

## THE PRESENCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF WATER IN FAMILY TRADITIONS BORN

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**Abstract:** *Water as an indispensable element of life, plays an important role in the passage cycle:-birth, marriage, death. In a first stage, we have focused on the water's purifying role in the traditions connected to birth. The archaic popular beliefs imposed a series of rituals for the removal of the forces of evil and the prevention of certain diseases in which water is the primordial element. Beginning with the first bath of the new-born baby until its baptism (for a period that can last between several days and six weeks, and sometimes even more, a series of ceremonies take place, generating numerous beliefs related to the child's growth, health and subsequent development. The midwife, as a main character, leads and practices all the rituals related to water, carefully keeping the secrets of the ritual practices but also the tradition of the custom development. She watches that all the sequences of the bathing ritual be strictly respected: the bathing water needs to be neither too cold, nor too hot, for the child's state of wakefulness not to be disturbed, she puts different objects in the baby's bathing water for the child to be "wise", an important man in society and protected from all evil things, known and unknown. The midwife together with the women who are allowed to assist to the bathing accomplish certain rituals (songs), dances, declamations, incantations) meant to protect the child. The archaic elements comprised in the tradition are still kept to this day in the practice related to the bathing of the new-born baby.*

**Keywords:** *Musical Expressivity, Emotion, Creative Strategies.*

### 1. Introduction

Water, along with the other vital elements of the existence of life on earth, is present almost in all the customs or rituals circumscribed to the Romanian folklore. Starting with the children's folklore, in which we find practices in which water is the principal element (and here we are referring to *Scaloian* and the *Paparuda* practiced by children) and going on to the calendar-related traditions (*Iordănitul*, *Plugarul*, *Sângeorzul*,

*Bricelatul* or *Alegerea cailor*, *Paparuda*), which most of them represent sequences/aspects of the work of the land, they are all connected to man's struggle for obtaining rich crops, needed for the daily existence. For this, man uses songs, games, dramatic or ritual plays in which water is the main character, either present in its natural state (through the aspersion of a character /the whole crowd present - *Iordănitul*, *Plugarul*, *Sângeorzul*, *Bricelatul*), or under the form of an incantation (*Paparuda*, *Scaloianul*).

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Regarding the manifestations accompanying man from his birth to his death, we can notice that water is omnipresent, especially in the sequences with a ritual and ceremonial character. Next, we shall detail the moments we have set out to highlight out of the complex manifestations integrated in the cycle of the great passage.

## 2. Traditions and beliefs related to the presence of water at birth.

While the calendar-related traditions occur on certain calendar data or during the periods of the agricultural works or of the shepherds' life, the customs related to the important moments of man's life occur randomly (birth and death) and/or on the initiative of the family members (marriage), having an unrepeatable character. In the traditional patriarchal communities, the family had close connections between its members not just in the relation parents-children but also with all the blood-related relatives and God-parents, the connections between the members being very strong.[5]

The birth of a child in the archaic communities supposed a series of propitiatory customs or rituals [5] or prophylactic acts accomplished by the midwife. She represented the main character, having both the role of assisting and supervising the birth, of practicing all the rituals pertaining to the child's coming into the world but also that of "master of ceremonies" of the whole custom [5]. The moments of birth, even those preparing it, are associated to customs and beliefs always related to certain objects, incantations, invocations, water being the central element of the rituals.

S.Fl. Marian presents in minute details the rituals related to the incantation uttered by the midwife for the pregnant woman considered the victim of the evil eye, which would delay or prevent the birth. In this

incantation, water is attributed beneficial, healing or purifying effects. "Some of the incantation singers [...] take holy water sanctified at Church on the day of the Epiphany and, pouring it into a new vessel, give three sips to the suffering (pregnant) woman, and, washing her body three times, utter the following incantation [4]". Obligatorily the water has to be either holy or untouched to preserve its sacral properties.

