

The Ritual and Economic Basis of Women's Power. In a Romanian Village

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In the region of Maramures, Romania, over the past eighty years, the critically important social and ritual roles of midwife and godmother have undergone a significant transformation. There have been changes in: the interplay of the two roles, the criteria for selecting women to fill them, their perception by members of village communities, and the way their practice and performance fit into the context of village life, including the relationship of females to males.

I would like to briefly outline and then analyze the evolution of these roles and relationships during this period, slicing into the process in 1902, 1940, and 1974. I seek neither an un-form for Romanian crisis rituals nor a primal formula for the relationship between these rituals and women's power. The evidence I have suggests considerable flexibility in both the form and in the relationship. Through comparison of the situation at different moments, what might emerge is an understanding of the tie between historical variables and the ritual-power complex, and perhaps a picture of the structure that persists in spite of history. These would seem to be crucial points for comparison of the individual ethnographic cases that we are sharing with each other today.

I should say a brief word about the Romanian case and the sources of my information. Maramures is an ethnically mixed, historically well-defined region occupying a mountain depression that straddles the current border of Romania with the Soviet Union. Much of the land is marginal agriculturally; livestock and timber have been the backbone of the peasant economy. The seventy or so villages are strung out along four major river valleys or tucked higher up in transverse valleys. Many of the villages are over 500 years old. They entered the 20th century overpopulated, economically backward and culturally conservative - having been largely neglected by Austrian and Hungarian administration.

The past 80 years have been marked by continuous turbulence. Aside from the socio-economic problems caused by the overpopulation and attendant land shortage, the communities have been racked by two World Wars, a wrenching shift in governmental control from Hungarian to Romanian, the ravages of the interwar depression, the rise and fall of indigenous fascist movements, the arrival of thousands of Jews from Galicia who transformed the local economies, the traumatic and tragic removal of the Jewish population to Nazi concentration camps, the socialist "Revolution" and forced collectivization in the 1950's. Some 60% of the villages were, however, not collectivized - partly because of popular resistance, partly because of the inhospitable character of the hilly terrain.

The last thirty five years have been marked by accelerated change in all aspects of village life - including a marked improvement in the standard of living and a secularization of values promoted by local Communist administration and the school system¹.

My findings are based on two years field research in 1973-4 and 1981-2 in, Poienile Izei, other villages, and the main market town of Sighetul Marmatiei².

Historical records suggest that in 1902, Maramures villages were largely isolated, self-sufficient communities. They were characterized by a general egalitarian structure, although family lines were differentiated in terms of prestige, based on their relative longevity in the village, wealth, and whether or not they had received so-called "diplomas" from the Hungarian government centuries before in recognition of their service to the crown. The intensity of this family status differentiation varied from village to village. In large, old, "noble" villages, such as Ieud, studied by Dr. Gail Kligman, these differences were very important³. In smaller so called "serf" villages such as Poienile Izei, these differences were not strongly developed.

¹ For a more detailed treatment of Maramures history, see: *Marrant, Joel, The Idea of Folk Tradition in Romania*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Oregon, 1977

² These periods of field research were supported by a Fulbright Doctoral Dissertation Abroad Fellowship, an International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) Fellowship for Doctoral Research, a Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research Abroad Fellowship, and an IREX Young Faculty Abroad Fellowship

³ For information on other Maramures villages, see: *Kligman, Gail, Poetry as Politics a Transylvanian Village*, *Anthropological Quarterly*. 56 (2): 83-89; *Masson, Daniele Les Femmes De Breb*, *Etudes et Documents Balkaniques* 4, Paris, 1982

In 1902 Poienile Izei was a homogeneous Romanian, virtually closed community, bound together by kin, marriage, age-grade, and neighborhood networks. Although ties also extended outward to the nearby villages that formed the local village "cluster", Poienile Izei was inward directed, the people united by a strong magical-religious tradition based on the liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the practice of crisis rituals.

Central to the functioning of this magical-religious system were the few women who served as midwives and godmothers to all. In 1902 there were just three women who served as midwives. They were also the most important godmothers, selected in more than two thirds of the baptisms performed in that year. It is nearly impossible to know if each midwife-godmother had her own sphere of influence or if they were in competition within the village, but it doesn't seem likely. For the period 1902-1911, in almost 13% of the baptisms, the godmother chosen was a midwife *other than* the actual midwife of the child's mother, suggesting a relatively free interchange among them.

Frequently, in those years, the status of midwife-godmother was passed from mother to daughter or mother-in-law to daughter-in-law. There was continuity in the dyadic ritual tie, as one's midwife-godmother at birth and baptism (or her daughter/daughter-in-law) would normally become the godmother (or marriage sponsor) at the wedding of one's child.

Native Romanian ethnographers have conventionally stressed a strong "patriarchal bias" in Romanian peasant social structure, suggesting that midwife-godparent were institutions used by males to exert their dominance and serve the interests of patriarchal descent groups¹. At the turn of the century in Maramures there were certainly villages where this tendency was pronounced, but the picture that is coming into focus for Poienile Izei in 1902 is quite different. Basically, it appears that female prestige was high. The village economy was based on a sharply drawn and complementary division of labor. Women were included in economic planning and decision making; they were dominant in ritual activities within the domestic sphere, which they controlled.

