

SPIRITUAL ITINERARIES: MYTHS AND TRADITIONS REINTERPRETED

THE WEDDING CEREMONY IN THE TRADITIONAL VILLAGES OF OLTENIA. PRELIMINARY RITES*

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Abstract: Marriage is the second most significant moment from a man's life, an event that gives the opportunity of a rich display of folkloric manifestations. The ceremonial complex of the wedding mark, in a festive manner, the passing to another social statute.

In Oltenia, it generally has a unitary structure, with small individualising elements, from one village to the other. The nuptial ceremony also presents in its development the three categories of rites, specific to the passing rites, such are: preliminary, liminary, post-liminary.

Therefore, the nuptial scenario includes the existence of new rules and a logical succession in the development of the sequences. In the present material, we are going to stop on the customs from the stage that precedes the nuptial ceremony (wooing, discussing the dowry of the girl, the engagement), trying to point towards few dominant element of the phenomenon.

Keywords: Oltenia, the nuptial ceremony, preliminary rites, wooing, the engagement.

From the rich collection of customs preserved in the culture of the Romanian people, those related to the family, form a distinct chapter. They are related to the important moments from the life of an individual: birth, marriage and death, aiming, through their logics and structure, at the family status of the man and, through it, to the entire system of the social relations, from a larger community.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Arnold von Gennep calls the rites that accompany birth, marriage and death, "passing rites"¹. They are based on the

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passing, as the French ethnologist was saying, transitions from pre-existence into this side world, that of the living, and further on, into “the other-side world”, the one after death, passing accompanied by specific customs that are translated into rites and ceremonies. The three passing rites ought not to be regarded separately. They are, nonetheless, stages of the becoming, together forming a ceremonial complex of the passing. Pavel Ruxăndoiu establishes the essential characteristics of them, noting that: “For the passing rites, there are characteristic the *uniqueness* of the performing, as related to the individual destiny and the *ternary structure* implied by the transition one state to the other”².

The customs from the family cycle are taking place, generally, in a logical succession, marking every moment from an individual’s life. The fundamental principle that structures them is that, according to which, in the essential moments of his life, the individual experiences a passing between two distinct existential ways, between two human conditions, or between two states. If the birth of a man is nothing but the beginning of a new stage of cosmic life, in a terrestrial hypostasis, the wedding implies the integration of this stage into the rhythm of the earthy life, and death is the returning on the man into the Cosmos. These events represent, for the individual who transits them, a change of a previous condition, disorder in the vital biotonus of the human body and the human environment (inside a family and a wider social group), therefore a disequilibrium in the system of the social relations.

Marriage is the second most significant moment from a man’s life, an event that gives the opportunity of a rich display of folkloric manifestations. As referring to this aspect, Mihai Pop notes that: “Nowadays, in the traditional popular forms, marriage is performed through complex manifestations, in which there are combined economic, legal, ritual and folkloric elements, in order to form a great popular show, an important popular artistic manifestation”³.

In its classical form, the peasant wedding, is an interesting and picturesque show. To its artistic values of the form, there are added aesthetic and ethical content values, due to the fact that from the phases and the moments of the ancient custom, the people created the acts and the scenes of the later spectacular party, in the opinion of Ovidiu Bârlea, the wedding is the only custom that “gathers closely the fatuous with the comical representation... this antonymy governing the entire wedding, both the ritual and the ceremonial scenes, then each gesture and act, together with the repertoire that accompany them”⁴.

The ceremonial complex of the wedding mark, in a festive manner, the passing to another social statute. In this respect, Mihai Pop and Pavel Ruxăndoiu

¹ Arnold von Gennep, *Riturile de trecere*, Iași, Polirom Publishing House, 1996, pp. 22-23.

² Pavel Ruxăndoiu, *Folclorul literar în contextul culturii populare românești*, Bucharest, Grai și Suflet – Cultura Națională Publishing House, 2001, p. 218.

