

OLD RITUALS IN A NEW CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT. THE 'DROWNING' OF A MIDWIFE AND THE 'HANGING' OF A MATCHMAKER IN LITHUANIA AND WESTERN BELARUS

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Abstract: In the analysis of baptism rituals in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus, I have repeatedly drawn attention to the similarity in the structure of individual traditional wedding and baptism rites and even the transition of some ritual acts from one ritual to another. The similarities noticed in the ritual acts performed at baptisms and weddings in the first half of the twentieth century have led to a more detailed analysis of these life-cycle celebrations in the twenty-first century. In this article, I examined the peculiarities of the ceremonial/symbolic killing (or attempted killing) of a midwife and a matchmaker. Analysing both rituals I revealed the differences between the traditional ceremonial killing of a midwife and the 'hanging' of a matchmaker; uncover and compare modifications of these rites in modern society. I showed that, with the loss of their former ritual value and the absence of matchmakers and midwives in real life, the ritual practice of symbolic drowning or hanging has remained. This indicates a

desire to preserve the old customs and, with modifications, practice them in today's baptism and wedding ceremonies as the final part of the ritual. On the other hand, a thorough analysis of the ceremonial acts has shown that both the symbolic hanging of a matchmaker and, in particular, the drowning of a midwife (*bobutė*) are late cultural phenomena, dating back only one or several hundred years in the areas studied.

Keywords: baptism rituals, Belarus, Lithuania, matchmaker, midwife, ritual purification, symbolic death, wedding rituals

Introduction

The midwife played an important part in the baptism ceremony ritual in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In eastern Lithuania and western Belarus,¹ the ceremonial acts of taking away the midwife and/or the symbolic midwife's drowning were performed at the end of baptism.² Although the institution of midwives ceased to exist in Lithuania by the second half of the twentieth century, as women began giving birth in hospitals, the 'drowning' of a midwife at the end of baptism had not changed. Only the ritual functions of the midwife (sometimes in Lithuanian called *bobutė*³) were taken over by an older female relative of the person being baptized, usually a baby's grandmother. Sometimes both grandmothers of a baby (in rare cases, even to this day) took part in baptism. Therefore, in the above-mentioned areas, even in the early twenty-first century, the baptism ceremony often ends with the symbolic drowning of a baby's grandmother. I pose a question: in what ways do these old ceremonial practices persist in today's culture despite the social and cultural changes in society?

In the analysis of baptism rituals, I have repeatedly drawn attention to the similarity in the structure of individual traditional wedding and baptism rites and even the transition of some ritual acts from one ritual to another. At the end of a wedding, as well as at the end of a baptism with the midwife or, the grandmother, the matchmaker was symbolically killed, usually hanged or in rare cases, drowned. He was an eloquent, witty, older rural man, usually a stranger (not a relative) to the young man's family, the person, who arranged the marriage partners, negotiated the girl's share, and took part in the wedding ceremonies. Like the midwife, who helped the baby to arrive into the world and 'created' a new person through ceremonial acts, the matchmaker's role was 'to

create' a new family. Nowadays, the traditional roles of the matchmaker and the midwife are no longer performed either before or during weddings and baptisms. However, the symbolic hanging of a matchmaker, like the drowning of a midwife, has remained one of the most striking ceremonial moments and one of the most entertaining parts of the wedding or baptism rituals to this day.

The similarities noticed in the ritual acts performed at baptisms and weddings in the first half of the twentieth century have led to a more detailed analysis of these life-cycle celebrations in the twenty-first century. In this article, I examine the peculiarities of the ceremonial/symbolic killing (or attempted killing) of a midwife and a matchmaker and try to reveal the differences between the traditional ceremonial killing of a midwife (when in addition to her medical function, she also performed a social function by introducing a new member to the family and local community) and the 'hanging' of a matchmaker. I will also try to compare the modified rituals (when the institution of midwives ceased to exist and the role of the midwife in baptism was taken over by a baby's grandmother; whereas the symbolic role of the matchmaker was replaced by the 'steward' of the wedding).

Personal field research material collected in Lithuania in 1988–2010 and in western Belarus in 2011–2012⁴ constitutes the main source of this article. The absolute majority of respondents are Lithuanians and profess the Roman Catholic faith. I also relied on the research of Lithuanian ethnologists, archival material, and historical sources. Larger-scale research on weddings was conducted by Juozas Baldžius (Baldauskas 1936, Baldžius 1940), Angelė Vyšniauskaitė (2008), Irena Čepienė (2012), and Irma Šidiškienė (2003; 2007; 2009; 2012). Vincas Krėvė Mickevičius (1933) and Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė (Paukštytė 1999; Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2007; 2009; 2012) have carried out more extensive research on the topic of baptism. Saulė Matulevičienė (2011) has published the most comprehensive description of the midwife's drowning.

