

# **Godparenthood capitalism: strong ties as anchor and shield in illegal economic practices**

*Monica Vasile<sup>1</sup>*  
*University of Bucharest*

*Paper presented at EASA 2008, workshop 'Kinning' with the neighbours, ritualizing the kin: ritual bonding and negotiating resources*

## **Introduction**

Starting to work recently on godparenthood literature in social anthropology, I had the impression of a huge gap, both in time and in space.

The temporal gap comes from the fact that after the boom in the '50s and '60s and several important echoes from the '70s and the '80s, the topic faded away, although it contains the germs of kinship, spirituality and ritual – core issues for the discipline of social anthropology. The impression of spatial gap comes from the concentration on Latin America and the Mediterranean world, with one exception, the Balkans (Hammel, 1968).

The present paper aims to bring a fresh approach to a classical theme from an area (Romania) where the practice of godparenthood is yet present in various forms and intensities, even reinforced, I would say, in the realm of economical and political changes after socialism. Because of the perceived gap, I will give a more descriptive account of godparenthood practices across Romania, and then focus on one particular case that shows how spiritual kinning serves as a mean to position oneself in a web of power relations and to forge illegal practices.

## ***Theoretical outline and aim of the paper***

It is often expressed in the literature on godparentage that it creates solidary relationships, which may be put to diverse social uses (Gudeman, 1975: 229), that it is connecting people and different groups (Gudeman, 1984: 55; Killick, 2008: 328). It is also said that it is reinforcing and emphasizing preexisting ties of friendship or economic relations (Killick, 2008: 328). Sometimes, the feature of cross-cutting across ethnic or class differences in creating vertical godparenthood ties is seen in terms of reinforcing differences rather than drawing

---

<sup>1</sup> [monica.vasile@gmx.net](mailto:monica.vasile@gmx.net)

groups socially or culturally together (Osborn, 1968: 605), for example by creating enduring patron-client relationships (G. and P. van Den Berghe, 1966: 1239).

However, to understand the functions of godparenthood ties, one must strive to understand the contents of these ties. Understanding the contents means on the one hand, from a static point of view, depicting the actors that enter the relationships, and on the other hand, from a dynamic point of view, mapping the social interactions of the actors in cause. The social interactions that form and enforce the godparenthood ties are mainly rituals and exchanges of visits and gifts, both at the ceremony (of baptism or marriage) and afterwards. I will offer in the first part of the paper a glimpse on social interactions that are associated with godparenthood in Romania and on rituals and exchanges performed in such interactions.

A classical theme in the anthropology of godparenthood is discussing symmetry or asymmetry of the social relationship, i.e. the horizontality or verticality of relations (godparents in equal status positions with godchildren or parents versus unequal positions). It has often been implied that the godparenthood relation is in most cases vertical, or asymmetric, the godparent having a higher position (Mintz and Wolf, 1950). This is seen as the impact of church notions upon folk practices, namely of the ecclesiastical idea that spiritual is higher than the natural (Gudeman, 1975: 235). It has been seen also in a more social light, as people seeking to connect to other people in a mere instrumental way, as to increase social capital in order to explicitly forge other types of relations, economical or political ones (Mintz and Wolf, 1950; Foster, 1961; P. van Den Berghe, 1966). In this paper I am implying that the customary social practices associated to godparenthood (rituals, exchanges, gifts) contribute in a high degree to defining the nature of the relationship and, implicitly to the choice of a godparent. I will argue that for the 'Romanian' case, it is widely accepted that the godparent has in some respect a higher status, but the exchanges that are performed account for a tolerated limit of status difference. The godchildren or the parents have to be able to perform a relatively reciprocal exchange of gifts and visits. Where the customs have loosened and the exchanges are no longer performed properly, there is room for more vertical alliances, but, in turn, these alliances do not provide the expected economical or political ends. Thus, I will argue that the classical dichotomy has to be nuanced and the notion of *accepted limit of status difference* describes best what is happening in the 'Romanian' case. I will provide further in the paper two cases

that aim to illustrate both an economically and politically effective relationship and another ineffective one.

In the first part I will show that Romania, although religiously unitary, accounts for very different patterns of the godparenthood complex across different regions. I will draw a continuum of the godparenthood ties all across Romania, a continuum that aims to show that while the number of godparents for one person or couple increases, going up to 25 pairs of godparents in certain regions, the strength (or the quality) of the spiritual and social bonding decreases. On this continuum, I will first draw the lines of the more general situation, that of one pair of godparents and then point out two cases in detail, both from villages where the primary livelihood source is forestry. I will depict a case where there are usually four pairs of godparents and the supposed economic and institutional backup is not effective, in contrast to another case, where godparenthood is a tie that enforces economical, political and institutional power and brings trust into economic and political relations. The latter will constitute the second part of the paper.

The pursuit of the paper is yet exploratory, drawing very much on my, let's say, "embodied knowledge" of godparenthood as a native Romanian and on co-lateral data from my PhD fieldwork on collective property over forests. Actually, the idea of writing a paper on "godparenthood capitalism" rose from my fieldwork experience, where many of the folk explanations for perpetuated corruption and illegal logging rely on the creation of strong ties, like marriage alliances or godparentage, among people positioned in webs of power and economical relations.

### ***General lines of godparenthood in Romania***

The practice of godparenthood is very much spread and respected across Romania; people largely consider themselves as religious persons (belonging to the Orthodox religion in proportion of 86%) and perform baptism and marriage in the church.

