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**RITUALS OF BIRTH, WEDDING AND BURIAL IN THE
VILLAGES ON THE IZA VALLEY, MARAMURES COUNTY**

Ph.D. THESIS

ABSTRACT

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Keywords: rites of passage, ceremonials, birth, wedding, funeral, ritual, rites of separation, rites of threshold, aggregation rites, ceremonial texts.

The Paper entitled **Rituals of Birth, Wedding and Burial in the Villages on the Iza Valley, Maramures County** focuses on the research of the most important moments that are part of family life, namely customs related to birth, wedding, and burial, in a clearly determined area belonging to the Historical Region of Maramures.

The rites of passage, as seen in the context of family life customs, encompass key moments the human beings have to go through in their existence: birth, marriage and death. The ways in which humans manifest themselves when faced with these transitions involve some form of communication which proves to be, most of the time, a symbolic one, a result of a particular way of thinking, also symbolic, with the help of which individuals establish themselves in the world.

Any transition involves breaking away from one's old state, exceeding one's previous status, these being required elements in the path of initiation any man should take to ascend to a new condition. Giving up a given status leads to a precarious existential situation, entering a threshold or limit state that brings along a certain situation of existential imbalance. Thus, the ceremonial manifestations accompanying the changes in human state have, as a first purpose, to restore the balance lost through the passage.

The key phases of human existence are perceived as passages from one state to another that are configured within different systems of relationships, involving also different behavioural patterns. The rites of passage suppose, according to Arnold Van Gennep's theory, three relatively distinct stages: the separation from the old state, the passage proper, and the integration into the new state itself. The ceremonial acts that accompany each stage are performed in order to initiate and prepare the individual for accession to the new state. The passage *per se* from an existential state to another proves, most of the times, difficult, because the recipient of the rites passes through a threshold situation, vacillating between the two existential conditions. This phenomenon is determined by the cancellation of the individual's identity while embarking on a journey of initiation, the access to a new identity occurring only after the lost balance has been restored, after having left the previous existential state.

The Paper **Rituals of Birth, Wedding and Burial in the Villages on the Iza Valley, Maramures County** is structured on six chapters, together with an **Introduction** and **Conclusions**, offering both a diachronic view of the facts of popular culture, as well as a synchronic vision, through following the development of patterns and the links between them.

The **Introduction** mainly focuses on a motivation for the choice of the subject-matter of the thesis and also on a short description of the folkloric area subjected to research in this scientific approach. At the same time, this introductory part provides an overview of the thesis, following key themes that are to be addressed in each chapter.

The first chapter, **Theoretical Aspects of Ceremonials Linked to Man's Main Events in Life: Birth, Wedding, Burial** is divided into three subchapters: "The Origin of Customs", "Steps in the System of Rites", and "Components of the Ritualistic Scenarios".

The approach, theoretically envisaged, of the rites related to the habits of family life, requires, in the first place, a diachronic approach of customs. Thus, the first chapter deals with, from a historical point of view, the origin of customs, and this subject proved, more often than not, a controversial one. The native basis of the cultural patterns of family life is difficult to identify because it is outlined in lines becoming more and more diffuse, once the Christian elements overlap the pagan ones. In addition, the stratified dimension of customs is due to influences from other cultural places, and contaminates the original basis of rites. Analyzing the patterns of family life based on internal comparisons, in terms of their age, it has been concluded, a conclusion accepted by most scholars, that the funeral rites are the most ancient, they being followed by rituals related to birth, and, therefore, the newest customs are the wedding-related ones.

The next subchapter, entitled "Steps in the System of Rites" delves into the instruments with the help of which we will operate throughout the present thesis, a definition of this system proving to be useful and, at the same time, necessary. The theorizing of rituals begins with a generalized vision, through distinguishing between the two types of culture - the material and the spiritual - and then gradually the approach becomes tailored according to the specialized semantics for each given category: ceremonial / ritual, customs of the calendar / customs of family life, the theorization of the rites of passage, etc.

The foundation for the analysis of the rites of passage is Arnold Van Gennep's theory that proposes a scheme consisting of three types of rituals: preliminary or of separation, liminary

or of threshold, postliminary or of aggregation.