The ancestral beliefs require that the baby be bathed in cold water immediately, usually to fortify him, to make him resilient and healthy. "In most parts of Bukovina and Moldova [...], the midwife lifts the baby and keeping him above a little sink or bath tub pours it on him purposely to make him resilient later on to the cold." [4] The midwife also has the task to bathe the baby (this ritual bath is called *scaldă*, *scălduşcă*, *scălduşă*, *ciupă* according to the respective geographic area. The whole operation takes place according to a true ritual meant to protect the baby from all evil; thus, each sequence or object used in the ceremonial is charged with significance:

- The pot in which the water is warmed has to be new for the child's voice to be clean, pleasant to the ear;
- The water needs to be warm, not hot, for the new-born not to have an agitated life, full of turmoil or troubles;
- In the bathing tub (also called *albie*, *copaie*, *vănuţă*, *covăţică*), the participants to the ceremony put: basil, money, flower petals, honey, bread, sugar, milk, walnuts, holy water etc., each of them having a magic role in the child's future development (the basil assures attractiveness and love, silver money keep the evil charms away, the flowers are a sign of health, honey gives a charming talk and attracts love, bread represents prosperity and goodness, sugar – the sweetness of life, the egg - health and integrity, the milk

– physical cleanliness and richness, the holy water – protection against the evil spirits [4].

After the child has been taken out of the water, the midwife breathes out upon the bathing place in the shape of the cross and spits in the water, gestures signifying the chasing away of the evil spirits and genii. By this last gesture, the midwife closes the series of the moments and actions undertaken in order to create a magical circle around the baby meant to protect him in the earthly life.

According to the ancestral traditions, the water in which the baby has been bathed (immediately after the birth and until the baptism) is thrown in a clean, untrodden place, at the root of some fruit trees, for the baby to grow and bring fruit just like them; the water can also be thrown on the flowers in the garden for the new-born to grow beautiful and good-looking like them. Another belief says that the water from the bathingplace must never be thrown by day (while it is sunny) but only after the sun sets or else the child might get full of pimples. This water must not be thrown on fire either or else the child will have no luck in life<sup>i</sup>.

Very important is also the belief according to which the water needs to be brought only at a certain moment of the day, namely after sunrise until sunset and taken from a single source or else the child might suffer; if the water comes from two wells the child might get into trouble (*Măicută/ măicută, / Tu când m-ai făcut./ Bine ti-a părut [...] / Iar când m-ai scăldat/ Cu apă din iaz/ Să fiu de necaz*) [4]. On the contrary, if the water is taken from a river with crystalline and rapid water from a clean well, the folklore belief says that it will have a positive influence on the

child's physical evolution and character (*Spune-mi maic-adevărat/ Cu ce apă m-ai scăldat/ Ori cu apă de pârau / Să port pistoale la brâu/ Ori cu apă de fântână/ Să port sabia-ntr-o mână/ Ori cu apă de sub punte / Să fiu viteazul de munte*) [4]. Other beliefs related to bathing:[2]

- the little bathing tub the baby has been washed in must not be put just anywhere, it is believed that, if it is put down overturned or up against the wall, the child might die;
- the dirty swaddling clothes the baby was enswathed in should be washed in the water of the little bathing tub and should not be turned on the other side or else the baby's anus might get overturned;
- the swaddling clothes should not be left outside over night because the baby might get scared and become whiny and the evil spirits might hurt him;
- the swaddling clothes should not be set to get dry on a fence/rope but on a cart wheel, for the son/daughter to be swift, agile and dexterous.
- the child should not be wiped with the swaddling clothes at the mouth or his mouth will get smelly;
- the members of the family should not use the swaddling clothes as *obiele*<sup>ii</sup> or else this will have a negative effect on the child in the sense that he will not be an important man [4];
- in the water in which a baby was washed until his baptism, the midwife will wash her feet for the child to start walking soon and be fast when walking;
- after the baptism, it is forbidden that any family member wash their feet (in the respective water) because it is a great sin [5];

<sup>i</sup> It should be noted that the water from the first bath but also from the next until baptism.