#### **Words describing relations**

In Romanian, words describing godparenthood ties are many and various, suggesting a rich development of the ritual kinning complex. First, the godfather is named *naş*, with its regional variations of *nănaş*, *nunaş*, or *nun* (coming from the Latin *nonnus*) and the godson is named *fin*. For the action of becoming somebody's godparents, it is said *a cunună* and the marriage is

called *cununie*, literally meaning “to crown somebody”, coming from the ritual crown put on the couple’s heads during the marriage ceremony.

The more general relations established between the families of the godparents and the couple are named *cumetrie* (not established if the root of the word is the Slavic *kum/kumotra* or the Latin *commater*). The parents and the godparents or brothers of the married couple and the godparents name each other *cumetri*. Because more people are tied in the relation between the families and thus match the denomination of *cumetri*, this word is very commonly used and heard in rural areas. Moreover, in certain areas, the word is use to call persons from the village, born in the same generation. This type of extension of the use of spiritual kinship terms to designate relations where there is no spiritual binding is reported also for Mexico (G. and P. van Den Berghe, 1966: 1238 and Whiteford, 1964, cited in G. and P van Den Berghe: *ibidem*), here the usage being extended to parents or grandparents of the married couple and even loosely extended to friends.

Frequently for speaking about the marriage itself, people use the word *cumetrie*, (“I am going to a cumetrie”), thus, putting first the spiritual kinning of the respective families, despite the marital alliance.

### **Spiritual and moral bonding**

Unlike cases from the Catholic world, in the Orthodox countries there are only two ceremonies when a person gets godparents, baptism and marriage (as for the Catholics seeking for expanding ties, there might be also first communion, confirmation, or other secularized occasions, like the 15-year “coming out” fiesta for girls, or sometimes graduation from highschool G. and P. van Den Berghe, 1966: 1237).

The church ritual of baptism as well as that of marriage entails one principal action from the part of the godparents, that of holding the candles during the ceremony, the metaphor of light meaning that the godparents are the ones that enlighten the child’s or the couple’s way, being their guides and moral sponsors. Moreover, it is said by the church that the character and the sins of the godparent reflect upon the child’s own character and actions<sup>2</sup>. It is considered that if the godparent is sinful, than the child has to bear those sins as well, underlining the moral responsibility of the godparent to his or hers spiritual children. Sins appear here in an interesting position, as the child may be actually charged with uncommitted sins by alliance

---

<sup>2</sup> Interview with priest Ioan, Bucharest

with an improper godparent. It appears in contradiction with the original significance of the baptismal sponsorship, that of cleansing of the original sin and of entering a spiritual order (Gudeman, 1975), but it enforces the church prescription for the sponsors to have certain moral qualifications for the position (reported also for eighteenth-century Bahia, Brazil, by Gudeman, 1984: 39 )

The orthodox ecclesiastical rules concerning godparenthood derive mainly from the fact that the godparents become parents, relatives in the first grade with the children, or with the married couple. Thus, the entire complex of consanguinity prohibitions arises, as it is universally the case in Christian beliefs (documented for Catholic *compadrazgo* Gudeman: 1975)

### **Social bonding**

However, as Gudeman considers (1975: 235), the spiritual bonds are realized in a social system.

The event for which godparents are nowadays carefully chosen is primarily the marriage, not the baptism (as it used to be in customary norms Constantinescu 2000: 217). The general requirement for the marriage sponsors is to be a married couple<sup>3</sup>. Then, one of them also becomes the baptismal sponsor of the first child (although in many situations, the child calls both members of the godparental unit as godparents, not only the one that was fulfilling the role at the baptism). However, this rule has many variations. It is frequent that one of the godparents' children becomes sponsor of the first child, thus happening that the godparent is not even 14 years old. In this case, the very young godparents do not realize or assume the spiritual bonding, facilitating the decline of the spiritual kinning.

Romanian rituals of the wedding, both the church ritual and the social event<sup>4</sup>, entail an increased number of ritual exchanges and ritual performances. The custom at weddings is for all the guests and the kin to give a money gift (*dar*)<sup>5</sup>. Usually, the value of the gift is judged

---

<sup>3</sup> Although for other Romanian areas, in the case of multiple godparents (to be presented further in the paper) this rule is broken, one of the pairs of godparents might be concubines.

<sup>4</sup> Consisting in a party with guests ranging from 100 to 250 and marked by different ritual moments.

<sup>5</sup> Weddings in Romania are a very good occasion to observe the ritual complex of exchange; first, if somebody attends the wedding of somebody else, the married couple has to return the attendance of the wedding; the gift exchange is also highly regulated; the value of the gift is reciprocal, but also depends upon other circumstances, as for example location; the ritual performance of the gift giving remained very rich in several regions, mostly in rural areas – a man with a bag passes by the tables and everybody loudly presents its gift, sometimes showing the money and putting it into a bag, sometimes just showing an envelope; some couples keep a record of all their wedding guests and the correspondent gift, in order to remember their own obligations and not to break the reciprocity rule.

related to the total costs of the wedding (the criteria usually is whether it is in a fancy location or not) and to the local custom. The gifts are differentiated according to the relationships to the couple. The godparents are the ones that make the most valuable gift, in most settings 10 times more than a usual guest couple (the godparents' gift usually amounts 1000 euros). Consequently, when the couple proposes a godparenthood kinning, they take into account (among other criteria) the material possibilities of the potential godparents, to be assured firstly that they will not refuse due to financial constraints and secondly that they will participate financially at the wedding costs<sup>6</sup> and will contribute a satisfactory money gift. The married couple gives another type of gift to the godparents, a home decoration or use object, usually of a lesser value<sup>7</sup>. Further on, there are certain calendar moments during the year, when has to take place a ritual exchange of gifts, mostly from the part of the godchildren, and the married couple to visit the godparents (Răchișan, 2007: 2104), for maintaining the social bond.

