

## WEDDING IN THE CONTEXT OF FAMILY AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

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Wedding represents a system of customs and rituals which defines behaviour of people when getting married and belongs thus to so called rituals of passage. Science of Ethnology has paid to this type of rituals permanent attention. Until now this issue is one of the most frequent topics.<sup>1</sup> Its topicality results from current situation, as the existence of various rituals in industrial as well as urban communities seems to be more important than was presumed.

The ethnological research of wedding, similarly as other types of customs, has acquired an approach which considered these customs as old-fashioned. There was an effort to reconstruct their oldest forms. That would serve as a document about life in ancient past. As Swedish ethnologist Frykman explicitly defined it - "this study was like a rails which led ethnologists into the darkness of the past". (Frykman, 1979: 54). Gradually this opinion has changed. The research of customs acquired different position. It started to be understood as a different means (not rails into the past) but a kind of "reflector" which illuminates or a "mirror" which reflects the way of life and values of relevant community - "customs as concentrated communication of values". (Bruck, 1983: 90). According to C. Geertz the ritual is "a visor to strange world and strange conscience". (Geertz, 1987: 105 - 133). Application of these opinions means that the study of customs provide an answer also about the current state of relevant community. This type of interpretation of customs must inevitably take into account current social and cultural context as "the tradition always goes hand in hand with synchronic standards and evaluating attitudes" (Leščák, 1986: 107). Contextualization of the custom means to follow the statement context gives about the custom - "communicated information encompassed in the custom can be decoded via context" (Leach, 1989). But the relation custom - context has also other side. Context can be better understood and explained via custom, what is sometimes defined as "customisation of the context" (Prica, 1991: 248 - 9). Application of this approach means that through customs analysis we can give an account of investigated community. In this paper I will try to give such an account of a village community in Slovakia in 70-80ties of 20th century which is based on the analysis of existing wedding customs.

Before interpreting family and social context of wedding customs, the essential factor determining their existence has to be clarified - i.e. the way of translation of custom traditions. In the tradition transfer mechanism this process is defined as process of selection. Selectivity is most often attributed to generation overtaking traditions. Analysis of life cycle trading showed that selection is applied also within generation passing on the traditions. This means that not everything they experienced and applied in their lives is passed on. Maybe this is specificity of the second half of the 20th century in which many fundamental changes took place in the life of one generation. This caused that the generation re-evaluated already acquired traditions, result of which was the decision not to pass further some phenomena to younger generation. This process was influenced also by decreasing authority of older generation. The older generation voluntarily gave up trading of some phenomena, standards, values because they were aware of not being respected. The result of such double-dealing selection of passing on traditions is that young generation did not even in the latent form acquire several traditions; widespread in the generation of their parents.

It seems that so far prevailing general opinion about the fundamental importance of family in customs trading has to be corrected. E.g. at wedding customs it occurs that taking over from the same age groups, respecting of local standards have greater influence than intergeneration transmission within the family.

## **1. Family Relations**

**1.1.** In the system of family relations traditional wedding till the beginning, somewhere until the half of the 20th century meant passing of the bride from her parental family into the family of her husband (bridegroom). Customs confirming this passage and acceptance of the bride by the new family belonged to the most developed and for a long time they were obligatory (e.g. bride walking around the table, welcome with bread, bringing gifts to new family). In current wedding model these customs have been reduced. It results partly from the change of newly married couple family localisation. Matrilocal and neolocal settlements prevail over patrilocal one. The absence of these customs thus provide evidence of a decreasing importance of the family relation between bride and bridegroom's family. Woman - bride no longer gets married to the family of husband, but gets married to a husband.

**1.2.** Establishment of a new marriage relation acquire dominant importance. Equal position of both wife and husband is stressed - e.g. custom of common sweeping of broken glassware or sawing wood after marriage what is a symbol of future co-operation of married couple in the household. In comparison with older customs there is a new meaning expressing requirements of current standards of matrimonial co-existence. In accordance with declaring marriage as an equal partnership a new shift in meaning has been recorded - an analogy of the ritual roles of bridegroom and bride (gifts of bride as well as bridegroom to his/her parents-in-law, provision of smaller trousseau also for a bridegroom, presence of both bridegroom and bride at the ritual dance with the wedding guests). In latest

customs even prevail those which are oriented on a bridegroom. They emphasise loss of his freedom, his new duties in the household, fulfilling of matrimonial duties and submission to his wife. On the whole these trends in current wedding customs can be considered as certain feminization of the ritual role of the bridegroom. In clarification of current family-matrimonial relations on the basis of these customs a question arises if it is a form confirming real changes or a form manifesting an expected ideal model of marriage.