<sup>ii</sup> *Obielele* are pieces of tissues that the adults and the children use to wrap their feet before they put their shoes on during frosty periods.

- the little bath tub (*vănuţa, covăţica*) in which the child is washed must be made necessarily out of a certain tree, namely fir-tree or lime-tree not alder tree, or else, when the child grows up, he will live his life among strangers;
- the bath must necessarily take place after sunset, or else the evil spirits might scare the child and it will cry continually;
- after the bath, the child will be “massaged” with different anointments (oil, rank fat over which one has to pour milk taken from 3 cows, on three Fridays, by three old women).

The traditions and customs related to the bathing of the new-born baby acquire particular meanings depending on the folklore zone but also in the small traditional communities that have still preserved unaltered the archaic practices and beliefs related to the role and significance of water in the future life of the child but also of the respective family and community.

### 3 Christian practices related to the mother and the child before baptism.

Generally, this magical circle of water, traditional with the Romanian peoples, is completed by the “sanctification of the small water” accomplished by the priest of the village, consisting in the aspersion of the new mother (*lehuză*<sup>iii</sup>), of the child and of the whole assembly by the priest with a bunch of basil dipped in holy water; the priest makes the sign of the cross with the incensory, censes the room and the people present uttering a purification prayer both for the mother and for the child. To the midwife, to the new mother and to all the

<sup>iii</sup> *lehuză/leuză* is the name given to the mother from the birth of the child until 40 days later, when a special prayer (*moliftă*) is read for her by the priest.

women present at the ceremony, the priest gives holy water to drink three times. The rest of the holy water is kept by the mother of the child to be put in the child’s every bath until baptism, for the baby to be protected from diseases, evil eye, charms or other evil things [1]. The mother of the child is not allowed to get out of the courtyard or to go to the well until the priest has sanctified her using holy water and has read a specific prayer for her. It is only after this that she can take water from the well, yet even then she needs to pour water on her feet, in sign of bodily cleanliness and, only after that, can she come with the water at home. This custom is not practiced on a certain date; it may be accomplished just a few days after the birth but also 40 days /6 weeks after the birth, when the new mother is able to get out of the area of the house.

### 4. The baptism and superstitions related to the water ceremony

On the day when the child is christened<sup>iv</sup> the midwife bathes the child and dresses it in its father’s shirt, if it is a boy, or in a shirt of its mother’s, if the baby is a girl. At the same time, the midwife puts in this shirt a piece of bread, salt, money, for the child to have a lucky and rich life and be as good as bread. Before leaving for the church, the midwife says “I am taking a pagan to church to bring back a Christian at home” (“*duc păgân să aduc un creştin*”) and, on her return, she has to say: “I have taken a pagan to church and I am bringing back a Christian at home” (“*am dus un păgân şi am adus un creştin*”)[4]. Another custom says that if it happens for several children to be baptized at the same time, in

<sup>iv</sup> The period between birth and baptism may vary depending on the health condition of the child, of the mother, on the social status and may range from a few days to 6 weeks. Today, the data are no longer respected.

some areas they are submerged into water sanctified separately for each child in turn. According to ancient traditions, baptism brothers are not allowed to marry each other, this being a mortal sin. Yet, it is good for twins to be baptized in the same water, according to some folklore beliefs. According to some other folklore beliefs, the baptism water (just like the water from the child's daily baths at home) should not be thrown just anywhere. After the child has been baptized, the midwife takes the water, puts it in a vase uttering at the same time an incantation. Later on she throws this water in an "untrodden", clean place, at the root of a tree or among flowers. It should be noted that water has not just functions of bodily cleansing but also a mystical one: water acquires significances of healing [3], of protection against all the evil things that might fall upon the baby but also upon its destiny as future adult, both physically and from the perspective of its integration in the traditional community.

