

## TRADITION AND MODERNITY, EXISTENTIAL PATTERNS

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**Abstract.** *Traditionally, life had its sense, structures and patterns. But how about today, in the era of modernity? Science offers solutions for the numerous problems contemporary life poses, it prolongues the average life expectancy, heals diseases etc. But does it also offers a "universal" existential pattern, common and beneficial to all members of the community, as the ancestral pattern used to do?*

**Key words:** *tradition, modernity, existential patterns.*

### INTRODUCTION

The traditional village was a closed, self-sufficient world, with relatively accidental and “poor” relations with the outside. That is to say it acted as a viable existential model, in which entropy was only represented by death, and even this only temporarily. We imagined such a model, with applications in all fundamental elements of a person’s life: death, birth, and marriage.

Thus, the moment when the dead person leaves the consecrated area represents a rupture in the day-to-day life of the community; this event, however, does not contain the tragedy that death carries in modern societies. For the members of archaic (traditional, primitive, folk, etc.) societies, regret is focused on the disappearance of the one who travelled away from this **first area of existence (The world on this side)**. The closed circle of the self-sufficient life opens to allow one member of society to move into another plane of existence, death being imagined as an alienation from the old way of life. The reason for grief is sentimental, and not existential: people mourn the loss of someone dear, the temporary separation.

Nevertheless, the entropic moment is short: balance will be reinstated eventually, through a complex set of specialized rituals. The collectivity has deep respect for fulfilling man’s destiny on this earth; it cannot let the one who has set out on the great journey remain **unwed**, because such a departure would really and completely unbalance the natural order of things.

Being unwed when taken by death is said to be one of the reasons why dead people’s souls cannot rest and might get back to this world as evil spirits.

One steadfast duty of individuals in society is to settle down and to produce offspring who will strengthen, enrich and enlarge the collectivity. If, for whatever reason (sudden death, calamity, war, etc.), the dearly departed did not perform this duty to society, for them death becomes a symbolic wedding, and all the rituals are set in this direction. One of the most evocative rituals in this sense is the presence of the fir tree during the funeral. By dying, the unwed youth creates a break, a disruption of the order of things for the entire collectivity. The

soul of the one who did not find fulfilment in this world would disturb the peace of the ones left behind. That is why they are symbolically assigned a bride or groom in the fir tree. The latter is cut off from the forest during a ritualistic procession, and then, after joining the dead person on his or her way to the resting place, it is buried at the head of the deceased. The ritualistic metaphor has multiple and yet very clear meanings.

Therefore, we must acknowledge once more the huge role that the institution of marriage used to play in archaic and traditional societies. In Romanian folk culture, marriage is marked by complex manifestations, mixing elements of economy, law, ritual and folklore. On this occasion, the new family, meant to contribute to the biological and social perpetuation of the nation, becomes the centre of interest of the entire collectivity. In folk culture, the wedding is not marked merely by elements pertaining to law and economy, but especially by ritual and ceremony: "Ritual acts are meant to shelter the new family from evil spirits and at the same time bring abundance, prosperity, and happiness in their lives, while integrating it into the social life of the entire community. The three categories of acts that made the foundation of marriage in its traditional folk variant were marked by rituals and were materialized in a series of folklore manifestations including poems, songs, dances, as well as mimic and dramatic manifestations. Some of the acts of folklore that were part of the wedding customs appeared only in weddings and were ritualistic in nature." (POP, M.: 1991).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the most important rituals is the **ritual that accompanies birth**. Besides interdictions, indications or rules that had to be followed starting when the woman was still pregnant, there were also a set of propitiative rites, ending in gifts and good wishes, as well as various prophylactic acts.

The first to greet the baby was the midwife, immediately after the baby was born. She would make good wishes every time the new-born was doing an action for the first time. Prophylactic acts were performed every time the mother or her baby had to be defended against hostile forces. They differed from one case to another, depending on which evil spirit had to be chased away – the spirit made its presence known through various diseases or ailments that had to be cured. Traditionally, among the customs related to birth, the essential moments were linked to purification, consecration in the new state and good wishes, i.e. propitiation. The belief in fairy godmothers is of utmost importance in birth-related rituals. There are three (sometimes seven or nine, but most often three) fairies, each with her specific tasks. Although apparently this is an old belief with origins in the Roman Pantheon, the practices related to deciding a baby's fate seem to be much older. Thus, ritualistic and magical practices require a table to be set (the night the baby came into this world) especially for the three fairy godmothers.

If not offered the traditional meal, the fairies would design an evil, hostile, unfriendly destiny. The importance given to the new-born baby starts from ancient myths of origin, according to which the world, the universe even, was born just like a baby.

In a traditional view, the fundamental duties of man on this earth are therefore birth, marriage and death. But how could someone die without first being born? In the traditional-Christian universe, the children who die without having been christened are the most vulnerable from this point of view. So, when they are buried (usually in one corner of the graveyard), they are given a special mass, to soothe their souls which are not protected by the divine. The sequence is perfectly illustrated in the fairy tale *Tinerețe fără bătrânețe și viață*

*fără de moarte [Youth without old age and life without death]*, when, after repeated failed attempts, the Emperor promises his son (who, as we may remember, has not yet been born) that he will enjoy youth without growing old and that his life will never end. And the baby becomes quiet and gets born (stillborn, we would say, because exactly the shouting, the crying that announces the arrival of a new human being on this earth is missing here). Besides, in our opinion, the whole procession that joins the young man on his long journey is nothing but the act of accompanying the deceased (at one point the court, the people, the Emperor himself have to go back, because they cannot follow the young man any further).