Sources of wedding customs of the early nineteenth century, describing the trial of a matchmaker, were published by Stasys Skrodenis (1966; 1972) and Viktoras Gidžiūnas (1994). The works of Motiejus Valančius (1972: 311–312), Antanas Juška (1880: 71–78), Juozas Mickevičius (1933: 47–125) and others are also significant. The sources describing both wedding and baptism rituals have been studied by Angelė Vyšniauskaitė (1964) and Pranė Dundulienė (1999). This, in turn, allows comparison of the two.

Acts imitating the symbolic killing of a matchmaker and a midwife in the nineteenth and early twentieth century

The ethnologist A. Vyšniauskaitė observed that the ritual of the matchmaker's hanging in western Lithuania was formed between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, while in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the trial and the symbolic hanging of a matchmaker were recorded not only in western Lithuania but also in central Lithuania (Vyšniauskaitė 2008: 414). The oldest source attesting to the 'hanging' of a matchmaker comes only from 1820. In the sermons of the priest Jurgis Ambraziejus Pabrėža, who lived in western Lithuania,⁵ one can find the following:

From the very morning, the 'headsman,' dressed in a frightening manner, with his tongue lolled out towards the guests, is talking and showing all kinds of gestures, as if he intends to hang the matchmaker ... The headsman and his friends have been gulping down vodka under the gallows. (Skrodenis 1972: 70)

A source from 1822 also mentions the 'hanging' of a matchmaker. It states that this ritual has been preserved in Lithuania since ancient times (Daukantas 1976: 19). In the absence of written sources of the functioning of the custom in old times, it can be assumed that this ritual was already present at least in late-eighteenth-century weddings. It also suggests that the ritual has developed in the present-day territory of Lithuania. Juozas Baldžius, who searched for surviving traces of kidnapped wedding customs, supported this argument. He wrote,

It would seem that the hanging of a matchmaker, found perhaps only in our wedding ceremony rituals, should be considered to be the surviving traces of a kidnapped wedding; neither the Latvians, nor the Russians, nor the Belarusians, nor the Ukrainians, nor the Bulgarians, nor the Poles, nor the Germanic peoples have this custom. (Baldžius 1940: 115)

In 1869, Motiejus Valančius described in detail the ritual acts of the 'hanging' of a matchmaker in western Lithuania. According to him, at the end of the wedding, the bride would save the matchmaker who was about to be hanged by throwing a towel around his neck (Valančius 1972: 311–312). The 'hanging' of a matchmaker was also mentioned in Juška's description of nineteenth-century

Lithuanian wedding customs in south-western Lithuania, which was written in 1870 and published in 1880 in *Svotbinė rėda* [A Wedding Party]. The book describes the trial of a matchmaker. It says that a judge is appointed from among the wedding party and decides to hang the matchmaker in the manor house under a green lime tree for “kidnapping a live man”. The description is accompanied by an exhaustive decree specifying which part of the matchmaker’s body is to be used for what purpose. From the forehead it is promised to make a lantern, from the nose to make a rifle, from a moustache to make a brush for shoes and so on. The matchmaker, who is about to be hanged, is defended by girls and is ransomed by the bride, who gives him a linen cloth or a towel. After the ransom is received, a straw scarecrow dressed in men’s clothing is hanged (Juška 1880: 71–78).

In the late nineteenth century, in the north-eastern part of Lithuania, as well as in western Lithuania, the wedding party tried to kill a matchmaker. When the matchmaker was ransomed, the scarecrow was hanged, less often burned or drowned. The timing of the execution of a matchmaker differed between western and north-eastern Lithuania. While in western Lithuania, he was executed at the end of the wedding, in north-eastern Lithuania, the matchmaker was not allowed to go to the church with the wedding party. The women who stayed at the bride’s house pursued relentlessly the matchmaker in every possible way, ordering him to write a will until the bride’s mother took pity on him and bought him off with a towel or a cloth. The matchmaker was then dressed in an entertaining way, given a gift and allowed to go to the groom’s house (Šidiškienė 2003: 54). I. Šidiškienė notes that a comparison of the maps of the prevalence of symbolic acts at weddings shows similar areas of the prevalence of the symbolic acts of the groom’s hostile welcome at the bride’s house and the trial of a matchmaker in north-eastern Lithuania. The author argued that this meant that “at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the bride’s community treated the groom as an ‘intruder from a foreign country’ and his main representative, the matchmaker, as a ‘robber’ and ‘deceiver’” (Šidiškienė 2003: 54).