The depicted social practices that maintain and perform the social ties created through godparenthood attest neither for a perfectly symmetrical, nor for an asymmetrical relationship, rather for an *accepted limit of status difference*, which I might translate relatively symmetrical relationship between the godparents and the godchildren (or the godchildren's family). The godparents have to be 'affordable', because of the continuous exchange of gifts. Although it is accepted that the godfather has to be more powerful, wiser and more experienced, the social events that cement the relationship, in which the godchild has to reciprocate through gifts the spiritual patronage, determines that the difference in status is not very sharp.

The roles of 'giver' and 'receiver' are not fixed. Who initially gives the favor (a criteria of determining the giver and the receiver discussed in Gudeman, 1975: 234) is only one aspect of giving and receiving. One has to ask about the totality of honors and 'things' that constitute the objects of exchange and about when, in which occasion, one is giver and another one receiver. Unlike Yugoslavia for example, where the godfather is the receiver (Hammel, 1968: 74), in Romania the godfather is the giver of the initial favor. In addition, at the wedding, the godparents are the givers of the gift. Afterwards, the godparents are the givers of hospitality

---

<sup>6</sup> The custom is for the godparents to buy either the candles and the flowers, or the bride's cake (the value of this contribution being approximately 300 euros, depending on the general level), and to pay the church tax (100 euros)

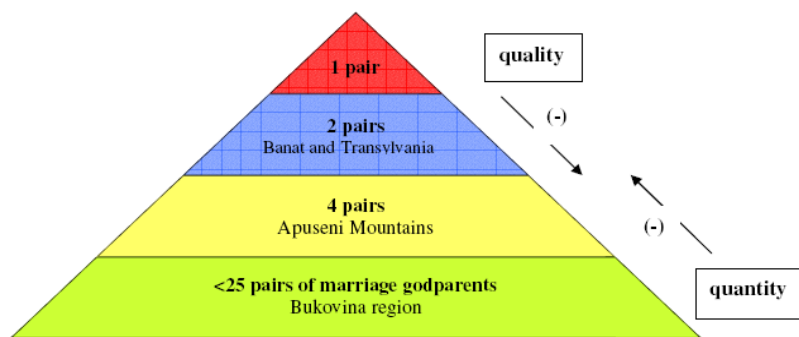
<sup>7</sup> In certain cases, it is the parents that make a gift to the godparents; usually the gift for the godparents is given after the wedding, in certain rural areas in the form of farm products (e.g. a calf or a sheep, cheese).

(hosting the visits) and the givers of advice, and the receivers of the gifts. The godchildren maintain the relationship, by giving attention, and by constantly owing gifts. Thus, it might be implied that at the wedding the godparents are those who bare the material duties, while afterwards the roles change. The social duties, hospitality, attention and respect are shared.

I have attempted to draw a unifying picture of what might be implied under the label of ‘Romanian’ godparenthood, however, relations and customs vary greatly among regions, rural-urban and social statuses. This is why in the next chapter I will give a more nuanced picture, mapping differences across Romania’s regions.

***A pyramid of godparenthood relations***

I have drawn a typology of four different situations of the godparenthood complex across



Romania, according to the numerical extension of godparents involved. The typology is conceived in the shape of continuum on which these cases might be understood; at one end of the continuum I put the case where we have the most usual situation, with only one pair of godparents, which is a good premise for tight relations between the godparents and their godchildren where one can expect to find mutual help and various types of ritual exchanges among the people involved; at the other end of the continuum, I put the case where we have the most unusual situation, with up to 24 pairs of godparents. In this case, the pool of social relations established is highly enlarged, but the actual bonds become very loose. Drawing the continuum in the shape of a pyramid is suggestive, implying that at the bottom of the pyramid we have an important amount of social relations created through godparenthood, though the relations do not actually bind people together; through the top of the pyramid, the pool of social relations is not large, but the created bond is strong.

The high degree of development of ritual kinship is not a unique form throughout the Christian world, it can be found also throughout history in Spain, in registers from 1543 it can be seen that there were 3 pairs permitted (Poska, 1998: 97), or in southeastern Mexico, where “at marriage there are often several sets of *primeros padrinos* and in addition, from four to six *madrinas* perform distinct functions during the church wedding” (G. and P. van Den Berghe,

1966: 1237). As for the social consequences of the extension, in Spain, where marriage prohibitions were strongly controlled by church, the custom of multiple godparents seriously depleted the number of possible marriage partners (the result was that the church stopped the practices of multiple godparents); in Mexico, extension is purchased at the price of loss of intensity, sometimes it occurs that “people even forget that a ritual tie exists or let it lapse through disuse” (*idem*: 1240). In the Romanian case, generally the church does not impose its rules over folk customs; there are rare cases where the priests refuse to perform marriages with more than one pair of godparents and the general outcome in the cases of extension is the decline of the social and spiritual ties.