³ Mihai Pop, *Obiceiuri tradiționale românești*, CCEs, Bucharest, 1976, p. 131.

⁴ Ovidiu Bârlea, *Folclor românesc*, vol. I, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, 1981, p. 424.

see marriage as “a change in the statute of an individual’s social relations, the passing from a system of family and group relations to other group relations, bearing implications in the behaviour of the main performers, who themselves are subjected to fundamental changes”⁵. Through the detachment of the young bride and bridegroom from their old condition, and then their union, there appears a perturbation in the existent system of relations. And, the wedding with all its ceremonial sequences, represents nothing else but the reestablishment of the affected equilibrium.

Marriage, tightly connected to the emerging of the family life, has been, since ancient times, the best way that the human community chose for constituting a favourable social background for giving birth and bringing-up children. Therefore, marriage can be considered an institution related to the transmission of life, “it symbolises the divine origin of life, for which the communion between the man and woman is just a recipient, a passing instrument and channel. It is included in the area of the rituals that make life sacred”⁶.

Through tradition, marriage is considered a social act with a major signification, both for the young pair who behave accordingly, and for the entire village too. Through the assembly of customs that it implies, this existential stage has as purpose to assure the passing of the young people involved in it, into the ranks of the householders, of the mature and responsible people. It is the only preserved passing ceremony in which the main characters are aware of their participation, and in which the both terms belong to “the white world”. The entire nuptial ceremony unfolds according to some precise rules that include ceremonial and ritual prescriptions, with well-established roles: “each sequence has its well-determined role in the context of the custom, and a precise role in accomplishing the ultimate purpose of the wedding: the annulment of two into One, through the passing from one state to the other”⁷.

The nuptial folkloric rites, acts and practices desire not only the accomplishment of the passing, but also the creation of the premises that will further consolidate the new family, will assure the economic, social and biological continuity, along with its permanence in time. The entire community watches the traditional development of the ceremony, supervising attentively the creation of the new family and the enrolment of it into the traditional norms, transmitted by our forefathers.

All these are of a greater significance, as in our traditional village, the family is extremely important, being seen as a cell, a “human micro-unity created through marriage, which unites the spouses and their direct descendants through tight

⁵ Mihai Pop, Pavel Ruxăndoiu, *Folclor literar românesc*, Bucharest, Didactical and Pedagogical Publishing House, 1978, p. 179;

⁶ Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dicționar de simboluri*, vol. I (A-D), Bucharest, Artemis Publishing House, 1993, p. 278.

⁷ Delia Suiogan, *Simbolica riturilor de trecere*, Bucharest, Paideea Publishing House, 2006, p. 119.

biological, economic, psychological, spiritual and legal relationships”⁸. In the family there is possible the reproduction and the perpetuation of the species, the bringing-up and the education of the children, the assuring of the existence: “Essential element of production, it assures the economic functionality and the transmission of patrimony. Cell of reproduction, it assures the necessary of children, to whom it provides proper socialisation. Warranty of the race, it watches over its purity and sanity. Melting pot of the national conscience, it transmits the symbolic values and the founding memory. It creates both citizenship and civilisation”⁹.

The passing of the young people from the condition of girl and boy, into the category of adults, their positioning in another system of roles and relations, is overlapped over the surpassing of a biological age. This passing implies, nonetheless, the wilful acceptance of a social statute that evolves subjected to other criteria, different from those specific to the so far age. As a matter of fact, in the traditional vision of the village, the collective mentality and experience, most of the time, were eliminating the possibility of the young people to choose this event. Yet, the phenomenon is not regarded by them as a restriction of their freedom of choice, due to the fact that it is framed into a complex of behavioural patterns, traditionally transmitted, until they have come to be accepted. Marriage is seen as a normal stage of their existence, one might say even indispensable and necessary in an individual’s life¹⁰, while the celibacy is rarely met, being considered a deviation from the norms of the collectivity.