**1.3 Relationship parents - children** represents the most important part of the family relations system. What evidence do the wedding customs provide us about it? First of all parents no longer decide the choice of the marriage partner for their children. Resulting from this customs such as asking for the bride and betrothal lost their previous function. Traditional ethical norm according to which parents are obliged to prepare a wedding to their children (parents cover financial costs) is still valid. This is valid both in relation to daughters and sons. If a young couple decide for so called "quiet wedding" (without guest, banquet, entertainment), parent feel obliged to reimburse them with a sum of money which accounts for the costs of wedding banquet. Despite financing wedding, parents do not claim to influence the wedding course (e.g. they do not try to force older customs from the times when they were young. Wedding parents' position is more dignified at current weddings than in the past. In the past they were not present at the wedding ceremony, they did not use to sit at the wedding table for it was their duty to look after the course of the wedding banquet. Wedding farewell of a young couple from parents has maintained its ritual character up to present time (farewell speech - somewhere in verse, asking for forgiveness, thanking, kisses, hugs, blessing). Ceremonial separation from parents belongs to firm and mostly widespread customs of current weddings. It provides evidence of relatively strong emotional linkage between parents and adult children though in comparison with the past the authority of parents has decreased.

## 2.

**Kinship relations** Wedding was never only the matter of close family. Traditional wedding model was based on participation of wide scale of kin to the third degree. Out of them wedding functionaries who directed the wedding were chosen. Participation of relatives had not only ritual function but also meant social help. Young couple's Godparents had especially important position wedding functions. These characteristics of relatives' participation in the wedding are valid even nowadays, although the scale of invited relatives has been narrowed to the second degree. The function of their social help has increased because besides food gifts they dedicate gifts of considerable financial value. Participation of relatives from both families enables them to get acquainted and confirm establishment of new kinship relations. At wedding where a large scale of relative participate continuation of family traditions, demonstration of fellowship and solidarity can be observed. This phenomena confirms that in this community establishment of a new family is still not considered only an

individual but a close family matter. Participation of relatives at the wedding contributes to a certain extent to greater obligatory character of entered marriage.

### **3. Age Groups**

**3.1 Children.** At traditional wedding children did not form a separate group. Although they were present at the wedding, customs did not count with their participation. They did not have a determined position in the wedding procession or at the wedding table during the banquet (they used to be under the table or behind the stove). Nowadays their status increased. They are considered a special group of wedding guests (special place at the wedding table, decoration with wedding feathers as other guests, adequate participation in amusement). Children are even considered to be the decoration of each wedding.

**3.2 Youth.** Their participation in the wedding was important - they were of the same age group as the young couple. Youth at the wedding was represented by selected (invited) individuals who created wedding company composed of a group of bridesmaids and groomsmen (not couples). The main function of the company was not legal but entertaining (dances, singing). Besides the youth company also other youths had right to participate in the wedding of a couple of the same age group (they took part in pre-wedding farewell, in dances at the wedding).

Currently the participation of the youth of the same age group of the local community has faded away. It provides evidence of a weakened local linkage to this group. Only the invited youth take part in the wedding. Invitation to a wedding is based on kinship, neighbourship, friendship or work relations. According to current ethical norm it is polite to invite also the partner of invited person. It means a numerous increase of the company members, result of which is the couple arrangement (groomsman + bridesmaid) prevailing over the group arrangement within the company. On the whole the youth is less active at the wedding than in the past (e.g. in singing).

**3.3 Adults.** All adult members of the local community used to take part in the wedding in some way (as onlookers, donors of gifts, direct participation in the wedding feast). At the wedding they did not represent a separate group as this age category was determined by family association. They acted separately as a group of men and women (see 4.1.2 and 4.2.2).

Nowadays the adult group is represented by invited guests (relatives, neighbours, friends, workmates). Similarly as in the youth group couple arrangement (married couples) prevails over group arrangement (men - women), too.

**3.4 Old people.** Similarly as children and adults they also did not take part in the wedding customs as a separate group. Its members joined some customs of the group of men or women. Their participation mostly depended on the kinship relation to the newly weds and not upon association to their age group.

At present participation of the old people in the wedding is even more reduced. Its due to the change of the wedding locality. Wedding takes place away from home milieu and therefore old people do not like to go there. Prevailing modern type of amusement (music, dance) is not convenient for them and that is also one of the reasons why old people's participation in the weddings has been reduced. Today they prefer to take part in post-wedding feasts with the prevalence of older people.

