

The Interpretation of Childbirth in Early Modern Spain

Childbirth calls for interpretation and while birth is interpreted, crucial issues of culture are expressed and worked out.

The periods of pregnancy and birth generate strong hopes, fears and expectations; birth is a moment of revelation, followed by joy or dismay. It places women in the focus of attention and summons all their mental and physical resources. Always related to past incidents and to the destiny of mother and child, it is lived and remembered intensely. Its vicissitudes and possible outcomes ask for social and cultural response whereby the intimacy of a very small group interacts with a wider community and its norms, interests, pressures and judgements. Birth establishes the first ties between a human being and its social environment, thus introducing her or him into culture.

It follows that childbirth constitutes an area of intensified semiosis, that is, an area where cultural values are created, affirmed, negotiated, temporarily altered or put to the test. Where so much is at stake, essential questions are raised:

1. How is life interpreted in its formation and first stages?
2. In which ways does childbirth shape gender relations? How does it affect the status of women - as mothers or as female professionals - in society?
3. How is childbirth related to wider cultural forms and concepts, as well as to the definition of personal, cultural and religious identities?

We will concentrate on debates and areas of social experience where the anomalous (violence against pregnant women, death in childbed, posthumous birth, emergency baptism, sectio caesarea in mortua, miraculous events) challenges dominant assumptions, so that implicit concepts and values have to be made explicit and debated and cultural tensions and contradictions become visible. Thus research will concentrate on:

- Cultural dimensions of medicine;
- The debate on midwives;
- Debates within the church on Immaculate Conception, the obligations of fathers, emergency baptism and cultural strain between Christians and Moriscos;

- Legal debates on the duration of pregnancy, the prevention of fraud and posthumous birth;
- Myth, religion and fiction as frames of interpretation;
- Semantics of childbirth and its implicit meanings;
- The symbolic values of the birthing scene;
- Legal practice: violence, recognition of paternity, cultural conflicts, midwives as witnesses or accomplices, the consequences of posthumous birth;
- Sources will be analysed for their functions as normative (providing scripts, instructions and models), performative (accompanying the process of pregnancy and birth) or evaluative (expressing judgments about real birth experiences).

We propose to explore uncharted areas of Spanish history. We want to contribute to the investigation of historical changes in birth. We hope to encourage debates about the cultural foundations of present-day debates around procreation.