

## PRE-MARITAL RELATIONS — ENTRY ADULTHOOD\*

Investigation was carried out in north-east Serbia, in the region which is known for more freedom in male, female relations and marriages between minors. To prepare children for early marriage, the community takes care to introduce them to the world of adulthood through customs and to speed up their sexual maturity. Thus, on certain holidays, freedom in the behaviour of the young and the possibility of their getting to know each other more intimately was the accepted and publicly approved custom, although at the same time the strict rules of patriarchal morals, which prescribed submissiveness in the behaviour of youth in daily life, were valid.

Key words: pre-marital relations, customs, *strndžanje*, *mutkaluj*

The significance of marriage in Serbia is known. It can be said that the first step towards becoming an adult member of the community, with equal rights, was to enter marriage. Distinguished and respected members of a traditional village community are the individuals who are married, have children, diligent, honest, authorities in their own home and good neighbours. In establishing a new marriage, the life of a yet another family begins, and for the community this means a more secure future, progress, insured old age and progeny. For this reason all youths and young girls, widowers and widows tended to marry and only those who were very ill or badly handicapped remained unmarried.

The acceptance of marriage by each individual, as an obligation, was accompanied by suitable preparation which began in early childhood. Children were taught to do the jobs which awaited them as future heads of family, dowries were prepared, brides prepared and instructed in the obligations which await them when they take over family rituals. All these instructions are described in detail in ethnological literature but, as well as this, the families in village communities took care of the sexual maturity of the young. In the environments where early weddings were the custom, particular care was taken to accelerate the process of sexual maturing and so make possible the establishment of new marriage relations and new families.

Investigation of intimate and love relations between the sexes, which develop outside the family circle, in traditional village culture and have a definite ceremonial and ritual framework, belongs to one of the most delicate areas of field work. This is the possible explanation why ethnological papers, concerning the pre-marital life of young people in village communities, are rare as a separate subject of research.

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\* This paper is the result of the project no. 2157: Serbian Traditional Culture — Patterns of Images, Rituals and Social Structures, finances by MSTD RS.

For this reason the literature concerning pre-nuptial life consists mainly of descriptions of the manner of meeting and amusement in village and family groups, to be found in just a few monographs of the *Srpski etnografski zbornik* (Serbian Ethnographic Anthology). Thus included in this important ethnographic publication with a long tradition, there are detailed descriptions of flirting, in the areas of Boljevac and Homolje, by S. Grbic and S. Milosavljevic<sup>1</sup> Contemporary investigation of pre-marital relations between youths and girls has been carried out by S. Zecevic<sup>2</sup> through a study of dance and music, and by N. Pantelic<sup>3</sup> who has provided the most complete material up to date, in his investigations of social life and marriage customs in north-east Serbia. This theme was referred to by authors in the field of anthropology, sociology and psychology among whom I will mention Vera Erlih<sup>4</sup> who analyses the relations among the unmarried, but outside the usual framework.

It should be mentioned that almost all the available data relates to north-east Serbia. Ethnologists have studied and recorded the established behaviour of the young, in north-east Serbia. This region has already been distinguished as an example of different moral behaviour, great freedom in pre-marital and marital life. It is specific for instability of the marriage unit, with the usual marriage, one child, juvenile marriage and general acceptance of *domazet* (man moving in to the wife's family) marriages. This peculiarity, from the aspect of social life, is explained by N. Pantelic<sup>5</sup> as the fact that Serbs and Vlachs intermingle unifying their already close cultural traditions. On the other hand there is a lack of data concerning pre-marital relations in other parts of Serbia that may be attributed, as considered by R. Kajmakovic<sup>6</sup>, to researchers who did not pay attention to or avoided these customs, because they did not coincided in any way with the official picture of the patriarchal life of village community. It may be, as proposed by V. Stojakovic<sup>7</sup>, a question of a change of form which, on account of the idealised representation of patriarchal life, escaped detailed scientific scrutiny by researchers. It is also possible that ethnologists did not meet with such data because they did not exist in other regions. However, in north-east Serbia, ritually regulated socialising among the young on certain annual holidays, has been recorded.

