

## THE BASIC INTERPRETATION OF SOME CUSTOMS FROM THE PREGNANCY PERIOD IN BANAT REGION

## L'INTERPRÉTATION PRINCIPALE DES COUTUMES DE LA PÉRIODE DE GROSSESSE DANS LA RÉGION DE BANAT

## INTERPRETAREA UNOR OBICEIURI DIN PERIOADA DE GRAVIDITATE ÎN REGIUNEA BANATULUI

Otilia Daniela ALEXIN (MILUTINOVICI)

Human Science Doctoral School,  
West University of Timișoara

### Abstract

*The pregnancy period, together with the delivery stage and the baptism, forms the cycle of birth, the first of the three family life cycles: birth, wedding and funeral.*

*It is an important stage due to the fact that "birth settles the person on the life path" as Gail Kligman used to say in his book "The wedding of the dead" (KLIGMAN, 2005, 127).*

*The reason why the pregnancy period possesses such a high value, in the people's mentality from the Banat region, is the fact that it is responsible for the future baby's health and beauty, in fact for the future of the community.*

*In other words, the pregnant woman must obey certain rules and strictly respect a range of customs and traditions imposed by the community in order not to be hexed by gods.*

### Résumé

*La période de grossesse, ainsi que les étapes de la naissance proprement-dite et la cérémonie du baptême, forment le cycle de la naissance, le premier des trois cycles de la vie familiale: la naissance, le mariage et l'enterrement.*

*Elle représente une étape importante parce que "la naissance met l'homme sur la voie de la vie", tel comme l'affirme Gail Kligman, dans son livre "Le mariage du mort" (KLIGMAN, 2005, 127).*

*Le motif principal qui confère valeur à la période de grossesse est l'importance de celle-ci dans la mentalité de la communauté de Banat, elle déterminant la santé et la beauté du futur enfant et, donc, de la communauté entière.*

*La femme enceinte doit ainsi se soumettre à certaines règles et respecter des coutumes et des traditions, ainsi qu'une longue liste de comportements interdits pendant cette période bénie.*

### Rezumat

*Perioada de graviditate/sarcină, alături de etapele nașterii propriu-zise și a ceremonialului de botez, formează ciclul nașterii, primul dintre cele trei cicluri ale vieții familiale: naștere, nuntă, înmormântare.*

*Ea reprezintă o etapă importantă datorită faptului că „nașterea așează omul pe calea vieții”, după cum afirmă Gail Kligman în cartea sa „Nunta mortului” (KLIGMAN, 2005, 127).*

*Principalul motiv ce conferă valoare perioadei de graviditate îl constituie importanța acesteia în mentalul comunității bănățene, de ea depinzând sănătatea și frumusețea viitorului copil și, deci, a întregii comunități.*

*Astfel femeia însărcinată trebuie să se supună unor norme și să respecte o serie de datini și obiceiuri, o lungă listă de comportamente interzise în această perioadă binecuvântată.*

**Key words:** *birth, customs, mentality, pregnancy, traditions*

**Mots clés:** *naissance, coutume, mentalité, grossesse, traditions*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *naștere, obicei, mentalitate, graviditate, tradiții*

To define the concept of traditional custom has consisted the main preoccupation for many generations of Romanian ethnologists, who struggled to find comprehensive definitions which reflect the Romanian traditional facts and beliefs.

Thereby, Ernest Bernea, the author of a well-known study about customs, which tried to theorize the categories of customs, chose to define the custom related to the tradition. Pointing out the synonymy between the two terms, the relative superposition, during the process of defining the term of custom, the author noticed fundamental differences on one hand due to their double nature and direction, on the other hand due to their performance:

”The tradition comes from what it has been given, an outer fact, already made and objectively observed. In its contents, socially speaking, resides the idea of heritage, of transition and connectivity between generations. The tradition is an ancient form and reality. Within a society, the tradition represents what is crystallized, laid down in time, also represents forms taken spiritually collective, being the palpable expression of a real system of thinking of the world and its internal relevances. What we firstly ought to have in mind is the idea of external, absolute object, of a thing already done; and secondly, the idea is of something received, given through the instrumentality of tradition.” (BERNEA, 1968, 381)