¹ Cf. *Lorint, Florica, Tradiția moașei de neam în Gorj*. Revista de Etnografie și Folclor 12 (2): 127-132, 1967; *Lorint, F. and C. Eretescu, „Moșii în obiceiurile vieții familiale”*. Revista de Etnografie și Folclor 1967 12 (4): 299-307; *Stahl, P.H. The Rumanian farm household and the village community in: Anthropology and Social Chang in Rural Areas*. ed. B. Berdichewsky, pp. 233-344, The Hague: Mouton. 1979

Again in contrast to the conventional picture, it seems that women operated as midwives and godmothers independently of their husbands, who were not prominent in the crisis rituals of baptism and marriage. In Poienile Izei people recalled the old midwife-godmothers as "respected," "important", "good" individuals within the community. There was less agreement about the good character of their spouses. Other clues are suggestive: in the church records of births and baptisms the midwives' maiden names were used. Sometimes the godfather's name was even omitted altogether. When midwife-godmothers were widowed, they continued on in their ritual role, choosing surrogates (including in some cases a male consanguinity Kinsman) for their husband. Conversely, when an old midwife-godmother died (as three did in the 1920s), her husband invariably dropped out of ritual service as a godfather.

This ritual (and socio-economic) importance of women in the community was reinforced on other special occasions the most significant being the "day of the granddaughters or goddaughters", when all of the females of the village would, gather at the homes of their midwives and celebrate their ritual and social ties¹.

On this occasion, as well as at other rituals and in the course of daily village life, questions of individual power seem to have been subordinated to the maintenance of solidarity within the community as a whole.

By 1940, the village community and the role of midwife-godmother had changed. There were still just four midwives who attended the 27 births, yet none of them would serve later as godmothers at the infants' baptisms; the one role had fractured into two. Fourteen different godmothers served at the 27 baptisms. The selection of godmother was no longer restricted to a handful of "well-respected" women; other criteria came into play: kin ties and wealth being the most important. The "gatherings of goddaughters" were still practiced, but with the increasing importance of kin ties, the ritual gatherings became increasingly "familial" in character and faded away as community events.

Formerly, there had been an elaborate assemblage of magical-religious rituals built up around parturition, with the midwife in

¹ An excellent description and analysis of the comparable tradition in Bulgaria, see: *Silverman, Carol Ritual Transformation in Bulgaria*, paper presented at the 82nd, Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, 1983. Chicago, ILL

charge¹. With the bifurcation of roles, there was apparently a decline in the ritual character of midwife. Much of the ritual web that had included acts of purification, the child's naming, arranging the meal with the Three Fates, was lost. The emphasis was now placed almost strictly upon practical skills of delivery, and midwives came to be chosen on this basis - not because of their stature within the village. Socially marginal women, including some who had received technical training, now assumed the positions. This shift was vividly expressed in the presence of Jewish midwives in some Maramures villages in the 1930's. They were chosen because of their superior skills in the art, even through the ritual worlds of the Jews and Romanians were almost totally closed to each other.

Soon after the 1947 consolidation of communist power in the Romanian government, as part of a strong pro-natal policy, passed laws forbidding the practice of midwife by anyone but state-certified individuals. Villages such as Poienile Izei now had "scientifically trained" midwives, often not native to the village or even the region, who would assist new mothers in village "birth homes". In 1972 the birth home in Poienile Izei was closed. Since then, expectant mothers have been taken by ambulance the 31 miles to the hospital in Sighet. There, among peasant women from other villages, as well as urbane city dwellers, they have experienced the basically 1950's American pattern of childbirth (general unaesthetic, stirrups, forceps, hygienic conditions, and a much lower mortality rate for mothers and infants). Almost as a point of policy, the obstetricians, who are almost exclusively male, and their assistants (almost all female) avoid ritual of the experience during the mandatory seven day stay in the hospital. Only rarely do mothers maintain ties with the doctors/midwives after this period; few mothers I spoke with even recalled their names.

In regards to the role of godmother, the trend towards fragmentation has continued. In 1974, for example, there were 14 different godmothers for only 19 baptisms. The chain of inheritance of the role has been broken, with young couples choosing as godmothers at their weddings women other than those who served as godmothers at their own baptisms. With this rule of generational succession no longer held to, adult villagers now see their *real* godparents as those who serve as such at their own wedding and then go on to sponsor

¹ See, for example: **Dăncuș, Mihai**, *Riturile de separare, agregare, și de inițiere în fața copilăriei. Zona Maramureș*, ("Rituals of separation, aggregation, and initiation in the period of childhood") **Marmația**. 5-6 (1981), Baia Mare, Romania

their children at baptism. Although there persists the tendency to choose favorite relatives as wedding godparents, the overriding criterion now for selection is clearly practical, economic advantage. In the words of one aged former godmother-midwife "almost anyone can become a godmother now".

