

MIDWIVES AND GODMOTHERS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: A CASE FROM ROMANIA¹

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The roles of midwife and godmother have changed dramatically over the last century in villages of the Maramures region of Romania. Conventional views of their position in rural communities suggest a general and persisting subjugation to patrilineal privilege. This paper examines evidence that the two roles were formerly integrated and that in their practice midwife-godmothers expressed important dimensions of community structure other than agnatic priority. Historical changes and intra-regional variation in this pattern are linked to the influence of intrusive forces that accentuated the primacy of family lines and patrimonial rights.

In the Romanian villages of Maramures, Romania, the roles of midwife and godmother have undergone a significant transformation over the past century. There have been changes in the interplay of the two roles, the criteria for selecting women to play them, their perception by members of village communities, and the way their practice and ritual performance fit into the structure of village life, including the relationship of females to males. Moreover, within this quite homogeneous rural region there is an intriguing pattern of village-to-village variation. The contours of this historical change and Intra-regional diversity are striking and beg explication.

I will argue in this essay that this historical variation in midwife and godmother roles is closely tied to evolving conceptions

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of gender and social (in)equality within Romanian peasant communities. As Jane Collier (1985) recently proposed for Andalusian villages, I will suggest it is essential to focus on the changing „idioms” used by the peasant people of Maramures to place themselves and be placed in a coherent social world¹. Perceiving that world to be characterized by fundamental relations of inequality, Dr. Collier has cogently argued that gender conceptions serve as a prominent idiom for negotiating and reinforcing those practical relations. These conceptions are often condensed in distinctive models for behavior, such as the Virgin Mary and „the modern woman”, and also in the real women who play key ritual roles in the cultural system. Bloch and Guggenheim (1901) have specifically pointed in this way to Christian godmothers ostensibly serving a religiously-sanctioned “moral community” while actually functioning on behalf of an unequal, male-dominated social order. They suggest that in a “symbolical dialectic used well beyond the specific confines of Christianity” (1981:381), godmothers are seen to act for the forces of social legitimacy against the biological creativity of women. Natural birth (and the female order with which it is necessarily associated) is not just set in opposition to cultural rebirth, but subordinated, devalued and even vilified.

Given the intensity of this opposition, the relationship of midwife to godmother in human communities would seem to be crucial. These are, after all, the two roles that embody both the symbolic dichotomy and the real social-political conflict. The women playing them in many European and non-European societies stand at the nexus of an apparently fundamental struggle in which winners and losers are clear. The Romanian case examined here is, I believe, interesting precisely because it questions our certitude concerning this tidy dichotomy. We are confronted with a situation where these roles appear not just to have been played by the same women but integrated rather than opposed. At the very least we may be inclined to reconsider the rigidity of this fundamental opposition and the general applicability of the “Mediterranean” model for gender relations upon which it is largely constructed. Whether specific gender conceptions or the various idioms of family organization and political ideology express a fundamental social equality or inequality is a matter, if not

¹ By „idiom” as used in this essay I mean a culture-specific vehicle (idea, image, orientation) that is used to interpret, express, reflect, or reinforce a distinctive social reality.

literally negotiable, then at least historically contingent. While agreeing with Dr. Collier that these idioms are “complex and multiply-determined”, I will emphasize their tensional co-existence. I would propose to see them, as often contradictory as complementary, as emergent within the cultural system, waxing and waning in response to historical forces and events.

What regulates and animates these idioms and the social reality which they express is, of course, problematic. Economic and other material conditions are clearly crucial, as may well be certain biological imperatives, but also critical is the creative momentum produced by humans working and playing in primary social groups with the symbols they have invented and inherited - and had imposed upon them. This helps to account, as I see it, for the richness, pliancy- and contradictory character - of human institutions such as midwifery and godparenthood in the villages of Maramures. Although I will not propose here any “first-level explanations” for the ethnographic facts as I have found them, I will offer some suggestions regarding the source of the variation documented, imbedded within a very complex historical context. These suggestions are intended to bear upon the larger issue raised above.

The Geographical and Historical Context

Maramures is one of many geographically well-defined and historically persistent regions that form patches in the complex quilt of Eastern European cultures. For much of its history it constituted the *comitat* of Maramaros- within the Kingdom of Hungary and the Habsburg Empire. Today forming part of a *judet* (county) in the Socialist Republic of Romania, the Romanian part of “historic” Maramures occupies a Carpathian intermontane depression between northern Transylvania and the current border of Romania with the Soviet Union¹. Basic subsistence practices and work patterns here have closely resembled those of other mountainous regions of Eastern Europe. Much of the land is marginal agriculturally; livestock and timber have long served as the lifeblood of the peasant economy. Most of the sixty-five or so villages (predominantly Romanian but also Hungarian, Ukrainian, and ethnically mixed) are strung out along four major river valleys or are tucked higher up in transverse valleys. Many

¹ The northern two-thirds of „historic” Maramures (i.e. the ethnographic zone defined by distinctive cultural patterns, a common historical experience, and strong sense of regional identity) was annexed to the Soviet Union after World War II

of the villages are more than six-hundred years old, having experienced a long process of evolution from what Henri Stahl (1980) has characterized, with considerable dissent by some historians, as pre-feudal, pre-capitalist, “free, archaic communities”. The changes in village midwife and godparent institutions that form the subject of this essay are entangled in this larger historical process.

Unfortunately, there are many gaps in our knowledge of this social evolution that carried the villages and their inhabitants through successive periods of confrontation with scattered tribal invaders, semi-nomadic “predatory tributary formations”, expansive feudal states (the Hungarian kingdom), bureaucratic colonial empires (Habsburg and Ottoman), and modern nation-states. It is not at all clear what structures and institutions were imposed from without on the rural communities, although Christianization certainly had an enormous impact. The region shared in the general „second feudalization” experienced in much of Eastern Europe, although it appears the Romanians of Maramures, as those of Fagaras, Vrancea, Hunedoara and a few other peripheral zones, were able to maintain a certain degree of independence and self-determination under Hungarian political control. In the eyes of Budapest, Viennese, and Istanbul political leaders, the importance of the area was strategic rather than economic, policies had been aimed at the maintenance of socio-political stability and the measured extraction of timber and mineral resources (primarily salt). As Katherine Verdery (1983) has described for Transylvania proper, modernization of and capital investment in agriculture was not encouraged during these centuries and distribution of goods was largely restricted to internal markets. Agricultural and industrial development of the western reaches of the Empire and the Pannonian heartland remained of first priority. In Maramures, labor-intensive agriculture and livestock-raising remained at the subsistence level. Many of the land-poor Romanian peasants were forced to engage in sharecropping and migrant labor in the service of the predominantly Hungarian noble class to survive.

