

## rites of passage-novel sequences in oltenia region

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**Abstract:** Riturile de trecere în accepțiunea de «ceremonii care însoțesc și dramatizează evenimentele majore» (C. Bell) din viața comunității rurale s-au constituit pentru noi într-o cercetare de teren în zona Olteniei. Secvențele care s-au dovedit inedite și care au rezistat în timp în satele din Oltenia au fost înregistrate și transmise la radioul public românesc. Ulterior au fost material de analiză a funcționalității riturilor de trecere. Trei secvențe rituale de naștere (Boborodița, Ponuda, Năpoinița) au ca element comun ospățul ritual ca moment de consacrare și integrare a pruncului în familie. Pentru ilustrarea inedită a riturilor de căsătorie prezentăm anunțul căsătoriei, primitul miresei pe pânză și petrecerea «pe vedere». În cadrul riturilor de separare (ca rituri funerare) o secvență dramatizată a suscitât interesul specialiștilor. Este cunoscută în județul Gorj drept «perna mortului». Toate secvențele prezentate se derulează în contextul unui eveniment major din viața familiei și au un evident caracter dramatizat.

**Keywords:** rites, Oltenia, birth, marriage, funerary.

Rites of passage have been analyzed from different perspectives (Victor Turner, 1969; C. Bell, 1997, N. Belmont, 1986, A. Van Genep, 1998, M. Coman, 2008), the common element being represented by the ceremonial construct.

The main ceremonial sequence will engender significant details for the rite of passage, individualizing it within the complex of existential ceremonial acts.

According to the most common vision “the rites of passage are ceremonies that accompany and dramatize the major events such as birth, maturity and initiation of boys and girls, marriage and death. Sometimes called rites of existential crises (life-crises) or of existential cycles (life-cycles), they mark culturally the transition of a person from a social state to another.” (C. Bell, 1997, p. 94).

We chose this definition of the rites of passage, because the sequences that we recognized in our field research are characterized by two attributes: they are performed in the context of a major event in the family life and they have a dramatized trait. The actors abide by a pre-established script, a direction of the event (which women are responsible for), the sequences involve a series of rhymed and rhythmic formulas endowed with propitiation and apotropaic role.

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These rites establish an order in life unfolding, the consecration of a certain status during a certain period of existence being the main role of the rites of passage.

According to this consecration function, the most used classification is the following: rites of birth, rites of initiation (for the passage to a new status), rites of marriage and funerary rites.

Arnold Van Gennep (1998, p. 22) identifies and justifies the compulsory order of the three types of rites: rites of separation (funerary rites), rites of aggregation (marriage) and liminary rites (engagement).

We retain from the description concerning the “material passage” the ones that refer to the threshold: “the rites performed on the threshold are liminary rites. [...]. The threshold rites are not rites of „alliance”, but a preparation for the preceded alliance.” (1998, p. 8).

Ceremonial sequences that we will present are performed also on the threshold, as concrete material passage from a space to another: from the big world to the family (at birth, the bringing home of the baby), from a family to another (marriage, reception on the cloth), from a world to another (the dean man’s pillow).

Rites of passage involve the entire community, the family event becoming an event of those who are integrated in the collectivity. Thus there is symbolically marked “the articulation between individual and social, [...] between natural and cultural, between human and cosmic”. (M. Coman, 2008, p. 151).

The dramatization of the ritual sequence also has the role to persuade the community for the transmission of tradition and the adhesion to the ritual act seen as a life performance. This is the modern comprehension of integration rites, for they nowadays lack the foundation on faith, the status of “given fact” and the compulsory nature of abiding by the norm. The models have lost their compulsory trait, they are no longer thoroughly abided by. They have become references to reiterate within more general frameworks, with circumstantial data imposed by place and time.

## **1. Birth rites**

„I consider rites of passage all the rites that have as object to make the child enter in the linear period that lasts depending on the population, from 2 to 40 days or more.” (A. Van Gennep, 1998, p. 57). We propose three birth ceremonial sequences, that have as common element the party, the ritual feast as moment of consecration and integration of the baby into the family.

### **1.1. Boborodița**

The baby’s coming into the Longing World is accompanied in Dolj county, in Urzicuța commune by the family feast named “boborodiță” by which the entry of the new born baby is extolled.

It is a custom that the community established after the foundation of maternities.

Since the child is not born at home, he must be introduced into the family environment that remind us of the hospitality which the stranger is treated with, to banish mean thoughts.

