

The Anthropology of Birth in Russia and Ukraine

The Midwife in Traditional Ukrainian Culture: Ritual, Folklore
and Mythology (1)

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*Starting to do anthropology, no one
knows in advance where it is going*

(Mary T. Douglas)

As is well known, the Bible opens with the Creation and recounts the carefree life of the first two people in Paradise. This blissful state soon comes to an end when Adam and Eve are driven from Paradise. Eve is told: “In pain shall you bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband” (Gen. 3, xvi). “Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord” (Gen. 4, i). An unbroken chain of births followed, a story that mingled joy and sorrow [Stol, Wiggermann 2000: ix]. Such was the beginning of the anthropology of birth.

In this article I shall be drawing upon a database collected in the field over the last few years in the Middle Dnieper region of Ukraine, as well as on archival material. The latter includes the unique notes of the Ukrainian folklorist and ethnologist, Liudmyla Shevchenko (niece of the great Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko) [Boriak 2001b: 42-56], and S. Verkhads'kyi, professional physician and ethnographer. From the 1920's through the 1940's they succeeded in collecting some outstanding material from peasants in various regions of Ukraine, in particular Polissia, famous among ethnologists for the archaic nature of its oral tradition [e.g. Kabakova 2001].

In Ukraine, just as elsewhere, the traditional midwife (*baba* or grandmother) coexisted with those who had received some training. The latter had undergone brief courses, qualifying as licensed nurse midwives, but usually practiced in city regions. Over time obstetrics became a profession and developed its own body of knowledge: Zamois'ka Academy, set up in 1593, was

the first medical faculty to train medical practitioners. After 1702, physicians learnt their knowledge of pregnancy and delivery at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy in a special medical course set up originally by Professor Apanas Maslovs'kyi. At the end of the eighteenth century a medical college opened in L'viv. Its initial director, Andrii Krupyns'kyi was the first to forbid midwives without formal training to attend deliveries.

It was at this period that specialist literature on midwifery appeared, the most famous being the textbook written by M. Ambodik-Maksymovych (1744-1812), a native Ukrainian, who had studied at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy before taking specialized medical courses at the University of Strasbourg and establishing a clinical midwifery institute in St Petersburg. The institute was in fact a brilliant group of male obstetricians; this had been a characteristic phenomenon in medieval Europe. In addition, the name of George Rein, a professor at Kyiv State University should be mentioned. He made efforts to set up special training courses for village midwives. Indeed he was the only professional in the field to realize the pitfalls of the standard policy of avoiding any association with traditional midwives; the latter were seen as socially inferior by physicians. Although the knowledge that physicians possessed was more accurate, they had no systematic way of acquiring the living personal experience and knowledge of the traditional midwife. Thus he called their work “experimental obstetrics,” and he even devised a special questionnaire for gathering information about their work, intended to further research into the practical aspects of birthing.

We know that one of the first formal midwife training programs was set up in 1783 at the obstetrics school in Chernivtsi. In 1803 the first maternity home opened in Kyiv. Later, thanks to the special efforts of adherents of the “zems'kyi” reforms of the 1870's, special schools of midwifery, exclusively for women, were created in all provincial and district centers. The problem with them was their effectiveness. Thus, at the beginning of the twentieth century, according to a report for the Kyiv Zemstvo, only 3.8% of births were assisted by a trained midwife. This situation remained unchanged over the next several decades. According to the records of the First Obstetrical Conference, held in Kyiv in 1927, 90% of Ukrainian women had no professional assistance during delivery. In 1934 the first maternity hospital to be set up on a collective farm opened in the Zhytomyr region.

What then was the reason why 90% of Ukrainian peasant mothers did not receive professional help prior to the mid-twentieth century? The answer lay in the services provided by the midwife or *baba* (grandmother), normally an uneducated old woman, widowed and beyond

child-bearing age, who had usually brought up several children of her own. Many midwives, therefore, had learnt their trade from personal experience, but it was also quite possible for them to be childless. In the latter case, they would claim that they had acquired their knowledge from God. In reality, they probably learned from observing and helping during their neighbors' (or relatives') deliveries or by assisting an established midwife. When serious complications arose, and when it was feasible, village midwives would summon a physician or more experienced midwife.

The word *baba* is an extremely broad notion, represented by several Indo-European roots and by a considerable variety of words in many Indo-European languages. In general, the principal words in this category are applied to female relatives: Slavic *baba* = grandmother, old woman; Lithuanian *boba* = old woman; also Middle High German *bobe* and New England "baby" [Buck 1949: 94]. The variations in the meaning of the word for midwife extend into all Slavic languages, Bulgarian, Serbian, Slovak and Czech in particular. According to Egyptian mythology, the morpheme *ba* expressed one of the elements that made up the human spirit, and denoted soul and life. In Babylonian literature *Bau* (*Baba*) was the goddess of medicine. It is evident, therefore, that the oldest meaning of *baba* is that of an old woman, and this reflects the reality of Ukrainian midwives, given that the "swaddling craft" (*povyval'na sprava*) was only practiced by women beyond child-bearing age, that is, those could no longer fulfill their primary gender role.(2) But the meaning of *baba* is not simply a metaphorical one.