In this region, we also know of the matchmaker being taken to the tavern on a harrow turned upside down or being tied to a harrow (Čepienė 2012: 123). Similarly, a midwife was also taken away, which clearly shows the similarity between baptism and wedding ceremonies. However, according to researchers of wedding rituals, we can say that at the beginning of the twentieth century,

when the regional features of the wedding ceremony began to disappear, the 'hanging' of a matchmaker, which existed in western Lithuania, became popular throughout the country due to its entertaining nature and was performed at the end of weddings (Vyšniauskaitė 2008: 414–415). In the early twentieth century, the role of a matchmaker as a wedding steward increased (Čepienė 2012: 124).

The oldest descriptions of the 'drowning' of a midwife (*bobutė*) at baptism date back to the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. They are specific to eastern Lithuania. Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius, who described baptismal rituals of an earlier period in his *Krikštyną apeigos Dzūkijoje* [Baptismal Rituals in Dzūkija], which also covered part of eastern Lithuania, did not mention this ritual yet (Krėvė Mickevičius 1933). Nor do we have data from other sources earlier than the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. A publication by A. Vyšniauskaitė in 1964, based on the author's ethnographic field research, showed that in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus the baptism feast ended with the taking away of the midwife, who had already done her job and was no longer needed by the household. During baptism, the village men would also take the midwife on a harrow turned upside down, in a trough, in a skiff, on a sledge, or on a two wheeled cart to a body of water. If they demanded a ransom, they would take the midwife to the inn or to their neighbors' house who were expecting a baby. For this ceremony, the midwife would be specially wearing a fur coat inside out, a tall hat made of coloured paper, straw and feathers, and adorned with 'earrings' made of nut shells and 'necklace' made of onion braids. In one hand, she would hold a pine broom or a long whip to drive the 'horses,' and in the other, a red scarf tied to a long pole, symbolizing the 'flag.' The 'horses' were mainly village men, although women also took part in the ritual (Vyšniauskaitė 1964: 474).

My ethnographic fieldwork data collected in 2012 in the Gervėčiai area (Lithuanian settlements in western Belarus) also showed that in this area, at the end of baptism, the *bobutė* ('midwife') was taken to be 'drowned.' The respondent, who was born in 1931, said that in the old days, the midwife used to dress in an ugly way, like a gypsy, with soot on her lips, and always tried to kiss somebody. The midwife was taken away on a sledge or *račiukai* ('a small wagon'). The other guests at baptism changed their clothes too, and sometimes the parents as well. They would walk disguised through the village singing and visiting every house. Upon coming to a courtyard, they would eat, sing, dance

and try to steal something, such as a sausage or onions. Later, the stolen item was returned.

Alternatively, according to other respondents interviewed in those areas, the dressing-up party would carry vodka and snacks with them and treated everyone they met. Everyone in the village would come out to see the disguised party. After they had passed (and the midwife had been transported), the whole village would go back. According to one respondent, the godparents usually did not travel with the procession, only the *pastaroninkai* ('strangers'). After the whole village had been covered, the dressers would take a bath and that would be the end of baptism (R. Paukštytė-Šaknienė's notes from the Gervėčiai area in western Belarus made in 2012).

I would like to point out that in baptism rituals, some parallels exist with calendar festivals. The persons who carried and accompanied the midwife often wore masks, as at Christmas – Epiphany Day period or Shrove Tuesday. Moreover, as on the aforementioned festivals, the ceremony was very noisy. Although A. Vyšniauskaitė's study of baptism rituals mentions only the taking away of the midwife (*bobutė*), some also mentioned taking her to a body of water. A. Vyšniauskaitė also noted that such a ritual act also existed in Slavic lands, when the day after baptism the midwife was taken away with the godparents on a harness or two wheeled cart in order to obtain ransom from her (Vyšniauskaitė 1964: 474). This ritual was known in Belarus and Ukraine (Kabakova 1999: 660). Also such ritual act one can see among the Ukrainians from the Russian Far East; the midwife was seated on a harrow and driven to a tavern. In the same region, Russians put a midwife on brushwood and rode around the village (Argudiaeva 1997: 177). Also we can see symbolic killing of midwife. The Ukrainian scholar Olena Boriak observed that at the end of baptism, the carrying away of the midwife to her house, to a tavern or to the water and pulling her down was a climactic moment of the ritual complex (Boriak 2009: 198).