The entry of a stranger into the family circle is welcomed with apotropaic and propitiation acts. The new born baby is welcomed by the paternal grandfather (or another old man) with bread and salt and with the wish “may you live long!”. The welcome is performed on the house’s threshold, the place of separation of the world with good and things from the sacralized space by means of purification rites. The mother is the one who passes the baby over the threshold.

The mother –in-law on behalf of the groom organizes the next day after the arrival of the baby a party at which there will participate the closest relatives. The party will begin before midday and will last till dawn the day after. The participants do not bring gifts for the baby and do not give money. It is a party thrown by the family to celebrate the baby’s birth.

All must make health wishes to the baby and to the parents. After „boborodiță” there is organized the baptism, a complex integration ritual within the framework of the rites of passage.

Toți însă vor face urări de sănătate atât copilului, cât și părinților. După boborodiță se organizează botezul, rit de integrare complex în cadrul riturilor de trecere.

### **1.2. Ponuda**

In Romanați Southern region, at Vădastra-Olt there is kept the custom of organization of a novel party, ponuda. It is „the joyous feast” for the child and it is organized the second or the third day after the baby’s birth, in the house where the young parents live.

An original aspect is represented by the fact that „the feast” is organized, even if the baby and the lying-in woman have not arrived home yet. The performance in the absence of those to whom it is dedicated is an argument for the viability of the rites of purification of space, in which the new born baby will live.

The house is cleaned, all the clothes, carpets are washed, and they are sprinkled with holy water. Then there begins the preparation for the party.

A second original aspect is the exclusive participation of old aged women, over 50 years old. The interdiction of the presence of children at this moment is equally surprising. People are served soup and steak, and they drink wine. There are no gifts brought to the child. The godmother and midwife are given important places at the table. In the context of the feast, the two do not have specific tasks. The midwife is given more attention because it is the main actor at the first three important moments in the young family’s wife: at birth, at „ponudă”, and at the Fates’ feast. Men wait for the women to come home towards dawn, the next day.

### **1.3. Năpoinița**

In Cetate commune, Dolj county, people have kept the custom to organize at the new born baby’s house a feast to which only women participate.

From birth to „năpoință”, the Holy Mother kneels and cries. That is why the day for „năpoință” must not last longer than a week starting from the child’s birth.

The interdiction of men’s and children’s participation is strictly abided by, any transgression being verbally amended by the oldest female-participant. Women who have not been invited to the party bring gifts for the child.

The children’s presence is claimed in a sequence from the baby’s baptism party: at church, the old lady of the house prepared a meal covered with white cloth. To the four corners there were placed money. The new born baby was placed on this ritual table. Four children would lift the table and pass it over the house’s threshold. Then there followed the party with the family members, relatives, neighbours.

The reentry in the family environment after the denomination rite (baptism) was done by the marking of the passage over the threshold, with the payment of the moment (money put at each table side). The choice of children for the performance of the act was significant for the idea of magic transfer of attributes: physical purity, ingenuity, joy, solicitude.

These parties, organized in Oltenia by exclusive participation of women, parties circumscribed to the rites of beginning and to the augural magic practices remind us of similar family parties in Moldavia.

They are known under the name of „rôdin”, „rôdină” with victuals, „plocon” (bribe) and „pocinog” (nasty trick) and they unfold according to a script resembling „ponuda” or „năpoință”. Women bring gifts and wish health and prosperity to the new born baby.

The role of these traditions with regional denominations is to mark the beginning of a period, the purification of space by augural magic practices.

As active presence at biological, psychosocial and cultural level, the woman activates the emotional register of actors at events that establish the passage of the baby from the ancestors’ world to the present real world.

In traditional mentality, there is believed that the woman occupies the main role in the organization and carrying out of customs, especially of those from the family cycle.

It is obvious that she detains the main role in the moments of entry and exit from the family magic circle: at birth and at death.

She is the one who will care for the soul till 40 days after the relative’s death and she will be in charge of the charities for relenting the souls of the departed ones. She will take care of separation rites at the entry or exit from the magic circle.

The woman’s image is associated with the image of the house-symbol of the vital and cultural-magic space.

## **2. Marriage rites**

In the tome „Romanian traditional customs” (1976), Mihai Pop considers that marriage rites are composed of three ceremonial units: engagement, marriage and customs performed after the marriage.

In order to illustrate them, in the succession still recognizable today (according to our field research) we will briefly describe three sequences that were viable in Oltenia region, and which are today reconstituted only on purpose (especially for documentaries or as sequence of performance according to a script).

