

THE WEDDING CEREMONY IN OLTENIA**

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Abstract: Based on field investigations, the present research is to analyse the nuptial ceremony that evidences itself, within the investigated area, through the rites, ceremonial performances and ritual and magical practices that contain extremely old elements. The found information, taken from the folklore magazines, articles, studies or volumes, has been completed with recent field investigations that allow the studying of this type of ceremony, one which is still developing.

There has been analysed the ancient practice of wooing, the engagement, the ritual of fir-tree decoration, the ritual water drinking, the putting of the veil and of the scarf on the bride's head, the shaving of the groom, the verbal rites, among which the *forgiveness* or the blessing received either from the parents or the godparents, the symbols of the hora (the dance), the rite of the common feast. The analysis of these sequences has been made on addressing all the stages of the ceremony, starting with the pre-nuptial ones, and continuing with the wedding ceremony itself.

Keywords: rites of passage; the wedding ceremony; Oltenia; ancient traditions and pre-Christian rites; the rites, ceremonial performances and ritual and magical practices.

The wedding, an important event in the man's life, represents the complex passing, through acknowledgment and acceptance, from one existential statute to another, and the integration into a new condition. The rites of initiation are the ones that allow the rebirth into a superior plan. In the traditional environments, the wedding represents the most complex and significant popular manifestation of the three sequences that are involved in the rites of passage. The fulfilment of these stages of the nuptial ceremony leads to "the instauration of a new structure and, implicitly, to the re-establishing of the equilibrium, which reminds of the cosmicization of the Chaos"¹.

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¹ Delia Suiogan, *Simbolica riturilor de trecere*, Bucharest, Paideia Publishing, 2006, p. 132.

In relation to the other rites of passage, marriage has the highest degree of complexity, and confers the individual the right *to be similar to their kindred*: “The young married man leaves the group of the single, to be head of the family from now on. Any marriage implies tension and danger, unleashes a growth; therefore, it is performed through a rite of passage”².

Similar to the other regions of the country, the pre-nuptial sequences, the wooing and the engagement represent manifestation of the rites of separation, on one side, and those of preliminary aggregation to the new context, on the other side, which allow the continuation of the event. Sometimes, the ancient practice of the wooing that sanctions the connection between the boy and the girl coincides with the engagement of the young people. These preliminary sequences of the wedding, marked by the consent of the parents, the establishing of the dowry and the writing of the dowry paper³, of exchanging the faith rings and the establishing of the wedding date, are accompanied by ritual-ceremonial formulas: “–We have come after a deer, says the godfather./ –If you find her, hunt her, answers the father of the bride”⁴. As signification, it ought to be mentioned that, in the present context, the ring symbolises the eternity, the unity, the connection, the union, the faithfulness of the two young people, the affection and the reciprocal desire to form a family⁵.

If the young man was too shy he would go to ask in marriage, to the girl’s house, accompanied by friends: “–Will you go with me to ask the girl of so-and-so to marry me?/ –Won’t you go alone?/ –You have a well-oiled tongue/ –Will you let me be your best man?/ –Yes, I will!/ – Then, let’s go!”⁶. Reaching the destination, the conversation with the girl’s father would start: “–Greetings good people!/ –Welcome, you folks!/ –Don’t you ask yourself what we are doing here?/ –You shall tell me, I have no worries/ –Uncle so-and-so./ You have a daughter./ Her name is so-and-so./ May she have a long life!/ –You shall have live the same/ Does this boy like her?”⁷. The visit was not announced, the evening of the asking for marriage was ended with a common feast, which signified the acceptance and the acknowledging of the new status of the protagonists. Nowadays, the asking for marriage is a symbolic act, which occurs after the young people have accepted to marry each other, establishing the date of the wedding. It can be observed the social, and also the psychological role that the two ritual sequences fulfil, triggering the entire mechanism of the nuptial ceremony.

² Mircea Eliade, *Sacrul și Profanul*, translated by Brândușa Prelipceanu, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing, 1995, p. 160.

³ In the past, the bride’s dowry, an essential element in the agreement, was registered in the marriage contract, and was made of: land, cattle, furniture, money, clothes etc.