The custom is defined to be ”a long time repeated fact, a social act, that gives life and updates the traditions”. Compared to the ancient tradition, which represents a compilation of data, the custom is perceived to be a live tradition. The meeting point of the two concepts is represented by old beliefs, being the common denominator that superimposes the stagnant concept of the ancient tradition with the dynamic concept of the custom. The dynamic character of the custom, emphasized by Bernea, offers it the role of an coordinating phenomenon, possessing the preservation and maintaining functions of the social body.

The custom also has a multifunctional character, enveloping manifestations and social, juridical and cultural-aesthetic norms. The reminded researcher distinguishes the most important two functions of the custom: moral function and judicial function.

Another function of the custom is that of a complex language, through its messages being communicated the meanings of life. In order to function as a communication act, the custom needs a sender/transmitter, a receiver and a message, that requires to be decoded based on an understood code.

The custom imposes through its repetability: ”The custom occurs to be a long time repeated fact, a social act, that gives life and up-dates the ancient traditions, in the way of needing to sustain the social life”. (CREȚU, 2014, 234)

The ethnologist Ioan Viorel Boldureanu in his book, *Traditional Oral Culture. Themes, concepts, categories*, also presents the report custom - tradition as a proportion from the whole to the part, explaining the concept of ancient tradition as a restrained form of the custom and a form usually used in rural areas. (BOLDUREANU, 2006, 39)

Within the tradition of the Romanian ethnology and folklore it has been imposed the classic classification of customs, divided in calendar customs, family life customs and traditional occupations customs. (HEDEȘAN, 2005, 16)

The family life customs comprise: the birth ceremonies, the baptism, the wedding, the funeral and the postfuneral rites.

The concept of the transition rite has been developed by Arnold van Gennep based on the duality of the world: the sacred world and the profane world, two incompatible entities necessitating a midway stage between the two.

This concept has been assumed and successfully used in the Romanian ethnology for explaining the family life customs.

The rite, whose ethimological roots derive from the Indo-European root *rta*, *arta*, sends to the cosmic order, the order of the men-gods reports. The Latin word *ritus* designates what must to be done. It approaches to the meaning of the word "ceremony", came from the Sanscrit language: *kar* - to do, *mon* - thing, implying a "must do" thing, a sacred thing. (CĂLIMAN, 2008, 27) The functions of the rite in the profane life can be different: its efficacy, compatible with some necessities coming from inside, a utilitarian theory of the rite sustaining that its function, the same with the ones of religion and magic, is to temper the individuals, to transmit them courage when encounter the danger or try to control aleatory.

Going back to the classification of the family life customs, these are divided, traditionally and unanimously accepted, in customs related to birth, wedding and death.

From these three categories of the family life customs, the article discusses the birth customs, being referred to as a series of forbidden practices and traditional acts that must have been accomplished beginning with the pregnancy period.

Birth represents the first of the three major stages (birth, wedding, death) of the family life transition rites, primordial stage, fundamental in the human being's life cycle. It provides the perpetuation of the human species (also complying one of the first biblical commandments: "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it"), of the race and of the name. (HOLY BIBLE, 1984, 1)

It produces an important change within the family life and also within the community the family belongs to, representing "the main purpose of marriage", of having a family in the mentality of the traditional and archaic communities.

People wished children because they were considered to be a reliance and a comforter for parents when they arrived in the vale of years. Children were supposed to take on their own shoulders the duties of the household and also to take care of their parents when needed.

If we refer to the researcher Arnold van Gennep's theory, the first stage of a human being's life – birth and baptism ceremony – includes three rites: preliminary rites that include the pregnancy period, liminary rites that correspond to the giving birth and delivery the baby period and postliminary rites that include the baptism ceremony with its entire palette of postnatal practices. (VAN GENNEP, 1999, 21)

In traditional folk culture the pregnancy (the future baby) is considered the God's gift, being set "at His will".