Any individual human existence is organized in three main stages, ceremonially marked. *The birth* represents the transition from the world of the unknown to the white world, the known one. At this stage the concern for the perfect integration in the world, within the community, is obvious the birth customs being marked as the rites and ceremonies of integration. *Marriage* is regarded as the culmination of the integration in the ideal individual destiny. The marriage customs represent the most complex manifestation of the three sequences involved in the structure of rites of passage: the separation, the transition, the integration. *Death* involves the passing of the individual from the white world to the world beyond, the funeral ceremony being dominated by a feeling of final separation from the earthly world.

The last subchapter approaches the components of the ritual scenario through a method of transferring the specific elements of a communication act to a symbolic dimension. This symbolic communication represents the manner through which the individual tackles the journey necessary for the change of his existential status. In this context, the transmitter turns into a performer and the receiver becomes a beneficiary. The code turns into an allegorical language, the execution of actions is linked to some elements that define space and time, while the tools used create props that make up the ritual scenario: water, coins, wheat, the funeral bread, candles, linen etc.

The second chapter, entitled **Popular Customs. Bibliography on the Topic**, advances an analysis of studies referring to family life customs published so far by legitimated researchers in this field. The chapter is divided into three subchapters addressing Works on General Themes, Folklore Anthologies, and Syntheses.

The Works on General Themes, fall into two categories: Bibliographies and Historiography Studies. A systematization of these studies can be found in the volumes that make up the "General Bibliography of Romanian Ethnography and Folklore," which were an invaluable tool in shaping a bibliography of family customs in the historical Maramures area.

The Works on General Themes follow the activity of researchers that collected texts included in folklore anthologies, thus contributing to the preservation and transmission of Maramures County popular culture: Al. Ciplea, Titus Bud, Ion Bârlea, Tiberiu Brediceanu, Béla Bartók, Tache Papahagi, Petre Lenghel – Izanu, Ion Muşlea, Gheorghe Dăncuş etc.

The works on folklore constitute the substance of the second subchapter that includes Studies on General Themes and Surveys useful in the research field of family customs, Studies on Customs and Beliefs about Birth, Wedding and Burial. This folkloric field could by no means be exhausted without a review of the folklore collections which offer a particularized panoramic view through the texts and folk songs collected, this view being further shaped by syntheses which are divided into two categories: Works on General Themes about Maramureş and Monographs.

The subject of the next three chapters is centered on the analysis of ceremonials related to birth, marriage and burial. The research on these habits was done using several methods which consisted, on the one hand, in direct observation of the ceremonial facts of family life and, on the other hand, in using specific means of a survey such as questionnaires and free discussions.

The third chapter has as its central theme the research of customs about birth. The way of approaching these customs is the analysis of the sequences that make up the ceremonial manifestations, which accompany the individual's passage from the unknown world to the accessible universe, related to our earthly existence. In this context, we can see that bringing a child into the world is a constant goal of each newly founded family, this moment being announced through a series of rites of anticipation, performed even during the nuptial ceremony. Also in the area of the rites of anticipation are those linked to the sex of the child, in this case the woman showing an increased sensitivity to certain warning signs or dreams. The pregnancy coincides with a withdrawal of the future mother from the active area of the community; she therefore enters a restrictive area, subject to certain prohibitions induced by the beliefs existent at the level of traditional mentality. As a rule, the entire system of prohibitions is subject to a protective function exerted on both the child and the mother.

In the past, but not in a too distant one, however, the birth was taking place at home, the woman being assisted by a midwife. In the case of a difficult birth it was customary to perform some magical acts having as a function the anticipation of the actual moment of the entry of the newly - born into this world. At the same time, any threat, any abnormality, such as a disease that could affect the child had to be anticipated and corrected and, in this context, in order to avoid an imbalance at the level of this rite of passage, the midwife baptized the newly - born, protecting it from the risk of passing on the other side without receiving the sacrament of baptism.