⁴ Informer Dochia Capotă, 83 years old, locality of Ciungetu, Vâlcea County, 2017.

⁵ Ivan Evseev, *Enciclopedia simbolurilor religioase și arhetipurilor culturale*, Timișoara, Învierea Publishing, 2007, p. 350.

⁶ Inf. Gheorghe Barbu, 73 years old, locality of Nedeia, Dolj County, 2016.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

In the past, if the parents did not agree, there was the custom that the girl was stolen. After three weeks, there took place *the conciliation*: within the common feast, there were talks, and the girl's father would give the girl the dowry that he considered appropriate, ignoring the pretensions of the boy's family and parents⁸.

The decorated fir-tree was always present at the nuptial ceremony from Oltenia. The fir-tree is a dendro-morphous symbol, found in the folk categories, in the ritual, magical and symbolic manifestations, and in the non-verbal arts from different regions of the country. For the man of the Romanian traditional community, the fir-tree is "a cosmic tree, a heavenly and life tree"⁹.

The symbolic of the fir-tree, an extremely rich one, related to the eternal life and the ascension towards the sky, can suggest the durable and prosperous marriage of the young people, and indicates the initiation role that the vegetal represents this time. In Oltenia, where the ritual of decorating the fir-tree is still performed intensively, the protagonists are both young unmarried girls and boys, who aspire to a new status. Along the verbal message, present quite often, the ritual is also intensified by background elements that would transpose the actors in the sphere of the magic. If the day of the decoration differs according to the area, the formula "The groom shall be as strong as a fir-tree/ The bride shall be as beautiful as the flowers in the fir-tree", which is the most wide-spread one, signifies the fact that the tree becomes a symbol of the married couple, a vegetal doublet of the human, which is evidenced by other rituals that present important bio-cosmic moments too.

As in all the rituals of aggregation and integration of the individuals into a group, water does not miss from the nuptial ceremony, an element involved in several sequences, among which "the bride's ritual drinking of water". The information points towards a unitary structure of the custom, nonetheless confirmed by the cheerful atmosphere. In the ritual, the water, an element with a rich symbolic manifestation, shows purifying, fertilising, regenerating ritual virtues, accepted by the entire community. Furthermore, there are valued the ethnologic valences of the basil, involved in practices that refer to the integration, the accession to another status in the social life, physical and spiritual integrity of the individual, and, not least, the fulfilment of the marital wishes¹⁰. The ritual context considers especially the semantics of the fountain, a place where the young people meet, communicate and promise to marry each other. The fountain is "an erotic and fertility symbol"¹¹.

⁸ Inf. Gheorghita Cochintu, 52 years old, locality of Chilizii, Olt County, 2017.

⁹ Romulus Vulcănescu, *Mitologie română*, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing, 1985, p. 485.

¹⁰ For details, see Loredana-Maria Ilin-Grozoiu, *Simbolica busuiocului în obiceiurile vieții omului și în cele calendaristice*, in "Memoria Ethnologica", year XVII, no. 62-63/2017, pp. 28-39.

¹¹ Ion Taloș, *Gândirea magico-religioasă la români. Dicționar*, Bucharest, Enciclopedic Publishing, 2001, p. 57.

Another ritual element that sanctions the connection between the young marrying people is the apple. As signification, it ought to be underlined that, in the popular culture, the apple, bearing the attribute of the sacredness, is the symbol of purity, beauty and fertility of unmarried girls. It is involved in a succession of ceremonial complexes along the year, and both life. In the present ritual context, the apple certainly fulfils purifying and fertilising functions, and it is rendered valuable as a substitute of the human. The *dance with the fir-tree*, to which everyone who attends the event participates, young and old, is a ritual segment that would consolidate the connection between the protagonists.

As resulting from most of the declarations, a significant segment of the marital ceremony is constituted by the *Great Speech*: “The discourse, as Delia Suiogan asserts, is based on an allegorical process, a result of *a game of images* that, as noticed before too, excludes the gratuity totally, an extremely important role in the supporting of this process being carried out by the symbol-metaphors, and the proper symbols”¹². The verbal formula indicates the purpose of the action: (approx. translation) “We come to your courts,/ Now you are giving us the little flower,/ Otherwise, we shall not go away/ We have brought silver pickaxes/ To pluck the flower out of the ground,/ To plant her in the emperor’s garden/ To be better in that place/ To not wither again”¹³. The flower becomes the symbol of the bride who would soon become a wife.

