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**A mirror of the village:
the arrangement of congregation in the Orthodox church of Moeciu de Jos¹**

Simona Niculae

The manner in which the congregation is arranged in an orthodox church may seem, to those who entered such an edifice, a simple order, that takes into account a few rules which are clear and familiar to everybody: the men sit in the front and the women, with their head covered, in the back, with the other variant: the women stand or sit on one side, along the church and the men on the other side. In reality, this arrangement is based on several criteria that take into account not only this spiritual hierarchy – men go before women – but also the hierarchy of the sacred space, as well as the social hierarchy of the village. When these types of hierarchy are joined together in the church space, „a parallel hierarchy is born (social and religious) that gives logic to the arrangement of the congregation” (Stahl 2000: 184).

Why is the arrangement of the congregation in the church so important? On the one hand, because the church, together with the cemetery are the most sacred places of a village (Stahl 2000), its centre, and the arrangement of the congregation is relevant to understand the relationships of the inhabitants of the village, the way it is structured and what gives unity to the village. On the other hand, it provides us access to understand certain aspects regarding the transmission of property, the importance of hierarchy in the village and of genealogical line (*spita de neam*) in creating the local structure.

Moeciu de Jos is a village well-known today especially for the services of rural tourism that are well developed in the area and tend to become the main occupation of its inhabitants. The village and other 5 villages are part of the Bran commune – with its famous castle which is 12 km away, and Brasov – 30 km away. Its position in the largest depression, close to a lot of tourist landmarks, either natural or cultural, turned it into a highly popular holiday destination. There are around 5000 people living in the entire commune, traditionally Romanians, who used to earn their living in the past by raising sheep. In august 2000, when we performed this research, Moeciu was already undergoing great developments in tourism, its particularly dynamic transformation being characteristic to the area.

The church in Moeciu is the old church of the village, built on the site of a monastery between 1758 -1761. Generally speaking, the characteristics of a position of an old church are: position at the boundary of the village - and not in its centre, like new churches - on a higher ground and in the yard of the village cemetery (Stahl 2000). Being a mountain village, with houses scattered all over that later were built along the main road, Moeciu does not have a village centre, but the church still keeps the other features of the position in space. The church was

initially built in a more simple style, without a tower or apses that were added later in 1864.

What is important for this study is the organization of the church interior and how the village congregation is arranged in this space.

The Hierarchy of Sacrality

Leaving the description of the church interior aside, I will refer only to the relevant aspects for this study. Like any orthodox church, the one in Moeciu is divided into spaces with different degrees of sacrality. In ascending order of sacrality, from the first room to the opposite end of the church, these areas are as follows: the porch (also known as the veranda, the hall, or the vestibule – *arvon, tinda, vestibul*), the narthex (*pronaos*), the nave (*naos*) and the altar.

The first room at the entrance is the porch. This is a place where the movements of those who come to light up candles are mixed – the place for the candles for the dead and for the living is placed to the left – with those who enter and exit the church, among whom there are people who found a standing seat to attend the service.

From the porch you enter the narthex through two large doors; the “*pisania*” is written above them – the inscription found at the entrance of every church, restored during the last church restoration, during 1996-1999. Large icons are placed on each side of the doors. The passing is done over a small threshold, called *prăguș* that has a great significance to women. Once the *prăguș* is passed over, you are finally in the church. Right above the entrance, the narthex has a balcony called *podîșor*, for the choir. The passing from the narthex to the nave is done to the lateral enlargement of the space, in both directions, into two semicircle areas called apses (or *hore*). Although the altar is the most sacred space of the church, it is a space with very limited access and that is why the nave is the most sacred area where the congregation may stand in order to take part at the activities in the

church. The nave is also the most spacious area, here stands the priest during the service and this is also the central space of the rituals in the church, such as the baptizing or the wedding. The altar is separated from the nave by the iconostasis with the royal doors.

