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Lived Religion as Reproductive Decision-Making Resource Among Romanian Women Who Use Abortion as Contraception

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Abstract This article draws upon qualitative ethnographic data collected between 2005 and 2013 in southern Romania among women who have been consistently using abortion as a contraceptive method. It particularly considers the role that lived religion might have played in some individuals' strategies to render abortion a justifiable practice. Over the last seven decades, Romanian women's experiences of abortion have often been at odds with both secular and religious regulations. This study shifts the perspective from the biopolitics and the bioethics of abortion toward women's own reproductive decision-making strategies in a context of enduring traditional patriarchy. It explores the fluid and pragmatic ways in which some Romanians use the notions of "God's will," "sin," "redemption," "afterlife," and "Godparenting" to redefine abortion as a partially disembodied reproductive event. As a reproductive decision-making resource, lived religion empowers women to navigate the lived complexities of conception and contraception.

Keywords Abortion as contraception · Lived religion · Reproductive decision-making · Romania

Introduction and Background

> I did not have one abortion, I had thirty! Oh, […] thirty I had! Oh, God, may God forgive us, and may [God] spare us the punishment to eat them all, once we reach the afterlife.

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These words belong to Maria, a 74-year-old primary school educated farmer from southern rural Romania. Her reproductive years long gone, Maria recalled during our interview the pregnancy interruptions she had had from the late 1950s through the early 1970s. Coincidentally, it was during that time period that the Socialist state policy regarding abortion and contraception had changed drastically. In 1966, Decree 770 criminalized pregnancy interruption, while modern contraception was unofficially banned. Especially in Catholic countries such as Ireland, Poland, or Argentina (Erdman 2014; Mishtal 2015; Defago and Faundes 2014) pronatalist policies restricting abortion and contraception were enforced to presumably protect life from conception. Unlike other reproductive policies, the Romanian law was promulgated by the atheist authorities in order to increase natality and expand the future working class generation (Băban 1999; Bradatan and Firebaugh 2007; Kligman 1998). However, Decree 770 didn't stop Maria—as well as millions of other Romanian women—from surreptitiously seeking abortions on a fast-growing black market of illegal pregnancy interruptions.

In a rural and peri-urban Romania with cultural roots in traditional patriarchy and little to no access to modern contraception, abortion had been used as a contraceptive method. After its 1966 criminalization, a much larger demographic group—including virtually all Romanian women—was forced to adopt abortion as a method of fertility control. Significantly, the practice of using abortion as a contraceptive method has continued also after the 1989 legalization of abortion and liberalization of modern contraception. The estimated total number of pregnancy interruptions performed between 1958 and 2008 was 22,178,906—more than the total living population of Romania, which counted 21,504,442 inhabitants in 2008 (Gheorghe 2011; Grimes et al. 2006; Sedgh et al. 2007; WHO 2015). These statistics reveal the extraordinary magnitude of a mass-phenomenon that has been taking place for decades. As disconcerting as it might seem, Maria's personal history of repeated abortions is in fact similar to millions other stories of Romanian women.

Maria's confession is nevertheless far from being an ordinary account. She considers abortion a sin that is redeemable in the afterlife through the dreadful cannibalistic act of ingesting the aborted fetuses. As many other women from Southern rural Romania, Maria is an active Greek Orthodox worshiper, but the way she sees abortion—as both practice and ideology—has little to do with the official views of the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) regarding pregnancy interruption. BOR—which claims the status of "national church"[1]—issued in 2005 an official pronouncement on abortion that defines it as the sin of infanticide in any phase. The document does not mention traditional contraceptive methods, like the use of the Ogino calendar to avoid intercourse during a woman's fertile days, endorsed by the Roman Catholic Church, but condemns the use of modern contraception as "as a very serious sin, equal to abortion" (BOR 2005; Stan and Turcescu 2005, 2007).

