

Aleksandra PAVIĆEVIĆ  
Ethnographical Institute SASA, Belgrade

UDC 392.5(497.11)  
Original Scientific Paper

## THE WEDDING ACT IN SERBIA IN THE LIGHT OF SOCIAL CHANGES\* A Study of Traditional and Contemporary Ceremony

Retraditional form of getting married included a wedding ceremony in which we had, among other rituals, an obligatory church wedding. The church wedding was omitted in certain cases, as, for example, the marriage of underage partners.

When transformation of traditional life began, church wedding was omitted more often, though it was still the norm (in traditional and civilian law). In this period, traditional wedding ceremony was considered as popular way of marking the start of a new family.

At the end of 19th and beginning of 20th century, the civil marriage ceremony was introduced, but most of couples still got married in church. This was the custom until The Second World War, when the church form of wedding became undesirable. Communist ideology meant a complete break with religious and national traditions. This resulted reduction of the numbers of church weddings, but not their complete omission.

Economic crises, war destructions, low life standards and disturbance of the system of values, at the end of 20th cent resulted in retraditionalisation processes as for instance, revitalization of church life, or some of it's elements.

Last few years in Serbia, young couples approach both the civilian marriage -because it is an obligation and the church marriage — because of different reasons: need to make continuity with historical heritage, or to invent new one.

I will try to show this course of transformation of act of getting married, through analyses of social meaning of some wedding ceremony elements.

Key words: wedding, church, tradition, continuity, and transformation

Transformation of traditional society in Serbia began as early as the mid 19th century with the liberation of Serbia from Turkish dominion and by the execution of political and legal measures, by which values different or even contrary to the previously accepted ones were often promoted. The process of change progressed slowly and continually even to the very beginning of the Second World War. Ideologically, the socialist revolution was a complete break from what was left of tradition, although many institutions of social life “survived” and continued to exist (sometimes maintaining only traditional form) even in the second half of the 20th century.

---

\* This paper is the result of the project no. 1868: Contemporary Rural and Urban Cullture — Ways of Transformaation, finances by MSTD RS.

Institutions of marriage and family were not only among the first to be changed, but they could be viewed as the “crossroad” at which different levels and kinds of transformation occurred: demographic, social, economic, cultural, ideological... In post-war Serbian society they were influenced by: industrialization, urbanization, agrarian reform, atheistic tendencies, change of legislative system, development of the feminist movement, sexual revolution...

The marriage act as an element of a wider ceremony has never been the focus of attention by ethnologists. This probably results from the fact that the wedding itself, in its ritual sense, has been of marginal significance, in the understanding of our people. The practice of marriages without a contract, relatively widespread in the life of our traditional society, was rooted, among other reasons, in the idea that the wedding — feast was what made the alliance of two people official, whereas the marriage ceremony “could wait”. However, it should be noted that the commonest situation was that people who made a wedding — feast also married, whereas in the case of common law unions both aspects were delayed.<sup>1</sup>

Before the introduction of obligatory civil marriage in Serbia the church wedding had been the only formal way of making a marital alliance. Under the jurisdiction of state authorities<sup>2</sup>, marriage, as well as the rituals involved, underwent a transformation<sup>3</sup> from both the ideological aspect and that of structure and function of ritual.

The general direction of the transformation was related to reduction and change of the function of the ritual (specially in conditions of urban life), as well as changes in comprehension of the essence of marriage as an institution, inner principles of functioning of the marriage union and the bases on which it rests.

Considering the limited space for this report, this paper will present a brief survey and an analysis of church, popular and civil wedding ceremonies and, on the basis of this, the supposed, that is, proclaimed concept of marriage, as the model existing in religious, popular and official state ideology, as well as the attitudes of future brides and bridegrooms towards one or the other “form” of marriage<sup>4</sup>.

The traditional way of wedding which still takes place in most villages of Serbia represents a complex ceremony composed of various rituals of different magic and social significance. As I have already mentioned, limited space prevents presentation of all the details of this ceremony, therefore I shall point out the basic changes which are taking place within the traditional model of a wedding feast and within the relation of this model to the contemporary, that is, civil wedding act.