This hierarchy of sacrality is respected by the congregation, each of its members wanting to sit or stand as close to the most sacred areas as possible, in other words to move forward to the altar, but their access to these spaces is differentiated. The men stand in the nave, in the apses and the women behind them, in the narthex, in the *podîșor* and on the porch. These categories have their own structures themselves, where the elderly will stand in front of the young ones. The elder men will therefore be closer to the altar, and the youngest girls will occupy the remotest place, as they will rather stand on the porch, not even in the last row of the narthex, especially if they are not married. Moreover, the priest re-emphasized the rule that women should not reach the nave, where they are allowed only to kiss the icons in front of the altar, by placing icons on the porch and investing them with the same importance as of those in the nave. “[Women may reach the front of the altar]... but they shouldn’t. That is why I placed icons on the porch for them, so that they shouldn’t come here.” Women who are menstruating must stay on the porch.

Also the choir – including both boys and girls – was moved up in the balcony because its initial place – the nave – was breaching the rule of sex segregation.

Not only age and sex count, but also social hierarchy. The most important people of the village, the richest ones, and the oldest families have privileged standing seats.

This arrangement actually shows the structure of the village - where the oldest people are the most respected ones - , the oldest households, but also the richest ones, as well as men comparing to women. “Men prevailed in front of God and in connection to Him”, say the locals. This is crucial, as “men are allowed in the altar, but only

the old ones and without great sins; also the boys up to the age of 13-14". But "young men do not enter the altar, because they sleep with their wives at night and they are not clean". As for the women, married women prevail upon those unmarried.

The Stacidia

The church stacidia (*strane*) are along the walls of the narthex and the nave – wooden carved high chairs, with tall seat backs, close to the church wall, with arms, which are also carved. Found both in the spaces for women and in those for men, there are two types of stacidia: for men and for women. At the moment of our study, there were 110 stacidia in the church in Moeciu, 58 for men and 52 for women.

The stacidia were assigned ever since the church was built to those who made donations for its construction or, when the space permitted it, for the restoration of the church. That is why initially the richest persons, with the highest prestige and who contributed the most to these actions were assigned a stacidia. The rest of them were assigned by auction. The more important the position and contribution, the closer the stacidia was to the altar. For example, the grandfather of Gică al lui Chioraş, who donated the wool used for the base of the church, after being mixed with stones – therefore an important donation – was assigned the second stacidia on the left side of the altar. Each stacidia has a plate with the name of its first owner.

These stacidia are inherited, the ones for men by men and the ones for women by women. For example, the stacidia of the father will be inherited either by his elder son, or by the one who stays in the house after he gets married, who is rather the youngest son. As a general rule, the one who stays in the parents' house or close to it will also get the stacidia and the family's gravesite. The mother's stacidia will be inherited by the eldest daughter. If there are heirs of different sexes, for instance the father leaves a

stacidia as inheritance, his only daughter cannot use it, but she can keep it in the family for her future husband or future son. There can be situations where the stacidia of a woman to be left to the son – the first born – and not to the daughter, but he will stay in the parents' house. He cannot use it, but his wife will have priority to use it to her sister-in-law, because she is the one who lives in her husband's parents' house and so "the stacidia remained in the family".

The stacidia are therefore in close connection to the household, once the household is inherited, the stacidia and the family's gravesite are inherited too. When the inherited household is not lived in permanently, the stacidia is considered to have no heirs and should be sold. The way the stacidia is inherited abides the rules for inheriting the parents' household, however taking into account the type of stacidia, when it is used.

Thus the stacidia stay in the family, even if there are no heirs of the right sex, who cannot use it. If there are no heirs at all, the stacidia should be auctioned. But there was no auction until now; usually those who wanted to give up the stacidia either because there were no heirs, or because no one stayed in the village, were contacted and negotiated with the interested parties, a process mediated by the churchwarden (*epitrop*) and the priest. But major changes like this were very rare. In general, „people do not give up the stacidia, because it is inherited“ and it will be "sold" to a close relative (by an aunt to her niece, for instance). Sometimes, even when the auction was expected to take place because all the heirs had left the village, they still wanted to keep it, even if they were not there to use it.