It appears that Maria's attempts to navigate the issue of abortion go beyond—and, to a certain extent, against—the official reproductive discourses and practices enacted at different political levels by both State and Church. She makes use of non-canonical, yet religious notions and meanings that allow her to redefine abortion as a defensible practice. Thus, Maria seems to neutralize the moral issues raised by her lived reproduction experiences by mobilizing lived religion—"an ever changing, multifaceted, often messy—even contradictory—amalgam of beliefs and practices that are not necessarily those religious institutions consider important" (McGuire 2008, p. 4). When considered through the lenses of the more dynamic and personal lived religion, most experiences often entail engagement

[1] During the 2011 population census, out of a total of 19,043,767 Romanians 16,367,267 (that is 85.94%) declared themselves Greek Orthodox Christians (INSSE 2011).

with the materiality and mundanity of everyday practices (Orsi 1997; Hann and Goltz 2010; Pop 2015).

A significant number of publications have explored the biopolitical and bioethical implications of Romanian abortion policies, such as the dramatic increase in the number of unsafe and costly back-alley abortions, as well as the raise in maternal mortality rates, and in the number of abandoned children (Băban 1999, 2000, 2006; Bradatan and Firebaugh 2007; David 1999; David and Băban 1996; Jinga et al. 2011; Keil and Andreescu 1999; Kligman 1995, 1998; Stan and Turcescu 2005; Şerbănescu et al. 1995). However, ordinary citizens' responses to such policies are still not thoroughly elucidated. Besides a handful of studies that feature ethnographic interviews with women recalling dreadful details of their past reproductive histories (e.g., Anton 2009; Kligman 1998, chapter 6; Miroiu and Dragomir 2010), it was rather popular culture and cinema that focused the attention to Romanian women's lived experiences of abortion. Iepan's (2005) documentary *The Children of the Decree* features several women's actual abortion stories, as it follows the lives of the Romanians born immediately after the adoption of Decree 770. Cristian Mungiu's Golden Palm award winning movie at the 2007 Cannes film festival *Four Months, Three Weeks and Two Days* explores the desperation and cynicism that shaped power relations on the Romanian black market of abortion in the 1980s. Although Mungiu's story is a veridical one, it follows the logic of cinematic fiction, thus providing an alternate insight into ordinary people's lives compared to the perspective that ethnography can foster.

This article draws from ethnographic field data collected in Southern Romania, in the attempt to illuminate the lived reproductive experience of abortion in women like Maria and her peers, who have been consistently terminating their pregnancies as a method of fertility control. I particularly consider the role that lived religion might have played in some women's strategies to render abortion a justifiable practice. Their experiences of pregnancy termination are often at odds with both secular and religious institutional regulations concerning abortion and contraception. State and Church are concerned with abortion from a biopolitics of life and death, respectively, from a bioethics of life and death perspective. However, both State's and Church's views on abortion are problematic, because they ignore that "women, children, and families are not abstract public goods. Impassioned rhetoric about the sanctity of life as an abstraction divorced from the realities of everyday circumstances does not alter those everyday realities" (Kligman 1998, p. 18). The remarkable fact about abortion in Romania is that, despite repeated and dramatic changes in state reproductive policies, and despite Orthodoxy's unequivocal condemnation of contraception and pregnancy termination, Romanian women have continued to use abortion as a contraceptive method over the last more than seven decades (Johnson et al. 2004). We thus need to shift our gaze toward elucidating women's own tactics to stage abortion as a reasonable everyday practice. It appears that, to some Romanian women, lived religion constituted a reproductive decision resource that allowed them to meaningfully articulate the experience of abortion. As I show in this article, they used religious notions in complex, fluid and pragmatic ways, in order to redefine abortion as a partially disembodied reproductive event.[2]

[2] It is worth noting that the lived religion approach to abortion has its roots in traditional rural Romania. Both abortions and births were attended by traditional midwives who had learned their skills from older women (see also Kligman 1998, pp. 45–46). Because of their expertise related to both facilitating and preventing a new life, traditional midwives were simultaneously revered and feared. As mentioned later in this article, some lived religion practices centered on midwives still persist in southern Romania.