In 1919 the southern part of Maramures was included in the construction of “Greater Romania” and the peasants acquired full political rights. Yet economic conditions did not improve substantially for the latter, in spite of the agrarian reforms of 1921 that led to the distribution of millions of hectares to landless and near-landless peasants. As Verdery (1983:282) points out, the gentlemen bureaucrats of Bucharest failed to confront and resolve the main problems confronting the peasants: „absolute overpopulation, conti-

nued extensive rather than intensive cultivation, low productivity, and inadequate capital or credit to improve it”.

Of these problems the most serious was that of overpopulation, so devastating because of its linkage with the region's low productivity. From the middle of the nineteenth century on, severe land shortages had forced many peasant families to emigrate. Yet this demographic “control” was more than made up for by the highest natural rate of increase in Europe and the immigration into the region of thousands of Jews from Galicia (Poland). In a matter of decades the latter had thoroughly transformed the local and regional economies and formed significant minority populations in many of the rural villages as well as in the provincial capital of Sighet. Uprooted from their homes in 1944, almost the entire Jewish population of Maramures died in German concentration camps and only a handful returned after the war to claim any part of their broken heritage.

In those years of continuing turmoil, a new social and political order was being forged in the grip of the Romanian Communist Party, and Its construction included the forced collectivization in the 1950s and early 1960s of some 60% of the region's villages¹ Maramures, as a *județ* in the Socialist Republic of Romania, has since undergone extensive administrative reorganization and unprecedented socio-economic development (Bandula et al, 1967). From the middle 1950s to the onset of Romania's recent economic crisis, there had been a steady improvement in the standard of living for most of the rural population. Continuing on to the present has been a general secularization of values and social relations radically at odds with the “traditional” patterns. Schools, the Party bureaucracy, extra-village networks, and varied wage-labor opportunities have come to play leading roles in the organization of village life.

Yet these changes mark only the final chapter in a century and a half of massive social and economic transformation. To again borrow the perspective of Jane Collier, the villages have not just “opened up”; the conceptual organization of their inhabitants has been radically altered. During this time the forces and events mentioned in this necessarily brief historical overview have impinged upon religion and ritual in Maramures villages; the evolution of midwife and godmother roles cannot be studied fruitfully apart from them.

¹ In April 1962, when the collectivization program was declared complete, 77.4% of all arable land within Romania belonged to collective and state farms (Shafir 1985:46). Approximately 3% of the nation's villages remained uncollectivized

The village context

My findings are based on two years of field research (1973-74 and 1981-82), chiefly in the small (pop. 1200), non-collectivized, ethnically Romanian village of Poienile Izei, but also in a number of other Maramures villages and the main market town of Sighetul Marmatiei (Sighet). Although the data presented here are, I believe, reliable, there is a significant lack of information regarding such critical factors as land tenure patterns, income, interethnic relations, and the status of regional elites.

Accessibility to such data is problematic, and few source materials, given the acrimonious political history of the region, could be considered free of partisanship and bias¹. Much of the information presented here is, in fact, drawn from the limited church records of Poienile Izei, and thus must be generalized cautiously.

These records confirm the recollections of informants and the published sources (Papahagi 1981; Bîrlea 1968, Pop 1979, Bud 1911; Filipascu 1940) in suggesting that many turn-of-the century Maramures villages were still relatively isolated, inward-directed, more or less self-sufficient communities. Eighty percent of marriages contracted, for example, were between villagers. Transportation and extra-regional trade, as mentioned earlier, were very poorly developed. The communities were characterized by a generally egalitarian structure, although peasant family lines were differentiated in terms of wealth and prestige. These traits were not coterminous, in that considerable emphasis was placed, in the calculation of "prestige", on the relative longevity of the family line in the village. This was accentuated in many cases by another factor, the awarding of so-called "diplomas" centuries before by the Hungarian government to individuals in recognition of service to the Crown (Mihalyi 1900). Although their patrimonial land rights might have long since broken down, the descendants of these ancestral "nobles" *nemeși*) preserved the diplomas as badges of honor for the family line. Mihai Pop (1979:139) has argued that a virtual "caste hierarchy" based on "family origin and titles was therefore created among the free peasants". Yet the intensity of this differentiation in family prestige (in terms of both longevity and "nobility") varied significantly from village to village. In large, old, "noble" villages such as Ieud, studied

¹ See Stahl (1980:8) for the distinguished sociologist's comments regarding this problem

by Gail Kligman (1984), these differences were apparently very important. In smaller, so called “serf” villages (once “owned” by Hungarian nobles and perhaps „ennobled” Romanian peasants, and inhabited by small-holding commoners) such as Poienile Izei, these differences seem to have been much less pronounced. As we shall see, this differentiation, of “serf” and “noble” villages seems to have been a critical factor affecting the evolution of the midwife and godparent institutions in Maramures.

At the turn of this century, the population of Poienile Izei had reached one thousand, with Jews making up some 10% of this total. The Romanian and Ashkenazi cultural systems moved tangentially to each other, interpenetration occurring only along an emotionally strained economic, axis. The non-Jewish community was homogenous, knit tightly together by kin, marriage, age-grade, and neighborhood networks, although ties also extended outward to the nearby villages that formed the local village cluster¹. Above all, the Romanian population was united by a strong magico-religious tradition based on the liturgy of the Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church, and the practice of crisis rituals².

Central to the functioning of this magico-religious system were the few women who served as midwives and baptismal godmothers to all. In 1902 there were just three women who served as midwives in the village of Poienile Izei. They were *also* the most important godmothers, selected to play that role in more than two-thirds of the baptisms performed in that year³. The striking pattern of the same

¹ For a general discussion of the folklore, history, and social organization of Poienile Izei, see Marrant (1977).