Considering that among our people church is considered to be an inseparable part of the tradition, a peasant who organizes a wedding ceremony after the traditional customs includes in it a church wedding as well. This rule was applied even in the

---

<sup>1</sup> This is claimed on the basis of personal research

<sup>2</sup> By The Basic Law on Marriage, from 1946, obligatory civil marriage was introduced at the entire territory of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia.

<sup>3</sup> On transformation of wedding ritual as the indicator of social tendencies, the work that is interesting to consider is: Sanja Zlatanovic, *Reafirmacija tradicije i svadbeni ritual, Zivotni ciklus, referati bugarsko-srpskog naucnog skupa*, Sofija 2000, 223–230.

<sup>4</sup> The Analysis is carried out on the basis of study of the existing literature, legal regulations on marriage, personal observations of the act of wedding in two Belgrade churches: The church of St. Apostles at Topcider and the Church of St. Alexander Nevski, on Dorcol, as well as in the district community of Stari Grad, on the basis of a poll carried out among future brides and bridegrooms, on the occasion of fixing wedding date and a study of wedding customs in the village of Dubona near Mladenovac (70 km from Belgrade).

post-war period when the number of weddings in church (both in rural and urban areas) declined. Those who were inclined to follow the “new fashion” or ideology and to avoid church wedding, most often chose not to make big wedding feast, but to organize the wedding celebration in a restaurant, taking the model of urban areas. I say most often because there have been cases in which church weddings have been excluded from the traditional concept of marriage.

The most evident change occurring in traditional wedding ceremony is partial or complete (differing from case to case), change in the function of magic rituals. Whereas previously they were used to establish relations with “higher powers” which were supposed to ensure fertility, abundance, harmony... in marriage, today they have mainly entertaining function. That is what can be seen or heard from the participants in rituals. However, although they claim that it is “all a matter of fun”, they keep to the proper order of events very strictly, fearing, in fact, that “breaking the rules” will cause bad luck. The fact that contemporary villager does not know the meaning and purpose of some ritual tells us only of the passing of time which has taken with it knowledge of that kind, which has been, doubtlessly, helped by the strong spirit of modern urban life evident in our rural environment as well.

The most important change of a social nature is certainly the position of bride and bridegroom at the wedding feast and in the life of community. Earlier social patterns always put bride and bridegroom at an extremely marginal position. Not only their marriage was often arranged without their knowledge and assent, but they had a secondary place during the wedding celebration as well. Although the whole ceremony was because of them, they were practically only intermediaries in making an important agreement between two social groups, and the purpose of their marriage was fulfillment and reaching socially proclaimed values. Contemporary “traditional” wedding feasts introduce a lot of romantic elements, and thus, what used to be unimaginable, the bride and bridegroom show their affection and closeness openly (by holding each other’s hand, conversation, and even by kissing in public). Moreover, they sit and partake of a feast with other wedding guests, whereas earlier they used to be the ones who waited on the most important guests, such as godfather and witness at the wedding, and they used to eat in a separate room. Today the bride is dressed in a luxurious white wedding gown (and thus easily recognizable among all the other female guests. Earlier she used to be dressed in a traditional national costume that was worn on formal occasions and also worn by all other girls present at the event (although the bride usually wore more jewelry and ornaments). The tent in which the wedding feast usually takes place is decorated with the initials of bride and bridegroom made of flowers and heart shaped ornaments.

Although social agreement made between the bride’s and bridegroom’s relatives is not of such importance as it used to be, and although the relationship between young husband and wife is more significant than before, rituals and customs following the wedding feast in the village still proclaim social values which used to characterize a traditional rural area. Thus the marriage should be fertile, matrimonial alliance firmer, the house rich, spouses devoted to each other and, the most important, on good terms with the rest of the family they will live with (usually bridegroom’s family). Wedding rituals attempt to establish connection with higher forces that would make all of it possible. Although at first sight it might appear that the contemporary wedding feast in relation to the traditional one has changed more in content than form, my opinion is it is possible to view things the other way round and conclude that the form is changed more,

specially under the influence of mass media that advertise glamour and luxury as a life style, as well as under the influence of emphasized longing of a villager for city life.

Church dogma, canons and ritual practice in connection with the sacred sacrament of marriage exist as elements of life in the Orthodox church which remained unchanged for centuries. Changes that happen, however, are on the one hand of an administrative nature and on the other individual exceptions to the rule.