Methods

The data were collected between 2005 and 2013 during several fieldwork stages in Delcel, a neighborhood of Roşiori de Vede, in Teleorman County, southern Romania. Roşiori de Vede ranks as a municipality, having about 31,000 inhabitants. Delcel counts about 200 households. The research protocol was approved by the researchers' affiliated University Institutional Review Board. Qualitative and quantitative data were gathered on prenatal and postpartum medical care, childbirth, and cervical cancer primary and secondary prevention. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 43 women ranging between 20 and 87 years old. All informants were asked the same set of questions, but the interviews lasted between 90 min and 3 h, depending on women's willingness and ability to further elaborate some topics. Informants' level of education ranged from primary school to college, with more than a half of them having had completed 10 grades. Written informed consent was secured from all respondents. They were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity. The interviews were audio recorded. The recruitment strategy was to gain access, with the help of one researcher's distant affinal female relative, to virtually all women over age 18 years, from Delcel. The interviewer's personal demographic profile and reproductive history facilitated initial contact and established trust. In some cases, contact was impossible to initiate, or women declined participation in the research. All but two of the respondents were lower and middle class Greek Orthodox Romanians. Almost all of them were active Orthodox worshipers who observed the religious celebrations, fasting days and Lent, venerated icons, and regularly attended religious services. Participant observation was also conducted during liturgical Orthodox services in the local church from Delcel, christening ceremonies, funeral services, and dead remembrance rituals.

Following other ethnographers' experience with the limitations of interviews as a qualitative method of anthropological inquiry, informants were approached gradually, through "participant conversations" (Rivkin-Fish 2005) that eventually led to in-depth interviews, minimizing the artificiality in communication that a formal interview is likely to bring. This method proved to be particularly suitable when discussing intimate reproductive events, such as miscarriage or abortion. Even though details about their pregnancy terminations were not elicited from respondents, many of them volunteered such information in the context of comparing the provision of reproductive health care before and after 1989. Data obtained were evaluated using thematic analysis (Pope and Mays 2000). The process of identifying recurring themes and sub-themes and codifying them was carried out manually.

The abortion research limitations result from the potentially sensitive character of the topic, as well from the informants' memory shortcomings, which might have made some women to minimize or, on the contrary, to exaggerate their past experiences of pregnancy interruptions. However, the abortion stories of women from Delcel resonate, in both number estimate and emotional intensity, with similar pregnancy termination recollections of women from other studies' cohorts (Băban 1999; Kligman 1998). In addition, in this article we are not concerned with the exact number of abortions each women actually had, but with the practice of using abortion as a method of fertility control and the role that lived religion might have played as a decision-making resource for pregnancy termination.

Findings and Discussion

Traditional Patriarchy Limits Women's Reproductive Decision-Making Resources

In order to understand the abortion experiences of women from Delcel, it is necessary to highlight to what extent their everyday lives as wives[3] are shaped not only by patriarchal ideology but also by patriarchal practices. It has been shown that, while patriarchy is articulated ideologically as "men's rule," it often entails antagonistic relations among women (Stone 2006). In its patrilocal enactment, the patriarchal uprooting of young wives from their kin networks leaves many such affinal women on their own. A young wife's isolation is particularly problematic in questions regarding sexuality and contraception. During fieldwork I often observed gendered interactions between husbands and their wives and I also gathered several accounts detailing the meanings of such interactions from the perspective of the women of Delcel. Ileana's story stood out to me because it provides an exemplary glimpse into customary gender and kin relations.

At the time I met her, Ileana was 59. Except for her tired, sun-burned hands that never had a manicure, she was not showing her age: dark-blond dyed short hair, an almost wrinkle-free face, and vivid eyes. After she had graduated 10 years of school more than 40 years earlier, Ileana had married and settled down in her husband's household, living with her in-laws, like the majority of Delcel married women. She recalled with resigned sadness the first major incident that she had with her affinal relatives. Her older son, then 5, had beaten a classmate and the teacher sent Ileana a note asking her to come to school to discuss the incident. Ileana had been busy all day, cleaning the house and cooking festive meals in preparation for the upcoming benediction of the family's house—a Greek Orthodox ritual held to consecrate new or recently renovated construction. Upon seeing the teacher's note, Ileana's mother-in-law decided that she would go and talk to the teacher. Ileana reminded her that the teacher had asked to talk to the mother—not the grandmother. Deeply offended, the mother-in-law reported the incident to her son—Ileana's husband—who immediately settled the dispute by beating Ileana and confiscating the festive dishes the young woman had prepared. Then, Ileana's husband and her mother-in-law left together to the *moaşa*'s place, leaving a tearful Ileana alone at home. In southern Romania, *moaşa* is the husband's older sister.[4] Before the 1950s medicalization of births, *moaşa* used to actually cut a newborn's umbilical cord. Today she still plays an important enculturator ritual role during the newborn's first rites of passage.