The ritual gestures that are performed in the moments immediately following the birth consist of certain rites of separation become obligatory in the context of the transition from the world of the unknown into the white world. A fundamental rite marking the separation from the intrauterine life is performed at the moment of cutting and sealing the navel. The navel acquires, together with these ritual gestures, a magic function whose effect will be revealed a few years after the birth, with the custom of its unsealing, in order to anticipate the destiny the child will have to accomplish.

Another significant sequence performed after birth is the purification of the newly - born. This act is realised with the first wash, transformed into a ritual, a custom which also requires the use of certain objects with magical and religious bearing, objects which also hold protective and premonitory values. Therefore, the purifying function of water is strengthened by elements such as the silver coin, the fiddle string, the basil, the flowers etc., elements which set up the props for a symbolic scenario with premonitory functions.

The period of time between birth and baptism is a stage of transition, the passage between the world of the unknown and the accessible one, determining a precarious existential state, subject to certain harmful influences. In this context, a series of rites and practices are performed, aimed at annihilating the specific threats of this transitional phase. An important role in child protection is played by the incantations, the ritual texts built by using magical formulas, with an obvious function in restoring the health of the newly - born.

Another common magical practice in all areas of the Iza Valley is selling a sick child through the window, thus simulating another type of birth, at a symbolical level, through which the adverse fate of the beneficiary can change.

Baptism represents a fundamental sequence of the birth ceremony which holds as an immediate finality integration of the newly - born in the religious community. The baptism ceremony used to be held at the priest's house where the midwife, along with the godmother, would take the child and some objects needed for this ritual such as the cloth and the candle. "Botejunea" or the party after the religious moment of baptism, represents a sequence which legitimizes the integration of the newly - born in the community to which he will belong for a lifetime.

The customs related to the wedding ceremony is the subject developed in chapter IV. The manner in which we have dealt with these ceremonials is, as with the birth and burial customs,

an analysis of the sequences being part of the wedding ritual, which is considered as having the highest degree of complexity in relation to the other rites of passage.

The preliminary sequences of a wedding, consisting in the meeting of the youth and the wooing act, set off the entire mechanism of the wedding ceremonial. Magical and religious beliefs can be found across the whole wedding scenario, being announced since the sequence of the premarital practices of bringing forth the fated one, practices performed especially in the Feast of Saint Andrew.

The wooing is taking place following the rules of a ceremonial in which concrete language is replaced by a symbolic one. The "Tomalã" or the engagement of the youth is followed by the onset of the actual wedding preparations consisting of the "proclamations" at the church and the call for the wedding. The sequence in which community members are invited to the wedding marks the moment of introducing some characters with important roles in the wedding ceremony: the bridesmaids and the ensign.

The evening before the wedding is devoted to customs linked to the preparation of the groom's flag and the bride's wreath. These objects have a symbolic value through which a transfer of identity is achieved, thus they become real substitutes of the couple in certain moments of the nuptial ceremony. The bridegroom's status is thus projected through a symbolic dimension, the image of the flag. This ritual object is sewn by a specialized woman and decorated with ornaments the ensign gathers from the village: collars, "Zgardans", kerchiefs, handkerchiefs, etc. The functions of the flag in the nuptial ceremony economy oscillates between the aesthetic and the magical, according to the sequences in which this ritual tool appears. The substitute of the bride is represented by the wreath, the most important accessory that complements the specific dress worn on the wedding day. The crown is also made in the evening before the wedding, is then "danced" by a bridesmaid in a ritual ceremony which legitimates the status of the bride in the nuptial context.

The wedding - itself took place in the past in two separate areas, at each of the grooms' house. This "division" of corteges is determined by practical reasons related to the relatively tight space of traditional peasant houses, an event as ample as a wedding being therefore impossible. The wedding scenario consists, in its turn, of several sequences: the dressing of the bride and groom, the asking for pardons, the way to church, the religious ceremony, "the nuptial feast" the

confrontation and the union of corteges, the bride's dance, the moment of bringing forth the chicken, the undressing of the bride.

The classification of the rites of passage proposed by Arnold van Gennep, in rites of separation, of limit and of aggregation is reflected not only in relation to the whole ceremony, but also to the sequences that compose it. In the context of the wedding, the separation of the young from their old statute is anticipated and prepared by the moment of their dressing and when asking for pardons. As they represent rites of separation the logic of the scenario involves a situation fraught with drama, which has as an effect the ritual weeping of the bride, thus making it mandatory at this stage of the separation from her parents' house and therefore from her maidenhood.