The nuptial ceremony is seen by the popular community as a fulfilment in the biological, social and ethical level. In Oltenia, it generally has a unitary structure, with small individualising elements, from one village to the other. The nuptial ceremony also presents in its development the three categories of rites, specific to the passing rites, such are: *preliminary* rites, invoked to ease and to assure the breaking from the old state; *liminary* rites, which include the displaying of rites and ritual acts meant to prepare the individual for the new state and to assure the proper passing; *post-liminary* rites, which are supposed to favour the entering into the new condition, to incorporate the individual into the new state. Unlike other passing

⁸ Vladimir Trebici, Ion Ghinoiu, *Lumea de aici, lumea de dincolo*, Bucharest, Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing House, 1986, p. 227.

⁹ Michelle Perrot, *Funcțiile familiei*, in Philippe Ariès, Georges Duby (coord.), *Istoria vieții private*, vol. VII, Bucharest, Meridiane Publishing House, 1997, p. 87.

¹⁰ Generally, the marriage age was rather young (18-25 years old for boys and 14-18 years old for girls, sometimes earlier). This young age was corresponding, in the traditional thinking to the biological and socio-economic maturity, in other words, the people were able to procreate, to work and support their families. The boys after 25 years old were called old bachelors and they were considered either too ugly, too pretentious, or “to have their foreordained wife dead”, and the girls were called spinsters. Almost unnoticeably, in the both cases, they were excluded from the group of the lads, and that of the young girls. (Florin Valeriu Mureșan, *Satul Românesc din nord-estul Transilvaniei la mijlocul secolului al XVIII-lea*, Cluj-Napoca, Romanian Cultural Institute, The Centre of Studies from Transylvania, 2005, p. 207).

rites, what is specific for the nuptial ritual is the equilibrium between the sequences that mark the breaking from the old state and those that assure the integration of the individual into a new state.

Ion Şeuleanu, understanding the nuptial ceremony as a passing from a stage into the other, remarks that the union of the young people “is done progressively, in stages that prepare them, which unfolds successively and concentrically, from the initial tries (meetings, wooing etc.), until the consecration of the new social cell...and then its inclusion into the mechanism of the community”¹¹. Therefore, the nuptial scenario includes the existence of new rules and a logical succession in the development of the sequences. In the present material, we are going to stop on the customs from the stage that precedes the nuptial ceremony, trying to point towards few dominant element of the phenomenon.

Wooing¹², the first preliminary act of marriage, is also known in Oltenia as agreement, or asking in marriage (*peşit, înţelegere, împeşit, împeşală*). According to the tradition, if the young man accepted the girl that the parents had chosen, or if the parents agreed with the choice of their son, they would go the house of the girl to woo her.

First of all, we need to mention that in our traditional village, in most of the cases, marriage was a business between the parents of the young people, motivated by their material position and social prestige of the family that they were going to become related: “the parents were deciding most of the times. Even if the young people didn’t like each other, they would marry anyway. There were situations as this in our village”¹³. Hence, the pecuniary interest was above the feelings: “if the girl had land, the parents of the boy made him marry her. She could be limping and blind, he would take her anyway. He would marry her for the land”¹⁴.

Through wooing, the young man “asks the girl” from her parents, in other words, requires the consent of the young girl’s family for the marriage. They habitually used to woo after the future bride had been chosen by the parents and after another relative of the boy, who had been sent with a bottle of wine or brandy, was returning bringing good news from the girls’ parents, such is the accept to receive the wooers. The young man was going along with his parents and other people, closer chatty people, or friends: “for wooing, there were leaving the parents of the boy, the boy and other close relatives or neighbours. The young people had known each other before. The parents of the boy were sending the parents of the boy word, to see if they are welcomed. There were cases when the two knew each other. The parents made the decision, not the young people”¹⁵.

¹¹ Ion Şeuleanu, *Poezia populară de nuntă*, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, 1985, p. 58.

¹² The reconstitution of the wooing sequence, from the nuptial ceremony, was based on the existing bibliographical sources and the researches made in few villages from the south of Oltenia in 2012-2015.