Till recently, a church wedding could be performed only after the civil ceremony had been previously carried out. The priests who wedded a couple with no evidence of civil registration of their marriage were subject to penalty.<sup>5</sup> This is regulated both by church and civil law, but it is no longer strictly adhered to. Therefore, it is possible to carry out a church wedding without previous civil registration, with the results that a certain possibility of formal polygamy exists, namely, that an individual be both in church and civil marriage, but with two different persons.

Preparations for a church wedding are twofold. They include confirmation of the fact that there is no blood kinship between the future bride and bridegroom, which used to be proved by presenting the family genealogy, whereas today is left to the conscience of the couple and their parents and public announcement of the wedding in front of members of the parish. The second thing consists of a premarital test at which the priest teaches the bride and bridegroom the basic prayers and regulations of Christian life. Saying prayers with the future bride and bridegroom at the premarital test, as well as the ritual of engagement, which used to be performed sometimes several months before the wedding, are carried out directly before the wedding nowadays.

Considering that according to Orthodox Christian teaching marriage represents a mystery, the act of church wedding is constituted and aimed at making the marriage alliance sacred and initiating (through prayers and ritual) bride and bridegroom into the life of holy sacrament. In the Orthodox Church the wedding used to be performed in the course of the Holy Liturgy which represents the central “event” of Christian life.<sup>6</sup> Why and how it happened that the wedding ceremony was separated from the liturgy was explained in my study on popular and church marriage<sup>7</sup>, therefore I shall not dwell upon the subject here. I would just like to note that today more and more frequently the young couple request to be married in the course of the Holy Liturgy, but here it is a question of people who participate regularly in the life of the Church.

A general conclusion can be drawn that there is an evident tendency in some churches that some priest shorten the ritual, which is most probably the result of the general process of secularization, as well ignorance of the “rules of service” on the part of those who are to be married. Namely, out of 30 polled couples 22 feel that a church wedding is a traditional and romantic event. It is interesting to mention that only one couple goes to church to attend the service, whereas the others do it mostly to light a candle or to “find peace in times of difficulty”.

However, putting aside this social problem for a moment, let us look at what is proclaimed as the model through dogma and the ceremony of wedding performed by the Orthodox Church.

<sup>5</sup> Branko Cisarž, *Crkveno pravo II*, Beograd, 1973, 120.

<sup>6</sup> Episkop backi Irinej (Bulovic), *Poredak cina vencanja u sklopu svete liturgije*, u *Pravoslavni brak I porodica*, Svetigora, Cetinje, 1995, 45–46, 45.

<sup>7</sup> Aleksandra Pavicevic, *Narodni i crkveni brak u srpskom seoskom drustvu*, PI EI 46, Beograd, 2001, 24, 25.

The first and the essential characteristic of marriage in the Orthodox concept is its sacredness. It comes from the belief that marriage is an agreement, that is a kind of (sacred) alliance between the bride and bridegroom, and God. In the scope of this agreement, they take an oath before God to live in accordance with the law and to obey the basic principles of Christian life, and in return they are offered abundance of earthly fruit (material prosperity and richness in children, peaceful life, health, etc), as well as "heavenly wealth". As basic principles and desired values of Christian life absolute male seniority was pointed out, but accompanied by the example of Christ's love and sacrifice for the Church (parallel is drawn between bridegroom and Christ and bride and the Church), martyrdom (as the most striking analogy Christ's martyr death is mentioned, and crowns which are put on the bride's and bridegroom's heads, that is, the wreaths, symbolize his wreath of thorns and mutual sacrifice, but also remind of the wreaths of glory to be won by those who respond to this call, numerous posterity, love for children, fidelity and "chastity of the marriage bed" (to which aims most of the prayers), and mercy. The last virtue, as well as constant mention of the whole community, both family and church community, in prayers, attribute to the "agreement" social significance as well, namely, it speaks about the concept of marital alliance as the basic social unit of the community "the right arrangement" the results of which is benefit to all the society.

Whereas through the traditional wedding "the agreement" made between two social groups, and between a new marriage unit and society, is pointed out as the primary one, church ceremony, although not neglecting that aspect, puts personal relation of bride and bridegroom and their alliance ("agreement") with God in the first place, which gives marriage beside a horizontal dimension of earthly time, a vertical dimension of eternity as well.

