THERE IS NO RUNNING AWAY FROM FATE

OTILIA DANIELA ALEXIN
West University of Timișoara
4, Vasile Pârvan Blvd, 300223 Timișoara, Romania
otitasinasin@yahoo.com

Abstract: At birth, everybody is assigned a fate that cannot be changed. In the Banat region, the belief in the powerful influence of the Fairy Godmothers on the new-born’s destiny is still alive. This article aims at presenting the origins of the three fairies and the way in which good luck, health, beauty and fertility can be foretold in the Book of Fate.

Keywords: belief, fairy godmother, fate, foretell, luck.

1. Introduction. General beliefs about Fairy Godmothers

The article is based on the results of a small-scale research on the surviving belief in fairy godmothers within the Banat rural area, especially the folk communities located in the valleys of the Sebeș and the Timiș rivers, a mountainous region.

The tradition of the three Fairy Godmothers, embodied by three virgins/fairies also called Fates, still represents an extremely powerful belief across the Banat region. Each of them plays a specific role: “the first one [the oldest of the three fairies, the Fairy Godmother] spins the life thread, having a spinning wheel with a pack of wool, the second one [the middle-aged fairy, Fate] spins the yarn using a spindle, and the third one [the youngest fairy, Death] cuts it with a pair of scissors” (Evseev 1999:473, my translation). Tradition has it that there is a book, the Book of Fairy Godmothers/ the Book of Life/ the Book of Fate/ the Book of Destiny, where “the child’s fate” is written. This book contains the decisions made by the fairy godmothers with regard to the three essential stages in life – the moment of birth, declaring it propitious or less favourable, the moment of marriage, when it was going to take place and who should be the one, the length of life, the moment of death, how and when it was going to happen.

The belief in destiny, an ideology characteristic of the Indo-European religious and cultural area, is widespread in folk mythology – “There’s no running away from fate”, “You cannot escape from fate” or “Just consider this your fate.” (Gorovei 2002:20, my translation).
2. The origin of the ritual

The Fairy Godmothers are mythological beings, spiritual entities who belong to a higher realm. This integrating ritual has pagan origins, the sacrifice of blood has been replaced by the offering of food, the sweet bread - 'pogača', symbolizing abundance, the richness of the land and, by analogy, prosperity in our lives (Căliman 2011:79). The belief in fairy godmothers has its roots in the Roman and Greek mythologies. The verb 'a urzi' (meaning both 'to weave' and 'to predict') comes from the Latin verb ordior, ordiri, orsus (orditus) sum. The supine form of the verb - orsus represents the origin of the verb “to foretell” (“a ursi”), and of the nouns “fairy godmother”, sometimes called “Ursa” (“ursitoare”, “ursite”). In Roman mythology, the fairies who came to the new-born to foretell his/her fate were called Parce (Parcae) – Clotio, Lachesis and Atropos and the word is derived from the verb pario-partus = “to give birth”; in Greek mythology, they were called Moere (Moirae: Nona, Decuma and Morta), and were thought to come on the seventh day to decide the baby’s fate (Marian 2009:121).

Besides the Parcae, the Romans also had Fata Scribunda, another birth fairy, who came on the seventh day of the week “singing and writing the new-born’s fate in a book or on a board where everybody’s fate was written down, and once written […] it was fatum, impossible to change, holy.” (Marienescu 2008:309-310, my translation).

This belief is widespread not only in Romania but also in other countries within the Balkan area. In Serbia, for example, the three fairy godmothers are called “Usude/Sudeniţe” and in Bulgaria people name them “Nărăciţe” (Vulcănescu 1987:163).

2.1. Different approaches of welcoming the Fairy Godmothers

The foretelling of the fairy godmothers, the three sisters dressed in white, can be heard only by the mother or the midwife, who carries out the role of mediator between the sacred world of our ancestors, where the child comes from, and the profane world we live in, to which the child is welcomed, enabling the meeting between the fairy godmothers and the child and also conjuring them from the very moment of birth: “You holy ones,/ You good ones,/ May God keep you pure,/ Enlightened,/ As good as bread,/ As sweet as honey/ And as smooth as water” (Evseev 1999:50, my translation).

Thus, the third night after birth, the midwife or the mother prepares dinner as an offering to the Fairy Godmothers in order to gain their goodwill, to make them bestow good health, luck, beauty, fertility on the child (Praoveanu 2001:247). In the village of Petroșnița in the Timiș river valley, in the mountains, there is the custom of putting three glasses (with wine, milk and water) and salt in front of the open window. The mother also puts the midwife’s girdle under
her pillow when sleeping so that she can hear or dream about the fairies foretelling the baby’s future. In the villages of Buchin, Poiana Buchin and Valea Timișului Cârpa, they put in front of the open window three glasses of water with three slices of bread on top, and sprinkle a little salt on each slice. The decisive element is the midwife’s girdle placed under the sleeping pillow that night.