The symbolic drowning of a midwife is also mentioned in early twentieth-century sources. Reda Kralikauskaitė, describing the rituals of Dieveniškės (south-eastern Lithuania), wrote,

The men put the bobutė in a harrow or a cart and take her away. They transport her around the fields until she pays them off. The ransom was a 'rooster' (a lozenge. — RPS), money or sweets. If the men do not get the

ransom, they take the bobutė to a river or a puddle and dump her there. Later, of course, they would bring her back. (Kralikauskaitė 1995: 373)

Antanas A. Bielinis, describing the baptismal rituals of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century north-eastern Lithuania (Tverečius area), also recorded the ritual of the drowning of a midwife.

When brought to the puddle and when the guests tried to turn the harrow over with the bobutė in it, she would begin to say some inarticulate words and wave her arms to the sky as if she were calling out something, as if she were asking for something. When the men stopped in fright, she would threaten them that if they laid a finger on her, she would turn them into rams, calves or stones. The men were all frightened by such bobutė's incantations and threats and, leaving her alone by the puddle, would run away. After that, the bobutė would go home and not show up at baptism again that evening. (quoted in Matulevičienė 2011: 46)

Leaving aside A. Bielinis's integrity and refraining from commenting on the situation described, I must stress that it is one of the oldest accounts of the 'drowning' of a midwife, and one of the few accounts that does not mention the ransom of a midwife. At the same time, similar ritual acts related to the 'drowning' of a midwife were also documented in Belarus, where the midwife was transported on a harness in the presence of people disguised in various costumes (a doctor, a soldier etc.). The ritual even had a name: *везці маніўр бабы* ('taking the midwife to drown her') (Kucharonak 2001: 319).

The analysis of the available material suggests that the rituals of ceremonial killing of a midwife are known only from ethnographic sources from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, covering eastern Lithuania and Belarus (also in some part of Ukraine). However, the territory of this ritual act does not correspond to the symbolic custom of the 'hanging' of a matchmaker, which existed in western, partly central and northern Lithuania during the same period. According to Slavic ethnological studies, the symbolic killing of a matchmaker by hanging has been unknown in their territory. It is true that matchmaker was sometimes punished or ridiculed in the Slavic states, but the actions of direct symbolic killing (by hanging) are not mentioned (Gura 2012: 539–540),

The links between ritual acts of execution at baptisms and weddings

A review of the above-mentioned sources and related studies raises the question: what is the meaning of those ritual acts? In order to answer this question, let us look at the analogies and differences between baptism and wedding rituals. In both cases, the midwife and the matchmaker were accused of wrongdoing. The midwife was accused of having ‘caught’ an ugly baby (assisted in childbirth) – without teeth and hair, looking nothing like their godparents (Vyšniauskaitė 1967: 62). The matchmaker was accused of lying about the groom’s wealth. The bride usually saved the matchmaker from execution, while the midwife had to save herself from being drowned. Sometimes women tried to rescue her. However, there is no record of the midwife being rescued by the childbearing mother. There is a rare mention of the baby’s father buying her out. In the case of weddings, the matchmaker was usually sentenced to be hanged – the scarecrow representing him was hanged or otherwise destroyed. In contrast, at baptism, the scarecrow representing the midwife was not presented and destroyed. At both baptisms and weddings, in most cases the symbolic killing was performed by men, while the buying out of both the midwife and the matchmaker was carried out by girls or women.

There are other similarities between baptisms and weddings. In some areas of north-eastern Lithuania, a similar symbolic killing was carried out at both weddings and baptisms. In the Ignalina area (north-eastern Lithuania), at the end of the nineteenth century, the custom was to kill with a knife the *meškos močia* (‘mother of a bear’). Such a name was given to the hostess of a wedding or baptism, the woman who prepared the feast for the party. At the end of the wedding, she is “laid down on a bench; a trough is brought in, a rolling pin is rolled over her, the axes are taken out, and the woman screams, ‘*Ratavokit* (‘Rescue me’)! They’re killing me!’” She would buy out herself (like a midwife at baptism) with a drink or a cake (Karaliūtė 1966: 172). The ‘mother bear’, like the midwife who was taken for drowning, was wearing a fur coat inside out.⁶ When describing the cases of killing the ‘mother bear’ at weddings, A. Vyšniauskaitė assumed that the ritual was taken over from baptism rites, where, according to the ethnologist, the ‘mother bear’ could be considered as a representative of the other world, who by her mysterious acts helped a new person to arrive

to this world. The killing of the ‘mother bear’ may have been associated with the destruction of the old, former life necessary for birth (Vyšniauskaitė 2008: 416). The author also pointed to a similar ritual in Germany of collecting money for a cook dressed as a bear at a wedding. However, no symbolic killing was performed (Vyšniauskaitė 2008: 416).

