation by researchers in various fields, including folklorists and ethnographers.

The ethnographic research is mostly characterised by concrete information, collected in the studied areas, by a variety of facts, by attempts to describe the accomplishment of each custom and, in some cases by attempts to find out their role and significance in social life. Among these works the first to mention are the volumes published by Simion Florea Marin in Bucuresti in 1892 and dedicated to the three great cycles of customs connected with birth, wedding and death.

The study of birth and death customs is not an easy task in the present ethnographic situation. On the one hand there are certain micro-zones of a wide spectrum of ritual practices which in the remote past might have had a more important or general character. On the other hand, we can speak of substratial mutations in the function and significance of some customs and even of the omission of certain moments of special significance in the corresponding cycle of performance.

While speaking about the three great cycles – birth, wedding and death – we can see a different situation. The observations show the tradition to be stronger in customs connected with family life, than in customs in general, as the customs with a restricted number of participants have a greater persistence. The funeral customs are the closest to their traditional substance, their essential moments have remained much the same. The birth customs have been deeply and rapidly changed.

Only a systematic ethnographic collection work might clear up the relations between different categories of customs, between the basic moments in some customs related to the life cycle, and the whole series of practices and popular credences, between the practice of customs and the popular mentality.

The Romanians, as well as other nations have always expressed joy about the arrival of a new-born child in the world. An old proverb said: 'The more children, the richer the Romanian'. So, one of the most ardent desires of the newlyweds, especially the bride's, is for the mighty God to bless them with sons and daughters. If the bride's desire is not fulfilled she seeks help in different remedies, by preparing and consuming certain plant drinks. The most frequently were used some species of the orchids, white rose and white lilac,

which were boiled in honey or wine, or nine young garlic plants were put in spirits of wine and kept in the flue for nine days. This kind of remedy was taken in on nine successive days. Garlic is an acknowledged remedy used by old Indo-Europeans as well as by contemporary people. The Romanians used it especially often for driving away ghosts and evil spirits, against bewitching and to cure different real and imaginary diseases. It was believed that the woman who had no children was not accepted by God. During pregnancy the woman was to follow certain regulations, either while doing her everyday work or while eating, resting and preparing food. These bans, along with different customs, are kept till after the birth in order to avoid doing harm to the woman or to the new-born baby. The 'blessed', that is the pregnant woman, should not go out too often, in order not to be bewitched and give birth prematurely. She was not to give water to anybody, or she might not be able to give birth to the child until the person in question gave her water to drink from his (her) hands. She was not to blow on the bread in the oven, so that she would not give birth to a child with a viciously joint tongue. She was prohibited to pass through the weaving-loom and to eat joint berries or she might have twins. Nobody was to cross the pregnant woman's way, or he (she) carried her away into the better world on his (her) back. She was not to kick a dog with her foot, or the child might be dog-hearted. A pregnant woman should not be a bridesmaid at weddings, or her child might die. If the woman knew that she was pregnant and denied it when asked, she might give birth to a mute child.

Often pregnant women were said to lose their children due to some evil spirits, like the *Flier*, who in the form of a snake with a flaming appearance tortured the woman for the whole night and she gave birth to a dead child. Another evil spirit *Samka* tortured the woman during child-birth. It is known that the husband of a delivering woman put two axes in a house pillar, when his wife's labours began. For the child-birth to be easy the bride, when leaving her parents' house, had to step on an egg.

In Roman Dacia it was believed that the birth was difficult, if people knew about it and precautions were taken to conceal the event from the neighbours and relatives. If, however, a woman knew about the birth, she took out her wedding-ring and put it on the woman in childbed. If nobody knew about the birth and the birth was nevertheless difficult, the midwife turned over all the things in the house to make the delivery easier. When the baby was born, the midwife washed the new-born child with cold water to make it insensitive to cold and put it for a moment on the floor – under the table, as a rule.

The Romans had a number of gods looking after new-born children, first of all Ops, the earth-mother, the goddess of children. That is why the Romans, according to the old custom, laid the new-born child on the ground, which is

similar to Romanian custom to lay the new-born child under the table. While the child lay under the table, each of those present threw a stone over his (her) head saying: 'Run into the ghost's mouth', alluding unawares to Saturn, who was supposed to devour children and was cheated, using stones wrapped in swaddling clothes.