Civil wedding is carried out in the main hall of the municipal building, and recently in less formal places, at the choice of the bride and bridegroom,<sup>8</sup> in the way regulated by the Law on marriage and family relations (from 1980, 1988, 1993, 1994), which represents the basic source of Family law in the Republic of Serbia.

Preparations for contracting civil marriage include an application which the engaged couple submits to the registrar, enclosing with it birth certificate, and other documents if necessary. These potential the divorce document of any previous marriage, as well as court approval for marriage registration of under-aged individuals or individuals who are in kinship which is considered an obstacle to marriage (this approval may be obtained by those who are not blood related: father-in-law and daughter-in-law, son-in-law and mother-in-law, as well as relatives by adoption: step-father and step-daughter and step-mother and step-son (art. 46–49 of the Law on Marriage and Family Relations).

It is possible to conclude that in the concept of the civil marriage act there is also an obligatory recommendation by the registrar that the couple who want to contract marriage have a health check visit marriage, or family counseling service, where they will get acquainted with the professional opinion on the conditions for the development of harmonious marital relations, as well as a health institution where they will get information on the possibilities and advantages of family planning before the day

---

<sup>8</sup> Miroslava Lukic – Krstanovic, *Produkcija svadbene svetkovine u Beogradu, u Zivotni ciklus...* 211–222, 213.

determined for contracting marriage (art. 55 of LMFR) Nowadays this part of the preparation is usually not carried out in Belgrade municipalities.

In the Commentary of LMFR, marriage is defined as a unit in which the interests of both husband and wife, as well as the family and the community are realized simultaneously. It is recognized by law and defined as a complete, permanent, sexual, emotional, economic and spatial alliance in the life of husband and wife.<sup>9</sup>

The ceremony of civil marriage registration can be considered at two levels: at the level of form and the level of content.

A specially furnished and decorated room where the marriage is carried out, as well as the requirement of adequate clothes and behavior of the main participants, give the moment of contracting marriage a solemn character, namely, in the language of anthropologic analysis, a character of sacredness. However, the fact which makes this “ritual” profane is the absence of relation to deity, supernatural or higher powers. In the scope of this analysis an analogy may be found between the elements of civil and church ceremony, for instance: main hall /church, registrar/priest, state/God, but a possible conclusion on the existence of this analogy on the semantic level of the ritual should follow after a more thorough semiological analysis. The position of future husband and wife on the left and the right side of the “registrar” respectively (contrary to the church) remains with no special explanation. Giving priority to a woman in the statement of consent and signing in the marriage register should represent proof of the equality of sexes which is proclaimed by state laws (although when anyone has priority it becomes absurd to talk about equality), but I am of the opinion that it is rather an expression of good manners in the style “ladies first”.

As for the content of the ceremony, it expresses the desired values and relations in marriage alliance, proclaimed by the legislator. This is best illustrated by the articles of the Law which are read in the course of the wedding. Thus article 65 guarantees husband and wife the right of independence and freedom in their choice of occupation, article 66 points out their duty to develop the feeling of mutual solidarity and solidarity towards other members of the family, and article 67 emphasizes equality of both spouses in all personal proprietary relations. Fidelity and helping each other as a marital duty is “recommended” by article 68. Article 69 states that husband and wife decide on the place of living by mutual agreement and that each one individually, in accordance with his ability, contributes to the support of the family. In articles 70, 287, 320, 321 the legislator deals with regulation of proprietary relations and definition of concepts of individual and common property in marriage. Therefore, as the desired values pointed out in the above-mentioned legal regulations we find: mutual independence of spouses, solidarity, equality, fidelity and reciprocity, agreement on important matters in life and, the most emphasized, regulated proprietary relations. Treating marriage as a kind of social agreement where attention should be paid primarily to concrete, “tangible”, and to law subject categories is evident, except in the mentioned regulations which, being important, are singled out from the context, also in the commentary on article 56 of LMFR, in which it is stated that the formal form of contracting marriage “singles it out from other short-term (no coma in between) business.”<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, the civil form of marriage regulates primarily the legal relations of the married couple, whereas the Church emphasizes spiritual life and moral issues. In this

<sup>9</sup> Ilija Babić, Komentar Zakona o braku i porodičnim odnosima, Službeni list SRJ, Beograd, 1999, 56.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 56.

way the inner side of marriage and personal, emotional, psychological and spiritual life of a married couple is for the most part, though not completely, neglected.

