

SUPERSTITIONS AS A PART OF THE FRAME “PREGNANCY AND BIRTH” IN THE ENGLISH, RUSSIAN, AND MARI LANGUAGES: PART1

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Abstract

The article is the first of two which considers the expression of the frame “pregnancy and birth” in the superstitions of the English, Russian, and Mari languages. Pregnancy is one of the most important periods in the life of every family and especially in the life of a woman. It is one of the rites of passage which gives a woman a new status of a mother and secures her status as a wife. The birth of a child is another rite of passage – the first for everybody in this life – when an immaterial soul becomes a real person. These two events are inextricably linked as the mother is connected with her child. That is why a lot of superstitions are related both to mothers and children. Authors distributed all the superstitions of three languages among three top-level groups: preliminary, ‘liminary’, and postliminary. The preliminary level includes the slots: 1) predictions (predictions about being or not being pregnant, pieces of advice how to become or not become pregnant, as well as guesses about the gender of children); 2) prohibitions (what the pregnant woman shall do and must not do, and different ways how to protect her from evil spirits). The ‘liminary’ level gives the advice of what shall or shall not be done during the process of giving the birth to make it easy and successful. All this is presented in folk superstitions which reflect world view of peoples under study.

Keywords: superstitions, pregnancy, rites of passage, the English language, the Russian language, the Mari language.

1. INTRODUCTION

During their life people come through a lot of rites of passages that are an integral part of national customs and traditions existing in every country. Pregnancy is one of the most important periods in the life of every family and especially in the life of a woman. It gives a woman a new status of a mother and introduces her into women community of the settlement giving her more rights. Moreover, it secures her status as a wife rising her position inside her husband’s family. The birth of a child is another rite of passage – the first for everybody in this life – when, according to numerous believes, an immaterial soul becomes a real person.

These two events are inextricably linked as the mother is connected with her child and one process continues with the other. That is why a lot of superstitions on this topic are related both to mothers and children.

Mothers and newborns pass through the most difficult period in their life so they are most subject to the adverse influence of the external world, namely, evil spirits, fairies, or evil eye and envy of people. They are in the most vulnerable state during the whole period of pregnancy and several first months after birth. That is why they need special protection. Folk superstitions collect all the experience through time and provide people with necessary pieces of advice, both preventive and protective. In the article authors describe the role of such superstitions in the life of three peoples: English, Russian, and Mari as representatives of different language groups.

The article is the first of two describing frame “pregnancy and birth”. The purpose of the article is to give a brief overview of the most interesting examples, matches and differences in the images reflected in superstitions of the three languages which can show distinct peculiarities of cultures and national views of the world. This particular article deals with superstitions about pregnancy.

Material for the research was taken from collections of superstitions and descriptions of folk customs and traditions of the three languages (Lys, 2005; Oliver, 2006; Murrell, 2008; Puccio, 2013; Webster, 2009; Kouti, 2012; Lebedeva, 2007; Shcheglova, 2007; Lavrentyeva, 2006; Sebeok, 1956; Toydybekova, 2007; Sepeev, 2001; Glukhov, 2012).

2. OPINIONS AND DISCUSSION

In the course of research all the superstitions of three languages were distributed among three top-level groups: preliminary (1), ‘liminary’ (2), and postliminary (3) (Gennep, 1999, Fliginskikh 2014). Preliminary superstitions include rites connected with pregnancy period. They predict pregnancy or sex of a future child and give advice for pregnant woman how to keep safe. ‘Liminary’ superstitions present traditions important for the birth moment. Postliminary superstitions are mostly connected with babies after their birth. The present article considers top levels 1 and 2.

Top level 1. Preliminary superstitions. Slot 1. Pregnancy predictions and advice

Subslot 1. A woman will become pregnant (English 12, Russian 4, Mari 0)

Superstitions of this subslot predict pregnancy of a woman. The only superstition that matches for Russian and English is connected with storks which are a symbol of a new arrival in the family: in England *a woman shall see a stork to become pregnant*, while in Russia *a stork shall nest on the roof the house*. Other names of birds in the predictions are four crows in English and owls in Russian (while owls hooting at night in English culture mean death of a baby). English example *If you rock an empty cradle, you will rock a new baby into it soon* is of great interest because the same Russian superstition has the opposite meaning, belongs to *Subslot 2*, and means the death of the future child.

Subslot 2. A woman will not become pregnant (English 4)

This subslot is presented only by English examples. There are some things that will not allow a woman become pregnant. They are, for example, *keeping peacock feather on the house, threading on swallow eggs, and knitting before pregnancy*.