At this point I shall briefly survey the uses of the word. In addition to the meaning just mentioned, I would also like to point to an unusual link with mythological personages, such as the "iron grandmother" (*zalizna baba*) and the "rye grandmother" (*zhytnia, rzhana baba*), whose bogeyman images were used to frighten naughty children. We also have the mythological *baba*, *Sereda* (Wednesday) and *P'iatnytsia* (Friday), who are closely connected with domestic weaving; the personage of the Christmas carol (*koliada*); the figure of the *Baba Iaga* from the magic tale, who is both warrior and kidnapper, and at the same time helper and donor; and finally the "stone image" *baba*, found as ancient anthropomorphic sculptures in the steppe regions, placed by nomads on graves and linked to an ancestor cult. In this context it is interesting to note that in the Polissia region *babka* denotes an ant, and is thus connected with the ancient concept of the incarnation of the human soul in an insect (c.f. butterfly (*babochka*) in Russian, and Polish *baba* meaning "ladybug").

Other significant etymological meanings of the root in Ukrainian connect it with illness (*babytsi*). It is also the name of an ancient autumn funeral feast in Polissia (*baby*), as well as being used in Ukrainian astronomical terminology, where *baby* is a name for the Pleiads and *babyn poias* (grandmother's belt) is a rainbow. It is also the case that *babka* is widely connected symbolically with bread of various kinds: the Easter cake (*paskha*), a special Christmas bread called *baba* and a wheaten loaf (c.f. the ancient Slavic root, *bob-*, meaning “blow” or “bloat”); compare also the name of the dandelion, *kul'baba* in Ukrainian.

The word *baba* was not the only word for a midwife. We can identify more than fifteen, grouped around a number of key concepts: giving birth (*rodyl'na*), delivery (*branka*), the umbilicus (*pupova*, *puptseva*, *pupna*), cutting (*rizna*), swaddling (*spovytukha*, *povyvakha*) and combinations of these terms, such as *baba-branka*, meaning “the one who delivers [the child]” or *puporizna*, “the one who cuts the umbilicus.” All of these words may also be combined with other word groups. When we examine the derivation of some of these terms, it emerges that the Old Russian word *rod* also possesses a range of meanings, including family, clan, birth, generation and grammatical gender. The Indo-European root **ghen-* (to bear), on the other hand, is linked to the Lithuanian word *zembeti* (germination) and Greek *genea* (birth), and the Ukrainian (Belarusian, Russian) word for wife *zhinka* (*zhona*, *zhena*) derives from this stem. Moreover, the semantics of this word include the concepts of the sacred, of divinity and supremacy (compare Common Slavic **gena* with Indo-European **guena*, Old Indian *gna* (goddess) and English “queen”).(3)

When we examine these words, we find that the range of their nuances is extensive. Indo-European **bher*, **bhar* is related to the Old Indian *bharat*, *bibharti*, meaning “to carry”, “to bring” or “to bear” (Irish *brith*, English “bring”). In this context it is interesting to note that the name of the great Irish goddess and saint Bridget derives from **bhrghnti* (> *briginti* > *Brigit/Bridget*). The Sanskrit cognate form *brhati* means “great”, “uplifted”, “high” or “exalted”. Thus, the name of the Brigantes (Brigantia, Briginu), provided it denotes an attribute of the people, most likely means “the exalted, noble or ruling people” [Olmsted 1994: 360]. We should note that Bridget was invoked as the patron saint of childbirth by women in the Hebrides, and revered as the Virgin Mary's midwife [Ross 1967: 361].

The geographical distribution of the terminology for midwife is also extremely significant. The term *baba* (grandmother) was normal in Polissia, where the village culture is known for its extremely archaic features. Throughout the territory on the right bank of the

Dnieper river the most characteristic term was *baba-branka* (grandmother-deliverer), and in the north-western region of Volhyn' also occasionally *puporizna* (cutter of the umbilicus). In eastern Ukraine on the left bank of the Dnieper the midwife was variously termed. The terms mainly derive from *baba* and the word for umbilical cord: *baba-puporizna*, *pupova*, *puporizka*, and locally, *baba, scho v'iaze pupa* (the grandmother who ties the umbilicus) and *porodil'na* (she who attends the birth). In southern Ukraine as in northern Polissia, the most typical term was *baba (babyshka)* [Havryl'i'uk 1981: 68]. As is clear, all of these terms derive from the midwife's functions.

Certainly, during those moments, when a "new" small person, "another," an "unknown" creature emerged, an extraordinary "performance" took place, one that included practical actions, directed towards helping the woman in the birthing process, as well as caring for the newborn child and conducting rites of separation, transition and incorporation. The traditional midwife (*baba*) was the only person who possessed the entire repertoire of essential skills, and consistently performed the relevant ritual actions, as well as uttering the necessary verbal formulae and making predictions about the child's destiny.

Accustomed as we are to late twentieth-century obstetrics with its emphasis on prenatal care, hygienic conditions and medical technology, some of the methods and medication used in old-style childbirth inevitably evoke fascination and horror. There is, of course, the danger of romanticizing the birth experience of earlier generations, which was often painful and dangerous. However, we should bear in mind that, according to official statistics, cases of death in childbirth as a consequence of the ministrations of an unskilful midwife were rare indeed.(4)

It was the husband's duty to summon the midwife. When the midwife went to attend the birth, she brought the tools and equipment common to her craft: implements such as a knife (usually consecrated at the church), a piece of cloth (both linen and hemp) and a swaddling band, along with herbs (both medicinal and symbolic). She also took along a piece, more specifically a crust, of bread and some salt. The midwife might even bring a pot containing cooked kasha (boiled cereal), some dumplings (also stuffed with kasha, potatoes or cottage cheese) and pancakes. There is some evidence to suggest that she might also take these three dishes to the young mother the following day. Sometimes all these dishes were collectively named *var* (boiled foods), meaning dishes that had not been roasted.

