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Боряк, Олена. *Баба-повитуха в культурно-історичній традиції українців: між профанним і сакральним*. [Boriak, Olena. *The Midwife in the Cultural and Historical Traditions of the Ukrainians: Between the Ordinary and the Sacred*]. Kyiv: Інститут мистецтвознавства, фольклористики та етнології ім. Рильського, 2009. 400 pp. Bibliography. List of Respondents. Illustrations. Index. Summary in English. Paper. ISBN: 978-966-02-5480-0.

Olena Boriak is the one of those few scholars, whether in Ukraine or elsewhere, who seek to make a significant contribution to the study of those Ukrainian rituals, customs, and traditions related to childbirth. The midwife and her practice were described in detail by the so-called “fathers” of Ukrainian ethnography, the scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Childbirth customs and rituals also received substantial attention at that time. However, in recent Ukrainian scholarship these have not been popular topics, unlike in the West. Although giving birth was and is considered an essential part of the life of a Ukrainian woman, researchers do not explore childbirth as extensively as other life and family cycle events. There were many reasons for this, including the fact that childbirth is not a social occasion like a wedding or a funeral; birth takes place in more private circumstances and might be considered more a matter of biology than of ritual. But lack of scholarly attention should not imply that childbirth is unimportant and it should not conceal the significance of the midwife to Ukrainian society. The midwife was not just the recognized expert on the subject of birth but, as Boriak states, she was also the mediator between the living and dead, between this life and the afterlife, between the sacred and the profane.

To give the midwife her due, Boriak draws on an exhaustive reading of published ethnographic material, complemented with more recent works on midwifery and childbirth. She summarizes previous studies and extends them by adding her own findings and interpretations. She draws not only on published sources but also on an impressive amount of fieldwork. Interviews were conducted in more than one hundred forty villages in eleven of the main ethnographic regions of Ukraine. The field data was collected by Boriak and by other researchers including N. Havryliuk, L. Artiukh, A. Artiukh, T. Zubryts’ka, and M. Mayerchuk. The author emphasizes the significance of fieldwork for her research, stating that, between the years 2000 and 2009 she interviewed approximately 330 respondents, most 80 years old and older. Boriak also

uses previously unpublished archival materials, including manuscripts from the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. These are field materials assembled by Liudmyla Shevchenko, Serhii Verkhrats'kyi, Vasyly Kravchenko, and others. The author's knowledge of western ethnographic and anthropological literature enriches her work.

Structurally, the book is divided into four blocks. The first chapter, *Historiography and Resources*, is a survey of the scholarship related to midwifery in Ukraine. It includes ethnographic, anthropological, folkloric, and medical data. The second part, *Midwifery in the History of Medicine and Culture*, presents the history of the development of midwifery in Ukrainian culture and medicine and also in the broader context of European data and occasionally data from other parts of the world. The third unit, called *The Midwife's Place and Role in Obstetric Care and Ritual Practice*, describes the roles, both medical and ritualistic, which the midwife performed during her practice. In the last chapter, *Symbolism and Semantics of the Image of the Midwife in Folk Belief*, the author endeavors to interpret the image of the midwife as it appears in Ukrainian folklore. The book contains an extensive bibliography (pp.295-341), a list of the interviewees, explanations to the illustrations, and an index. It ends with a two-page summary in English. All of these are useful tools, and the illustrations are very interesting, although their relevance to the subject matter of the book is not always apparent.