The pregnant woman has being called in different ways over time and according to the local culture: in a different condition (HEDEȘAN, 2001, p.16 ), with child (RADAN USCATU, 2014, 38), (far) gone with child, high-bellied, pregnant, impregnate, quick with child, great with child (MARIAN, 2000, 25 ). If the pregnant woman is unmarried, she is called up the spout, preppers or with young. (MARIAN, 2000, 25)

In the mentality of the folk community, the woman expecting a child is seen the same way the other women are, the only difference consisted in her high belly. She benefits of no special treatment from people around her. The pregnancy is considered a normal state, so the pregnant woman is required to fulfill all the tasks. It is believed that movement makes the delivery of the baby much easier. Surrounded by these beliefs, the pregnant woman struggles to take care of herself, paying attention to heavy things and girding through the whole period of pregnancy.

Analyzed from the pregnant woman's point of view, the pregnancy stage represents a delicate period in her life, the entire body crosses through a series of changes which affect not only her appearance, but also her state of mind. She is invaded by new emotions and feelings (inexplicable sometimes even for her, hardly enough to explain the people around her, usually

attributed to the hormones): laughing – crying in the same time, nervousness, nausea, food cravings, fetus' touches, discomfort during the night, insomnia sometimes.

As if all these physical and mental changes (transformations) are not enough, the pregnant woman is being faced with a long list of behaviors/ practices that “are forbidden” to be done. (BOLDUREANU, 2003, 120)

For example in the traditional folk communities from Banat region it is thought that the pregnant woman “must not get scared or she loses the baby”, “must not look at frogs, other animals, or the baby would resemble the animal, having the mouth of a frog, of a lion or of a wolf”. (HEDEŞAN, 2001, 16) It is also thought that hiding the pregnancy could damage the baby's ability of speaking (up to muteness). Thus, the woman expecting a baby should spread the good news as soon as possible for helping the baby to talk early.

The woman who is impregnate has to pay a great attention to the materials she reads. She is supposed to read the prayer – The Dream of the Holy Mother of God - daily in order to assure herself an easy childbirth and a healthy baby. (MARIAN, 2000, 38)

At the same time the tradition says that the pregnant woman is forbidden to steal any fruit or anything else, this causing a sign on baby's body in the place where she hides the stolen object. However this fact has happened, the woman tries not to touch her face with her hand, saying:”I am not taking one, but two”. (MARIAN, 2000, 23) Also regarded to stealing, there are regions where people even think that the future baby might become a thief. (RADAN USCATU, 2014, 39 apud MARIAN, 2000, 24 )

For avoiding such situations and being aware of the fact that the pregnant woman have cravings, she is invited to taste from all the dishes if happens to be in a foreign house while the food is cooked, so that she might not lose the baby because of the cravings.

Other deeply growing tradition in the folk people's mentality is the pregnant's wondering when admiring someone's beauty, for the baby “to borrow” certain physical features (blue/ green eyes, blond/ curly hair), but she “must not stare” to people with physical defects (dumb, deaf, blind, lame people) or having doubtful characteristics (addicted to drinking, loverboys) lest the baby would be spoiled. (HEDEŞAN, 2001, 16 ) This tradition has been also referred to by the ethnologist Simion Florea Marian, who said:”she must never look passionately to things or human beings that are deformed, ugly, lame, cripple, blind” because “then the baby would be born according to way in which the thing or human she saw looked like.” For preventing from this resemblance, the woman says “I do not see one, but two.” (MARIAN, 2000, 24 )

Within the local communities from Oravița area, in the past women used to not being pleased of the idea of having twins (in contrast to the current trend) probably due to the concept that these were special children, more sensitive, sometimes occurring problems at birth. For them also the physical and financial effort is double, not only at the delivery but also through the entire period of parenting. In order to avoid such a situation, the pregnant woman did not consume twin fruit (cherries, plums, sour cherries) and did not hold two things in both hands or cross through the loom. (RADAN USCATU, 2014, 38 )

Generally accepted in all traditional beliefs is that pregnant woman is forbidden to go to funerals. She could seldom participate only if the deceased is a very close relative. (HEDEŞAN, 2001, 16 ) Even though the pregnant should stay as far as possible from the dead, people believed that also the dead could hex. If she has still looked accidentally, she says “ I do not see one, but two”, so that the baby should not take the dead body's pallor.