#### 4.

Gender Groups Wedding is a ritual of passage where the division of gender roles is very distinct and important. The very analysis of wedding customs is of essential importance for knowing the status of men and women in relevant community. It is based on the assumption that the division of roles and ritual activities is not random but results from the position of the given group in the community. It has been demonstrated by the results of the wedding customs analysis.

##### 4.1 Men

4.1.1 Single Lads. This group is important as the same age group of the groom. By having got married the groom is no longer a member of this group. Therefore activities of this youth group were related to the groom. It was farewell to the groom - so called "drinking over freedom" which has survived until present time. It has proved an uninterrupted identification of the single men with the youth group. During the wedding this group demonstrated its association with the groom also a connection to the bride by expressing the claim for the bride - the groom paid for her, bride's garland belonged to them or they stole it. A separate claim for the bride had a representative of the youth group - "the best man" (he led her to the wedding, took off her garland, presented bonneted bride, had the right to the first dance with her and in ancient past he was laid on the bed with the bride). It is difficult to prove that the customs of the youth group are remnants of past sexual promiscuity or "the right to the first night". However it is obvious that this means application of claims of this group on the bride. Lately this right was understood and demonstrated only symbolically.

4.1.2 Married Men. Wedding customs with exclusively male participation were only a few. The main and most widely spread custom was payment of so called "accession fee". After the wedding the groom paid for alcoholic drinks of men in the local pub. This custom has survived till nowadays. It confirms the social status of the groom. The function of a witness at the church wedding ritual was an exclusively male matter. Church regulations, however, did not restrict women as witnesses. Even at present male witnesses are preferred. If women appear in this function (single or married) then women with higher social status are chosen (education, employment). This is valid only for the village community (in cities selection of witnesses is a personal matter).

## 4.2 Women

4.2.1 Single Maidens. They are of the same age group as the bride whom with she ritually departed before the wedding. At wedding this group was represented by selected maidens - bridesmaids. Their task was to prepare ritual subjects and signs (garlands, feathers, wedding flag, tree). They used to prepare bride for the wedding, repeatedly departed with her, released the bride to the groom after paying ransom. They carried out several magic rituals which would secure them early marriages.

Nowadays the ritual of bride departing from maidens has faded away. Extinction of this ritual of passage reflects the reality in which maiden groups do not act. Its absence gives evidence that after getting married women do not break all previous contacts. Marriage does not change their lives so fundamentally as in past times.

4.2.2 Married Women. In traditional wedding many of them had important roles. In several weddings they manifested a separate group. It was females' duty to help to prepare bride's dowry and also its transfer to groom's house. Moreover they were carrying out many magic rituals. These activities secured vital existential values - prosperity, fertility, health and protection against evil. Women most distinctly presented themselves in rituals of bride acceptance among women - at bonneting, dances with bonneted bride, accompanying bride to the post wedding church purification ritual in church, so called introduction. A separate form of bride's acceptance to the local group of women was a post wedding refreshment for all village women. In some places it was female Shrovetide feast, at which all brides married in that year were accepted as women.

Women in current wedding model act as a separate group only rarely. Here, similarly as in the youth group, couple arrangement (married couples) prevails over the group one.

When comparing ritual activities of males and females certain characteristics of both genders are shown. Customs of legal function and giving ceremonial speeches were carried out exclusively by males. Women were dominant in magic rituals - in securing vital existential values.

Comparison of youth group characteristics (lads - maidens) indicates greater aggressivity and claim of rights by the young lads group. In ritual- magic behaviour of maidens a certain contradiction can be found. While they were single (bridesmaid at the wedding and out of it) the aim of the magic rituals was to secure marriage. After its achievement - wedding - grief for the loss of freedom is repeatedly expressed (usually in farewells, texts of songs).

In the single lads group love magic was practised less frequently. If so, then with the aim to secure affection, love of a girl but not marriage.

Gender - age groups were distinguished not only by different standards of behaviour but their distinctiveness was manifested externally by special signs. This gender-age symbolism was applied also in everyday life but was especially important and apparent in ritual situation of wedding. Despite certain variability the following basic symbolic signs were valid:

1. Single maidens were singled out by head garlands, flowers, ribbons
2. Married women - bonnets
3. Men - feathers, in some places woven textiles

When the same sign was used - feathers - the status distinction of single and married men was demonstrated by different position of the feather (hat, coat lapel), its direction (up - down), other quality (single men had peacock feathers, married men feathers from plants) or other colour, size, decoration. Despite these distinctions the signs of both single and married men were basically identical (feather), while in female gender, maidens were singled out from women by other signs (garland - bonnet).