The focus of Boriak's book is, of course, Ukrainian midwifery, but she explores it in the context of world history apparently because there are no early Ukrainian sources for her to draw on. Thus, Boriak refers to the Bible and the Talmud, to the papyri of Ancient Egypt and to the Ayurveda and she uses the philosophers of Ancient Greece and Rome. Discussing midwifery in the Middle Ages, Boriak notes that, unlike other female healers, the midwife was not systematically persecuted, even though she was connected with magic and therefore evoked fear. She finds that, on the contrary, the midwife often acted as an expert in court: she could be called as a witness in cases of rape, adultery, and the suspected killing of the child. She was credited with the ability to detect "witch signs" on the skin of the suspect, to be able to determine parenthood, and so forth (115). Even though the midwife was vulnerable due to her special knowledge and skills, she managed to coexist not only with civil, but also with religious, authorities. In fact, the Christian church recognized the midwife and her profession and collaborated with

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her. The midwife became an instrument of God's will, as it was her responsibility to baptize a newborn when there was any danger that the baby might die. At the same time, the church tried to exercise control over the midwife, thus avoiding undesirable competition.

Among other topics, Boriak focuses on an interesting phenomenon characteristic of Ukraine, namely the fact that folk midwifery coexisted with official medical obstetric practice until as late as the 1970s. The author explains this phenomenon by Ukrainian history. Ukraine covers a large territory and many villages are isolated. This country has suffered poverty and starvation brought on by war and the miseries of the first years of Soviet rule. It has lived through the famine called the *Holodomor* and it was plagued by a constant lack of professional obstetricians (125). The determined expansion of biomedicine into the countryside that occurred under Soviet rule did not eliminate folk midwifery till 1960-70s. From the folk perspective, birth was not just a physiological act but also consisted of meaningful rituals. Thus, as the author points out, when Soviet authorities made a concerted effort to replace folk midwives with trained obstetricians, a new personage appeared and assumed a ritual role in birth. She was an elderly woman, like the midwife, a *baba*, whose responsibilities included bathing the baby, naming it, organizing the *rodyny*, the ritual welcoming the newborn, and performing other birth-related acts. In other words, she provided the family with the ritual component of birth which was missing in hospital delivery, but was deemed essential for the proper life of any individual.

Describing the roles, both practical and magical, which the midwife performed during her practice, Boriak illustrates them with multiple examples, Ukrainian, Russian, and those drawn from other Slavic peoples. During her "performance" the midwife was literally on the threshold: her job was to receive the baby from the other world and, at the same time, to prevent the new mother from slipping into the otherworldly realm. Boriak sees birth as the moment of radical change: from having no child, to the existence of a child; from there being one person, the woman, to the existence of two persons, the mother and the child; from the birth of the baby to the birth of its 'twin,' meaning the placenta. Although the author describes both the medical and the ritual activities of the midwife, she pays greatest attention to those rituals which occur after actual delivery: rituals connected with the afterbirth, celebrations for the newborn, and ritual visits to the midwife.

Exploring folk beliefs, Boriak analyses the terminology applied to the midwife. The names used for her include *baba*, meaning elderly woman, *baba puporizna*, meaning the one who cuts the umbilical cord, *baba-povytukha*, the one who swaddles, *baba-branka*, the one who takes and also who defends (from the verb *boronyty*), and so forth. As the author argues, these names not only illustrate the functions of the midwife, they also convey the beliefs and traditional worldview of the people. Predicting the newborn's future is among the midwife's functions and this suggests that she has connections to the other world. A midwife could foretell the gender of the baby, its physical health, the length of its life, the circumstances of the baby's death, and so on. She based these predictions on the time of the birth, the way the baby looked and behaved, and other signs. She could also literally see the baby's future if she looked into the house where the delivery was about to take place through the window. The fate predicted by the midwife could not be changed. The polysemantic nature of the terms used for the midwife, her "secret knowledge", and her connection to the other world lead the author to conclude that the midwife was a mythological persona. Boriak then draws parallels between the midwife and pagan goddesses and finds remnants of their divine features in her.

Boriak's book is a comprehensive study of the traditional midwife and of Ukrainian midwifery up until the end of the twentieth century. It is a much needed contribution and fills the gaps in Ukrainian scholarship on this topic. It is highly recommended to those interested in ritual, in folk belief, and in women's roles in traditional culture. Student midwives who are able to read Ukrainian would also benefit from this book.

Maryna Chernyavska
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta
Canada