¹³ Inf. Peşa Maria, 78 years old, Cetate, Dolj County.

¹⁴ Inf. Olga Văcaru, 73 years old, Dârvari, Mehedinţi County.

¹⁵ Inf. Vultureanu Lucica, 73 years old, Dârvari, Mehedinţi County.

Wooring is one of the oldest customs, preserved in the traditional environment until nowadays. The oldest mentions that refer to this custom are found at Dimitrie Cantemir in *Descrierea Moldovei*-Description of Moldavia. This is what the scholar was noting in his works: "...if a young man likes a girl, he sends people to the parents of the beloved to ask her in marriage, which are called with a corrupted Latin word *peșitori*, meaning petitores. They firstly evaluate the opinion of the parents, for not facing a possible public insult, followed by a public refusal. But if they notice that the parents do not refuse the proposal, then they gather all the relatives of the future groom, and leave for the girl's house"¹⁶.

Wooring was usually done on a Saturday evening, on a Sunday or a holiday. In the Villages from Dolj County, the wooers, once reaching the girls' house, were talking about the subjects related to the farming season, the condition of the harvest, the weather etc.: "Don't you ask us/ Why we are here?/ Why you are here, you are going to tell/ We have come to look for a weaver's reed/ But it should have strong teeth/ And if you give us the reed/ You should also give us the girl"¹⁷.

During the wooring, it was also discussing the dowry of the girl, and the "agreement" was made. The custom, as carried out in the villages from Dolj County, is described by Charles Laugier: "In the evening, the boy and his parents, with one or two closer relatives, go to the girls' house. They make there the agreement. The father of the girl serves a meal to the guests, according to his condition, and then they start the dowry negotiations. After all the item that are going to constitute the dowry have been enumerated... it is made the so-called «dowry paper» (marriage portion document), which is written by a literate person, among the present people, and it is read by the groom"¹⁸. At Cloșani, in Gorj County, the wooers were also welcomed with generosity: "There was laid the table, if the proposal was accepted. During the meal, every glass of brandy or wine, was accompanied by the wishing «Let this be an auspicious moment»"¹⁹.

The dowry of the future bride was the focal point of the agreement between the two families. Its value was depending on the social and economic status of the families. Nevertheless, the dowry was mandatory for each girl, regardless their social class. Generally, for the lower classes, the marriage portion was made of the dowry chest, land, animals and different object, necessary in the household: "the parents gave the girl land, the dowry chest with pillows, blankets, quilts, rugs, bed sheets, clothes. I still have the chest. I keep the good clothes in it"²⁰. At Susani,

¹⁶ Dimitrie Cantemir, *Descrierea Moldovei*, Bucharest, "Cartea românească" Publishing House, 1923, p. 158.

¹⁷ Ștefan Enache, Teodor Pleșa, *Zona etnografică Dolj*, Bucharest, Sport-Turism Publishing House, 1982, p. 129.

¹⁸ Charles Laugier, *Sănătatea în Dolj*, Craiova, 1910, p. 55.

¹⁹ Ion Ghinoiu (coord.), *Sărbători și obiceiuri. Răspunsuri la chestionarele Atlasului Etnografic Român*, vol. I, Oltenia, edition supervised by Ofelia Văduva and Ofelia Pleșca, Bucharest, Encyclopedic Publishing House, 2001, p. 65.

²⁰ Inf. Stângă Fica, 78 years old, Unirea, Dolj County.

Vâlcea County, “some long time ago, the girls got only clothes, cattle, sheep, and the boys were inheriting the land”²¹, and at Stoina, Gorj County, “the girl was given land, a house (rarely), cattle, her clothes and different types weaved clothe for dressing up the house where she was going”²². The dowry chest was always present, in the past, among the items constituting the marriage portion of the girls, being the best proof of their diligence. Beautifully decorated, they were later used as items of furniture for storing the “good” clothes.