² Problems involving religious ideology and the history of Christianity in Romania, particularly the conflicts between Greek-Catholic („Uniate) and „Romanian Orthodox” theology deserve much more attention than I can provide here. One critical point that does need to be made is that the differences between these two Christian sects was largely, from the standpoint of the majority of peasants, insignificant. Theological debates over minutiae such as the *filioque* issue had little bearing on liturgy and the ordinary lives of believers, although they were effectively used to enlarge divisions already present in rural communities. In regards to the actual religious-ritual practices germane to this essay the differences between the two sects seem to be minor

³ Diagram 1 shows the gradual decrease in the coincidence of the two roles in the village of Poienile Izei. Unfortunately, the oldest surviving marriage records date only from 1926. Although oral reports suggest that twenty-five years earlier the same midwife-godmothers also played the role of marriage sponsors, the lack of firm documentation makes this point problematic

women playing both roles was almost certainly the case in all turn-of-the-century Maramures villages (Masson 1982:71) and may well have been general throughout rural Romania prior to this time (Lorint and Eretescu 1967).

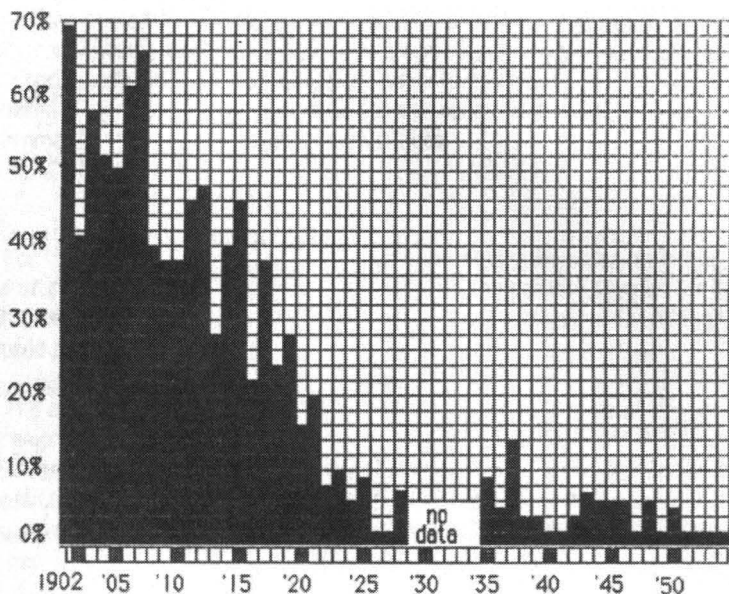


Diagram 1. Percentage of baptisms performed in village of Potenile Izei where godmother was the same woman who served as midwife in the birth of the child. 1902-1954.

Who were these women and why were they chosen to play both ritual roles? How, then, were biological birth and cultural re-birth related in the conceptual organization of Maramures villagers? What idioms expressed in the institutions of midwifery and godparenthood were used to fix the place of men and women alike within the social whole?

Responding to these questions that are at the heart of this essay necessitates discussion of one of the most critical aspects of Romanian village social structure and the larger ethnological problem to which it is tied.

Midwives, Godmothers and Patriline

Social scientists have conventionally stressed the presence of a strong "patrilineal" principle in traditional Romanian peasant social structure (Pop 1979; P. Stahl 1979; Kligman 1981, 1984). Perceived as central to the persistence of the community is the perpetuation of

what has been described as agnatically linked family lines (*spite de neam patriliare*) and the “households” (*gospodarii*) that embody them. Consequently, the primary social identity of men is seen as fixed and dominant from birth, while that of women appears problematic and derivative. Established forms of symbolic action would act to express and reinforce those “traditional’ patriarchal values and behavioral norms” (Kligman 1984:167). From this standpoint both midwifery and godparenthood have been seen as institutions used by males to assert their dominance and primacy, serving the interests of these “patriline” that form the very foundation of the village community. Florica Lorint (1967, 1968, 1969; Lorint and Eretescu 1967) has been a fervent spokesperson for the view that the overriding concern in the practice of all Romanian crisis rites within the traditional village community had been to reinforce the patriarchal principle and ensure the continuity of these patriline. As the Romanian folklorist Mihai Pop might say, the system of custom was in the service of a male-oriented kinship system. A lucidly described case of this would be the performance of “shouted verses” (*strigături*) at Maramures weddings (Kligman 1984) whereby the subordinate position of women in the community was effectively celebrated.

This picture of traditional Romanian social organization would seem to fit neatly into the provocative thesis of cross-cultural scope proposed by M. Bloch and S. Guggenheim (1981) mentioned in this essay's introduction. In their critique of Stephen Gudeman's (1972) symbolist and particularist understanding of the Christian institution of *compadrazgo*, they assert that institutions, rituals, and roles (godparenthood, baptism, midwifery) constructed around the birth event in a great variety of cultures are uniformly based on the undervaluation of the biological tie between mothers and their children and the supervaluation of an imposed cultural tie. The institution flourishes in the service of a specific ideology the triumph of male-dominated “legitimate society” - a central idiom for the establishment of social identities. Female participants, in the roles of mothers, midwives and godmothers, act, they say, as unwitting accomplices.

It must be said that much of the Romanian data on traditional peasant communities, particularly those provided by Florica Lorint's researches, seem to provide support for this thesis. For example, she argues that southern Romanian midwife-godmothers were not selected on their own merits but always selected because of their affinal or

consanguineal ties to key males, thereby acting in concert with them as representatives in ritual of those patriline. She asserts (1968:523): "the nature of relationship with the father of the child, the midwife realizes ...indirectly, through her husband. This would be in fact a male consanguine of the newborn's father. This would explain why, in birth customs...the midwife is not considered alone but together with her husband as old ones (*moși*). In Mehedinti, there can be reconstructed the tradition in which the role of ritual assistant at the birth would even be played by a male blood relative of the child's father. Thus, the midwife (*moașa*) would merely be the wife of the old one (*inics*)"

The (*moși*) together would serve as central figures at later critical moments of transition (marriage, death) over the course of the individual's life, re-asserting on those ritual occasions as well the strength and continuity of the common patriline. In reference to godparenthood, Paul Stahl (1979:215) has emphasized the central position of the godfather and his role in the perpetuation of linkages between households. The choice of a godfather necessarily follows several rules: "The godfather of the child at the time of his baptism is the same one who cared for his father and who also was his godfather at the time of his marriage. When the child marries, he will be aided by this same godfather, and this last affirmation is true only for those boys who, through this process, will continue the tradition of the paternal household. On the other hand, the daughters, who at their baptism will have the godfather of their father, will have the godfather of their husband after they are married. The children of the new couple will in turn have the same godfather as their father and as all of the members of their father's household.