In other words, the church stacidia are the representation of the household in the village. The significance of the stacidia that cannot be kept is quite deep; it symbolises the fact that the genealogical line disappeared, and so did its household.

The importance of the stacidia is also reflected in the fact that since the church was built, more stacidia have been added. One could notice

in figure 1 that in the narthex there are spaces where a row of 4 stacidia has been added in front of those close to the wall. Another example is the one from 1998, when a man from another village – Cristian, donated 700 sqm. of timber to change the floor and restore the stacidia. A stacidia was built especially for him close to the altar (the eighth stacidia on the right from the altar).

After this restoration, there were added in total: 2 stacidia for men, 6 stacidia for women in the narthex and 6 stacidia in the balcony for the choir women. Those interested purchased them directly, after discussions with the churchwarden and the priest. “If you are a rich man, you can buy”, this is how the locals perceive the affordability of the stacidia and the status of those who got them. During 1996-1999 a stacidia would cost 2 million lei.

The most prestigious category of seats in the church is the stacidia category. They not only signify the important position that their owners have in the community, but also the fact that their family is one of the oldest, and those who sit in them are among the richest in the village: „back in the old days not everybody had a stacidia“.

As it belongs to someone and represents the position of this person and his/her family in the village, the stacidia is not occupied by anyone else but the one who owns it. If the owner does not come to the church, then the stacidia can be occupied during the service only by a very old person, who is not able to stand. Moreover, if the person inheriting the stacidia is a young person, he/she will offer his/her stacidia to an old person who stands up: “this is about common sense”. But no old woman will be allowed to sit in a stacidia for men and vice versa. That is why, sometimes, when the church is full, some stacidia remain free.

Standing seats

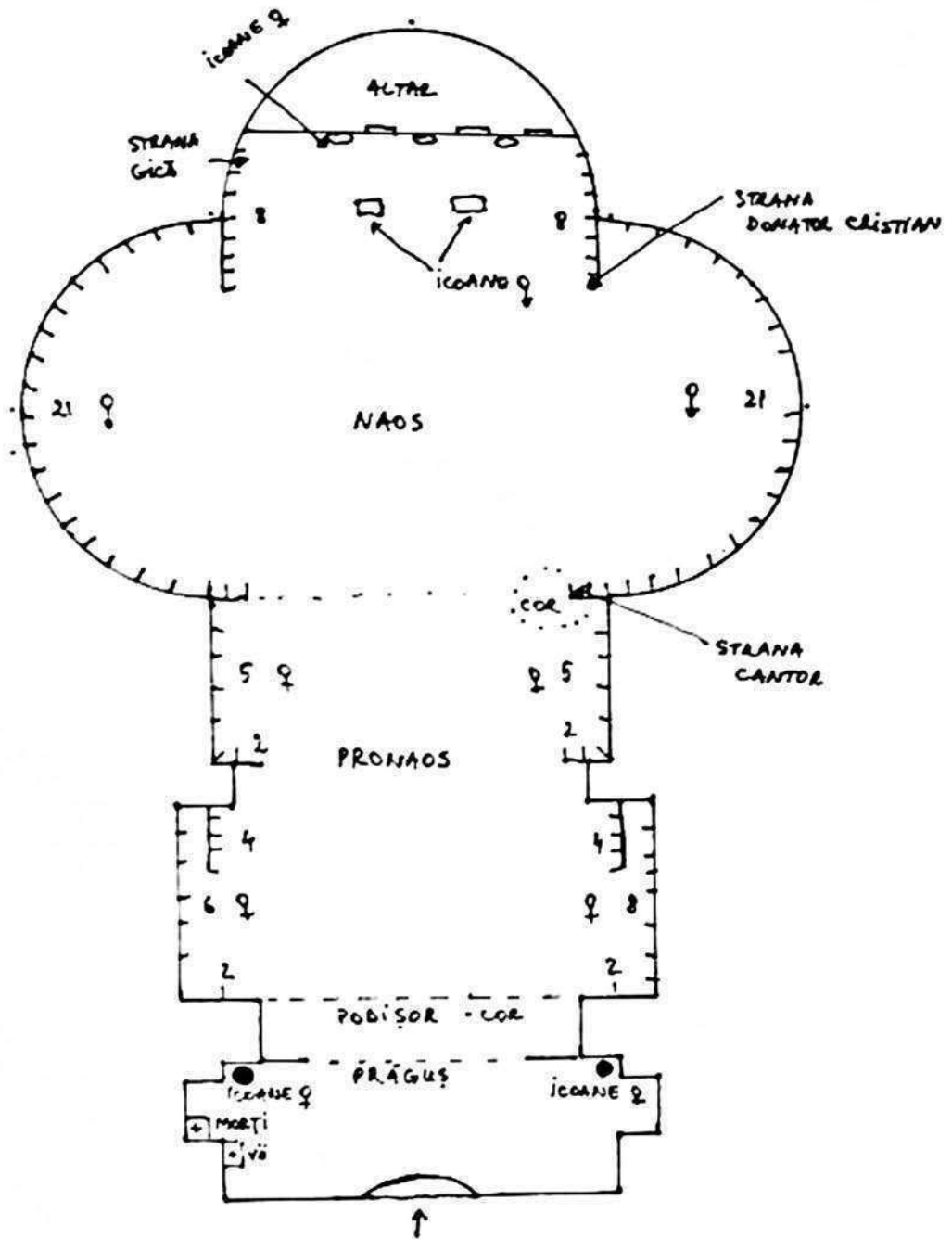
Though more freedom is to be expected and only general rules are to be taken into account,