What was particularly painful for Ileana was precisely the feeling of estrangement and isolation from her female affinal relatives. As a young bride, Ileana struggled to adjust to life with her affines under the authority of her mother-in-law. Later, it was her sister-in-law (*moaşa*) who assumed the prerogative of watching over Ileana and her offspring even though they were not living under the same roof.

Ileana's narrative echoes numerous other Romanian ethnographic accounts that describe tense relations between mothers and their daughters-in-law (e.g., Marian 2009[1892]). While in theory the Socialist regime ended patriarchy by promoting women's emancipation and gender equality, traditional patriarchy has in fact survived in the private sphere under Socialism and re-emerged in Romania's public life as well after 1989 (Miroiu 2010;

[3] All my respondents were indeed married and shared with me their abortion experiences as wives. In a relatively patriarchal peri-urban Romania, conceiving and/or aborting out of wedlock is still stigmatized.

[4] The Romanian word for "midwife" is literally "the old man's wife."

Roman 2001, 2003; Durandin and Petre 2010). Ileana's story illustrates not only the local realities of Southern Romania's traditional patriarchy, but also the much broader, cross-culturally documented reality of strained relationships between affinal women that worldwide patriarchy produces in practice. As daughters-in-law, the new wives seem to benefit of little kin support when facing a wide range of issues, including, for instance, domestic violence or the contraceptive use of abortion (Halpern et al. 1996; Brown 2014; Braam and Hessini 2004). One of my main findings is that Maria, Ileana, and other women from Delcel chose to mobilize lived religion to justify their reproductive decisions, rather than relying on their female (or male) relatives' advice and support. With respect to abortion, these women made use of non-canonical versions of Greek Orthodox notions—such as "God's will," "Godparenting," "redemption," "afterlife," and "sin"—in order to stage pregnancy termination as a partially disembodied and thus less significant reproductive event. In the context of reproductive decision-making, lived religion was appropriated by isolated affinal women as a personal resource, empowering them, to a certain extent, in reproductive matters.

Lived Religion Stages Abortion as a Partially Disembodied Reproductive Event

Many Delcel women articulated both conception and contraception as reproductive experiences that were not taking place exclusively within the body. The section of the questionnaire aimed at mapping knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding conception revealed that most informants explicitly ascribed an essential role in conception to what they called "God's will." In their view, conception occurs as a result of both summoning God's intervention through prayers for a child and subsequent sexual intercourse between partners. Traditional patriarchy tends to stigmatize female sexuality while celebrating motherhood (Stone 2006). This tension between female sexuality and female reproduction is evident also in the patriarchal conceptualization of the female body as a locus of both pollution (menstrual blood) and purity (breast milk) (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Douglas 1966; Pop 2016). Thus, it seems that the notion of divine intervention into conception allows women to innocuously link female sexuality to motherhood, while dissociating, in part, conception from the body. "God's will" solves conveniently the patriarchal issue of female dangerous sexuality, but it also empowers some women to operate a discursive twist and apply it with respect to pregnancy termination. Since conception occurs both inside and outside of the body, abortion also happens only partly to a women's body and, by extension, to herself. Post-factum, some of my respondents tackled with the idea that abortion was also a manifestation of "God's will" of not letting some babies to be born.

