

**PHD THESIS ABSTRACT**  
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**THE ROLE OF BIRTH-RITES AND BELIEFS IN THE SOCIAL  
NETWORK OF A COMMUNITY AT GYIMESKÖZÉPLOK**

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## RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The subject of the present piece of research is the first major turning point of human life as a rite of passage. My aim is to give a functional examination of the rituals organised around giving birth and being born, to explore the way in which related beliefs work in the context of the community which keeps them alive.

In the focus of my analysis we find the period of *child bed* starting at the time of childbirth, as well as the initiation rites which follow this period (the mother's initiation, meaning her re-integration into normal society, and the baby's baptism in the church), in other words the occasions when the participants are ritually admitted into the community. I give detailed attention to the beliefs and ritual actions which play a significant part in this phase of life and are recognised by members of the community as normative rules, prescriptions and prohibitions.

Although childbirth is a popular topic of research in ethnography, sociology and the history of religion, not all aspects have been elaborated to the same depth and extent. Although there are a number of monographs, partial monographs and essays in the Hungarian literature of the field which describe childbirth, there are, apart from a few attempts, practically no systematic surveys that go beyond a mere presentation of beliefs and magical rites and offer an analysis of the rites including an exploration of their broader social context.

In my dissertation I shall view childbirth and related ritual phenomena as a coherent system rather than a merely consequent line of beliefs and/or magical actions. When examining childbirth, I am seeking, in a general sense, to answer the question how social needs influence the belief system and vice versa, the connection which exists between the normative role of beliefs and their organising function within the community on the one hand and

social (and even economic) ties and networks on the other hand. Therefore, in order to interpret these beliefs it is inevitable first to offer a micro-survey of the community which shapes them, as in reality the beliefs are embedded in the workings of the community and together they operate as a unified system.

## THE SUBJECT OF THE EXAMINATION

My analysis relies on the results of my field work<sup>1</sup> and on the corpus of belief texts from the whole of the Hungarian speaking territory including recent additions by ethnographic collectors.

The field work was preceded by a phase of research in which I systematised belief texts and taboo narratives which are formulated as prohibitions and concern the area of birth as well as marriage and death. This phase of research focussed on creating a data base of textual material collected by a number of researchers. The taboo database contains data from already published ethnographic collections work but also contains the material of various manuscript sources preserved in various archives. In order to collect material I used the Ethnological Data Collection of the Budapest Museum of Ethnography; the Folk Belief Archives of the Ethnographic Research Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences where I also used the Hungarian Popular Belief Topography Questionnaire; and the Data Store of the Ethnographic Department of Janus Pannonius Museum at Pécs.

The data base I created contains nearly a thousand texts and covers the area of almost the entire Carpathian Basin, including the

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<sup>1</sup> My field work in Gyimes forms a part of the team project 'Popular belief and religious folklore in Gyimes' sponsored by OTKA under number 49175 and led by Éva Pócs.

outer boundaries of the Hungarian speaking area (Moldva) while within the linguistic boundary it also covers the data of ethnic minorities living in Hungary. In terms of time span it ranges from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. Although the belief material here examined is scattered over space and time, it can be considered representative with regard to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian speaking areas.

My own field work took place in the ethnographic region known as Gyimes which lies on the boundary of historical Hungary on the Western side of the Eastern Carpathians, between the mountains of the Csíki-havasok and Moldva. I did my research in a clearly outlined area of Gyimes, the village of Hidegség (Valea Rece) which belongs to Gyimesközéplök (Lunca de Jos) in clerical and administrative terms. This large and densely populated area branches off from the valley of the Tatros in a Northern direction and is named after the stream Hidegség, the longest and most profuse tributary to the Tatros. The population of the village, numbering just over 2000, is almost exclusively Hungarian speaking and Roman Catholic. In 2005 I spent altogether two months at Hidegség.

### **METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS**

The earlier phase of my research consisted in systematising birth taboos on the basis of recent Hungarian ethnographic collections. This computerised analysis, which represented my graduation thesis, made it clear that the texts in the data base allow us to outline certain tendencies and regularities and to define the main groups and themes of the birth taboos of the Hungarian speaking area. The results of this effort were not significantly modified by the later expansion of the collecting work to a wider range of topics. This

piece of work offered the conclusion that it is not possible to answer my questions regarding the operation, function and changes of these beliefs by analysing texts which come from disparate times and places and were collected by heterogeneous methods, often taken out of their original context. This way it seemed necessary to supplement the examination with some field work. This became possible by joining the work team founded and headed by Éva Pócs at the Ethnography Department of Pécs University which was engaged in exploring the religious life and belief system of Gyimes. As a result of this field work it became possible to study the beliefs which regulate behaviour in their original context and this made it possible to carry out a functional analysis of the belief system.

Through direct observation as well as unstructured and semi-structured interviews conducted at the location, it became possible for me to examine the connection between members of the community knowing these beliefs and referring to them as rules on the one hand and practical adherence to the rules on the other hand. I was also able to explore in what ways this was influenced by the system of norms carried by the community and by the influence of outside factors. Field work made it possible to observe how control by the community lends legitimacy to the operation of the belief knowledge.