In contemporary Serbian society there are, as presented in this paper so far, three forms of contracting marriage. They are most frequently interwoven in the sense that, in most cases, all three ceremonies are performed. In the first two, as we have seen, it is a question of "agreement" mediated by "higher powers". Proclaimed values and aims in these two models, although out of reach of civil legislation and thus of concrete punishment, contain a certain compelling force, because disrespect for them means judgement by the community, as well as a kind of excommunication. In the concept of marriage found in the civil ceremony, the marriage agreement is reduced practically to a personal, legal relationship of the married couple, and disrespect for the proclaimed values of this concept is not subject to penalty. (By the regulations of Criminal Law only polygamy and unmarried alliance with a person under 14 years are sanctioned).

In the conditions of socio-economic crisis and war situation, since the beginning of the nineties there have been the increase in the number of weddings celebrated in church, therefore it is almost possible to say that they are becoming a rule.<sup>11</sup>

According to the poll carried out, most of the future couples considers a church wedding to be of greater importance, which can be supported by the fact that some of them leave the civil ceremony "for some other occasion". That occasion is usually less formal than the church wedding where a white wedding gown for the bride is almost inevitable (at the registrar's simpler clothes "can be tolerated" and it is attended usually by a smaller number of wedding guests than is the case in the church. At "spectacle wedding", such was the wedding of Zeljko Raznatovic Arkan and Svetlana Velickovic Ceca,<sup>12</sup> accent was also placed on the church wedding, while civil registration was followed with far less pomp.

"The return" to the church certainly has different meanings in rural and urban environment. Increase in the number of church weddings in Serbia is proof of a certain need. Whether it is the need to establish cultural and historical continuity which is non-existent, or it is a question of the needs of a personal, emotional-psychological and spiritual nature, or of all of these together, is a matter for discussion and further study.

Александра ПАВИЋЕВИЋ

#### ЧИН ВЕНЧАЊА У СРБИЈИ У СВЕТЛУ ДРУШТВЕНИХ ПРОМЕНА — ПРОУЧАВАЊЕ ТРАДИЦИОНАЛНЕ И САВРЕМЕНЕ ЦЕРЕМОНИЈЕ

Чин венчања као део шире свадбене церемоније није никад био у „жижи инересовања“ етнолога. Ово вероватно произилази из чињенице да је само венчање, у ритуалном смислу, у поимању нашег народа, било од маргиналног значаја. Пракса невенчаних бракова, релативно распрострањена у животу нашег традиционалног друштва, имала је, поред осталих разлога, корена и у схватању да је свадбено весеље оно које озваничава заједницу двоје људи, док је са венчањем „могло и да се сачека“.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

До увођења обавезног грађанског брака у Србији, чин црквеног венчања био је једини формални начин склапања брачне заједнице. Прешавши у правну надлежност државне власти<sup>13</sup>, брак, као и ритуали који су пратили његово склапање, доживели су трансформацију<sup>14</sup>, са идеолошког аспекта и аспекта структуре и функције ритуала. У раду је дат кратак осврт и анализа црквеног, народног и грађанског чина венчања и, на основу њих, претпостављеног, односно, прокламованог концепта брака, као модела који егзистира у религијској, народној и државној, идеологији, као и ставова будућих младенаца о једној односно другој „врсти“ венчања.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> По Основном закону о браку, из 1946, уведен је обавезан грађански брак на читавој територији ФНРЈ.

<sup>14</sup> О трансформацији свадбених ритуала као показатељу друштвених кретања, занимљиво је погледати рад, Сања Златановић, *Реафирмација традиције и свадбени ритуал*, Животни циклус, Реферати бугарско-српског научног скупа, Софија 2000, 223–230.

<sup>15</sup> Анализа је извршена на основу проучавања постојеће литературе, правних уредби о браку, личних посматрања чина венчања у две београдске цркве: црква св Апостола на Топчидеру и црква св. Александар Невски, на Дорћолу, као и у општини Стари Град, на основу анкете спроведене међу будућим младенцима, приликом њиховог заказивања венчања и проучавања свадбених обичаја у селу Дубона, код Младеновца (70 km од Београда).