"We might therefore conclude that godfatherhood is transmitted according to the male lineage, just as are property, names, or marks of property placed upon objects belonging to a particular household. A single godfather will assist at the baptism of all of the members of a household that might be called a filial household, and at the marriages of all of the sons in this household as well. He will later act as the godfather of the members of the households resulting from the subdivision of the godsons' households.

"If the godfather dies or if his advanced age prevents him from performing his assigned duty, one of his sons is chosen, preferably the one who has remained to live in the paternal household. The godmother has a secondary role in the system; she is usually the wife of the godfather and exercises some functions from the fact that she is

part of the household of her husband”.

This pattern of godparenthood resembles that outlined for Serbia by Eugene Hammel (1968), with dyadic, male-focused linkages between households related asymmetrically (with the godfather-household in a “superior” position, the godson-household in an “inferior” position). It seems quite possible that such a pattern was widespread during certain periods of history throughout southeastern Europe, including Romania.

It would be unfortunate, however, to simply accept this pattern as the neatly codifiable “traditional” type for Southeastern Europe. To do so would suggest a static uniformity for the institutions of godparenthood and midwifery and their related roles and rituals. It would ignore the fact of significant historical and intra-regional variations and overlook the possible linkage of these institutions to idioms other than that of “patrilineality” or a male-focused “social legitimacy”. Hammel has already demonstrated to us in his studies of South Slav fictive kinship that the institution of godparenthood has in this century shifted its character to respond to new value-orientations and material conditions. Given the recent critiques of descent theory (e.g. Kuper 1982), we might be also be well-served to consider more carefully the real status of the “agnatic principle” - seeing it less as a persisting rule than as a pragmatic guideline for organizing social groups. Otherwise, we may be lulled into perceiving the course of social change as the facile corrosion of a single “traditional” pattern, the breakdown of some primordial principle, when in fact several idioms might well have been in play, expressing a more complicated social reality.

As I tried to suggest in the first part of this essay, rural Romanian communities have continually experienced great and varied social, economic, and political disturbances, to which components of the “system in place”, as Sahlins (1976) would call it, have responded and adjusted. It would therefore not be surprising to encounter considerable variation through time and space in the forms and functions of the midwife and godmother roles. Florica Lorint (1968:523) herself notes some of this variation and the contradictory character of the data. My own findings from Maramures confirm the fact of intracultural variation in a striking way. There, at least for a time in the village of Poienile Izei, women operated as midwives and godmothers independently of their husbands and the “patrilineal principle”. This is not to suggest such a prominent idiom for fixing identities within the Romanian peasant community is lacking, this

point is not arguable. I would propose, though, that there have been in contemporaneous operation other idioms that have affirmed other aspects of social selves.

The old *Moaşe* in the village context

An appropriate starting point is the very name for midwife, as used in the quotation from Florica Lorint' article above. The midwife (-godmother) and her husband were called *moş* (feminine: *moaşă*, *moaşe*; masculine: *moş*, *moşi*). Of probable ancient Thraco-Dacian origins, these words have long been used in village social interaction as terms of address and reference expressing respect and affection for elders (both relatives and non-relatives). The terms literally mean "old one(s)" but also "aunt", "uncle", "grandmother", "grandfather", and even "ancestor" - extended to past generations through addition of the prefix "*stra-*". Their root is the same for the verb „to deliver a woman of a child” (*a moşi*) but also for the verb to inherit (*a moşteni*) so there is connoted in their use the idea of continuity and heritage. The original matrix for this relationship was *moş* t certainly consanguineality, but was the linkage emphasized strictly that of the patriline? In southern Romania, as reported by Lorint, the *moş* was related agnatically to the child's father; the ritual tie was represented in the idiom of patrilineality. The *moaşă*, ritually peripheral rather than central, just happened to be the wife of the *moş*.

In the Maramures village of Poienile Izei, however, the *moaşă* was the focal figure rather than the *moş* and she established ritual ties through her practice with relatives and non-relatives alike. This is reflected in the fact that the few *moaşe* of the village were serving as midwives to ail of the villagers, apparently Irrespective of family lines. There is no evidence to suggest that each *moaşă* had her own distinctive domain (that is, one branch of families) within the village community. In fact, for the period 1902-1911, in almoş t 13% of the baptisms performed, the woman chosen tc be godmother was a midwife other than the midwife who assisted at the child's birth, suggesting cooperation among them rather than competition. Some idiom other than patrilineality was in service, an idiom that was by nature more Inclusive than restrictive.

The possibility that *moaşe* operated more or less apart from a patrilineal principle is further strengthened by other evidence drawn from village documents. In the oldest church records (though dating only from 1902), the maiden names of *moaşe* were used. More significantly, since the above practice may be related to prevailing

Hungarian administrative practice (Verdery, 1985), their husbands' names were sometimes omitted altogether. When midwife-godmothers were widowed, they continued on in their ritual roles, choosing surrogates (such as a brother) to play the role of godfather at baptisms and weddings. When they re-married, their new husbands would assume this role. Conversely, when the old *moașe* died, their husbands invariably dropped out of ritual service as *moși* and their new wives did not inherit the role of *moașa*.

At the very least what was being emphasized was the importance of the *moașa's* own family line as opposed to that of her husband's, an emphasis that clearly conflicts with the „traditional” pattern proposed for archaic Romanian communities. In Poienile Izei, the status of *moș* was clearly derivative; the status of *moașa* was primary. To reverse Lorint' assertion: the *moș* was merely the husband of the *moașa*! In oral tradition, people recalled the old *moașe* as „respected”, „good”, „well-established”, „important” individuals within the community. Interestingly, relative affluence seemed to emerge as only a secondary quality. There was consistently less agreement (among people who could recollect those days) about the good character and prestige of the *moașe* 's spouses.

There seems to be no question that the midwife was the central actor in the birth event and in control of all accompanying rituals, from the child's naming during parturition or soon after, to the critically important first bath, the burying of the placenta, and beyond. The child's naming „under dangerous conditions” (Dăncuș n.d.:10) Is especially significant, as this suggests the newborn's „social personality” could be Initially established not under the auspices of representatives of the patriarchy (such as with the *padrinos* of Spain, cf. Pitt-Rivers 1977:6) but through the work of someone representing another dimension of the social order. As Mihal Dăncuș (1979:438) has made clear, it is highly unlikely the midwife's husband (or any other male) played any active role in the birthing act and in the many associated rituals. Elderly villagers consistently asserted that any such involvement „in those days” would have been totally out of order.