Calendar holidays are marked by the stages of development in nature and man, which repeat each year. There are almost no important holidays which are not accompanied by some form of ritual behaviour. Included in the framework of the church holiday calendar, frequently on a pre-Christian basis, calendar holidays describe a year

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<sup>1</sup> С. Милосављевић, Српски народни обичаји из Среза хомолског, Српски етнографски зборник, Живот и обичаји народни, 11, Београд 1914; С. М. Грбић, Српски народни обичаји из Среза болчевачког, Српски етнографски зборник, Живот и обичаји народни, 8, Београд 1909

<sup>2</sup> С. Зечевић, Оргијастичке свечаности летње солстиције, Народно стваралаштво, св. 13-14, Београд 1965; the same, Српске народне игре, Београд 1983

<sup>3</sup> Н. Пантелић, Друштвени и породични живот на територији Зајечара, Зајечар и околина, Гласник Етнографског музеја 42, Београд 1978; the same, Из друштвеног и породичног живота – Женидбени обичаји у околини Бора, Гласник Етнографског музеја 38, Београд 1975; the same, Друштвени живот у Неготинској крајини, Неготинска крајина, Гласник Етнографског музеја 31-32, Београд 1969.

<sup>4</sup> V. Erlih, *Jugoslovenska porodica u transformaciji*, Zagreb 1971

<sup>5</sup> Н. Пантелић, Друштвени живот у Неготинској крајини, 306

<sup>6</sup> R. Kajmakovic, *Narodni obicaji stanovnistva Listice*, Glasnik Zemaljskoh muzeja, Nova serija E XXIV/XXV, Sarajevo 1970, 300-301.

<sup>7</sup> V. Stojakovic, *Etno-socijalni okviri zivota stanovnistva Dreznice*, Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja, Nova serija E, 37, Sarajevo 1982, 205.

of human activity, from farming and animal husbandry to holidays dedicated to trees, plants, water, atmospherical states, otherworldly creatures etc. So at certain time intervals, according to the changes in nature, a variety of rituals provide celebration of earth fertility, vegetation and herds, but also the health and fortune of people and family.

Annual customs are, not infrequently, also an occasion to influence, through ritual activities, the family, marriage, progeny and other things. Understandably, the most important thing for each family was its renewal and, its extension through successful marriages and the addition of new members — male inheritors. For this reason it is important that the young men and girls prepare to some extent for future married life. The parents, family and the entire village community take care of this.

The research which I carried out in north-east Serbia indicated that, in traditional villages, care was taken to prepare the young pairs for married life. So on certain holidays, introductions, intimacy and courting was established practice and as such approved of by the village. This flirting, in the surrounding of Boljevac in Homolje, is called *asikovanje* among Serbs and *strndzanje* by Vlachs. Other similar calendar customs, and those called pre-marital, were connected in traditional villages with the seasons of the year, the beginning of summer, the period of vegetation renewal, flooded rivers etc. Then the young peoples thought of love, and holidays were a good occasion to meet the loved ones. So the holiday on the last day before the beginning of the Easter fast was called carnival, white carnival. Just because it fell on the eve of the longest and strictest fast in the year it was celebrated with great joy, through amusement, song and dance. So on that day, the eve of a several week period of abstinence, people eat and drank unrestrainedly and in general relaxed, behaving in a dissipated fashion. On this holiday and in such an atmosphere, particularly among the Vlachs of north-east Serbia, the custom called *strndzanje* (flirting) takes place. B. Drobñakovic noted that among the Vlachs in Homolje it was the custom during “white carnival that youths and girls lit a big fire in the centre of the village, jumped across it and danced around it. Youths grab girls, take them away from the fire and pay them court. If a girl is not lead away, her parents consider it to be a lack of success because not one of the youths took a fancy to their daughter”.<sup>8</sup> S. Zecevic also connects the custom of flirting, in traditional villages, mainly with white carnival.<sup>9</sup> I also noted the same customs while investigating in the villages in the surrounding of Negotin.