Weddings have become high powered economic transactions and have preserved only the ritual shell, not the substance. Although in the ceremony itself the godmother remains a central actor, the real power figure is the godfather - and the "success" of the wedding is to a great extent determined by the size of his status and the gift that he confers on the bride and groom. Probably to increase the benefits, couples occasionally choose two sets of godparents - a phenomenon that the oldest people in the village, because of what they knew as youths, frowned upon but, because of what they know life to be now, understand.

Clearly, in the course of the past 80 years there has been enormous change in the character of crisis rituals and the ritual roles prominent in them. To focus on the shape of things at any one point, hoping to see exposed some "pure" traditional structure is misdirected. Instead, we should look to the pattern of change and to the identification of forces that lie behind those changes.

In doing this, we have a basis for comparing this isolated Romanian case with Zapotec villages and Tagalog communities, exposing the connection between women's power and status and the variables that influence their character. In view of this, what does the case I have outlined today say about the chain of variables that is the subject of the symposium? (namely: ritual participation/control power and enhanced status in the community at large.)

It seems clear that the midwife-godmothers of Maramures villages were, at the turn of the century, "powerful" women within the village. It may not be accurate, though, to see this "power" as being acquired through their ritual practice. From what I know, women were midwife-godmothers because they were respected, morally fit, came from "good" families, and had the skills.

As one elderly woman recalled, they were "healers", and their service to and stature within the community went beyond those ritual roles. One could say their status was *reinforced* by their participation in crisis rituals but the benefits gained were not strictly personal or familial.

Their ritual practice served as a bonding mechanism for the community as a whole; they literally sewed the village together

through time and space. Their positions involved less a condensation of power within their own hands than an *expression* of general female potency within the village community. This is made wonderfully clear on the "gathering of the goddaughters" day when all village women would join together, not as individuals sorted into a hierarchy of dominance and power, but as equals in solidarity. Thus the great significance of the rule that at the meal climaxing this celebration, seating was arranged without regard to hierarchy within the group. Moreover, men apparently saw no threat to them in this celebration, nor in the other women's events and rituals; they were appropriate expressions of one aspect of the whole fabric of village life.

It is very difficult to reconstruct how long this pattern had been established and with what historical conditions it had been associated. The history of the region is a muddle; we cannot speak confidently about feudal structures, landowner-tenant relationships, or even patterns of land ownership prior to the twentieth century. In 1902 we have a picture of small inward-directed, basically self-sufficient communities just beginning to "open". As the century unfolds, the pace of change quickens. It is tempting to single out factors that were agents of change; but it is impossible to prove causal linkages.

Government intervention was obviously important; its rural health and hygiene programs, particularly after WWII, clearly affected the attitude of many peasants about childbirth. The current government's total control of this crisis occasion culminates a long movement towards detachment of childbirth from a magical-religious base. This movement was joined with broader efforts at demythologization and secularization, reducing the world of experience to the literal and the profane. The shrinking domain of the mythical and magical was precisely the sphere in which women played prominent roles and possessed power, in the actual practice of which their legitimate place in the community was expressed and reinforced. The Christian component, however, with its patriarchal structures built into the Orthodox liturgy, fared much better. It joined up neatly with the power politics of the public realm that men had dominated and in which women now had to find individual and collective identity. They are still looking.

There is considerable irony in the fact that in a constitutionally egalitarian socialist society such as Romania, genderbased differences in occupations, political power, and prestige remain so great. It is in the rural villages that the inequality appears greatest. Women have assumed the grand double burden, as female peasant-workers juggle

salaried jobs and domestic chores. In collectivized villages this means women assume the low paying, low prestige jobs on the collective farm, while the husbands capture the higher salaried jobs and the advantages of tapping into the new political-economic networks of privilege. In this context it indeed appears that competition among women has increased, as their families compete with each other for material goods for conspicuous display and consumption.

Over the last fifty years this growing competition at the familial level may lie behind the extension of godparent opportunities to so many - as it became increasingly appropriate to keep the prestige within the family, or, in an alternative strategy, to find godparents (= godfather) who could offer real practical benefits to the couple and their families. It is clearly this same pragmatic reasoning that has led some individuals invited to serve as godparents to decline the invitation.

Looking at the ritual roles of midwife and godmother in historical perspective, it is apparent that they have been 'lost' as a basis of women's power in the Romanian communities that I investigated. In the course of the Twentieth Century, in response to economic and ideological forces, the roles have been put in the service of other interests: the government, families, male prestige in the public realm.

It is equally important to recognize that when women were in apparent control of those institutions, the interests served were not just "different"; the ritual roles had a different ontological basis. The prevailing ethos seems not to have been one encouraging short-term pragmatic gain; so it may not be appropriate to phrase our questions about the relationship of ritual roles and 'power' in strictly utilitarian terms. The "rational actor" may in fact be a product of historical conditions. At least during one period of recent history, Maramures midwives and godmothers did not so much use their roles to acquire power in the public realm as express, one might even say *embody* in their service, a fundamental structural principle-female value and potency.