Why do baptism and wedding rituals feature a bear, and why does a midwife or a bride wear a fur coat? The mask of a bear was also worn by the party disguised in various costumes at the wedding (they would go for a stroll at various stages during the wedding, including the ‘hanging’ of a matchmaker (Vyšniauskaitė 2008: 408–409)). The mask also functioned in calendar customs. According to Arūnas Vaicekauskas’s map dedicated to dressing-up characters, the mask of a bear was popular in western Lithuania during the Shrove Tuesday carnival. In northern Lithuania, the mask was worn at Christmas and, to a lesser extent, at Three Kings Day. In north-eastern Lithuania, the bear character appeared at youth gatherings from Christmas to Shrove Tuesday (Vaicekauskas 2005: 118–119).

As Vaicekauskas noted, in order to make the bride rich, she was enveloped in a fur coat at the wedding. The author also points to another ritual mentioned in sixteenth-century sources: eating the genitals of a bear at the wedding in order to make the bride and groom fertile (Vaicekauskas 2005: 118–119). The bear motif is also present in the mid-twentieth century customs during the first day after Shrove Tuesday in western Belarus (Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė and Žilvytis Šaknys notes from the Grodno area in 2011). On that day, children were required to do a somersault to make it easier for the animals to produce offspring, as the “bear was also somersaulting.”

The bear was also mentioned in an unpleasant joke performed on the first day after Shrove Tuesday. The children were told that the bear was giving away shoes outside the barn. They were told to run there barefoot, “otherwise you will be left with nothing.” When the children ran barefoot through the snow, their feet would turn red from the cold, and the adults would say that these were their shoes. Later, the supposed gifts were replaced by real ones, i.e. new shoes. It was said that “the bear turned over the fence and left the gift,” and children had to run barefoot to get them (the material collected by Žilvytis Šaknys in 2012 from the Gervėčiai area in western Belarus). It is clear that the symbol of the bear is multidimensional, present in many cultural spheres.

Why was the symbolic killing of a midwife or a matchmaker associated with the end of baptism or wedding? The Ukrainian scholar Natalia Gavriľiuk observed that in Ukraine a water purification ritual was performed on the midwife to enable her to receive the next baby. Apparently, according to the folk belief, the midwife after receiving the baby, like the mother after giving birth, became impure (Gavriľiuk 1981: 99). This interpretation could also be applied to the ritual drowning of a midwife. Water rituals we can see in the *Babinden* ('Midwife Day'). In Bulgaria on the 8 of January, the woman takes the midwife onto a cart to the river or the well, where the ritual bathing takes place. The midwife is bathed in the water and carried back home to the woman (Benina-Marinkova Dimitrova & Tsanova Antonova & Assenova Paprikova-Krutilin 2019: 12–13).⁷ Another traditional activity on this day involves boys dunking girls in the icy waters of rivers and lakes, supposedly to bring them good health in the coming year (Henderson 2005: 35). It also supports the purifying function of water.

However, in such a case, the 'hanging' of a matchmaker can hardly be linked to purification. Irma ŒidiŒkienė, a researcher of wedding customs, noted that the wedding ritual shows the connection between the activities of the matchmaker and the groom. These activities are terminated by the trial of a matchmaker. The matchmaker no longer has the right to provide similar services to the same groom, as a new life cycle of the married man begins (ŒidiŒkienė 2003: 55). The ritual of taking away of the midwife was perceived in a similar way in the KaiŒiadorys area (eastern Lithuania). Gintarė Daunoraitė, who had written on the customs of baptism, said that at the end of baptism, the midwife was taken away "as she was no longer needed" (Daunoraitė 2011: 69). However, weddings were usually a one-off event, and women gave birth to many children, and the same midwife was often needed the following year.

Apparently, in both cases, the symbolic killing of a matchmaker or a midwife usually marked the end of baptism or wedding. As Irina Sedakova has noted in her analysis of the Bulgarian material, it is possible to identify in the customs of the nativity rituals the ritual acts that determine married life. Proper observance of the traditional childbirth rituals can mark the right path in a person's life (Sedakova 2007: 236–252). In the case of Lithuania, we can also see the intertwining of baptism and wedding rituals. Both the ritual killing of a matchmaker and midwife are intended to pave the way for the next stage of a person's life. The similar location of the performance of the ritual act in the

structure of the celebration and the similarity of some of the ritual acts allow us to relate the symbolic hanging of a matchmaker and the drowning of a midwife. In the second half of the twentieth century, the institutions of both the midwife and the matchmaker had disappeared, but the characters continued to function at weddings and baptisms.