In the larger, wealthier villages, there was the custom to make “dowry papers” (marriage portion documents), in which there were registered all the goods that were going to make the dowry. In these papers from the 18th century, there were also recorded the buildings, the alembics, the rings, the plates and even the sets of table linens²³. The dowry paper, a custom inherited from the Romans, was signed by the parents, the young bride and groom, and then by a judge. These marriage portion papers were drawn up only by the rich and the scholars.

The next stage was *the engagement*, which took place at the house of the future bride. “The engagement includes separation rites and threshold rites, and ends by preliminary aggregation rites, in the new place”²⁴. Therefore, the engagement expresses symbolically the breaking from the parents, the gifts exchange signifying the entering of the girl into the new family.

The event included an organised meal, occasion on which it was also established the date of the wedding: “at the bride’s house, without a priest, there was a meal only with the relatives. The engagement was done with three, four weeks before the wedding. The godparents were called there too”²⁵. In the north-west of Transylvania, the engagement was done in the morning of the next Sunday after the agreement, at the church²⁶. There, the young people were declaring their decision in front of a priest.

The exchange of gifts, on this occasion, between the two young people, was making their relationship official. The young girl gave the young boy a shirt, a towel or a pillow, and received from him money, cloth for making a dress and the engagement ring. Therefore, the bride and the groom hold, in turns, the two positions, of donor and beneficiary. Ofelia Văduva notices in the reciprocal exchange of gifts a lot of magical significations, through which it is transmitted a beneficial energy, which facilitates and tightens the union²⁷. In the opinion of Ion Șeuleanu, the exchange of gifts can be placed in the category of the compensatory

²¹ *Sărbători și obiceiuri ...*, p. 71.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ see M. Theodorian Carada, *Foi de zestre olteneste*, în “Arhivele Olteniei”, Year VII, no. 39-40, Septembrie-Decembrie 1928, pp. 463-468.

²⁴ Arnold Van Gennep, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

²⁵ *Sărbători și obiceiuri ...*, p. 51

²⁶ Florin Valeriu Mureșan, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

²⁷ Ofelia Văduva, *Magia darului*, Bucharest, Encyclopedic Publishing House, 1997, p. 103.

acts: “the compensatory acts and rituals work, in the unfolding of the nuptial scenario, in the immediate closeness of the union rites, which are supposed to make the union of the two easier, until the fulfilment of the couple”²⁸.

Habitually, the engagement was done by the well-off people, and lasted three-four weeks, or few months, until the wedding. After the engagement, the young couple could meet and spend time alone.

Although generally a conservatory one, the nuptial ceremony was gradually adapted to the changes. Some ritual acts disappeared, others, which are still preserved experienced the vanishing of the initial significations, and a frontal positioning of the parading function. Nowadays, the young people decide on their own on the marriage, the parents finding later on. The sequence of the wooing was almost eliminated, and where it is still preserved, it represents nothing but a formality. The actual image does not correspond anymore to the original one.

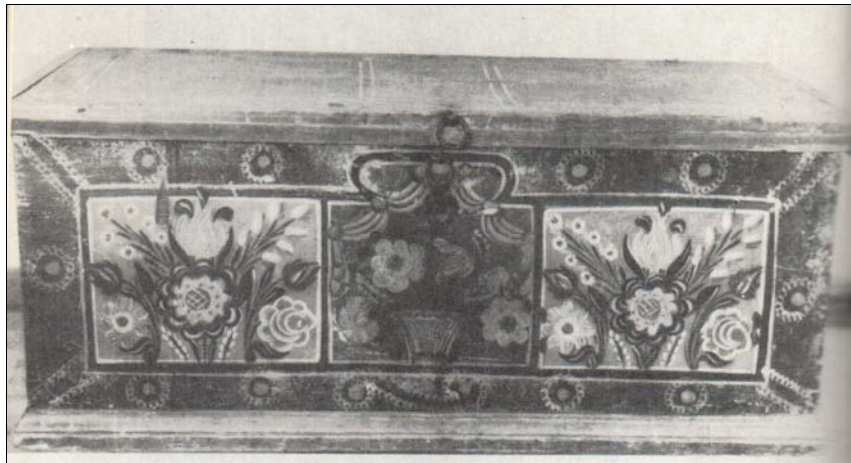


Fig. 1. Dowry chest painted in Dolj County (after Șt. Enache,Th. Pleșa 1982)