like men sitting in the front, in the nave, and women behind them, in the narthex and on the porch, while the elderly sit in front of the young ones, in the church in Moeciu even the standing seats have a very strict order and, just like the stacidia, are inherited in the family. “How nice things are, when each person keeps his/her seat, inherited from his/her mother or grandmother”, the priest told us.

The occupation of these seats has however a greater dynamics, comparing to the situation of the stacidia, due to several aspects. There are actually two trends to organize those to take part in the service standing. On the one hand, the age criterion is taken into account, i.e. girls and younger women are not allowed to reach the seat they inherited until they have the right age for it. In the year 2000, this seemed to be the decisive criterion; younger women, up to the age of 40, would compulsorily stand in the back, on the porch or in the balcony. Sometimes they would reach the age of 50 till they had the courage to go to the narthex and take over the seat they had inherited.

On the other hand, there is the criterion of belonging to the genealogical line, in the sense that ever since they were children, these people stay with the parents of the same sex and they will sit there together, until they inherit the place left by their mother or father. Also, women take over this role to introduce their daughters-in-law who are new in the village to the seats they will leave to them (the same goes for the men with their sons-in-law).

The situation is simpler in case of men, who are generally fewer and placed in the apses in the nave that is in a larger space. In this case, the sons have always sat next to their fathers. But in the case of women, this seems to be the trend only lately, not respecting the age criterion as much as they used to, especially for the oldest in the village, the ones who have precise seats in the church. This arrangement is justified by the congregation by the fact that they will inherit that seat anyway and, should they go in the back, they



would take someone else's place, which has also been assigned a long time ago. The hypothesis is that, after the rapid growth the village has known, the newcomers, „the aliens“ created a pressure, not only by their number, as the number of those who go to church has increased comparing to what the situation was 10 years ago, but also by the pretensions they have had over privileged positions. For instance, ever since the year 2000, there has been a pressure coming from younger women who became recently rich, women who were either from the village or newcomers, to try and sit as close to the front as possible, even if this was not appropriate considering their age. That is why it is possible that the actual trend is to group on the genealogical line for keeping the seats and their memory in front of the new dynamics of the village community, which has consequences inside the church as well.