*Strndzanje* (meaning embracing, caressing) meant just embracing and caressing. The young people were allowed to talk, embrace and caress but only above the waist. This event was held at a certain place, usually in a clearing with tall grass and some bushes. The time of day was also laid down — always between 17 and 19h. The youths chose the girls and they were obliged to accept. There were always several pairs on the clearing who were visible and audible to one another. Their parents were also in the vicinity and observed sympathetically how the children amused themselves. There was no strict age at which *strndzanje* began. The young boys and girls themselves decided when they would join in the courting. As soon as they started to show interest in the opposite sex they would take part in *strndzanje* and so become youth and girl. It usually happened with children of ten to twelve years old. This was a type of initiation, introduction to the world of adults, those who were prepared for marriage. The parents themselves encouraged the children to begin as early as possible. This was mainly

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<sup>8</sup> Б. Дробњаковић, Етнологија народа Југославије, Београд 1960, 194

<sup>9</sup> С. Зечевић, *Оп. cit.*

because of the wish and necessity to wed them, and as we know in this part of Serbia early weddings are the rule.

This customary introduction and becoming close between the young was permitted by the traditional village milieu and considered desirable. There was nothing hidden, because there was nothing to hide. A girl was rated by how often the boys chose her. She was considered good and honest if she spoke and caressed all the boys, while a girl who always had only one suitor aroused suspicion, gossip and little respect. Those who did not do *strndzanje* or were rarely chosen by the boys were given the worst assessment. They were spoken of as not normal or sick. For this reason parents directed their daughters how to behave: what to speak about, how to caress and kiss the young man, what to allow and what not, so that several young men would pick them out. When this was the case the parents would boast “So young and already flirting with all the boys” — they would say proudly. They were indeed proud that their daughter would soon marry, because this customary behaviour encouraged the desire for marriage, in children already in early puberty, and with it the desire for offspring.

Introduction and courting between the young did not mean that they chose their future partner in marriage independently. On the contrary, parents had already chosen their daughter-in-law or son-in-law according to the property status and prestige of the family. For this reason it was important that the young people did not attach themselves to one partner, but flirted with everybody equally.

As the custom *strndzanje* was strictly controlled in several ways — by the pairs themselves, the parents and the entire community, it rarely happened that there was any exception to the permitted behaviour and the accepted opinion that a girl should enter marriage as a virgin. There is an example of this in data noted in the village Manastirica, that in the late forties there was a situation that a girl made a mistake during flirting and became pregnant, and remained with her mother to give birth. The fact that the village has not forgotten this in forty years and that the girl remained with her mother and did not marry indicate that such cases were rare, as the community judged the transgression of existing rules. And according to the rules of a patriarchal society pre-marital relations were considered a great sin. A girl who lost her virginity and particularly one who gave birth to an illegitimate child was punished sometimes very cruelly. In some regions such events excited not only a reaction from society but also, it was believed, the anger of higher creatures. Undoubtedly such an event represented shame and misfortune for the family and the entire village. It is therefore understandable that the family, relatives and village community are all involved to avoid such an unfortunate event.

Apart from *strndzanje* another custom of relaxed behaviour among the young has been noted in north-east Serbia. This is “*mutkaluj*” with the Vlachs and “*laza*” with the Serbs noted in the Bor region,<sup>10</sup> and takes place on the second Tuesday after Easter. This is a sort of party organised by the girls. Each one brings a distaff, three-legged stool, Easter egg and something to eat. They light the previously gathered wood and sit around the fire doing their handwork. They are not alone, there is an older woman whose is disguised and called “*moasa*”, that is midwife. *Moasa* supervises the party and in a certain way runs it as they all refer to her. There is also an allegedly uninvited, but welcome guest who is a great wit, full of jokes and responsible for a good and lascivious atmosphere. There are also musicians playing all the time. Finally the young men arrive when they see the fire burning and hear the music. The young men sit between the girls

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<sup>10</sup> Noted by Vlasta Jovic, village Luka, Bor.

and chat with them, eat a little, then lead a kolo where the girls join in. When the music stops the youths arrive first to the fire and take the girls' three-legged stools. Then the girls, encouraged and advised by the moasa and jokester, sit in the young men's laps. Each one has an Easter egg hidden in her bosom which her young man tries to find, with laughter and jokes. If one of the youths wanted to kiss a girl he would grab her handwork and escape into the woods where she would go to find him. When the party ended each young man tried to accompany a girl to her home, particularly if she had come alone. If the party was prolonged, some parents would dress up in old torn cloths and mark on their faces with soot, then in this disguise they chased the young people away.