### **Case 1. Good potential for strong godparenthood ties: 1 pair.**

The first case in the continuum is the one where there is only one pair of godparents at the marriage and one pair or one single godparent at the baptism.

One implicit thesis of this paper is to show that while enlarging the number of godparents, the social and spiritual ties become weaker. Nevertheless, the reverse proposition is not always valid. *It is not always the case that having only one pair of godparents ensures a strong social and spiritual binding.* To the general decline of godparenthood ties, even in the case of one pair, might contribute the increasing spatial and social mobility. **Spatial mobility** determines the physical concrete distancing of people, which makes no longer possible respecting all the visiting events marked in the popular calendar. But spatial mobility might as well contribute not to the decline, but to the transformation of the gift exchange practice and of the visiting practices. I have encountered an example where a person inhabiting one village in Vrancea Region<sup>8</sup> is godfather to two couples, one established in Greece and the other one in Italy. They maintain their social ties through visits, but while the custom promotes the idea that the godchildren are indebted to pay visits and to bring gifts to the godparents, somehow in exchange of their spiritual patronage, actually what has changed is the direction of visits; now godparents pay visits to their godchildren, going for two weeks holidays in Greece or Italy, thus enabling the godchildren to transform the hospitality itself into the due gift.

**Social mobility**, i.e. increasing the status difference, also contributes to diminishing the exchange of visits and of gifts, because at the beginning the couple of godparents or

---

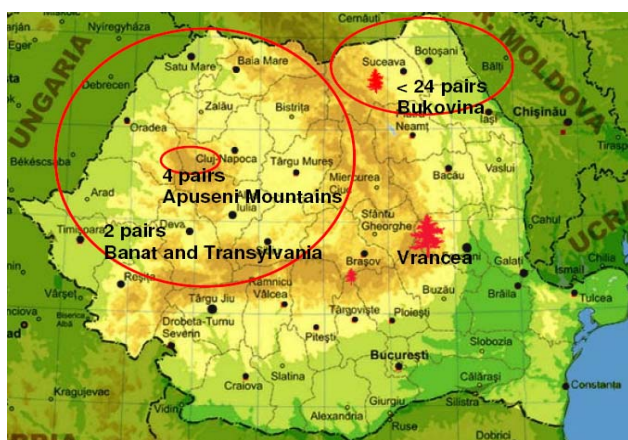
<sup>8</sup> Where I conducted fieldwork



godchildren were 'affordable' and a certain affinity and reciprocity existed, but in time, when one of the couples gets rich, reciprocity or the tolerated limits for difference are no longer possible.

However, in most cases, when there is only one pair of godparents, the social bond remains strong, meaning that the customary 'duties' at the wedding and afterwards are performed. The godparents will offer an important money gift and furthermore the gifts and visits exchange will be respected.

In Romania, mainly in the southern belt of the Meridional Carpathians, one can also find the Slavic model, of godparenthood relations among kin groups, where the duty of being a godparent is inherited by the son or daughter who remains in the house. This model is to be



found in a lesser degree and I do not have yet sufficient information to present it in this paper.

### **Case 2. Gender differentiation: 2 pairs.**

In this case there are two pairs of godparents, usually found in the regions of Transylvania and Banat<sup>9</sup>. One pair is from the groom's part, named the Grand

Godparents, the other pair, from the bride's part, named the Little Godparents. Here is suggested an analogy with the Romanian denomination of the parents with regard to the married children, grand parents-in-law with regard to a male child, and little parents-in-law with regard to a female child, the pattern showing the primacy of the man's relatives.

However, it is not a rule that the roles of each pair of godparents to be differentiated.

Normally, they both fulfill the same roles in the church ritual and equal respect and attention has to be shown to them. However, it is frequently the case where the couple is more attached to one of the two pairs.

<sup>9</sup> Central, Western, North Western and South Western part of Romania, as suggested in the little map provided.

### Case 3. False expectations: 4 pairs.

In certain places of the two regions above mentioned one can find 4 pairs of godparents, sometimes maintaining the same distribution, two pairs on the side of the groom and two on the side of the bride. I documented more in depth such a case from the Apuseni Mountains<sup>10</sup>, where I could observe that the spiritual and social bonds are declining, although people try to connect to godparents that might enrich their social capital.

In this region the primary source of livelihood is the woodland<sup>11</sup>. Almost all people in the area are whether forest dwellers or working for forestry institutions. Thus, to be well connected here means to have kin and friends among foresters.

I will present an example of a young forest guard (belonging institutionally to the natural park), who married a girl from the same village. Among his four marriage godfathers he has the vice mayor, the ex chief of the local forestry district, a policeman in the area and a forest guard from another institution, from the forestry district. He had the intention to anchor himself in the forestry web, but, as he said, godparenthood did not provide him with helpful connections. It is only the vice mayor that helped him with a few occasions, but because *'he is generally a good person and helpful to everybody'*, independently from being his godson. Hence, the social ties seem to be weak. Although in people's expectations we might find the idea of a certain social bond, the actual performance of it does not prove for any strength, for any real anchorage through godparenthood.