In a parallel way, available evidence suggests that the godfather's role In the ritual of baptism was a decidedly minor one.

Danielle Masson (1982), in her study of the women of the near-by village of Breb (also a former “serf” village), suggests that even today (implying persistence of a past rule) each person is considered to have from baptism a godmother but no godfather - until that person's marriage. It appears that it is only in the highly

secularized and wealth-focused weddings of the past few decades that the Maramures godfather has assumed real importance - and this is ceremonial rather than ritual in character.

The limited data concerning the possible inheritance of the *moaşa's* status are ambiguous. Available records from Poienile Izei date from a time when the institution of midwifery was already in the midst of substantial change. As will be discussed later (and shown in figure 1) the most critical of these changes was the gradual bifurcation of the integrated role into two, resulting in a clear differentiation between them in terms of "necessary" qualities for selection. The turn-of-the century generation of old midwife-godmothers were said, by those who recalled them, to have just "emerged" from the community to assume the role, promoted by those positive personal qualities and respected social standing described earlier. Yet in Poieni as well as in several other villages, there were a number of cases where the position had been passed down from mother to daughter. In at least one instance, within a prestigious "noble" family of leud, this chain of inheritance extended at least four generations (into the 1940s). In some cases the daughter remained in the home of her parents and inherited the ancestral household along with the midwife status. In other cases the status was passed from a woman to her daughter-in-law, who also (more in keeping with the preferred residence "rule") would come to reside with her in the same home.

Lacking sufficiently deep documentation, we would be prudent to simply recognize the flexibility of the means by which a woman eighty years ago gained the status of midwife-godmother in Maramures villages. There is, however, little support for the view that in 1902 we can see the surviving remnants of a ritual system dominated by a rigid "patrilineal principle", within which women played strictly derivative roles, reflecting a uniformly subordinate female social identity. If we concede the *moaşa* much more of a central role, what can be said of the other key feature of the „traditional" role as proposed by Lorint et al: its strict function in service of the patriline? Family (*neam*; pi. *neamuri*) identity was clearly the cornerstone of community social structure, but it was perhaps less „patrilineally-biased than usually thought. H. Stahl (1980), P. Stahl (1979), and Mihai Pop (1979) have emphasized that the central value in the community was the preservation and continuation of the ancestral household (*gospodarie*). Henri Stahl (1980:70) describes a "juridical Pia fraud" practiced in the „free evolved communities" of Moldavia and Wallachia, where families

with daughters but no sons would solve the problem of household continuity by declaring one of the daughters a son. She would inherit the ancestral household and her husband would take on her patronym. One might see the idiom of „patrilineal descent”, in a way compatible with Edmund Leach's perspective, as actually subordinate to the material and emotional value of local property interests and territorially-based associations. These interests were vested both in the village community as a whole and in the *neamuri* that comprised it.

If the roles of midwife and godmother had once been played by the actual grandmothers (= *moaşe*) of each *neam*, this phase had been superseded by the pattern met in 1902-- when the *moaşa* role was limited to a few women. What of the possibility that these few women were in fact representatives of the most prestigious families within the village? Could a process have occurred, in association with the progressive stratification of the community, whereby some families came to be regarded as “ancestors of us all” - as met in kin-based societies elsewhere? This may indeed have been the case in the “noble” villages of Maramures, where stratification was marked, marriage partners for the upper stratum were rather rigidly prescribed, and family genealogies were carefully maintained.

This was, however, not the case in the „serf” village of Poienile Izei. In this much more egalitarian community the practice of marrying within one's „caste” was not nearly as critical an issue. Throughout Maramures, marriage of the „noble” peasants was almost always contracted between noble families within the same and other villages, peasants of the „lower castes” almost always restricted their partners to the large pool of appropriate candidates within their own village (Pop 1979:139). Hence the genealogies of serf village folk were inevitably more involuted and entangled than those of noble village folk. Those women chosen to play the *moaşa* role may indeed have been perceived as “ancestors of us all” but this would not necessarily have implied ascendance of their families over the others. I would propose instead that the *moaşe* **operated** on behalf of another important idiom for the establishment of social identity, interwoven with the others. The most compelling evidence for this is a ritual occasion widely observed at the time the old midwife-godmothers were still practicing.

Female solidarity and the „gathering of the goddaughters”

In Romanian villages at the turn of the century it was traditional for women and children to gather on a special day each year at the homes of the midwives who had delivered them into the world. The event may once have been practiced more widely, as Carol Silverman (1983) has described an identical occasion in Bulgarian villages where it was called *babinden*. The names of these gatherings differed from region to region in Romania, even from village to village. In Maramures the event was called “the gathering of the goddaughters” (*adunarea nepoatelor, strângerea nepoatelor*). The term for goddaughter (*nepoată*, -e) derives from the Latin *nepotus*, -a, meaning “lineal and collateral relative of the second descending generation”, but also “descendent” in an extended sense— the precise complement of the term *moaşa*. Except for musicians, men (including the *moşi*) were excluded from these gatherings. The ties celebrated here were between mothers, daughters, and their *moaşe*.

Along with a presentation of modest gifts to the *moaşa* there would be a ceremonial meal and dancing of the whirling, turn-around dance (usually performed by one male and two women), the *învârtita*. The Romanian ethnographer Mihai Dăncuş (n.d.:39) notes that seating at the meal was arranged without regard to hierarchy within the group, for “all are equal in the face of God”. This practice poses a perfect contrast (religiously-sanctioned, no less) to the carefully calculated and rigidly hierarchical ordering of places at public ceremonies as well as the permanent standing positions in the “men's” area inside the church. In the women's area of the church, as at the gathering of the goddaughters event, there were neither fixed places nor hierarchical ordering. One might say, in looking at this one occasion in isolation, that it was a typical “rite of reversal”, when the ordinary rules of social order and “legitimate” authority were suspended. It would seem, however, just as appropriate to argue that on these occasions another equally legitimate idiom simply emerged into prominence.

One of the most important parts of the event involved the washing of the *moaşa's* feet by the mothers, duplicating a similar ritual washing performed four to seven days after the birth of the child, and also recalling the solemn first bath of the infant just hours after its birth¹. The baptism of the child several months after this

¹ Dăncuş (1979:439-442) provides an excellent discussion of the complex symbolic significance of water in Maramures ritual and folklore

should be seen alongside these other ritual events involving washing and cleansing. A “conventional” interpretation of these acts would see them as acts’ of “purification” expressing a critical series of dichotomies, polluted/pure, natural/spiritual, inferior/superior. Bloch and Guggenheim (1901) would interpret these events as symbolic representations that are intrinsically derogatory to the mothers and their biological tie to their children, statements of their subordination to the male-controlled social order.

