

FOLK WEDDINGS OF UKRAINE

Chapter 1

The Wedding Ritual in Historical Records and Scholarly Literature¹

Scant details about the wedding rituals of the Ancient Slavs are preserved in the early chronicles. In *A Tale of Bygone Years*, when referring to the customs of the Slav tribes, the author notes that “they had a marriage custom whereupon the future bridegroom did not fetch his bride, but she was brought to him in the evening the day before, and the following day they brought her dowry.” The *Tale* says the Derevlians “abducted maidens by the water’s edge.”

Being a Christian, the chronicler was not very kindly disposed toward the Radimichians, Viaticians and Siverians: “And they had no marriages, instead holding games between villages. They gathered at these games to dance and sing all manner of devilish songs, and here they abducted wives for themselves, having previously arranged this with the girl...”

Apart from these scant details there is very little in the chronicles about the wedding customs of the common people. However, there is mention of the wedding customs observed by princes; these are often reminiscent of folk wedding customs in 19th century Ukraine.

The *Tale* mentions the custom of taking a wife by prior arrangement: “In the summer of 6620 [1112 AD]... Yaroslav marched on Yatviag, son of Sviatopolk, and conquered him; and upon returning from battle he sent an emissary to Novgorod and asked for Mstyslav’s daughter, Volodymyr’s grand-daughter, for his wife, on the twelfth day in the month of May, and she was brought to him in June, on the twenty-ninth day.”

Therefore, during the Kievan Rus’ period it can be said that there existed an interval between the making of an agreement concerning a wedding and the wedding itself, corresponding to later traditions of matchmaking and the wedding proper. The *Tale* gives an account of the celebration of a marriage with a lavish reception for large numbers of guests, where many different beverages were consumed and songs were sung. The *Lay of Ihor’s Campaign* also depicts the wedding rituals of the ancient Slavs.

That wedding traditions were maintained in feudal courts is substantiated by the fairly well-known fact of prince Volodymyr’s marriage to Rogneda, daughter of prince Rogvolod of Polotsk. Under the entry for 980 AD in *A Tale of Bygone Years* it says that Volodymyr “sent off messengers to Rogvolod in Polotsk, bidding that he be told: ‘I want to have your daughter for my wife.’ And he asked his daughter: ‘Do you wish to marry Volodymyr?’ But she replied: ‘I have no desire to unshod the son of a bondwoman,² I want Yaropolk instead.’” So Volodymyr took her for his wife by force after his army conquered Polotsk.

The chronicles include special wedding terminology which has survived to this day in the titles of wedding personages and separate rituals. Wedding customs are also mentioned during the 11-15th centuries in Ancient Rus’ writings and church literature. In condemning the pre-Christian religion, the church writers mention the wedding ceremony, which people celebrated “with much dancing and singing and clapping.”

Very little material survives about wedding rituals from the 15-16th centuries. An important document of the time is the book *De Russorum...*³ by Johannes Lasitzki, published in Latin in 1582. It contains the earliest surviving record of a Ukrainian wedding, most probably from Volyn.

“If someone takes a liking to a girl, he entrusts three or four neighbours to talk with the girl’s parents about giving him their daughter in marriage. But to fire up the lad’s heart, the parents assure him that nothing can be done, pretending that great difficulties stand in the way of the

intermediaries and the lad, whose hopes have not been realized, seeks an alternative way to resolve the matter. He very carefully selects a time and a place to kidnap the girl, and no sooner does she happen to step out of her father's abode, suspecting nothing, than she is grabbed by servants bidden by the lad to lie in wait for her. After this, new ambassadors are sent to the parents to apologize for this trespass, blaming everything on ardent love. Finally, when the consent of the parents is obtained, the day of the wedding is nominated, for they may not live together until a fine solemn celebration takes place." The author recounts that a church ceremony took place at about eleven in the evening, with the young couple being led into church escorted by flute players.