### **2.1. The announcement of the marriage ceremony**

Wedding is a public ceremonial and must be publicly announced. At Voineasa, in Vâlcea county, people used to make a marriage announcement for three Sundays before the religious ceremony. After the mass was over, the priest would announce the young couple's intention to found a family in the church, in front of the believers. If nobody „opposed” to it (specify the documents of the epoch), then the young people were married. The Church became the sacred place that consents the union of the two young people in the new family. And the Church is also the place far from wickedness, envy and lies, it submits to the collectivity's approval the intention to found a new family.

The judgment of the gesture could be done only within the sacred space, hindering any mean commentary “on the bench” in front of the house and forestalling any of the young people second thoughts or hesitation, for they had at their disposal three Sundays which were considered enough to make the last decisions regarding the future status. The passage from one state to another, from the status of virginity to that of marriage was accomplished gradually, with the community's approval and under the auspices of the Church, of faith, the only guide to the right path in the new life, the family life. Loviște Country is guardian and treasurer of a lot of traditions and original faith, carols of surprising expressivity.

The marriage announcement, during the three Sundays before the marriage, before the religious engagement, within the Church's framework, after the end of the Saint Mass, in the presence of most of the believers from the parish is an original element of a behavioural code claimed by the patriarchal village.

### **2.2. The receiving of the bride on a cloth**

The passage over the threshold into a new state, the entry in another world supposed, in the mentality of the traditional community, the use of symbolical gestures meant to forestall any intervention of mean forces. The relenting of spirits was accomplished through the use of objects with apotropaic powers: the sweet basil, money (payment of customs in the passage to the other world), the salt and so on. At opening the door/the gate in order for the stranger to entry into the house, mean spirits can pass by. „The stranger” can bring with himself, without him knowing it, signs of bad luck, of sadness. That is why the passage must be performed on a path that is „cleaned” of ugliness.

The bride is a „stranger” for her parents-in-law. Her reception into the house that will become the house of the young family was performed in the Southern part of Dolj county many years ago. In Calafat-Dăbuleni, people abided by a custom

known under the name of „reception of the bride on the cloth”.<sup>1</sup> Waiting for the bride and groom after the consumption of the religious ceremony was a party for the groom’s parents. As identical elements in the marriage ceremonial sequence, recognizable in Oltenia region, we mention: the feast where there would be placed a glass of wine and a special loaf of bread („azimă”).

The custom which we refer to was much more complex. The mother-in-law would weave the boy’s cloth after his baptism. She would measure the courtyard till the place where she thought she would receive the bride and she would thus establish the length of the cloth to suit this measure. The whiteness of the cloth symbolized purity, pure thought, with which one started on the path of life in couple. The path must be cleaned, especially at the beginning. Then it is possible for other events to soil the immaculate white, but otherwise, these events will be judged from the perspective of a common shared life style, of the house’s purposes that one should not overpass after the first misunderstanding.

The bride passes on the cloth (the immaculate path) that links the Gate, the World’s Threshold to the House’s Threshold. The fiddlers animate the atmosphere with songs that explain the ritual gestures of the actors:

The mother-in-law’s wish is essentially a message with ritual implications endowed with augural value and protective at the same time. The elements invoked have double value in two symbolical plans; they are endowed with different meanings for the couple’s life and for the norms of the social code that the future wife must abide by.

The mother-in-law’s wish focused on the formulation of three augural sequences ends with the wish for the future wife to continue the cycle of ceremonial sequences, over time, changing the place and register of appeal: she must become a mother. The formulation of the explicit wish of the mother-in-law on behalf of the groom is the first argument of the behaviour in the new quality that allows her to “command”. The pronunciation of the augural verbal sequences will have an “echo” amongst the participants to the marriage party and amongst the fiddlers, sign of reception of the message by the community.

The entire ceremonial sequence is placed under the sign of the Saint Trinity: people repeat three times the ritual gesture in order to make a permanent correlation with Divinity: the godfather leaves with a little chair and stops at three crossroads; the mother-in-law proposes a toast for the bride three times, breaks a loaf of bread into three and throws it; she places on the altar-table three kinds of offerings: wheat (with protective value), salt (symbolizing measure, temperance) and honey (“the sweetness” of feelings, the manifest affectivity).

The knot-shaped bread, the ritual bread has a protective value against any aggression of the mean forces in the couple’s life, and wine is the episanic beverage, purifying and regenerating the spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Custom reconstituted by Aurelia Popescu-Preda at Calafat-Dăbuleni and turned into a script by „The ensemble of customs and traditions *Dor călător*” from Craiova.