The memory of the seats is also kept through raising funds for the church, a practice to be discussed further on.

Funds for the Church

The funds for the restoration of the church must be regularly raised. Those who own stacidia, as well as those standing up must make donations. When we made the study, there was an annual contribution of 55 000 lei for those owning a stacidia, 50 000 for the others and 10 000 lei for the gravesite. Also, for the restoration of the church money is paid by those owning stacidia as well, even if they have been recently restored or installed, as was the case of a man who, a little while before had changed his stacidia with one made of oak. During 1996-1999, when the last restoration took place, the stacidia owners paid for their restoration 120 000² lei each. Also, when an inherited stacidia is taken over, this is paid with 600 000 lei. As we have mentioned before, the purchase of a stacidia would have cost approximately 2 million lei. These amounts are set by the priest together with the churchwarden.

There is an old practice of donations for the paintings of the saints in the church. It is not known when this practice occurred, but, since the 1946-1948 restoration, the village priest decided that the name of the donor be specified next to the respective painting – next to the name of the saint – so ever since then, the phrase “painted by...” with the family name of the one who donated the money for the painting or for its restoration is mentioned there. The criteria considered when the paintings are chosen are diverse: from the name of the saint of the head of the family, to the name of the protective saint chosen at the wedding, the name of the saint that lies over the stacidia where the family's standing seat lies, to the dimension and importance of the saint or the respective scene. For instance, in the past, the richest people in the village paid for the largest paintings in the church, consolidating their prestige both in the church and in the community. The integration in the community, both local and spiritual, seems to be also part of the motivation to donate money for paintings and to inherit a saint in this way, from „the aliens“, the newcomers. In comparison to the stacidia, the paintings are more affordable; in 1996 anyone could have a space painted from his/her donation.

During 1996 - 1999, 100 000 lei were donated for the paintings of the saints, for each sqm. of painting. The bigger and more important the painting was, and if it was positioned in a place of greater sacred importance, i.e. closer to the nave or the altar, the more important was the donor's position in the community.

These donations for paintings had several unexpected consequences: on the one hand, they legitimised the prestige in the village and in the church, consolidated the spiritual unity of the people in the village and of the village itself.

On the other hand, they transformed the paintings in landmarks connected to the standing position of the people in the church. This is facilitated by the fact that the restoration of these paintings is also inherited. Those who take them over from their family are called “heirs of the

saints" (*moștenitorii sfinților*) and they are the first ones to be announced about donations when a new restoration takes place. In addition to that, many of the paintings were chosen to be as close as possible to the place where the people from the village are standing, above the stacidia near which they usually stand.

For example, there is the case of a 59 year old woman, who inherited the standing seat from her mother – who also inherited it from her mother – but also Saint Elisabeth, placed above the stacidia next to which she would stand in a rather important area of stacidia for women. As she did not have the right age for such a position, she waited in the balcony, where she legitimised her seat by a small painting of Saint Mina, and when she was 57 she descended and stood in front of Saint Elisabeth, "because her seat was occupied by aliens".

The Dynamics of the Arrangement

The woman's descending from the balcony to reach the seat left by her grandmother did not pass unnoticed. The women do not let the intruders to move forward, they do not speak to them directly, facing them, but they elbow them, push them, showing them they do not belong there. In this case, the painting was helpful because those standing in those seats were reminded the fact that the woman was right to take over that seat that belonged to her through inheritance. "Let her stand here, her mother stood here, too" she was told.

In general, from the stories told by both men and women, the women seem to be more vigilant. For instance, even if a relatively old woman, aged 60, occupies a free stacidia during the service, the others around her make comments so that she get embarrassed and stand up. Social pressure is high, even if somebody may encourage her, "don't worry, it is not her stacidia. But I'm leaving...". Making somebody pay attention to this by elbowing that person seems to be the most frequent action taken when a rule or cer-

tain order is broken: "this is how they push you; this is how they squeeze you".