The transformation of the characters of a matchmaker and a midwife in the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first century

If in the second half of the twentieth century, the territorial range of the symbolic hanging of a matchmaker gradually expanded across Lithuania, while the symbolic drowning of a midwife diminished and even disappeared in north-eastern Lithuania. The participants of the ritual also changed. The midwife was replaced by a baby's grandmother and less often by another woman of the family. Meanwhile, the matchmaker at the wedding, who no longer performed the traditional function of introducing the future bride and groom, could be a relative, a non-family member, and even a hired man.⁸

The ritual of drowning a baby's grandmother (as the equivalent of a midwife) survived the longest in south-eastern Lithuania and western Belarus, even up to the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the second half of the twentieth century, the ritual changed very little, but it was supplemented with entertaining acts. The drowning of a midwife involved a certain amount of risk. For example, in 1992, in Vilnius area in south-eastern Lithuania, the grandmother of a baby at the end of baptism was put into a wheelbarrow and taken away to be 'drowned,' even though it was late October. The woman was thrown into the water, and afterwards she had to "treat the guests out of her own pocket." Another respondent, also from Vilnius area, told about a baptism in her family that taken place in 1991–1994. According to her, baptism was celebrated for one or two days with a large number of guests. At the end of the party, a baby's grandmother or both grandmothers were put in a cart (wheelbarrow) loaded with hay and were taken to a pond supposedly to be 'drowned,' or, if they were not near a body of water, they would simply be sprinkled with water. This ritual took place whatever the time of year.⁹

In 2005, a grandmother of a baby was ‘drowned’ at the end of the baptism ceremony. She was taken for a ride in a cart through the snow in the winter and then brought back to be sprinkled with water. Meanwhile, a respondent from Šalčininkai area in south-eastern Lithuania, born in 1989, said that she bathed and ‘baptized’ her grandparents on the second day of baptism. They were put in a wagon, taken to the river and dunked (pushed) into the water. The woman observed that this is done on a warm day. If baptism takes place in winter, the grandparents are ‘baptized’ (poured with water) from a bucket (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2009: 32).

During my research conducted in 2012 in the Gervėčiai area in western Belarus, it turned out that the tradition of ‘drowning’ of the baby’s grandmother still exists and is practiced by the local population. A respondent from Mockai, born in 1938, said that she *bobutę tapijo* (‘drowned the grandmother’). In 2010, at the baptismal ceremony of her great-granddaughter, she took on a ride the two great-granddaughter’s grandmothers through the village (Paukštytė-Šaknienė’s material collected in 2012 from the Gervėčiai area in western Belarus).

Folklorist Saulė Matulevičienė has published a detailed description of this ritual, illustrated with photographs (Matulevičienė 2011). The author attended the ceremony and described the memorable event she witnessed.

After the ceremony in the church and a filling feast, on the evening of the first day of baptism, all participants rushed to get ready for the fun part of the celebration – the ride of the grandmother/grandmothers ... the two girls’ grandmothers, one Lithuanian and the other Belarusian, seated in a cart were pushed out by a colourful group of people dressed in costumes, accompanied by the noise of pots beaten with sticks. The whole group approached every village gate: the doctor ‘treated’ the neighbours with drinks; the gypsy woman smeared their faces with soot, and when the soot was gone, with lipstick; the ‘old man’ ‘harassed’ them and made them kiss each other; and the other participants of baptism were ‘stealing’ household items from the farmstead and tied them up to the grandmothers’ cart. The party was greeted differently ... Some hosts were annoyed by the ‘stealing,’ others were amused, while there were those who didn’t even notice it ... When they approached the puddle that flooded the road, they remembered the purpose of the procession — the ‘drowning’ of grandmothers. Threatening

and witty negotiations ended happily that time, but on the return back, the water could no longer be avoided. (Matulevičienė 2011: 37–38)

So, at the end of baptism, baby's two grandmothers were literally, not even symbolically, dunked in a rainwater harvesting cauldron, while all the other guests were splashed with water. The ceremony was over, and the baptism party continued.

S. Matulevičienė noted that the observed playful act was characterized above all by carnivalesque, and the typical participants disguised as a doctor, a Jew, a gypsy, an old man, in her opinion, showed clear parallels or a merging of customs with other traditions of dressing up, such as weddings or Christmas (in the Gervėčiai area, western Belarus). The latter visit neighbours during the Christmas period, while Shrove Tuesday is associated with riding and visiting crop fields (Matulevičienė 2011: 38–39).

It is interesting that in the second half of the twentieth century, the symbolic killing of a matron in honour began to take place in almost all of Lithuania as well.¹⁰ A. Vyšniauskaitė says,

When a matchmaker is hanged, an attempt is made to deal with the matron of honour. She is also sometimes in hiding and wanted. If she is found, she is put in a wheelbarrow or a trough, and taken to be drowned or burnt. (Vyšniauskaitė 2007: 102)

The matron of honour, who represented the female side at the wedding, was often the wife of the matchmaker and had nothing to do with the bride's relatives (in older times the matron of honour was usually the bride's aunt or godmother).