There are other signs for weakness as well. The ritualistic side of godparenthood is poor. There is no gift exchange happening, the couple has no obligations (nor at the wedding, neither afterwards), only the godparents offer a money gift. Moreover, the gift giving at the occasion of the marriage does not reach the value of other Romanian regions. Essentially, there is an interesting discrepancy between what is loudly announced at the wedding as a money gift from the part of the godparents (the announcement reaches the amount of 800 euros), and the amount that is in reality given to the godchildren (8 times less, approximately 100 euros). I might suggest here that again the 'expectations' – what is announced - do not meet the reality. Godparenthood has thus transformed into a 'façade' custom, into a pure ritualistic event, emptied of its spiritual and social value. The keyword of this case might be

---

<sup>10</sup> While my primary PhD fieldwork was in another region, I just went to the Apuseni Mountains for the purpose of this paper, for documenting another case of forest-related village with a different godparenthood pattern.

<sup>11</sup> The precise area is the commune Gârda de Sus.

prestige. The godfather gains prestige by showing off in a prominent position at an important social event. The godson also gains prestige by appearing in alliance with an important person. It seems to be of little importance that beyond these appearances there are no other types of relations and exchanges involved.

#### **Case 4. Mechanical godparenthood: up to 24 pairs.<sup>12</sup>**

In the region of Bukowina there is the custom to have many pairs of godparents at the wedding and up to fifty godparents at the baptism. I suggest that in this case, the social and spiritual bonds weaken comparing to the other situations, as the lower position in the pyramid illustrates.

At the wedding ceremony, the godparents play an ordinary role, as well as in the godchildren's lives. At the baptism everybody who is in the church and wants to hold a candle becomes a godparent. As this might suggest, there is only the mechanical survival of the ritual act, of holding a candle. Hence, the significance of the godparents' role, to enlighten the child's way through life, is still performed in church, but not afterwards. Because of the number, sometimes there is no remembering of whom is a godparent of whom and usually there is no social or spiritual bond to the godparents, except the ritual function during baptism or marriage.

The church normally prohibits this practice, mainly because of the orthodox belief in becoming first grade kin with the godparent. It is thought that someone can not have fifty parents and, moreover, when it is happening in a rural area, it becomes obvious that the consanguinity rule is not respected anymore; in a village everybody would become kin with everybody. However, certain priests agree to perform marriages and baptisms with this large number of parents, in this way brokering the local customs into the Orthodox Church. This expanded practice of godparenthood suggests that the godparents are not considered as kin in this region and that godparenthood fulfils purely a ritual function, emptied of its long-lasting social and spiritual charge. Hence, while the pool of parents is largely expanded, the spiritual and the social ties are very weak, as other studies reveal for Mexico (G. and P. van Den Berghe, 1966: 1240; Foster, 1961: 1189). However, I suggest that in this region the significance of the institution of godparenthood is declining as a whole and not that only

---

<sup>12</sup> I have briefly come across this example on a short fieldtrip centred on the topic of forestry and documented it through literature. Sources on the issue are not very rich.

certain ties are recognized, while others are overlooked, as Foster (*ibidem*) suggests for Mexico, by not fulfilling reciprocal prestations afterwards.

### ***Political and economical use of godparenthood in contemporary Romania***

I will come back now to the case of one pair of godparents and show that in the same time with the decline of godparenthood practices in certain regions of Romania, spiritual kinship is still used as a very strong tie for economical and political purposes. The thesis is not new, but might still be interesting in relation to 'neoliberal' states, descending from a postsocialist social order. In the anthropological literature on Latin America and the Mediterranean, spiritual parentage, more precisely the vertical alliances, has often been related to practices of patronage and clientship (G. and P. van Den Berghe 1966; Osborn 1968; Killick 2008), and related to economical or political advantages (Mintz and Wolf, 1950; Ingham, 1970; Goody, 1970). Van den Berghe argues generally that establishing a special relationship or reinforcing existing ties to a social superior often has the effect of establishing paternalistic patron-client ties between persons of quite unequal status who exchange loyalty, favors, gifts, labor and hospitality over many years. Osborn and Killick, studying ritual kinning between distinct ethnic groups argue that the economics of the relationship is undoubtedly exploitative in nature (Killick, 2008: 324). Osborn argues for the pure clienship between the Colombian *mestizos* and the Kwaiker, pure "patronage under the guise of spiritual-cum-social relationship" (1968: 605). In contrast, Killick argues that the *compadrazgo* between 'his' *mestizos* timbermen and Asheninka workers in Peruvian Amazonia is meant to integrate power relations in a moral and social order and to bind the two groups together against a third entity, the large timber companies (2008: 304, 328). Ingham argues similarly to Osborn for the primacy of economic calculus over sacred relations (1985: 559), that social superiors will be chosen when there is need economic support and when there feel that "the economic advantages are... worth the added deference and allegiance due to a *compadre* of superior status" (Ingham, 1970: 285). Likewise, Goody has characterized the godparenthood complex as one in which "deference [is] traded for social and economic advantage" (Goody, 1970: 338).

I will draw on a case from the region where I conducted fieldwork for my PhD thesis<sup>13</sup>, case that reveals connections between spiritual kinning and corrupt practices. Data on this type of hidden issues is not always easy to obtain, thus, in some respects it might be said that my information relies very much on what the ‘others’ say about certain relations and exchanges. I do not have first hand information from the corrupt persons themselves regarding their godparenthood relationships, but I have verified the data from more than one source, and moreover, some information comes out in the local newspapers.