Receiving the bride on the cloth constitutes itself into a custom that emphasizes the active presence, full of meanings for the characters that have a symbolical role and function in the context of the family group: the mother-in-law and the future bride.

The alternation of the sequences with humorous connotations, full of sobriety and carriers of symbols of the sacred ensure the tension of discourse and the viability of the custom.

### **2.3. The party „on sight”**

The marriage ceremonial is carried out for several days, having as a central moment the great Sunday feast.

The wedding used to start on Thursday, when flour was sifted in order to bake the bread necessary at the wedding meals and would end on Wednesday morning during the following week when “runners”, helpers at the wedding would clear the dishes away.

The parties in the family continued also after the wedding. One week after the wedding, the bride’s parents threw a party where they invited the bride and groom, the godparents, the in-laws and the closest relatives. This was the first meeting of the bride with her parents after the passage to the new wife status and in order for her to be lucky as bride she was forbidden to see her parents till this party called party “on sight”. The way to the bride and groom’s house was known under the name of “primary path”, a first journey into a space, into the family space for which the bride should have no regrets and in order for her to get used to the affective distance there was interposed a time consecrated to fulfilment, a week.

In Oltenia region, there is still kept the custom according to which one week after the religious ceremony, the young bride goes to Church, accompanied by her godmother and by a few friends and relatives. After tasting Eucharist bread, the godmother and midwife invite those who have accompanied them to a party where the goddaughter pays. These are the first journeys into the world of the young bride that will miss home once the handkerchief is put over her head:

*An open-minded wife  
Is a wreath to her husband*

The change of social category is the most different and complex in the ensemble of rites of passage that involve the entire community.

### **3. Funerary rites**

Funerary ceremonies comprise rites of separation, liminary rites and aggregation rites (A. Van Gennep, 1998, p. 131). Amongst these rites we chose as an original sequence an integrated sequence of rites of separation, suggestively called „the dead man’s pillow”.

„Talking to dead people”, calling the souls is a practice acknowledged at all people from ancient times and supposes the existence of a medium, that is of a material link, the body, the witch’s „mouth”. For the performance, there is needed

the visualization of the „meeting”, by deduction of the meanings of gestures and of pronounced words (“mumbled”). In the case of onirical experiences, the appearance of the face in a dream represents the visualization of the meeting.

In Gorj county, at Cloșani there is practiced another way of talking to the dead: the moment when the „dead man’s pillow” is done and is placed in the coffin, the dead man is counseled.

Finita Ceacă (70 years old) and Georgeta Croitoru (45 years old) are the village’s mourners. Georgeta is the daughter-in-law of Ecaterinei Croitoru (68 years old). The three participate in the burrial ritual, interpreting specific songs.

They are the ones that make the dead man’s pillow and talk to him, and counsel him. The pillow had three corners. In the pillow they put wool, nine buds, three buds of peer tree, three buds of apple tree, three buds of ungrafted apricot tree, a seed of incense, a clove of garlic, a hair comb, a mirror and a piece of marble. After the pillow is sewed, the needle and thread are introduced into it, for nobody should take them away. When they put objects into the pillow, the mourners talk with the dead man, they counsel him what to do with them. The pronunciation is a recital, in white verse that do not resemble as incantation with „Zorile”/The dawn. They talk and the syncretism functions: gesture and text in an atmosphere that does not inspire fear, it is only strangeness. Those who assist are marked by the sadness of the loss of someone known or someone dear, but the defulation by pronunciation, by an act of the burial ritual (the sewing of the dead man’s pillow) saves them from the fear state, that they will not see him anymore.

It is a way to produce separation, as act it must be sustained by verbal formulas with persuasive role, suggesting the leaving into another world.

After the separation ritual, there will succeed the liminary rite (the passage of the new “bed” over the line of demarcation inside-outside), the passage to another world, the beginning of a new journey. As last time of journey there will be the rite of aggregation marked by feasts of communion.

The rites of passage are complex manifestations, to which participates an entire world (the micro-family, the macro-village, the community). As common element and as appeal there remains the organization of the party or the passage marked by a feast.

This moment represents the sequence most used as script in the mediatization of rites of passage. The involvement of the entire community, the diverse props, the specific songs and their variants from different ethnofolklorical regions are arguments for the realization of television documentaries and of radiophonic broadcasts of ethnography and folklore, the present generation knowing only these mediatizations in spectacular form.



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