The dressing of the bride (the adornment), by the godmother, is also an act that ensures the passing towards another level. Active character, the bride who is reborn as wife from a maiden, dressed in white, becomes the archetype image of purity, a fact that confers her the right to a new beginning. To ensure the efficiency of the rite, there is rendered valuable the round-shaped bread, the bride sitting in front of a mirror, on a chair with a cushion on it, with a round loaf of bread, empty in the middle¹⁴. The folkloric text refers to the marital fulfilment, and the accession towards an exceptional state: (approx. translation) “Damn you valley/ You remain in grief/ Without the voice of a maiden/ Without the riding of a lad/ You little girl don’t rush into marriage/ Because the kindness of your parents/ You won’t meet again/ The kindness of your man/ Is harsh as a dried leaf/ When you think you’re good/ He will hurt you bad/ Don’t rush into marriage/ As a flower that drops its petals/ The flower will bloom again/ But you shall never be a maiden again/ The flower blooms twice/ But you shall die a wife/ Shush you bride, don’t cry/ You shall see your mother/ When the poplar will bear fruit/ When the fish will sing in the pond/ Then you shall be a maiden again/ All the flowers go to the supreme judgement/ Only the sun-flower/ And the wheat ear/ Sit at the gate of heaven/

¹² Delia Suiogan, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

¹³ Dumitru Otovescu (coordinator), *Monografia sociologică în România*, Craiova, Beladi Publishing, 2006, p. 154.

¹⁴ Delia Suiogan, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

Judging the flowers/ And the brides too/ That's enough, may you live long/ Let us be merry and healthy/ To do everything we wish"¹⁵.

The lyrics invoke the flower as a symbol of evolution towards the seed and the fruit: (approx. translation) “-You girl of a rich man/ Why are rushing to get married,/ As the flower rushes to drop its petals?/ The flower will bloom again/ You won't ever be a girl/ Only when the pike will sing in the pond./ And neither then./ Maybe when the poplar will bear nuts/ And the reed sweet apples”¹⁶. The dressing-up of the bride is a threshold ritual of great emotion, when the moments of joy alternate with those of sadness, the price paid for the integration in the group of the married women, for starting a family.

In certain moments, the ritual is accompanied by elements that refer both to the integrating values and the ones that sanction a new beginning. One of such elements is the round loaf of the bride, present due to its purifying and protecting virtues, involved in a series of acts that consolidate, along the salt, the sugar and wine, the connection between the protagonists. The salt, involved especially in the ritual practices from the calendar cycle, is sprinkled in three corners, on the loaf from which the bride tastes. The wine, symbol of the blood that Jesus Christ shed for the redemption of the humankind, is meant to attest the right of the bride to pass into another status. It is the symbol of the eternal youth and a celestial drink¹⁷. The voiced formula “the bride shall be as sweet as sugar and as tasty as the salt in food” suggests the involvement of the foods into the act of communion, which promote kindness and welfare. From time to time, to these ritual elements, is associated the number three, identified with the sacred, found in a variety of gestural performances and beliefs from the Romanian space. The symbolic gestures, the dividing into pieces and the eating of the bread, by the participants, signifies both the separation and the definitive aggregation to the new state, of the protagonists.

As emphasised by the field researches and the older documentary sources, certain types of cloth are involved in numerous rites from the cycle of life, which points even more to the change of the status. We are to consider below only few of the multiple examples that the nuptial ceremony offers: the dressing of the bride into a white dress; the white veil from the bride's hair; handkerchiefs, towels, pillows, table cloths, duvets, scarves are given to the participants to the event; the handkerchief on top of the fir-tree and the pole etc. Much older information indicates the fact that the bride used to weave and sew the handkerchiefs, the towels and the silk cloth, along with the groom's shirt. There can also be mentioned here the symbolic gesture of changing the wreath on her head with the scarf of the wife, which has an obvious finality: the passing to the new condition, that of wife, by exchanging a piece of clothes with another. These fabrics, always

¹⁵ Inf. Anica Guță, 68 years old, locality of Nedeia, Dolj County, 2016.