There is no question that the “purification” component is present, at least in the baptismal event; it is an integral part of the Catholic /Orthodox symbolic system. Yet the ritual acts of the old *moaşe* seen in their full cultural context are richly multivalent. Although the practice of the godmother-midwives was integrated with the Christian ideology, it was also associated with other dimensions of the cultural system, specifically that of magic and healing. It is essential to be reminded that Christian ideology and symbolism was part of the structure imposed upon the rural communities over a long process of social evolution. The result in Romania, as for so many non-European peoples, such as the Zapotec (Sault, 1984) was a rich syncretism of religious and magical elements. As among the Zapotec, we can observe the synchronous operation of several levels or dimensions, or idioms of value - rather than the clear domination of one. In this sense it is important to envision the old *moaşe* as real people within the village, familiar and trusted faces who effectively bridged the domains of religion and magic. They played central roles in both the quintessential biological event – birth and the quintessential cultural event – baptism - (when the child would be formally incorporated into the spiritual and social community). The most tangible expression of this bridging role occurred on the day of baptism, when the *moaşa* (as midwife) acting alone would carry the infant to the church, and then (as godmother) bring the child back home to its family.

The old *moaşa*, as midwife and healer, was the very embodiment of the natural, biological, female order within the village. The ritual washing at the gathering, which may have been mutual, could be seen as an expression of respect and a reinforcement of „fictive kin” ties among village women. As Carol Silverman (1984:3) points out for the comparable Bulgarian events, these occasions honored „female potentiality” as well as female solidarity, an idiom that was to all appearances viewed by males as appropriate and necessary. There were certainly other occasions in the yearly village

cycle when this dimension of social identity emerged into prominence¹.

It is important to note that female prestige within 19th century Maramures villages was reasonably high for a complex agrarian society. The communities' social and economic order was based on a sharply drawn, even polarized, yet complementary division of labor and spheres of influence (Masson 1982). Women were included in local economic planning and decision-making, although their power was all but ignored in extra-village political and ecclesiastical administration (it was the Habsburg and Hungarian authorities who had insisted on official reckoning by surname). Within the village the labor of women was critical to the success and persistence of the households that served as collective units of production. Especially in the poorer "serf" villages, lacking any opportunities for salaried labor inside the village yet dependent upon seasonal employment outside the village by a significant number of men, the labor of women was crucial. Moreover, women were dominant in ritual, magical, as well as practical activities within the domestic sphere, which they controlled. To a significant degree they balanced the power and control accorded males beyond the courtyard and in the church.

The Transformation of the Old *Moaş* Tradition

In the Twentieth century this general status of women within Maramures villages would change significantly, along with the role of the *moaş*. In 1940 there were still just a few midwives (4) who attended the 27 births, yet none of them would serve later as godmothers at the infants' baptisms nor at their eventual weddings. What I have proposed to have been a single integrated role had gradually split into two, a process we can now see clearly in an incipient stage in 1902. Moreover, fourteen different godmothers (*naş*, or in the dialectical diminutive *nănaş*) served at the 27 baptisms recorded for 1940. The selection of godmother was no longer restricted to a handful of „respected” women; other criteria

¹ Among these might be included such „secular” occasions as the winter evening „sittings” (*sezatoare*), the feast days of important female saints, and the various periods of the year when the power of the *iele* („fairies”) is great—such as on Pentecost. Gail Kligman (1981) provides an insightful analysis of the ambivalent position of the *iele* within the Calus ritual complex. On a number of key points, her perspective and interpretation provides a thoughtful and well-argued alternative to that taken in this essay

came into play: kin ties and wealth being the most important. The „gatherings of the goddaughters” were still held, but were now much more fragmented, as they were held for both the *moașe* (a term now restricted in meaning to „midwife”) and the ever-growing number of *nănașe*. The ritual occasions became increasingly constricted and „familial” in character and faded away as true community events in many villages.

Formerly, as I mentioned, there had been an elaborate assemblage of magico-religious traditions built up around parturition, with the midwife firmly in charge. With the bifurcation of roles, there was apparently a decline in the ritual valence of midwifery. Much of the ritual web that included acts of purification, the child's naming, arranging the meal with the Three Fates to decide the destiny of the child (Dăncuș n.d.; 1979), and so on, was rent. The emphasis was now placed almost strictly upon the practical skills of delivery; women now assumed the role of midwife on this basis. Socially marginal women, including some with technical training, became the village *moașe*. This shift in selective criteria was most vividly expressed by the presence of Jewish midwives in some Maramures villages in the 1930s. They were chosen because of their superior skills. In the art, even though the ritual worlds of the Jews and Romanians remained almost completely closed to each other.

Soon after the 1947 consolidation of Communist power, the Romanian government, as part of a strong pro-natal policy, passed laws forbidding the practice of midwifery by anyone but those with state certification.

Villages such as Poienile Izei now had “scientifically-trained” *moașe*, sometimes not native to the village or even to the region, who would assist delivering mothers in village birth homes. In 1972, as part of an economizing program, the birth home in Poienile Izei was closed. Since then, all women in the final stage of pregnancy have been taken by ambulance the thirty-one miles to the hospital in the city of Sighetul Marmatiei. There, among both peasants from other villages as well as urbane blue-collar and white-collar women, they have experienced childbirth in a way familiar to mid-century American mothers: general unaesthetic, stirrups, forceps, hygienic if sterile environment, relative safety (the mortality rate for newborns and mothers being dramatically reduced). Perhaps as a point of policy, the obstetricians (almost exclusively male) and their assistants (exclusively female) who are still called *moașe*, avoid ritualization of the experience during the mandatory seven-day stay in the obstetrical

ward. In the inhibiting and unfamiliar environment, village women are reticent to perform any „superstitious” practices associated with their crisis state. Only rarely do mothers maintain ties with the doctors and midwives after this period; few mothers even remember their names.

The situation is quite different In some of the larger villages that have maintained their own doctors and midwives some of whom are native to the village in which they practice. With these individuals integrated into the community, social and even ritual ties between them and their patients have been developed. In at least one such village, Ieud (Kllgman 1986), the “gathering of the goddaughters” day continues to be practiced, with the state midwives incorporated into the ritual process.