One of the features seen as defining the midwife's supernatural powers was the belief that, even before entering the house of the woman in childbirth, she could foretell the future of

the as yet unborn infant. This kind of divination formed the substance of bizarre oral stories about her capacity to “see” details of the child's future life. These short narratives are all formulaic in character, and local to the Middle Dnieper and Polissia regions. They are remarkably similar and tell that, before she went into the house of woman in labor, the *baba* would always look through the window. If she saw either a rope (the symbol of suicide), or a tub with a water (indicating drowning) this would indicate that the life of the child about to be born would end badly. Informants are unanimous in insisting that such predictions were fulfilled. Last year in the Cherkasy region I recorded an amazing folk story about a midwife who had foreseen the poet Taras Shevchenko's destiny before his birth; in the window she saw a banquet with a very intelligent man at the head of the table. This, of course, was Taras Shevchenko. Midwives were also familiar with a specific set of signs, on which they based their predictions about the future of the child shortly to be delivered. Examples of these include the position of child's face in delivery, the timbre of the first cry, the color of the eyes and nails, and so forth.

On entering the house, the midwife went directly to the woman in labor without greeting anyone, although in certain circumstances she could utter the Orthodox Easter formulaic greeting: “Christ is risen!” An analysis of birth techniques employed by the midwife reveals that traditions differ little throughout Ukraine. With each delivery the midwife gained experience, learning through trial and error, and little by little developing more effective ways to comfort women and facilitate birth. She relied upon the birth mother's natural strength and good health, her own experience and knowledge and God's will. That did not prevent her from using herbs, with many using both potions and spells to assist the birthing process. She would force the woman to walk, usually around the table, on each corner of which a small heap of poppy seeds or salt had been placed, or to jump or step (over the door step, a towel, a pair of man's trousers or a shirt, a fire-iron (*kocherga*) or the trough for kneading dough). The midwife then untied every knot and plait on the clothing not only of the woman in labor, but also everyone present. After that, she would open the stove-door, while simultaneously closing the windows and doors of the house, just as the priest might be asked by the midwife to open the holy doors in the iconostasis to facilitate delivery. Other symbolic actions performed by the midwife include blowing into the chimney of the stove, and, in fact, we find that, throughout every stage of delivery and during the postnatal period, the stove with its close connection to ideas about fertility played an important symbolic role.

The woman usually delivered in a kneeling position, especially if the delivery was uncomplicated. This allowed the midwife to catch the child. In Ukrainian, the process of labor and delivery was described in terms of “searching” (*shukaty*) and “catching” (*lovty*) the child. Sometimes the woman would hold on to a towel (or belt) tied to a beam (*svolok*), in which case both squatting and standing positions were possible. Her husband might assist the midwife if the delivery was more difficult. The woman in labor could sit on his lap, and he would help by holding and supporting her, and even by shaking his wife. A husband assisting his wife might be considered a remnant of *couvade* on Ukrainian soil.(5) Lying down, whether on a bed, the earth floor(6) or even the stove, appears to be a later tradition, influenced by the obstetrical practices of licensed midwives.(7) If necessary, the midwife could even alter the position of the baby or help it with her hands. If the placenta was not expelled by itself, the belly was massaged, and if that did not help, the placenta was removed by hand.

Properly speaking, the rites of “separation” of the child from its mother began with the infant’s first cry. Once the child had been safely delivered, he or she was carefully inspected by the midwife. If the infant appeared not to be crying, or crying only feebly, she tried to blow the “divine spirit” into it. If that did not help, she would call him by his father’s name, if he was a boy, and, if a girl, by her mother’s, adding the extra syllable “hu” to differentiate the child from the parent. Thus, the son of Peter would be summoned by the formula: “Petro-hu.” The next step was to sever the umbilical cord with a knife (tradition strongly forbade the mother from doing this herself, the explanation being that “in the world above she wouldn’t get to see her child.”) Hence the midwife was the only person allowed to cut the umbilical cord. In the Pokuttia region, the *babka* turned the baby upside down, and tapped its little feet three times against the central beam in the ceiling. The midwife’s final act was to take the soft part of a piece of bread and to wipe the body of the newborn dry. In certain areas, the umbilical cord with drops of blood still on it was used instead of the crust of bread.

Then the midwife dealt with the placenta. She washed it, wrapped it in a piece of cloth (or placed it in a pot) and buried it together with some money, bread, a small quantity of salt and sometimes also some grain. There is some evidence that the midwife buried it in the ground together with a hen and a rooster. Sometimes she would sprinkle grains of rye over the new mother and infant, as well as over the placenta. The custom of burying the placenta was explained by the need to protect the child and its mother. There was a belief, that if the midwife buried the afterbirth under the doorstep, it could make a woman sterile (the same fate awaited the

young mother if the umbilical cord was tied by the midwife with male, rather than female, hemp).(8) By analyzing the appearance of the placenta the midwife could predict the number of additional children the new mother would bear, yet another manifestation of her role as prophet. Finally, she buried the placenta in a special, “marked out” place, either inside the house (not far from the stove, under the holy corner (*pokut*) or under the sleeping area (*pil*)),(9) or outside under a fruit tree, especially a cherry. Sometimes placentas could be buried under the barn floor or the outhouse floor, but never where people might walk on it.