We can see that on the symbolic level different status of the single and the married was more distinctly manifested by females than males.

At present gender-age symbolism expressed by signs on clothing has faded away. All wedding participants regardless of sex or age are decorated by the same sign - wedding feather (a kind of evergreen plants + ribbons + artificial flowers). It is a modification of a feather which once used to be the sign of male gender - today has a unified function - to denote wedding participants.

Current state of wedding customs reflects fading importance of the gender-age association. Specific customs manifesting particular groups or change of association with them are dying out. Greater tendency to extinction is shown in demonstrations of gender differentiation than the age one. The age differentiation on the level of young - old is surviving in many demonstrations and in some of them even increases (e.g. way of amusement).

## **5. Territorial Groups**

**5.1 Group of Neighbours.** Identification with this group was regarded as very important in the traditional village community. Its importance was nearing the importance of the kinship group. Slovak proverb says: "Neighbour is the greatest relative". During the wedding this was demonstrated by various forms of aid from neighbours in wedding preparations. Neighbours always belonged among invited guests. The circle of neighbours comprised several houses not only the closest ones. Importance of being the member of the group of neighbours was manifested also in the post wedding custom to bring refreshments from the wedding to neighbours' houses. This custom was carried out in a new settlement by the bride who thus confirmed her entry to a new group of neighbours. Refreshment of all neighbours in the house of newly weds, so called "susedskô", was of the same importance.

Currently the circle comprising the group of neighbours has become smaller (usually 2 - 3 nearest neighbours), but the importance of neighbourhood has survived in the village community.

**5.2 Local Community.** Every member of the local community had right to participate in the wedding of local community member (become a member of a community by getting married and small refreshment, dance at the wedding

feast). Besides all community members contributed to the preparation of the wedding feast (in food). Giving foodstuffs to the bride on her pre and post wedding visit of all houses in the village was also a demonstration of social aid. These customs express association, homogeneity and were signs of identification with the local community.

Nowadays are the forms of the local community participation greatly reduced (only the participation at the wedding ceremony, onlooking the wedding procession have survived). This reduction is so distinct that a part of this community does not attend the wedding of its member at all, moreover sometimes they are not even informed about it. It gives evidence of looser ties within the local community.

## 6.

Interethnic Relations Wedding customs belong to the sphere of social and spiritual culture to which relatively great ethnical signs are attributed (e.g. in comparison with material culture). As shown by our research results in ethnically mixed Slovak- Hungarian region of southern Slovakia, wedding customs are not phenomena which would manifest ethnic identity. They are performed mainly in the circle of "ours" so there is little opportunity of comparison and confrontation with "others", "strangers". Greater possibility for ethnic confrontation is in ethnically mixed marriages. As wedding is a ceremony confirming establishment of new family and kinship relations it does not create situation in which efforts to emphasise ethnic differences would occur. On the contrary, tendency to adapt or make a compromise prevails. E.g. wedding invitations are printed bilingual, church wedding ceremony is carried out in one language and civil wedding in the other, text of the wedding departure from parents is declared in the native languages of the marrying couple, wedding songs are sung both in Slovak and Hungarian. The effort to avoid confrontation or misunderstanding is expressed also by leaving out the customs which the other side do not know. It confirms the manifestation of ethnic identity and cultural differences do not belong in ceremonial wedding situation.

The above results of wedding customs analysis in the context of family and social relations contribute to understanding of changes of the norms and values of village inhabitants of Slovakia in the second half of the 20th century.

Customs and traditions as a whole, particularly wedding customs, are cultural phenomena which are still very vital, changing and reflecting the changes of the way of life and culture. Thus always new meanings, new contexts and through them possibilities of new interpretations are being created.

## ENDTNOTES

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## SVADBA V KONTEXTE RODINNÝCH A SOCIÁLNYCH VZŤAHOV

### R e s u m é

Príspevok obsahuje analýzu svadobných obyčajov, ktorá tvorí základ a východisko pre podanie výpovede o stave dedinského spoločenstva na Slovensku v 70-tych rokoch 20. storočia.

Kontext rodinných vzťahov odhaľuje zmeny v postavení ženy a muža v manželstve, objasňuje vzťahy rodičia - dospelé deti, intenzitu príbuzenských vzťahov.

V rovine sociálnych vzťahov sa poukazuje na status detí, mládeže, dospelých členov, starých ľudí, na odlišné statusy skupín mužského a ženského rodu (mládenci, ženatí muži, dievky, vydaté ženy). Napokon sú tu výpovede o fungovaní teritoriálnych skupín (susedská skupina, lokálne spoločenstvo), ako aj o interetnických vzťahov.