¹⁶ Delia Suiogan, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

¹⁷ Ivan Evseev, *Dicționar de magie, demonologie și mitologie română*, Timișoara, Amarcord Publishing, 1998, p. 491.

permanent in the passage ceremonies, for which there has always been shown preoccupation, there have been regarded, by the collectivity, as helpful means, filled with significations that allow the performer the access to a superior state. The action of weaving is a total form of participation to the building of the Self, as Mircea Eliade was remarking, because it involves the emerging out of our own substance¹⁸. The ritual significations become masks, elements of a great symbolism, which fulfil a role of mediation and “ensure the continuity within the traditional type of thinking”¹⁹.

Among the elements attached to the nuptial ceremony, we mention the flower that symbolises the youth, the purity, “the true symbol of the bride, in the position of becoming a woman”²⁰. The rebirth of the wife from the maiden involves a physical transformation, marked by the loss of virginity, and, in the same time, marked culturally, through the ceremonial. The flower extends its significations towards the groom too, who, after the finalising of the ceremonial shaving, he is given the flower, by the godfather or godmother, to attach it to his shirt. In this moment, there are sung specific songs that draw attention to the luck he had that he met his life companion: (approx. translation) “-Here it is, my groom/ Your flower from your godmother/ She is sewing it to your shirt./ -I am marrying too young/ But I have a good girl/ And I have made many suffer./ Not only myself”²¹.

The ritual shaving of the groom, performed by the best man or the godfather, is another magical-symbolical action within the nuptial ceremony, which marks the separation of the groom from the group of the unmarried men. In the same time, there are sung specific songs that draw the attention on the fact that the groom is passing over the threshold that sends him into a new existential stage: (approx. translation): “I’ve prepared the razor to be shaved,/ All the girls are laughing/ That I’ve married,/ And I won’t go out at night./ A green leaf and three small pence./ You flowers continue blooming,/ I won’t need you anymore./ Bloom all over the wide valley,/ The road has closed for me./ You flowers bloom and you peacocks look/ I’ve had my share of fun”²²; “I’ve married very young/ But I’ve chosen a good girl/ But why have I married?/ I’ve wasted a lot of love/ Not only mine/ But also of the many others”²³. A special importance is that of the people who perform this ritual, but also the instrument they perform the action with. As most of the information present, the shaving of the groom is done with some magical-symbolic objects: the halberd, the axe or the knife. Consequently, it is articulated the idea according to which, the magical-symbolic action from the nuptial ceremony on addressing the shaving of the groom intends the cutting of the connections with the

¹⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Tratat de istoria religiilor*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing, 1992.

¹⁹ Delia Suiogan, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ Inf. Antoaneta Sârbulescu, 76 years old, locality of Busu, Dolj County, 2016.

²² Inf. Petre Bădescu, 85 years old, locality of Stoicești, Dolj County, 2016.

²³ Inf. Ioana Văduva, 82 years old, locality of Bârboi, Dolj County, 2016.

anterior level, and the passing to the “relative stage of individuality to supra-individuality, as a constitutive and indispensable element, of the entirety and creation force of the One”²⁴.

The importance of the godparents is not just one that confers pomp to the religious marriage service, but, it is the fact that during the life they need to guide their godchildren to follow and fulfil the commandments of God, and, in the same time, they have the duty to help them when they lose the way of the good Christians, and to encourage and praise them when they do good. On the other side, the godchildren have the duty to listen and to respect their spiritual parents, with the same duty as their natural parents²⁵.

The forgiveness, or the blessings, from the parents and godparents belong to the category of the verbal rites of separation from the old state, and represents an important ritual sequence, within the marriage: “Forgive me, father and mother, that I’ve left you without help in your household, said the boy./ -Forgive me, father and mother, if I’ve made any mistakes, said the girl./ -God shall forgive us all, answered the parents”²⁶. Moreover, these ritual practices used to grant solemnity on the moment when the suite of the groom would enter the yard of the bride, and the inviters would go to the church, for the religious marriage. These solemn acts, along with that of hand kissing, are related to harmonisation of the family bonds, with the parents and the godparents, and they are meant to ensure, together with the rite of good wishing, the cohesion of the couple, the ideal of attaining it.