The severing of the umbilical cord and the expulsion of the placenta marked the stage of separation. At the next stage, transition, both mother and child required the assistance of the midwife yet again. What traditional midwives did to the child at this stage reveals that the newborn’s body, even after delivery, was perceived as a flexible, malleable object, perhaps something like woven cloth,(10) rather than the inflexible unit that obstetrical science takes the body to be. The midwife actually shaped and molded what was perceived as the formless, amorphous mass that was the infant’s body. The specific actions performed by the midwife included: rubbing and then pulling on the small infant's hands and feet, pressing on the top of his or her head, pressing on his chin, pulling the nose and so on. All of these actions are all associated with the idea of forming (or sometimes even changing) an infant's external appearance, its body matrix, and simultaneously perfecting and strengthening its status as a human being. It is worth noting that special attention was paid to the infant's eyes (this action continued the day after the baptismal ceremony, and is called “peeling open the eyes” (*ochedyryny*)).

The next steps were to bathe and then tightly swaddle the child's' body with the swaddling-cloth. The items most commonly used for this were an old man's shirt, the midwife's skirt or sometimes a man's trousers or a woman’s chemise. Once the infant had been wrapped in the swaddling clothes, he or she was tied with the swaddling-band. The band was typically a belt which had already been used by someone, and, in some cases, it might be supplied by the midwife. These actions served to consolidate all the ritual acts that had gone before. The custom of thanking the midwife at the baptismal party by giving her money while saying the formulaic expression *na spovyvach* (this is to pay for the swaddling band) is a well-known one.

When the midwife completed this list of duties aimed at ensuring the medical and psychological needs of the infant and the young mother, her role as an active member of the birth process was over. Still, her involvement in the life of the child and the mother continued

and an examination of her functions in the postnatal period can help elucidate her ritual significance and reveal some of the mythological ideas and folk beliefs underlying her ritual role.

The midwife's first actions after the birth, such as using old, second-hand clothes for swaddling, for example, were steps in the process of adapting the newborn and helping him or her fit into the human world. We may add to the list of her activities the “naming” ceremony, through which the new child becomes a separate person and a member of a social group. In the whole of the area on the right bank of the Dnieper the custom of “name receiving” (*otrymaty im'ia*) was well known. It was the midwife who visited the priest immediately after the delivery for precisely this purpose. An interesting practice of exchanging or selling infants' names is attested. The priest received a compulsory gift (usually a chicken together with some bread and millet), and the midwife in return “received” the name, which was registered officially later at the baptism ceremony. It is well worth noting that the midwife was entitled to baptize the infant in the first minutes of life if the child's life was in danger. This procedure was called “baptizing with water” (*khrestyty z vody*). In such cases the midwife gave the infant its name herself, usually Eve for a girl and Adam for a boy (though sometimes the names would be Ivan and Maria). The church would then recognize the procedure as a true baptism, so that the infant would not die unbaptized.

Once childbearing as an act of commencement of a new life had taken place, food and drink were the first consideration. The first postnatal party, known as *rodyny*, was an exclusively female gathering in which the midwife always participated. The next ritual meal was part of the baptismal ceremony, and was held between thirty and forty days after the birth. And finally, a special ceremony, attested throughout Ukraine, was usually held during the Christmas holidays and which was aimed specifically at honoring the midwife.

All these ritualized meals related to childbearing were, at the same time, an extension of the acts of “incorporation” performed by the midwife. Of particular interest is the Polissian rite known as *babyna kasha* (midwife's kasha).⁽¹¹⁾ At home the midwife would cook up some stiff kasha, usually out of millet, milk, eggs and fat, which she then took to the new mother. From the Kyivan part of Polissia comes a very interesting detail; before entering the mother's house with the kasha, the midwife sought permission with the words: “I am from a far-off land, permit me to spend the night here” [Hovirky 1996: 71]. This striking example of the connection between the image of the midwife and a traveler illustrates the midwife's

acknowledgement of her own liminality. At the end of the meal, the midwife put the pot with the *babyna* kasha on the table. Sometimes she decorated it with a “flower” (see below), or covered it with a kerchief, bread and salt. The culmination of this rite was the smashing of the pot to smithereens. The pot was to be smashed in such a way that the kasha remained intact. The godfather was the person called upon to break the kasha pot and he did it usually after the guests had thrown some money onto a special plate. Before the pot was broken, he sliced off the top of the kasha and gave it to the young mother, along with the money. Similar actions attested in other parts of Ukraine include the smashing of a pie, *babyn pyrig* (“grandmother's” pie). The midwife spread the pie with honey, broke it to pieces, and distributed it to all the women present at the festive meal. All these actions were accompanied by formulaic wishes, blessing the new mother and motherhood in general. After the expression of good wishes, those present took a piece of kasha, put it on a piece of the broken pot or wrapped it in an apron, and took it home to give to their children to ensure their health and future growth. In northeastern Ukraine the custom existed of making kasha from milk and millet, and then offering it to the guests at the very beginning of the special meal. This may well be the simplest form of *babyna* kasha as a ritual dish.

The ceremony of *babyna kasha* was regularly followed by another ritual: “driving out the midwife's kasha.” When the baptismal party had ended, or on the next day, it was customary to seat the midwife on a harrow, or, when there was snow, on a sledge, and pull her through the village to the tavern (*korchma*). There she would cover the table with a gift of a piece of linen or a kerchief, on which a bottle of vodka had been placed. This ceremony ended with the participants all together lifting up the midwife with their hands, or on a chair, and shouting hurrah. The custom is appropriately known as “raising the midwife with a ‘Hurrah’!” In another variant the midwife was deliberately thrown into a pool, pond or snowdrift, depending on the season and the weather.