The pregnant woman has to pay a special attention to the fruitful trees for the first time. She cannot eat their first fruits for fear the baby might die.

For the same reason, fearing of a sudden death of the new born baby, the pregnant woman is prohibited to stand godmother to a child. A strong widely-spread belief says that the baby who is toggled underneath would die. So, if she would hold the new-born baby, brought to be baptized, above her belly, her child would die. If she would hold the new-born baby beneath her belly, this baby would die. (MARIAN, 2000, 26 )

In conclusion, the surrounding world might prove to be hostile to procreation, however Narcisa Alexandra Știucă sets at the pregnant woman's disposal two types of "magic antidotes", that should help the future mother to defend her fetus of the fatal influences of bad spirits. "Some of them have permanent mystic assured efficacy (holy books, sanctified relics, objects and plants possessing magic peculiarities – garlic, basil, knotted thread, usually red), the others have a momentary, synchronous efficacy and they are imminent (the woman can depart the memories through gestures or words and also neutralize the contact with an evil force or agent that would produce, otherwise, birthmarks to the unborn baby)." (ȘTIUCĂ, 2000, 94)

In addition to these, in the traditional folklore from Banat region there are different incantations that are used by the pregnant woman, especially at her final stage of pregnancy, just before giving birth to the baby, on purpose to insure an easy delivery and to defend the future baby and the mother. (IANA, 1889, 483) One of these is used by the women from Oravița area. The impregnate woman, being in her final trimester of pregnancy, throws water over the eave of the house and sets a sieve and a pot under the eave, saying: "The faster the water drains off the eaves and the sieve, the faster I deliver my boy or girl", after that she wets her womb and drinks the rest of the water. (IANA, 1889, 483)

### **Bibliographical resources**

BERNEA, Ernest, *Introducere teoretică la studiul obiceiurilor*, „Revista de etnologie și folclor”, t.13, nr. 5, București, Editura Academiei Române, 1968.

BOLDUREANU, Ioan Viorel, *Cultură tradițională orală. Teme, concepte, categorii*, Timișoara, Editura Marineasa, 2006.

CĂLIMAN, Ion, *Ceremonialul riturilor de trecere. Nașterea*, Timișoara, Editura Excelsior Art, 2008.

CREȚU, Vasile Tudor, *Ethosul folcloric – sistem deschis. Existența ca întemeiere*, Timișoara, Editura Universității de Vest, 2014.

HEDEȘAN, Otilia, *Folclorul. Ce facem cu el?*, Timișoara, Editura Universității de Vest, 2001.

HEDEȘAN, Otilia, *Lecții despre calendar. Curs de folclor*, Timișoara, Editura Universității de Vest, 2005.

HOLY BIBLE, New King James Version, Nashville, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984

IANA, Aurel, *Credințe la nașteri. Din părțile Oraviței*, Revista „Familia”, an XXV, nr.41, 51, Oradea Mare, 1889

MARIAN, Simion Florea, *Nașterea la români. Studiu etnografic*, București, Editura Saeculum, 2000.

RADAN USCATU, Miliana-Radmila, *Botezul, nunta și funeraliile la carașoveni*, Timișoara, Editura Universității de Vest, 2014.

ȘTIUCĂ, Narcisa Alexandra, *În pragul lumii albe*, București, CNCVTCP, 2001

VAN GENNEP, Arnold, *Riturile de trecere*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 1996.