In the nuptial ceremony, within the considered region, the wheat and the corn gain ritual and magical valences. The ritual practice of throwing these ritual elements over the groom and bride, during the religious service, is related to the fertility and abundance. In Oltenia, these vegetal sacrifices are involved in many ritual and ceremonial practices, which discover their mythical, apotropaic, fertilising and funerary functions.

The threshold also gains a special importance within the wedding ceremony, which is one of the sacred places of the house. Here are few of the sequences in which the sacred signification of the threshold is evidenced: the receiving of the bride and groom over the threshold, the saying of the forgiveness at the threshold. As it is well-known, the threshold, the door, the gate, and the window have a special role in all the rites of passage, where they fulfil multiple sacred and magical functions.

The ritual background also evidences the symbols of the *hora* (dance), highlighted in the most diverse contexts. As forms of manifestation in the nuptial ceremony, the *hora* is: *the hora of the fir-tree, the hora of the wedding, the hora of the exchanges, the hora of the bride, the hora of the godparents, the hora of the moon, the great hora*. The joining into the *hora* of the bride and groom, who are

²⁴ Delia Suiogan, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

²⁵ Ilie Cleopa, *Predici la praznice împărătești și la sfinți de peste an*, 3rd edition, Mănăstirea Sihăstria Publishing, 2008, pp. 148–149.

²⁶ Inf. Dochia Capotă, locality of Ciungetu, Vâlcea County, 2017.

now performers, and also direct participants to the game, after the fulfilment of the ceremonial acts, can also be considered a rite of consecration and initiation. In the closed hora (the circle), on one side, and the open one (the spiral), on the other side, there are differences, revealed by Delia Suiogan: “The closed hora is related to the symbolism of the cyclical character of the evolution, representing the repeated rhythm of life. The spiral involves the idea of limit, one starts from an extremity to reach another, but also includes the idea of unlimited, due to the repeatability of the actions”²⁷. Hora, as a dance that appears within the nuptial ceremony, helping the actors to pass from one state to another, is the institution that unites the participants to this event, and also the young men who are about to get married, and the adults too. In a certain ritual context, there is danced the Hora of the bride, with obvious integratory functions, the text being projected at a cosmic level: (approx. trans.) “What a bright sun/ What a handsome groom/ What a bright moon/ What a beautiful bride”²⁸, or, “You, respected godfather/ Put your hand into your pocket/ And take out some money for us”²⁹.

The rite of the common feast of all the community, along with the two protagonists, marks the end, and respectively the beginning of a new stage. The verbal messages as “May you have a happy marriage!”, “Good luck” etc. are meant to potent the nuptial ceremony into the desired direction. It is desired the social integrity, the bride and groom not representing just a part of their family relations, but also a part of the community they belong to. The common consuming of the food, a complex event that is carried out within the wedding, suggests the acceptance, the integration and the acknowledgement of the new status of the protagonists.

Among the ceremonies that are related to the main moments from a man’s life, the nuptial one is always open to the new, and in the fulfilment of its functionality there are still kept some ancient traditions and pre-Christian rites that allow the reconstituting of the archetypal model of the Romanian wedding. As a consequence of the transformations and mutations that occurred in the villages, and also due to the fact that the individual had to adapt to the social and mentality changes, certain nuptial customs have altered, losing their initial signification, or even disappeared. In the investigated space, there are still preserved some ritual sequences of the wedding ceremony, but we also witness a series of transformations, on addressing the traditional elements. The practicing of the nuptial customs involves the entire community, preoccupied to give their agreement and to integrate the protagonist into the social life.

²⁷ Delia Suiogan, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

²⁸ Inf. Nicolae Zaharia, 82 years old, locality of Gebleşti, Dolj County, 2014.

²⁹ Inf. Lucreția Badea, 72 years old, locality of Spineni, Olt County, 2013.