The flower rite (*obriad z kvitkoiu*), another aspect of the midwife’s role, was performed during baptism ceremonies all over the huge area on the right bank of the Dnieper. Before attending the baptismal meal, the midwife made up a bouquet of flowers. The word “bouquet” is something of a misnomer, because it was usually only a bunch of guelder-rose or ears of wheat or rye. The bouquet could also be made of different herbs, such as mint, myrtle, lovage and garden flowers like French marigolds. In areas near Kyiv, it was customary to decorate the pot containing the *babyna kasha*, on which a *kalach* (a round flat bread, often with a hole in the

middle) had been placed, with this special “flower.” The “flower” rite existed in numerous variants. The midwife gave a “flower” gift, either the “flower” alone or the “flower” plus a *kalach* or pies, to the child's godparents, or to all those present, while uttering the special formulaic wish: “The number of flowers indicates the number of children.” An expanded version also included dipping the “flower” into plates containing holy water or red wine, before lightly sprinkling the drops onto the faces of the mothers and children present [Havryl'i'uk 1981: 152-53]. I should also mention that it was considered vital to take the “flower” home after the baptismal meal; the “flower” could not be thrown away. The baptismal “flower” was then used in domestic medicinal practice. The midwife also made a special presentation of the “flower” to any childless woman. There was a belief that, if, on the way home from a baptismal meal, you met the Mother of God, who asked where you had been, you had to show her a “flower” [Havryl'i'uk 1981: 168]. I suggest that the ritual use of the “flower” may distantly reflect ancient beliefs, connected with the cult of a female goddess. The image of the latter (usually depicted with flowers) has numerous parallels in other cultures; the goddesses of life and fertility, Demeter, Persephone and Zhyva (a West Slav deity) are often decked in flowers.

After the delivery both the new mother and her helper typically washed their hands, at times also their arms up to the shoulders and feet to the knees. Hence this rite is also known as “water-pouring” (*zlyvky*) or “water-bathing” (*obmyvannia*).⁽¹²⁾ This ritual cleansing did not occur at a specific point after delivery. It could be performed immediately after delivery, but in the majority of cases the ceremony formed a distinct part of either the *rodny* or childbirth party, or the baptism. It could be performed on the second, third, seventh, ninth, or fortieth day after the birth of child, all of these being considered special time periods. Whenever it was performed, the ritual was obligatory because “the midwife had bloody hands” and needed to be purified. In some villages, she was even forbidden from attending a different pregnant woman until she had ritually cleansed her hands together with her previous client [Havryl'i'uk 1981: 89-114].

While in the territory on the right bank of the Dnieper it is the midwife who is “cleansed,” in the Middle Dnieper area, and further south in the Azov region, including Donetsk and Luhansk, it is the new mother who undergoes this procedure. Mutual “cleansing” of midwife and young mother is characteristic of the southern part of the Middle Dnieper area and the central Slobozhanshchina region in eastern Ukraine. This ritual action requires some clarification. The idea of washing the midwife's hands is comprehensible, as is the mutual cleansing of the hands of

both mother and midwife. Childbirth might not seem as impure as death, but birth is still about blood, whether on the child, the afterbirth or from the cutting of the umbilical cord. The birth of new life can certainly be considered polluting. What is particularly relevant to the argument here is that the person who undergoes ritual cleansing is not the newborn, but another involved in the birth, either the mother or the midwife. The phenomenon of displacing uncleanness onto another, specifically someone already as loaded with ritual potency as the midwife, allows her to assume even greater mythic meaning.(13)

At this point we should consider the relevance of Aristotle's idea that a woman's blood flows like that of an animal that been stabbed, evidently taken from Hypocrites, where female blood, and the blood of childbirth in particular, is compared to the blood of sacrificial victims, hot, red, quick and coagulating [Duby and Perrot 1992: 469]. In this context it should be noted that in Polissia, where the purification ritual of the midwife washing her hands with water does not exist, we find instead the ritual of bringing the midwife *pyrohy*, or pies, at Christmas. In this area, there is a belief that the midwife must receive a gift of food at Christmas from the women whose babies she had delivered, or else she will be tied to a post (or a cross) until her "granddaughter," meaning her client, brings her pies. It is significant that in some areas the explanation for the washing ritual is virtually identical, namely that the midwife will be tied to a post or a cross until this ritual has been performed. [Havryl'i'uk 1989: 29]. The root of these beliefs leads back to the idea of sacrifice, since the idea of a midwife being tied to a post made her seem like an animal about to be sacrificed and the distribution of food and ritual washing are also elements in sacrifice rites.

In those areas where the cleansing ceremony is performed, the midwife makes special preparations for it by baking pies and cooking some kasha. She then takes these, along with a bottle of vodka, to the house of her "granddaughter." Here, "granddaughter" means the woman whom she had assisted in childbirth. In some cases the midwife only took kasha. Among other dishes sometimes prepared by the midwife for this occasion was fruit compote (*uzvar*), an obligatory ritual dish on Christmas Eve, together with *kuttia* and brandied fruits (*varenuksa*), prepared by stewing fruit with honey and alcohol, though in the second half of the nineteenth century *varenuksa* was replaced by vodka. Sometimes the midwife regaled those present with these dishes at the end of the meal.