The limit rites, in which the beneficiaries are located, existentially speaking, between the two states, are predominant along the way the corteges take towards the religious ceremony. The limit status between the two conditions implies, besides a conflict between the two families, an existential situation subject to dangers. In this context there occurs the apotropaic function of the flag which is swirled overhead by the ensign at crossroads and in front of the church. The purification required for this oscillation stage between the two states is achieved by sprinkling wheat mixed with salt on the road of the spouses to the church. The cancellation of the conflict between the two families is achieved by the custom of sharing the wedding bread when getting out of church at the end of the religious ceremony, this gesture anticipating the ritual of eating together practiced at the wedding table, which marks the integration of the young couple within the community.

The rites of separation, and respectively of integration of the bride in the new statute and the new kin appear accompanied by transfers identity of the young girl in some important sequences of the wedding ceremony. Such a transfer occurs in the context of the conflict between the two families, at the moment when the bridegroom's people come to the bride's house, and they are given a false bride. This custom reflects a tense situation within the bride's family, namely the loss of a key member that will enter, through the wedding, another kin. Another change of identity occurs in the sequence of the "dezbălțuit" where the bride's wedding veil is replaced with a kerchief, marking the definitive entry of the maid into the world of married women. The transition from one state to another is difficult, the bride accepting, after

several failed attempts, the kerchief which turns out to be, symbolically, the bearer of all existing difficulties within a couple.

The sequence of bringing the hen also involves another identity transfer for the young girl, the cook playing the role of mediator between the concrete and symbolic planes that imagine the completion by the bride, of the steps required for nuptial initiation.

The changing of the existential condition of the young girl is perceived as a trade that takes place between the two families. The buying back of the bride is an action that occurs at two distinct moments of the wedding ceremonial, on a symbolic dimension, as the godfather buys back the hen, and on a specific situation, the cash gift that the groom makes during the sequence dedicated to the bride's dance.

The wedding proper closes with the ceremonial sequence where the bride's dowry is brought to the groom's house, a custom involving two stages of the rites: a separation one, which marks the girl's final departure from the parental home, and an integration one, represented by the girl's entrance and remaining in the groom's house.

Chapter V deals with man's last rite of passage, tracing his journey from "the world here" to the "world beyond". As for the other rites of passage, the funeral ceremony respects the structure proposed by Arnold van Gennep, being divided into three categories of rites: preliminary or of separation, liminary or of threshold, and postliminary or of integration. The voyage and the integration in the community of the dead is achieved by the progressive detachment of the soul from the body, through the whole ceremonial ensemble accompanying this journey being realised, however, the transfer from a world known, concrete, to a world perceived through symbolic thinking. The sequences that form the customs linked to death are constructed, on the one hand, in direct relation to the deceased and, on the other hand, notwithstanding him. The main role in this rite of passage is assumed by the deceased's family and, not in the last place, by the community from which he takes his leave. The funeral ceremony knows, therefore, several sequences: anticipating death, preparing for departure, the funeral proper, the road to the cemetery, the burial of the casket, the "comând" or the meal after the funeral, the subsequent alms and memorial services.

Anticipating a significant moment in human life represents the passing through an existential state dominated by a strong magical – religious implication. The anticipation of death is not, therefore, an exception to this ritualized behavior, hinting at a state that the individual

passes through under the influence of a belief system that combines religious and magic elements. The magic layer of reporting oneself to death is made of warning signs, interdictions and dreams. The religious side is accomplished by human behavior in relation to divinity relationship that involves fasting, prayer and almsgiving.

The time of death is the triggering factor for the preparation for the journey into the realm beyond. Typically, these preparations are spread over three days from the moment of death and involves customs such as the ritual washing of the dead, his dressing and the wake. The libation of the body, an action necessarily performed by people who are not part of the family of the deceased, has as a main aim to purify and prepare it for its integration into the community of the dead. In this sequence, all items that come into contact with the dead body are considered impure, which is why there is a particular concern to annihilate their harmful effects and to avoid any contact with them later. Thus, the washing water is discarded in the garden, in a sheltered spot, and the rags that had touched the body of the deceased, as well as the bed sheets are burnt.