Returning to the idea of death as a temporary entropic element: once the departure of the deceased is prepared, depending on the reality that they are leaving behind, they will be the “beneficiaries” of a long series of initiatory trials (EPEB = External Practices for Ensuring Balance), or, in other words, IR = Initiatory Rituals.

Thus, on the one hand, the departed has to follow the natural way, the straight road that links one realm to the other; this is the duty and the destiny of all people. On the other hand, the deceased is a messenger between the two planes of existence: *‘cause there are two paths ahead / hard to know which one is best.*” Just like in the fairy tale, the traveller through the “World with no woe” has several possible ways to choose from. We named them OPW, i.e. other possible ways. The soul of the deceased is **taught (initiated)** which road to pick, not to lose its Way (as mentioned before in another context, that would endanger the peace of mind of the others, because in that case the soul would come back as an evil spirit): *Ask them nicely, / Speak to them politely, / with beautiful words, / That you were taught at home. / They will guide you / On the right path / Not to stray.* Choosing the wrong path means implicitly getting lost for good from the right path; on the other hand, a good choice takes them straight into “heaven”, into the Other World, where their relatives are waiting: *On a long road, / Sown with weeds / you will find / only locked gates / and empty houses, / But if you choose straight, / Good will come your way: / Unlocked gates, / Tables loaded, / Torches lit, / along the clearing.*

The fir tree has multiple and complex connotations in Romanian folklore. It accompanies people when they get married (the bride and groom’s tree), but also when they are buried (the tree of the deceased). Present in the funeral ritual, it is also evoked in the initiatory journey of “dalb de pribeag” (the term of endearment used for the deceased), helping the soul pass from one bank to the other of the big river that separates the two worlds: *Fir tree, brother fir tree/ Let your branches down, closer to the earth/ So that I can reach out and grab them/ To climb to the top.*

Once he reaches the other realm, the traveller is “invited” to join his relatives, the long line of ancestors from the beginning of time. The circle closes there and the journey comes to an end: *There, in the sun,/ In the big big house/ with a roof and eaves all around/ Gather everybody/ And look at them closely/ Maybe you can find mine, too.*

As for the modern society, everything is changed. Firstly, people are no longer **believers**. We have to say that the model presented above (very sketchy, for reasons that are easy to understand) includes few Christian motifs. **The World on the other side** is neither identical nor identified as the **Christian heaven**, which certifies once more that Christian elements appeared in traditional culture much later, when the mental, cultural and traditional model was already set. Because of the similarities with Christian beliefs, the two systems have melted into each other, becoming one. But, naturally, this makes the subject for another discussion. What is of interest to us for the purpose of this paper is the deep atheism of our contemporaries. Almost nobody believes in anything anymore. And yet, is it so? Paraphrasing

Eminescu's words, is there a better time and place to ask, especially now: **I wonder which god we give our hearts to?**

Unfortunately for Man, this god exists and has a name. It is called **Money**. Even within the great systems of beliefs, moral, ethical and religious values have slowly been abandoned for the new god, **Money**.

Obviously there would be a lot to be said about the history of money and the part it plays in this world. But we would have to start by saying that **money** played no part whatsoever in archaic societies, or, at best, its part was extremely small. In the **natural society**, people used the system of **bartering**, the exchange of goods and products. Gradually, the surplus changed into **money**, and there was but one step from money to commerce, industrialization and globalization.

### CONCLUSIONS

Money marks our existence from the very moment we are born; even in our early childhood, we do not feel our parents' tender care, our godparents' affectionate protection and the holy blessing of our Church (Jesus says *Let the children come to me*). Instead, we want to receive money to be able to buy sweets, toys and more recently smart phones, laptops and tablets that are harmful for our health, our minds and our bodies. Those of us who are of a certain age have had to go through this implacable transformation into *hommococonsomiensis*, and found it easier or harder to adapt to it, but the young and very young adults, as well as the children, do not have to **undergo** this process any longer: they are born in this world and are educated in this direction.

Thus, **Santa Claus** doesn't bring the news of the miracle of Jesus' birth by the Holy Virgin (the holy gift), but presents, which must be as varied, expensive and harmful for the family budget as possible. **Easter** is no longer what it used to be, either. For our grandparents and their grandparents, it represented the reiteration of the unique moment of Jesus' Resurrection. That was the time when they put on their best clothes and went to church to celebrate. Today, Easter means mind boggling expenses, balls, festivities, festivals, fireworks. Easter has become a show and a wonderful occasion for traders and businessmen to get richer.

**Christening?** An occasion to display personal wealth, and to make more money (giving money to the little one is a practice that appeared quite late, but which is now used exclusively), and no longer the first step into preparing the baby for his or her future life as a Christian.

**The modern wedding?** Theatre. People are supposed to bring money to give the new couple, and that says it all. Traditional weddings are no longer organized, not even in the countryside, because what prevails now is the **party**, with expensive food, with famous wedding bands and prominent guests. The wedding is at best a **business** meant to "help" the new couple start a life together. What used to be symbolic (and not money-related), has become exclusively mercantile.

Under these circumstances, death seems to become the least entropic moment. Carefully hidden from TV screens and advertisements, death seems something out of this world. Mourning, accompanying the deceased on their last journey and collective suffering, with their huge part they play in healing the soul and the mind of the ones left behind, are ever more discreet, pushed to the periphery of social gestures and considered somehow shameful. The great moments of commemoration of the dead (Christmas, Easter, Thomas Sunday, All

Saints' Day) have also become occasions to make money, as much money as humanly possible.

Thus, today we do not need entropy. We are born directly in it.

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