The "cleansing" ceremony was accompanied by a special formulaic dialogue containing the idea of an apology: "Excuse me, grandmother," to which the midwife replied: "And you

forgive me for shedding your blood.” The water that was used for the cleansing ceremony was usually holy water or so-called “untouched” water (*nepochata voda*) and, if any was left over after the “cleansing” had been completed, it could not be thrown away but had to be poured under the stove inside the house. In all cases the ritual ended with the midwife receiving a gift of linen and loaves of bread. In the central Dnieper region, after the cleansing of both midwife and new mother, the latter presented her “delivery assistant” with no less than seven (!) round loaves of white bread.

One further significant custom is unique to Slobozhanshchina. Usually it was enacted together with the “cleansing” ceremony and was called “leading to paradise” (*vesty v rai*). The core element in this rite consists in the following: the midwife took the young mother, who was carrying her child, by the hand (sometimes they held onto a towel), and led her round the table three times. In answer to the traditional question from those present: “Where are you going?” the midwife would say: “To paradise.” Someone would then say: “Take us with you.”(14) We may compare this to the ancient custom of walking around the altar (or, variously, a sacrificial post or table), which was also performed for reasons of purification.

The last event in the postnatal chain of ritual actions where the midwife played a key role was the custom of bringing her pies (*nosyty babi pyrohy*) at Christmas. The Ukrainians, unlike the Bulgarians, did not have a special Midwife’s Day (*Babinden*). Nevertheless, the custom of honoring the midwife was widespread. It most often coincided with Christmas Eve, though sometimes it could occur on the following two days. Alternatively, the new mother would honor the midwife nine or forty days, or six months after her delivery. The “honoring” consisted of the “granddaughter” bringing the midwife a gift of food, usually a fixed number of pies (three, seven or nine).(15) The “grandmother” accepted them and in exchange gave the young mother a food gift. Sometimes she organized a meal for “new” mothers, that is those who had given birth during the previous year, as well as for “old” mothers.(16) This Christmas pie exchange was the final element in the rituals associated with the midwife.

It is now time to draw some preliminary conclusions. There is no doubt that the midwife's role was marked by a number of rituals. She was an active person, putting into practice and preserving her professional knowledge, which we might like to term popular preventative medicine. At the same time she played the prime role in incorporating the newborn into his or her new family and community. The wide variety of acts she performed also affirms her status as defender and guarantor of the future of mother and child alike. Simultaneously, she acted as the

line of communication between all the actors: the unborn child, the new mother, the new father, the godparents and the community as a whole.

Amongst the wide-ranging possibilities for interpreting the ethnological data, I propose focussing on just a few. In the first instance we should direct our attention to elements relating to sacrifice. Overall, there is a dearth of evidence about sacrifice among the Slavs. In Sreznevskii's dictionary of Old Russian, which quotes from a wide range of written texts, we find the following, taken from a sixteenth-century copy of a popular florilegium, the Tsvetnik: "grandmothers (*baby*) cooked kasha for the gathering of *rozhanitsy*" (here meaning "goddesses of birth"). The textual evidence of the Tsvetnik implies that the cooking of kasha relates to the ritual worship of the goddesses [Sreznevskii 1903: 3, col. 141 s.v. *rozhanitsa*].

The modern data about midwives tends to confirm the suggestion that the archaic rite mentioned by Sreznevskii was essentially the performance of a sacred ceremony containing traces of sacrifice. Without the rite there was no sacrifice, and, vice versa, without the sacrifice there was no rite. Traditional Ukrainian village customs contain only survivals, traces, symbols and codes of ancient sacrifice. The folklore about midwives affirms that such traces do still exist, when we realize that their attributes were identical to those presented at animal sacrifices in ancient times: a knife (also an ax) which lets blood and, therefore, is equivalent to the tools for shedding blood in sacrifices;(17) an altar/post (and a table which possesses very strong analogies with the altar); a vessel for washing the hands; a pot containing boiled cereal; boiled rather than roasted dishes, ribbons and garlands as attributes of the sacrificial animal; the pot containing offerings covered with a cloth; the act of bringing the dishes to a "banquet" and their subsequent exchange, and even communal feasting.(18) It is also worth noting that priests received offerings of sacrificial cakes or loaves and pies, prepared at home and brought to the sanctuary [Van Straten 1995: 155]. They were gifts for the god. These close parallels indicate that the feast upon the birth of a child may be considered a relic of the sacrifice ceremony. In this respect note, too, a striking linguistic link where the same root appears in the three concepts, victim/guzzle/priest: *zhertva/zherty/zhrets*. From the features of Ukrainian birth customs listed above that show sacrificial elements, it would appear that there was no separate practice of sacrifice among the Slavs because the ideas and elements of sacrifice became associated with birth, birth rituals and the midwife.

We should also take into account that certain goddesses were sporadically worshipped as child nourishers throughout the ancient civilized world, in Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Egypt, Africa

and elsewhere. In Greece, Gaia and Demeter were particularly worshipped as child nourishers, the *Kourotrophoi*. There is no doubt that there existed a personification of the mother and/or nursing principle, and that special cults, rites and offerings were associated with this principle.(19) But it may be asked, whether and to what extent the same can be true for the Slavic world.