Over the same period that the role of village midwife has disappeared, the fragmentation of the godmother role has continued. In 1974, for example, there were 14 different *nănașe* for only 19 baptisms. The chain of inheritance of the role has been broken, with young couples choosing as „marriage sponsors” at their weddings women other than those who served as godmothers at their own baptisms. With this tradition of generational succession no longer held to, adult villagers now see their real godparents as those who serve as such at their weddings and then go on to sponsor their children at baptism. Those children will then grow up to choose their own *nănași*. As a result, an asymmetrical dyadic tie between young adults (and their parents) and their marriage sponsors has assumed primary importance, with a corresponding devaluation of the baptismal tie. The ritual relationship, such as it is today, therefore begins anew with each marriage and the choice of godparents by the couple in close consultation with their parents. Although there persists a tendency to choose favorite senior relatives as wedding godparents, the overriding criterion now for selection is practical economic advantage for the couple and their families in the words of one aged former midwife-godmother, “almost anyone can become a godmother now”. The list includes tavern managers, shopkeepers, schoolteachers, and even women from outside the village who are married to important men powerful in extra-village networks¹. Again, the overall pattern seems

¹ For the period 1963-1980, 28 of the 83 pairs of godparents (33.7%) were from outside the village of Poienile Izei. Twenty-three of these pairs were godparents only once. Among the five sets of non-Poienari who were godparents more than once were a forest manager and middle-range government official from neighboring villages

to have converged with that described for Serbia by Eugene Hammel (1968).

Weddings, now recognized as the dominant ritual event, have become high-powered economic transactions and preserve only the ritual shell, not the substance. Although in the still elaborate if hollow rituals the godmother remains a central actor (Kligman 1984) the real power figure is the godfather. In at least one important way, the relative „success” of the wedding is contingent upon who he is and what advantages the bride and groom (and their families) accrue from his sponsorship. Probably to maximize their benefits, couples frequently (more than one-quarter of the time over the period 1963-1980) choose two sets of godparents, especially in the increasingly common cases of inter-village marriages¹. In such cases, the pair chosen by the groom's family are designated as the “big godparents” (*nănași mari*) to be distinguished from those chosen by the bride's family (*nănași mici*). One can see in this evidence of the continuing patrilineal bias, although enjoined today with the „modern” idiom of capital accumulation and conspicuous consumption.

It is clear that in the course of the past century enormous changes have occurred in the character of Romanian crisis rituals and the ritual roles prominent in them. It is tempting but probably counterproductive to focus on the shape of things at any one point, hoping to see exposed some „pure” traditional structure inherently more significant than later „contaminated” forms. Instead we should look to the pattern of change, fluctuations in the salience of different idioms, and to the identification of forces that lie behind them.

The evolution of the *moașa* role

In the evolution of the midwife and godmother roles, the Maramures *moașe* of eighty years ago stood at a critical cultural horizon. Their Independence, power, and prestige was a function of the egalitarian and communal character of the villages in which they lived, a character fully realized historically in the pre-state, pre-feudal Romanian „free village communities” documented by Henri Stahl. In these archaic „non-genealogical” communities, communal economic

¹ For the period 1963-1980, 27.3% of the marriages involved multiple sets of godparents. There are, unfortunately, no comparable figures for the years preceding, but informants insisted that the practice rarely, if ever, occurred prior to World War II

prerogatives and legal rights had coexisted with (If not took precedence over) the economic and legal rights of the household and lineage. The community was „not a chance assemblage of people living isolated lives but residing near one another,...rather...a living social unit, with strong interior cohesiveness and a clear consciousness of its unity, this consciousness reaffirmed by a belief in common origin leading them to consider themselves almost as all being blood relatives” (P. Stahl, 1979:211). As the village formed a closed, endogamous system, women retained full shares in the common patrimony (forest, pasture land, waters), moreover, they had equal right to participate and vote, once they reached maturity, in the village assemblies (H. Stahl, 1980: 36-37). The Christianization of the villages must have led at some point to the syncretic fusion of the old ritual role of village midwife and the new one of godmother, to be played by women who represented the unity, cohesiveness, and egalitarian character of the community.

From the thirteenth century on, these communities experienced, at different rates in different regions, the penetration of disruptive outside forces and increasing population pressure brought about by colonization. As Paul Stahl 1979:211) points out, the intrinsic „cohesiveness and collective value put the village in conflict with the lords and political powers, who gradually took those collective rights away”. In association with the increased population and tributary demands, competition for wealth and prestige increased, leading to social stratification marked by the emergence of regional elites (the „noble” ruling families). The historical separation of „noble” from „commoner” family lines in Maramures was clearly part of this process, as it was the extension of the Hungarian state into Maramures in the 13th century that promoted and rewarded the establishment of social hierarchies. Population displacement and mobility during this period also promoted vertical structuring of relationships, as relative longevity became a key value In the calculation of property rights and privileges within the villages, many of which were newly founded in this era.

Concomitant, therefore, with this progressive fragmentation of the communal corporate village was an accentuation of family lines and patrimonial rights. Ritual assertion of kinship identity within the community gradually gave way to the assertion of kinship Identity against it. The slow turning of the midwife-godmother roles towards the service of the patriline was, perhaps, in this context, Inevitable. What Florica Lorint and others have reconstructed as the bedrock

„traditional” form of the *moaşa* role may rather be seen as one consequence of the uneven evolution of the free communal villages. This process moved faster in the larger noble villages of Maramures, much more closely tied to political, economic, and ecclesiastical developments, where there were much stronger external supports for social stratification and the differentiation of family lines. Within and among the various noble villages, the network of important families also produced major church and intellectual figures, men who assumed leading roles in the stratified system¹. It would be in their interests to minimize the importance of competing idioms within the village and promote closer adherence to the canonical tenets of the Christian ceremony. In other words, the midwives (embodiments of communality, magic, healing, and female solidarity) would be forced to give ground to the church-sanctioned and church-supported godparents. In the serf villages, lacking the „noble network” and the pressure of the church canon, the idioms of communality and female solidarity persisted longer.