In the second half of the twentieth century, a new symbolic act linking baptisms and weddings became widespread, when the matron of honour was seated in a wheelbarrow or a trough and taken out to be drowned or to the woods, in the same way as the midwife at baptism. The matron of honour was usually 'saved' by the matchmaker, or the bride, the groom, both newlywed, or the bridesmaids, that is, they would entertain the *torturers* (Vyšniauskaitė 1985: 175–176; Šidiškienė 2007: 140; Šidiškienė 2009: 129; Šidiškienė 2012: 159). In Irma Šidiškienė's opinion, taking away and 'drowning' or 'burning' of the matron of honour at weddings is a new practice, which has been established from the second half of the twentieth century and corresponds to the symbolic meaning of matchmaker's 'hanging', while her taking away in a wheelbar-

row corresponds to the symbolic taking away of the mother-in-law from her home, which was featured at the nineteenth-century wedding. It was part of the symbolic act of elevating the bride to the status of housewife (Šidiškienė 2007: 141; Šidiškienė 2009: 129). The ethnologist argued that the symbolic acts with matchmakers and matrons of honour – the destruction and separation of the character itself – was perceived as the termination of the duties they had performed (Šidiškienė 2007: 141).

A predominant gender distribution of the ways of symbolic killing of characters can also be observed. If the matchmaker is symbolically hanged, the matron of honour or the midwife is symbolically drowned. On the other hand, as S. Matulevičienė has noted, the ritual act of killing is also present during calendar festivals. Irena Čepienė, who has studied weddings, draws a parallel with the custom of destroying the mythical creature *Morė* (western Lithuania) or *Gavėnas* (eastern Lithuania) during Shrove Tuesday (Čepienė 2012: 123).¹¹ However, in western Lithuania, where a matchmaker (male) is hanged, the female creature *Morė* is burnt during Shrove Tuesday. Meanwhile, in the eastern part of Lithuania, where the midwife (female) is ‘drowned’, the male creature *Gavėnas* is drowned or beaten during Shrove Tuesday.

The study confirmed the similarity between the rituals of baptisms and weddings and the need for the ritual to migrate across life cycles and even calendar festivals. After the changes in living conditions and the decline and loss of meaning of the institutions of the midwife and the matchmaker, the traditional characters of the matchmaker and the midwife remained in the wedding and baptism rituals in the second half of the twentieth century, playing the roles assigned to them in earlier times. When analysing the survival of the ritual act in terms of territory, it becomes evident that the wedding ritual has remained more stable in Lithuania, while the baptism ritual has remained more unchanged in western Belarus.

Conclusions

The functioning of old rituals in today’s culture has once again shown the similarity and migratory nature of baptism and wedding ceremonial acts (as rituals of passage) in different life cycle celebrations. It could be assumed that the symbolic act of killing of a matchmaker in the wedding ritual originated in the territory of present-day western Lithuania (Žemaitija) in the eighteenth

century. Meanwhile, the symbolic act of killing of a midwife is mentioned only in the late nineteenth-century sources, and it is assumed that it was adopted from the territory of present-day Belarus.

When comparing wedding and baptism rituals, one discovers many differences and similarities. One of the motifs that show the commonality of the rites is the killing of the 'mother bear' performed at both weddings and baptisms in north-eastern Lithuania. One can also trace the analogy of the specific vehicles used to transport a midwife, a matchmaker and a matron of honour. Often a harrow turned upside down or a trough was used.

By analyzing the symbolic execution acts of a midwife and a matchmaker, one can see that it travelled from weddings in western and northern Lithuania to eastern and southern Lithuania. The act remained stable in baptism rituals in eastern Lithuania and western Belarus.

Research into baptism and wedding customs in the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has shown that as living conditions have changed and the institutions of the midwife and the matchmaker have lost their meaning, the traditional characters of weddings and baptism, i.e., the matchmaker and the baby's grandmother, have remained. They are also symbolically killed. In the second half of the twentieth century, the symbolic murder of a matron of honour also began to take place almost all over Lithuania, but most often, she is not hanged like the other wedding character, the matchmaker, but is drowned like a midwife. The analysis of the symbolic killing of a matchmaker has parallels with calendar customs. However, while during Shrove Tuesday in the nineteenth century, the female scarecrow *Morė* was destroyed in the area of the matchmaker's hanging, whereas in eastern Lithuania, where the symbolic drowning of a midwife was performed, the male scarecrow *Gavėnas* was destroyed.