In the Banat hills, they put three glasses of wine or water on the table, together with three sweet breads, three spoons, salt, a candlestick and a few objects symbolizing different skills (a flute for a player, a ploughshare for a hard-working ploughman, a needle for a tailor, etc.), this dinner symbolizing the moment of “communication between the Human and the Universe” (Știucă 2000:42, my translation).

In some of the Banat lowland areas (situated in the Timiș plain), the offering consists of a pogača (a flat white bread made of wheat flour, a Slovenian culinary speciality) with three coins placed on top, a mirror, a comb, a spoonful of lard and a new girdle, which the mother girds herself with the next morning. All these are arranged on a table located at the head of the bed, near the mother’s and the new-born’s heads (Hedeșan 2001:19). In other lowland areas (around the town of Făget), in the case of boys, on the third night people put on the table a sweet bread whose hole is big enough for the new-born to be passed through, a plate full of water, with a few coins inside, and with three spoons propped on it. Sometimes, food is added. If the new-born is a girl, people replace the sweet bread with a pogača and walk around it three times, holding the baby girl in their arms. In some cases, the offering is set at the window (Căliman 2011:74).

At the same time, in his studies, the researcher and ethnologist Ioan Viorel Boldureanu states that “in the Banat region – as in most regions of our country – people believe in fate: the three chimerical ‘characters’ from the folk mythology come to see the child in the first three nights after birth and foretell his/her fate” (Boldureanu 2001:55, my translation). If the fairy godmothers find no light, they will bestow an evil destiny on the infant (Marian 2009:121).

2.2. The symbolism of the most commonly used elements during the ritual

One of the recurrent elements in this ceremony is three, a magical number, possessing a unifying, dynamic and productive structure: three candlesticks, three sweet breads/pogača, three glasses, three spoons and three coins. It expresses a perfect order, an organized and layered wholeness characteristic of creation. Not only for Christians (God the Father – God the Son – God the Holy Spirit), but also for other religions across the world, there are three spiritual entities who govern the universe (in Hinduism: Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva or Agni-Indra-Surya).
The French comparative philologist Georges Dumézil and the French linguist Jean Przyluski have demonstrated that the social Indo-European structures were based on a triadic principle (the clerics’ layer, the warriors’ layer and the manufacturers’ layer) (Evseev 1999:462). Ethnic virtues and fundamental human values are always three: hope-faith-love, truth-beauty-goodness, equality-fraternity-liberty, etc. Any creative act has three stages: creator-the act of creating-creature. Time splits into three sequences: past-present-future. The Universe consists of the world of nature, the living world and the spiritual world. Even the human being is made up of three elements: body – soul – spirit (Pont-Humbert 1998:322).

In Romanian folklore, number three is omnipresent, especially in folk stories and fairy tales, being charged with a sacramental value: three sons/daughters, three evil forces, three challenges, three talismans or three gifts (Evseev 1999:463).

The light, which illuminates the offering, symbolizes the purifying fire that accompanies the major stages of life: the candle of welcoming the Fairy Godmothers foretelling the fate, the christening candle – the light of Christian life, the wedding candle – the light of married life, and the funeral candle – the light of passage to the afterlife. It goes between the sacred and the profane. There are regions where the candlestick burns up to its very end.

The fairy godmothers are thought to be God’s messengers. God wrote down all the days a person has in the Book of Fate and the fairies were sent to convey this information (Căliman 2011:85).

The sweet bread/pogača is given by the mother or the midwife to a child belonging to the same category of age and gender the next morning. If the new-born is a boy, the bread goes to a boy aged 0-12 months. If it is a girl, the bread goes to a girl aged 0-12 months. This ceremony ritually integrates the new-born into a certain group in terms of age (0-1 year old) and gender (male or female), thus the baby is officially accepted by the community (Căliman 2011:86-87).

3. Conclusion

According to folk mentality, Fairy Godmothers are being looked upon with certain fear because their wishes always come true: “What fairy godmothers foretell and you dream about is bound to happen; as sure as fate.” (Floarea Todorescu, aged 84, Valea Timişului village; Ana Gherga, aged 79, Poiana village). This is the reason why women pay particular attention when preparing the offering. The more pleased the Fates are, the better the child’s fate will be.
The fairies’ absence is unthinkable within folk communities. Even if, nowadays, most women give birth in a maternity ward, they ask family members to fetch them the midwife’s girdle to the hospital so that they can put it under the pillow on the third night.

By analyzing every piece of information received from respondents, we have reached the conclusion that people rely on the prediction dreamt about during the third night: “I dreamt about a nurse calling to prepare me for curettage and she entered the hospital ward. Everything turned out to be true. My daughter was frequently admitted to hospital, she miscarried, was operated on and couldn’t have any children”, stated Ruxandra Peica, aged 73, Turnu Ruieni village. Another respondent, Daniela Văcărescu, aged 53, Petroșnița village, noted that the wine glass had been emptied, and so that child turned into a man with drinking problems.

In conclusion, the belief in the predictions made by the Fairy Godmothers is not fiction. The real facts which it is based on prove that the tradition is still alive within the Banat folk communities.

References