It is known that the Slavs established states virtually at the same time they adopted Christianity, thus negating the possibility of preserving what might otherwise have been “national” mythological traditions. The peculiarity of Slavic mythology, as a consequence, consists in the predominance of ritual and customs over narrative myth. The mythological layers of pre-Slavic culture were destroyed, and all we have are mythological elements filtered through Christianity. In the first volume of his *History of Ukraine-Rusy* Hrushevsky noted the dearth of goddesses in the Slavic pantheon, declaring the alleged existence of “all manner of *Vesny, Lady, Morany* (to be) based on dubious sources, (including) even *Zhiva...*” (the female deity of West Slav mythology, who embodied the life force) [Hrushevsky 1991: 320],.

It has also been suggested that *Rod* and *rozhanitsy* were distinct personages in Slavic mythology. The main source of our evidence is a homiletic work fulminating against pagan superstition, composed sometime between the eleventh and early fourteenth centuries in Rus’, and largely based on one of Gregory the Theologian’s sermons. In it mention is made of the meal dedicated to Rod and the *rozhanitsy*, for which “bread, cheese and honeycomb were cut” [Hrushevsky 1993: 225]. Over the last two centuries scholars have variously considered these figures either deities of fertility and ancestral protection (Shepping), or embodiments of Fate (*Divy Doli*) (Afanas’ev), or else ancestral spirits (Solov’ev, Kliuchevskii). Hrushevsky put forward the idea that the features of the Mother of the tribe and the goddess of Destiny (*parki*) were combined in this image. Rybakov considered that Rod was the supreme deity. None of these theories, however, attempts to link the *rozhanitsy* to the mythological image of the *baba*, the old-style village midwife.

In advancing this thesis here I offer the following summary of the supporting evidence, which is based on the following attributes of the midwife: a) the swaddling-band (sometimes made by her, this being reflected in the term *spovytkha*); b) the knife (she would bring the mother in labor a knife that had been blessed, this being reflected in the term *baba-rizna*); c) a pot with kasha (cooked and decorated by her and brought to the young mother); d) the flowers (picked by herself, brought to the young mother's house and distributed among those present). There is separate evidence that a flower was a specific “emblem” of the midwife; e) hemp (and

thread, linen or cloth). The argument is also based on the offerings to the midwife that had great symbolic significance: a) the bread (pies and the twisted bread *kalach*); b) the linen/towel (and cloth); c) the evening supper (sometimes held on the dates traditional for funeral ceremonies).

It is clear, moreover, that the image of the midwife attains its special mythological status also through her wide range of functions and ritual actions (as well as the motivation for them), in particular: a) the divination of the infant's future; b) the ritual of "leading to paradise" (*vesty v rai*), an example of a rite of passage, and simultaneously one of the forms of the cleansing ceremony; c) "the washing of the midwife's hands" (and "the bringing of pies to the midwife"), which emphasized her liminal status; d) the custom of "taking the midwife for a ride," for which the midwife must pay by giving something in return (here I am inclined to see the transformation of the funeral ritual of "seeing someone off to the Other World" (*provody na tot svit*)); e) the annual honoring and even worship of the midwife on specific dates (Christmas Eve, Christmas itself - "the bringing of pies to the midwife" - honoring "those who bring life." We should also remember the terminology and meanings discussed above.

There is certainly enough evidence to allow us to view the image of the midwife, with its clear code of attributes, symbols of fertility and possession of supernatural features, as a relic of the pre-Slavic, pre-Christian, pagan era. With this in mind, we may accept the view that the midwife's ancient pagan image was transformed into some of the features of a pagan goddess, some of whose names have been preserved in historical sources: the Great Mother, the *Rozhanytsi* and, later, *Mokosh*.

The folkloric and ethnographic data connected with the traditional personage of the *baba* awaits further systematization and interpretation. The midwife, who was the only person who both "enacted" and round whom childbirth rituals revolved, seems to offer a key to the obscure area of Slavic mythology.

NOTES

- 1 This article has been prepared with the support of the US State Department's Fulbright Program. I am also deeply indebted to my mentor Natalie Kononenko, Professor in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Virginia for her encouragement and support.
- 2 There was a belief that if a midwife was menstruating while assisting a delivery, any child she delivered would be "scrofulous." If she bore a child herself, she would become an

object of derision on the part of the whole village, and villagers would term that child a mute [Archive of the Institute for Arts Studies, Folklore and Ethnology, Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences (IASFE), f. 14-3, 452, fol. 32]. Interestingly, the same nickname was given to a child who died before being baptized. According to oral tradition, the devil asked God to give him the soul of an unmarried girl who was not a virgin. God refused, and instead gave the devil the soul of a midwife's child.

- 3 The first mention of the word midwife in English dates from 1303. Some scholars are inclined to explain its meaning as connected with the idea of assisting (it is suggested that “mid” = “with,” so “with-wife,” someone with a woman during childbirth [Rooks 1997: 3]. Others have suggested it means wise woman (in Hebrew and Aramaic we have the word *h kama* meaning “the wise one,” while the Babylonian maternal goddess, Mama is called *eristu*, a literary word meaning “wise” [Stol, Wiggermann 2000: 171-72]. In a direct parallel we have French *sage-femme*, which likewise means “wise” or “good woman”). The Danish term for “midwife” is *jordmoder*, “earth-mother,” and in Jewish tradition the old midwife is called *bubbeh* (Yiddish for “granny”) [Klein 1998: 101].
- 4 The special official annual report by the Governor-General of Kiev, Volhynia, and Podillia notes only a single incidence of child mortality as a consequence of a midwife’s incompetence [Boriak 2001: 57].
- 5 In 1928 a folk narrative about a husband helping his wife in childbirth was recorded in the Poltava region. The husband agreed to participate on condition the child was a boy. On the midwife’s orders he climbed into the loft and made a hole in the ceiling. The *baba* then took a rope, tied one end of it to, as the story puts it, the man’s “great wisdom” (i.e. his penis), and gave the other to his wife “to amuse herself.” When her labor pains intensified, the woman pulled on the rope. Her husband, bathed in sweat, just kept groaning. After his role was finished he could not do anything except sit and look at his legs. When the midwife informed him that he at last had a baby son, he sighed heavily, and said, “So that’s why giving birth is so difficult!” [Archive IASFE, f. 1-5, 418, fol. 73-74].
- 6 One of the folksongs, sung at baptismal parties includes the following words: “Glorious God, Glorious on Earth, the women who were lying-in slid down from their sleeping place onto the earth” [Archive IASFE, F.1-5, 420, fol. 116].
- 7 According to legend, it was Louis XIV who insisted women in labor should lie flat, a position that gave him the best view of the birth of his own children.