²⁸ Ion Șeuleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

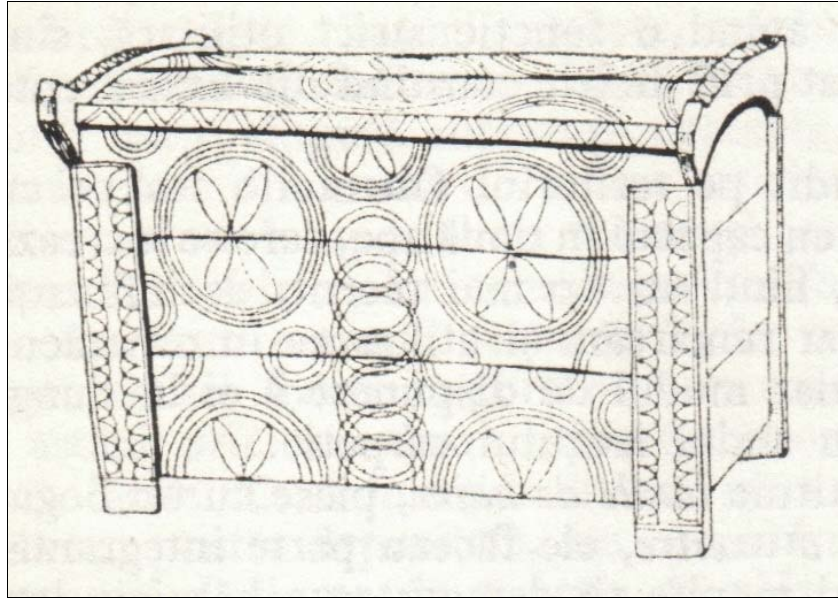


Fig. 2.

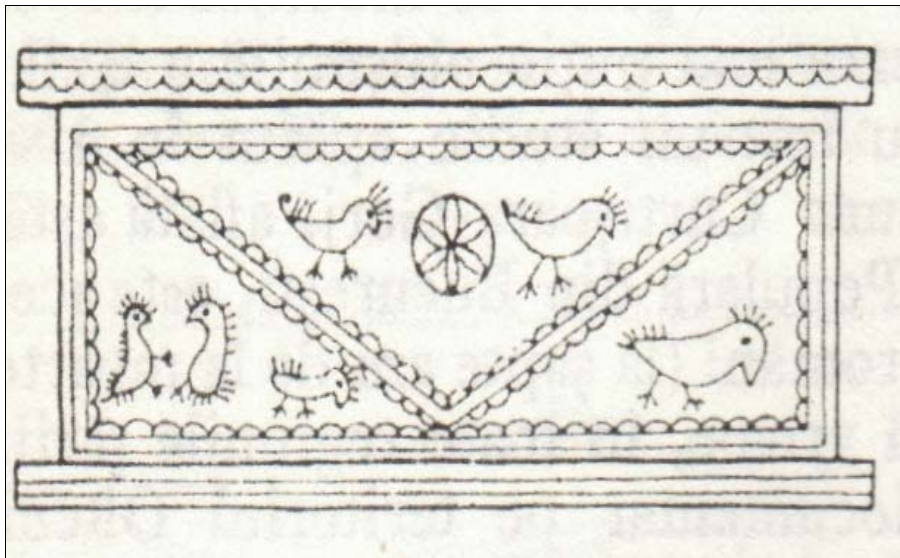


Fig. 3.

Fig. 2, 3. Chests of Oltenia. 2. Dowry chest bulging lid; 3. Dowry chest invoice town, with incised decoration (after Viorica Tatulea, 1989)