### **Ethnographic context**

My ethnography focuses on a community that is totally dependent upon the forest resource. As a consequence of privatisation and liberalisation of market, the village shelters the activity of more than one hundred timber-exploitation companies of various sizes. The owners of these companies control access to the resource that is formally owned by the community<sup>14</sup> and, moreover, they deplete the forest thoroughly, despite the proliferation of environmental and forestry decentralised institutions. Their actions are severely blamed in narratives by almost all other members of the community, but effectively opposed by only few of them. The powerful businessmen maintain access to the forest and paralyse opposition attempts (sometimes violently), by being enmeshed in patron-client networks, both downwards, comprising fellow villagers, and upwards, comprising forestry bureaucrats, judges and important politicians.

### **Networking and portrait of actors**

The success of illegal logging from the part of this corrupt group relies mostly on their social capital, build towards outside the village. The web of social relations in which community actors are enmeshed is formed out of friendship, kinship and ritual kinship relationships, doubled by economical, political and institutional exchanges. Very often, people in the community use the word *mafia*, *clan* or *clique* for describing what is happening in their village concerning timber. They use the expression ‘they among themselves’, in the sense that they do

---

<sup>13</sup> During 2005-2007, the region of Vrancea, central eastern part of Romania; an underdeveloped region in terms of education and infrastructure, comparing to other regions of Romania, where the main resource for livelihood is forest, economically used for timber.

<sup>14</sup> In the form a community-based institution, named *obște*, ruled by an executive board, in which all residents of the village have an equal right to withdraw wood and to vote for management and executive committee elections; the forest for this particular village amounts 4500 hectares, but business comprises also the neighbouring satellite villages, with another approximately 4000 hectares

everything among themselves, know and share everything among themselves. Somebody used suggestively the term “godparenthood capitalism” for expressing with anger the underground ties that succeed to contribute to the depletion of the village’s woodland.

I will try in the following lines to analyze and to draw a sketchy picture of the actual web of ties and actors that form the mafia and the respective clique<sup>15</sup>.

The two most important actors in the village are the mayor and the president of *obstea*. The mayor is in the same time the most powerful local businessman, thus he detains institutional and economical power, plus political capital<sup>16</sup>, being the direct political client of the most central character of Vrancea, the so called Wallet Baron (mayor of the county)<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, he has social ties through alliance with the other important character, the president (they are parents-in-law) and spiritual ties to other subordinate local businessman<sup>18</sup>. Thus, it might be implied that in this case the mayor is enforcing existing economical ties through godparenthood, securing loyalty among his clients. Thus, multiple exchanges will take place between the two. In the business sphere, the mayor gives security, protection against controls, because their economic activity is largely illegal, with the help of his upward network, while his client offers money (contribution for the political party), loyalty and access to his downward network. As for the social sphere, they exchange visits and gifts.

To resume his position, the political and economical capital that he ‘owns’<sup>19</sup> secures him a very good position externally, through a pure patron-client relationship. Internally, in the village, he anchors himself in social and spiritual alliances, strengthening in this way the relations with economically subordinates. On the other side of the relationship, people that engage with him in social and spiritual alliances enhance their economical security, very valuable for the illegal activities that they are into.

---

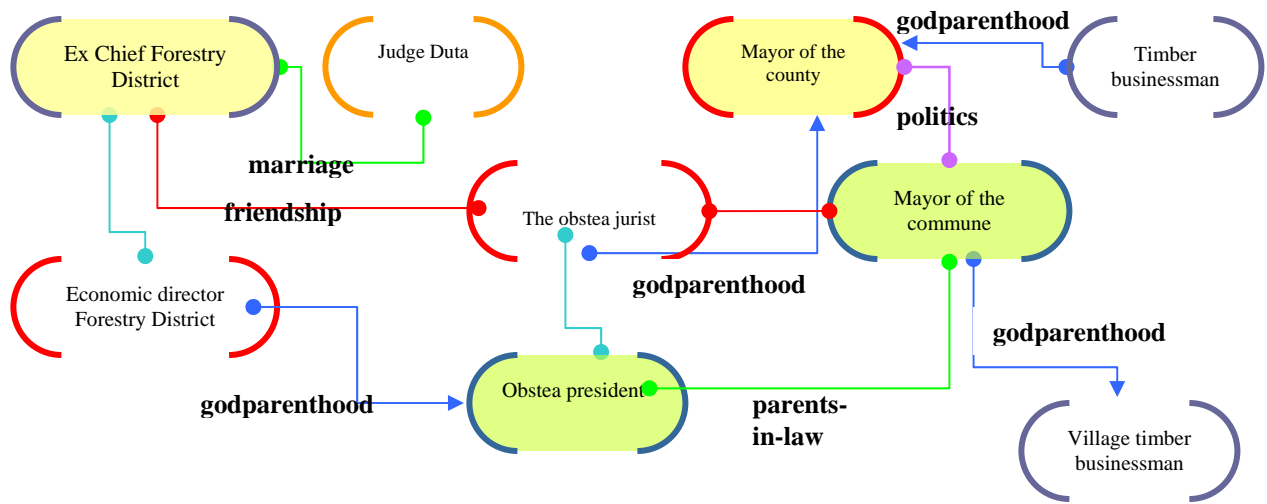
<sup>15</sup> It will only be a sketch because I will draw and describe only a selection of relationships, for not to overburden the readers’ mind.

<sup>16</sup> He was elected for the second mandate this year with a percentage of 85%, he is 41 years old.