- 8 Hemp grows as male and female plants, which look quite different, the female being much bushier. The flowers of the female plant have to be fertilized by pollen from the male plant in order for seeds to be produced
- 9 The professional physician and ethnologist, S. Verkhvads'kyi noted that up to fifty afterbirths had been buried under the earth floor of peasant houses he had seen. If we take into consideration that the folk name for the placenta was “nest” (*hnizdo*), then each house, with its buried placentas, genuinely symbolized the ancestral nest [Boriak 2000: 453].
- 10 According to fieldwork data, collected in the Cherkasy region, the midwife would ask for a bunch of hemp to be put into her coffin after death (compare this with the local tradition of presenting the midwife with a bunch of hemp at the baptismal party). In Ukraine a hank of combed but unspun hemp is given to mark new beginnings, because it is seen as unformed, but full of potential. Furthermore, the idea of a close connection between childbirth and weaving (hemp was woven into cloth) is echoed in other ethnic traditions. For example, in Andean culture, midwives' terminology for certain massage techniques includes the concepts of “braiding” and “twisting” the body. (My gratitude to Denise Arnold for kindly giving me this information). Carvings depicting votive offerings to the goddess quite often show a large spinning wheel.
- 11 The custom was also widespread in Russia, Belarus and the Baltic States.
- 12 In northern India the midwife was known as *dak' dul bu* [unknown] *dhi*, meaning the “water-pouring old women” [Culshaw 1949: 124].
- 13 Amongst numerous parallels in other ethnic traditions note that in an ancient Babylonian text of an incantation, a woman lying-in is termed “taboo” or “dirty” (*musukkatu*), indicating that she was considered polluting. This may be concluded from various passages where a woman who had given birth would bathe herself or wash her hands [Stol and Wiggermann 2000: 205].
- 14 One more parallel from the ancient Greek world may be mentioned here: on the fifth day after the birth, the *amphidromia* took place, during which the child was ceremoniously carried around the hearth in the house. The same day a ceremony of purification for those present at the birth was held [Dillon 2002: 254].
- 15 In Ukraine young mothers were called “granddaughters,” and the children the midwife had delivered were also called her “grandsons” and “granddaughters.”

- 16 In this context it is interesting to note that various ceremonies were associated in Athens with the birth of a child: notably the *amphidromia* on the fifth day, and the so-called “seventh-day festival” on the seventh, about which little is known. During the *dekate* (tenth-day) ceremony it was the father's duty to give his child a name. Celebrations then followed. It was also the occasion for a *pannychis*, an all-night festival, at the core of which lay a sacrifice ceremony as a kind of thanksgiving for the birth of a child. Such celebrations thanked the gods for the safe delivery of the child and his or her survival over the first difficult days. Women played a prominent role in this event. In the Euboulos play at the tenth-day feast in honor of the child they were called upon to dance all night long, and prizes of ribbons and apples, or, *nota bene*, cakes and loaves, were on offer. It would appear that women celebrated the *dekate* separately and differently from men [Dillon 2002: 233].
- 17 Note, however, that the goddess also used a knife to cut a few hairs from the bull’s forehead, subsequently throwing them onto the fire, something that may be compared to the ritual of cutting a child's hair at the party to celebrate his or her first birthday [Havryl'i'uk 1986: 217].
- 18 The evidence about animal sacrifice comes from all over the ancient Greek world, from Kerkyra to the Greek cities of Asia Minor, and from Rhodes to the northern shores of the Black Sea. It dates from the end of the seventh century to the end of the fourth century BC. Vase paintings (dated to the sixth and fifth centuries BC) and votive reliefs (dated fourth century) are the main sources of evidence.
- 19 For example, ancient evidence about Saami culture from Sweden and Finland in particular includes data about the goddess Akko “Grandmother” or Akka “the old woman.” In southern Lapland their names were used for four different female divinities (according to missionary accounts). First we have Madder-akka, who made the bodies of all unborn children in her womb, and then handed over the child (now provided with both a body and a soul) to her daughter Sarakka (or Sarak). Sarakka was a kind of universal midwife. She had two sisters: Uks-akka, who dwelt under the tent door (*uksa* means “door”), and Juks-akk (*juks* is assumed to come from *juoksa*, “bow”). The function of Uks-akka was to keep the baby from falling down and hurting itself in the tent, whereas Juks-akka had the faculty of changing girls into boys in their mother's womb. When a child was born, Sarakka boiled cereal was eaten in honor of the divine midwife [Collinder 1949: 169].

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