For the mother and child not to be bewitched, a red thread pinned with a needle was fixed above the door. The custom goes back to the Romans, whose goddess Carna was believed to guard the room in which a woman lay after delivery, standing against the door and the window to prevent the evil spirits from entering the room. The attribute of Carna was sweetbrier (*Rosa canina*) which was supposed to have great power against devilish influence. Therefore it was hung outside above the door, or burnt before the door.

While the child is not yet christened, every evening a black thread is burned and the mother and child are smoked to prevent evil things from coming near them.

At the same time it is not good for the mother in this period to go out without a light or to go out barefoot or bareheaded – otherwise the grass will not grow where she has stepped. Before christening the woman was neither to go out of the yard, nor use the well, nor look after the animals.

The custom to have a light burning from the birth till after the christening is, probably, a symbol of the light reached by the child coming into the world. The Greeks adored a birth goddess Eileithya, whose image on the Aegion coins is wrapped in a cloth from tap to toe and there is a torch symbolising the light of the world, reached through the birth.

The midwifery, as well as rituals connected with the childbirth, introduction of the new-born child into the family and kinsfolk are fulfilled, according to the tradition, by the midwife who ties and cuts the umbilical cord, looks after the mother and the baby, takes part in the christening. Soon after the birth the new-born child is bathed. The water must be warm, but not hot, for the child not to grow licentious. Then a branch of *Ocimum gratissimum* symbolising cleanliness and love, especially for girls, brought from church on Cross Day, is put into the water, together with silver coins for the child to be unspotted as silver and to be loved by everybody as they love silver; a peony – for the child to be strong and ruddy; in case of a boy – honey, that he would speak sweetly as honey; sugar – to have a sweet life, bread – to be well-provided and to be as good as bread; an egg – to be healthy; sweet milk – to be wealthy, etc.

After bathing, the child is swaddled and laid on the ground or under the table. A piece of garlic is laid beside it (to prevent bewitching). The bathing water is thrown in a solitary place at a tree-root. The child is not to be bathed before sunset, in order not to lose its sight. If in the family previous children

had died, the midwife laid the child in a basin with an iron chain near it, took it out through the window and laid it at the road, guarding it. The first man who passed it was to be its god-father. It was brought out through the window because deceased were carried out through the door. Numerous ritual practices were known to guard the new-born child from misfortune and disease. So, if the child fell ill, its parents simulated its sale and changed its name. Other peoples have done similarly and the custom originates from the period of primitive society. It was believed that the evil spirit that had brought the disease might be deceived by changing the child's name. In the first three days the 'fortune-teller's table' was prepared on which different things were put for the three fairies to come and tell the child's fortune. This action had the purpose of knowing the child's future.

At the funeral ceremony usually a great number of people assembled, who with their presence supported the family in their misfortune. This is an old custom and the ceremony is considered a moral and social duty. The archaic funeral customs were preserved in Romanian tradition better than other customs. Several of them are strictly followed, although they have lost their initial sense. The customs and practices connected with death have preserved pre-Christian elements, going back to the era of the primitive society. Some of them were adopted by the Church for its rituals of funeral services. The traditions and practices connected with death and burial are numerous and various, with many local characteristic aspects.

The most remarkable and widely spread omens of death are the following: unexpected cracking of some things in the house, such as tables, chairs, mirrors, the unexpected falling and breaking of icons or mirrors, a hen's crowing like a cock, a cow's mooing, especially in an inappropriate moment, for example, when the bride is taken from her parents to her fiancé in a bull cart, or the dog's howling. It is considered to be an omen of death if there is a sick person in the house and the dog, howling, scratches or digs the ground near the house and keeps its head down or if the sick person looks repeatedly at his nails or turns his face to the wall. The most powerful of all omens is considered to be the owl's call. Another name for an owl was the death bird. When a man is dying, the light must be held by a stranger, because if it is held by a relative, death will be slow and painful. This widely spread custom called forth a number of plaintive songs, called *doinas*.