Subslot 3. Advice how to become or not to become pregnant (English 4, Russian 5, Mari 4)

There are some pieces of advice given to women that may help them become pregnant. English-Russian match is connected with already pregnant women. They advise *to touch, to spend time* or at least *to have a thing of a pregnant woman* to become pregnant. Mari superstitions deal with symbolism and sacrifices: *having an egg in the bosom* (as a symbol of fertility) or *giving a silver coin to a girl* will help a new wife to become pregnant.

The second part of the subslot (not to become pregnant) is presented only by one Mari superstition: *Not to become pregnant, the placenta was drowned in the bog with asp stake*. Asp was always used to protect from evil creatures meaning something bad in the life of people, so it was used not to have an unwanted state.

Subslot 4. Predictions about the number and the gender of babies (English 12, Russian 6, Mari 4)

There is one match for all three languages where the parts of mother's body play a great role: it could be the first foot to step, stitch in the side, or full bosom. When something is connected with the right side of the body, she is expecting a boy. When something is connected with the left side, she is expecting a girl. English

woman were looking for a pin for the boy and for a needle for a girl. Russians were looking at the abdomen. The acute one meant a boy. Mari people tried to make some magic. When they wanted to have a boy, they put male tools under the pillow (like hammer). If they want a girl, they put hoops, knitting needles, and so on.

To learn the number of future children English young women shall *count the number of ribbons on the wedding presents, the number of spots on the ladybug, the number of magpies, or the number of seeds inside the apple and cut it in half.*

Top level 1. Preliminary superstitions

Slot 2. Prohibitions and advice during pregnancy (English 18, Russian 15, Mari 6)

This slot includes pieces of advice for pregnant women how to behave to keep the future baby safe. A lot of superstitions are connected with ropes and such actions like sewing, knitting, and spanning. In all three languages these brings bad luck: difficulties during birthing, umbilical cord lapping round baby's neck, and even death of a baby. Another common thing is connected with funerals and the deceased. Pregnant women were warned not to go the cemetery to keep a baby safe and not to look at dead people or baby's face will be very pale.

Common superstition for English and Russian is *A pregnant woman should not look at the fire; otherwise her child can get hives from the fire on its face.* Here we can see an example of sympathetic magic (Frazer) when some things make similar things. There are a lot of other examples in the English language of this kind like *meeting a hare gives a baby a harelip, washing dust with the dickey makes baby sloven, stealing makes baby a thief.* Another common English-Russian superstition is *buying things for a baby beforehand* which is not good and may become mortal.

Russian and Mari languages have one matching: *it is forbidden to cut hair during pregnancy.* But the consequences are different. In the Russian language it means to shorten baby's life, in Mari – to have difficult baby delivery.

Top level 2. 'Liminary' superstitions. Birthing process (English 2, Russian 5, Mari 5)

This level gives pieces of advice that can help a woman during the delivery process. Most of them are again connected with sympathetic magic. The match for all three languages says that *to make a delivery easy it is necessary to open all locks, windows, doors in the house.* It shall help a woman. But in Mari culture it is better to close an oven chimney that may let evil spirits enter the house and do harm for a woman or a baby.

In Russian and Mari languages we can also find superstitions saying that *it is necessary to let woman's hair down and undo knot all around the house.* They have the same meaning as locks, windows, and doors. Everything in the house shall be in loose condition.

English-Russian match warns about not to inform anybody about the delivery date as it may make the delivery process more difficult. Nobody shall know about it in order they do not discuss and not attract attention of fairies and evil spirits.

It is interesting to highlight that in Mari culture it was a tradition to give birth in the bathhouse or in the cowhouse (during the summer period). The bathhouse has a special Mari spirit that can help women. Moreover, a lot of rites need water that is at hand in the bathhouse. Giving birth in the cowhouse was connected with the elements of producing and sympathetic magic as animals give birth to their babies very easily.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The given brief overview of English, Russian, and Mari superstitions connected with pregnancy and delivery processes shows that there are matches in all three languages. This important thing underlines the universal character of some superstitions and, therefore, rites of different folks that are reflected in their languages. On the other hand, there are interesting superstitions that are unique for this or that culture or have opposite meaning in different cultures or similar superstitions include different images peculiar to a particular language. Such things help different cultures not to mix and save their own special identity and view of the world. It is superstitions that save this identity as they exist through centuries and do not lose their power.

As for the period of pregnancy and delivery process, superstitions help a woman to keep safe herself and her baby. They give pieces of preventive advice that thread on infirm ground for the first sight but include valuable experience of previous generations.

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