Another aspect that needs to be highlighted is that at baptism the baby would receive a name given by the God-parent(s), sometimes even the priest would propose a name of saint, and if the child became seriously ill, his name was changed into that of some wild animal (*Lupul*/Wolf, *Ursul*/ Bear, etc.). The series of traditions related to birth is concluded by the cutting of the hair (*tăierea moșului*) in the case of the boys and the breaking of the round cake (*ruptul turtei*) in the case of the girls, a custom still taking place to this day in most of the Romanian settlements, according to the old rituals. So, the child was seated on a water bucket full of water in which different objects considered to have an important role in the child's life or an influence on his/her future have been placed. A part of these objects can be found as well in the new-born baby's bathing ritual: (usually silver), gold, different plants and flowers but also

modern elements (book, pen, beads, and other adornments). Just as in the case of bathing, these objects have a propitiatory and prophylactic role, and, in this case, they also have the role of indicating the potential social/professional state of the future adult.

### 5. Folklore moments pertaining to the bathing ritual.

The folklore elements that were present in the archaic communities (partially preserved to this day) begin since the child's birth and go on until his baptism; they do not have a character similarly spectacular to that of other customs and traditions belonging to the Romanian folklore. As it has been previously mentioned, in the baby's bathing ceremonial, the water resulted after the bath would be taken out of the house in a solemn atmosphere by the midwife and the women accepted to participate (the presence of men was rarely allowed). They danced a ceremonial dance behind the midwife who was carrying the little bath tub to pour it in a river, a valley, in the garden, in the orchard or among flowers. During the whole period of the dance, the women called out different exclamations whose content was adequate for that moment [5]. After the water was poured down, the midwife expressed wishes of wealth and health to the child, turned over the little bath tub and stood up on it declaiming verses with an augural character: *S-a răsturnat covata/Să trăiască nepoata*<sup>v</sup> /*Si s-a răsturnat deodată să mai facă încă- o fată/S-a răsturnat pe-un picior/Să mai facă si-un fecior* / (The little bath tub has been turned on the other side,/ May the young mother live long/ And it has been turned on the other side fast/ That

<sup>v</sup> In Moldova and Bukovina, *nepoata* is the name given to the child's mother.

a new baby girl may be born/ And it has been turned on the other side after standing up/ That a new baby boy may be born).

Another interesting folklore moment related to birth is the celebration with the Godparents (*cumetria*) that usually took place after the child's baptism. Here the participants are: the parents, the midwife, the relatives, the Godparents, the neighbors and other people invited to the event. After the meal accompanied by lots of brandy, offered by the hosts, the guests would offer (even to this day) gifts and money to the new-born baby, accompanied by the traditional wishes of health, fortune, abundance. It is also now that gifts are offered to the midwife, gifts that she received for having accomplished the bathing ceremony.

## 6. Conclusions

Although the Romanian folklore has gone through changes determined by the inherent social-political, economic, technological transformations, by the always growing tendency of turning the traditional culture into show, the traditional customs as a whole have remained a well preserved system, transmitted from generation to generation.

The traditions related to the important moments of man's life involved, first of all, the members of the family, and a smaller or bigger number, according to case, of the members of the traditional community. Compared to the other passage customs (those related to marriage and death), birth involves the family, the midwife, the Godparents, relatives, neighbors, the number of those involved being much lower compared to the other two moments mentioned above. The passage rituals and ceremonies have been preserved to a significant extent, with the exception of the wedding ones, which have acquired urban elements, being more open

to the social changes. Some of the rituals related to the first bath or to baptism have been preserved in an unaltered form to this day: the bathing of the child before sunset; the taking out of the little bath and the water is still not thrown away after sunset; the swaddling clothes are not let out on the rope at night, etc. The disrespect of these norms was said to draw different mishaps on the child and on the family. The respect of the customs and the accomplishment of the traditional practices were of interest for the whole community, because their disrespect was feared to bring misfortune on the whole community not just on the faulty ones, according to the idea that individual deeds trigger the responsibility of the whole community.

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