The lighted wax candle means that the dying person is a Christian and that he is in concord with everybody and his spirit will be met with light when it leaves the body. When somebody has a long agony he is moved from one place to another, laid on the ground with his face to the east, his bedclothes are changed from head to feet and vice versa. There is also the custom to close his eyes for

him not to see the sorrow and pain of his relatives. It is an old custom dating back to the Romans. In the house the mirror and the clock are turned to the wall. From this moment rituals are performed which have practical purposes. The windows and doors are opened for the spirit and death to go out. Pails of water are covered to prevent the soul from falling into them and drowning. After bathing, the water is left at the feet of the deceased for his soul to bathe. For recollection and luck some hairs of the deceased are hidden on the door-post, because one cannot know for certain who brings luck in the house. As to clothing, it is important to know that old people keep the custom to be clothed in traditional clothes. Not rarely old people prepare beforehand the clothes to be put on after their death. The custom is preserved to dress the unmarried deceased young people in bridal clothes and to perform the funeral like a marriage. All the sucklings were believed to become angels, therefore their shirt is cut to enable them to fly. The deceased is laid on the ground to feel what he will transform into, with his head to the east and his feet to the door – a sign that he is ready for his last journey. A candle is fixed in his hands to light his way and to pass the evil's bridge. A coin is also put in his hand to pay for the boat, which will carry him to the other world.

The hens and other animals should be driven away, not to cross the way of the deceased, or he will either become a ghost or his soul may enter in one of the animals. If the head of the family has died, the oxen are harnessed with the harness upside down, symbolising that everything is topsy-turvy.

The *bochirea*, a lament with individually improvised words, is performed three times: in the morning, afternoon and evening, when the bells ring. The laments acquire sometimes an artistic, poetic colouring. The keening women are careful for the tears not to fall on the deceased's face, or they may burn him or drown his innocent soul. At the same time when the deceased is keened, the relatives prepare the alms, bake the *kolachei*, a kind of fancy bread, make the *coliva*, a sweet nicely decorated dish of wheat grains. In some places the *coliva* signifies the sins of the deceased. Simultaneously, the *pomul* is made. *Pomul* is a branch of a fruit-bearing tree decorated with different dried or fresh fruits and *kolachei*. *Pomul* symbolises:

- 1) the tree of life,
- 2) the passage from this world to the other,
- 3) the shadowing and recreation of the spirits after passing the *vamas*,
- 4) the paradise tree.

Almost everywhere the custom to go to *priveghi* is preserved. *Priveghi* means keeping vigil over the deceased at night. The vigil is kept in two nights between death and burial. The origin of this ritual we can find in the antiquity: the devil, claiming the man's body as his property, wanted to take it. At *priveghi*

different theatrical scenes are performed with masks like the Goat, the Old Man, the Old Woman, etc. The burial usually takes place on the third day. This day is the richest in regard to old traditional practices. The burial takes place before sunset, otherwise the soul may wander. On the third day at sunrise a group of women sing an old ritual song – the Sunrise Song. They ask the sun rays not to hurry for the deceased to have time to prepare for the long journey. On the way to the cemetery, halts are made – the *vamas*. As a rule there are 12 halts but not less than three. The first halt is done after carrying the deceased out of the house, the rest at the crossroads and near bridges. During the first halt in the yard different things are offered over the coffin: animals, objects, clothes of the deceased, a hen, etc. The presented animals' feet are washed before ritual. For instance, it is believed that the sheep cools the spirits of those who work in hell, the hen goes in advance of the soul, looking for its place. On his way to the other world the man must pass a lot of rivers, of course, not without help. Therefore the relatives, wanting to make the passing over the rivers easier, lay on the way in different places usually at all bridges, rivulets, etc. a piece of cloth, which the whole procession must pass over. These allegoric bridges symbolise bridges to the Paradise door. After the service at the cemetery the coffin is released into the grave. Red wine is poured on it, as well as wheat grains and coins. After that, all the participants of the ceremony must take a handful of earth and throw it on the coffin, thereby forgiving all the errors committed by the deceased against them.

Before leaving the cemetery, the participants wash their hands in the procession and go home by some other way. After the burial the relatives of the deceased invite those who were present to dinner, named *Praznik*.

After 40 days the grave is incensed and sprinkled with wine or water. Alms are given and this is the end of the funeral ritual. The prayers for the deceased belong to the old tradition and they have been preserved in different forms. The repast for the deceased is done during *Moshi*, when food and drink are distributed as alms. The *Moshi* are of different kind and take place in different periods of the year: the Christmas *Moshi*, the Easter *Moshi*, etc. The *Moshi* means the family spirits in whose honour the alms are given.

The customs connected with death and burial are losing their significance. Today the bridges of cloth and the halts are often omitted from the ceremony, different practices with religious character lose their initial sense. They are performed only formally, or are entirely ignored. Nevertheless, the described customs constitute an unsurpassed treasure – a lighthouse that throws some light on the spiritual life of the Romanians on both sides of the Prut River.