Yet even in the serf villages of Maramures the communal principles waned in the 19th century, and with their withdrawal passed the power of the old *moaşa* as promoter of horizontal solidarity and representative of female prestige. In those years, the socio-economic equilibrium of the village communities was irrevocably disrupted, with the widespread fragmentation of the communal holdings. Village assemblies voted to change age-old practices of communal ownership and use of water, pasture, and forest resources, for the benefit of individual interests. Wealth became increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few. Although the agrarian reforms of the twentieth century raised many villagers to the status of small holders (and lifted as well their hopes for solvency), partible inheritance and the lack of credit and market supports, coupled with the already marginal land base, led many families after a generation to sink again into abject poverty. During this period of severe distress, families turned inward for protection, and although the church continued to bond together the village with its public liturgy, crisis rites became increasingly a matter of family concern, losing what Henri Stahl (1980: 41) has called their

¹ The contrast between „noble” and „serf” villages on this point cannot be overemphasized. In a region that had one of the highest rates of illiteracy in Europe in 1911, the residents of the village of Ieud were described by one scholar (Bud 1911:47) as a „devout and book-loving people”. In contrast, the peasants of Poienile Izei did without a school of any sort until the 1920s and had gone for long periods of time (e.g. 1812-1847) without a village priest (Bud 1911:56).

„ceremonial and public function” Imbedded in a living magico-religious tradition.

At the same time, the government was making a concerted effort to change the peasants' view of themselves and the lives they were leading. For the first time, „modernity” emerged as a positive personal and social value. Rural health and hygiene programs, stressing the superiority of modern obstetrics, influenced the attitude of many peasants towards childbirth. Village sentiment gradually shifted to support the new programs; those who continued to utilize the services of clandestine midwives were condemned in village gossip as „backward”. The current regime's near total control of this crisis event is thus only the latest stage in a long movement towards detachment of childbirth from a community context and its magico-religious base. This movement has been joined with broader efforts at de-mythologization and secularization, increasing the peasants' experience of the literal and the profane. The shrinking world of the mythical and magical was precisely the sphere in which women had played prominent roles and possessed real power, in the actual practice of which their legitimate place in the community was expressed and reinforced. The once honored role of midwife-healer became a remnant of the past. The Christian component of the birth-rebirth complex, however, with its patriarchal structures built into the Catholic-Orthodox liturgy, has fared much better. A demystified godparenthood, in fact, has joined up neatly with the power politics of the public realm that men have dominated and in which women have had to struggle to find Individual and collective Identity.

As Gail Kligman (1984) has noted, there is considerable irony in the fact that in a constitutionally egalitarian socialist society such as Romania, gender-based differences in occupations, political power, and prestige remain so great. It is even more ironic that it is now in the rural villages that the inequality appears greatest. Women have assumed a double burden, as female peasant-workers juggle salaried jobs and domestic chores (Moskoff 1982). In collectivized villages this means women assume the low-paying, low-prestige jobs on the collective farm while their husbands capture higher salaried jobs with greater prestige, while also tapping into the new political-economic networks of privilege and privileged access. In this context it indeed appears that competition among women (including godmothers) has increased, as their families compete more and more with each other over a limited supply of 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. It became increasingly appropriate to keep the goods and prestige within the family or, in an alternative strategy, to find godparents who could offer real practical benefits to the couple and their families. From the standpoint of prospective godparents, however, the ritual roles present them with a mixed opportunity. In the new, open, secular villages there are other means of gaining prestige. In the past fifteen years, more and more couples invited to serve as wedding sponsors have declined the invitation. The costs, in their eyes, simply outweigh the benefits and, in the increasingly pragmatic and secular atmosphere of village life, saying no to ritual responsibilities is at least understood, if not totally approved. Other privileges are now being claimed, rationalized, and defended; people are driven by other fears and wants.

Conclusion

In the last decade we have seen a widespread reassessment of the position of women cross-culturally. The thrust of this essay is in line with those who reject the theory of the universality of male dominance and the assumption of an unequal social reality. Underlying this essay is a fundamental skepticism shared with others (Sault 1984; Rogers 1975; 1978) about the applicability on a world-wide scale of what might be called the „Mediterranean model” of gender symbolism and institutions (such as godparenthood) that are utilized in the service of gender politics.

The issue ultimately involves power, its sources and its uses. Peggy Sunday (1981:11) has suggested that power „is accorded to whichever sex is thought to embody or be in touch with the forces upon which people depend for their perceived needs”. In the last decade researchers have documented many cases where women have derived power from their connection with the domain of magic and the supernatural, employing it „in ritual time” and then carrying it over into public life. One such case is that of the Zapotecan godmothers studied by Nicole Sault (1984:11), who are said to exploit „this source of power when (they sponsor) a child's Baptism, dramatizing (their) role as mediator between the child's family and the divine.” The real and hard work of this mediation satisfies the people,

soothes their fears, addresses their concerns. The old *moașe* in Romanian villages did the same for a time, their personal power balancing to a degree the built-in hierarchical and patriarchal character of Catholic ideology. The Santa Catalina godmothers studied by Sault, however, apparently cultivated the power and prestige of the position for their own interests to a much greater degree than did the *moașe* of Poienile Izei. In this, they resemble more the status-conscious godmothers of „noble” Maramures villages.

In the villages of Maramures, we can see historical „windows” where Idioms of communality and women’s prestige and solidarity have acted in concert with other principles to construct a coherent social order. These idioms have been expressed through the institutions of midwifery and godparenthood, in the ritual role of midwife-godmother. Through her practice she responded to the fears and wants of members of the village community, helping to provide them with a critical dimension of social identity. The historical diminution of this dimension and the power of the women who embodied it can be tied to expansion of other principles of organization bolstered by the authority of external forces acting in their self-interest. In the case of the Zapotecan village of Santa Catalina, Sault (1984:12) has pointed to the impact of Protestantism that has undermined the godmother role and led women to „turn inward upon their own families (and) become increasingly dependent upon their husbands”. In the case of the villages of Maramures, it was the accentuation of patrilineal by state authority and the consequent vesting of interest in the preservation of titles and property. This was abetted by the grafting of those interests to the service of the Catholic Church hierarchy. The result was a bifurcation and eventual co-opting of the midwife-godmother role by male-dominated interests, to which the people have been persuaded to assent. The resultant condition of female dependence and fragmentation of communal solidarity, however, is much the same for both societies. One can thus derive from this Investigation a two-sided and hardly novel appreciation: one for the inherent capacity of cultural systems to create distinct social realities, the other for the immense power of familiar historical processes to constrict the options.

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