<sup>17</sup> He is almost the same age as the mayor of the commune, he is called the Wallet Baron, according to a common denomination of rich Romanian businessmen, politically connected, which have made an entire region as a personal feud or fief, by collecting taxes and offering privileges to vassals.

<sup>18</sup> The patrons of smaller timber companies in the village are all his clients. Patron-client relations are pyramidal; the mayor (with 16 sawmills) is on the top, at the immediate downward level, there are 11 businessmen (with 4-6 sawmills each), among which *obstea* officials, foresters, and the hierarchy might continue with other “clients” for each of the 11, with less than 3 sawmills.

<sup>19</sup> The two forms of capital are indissolubly linked, as it is common talk in the village and in the neighbouring villages that his external strength comes from financially contributing to the political campaigns of the Wallet Baron



**Web of personal, ritual and power relations involved in timber business around Nereju village**

The other local actor, the *obstea* president is very well connected through godparenthood with one of the directors of the county forestry districts<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, he brought at the *obstea* a very important extra local person, the jurist, a man with very good connections, as can be observed above in the figure (his is the godfather of the county mayor’s only child and is a close friend with a powerful ex director of the forestry district). The connections of the jurist, plus the connections of the president, practically ‘escort’ the *obstea* board to the departmental law court, to the judge that has ‘given’ all the trials in favor of the *obstea* (Judge Duta, marked above in the orange brackets). This is the key connection by which the *obstea* has won many trials intended by the locals that try to oppose the illegal and corrupt actions.

Another tie to be discussed is that of the godparenthood between the Wallet Baron and a very influential timber businessman in the region, the businessman being the marriage godfather of the mayor. The multiple social and ritual ties that unite politics and timber business in the area lead us to the idea that the respective persons form a very cohesive group, worthy of the name clique or clan.

<sup>20</sup> The county forestry district is one of the most influential forestry institutions, practically it is the one that coordinates all control actions.

### **Discussion about growing inequality, 'endogamy' and godparenthood**

The commune of Nereju was relatively egalitarian during socialist times and rather an isolated and closed community<sup>21</sup>. Immediately after the fall of communism, the state begun to retreat from forest management and timber withdrawal and locals begun to think about timber business in the area. As Nereju is placed nearest to the mountain, almost one hundred sawmills were established all across Nereju village. In year 2000, the forests were privatised; the entire community formally gained back its private rights and thus it was room for sawmills to debit more and more timber. It is in this way that economical elite grew in the village, a relatively young elite that articulates the characteristics and modes of action of old communists apparatchiks, like networking, privileges and clique formation with conditions of neo liberal kind, such as political concurrence, market liberalisation, privatisation of resources. Drawing on this canvas, what could be said about godparenthood?

It is visible from the diagram that godparentage relations are practiced among the upper bureaucrats, politicians and timber businessmen, that the net of relationships is quite dense and that connections are mobile, meaning that the connections of one person might be borrowed, eventually for a certain 'price'.

Concerning the village level vertical alliances did not constitute a custom, view the fact that in the communist past the village was relatively equalitarian. People such as the president of the *obstea*, who had an external powerful godfather, made this alliance when their positions where more equal, the godfather was then (30 years ago) the chief of the local smaller unit of the forestry district and the president together with his brother were employees at this unit. His tie to the godfather was explicitly activated economically only after year 1995, the difference grew between them, but the economic exchange that eventually took place maintained both interested in the relation.

The godparenthood relation of the mayor to a subordinate stands for what I have called the tolerated difference. The two men shared economical interests and hence choose to strengthen their relationship 'spiritually'.

---

<sup>21</sup> Villages in Vrancea are generally of a relatively poor condition, as I already mentioned, that were not collectivised; in these villages persons who might have desired a higher status had to migrate out of the village and to establish in the 80 km away city; the fact that Nereju is mostly an endogamous community was proven by the representative statistical data that I have collected, 93.5% of the people in the sample are natives, meaning that there are very few women or men from other villages married in Nereju.



It is obvious that in the region people do not expand very much their godparentage ties. They prefer fewer ties and the persons in the respective powerful group prefer to strengthen previous relationships to people that are economically interesting. I could say that a rationale for these choices might be security, but I also want to coin other structural causes. One of them is that sharp verticality is not customary practiced in the village and thus, the pool of selection for the rich stays with the other more or less rich, inside the limits of tolerated difference. Hence, an association between illegal economic practices and spiritual kinning is almost inevitable. Another explanation is that for the moment, the respective actors are socially connected only 'among themselves', as people in the village angrily deploy, and they prefer to engage mostly in local (endogamous) social relationships (although this type of middle businessman has risen in other villages as well, I have never heard of connections between businessmen from Nereju to them).

The village elite are still young and thus, it is now the time for forming godparentage relations. I might coin the idea that the economical young elite from Nereju will soon change the local godparenthood pattern and will not hesitate to contact external, 'more' vertical alliances for their children. This would be also in relation to opening their businesses to other domains, because the woodland is soon to finish.

However, this case shows how ritual kinning is highly valued, how other types of relationships gain more weight by adding godparenthood. Why in this particular village the ties are valued and respected, while in others, as I have shown above, they remain in shadow, lacking effective power to bind people and interests together? An encompassing explanation remains the larger hypothesis of this paper, that the pattern with only one pair of godparents ensures stronger ties. Another explanation might be that in the economic sphere of this particular village almost every practice is bounded in illegal chains; hence, uncertainty and anxiety play an important part in people's lives, which ask for relationships based on mutual trust.