"After accepting a loaf of bread, the priest read the Scripture, David's Psalms, and then grabbed the groom by the hair and said to him: 'Tell me, oh betrothed, oh brother, oh friend, can you be a husband to this girl, will you punish her not with canes? Will you leave her not when she is sick and wasted?' Then the betrothed vowed to conscientiously perform the duties of a husband. A similar question was then put to the bride. Was she strong enough to marry (for here girls married at eleven and at times even ten years of age) and care for a family, would she remain a faithful wife to her blind, lame, wasted husband? She vowed that she would be. Immediately the priest crowned their heads with wreaths of greenery bearing the words 'beget and multiply'. During the ceremony all present lit wax candles and a chalice frothing with mead was handed to the priest, who drank to the health of the young couple, and the couple then emptied the chalice with similar gusto and returned it to the priest. The wreath was removed from the bride's head and trampled, and then new dances began. This time the priest led the dancing, and everyone followed him in a long row. The women strew burdock and flax about the church, incanting: 'May the protector gods ensure that the young couple is always happy.' The wedding then continued with songs and dances, to the accompaniment of clapping hands."

There is little in the documents of the 15-17th centuries which throws light on wedding genealogy. However, even the stern church instructions contained details about folk wedding customs.

In his book *Lithos* metropolitan Petro Mohyla (1597-1647) mentions a tradition of marriage through abduction, while in *Perspektyva* K.Sakovych (1578-1647) asserted the survival of a tradition of marriage through wife purchase. Both authors described a ritual cutting of hair for both the bride and the groom, and that the wedding rites for a maiden differed to those for a widow, also mentioning wedding dances and the custom of wedding songs.

Interesting material about ancient wedding rituals was contained in the *Hustyn Chronicle* (1670). The chronicler had this to say about Lado, the god of marriage: "The fourth is Lado (the same as Pluto), a devilish god, he was believed to be the god of marriage, merriment, pleasure and all happiness, just as Bacchus was to the Hellenes. Those wishing to marry brought him sacrifices, so that with his help the union would be fortuitous and loving. The devil Lado is glorified even now in some districts during baptisms and weddings by the singing of certain songs, and the slapping of hand against hand or tabletop, interspersing the singing with chants of 'Lado, Lado'."

The information in the *Hustyn Chronicle* and other texts proves there were traditions of folk wedding ritual, as well as survivals of the pre-Christian religion in daily life in the 17th century. Ukrainian wedding rituals of this period are described in the memoirs of foreign emissaries and by travellers who visited Ukraine. The most complete description of a wedding can be found in Beauplan's *Description d'Ukraine*⁴ (1660). Beauplan recorded the rituals of matchmaking and wedding invitation, describing wedding and post-wedding customs. He also mentioned an existing form of marriage in the 17th century, which was a survival of the ancient form of

marriage through abduction. Though the rituals he described were characteristic of the wealthy classes, they did contain elements of folk wedding ritual.

G.Kalynovsky's account of wedding ritual in Ukraine in 1777⁵ is a very valuable ethnographic record from the late 18th century. The author provides quite exhaustive information about wedding dishes, describes the ancient tradition of first eating food and then partaking of various beverages. This tradition survived in the mountainous western provinces of Ukraine into the late 19th century. However, one cannot agree with the author's assertion that no songs were sung before the wedding. This statement was proven wrong by the first collection of songs published in the early 1800s, which provided examples of a very rich and diverse song repertoire in the pre-wedding cycle (songs sung at the engagement, matchmaking, inspection, etc.).

For ethnographers a very valuable work is A.Shafonsky's *A Topographical Description of Chernihiv Province* (1786). The author mentions the Ukrainian tradition of accompanying weddings with song and music: "The Little Russians are always partial to music, and especially the violin, the *husli* (psaltery), the *tsymbaly* (dulcimer), the bandura and the *dudka* (fife), while the Volynians play the *volynka* (bagpipe). Not one folk wedding takes place without music."

The 1830s and 1840s saw the publication of special studies of the wedding ceremony. Among these was the work of J.Loziński, *Ruskoje wesile* (Ruthenian Wedding), which was published in Latin script in 1835.⁶ Loziński's study was in fact the first attempt at a synthesized analysis of wedding ritual, albeit of a local, regional character. In the main the author examines rituals from Pidhirya in the Lviv region, on the outskirts of Peremyshl (now Poland) and in the southwestern territories of the present Volyn Province.