The transfer of identity is a situation to be found in the context of the funeral ceremony, as in other rites of passage. In this case, the replacement of the deceased is symbolically realised through the "light of the body", a candle whose dimensions copy the size of the lifeless body. The spiral form of this ritual object symbolizes the long journey that the dead has to take to the world "beyond". The preparation of the coffin is usually part of a custom having as a landmark the daily universe the defunct lived in. Thus, in the coffin, beside the shroud, the pillow and the funeral blanket, one still poses a series of symbolic objects: a staff, a rosary, coins to pay the passage to the other side.

The body of the deceased remains at home for three days, days in which the wake takes place. This period, seen as a transition between the two worlds is subject to influences considered dangerous, threatening the existential condition of the deceased and the family he has just parted with. Thus, the main function of the wake consists in its intended protection against malefic forces. The wake is also an opportunity for the family and the community to become solidary and, in this context, it is important to overcome the spiritual crisis installed because of death. The moments when this desire for balance is evident within this dramatic state are reflected by practicing some specific wake games that have as an immediate function to ease the atmosphere created by this conflict of final departure.

An interesting element of the wake is found in Strâmtura where, during the wake, death is announced in the community by means of trumpets, which are a form of proclamation prior to the bells of the church. In addition to this function, the trumpets play a defensive role by removing the negative forces present in the specific threshold stage which is the wake.

The funeral-proper is both a ritual through which the deceased's aggregation into the community of the dead is made and a process registering the gradual separation of the dead from the community of the living. This separation is achieved first by removing the deceased from the house and then getting the coffin out of the yard. The gradual widening of space involves a number of elements of the topos that are of symbolic value: the door, the gate, the road with its crossroads and finally the cemetery. The stops made on the way to the cemetery signify a practice to accommodate the dead with the other world, in the context of the belief that their number is perfectly reflected in the realm beyond.

The burying of the deceased is a sequence which marks the demarcation between the living and the dead community. This transfer from the world of the living to the world of the dead is accentuated by the custom of throwing into the grave a number of items that came into contact with the deceased, this ritual gesture thus receiving the meaning of a clear separation between the two communities. The participants at the funeral are purified from their contact with death by the ritual washing of hands, practiced out of the cemetery, before the meal offered by the family of the deceased.

The practices designed to restore the balance within the family and the community continue in observing a mourning period, giving alms and organizing periodical memorial services. The feelings caused by the intervention considered brutal of the passage to the other world evolve over time, from deep grief, to an experience of catharsis through the rites designed to restore the balance state temporarily lost through death.

A special place in the economy of the funeral ceremony is the burial of unmarried youth. According to traditional mentality, everyone has to follow the three stages of family life: birth, marriage and burial. The imbalance caused by the death of a member of the community is increased if the person has not gone through the nuptial ritual. To repair this existential breach, the unmarried youth receive a funeral ceremony which in many sequences resembles the deployment of the nuptial ritual.

The last chapter, entitled "Conclusions", returns to analysis the most important lines of research pursued throughout the thesis. After describing each rite of passage in part, the conclusions may be constructed by means of a comparative analysis having as a role to trace the mutation of the function that are recorded by certain rites and common instruments within the passage customs. The traditional system of mentalities, intertwined with the symbolic thinking system through which the customs of family life are imagined, record, in several sequences, a repetitive form of the rituals. This is explained, on the one hand, by the classification of customs into the three categories proposed by Arnold Van Gennep, by the ordering in a common scheme involving separation, transition and integration, conferring the repetitive nature in the ritualistic performance. On the other hand, magic and religious props as part of the scenarios of crossing ceremonies consist of objects present in each custom, although having, most of the times, a different functionality. Beyond the aspects that resemble or differ while performing important rituals what is important is the symbolic communication of the being and of the community on the threshold of an existential change. This communication creates a transition from the individual to the general, from the concrete to the abstract, from magic to religion, building, ultimately, the universe where the human being lies, while learning to cross different states of existence.

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