To sum up, even with the loss of their former ritual value and the absence of matchmakers and midwives in real life, the ritual practice of symbolic drowning or hanging has remained. This indicates a desire to preserve the old customs and, with modifications, to practice them in today's baptism and wedding ceremonies, as the final part of the ritual. On the other hand, a thorough analysis of the ceremonial acts has shown that both the symbolic hanging of a matchmaker and in particular, the drowning of a midwife (*bobutė*), are late cultural phenomena, dating back only one or several hundred years in the areas studied.

Table 1. *Symbolic execution of baptism and wedding participants: the dominant cases in Lithuania and western Belarus*

Period	Baptism Party	Wedding Party
1820–1900	*Killing mother bear with a knife (north-eastern Lithuania) ↓↓↓↓	*Matchmaker’s hanging (western Lithuania) ↓↓↓↓ *Killing mother bear with a knife (north-eastern Lithuania) ↓↓↓↓
1900–1950	*Killing mother bear with a knife (north-eastern Lithuania) *Midwife’s drowning (south-eastern and eastern Lithuania, western Belarus) →→ ↓↓↓↓	*Killing mother bear with a knife (north-eastern Lithuania) *Matchmaker’s hanging (western and northern Lithuania) ↓↓↓↓ *Matchmaker’s drowning or burning (north-eastern and western Lithuania) ↓↓↓↓
1950–2000	*Midwife’s/ grandmother’s drowning (south-eastern Lithuania, western Belarus) →→	*Matchmaker’s hanging (all over Lithuania) *Matron’s of honour drowning or burning (various regions of Lithuania)

Notes

¹ The larger part of the research area belonged to one state for a long time – for the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (thirteenth century – 1795; after 1569 the Grand Duchy of Lithuania became part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), Tsarist Russia (1795–1915), and the USSR (1940–1941, 1944–1990). The eastern part of Lithuania and the western part of Belarus were occupied by Poland in 1920–1939, as the Vilnius region (Zinkevičius 1993). This led to many common cultural traits and my choice of this area.

² I do not associate the word ‘ritual’ only with religious practices (cf. Platvoet 2006). In this article, I analyse the ceremonial acts of social recognition performed during baptism and wedding receptions.

³ In Lithuanian, the word *bobutė* can mean both a baby’s grandmother and a midwife.

⁴ Individual accounts of the respondents in Lithuania were also collected later, up to 2021. The Belarusian material collected by the author of this article has not yet been published. The material was collected within the Vilnius University project “Gervėčiai:

Historical Memory and National Identity" (2010–2012). The project was led by Saulė Matuliavičienė. The audio recordings of the interviews are kept at Vilnius University. The material collected in Lithuania is stored in the Lithuanian Institute of History.

⁵ By the term western Lithuania, I mean Žemaitija, one of the five regions of Lithuania: Aukštaitija, Dzūkija, Suvalkija, Žemaitija, and Lithuania Minor. It does not include Lithuania Minor, which is located on the Baltic Sea, where the ritual of the hanging of a matchmaker was not practiced.

⁶ In eastern Lithuania, the bride was given to wear a fur coat inside out, when she crossed the threshold of the young man's house, or the fur coat was placed at the threshold, so that the bride would step over it and the young couple's life would be 'prosperous' (Vyšniauskaitė 2008: 353–354).

⁷ It is interesting that ritual in Bulgaria common only to Orthodox and unknown to Catholics (Iankov 2003: 235). The tradition of driving a midwife away at the end of the Day of the Midwife is known to the Don Cossacks (Vlaskina 1998: 47) and also to Russian Old Believers (Plotnikova 2016: 48).

⁸ Irena Čepienė noted that the matchmaker is invited from the groom's side, and his ingenuity, wit, and humour usually determine the mood of the celebration. In contemporary weddings, a matchmaker does not play the role of a matchmaker, and the term 'matchmaker' does not correspond to its meaning. However, it is quite common to refer to the leader of the wedding as a matchmaker (Čepienė 2012: 196).

⁹ In 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the respondent attended the baptism of a relative's baby, which only lasted for 2–3 hours and the drowning of a grandmother was no longer performed, as well as the other ritual acts.

¹⁰ According to Irena Čepienė, the matron of honour is usually a married woman, invited by the bride. The matron of honour wears dark clothes to distinguish herself from the bridesmaids. She also attaches a flower to her chest as a distinguishing mark. She helps the bride to dress in her wedding clothes before the marriage, put on a veil, and crown her head with a wreath made of rue (Čepienė 2012: 206).

¹¹ In Slavic countries, the destruction of the scarecrow during calendar festivals is much more frequent than during family festivals (Agapkina & Vinogradova 2012: 467).

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