By highlighting the wedding ritual, the author shows his keen interest in the subject and he proves himself to be quite an objective researcher. Loziński took delight in the wedding songs, the wisdom and morality of the customary wedding rituals, providing fairly broad and in-depth explanations of pre-Christian wedding customs and rituals. Loziński concluded that despite certain local differences, wedding rituals and songs were in the main "performed in the same way".

Between 1840 and 1860 ethnography developed at a tremendous pace on Ukrainian territories within the Russian Empire. Material about wedding rites, mostly of an empirical nature, was published in *Gubernskie Vedomosti* (Gubernial News), in various literary almanacs, journals and heralds.

Among the ethnographic material available, some of the studies of individual Ukrainian villages and towns portray wedding customs. The Ukrainian magazine *Osnova* (Basis) published in 1861-62 in St Petersburg contained articles describing the life and times of the Ukrainian people, including much material on wedding ritual.

Much factual, very valuable material is contained in publications of the Russian Geographical Society. In 1869 an ethnographic expedition was dispatched to Ukraine, led by P.P.Chubynsky, which resulted in the publication of seven volumes of findings.⁷

Volume four of the publication is dedicated exclusively to family rituals. Records were made in more than 20 localities. Chubynsky presented the wedding ritual in a generalized version, which was in fact a literary rendition of the collected materials. He also included records of wedding rituals from informants in the Volyn, Podillia, Kyiv and Kharkiv gubernias. Of special merit are the recordings from separate territories, rather than the version assembled from 42 different weddings, which is probably more notable for its colour than its scholarly character.

The lifestyle of the Ukrainian people of the 1880s was presented on the pages of the magazine *Kievskaja starina* (Kievan Antiquities), published in Kyiv 1882-1906. The magazine

contained articles from various towns and villages, with essential details of wedding rituals, providing a wealth of material for analogies and generalizations.

This period also saw the publication of works by M.Sumtsov, B.Hrinchenko, V.Okhrymovych, and others, which analyzed the development and history of Ukrainian customs. Research by the noted folklorist Sumtsov on questions of wedding custom are notable for their high level of scholarly generalization and rather bold conclusions regarding the history of pre-Christian religion and the beliefs of the Ancient Slavs.

Among the countless periodicals in the late 19th and early 20th century, two that stood out were *Etnohrafichniy zbirnyk* (Ethnographic Collection), published 1896-1929 and *Materials Toward a Ukrainian-Ruthenian Ethnology* (1899-1929). The pages of these publications quite often shed light on Ukrainian wedding ritual. Thus volume 19-20 of *Materials...* was dedicated almost exclusively to this ritual.

The Ukrainian wedding has been described many times and interpreted by Ukrainian and Russian folklorists, historians, geographers and dilettantes. In part, it became the subject of research by Polish ethnographers and folklorists. Thus, by the turn of the 20th century the factual details of the Ukrainian wedding ceremony were sufficiently highlighted in ethnographic literature.

¹ Text selected from N.I.Zdoroveha, *Vesil'na obriadovist' v istorychnykh dzherelakh i naukovii literature, Narysy narodnoi vesil'noi obriadovosti na Ukraini.* (Kyiv: Naukova Dumka, 1974)

² Removing the footwear of a man was part of the Ancient Rus' wedding ritual. The insinuation here is that Volodymyr was Sviatoslav's son by a common woman, Malusha, Princess Olha's lady-in-waiting.

³ Johannes Lasitzki, *De Russorum, Moscovitorum et Tartarorum religione, sacrificus nuptiarum, funerum ritu.* Anno MDL XXXII.

⁴ See chapter 5 for translation of text.

⁵ See chapter 5 for translation of text.

⁶ *Ruskoje wesile opysanoje czerez J.Lozinskoho, w Peremyszly, 1835.*

⁷ *Trudy etnograficheskoi-statisticheskoi ekspeditsii v zapadno-russkii krai, snariazhennoi imperatorskim russkimgeograficheskim obshchestvom. Iugo-zapadnyi otdel. Materialy i issledovaniia, sobrannie d. chl. P.P.Chubinskim. 1877*