My examination also emphasised the social aspects of the customs around childbirth. For a conceptual tool I relied on the notion of rites of passage. However, instead of simply borrowing the finished model and applying it to my material, I used the regularities of the transition phases defined by Arnold van Gennep in order to examine the material both in its process and in its entirety and this way highlight the role of the connection between individual and community.

## RESULTS

Earlier research into customs around childbirth has been largely descriptive in nature, recording the current state of affairs. Therefore during my examination I emphatically made it a point of departure that the various elements and disparate phenomena of the belief system can only be fully explored and understood if they are seen as embedded in a web of social connections and considerations. Beliefs, rites and the system of norms and rules carried by the community are inseparable from each other. Beyond mutually presupposing, they actively and intensely shape each other.

During my field work at Hidegség I discovered a unique and highly active system surrounding the subject of childbirth. The reason for this is that this is a place where the culture, the society and the system of traditions itself is in a position where changes are not pointing in the direction of disintegration but are in permanent turbulence, integrating various influences. This way even if these modify the existing system, the beliefs become adapted to the new circumstances without becoming essentially altered. The society and, along with it, the belief system itself adapt in a flexible fashion to the changes, if necessary. The beliefs are shaped by a complex web of individual, communal and outside factors which are constantly in motion at the location under examination, and the elements of this web often strain against each other, even working in completely opposing directions.

At Gyimesközéplök we may observe that by the present time a completely unique system of godparenting has emerged. Since the community here functions as a largely self-reliant economic and social system, there is a heightened value placed on the interdependence of the members. An extensive and solid system of relationships based on mutuality ensures the well-oiled workings of

everyday life, the emergence and continued operation of which is regulated by consolidated customs and frameworks. I am convinced that the customs and social actions related to the period of childbirth and baptism, described in the present dissertation, all point in the direction of expanding the web of the family's social ties to as broad a range of people as possible through the institution of godparenting. The community secures the functioning of this system by operating an all-exclusive, complex system of customs. Certain elements of this system do occur at other points of the Hungarian speaking area, but in this form, as a complete and comprehensive system, they only occur at this location. The unique system of customs emerges from the co-occurrence of the described phenomena. It is unique in the Hungarian speaking area that at the location examined the godparents volunteer for the task themselves and are never rejected by the parents. Besides, it is the rule that each child of the family must have different godparents. A further rule is that the godparents must be strangers or, if they are relatives, the relation must be as distant as possible. This is near enough the only location in the Hungarian speaking area where the institution of 'childbed' is still extant today, the period lasting from childbirth till baptism. This period used to be considerably shorter in Gyimes but by today it has become extended even in spite of the wishes of the church.

As a consequence, the number of godparents has risen to an enormous level here compared to other Catholic areas as these relationships guarantee long term mutuality between families.

This ambition is also secured by a system of tacit rules operating at Gyimesközéplök, which legitimises the needs and interests of the community. The only time available for members of the village to volunteer as godparents is when they visit the woman in childbed, in other words it is the only one period for becoming a godparent. If the period when visitors are received were shorter, i.e. the child was baptised during, say, the first week, there would be no

time left for a sufficient number of godparents to volunteer. The longer the period when visitors may arrive and offer to be godparents, the greater the chance that the family will get a sufficient number of visits. The aim is for as many people to become godparents to the family as possible and this can only be secured by extending the period of childbed. It is my conviction that this is why the time of baptism became has shifted to an increasingly later date, seemingly adapting to the time of the mother's initiation. All of this also explains why the institution of volunteering to be godparents has no alternative here: it alone secures an unlimited increase in the number of godparents; nor does it make sense to lengthen the visiting period except knowing that the visitors come with the intention to offer to baptise the baby. If the godparents were chosen by the parents, there would be no need to postpone the period of baptism and there would be no need to solidify the system of childbed.

The resulting expansion of the social network is the vested interest of the local society, and it fundamentally influences the transformations of these beliefs. It is extremely important to point out that the weight and role of the beliefs does not decrease with the expansion of this period, even if this may be formal and only shown to the outside world. It seems that over the long term it is a worthwhile sacrifice for the family to do without the work force of the mother for this period of time, because the loss is compensated for by the increase in the number of godparents and the resulting increase in the supportive network. Besides this social tendency there is also a heavy prestige element in just how extensive a network of godparents a family possesses.

The final outcome of all of this is that the number of these 'in-laws' far outweighs the number of blood relatives. I would even risk claiming that this network is meant to supplant the ties with blood relatives and for this reason often becomes more

important. This is easily observable in the case of mutual assistance. On the occasion of great joint labour efforts and significant turning points in the human life cycle, godparents help the family in great numbers. In Gyimes, relatives are separated by such great distances that neighbours and godparents are often more easily mobilised if assistance becomes necessary. This is why godparenting has such a great cohesive role in the community.

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