Godparenthood brings loyalty and trust to relationships, merely to the economical ones, in the realm of corruption and illegality. For spiritual kinning, trust is one feature that is mentioned in the literature as a core issue. Godparenthood can be "an effective mechanism for extending the network of trust" (Magnarella and Turkdogan, 1963: 1631); it "establishes 'safe' links between households" by eliminating "the mistrust normally encountered between them" (Gudeman, 1971: 59, 60), and "its function is to provide... a basis for trust between individuals" (Pitt-Rivers, 1968: 41).

Due to the cohesiveness of such groups, formed out of multiple types of ties, they resemble for the outer world (i.e. the community) to a pure kin group, to a clan, as it is often expressed by locals: *“they are all kin”*, *“we are ruled by a veritable clan”*.

For this case, propositions from anthropological literature, which suggest that people engage in godparenthood relationships precisely because of the economical advantages that they might draw out of them, do not have full explanatory power. The case shows how ritual kinship ties bring the dimension of trust to the already formed political and economical relationships and how they are used as an anchor and a shield at the margins of legal spaces.

### ***Conclusions***

I have shown in the first part of the paper that in Romania one can find very different patterns for godparenthood. It could not be said whether practices of spiritual kinning are generally diminishing, expanding or intensifying under the changing socio-economical conditions.

Nevertheless, excepting the particular case of Bukovina with overextended spiritual ties, one common feature is that godparenthood ties are formed on the basis of previous relationships or of previous common interests. It is not frequent to find vertical alliances, to find a “patron” of a village becoming godfather of poor families; people rather apply the rule of the tolerated status difference, in order to be able to perform the mutual obligations, the exchange of services and gifts.

The second part of the paper shows that in the conditions of increasing social differentiation, people tend to choose their spiritual parents among the persons that are inside the tolerated limits of status difference. Status affinity or potential economic interests are not a magic formula for guaranteed strong godparenthood ties; they might however, in certain conditions, work together to form cohesive social groupings. Although these cohesive groups are formed of economic and political clienteles, equals and subordinates, enmeshed in underground uncertain worlds, godparenthood relations promise certain security and trust among these actors.

However, as I have said earlier, further questions need to be addressed. For example it would be interesting to know why the Romanians are behaving like Spaniards or Latin Americans when they ‘worship’ like Serbs and Greeks, why patterns of godparenting are more reminiscent of Latin Mediterranean groups than they are of the Slavic Orthodox.

## References

- Constantinescu, Nicolae.** 2000 *Etnologia și folclorul relațiilor de rudenie.* (Ethnology and folklore of kinship relations) Editura Univers: București
- Foster, George M.** 1961. The Dyadic Contract: A Model for the Social Structure of a Mexican Peasant Village. *American Anthropologist* 63: 1173-1192.
- Goody, E. N.** 1970 Forms of Pro-Parenthood: The Sharing and Substitution of Parental Roles. In *Kinship: Selected Readings.* Jack Goody, Ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. pp. 331-345.
- Gudeman, Stephen** 1971 The Compadrazgo as a Reflection of the Natural and Spiritual Person. *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.* pp. 45-71.
- Gudeman, Stephen** 1975 Spiritual Relationships and Selecting a Godparent. *Man* n.s.10(2): 221-237
- Gudeman, Stephen and Stuart B. Schwartz** 1984 Cleansing the Original Sin: Godparenthood and the Baptism of Slaves in Eighteenth-Century Bahia in (ed.) Raymond T. Smith, *Kinship Ideology and Practice in Latin America,* University of North Carolina Press. pp. 35-56
- Hammel, Eugene** 1968 *Alternative Social Structures and Ritual Relations in the Balkans.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall
- Ingham, John M.** 1970 The Asymmetrical Implications of Godparent in Tlayacapan, Morelos. *Man* n.s. 5: 281-289.
- Ingham, John M.** 1985 Review: Ritual Kinship. Volume II: Ideological and Structural Integration of the Compadrazgo System in Rural Tlaxcala by Hugo G. Nutini in *American Ethnologist*, 12(3): 558-559.
- Killick, Evan** 2008 Godparents and Trading Partners: Social and Economic relations in Peruvian Amazonia. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 40: 303-328
- Magnarella, Paul J., and Orhan Turkdogan** 1973 Descent, Affinity, and Ritual Relations in Eastern Turkey. *American Anthropologist* 75: 1626-1633.
- Mintz, Sidney W., and Eric R. Wolf** 1950 An Analysis of Ritual Co-Parenthood (Compadrazgo). *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 6: 341-368.
- Osborn, Ann** 1968 Compadrazgo and Patronage: a Colombian Case. *Man* 3(4): 593-608

**Pitt-Rivers, Julian A.** 1968 Pseudo-Kinship. In *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 8. David L. Sills, Ed. New York: Macmillan. pp. 408-413.

**Poska, Allyson M.** 1998 *Regulating the people: The catholic reformation in seventeenth-century Spain*. Leiden: Brill

**Răchișan, Delia.** Modificarea statusului premarital. *Memoria Ethnologica* 21-23: 2103-2106

**Van den Berghe, Gwendoline and Pierre L.** 1966. Compadrazgo and Class in Southeastern Mexico. *American Anthropologist* 68 (5):1236-1244