While my interlocutors did not express any particular concern about BOR's official interdiction of abortion, all of them perceived pregnancy interruption as a sin—but a possibly redeemable one. Most women from Delcel mentioned the institution of Godparenting [*năşitul*] as the best way to redeem the sin of having a pregnancy terminated. God parents are chosen by the biological parents to act as spiritual supervisors for a child's development. They are expected to maintain strong material and symbolic ties with their Godchild throughout his/her life. Rather than focusing on the dogmatic condemnation of pregnancy termination, these women attempted to navigate the issue of abortion by engaging in local lived religion practices deeply rooted in enduring fictive kin relations. When a woman takes the Godparent role and thus provides long-life spiritual guidance and material support to another couple's child, she redeems the sin of having aborted her own. Expanding kinship networks through Godparenting counter-balances the potential

disruption in the descent line produced by abortion. Reproduction appears once again disembodied, as it shifts from individual bodies to the social body (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987), and from biological parenting to spiritual parenting.

During my interviews, I paid particular attention to the lexical choices women made when recounting their abortion experiences. Cross-culturally, some studies have documented how linguistic taboos postpone the attribution of personhood to critically ill newborns [e.g., Einarsdottir (2009) for Iceland; Einarsdottir (2000) for Guinea Bissau; Scheper-Hughes (1992) for Brazil]. In southern Romania, naming interdictions are practiced also under normal postpartum circumstances. Prior to the Orthodox christening, during the first 6 weeks of a newborn's life, family members avoid calling the baby by her name, using instead metaphors—such as "bread loaf" or "bundle bread." Thus, naming taboos are meant to acknowledge the liminal status of the newborn and to protect the fragility of a new life. Remarkably, in Delcel, some women used a similar linguistic mechanism to refer to their aborted fetuses. Their lexical choices were meant to attenuate rather than to assign personhood to the unborn. For instance, Veturia (87, high-school graduate) confessed to me:

> I married very young and I was completely ignorant of such things [contraceptive methods]. I had no one to talk about this. I did abort a whole soccer team.

While Veturia's intention was to emphasize the high number of pregnancies that she had terminated,[5] she imagined the fetuses collectively, as a team, without individual characteristics. The aborted "soccer team" metaphor expresses the avoidance to ascribe personhood to never born babies. However, there is an underlying patriarchal connotation in Veturia's wording. In Romania soccer is an exclusively masculine sport that stands for virility. Veturia's assumption that she aborted boys might reflect a patriarchal preference for sons. Similar to her, some other informants referred to their aborted fetuses with collective nouns ("bunch," "pile," "team," or even "half of a team"), or simply avoided any linguistic reference to the unborn, and talked about abortion as a no-outcome event. These discursive strategies articulated, once again, abortion as a partially disembodied reproductive experience.

Lived Religion Empowers Women to Imagine the Future

As shown above, Godparenting was seen by many as a practical way to redeem abortion in *this* life. However, about half a dozen of my interlocutors were concerned with abortion punishment in the afterlife. Let us recall Maria's confession, this time providing its full content:

> I did not have one abortion, I had thirty! Oh, […] thirty I had! Oh, God, may God forgive us, and may [God] spare us the punishment to eat them all, once we reach the afterlife. Cause you know what? [My husband] was drunk all the time and I was tired and vulnerable, taking care of animals, of cows, of devils. He had other mistresses and he had fiddlers playing to him, all day long drunk. And I had two, three [babies] every year, but I went to the doctor and expelled them. I didn't go to old sage women, I had doctor S. and this one, you know – not doctor M., he died – the old one, the short one. And I was having three every year, I was going to the doctor.

[5] A soccer team has eleven players.

> They were still allowed to do abortions. Then they were not allowed anymore, but they were still doing that secretly. So, I was getting [abortions], what else to do?

Maria's personal history of repeated marital rape was a disturbing one to listen and record. She explained her use of abortion as contraception as a consequence of her husband's discretionary exercise of his patriarchal prerogatives. As a response to such disempowering circumstances, abortion appeared justified to Maria, yet she expressed concern about future punishment for it. Abortion as a yet to redeem sin provided narrative coherence to Maria's life history, as it linked past, present, and future. It allowed her to even imagine her afterlife. Fetal cannibalism representations are common in many cultures worldwide (Sasson and Law 2009). Their meanings are double folded: first, the sinner is supposedly forced to ingest the aborted fetuses to literally undo their premature expulsion; second, cannibalism exposes the sinner to the most atrocious and dehumanizing imaginable condition.