Like *strndzanje* this party made it possible for young people to make closer contacts. It directed them towards the world of adults and prepared them for membership of society as adults and adults as members of society are married and have children. This entertainment was also controlled and directed by older people. The older participants at the party have a special function: moasa or midwife is the obligatory participant at childbirth and customs connected with the birth of children. She is specially respected in north-east Serbia, because she receives the baby at birth and apart from a practical role also a ritual one as the spiritual protector of the child and mother. The other adult participant of the party, is the wit, like the master of ceremonies in marriage rituals, entertains and directs the party. Here there are two personalities from the customs of the life cycle, connected with birth and marriage, taking part in these customs. They direct and control at the same time the custom *mutkaluj*, which stimulates the awakening of sexuality in young people.

In fertility magic the great power of Easter eggs is well known. The egg as the source all that exists is used as a means by which life is created, protected and sustained. The magic power of the egg is widely used, among other things for the protection of people, particularly their health. The egg as a means of payment appears in the custom noted by S. Zecevic in Tekija and Sip: "On the eve of Easter, kolo was danced for initiate girls. An initiate would come to the dance place with a certain number of eggs with which she paid for the music. Having danced a kolo she would receive congratulations, and from then on became an equal member of the kolo, and a marriageable girl. During the dance she had to respond to offers of love. If she turned down such an offer she would be exposed to a general boycott, and would have difficulty in marrying. Mothers whose daughters were chosen several time did not hide their pride and pleasure".<sup>11</sup>

More freedom of behaviour among the young was also usually allowed for the holiday called Friday of Plants, when medicinal plants were gathered. N. Pantelic noted, "In the evening youths and girls would go to spend the night in the mountains. There they would spent the whole night together. Amusing themselves and making merry... In the morning they would gather geraniums, lilies and other flowers and then go to the river to weave wreaths. Not even here was there any excess of the customary limits of entertainment, there was no disgrace, just respect for the rules of permissible freedom of behaviour"<sup>12</sup>

These are examples, of premarital familiarity, which in customary forms were held during certain annual holidays in the villages of north-east Serbia. They all took place in the spring period, usually as one passed from a period of fast or entered such a period. The function of these customs in the traditional village culture is obvious — they

<sup>11</sup> С. Зечевић, Српске народне игре, 88

<sup>12</sup> Н. Пантелић, Друштвени и породични живот на територији Зајечара, 356.

were aimed at stimulating, in children the desire for marriage and family, already in the early years of puberty. This meant in fact an attempt to accelerate sexual maturity in children and make early wedding possible according to the wishes of the parents. The fact that it never happened that girls lost their virginity and became pregnant (or it was a rarity) during these customs, indicates that the rules were respected, and the generally accepted code of behaviour “girls must enter marriage as virgins” coincided with practice.

The custom of *strndzanje* during white carnival, *mutkaluj* on the second Tuesday after Easter, the night of entertainment in the mountains on Plant Friday etc. served to control sexual behaviour, because by allowing this type of contact, the consummation of sexual life with all its possible consequences was averted. Thus it was possible to uphold moral norms in the entire community, in the interest of the family and regulating the satisfaction of individual erotic needs.

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## ПРЕДБРАЧНИ ОДНОСИ — УЛАЗАК У СВЕТ ОДРАСЛИХ

Реч је о истраживањима у североисточној Србији, области која је позната по већој слободи у мушко-женским односима и малолетничким браковима. Да би припремила децу за рани брак заједница се труди да их кроз обичаје уведе у свет одраслих и убрза њихово полно сазревање. Наиме, о појединим празницима било је обичајно утврђено и јавно одобрено, слободније понашање младих и њихово интимно упознавање, мада су истовремено важила строга правила патријархалног морала, која су налагала смерност у понашању младих у свакодневном животу. Обичаји страцања о белим покладама, током ускршњих празника, на Биљни петак и сл., имали су и функцију контролисања сексуалног понашања, јер се дозвољавањем оваквих контаката спречавао, уствари, потпун сексуални живот са свим могућим последицама.