Both men and women admit, "There is a lot of haggling (*tîrgovițeală*) in our church". This means people talk too much, make comments, as the church is a meeting place for the entire village. When they meet, women kiss each other, especially friends who do not see each other anywhere else but at the church. In the past women used to kiss their godmother's hand and their mother's hand.

"The church is like a society – with mayors, etc., where one respects the elderly, the same goes for the church. The churchwarden is shown respect. And people like to stand out of the crowd".

The Cemetery

The church and the cemetery form an assembly, so if we speak about the arrangement of the congregation in the church, the arrangement in the cemetery is important, too. The cemetery represents the image of village in the Otherworld and the way in which the village is organised reflects in the organisation of the graves. The area of greater importance and sacrality is close to the church. The oldest families and families with the greatest prestige in the village are buried there. The gravesites belong to the genealogical lines that, in this way, maintain their unity in death as well. As we get further from the church, we will find more individual and recent graves. The graves of genealogical line can have successive burials separated by an interval of at least 7 years, a rule which is very strict.

In theory, not all the members of the family are buried here, but the heirs of the gravesite, i.e. the heirs of the respective family. Therefore, it is important for us to notice how these sites are inherited. As we saw before, they are taken over by those to inherit the household as well, and also the stacidia in the church. Usually this is the youngest son of the family, the one who stays in the parents' home and takes over his parents'

burial costs. His brothers will theoretically be buried in another area of the cemetery, should they stay in the village. But actually there are many variations, function of the negotiations in the family, financial reasons and so on. What is interesting is the fact that these negotiations demonstrate the importance of the gravesite in the family. For example, there may be conflicts as to the one who inherits the stacidia should not inherit the gravesite as well. Especially if one of the sons who does not inherit any of these contributes to his parents' burial costs. In other cases the situation is dealt with mutual agreement, especially if the site is large enough - as the density is also higher in the area close to the church. What is relevant here is the importance everybody confers to being part of the group and the unity of the family after death, too.

Notes:

¹ The study was conducted together with Oana Ganea in August 2000, with the encouragements of our Professor Paul H. Stahl, enthusiastic about the existence of the stacidia (*strane*) in the church in Moeciu, the village of Oana's mother and her home village and about the possibility to study two subjects which were less researched, the way they are transmitted from one generation to another and the arrangement of the congregation in the church. The data have never been used before and the result of the research remained "in the drawer" because of two reasons (at least this is what I believe now): on the one hand this was a field exercise for us and I think we made the "mistakes" of a novice: we considered this field a puzzle whose pieces can be found, and our duty was just to identify them and put them in a logical order. Yes, the journey to anthropological imagination is long. But the best way to begin it is through fieldwork. On the second hand, just like

In conclusion, starting from the apparently simple arrangement of the congregation in the church, one can understand even more elements regarding the organisation of a community. First of all, there is a parallelism between the religious monument and the village, and the ways the community is structured inside them have common elements. Genealogical lines, the hierarchy of the social prestige, wealth, sexes - all these elements play a part in both the unity of the community, the spiritual one - represented by the church - or social one, represented by the village. The way in which the sacred aspect is articulated with the social aspects lies both in the structure of the arrangement of the congregation in the church and in aspects that regard the functioning of the village, such as the way in which the inheritance, the property are transmitted to the others.

any novice, we had high interpretative ambitions and an asserted discontent towards descriptive studies; actually our research was, in essence, a descriptive study, too. Therefore we felt we should think our subject over in a more theoretical approach, which we never found the time to accomplish. Professor Stahl was pleading for the duty we should have to not losing the data by not publishing it, that any honest study is valuable for our discipline, which does not have enough resources available, especially when it comes to the research that were done or are under way in our country. With this in mind we reviewed the data collected 10 years ago.

² According to the National Institute of Statistics, the average net income and the Leu-US Dollar exchange rate were as follows: 1996: 321169 lei (1 dolar= 3082 lei), 1999: 1522878 lei (1 dolar= 15 332 lei), 2000: 2139138 (1 dolar = 21692 lei)

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