Yet, most of my interlocutors were not so much concerned with the consequences of abortion to their individual status in the afterlife. While still upholding to the notion of abortion as a sin, they chose to politicize the issue of pregnancy interruption and rather imagine the future of the next generations of daughters and granddaughters. In contrast with Maria's conviction about the impossibility of preventing the repeated use of abortion as contraception, Oana (a 59-year-old college graduate) struggled to articulate the need to access modern contraception as a moral right that should be granted by the state and endorsed through familial religious education.

> Author*: What should a woman do once she realizes she is pregnant?*
> Oana*: If she intended to get pregnant, she must be happy, if she got pregnant accidentally, she should regret and think that she could have taken contraceptive pills instead. Especially now, that pills are allowed. In any case, she shouldn't consider having an abortion. No way.*
> Author*: Why?*
> Oana*: I think that I could have had four [children] instead of two. Just because this is murder, it really is murder!*
> Author*: That means that there is life in there?*
> Oana*: Of course there is life from conception and today gynecologists and obstetricians are murderers! The state and health ministry should provide pills to all women, to all young girls, starting at 15; they should develop a campaign […] for contraception, because abortion is murder!*
> Author*: Don't you think that making pills available on a large scale to young girls will be likely to cause other problems?*
> Oana*: No, this is where mothers play a role. This is why these girls have mothers, right? But many times mothers chose to stay away from this.*
> Author*: Maybe many of the mothers were raised during the Socialist times, with virtually no access to contraceptive education…?*
> Oana*: Not necessarily, I talked to my daughter, I told her abortion is not the way, it's a sin and [it's] dangerous. And there are other [mothers] like me, but there are many who just don't care.*

Oana is now menopausal. She spent her reproductive years during the pronatalist regime, occasionally acquiring Chinese condoms or Hungarian pills from the black market of contraceptives. Her declared abortion record (of only two abortions to four pregnancies) is one of the lowest among all my informants. Oana framed her claims of life from

conception by operating a selective reading of the Orthodox interdiction on abortion, abortive remedies, and modern contraception. In addition to balancing the *pro-life* and *pro-choice* discourses, Oana foresaw a win–win partnership between state authorities and parents to solve the issue of abortion as contraception. Her perspective was though quite exceptional among my informants. While studies about mother–daughter communication about sexuality are still missing in Romania, Oana's remark that many Romanian mothers are reluctant to address the topic of sexuality with their daughters—either from a religious or from a secular perspective—seems to be accurate, especially in rural areas.

Conclusion

Looking beyond the biopolitical and bioethical conceptualization of abortion—as they are articulated by both State and Church—allows us to advance in understanding the ways Romanian women have been routinely framing abortion as contraception in the last seven decades. Qualitative research that recognizes that pregnancy termination is a lived reproductive experience suggests that some women have mobilized lived religion to render abortion a justifiable practice. While Romanians tend not to challenge the notion of abortion as a sin, they navigate this issue by subscribing to non-canonic, yet religious ideas and practices about sexuality and reproduction.

Both conception and contraception are thought to be influenced by divine intervention, which results in a partial disembodiment of human reproduction. Redemption for the sin of abortion becomes a social performance centered upon the transfer from the never consummated consanguineal relation parents-(aborted) offspring to fulfilling the spiritual duty of Godparents through fictional kin mechanisms. Moreover, linguistic taboos originating in peri-natal magic practices are employed by many women to decline personhood to the unborn. The partial disembodiment of abortion is expressed through language as well. Furthermore, redemption for the sin of abortion can still be secured in an imagined afterlife. Finally, a few women politicize the issue of abortion as contraception and envision a state–family partnership based on a selective reading of Orthodox antiabortion prescriptions.

Unlike State's and Church's views on abortion, which settle the issue in unambiguous terms, everyday religious meanings and narratives have a correlate in women's actual reproductive experiences. As a decision-making resource, lived religion appears to empower some women to navigate the complexities of conception and contraception. Considering abortion as contraception through the lenses of lived religion adds to our understanding of the persistence of this reproductive practice among some Romanian women.

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