

## Chapter 2

# Origins of the Ukrainian Folk Wedding Ritual<sup>1</sup>

### Social Factors

The main factor behind the appearance of the folk wedding ritual was its essentially social function. Ritual was used to celebrate important events in people's lives: marriage rites sanctified a new couple's relationship, emphasizing that a particular woman should be considered the exclusive partner of a particular male member of the clan. Thus rituals were unwritten judicial laws which all clan members adhered to, according to established tradition.

The ceremony was passed on from generation to generation, from clan to clan. To enable it to remain embedded in the memory of the community, it was performed according to existing traditions. However, with time the family structure underwent changes, as did the forms of marriage, and thus the wedding ritual changed, reflecting these changes.

In studying the historical development of the folk wedding on the basis of rituals recorded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the influences of various social orders can be seen.

Folk wedding ritual in Ukraine principally reflects the customs of matriarchy. This is apparent from the fact that most songs are directed at the mother and extol her virtues. The groom buys his bride not from the father, but from the mother or brother; when the wedding party arrives, the bride is defended not by her father, but rather her brother, who is her closest of kin. The mother conducts all the business of the wedding: she sees off the couple to invite guests to the wedding, she always greets them at the threshold, accepts all the honours from the groom and his clan.

The role of the father is quite minimal in wedding ritual. In wedding records from the 19<sup>th</sup> century he occasionally takes part with the mother in the rite of *posad*, the ritual seating of the bride and groom at the wedding table under the icons.

The wedding ritual retains survivals of tribal order. The wedding is a social act involving the entire family, especially in the rites of gift-giving, the baking of the wedding bread, the weaving of garlands, and so on.

Feudalism is also strongly reflected in Ukrainian wedding ritual: the whole wedding takes place in a feudal setting. The principal actors, the young couple, play the role of prince and princess, and they have an entourage of *boyars* – the groomsmen. During the wedding, songs are sung about plush palaces, valiant hunts, expensive clothing, goblets of silver and gold for holding beverages.

The Cossack era also left its mark on the wedding ritual. In the Lemko and Hutsul regions, as well as Polissia, the Cossack, the Zaporozhian and the cornet are all participants in the wedding drama.

The history of relationships within the family can be viewed as gradual changes in the woman's position: from one of dominance under matriarchy, to one of subordination and dependence on the male in later periods. In customs which have their origins in the dim past, bearing the influence of various eras, the woman appears in both positions: her dominant role as the bride's mother, the mother-in-law and the *svakha*, a female master of ceremonies. She is subordinate, on the other hand, in her role as the bride who finds herself in a strange household ruled by her husband and his "alien" clan.

In feudal times the landlord, as owner of the serfs, alone determined a young couple's fate. Marriage often brought tears, despair and grief, rather than joy. Consider the marriage of 800 serf girls sent to the military settlements, each soldier recognizing his bride-to-be only by his cap, which she was wearing. Or a landlord's arbitrary right of the first nuptial night.

A string of wedding rituals demonstrates the dominance of the male and his family over the bride: on leaving the bride's household the groom lightly struck the bride with a whip, repeating that she should abandon her bad habits; in the storehouse, where the marriage was consummated, the bride was obliged to remove the groom's footwear.

In Ukraine the growth of capitalism began after the reforms of 1861, although rapid industrialization proceeded only in the 1890s. Under pressure from the changing conditions traditional wedding customs also began to change in content, the ceremony itself was abbreviated, new elements appeared in the texts of the songs. Sacred and naïve beliefs in the magical power of ritual actions waned. Progressively, the actions became associated with a dramatization and lost their original religious significance, which before this had echoed ancient heathen outlooks and later feudal attitudes.

In recording the savage rituals associated with a dishonorable bride, the ethnographer P.Chubynsky finished his account with the words: "At the present time (1877) all these customs in Little Russia are merely viewed as tradition." In 1890 Tadey Rylsky wrote about the weakening of prejudicial attitudes toward unmarried mothers and the abandonment or easing of cruel rituals associated with a "bad bride".

People's attitudes, their views on morality changed and this led to the complete disappearance of those elements of the folk wedding ritual which offended human dignity.

## **Historical Aspects of Marriage in Ukraine**

Ukrainian wedding rituals reflect one of the most ancient forms of marriage – the abduction of the bride. Many sociologists, ethnographers and historians place the appearance of this form of marriage during the late matriarchal period or the early patriarchal family unit.

As mentioned earlier, the existence of this form of marriage in Ukraine is recorded by the chronicler in *A Tale of Bygone Years*. The chronicler attests that alongside the custom of the Polianians to take women in the evening and receive a dowry in the morning, a custom which later dominated in Ukraine, there was also the practice of abducting girls, when they went to fetch water or during games.

In the 19-20th century the form of bride abduction became a wedding ritual, a symbolic echo of ancient times. This is manifested in the bride's clan defending her from mock attack by the groom's clan, in the 'escape' of the bride from the groom's entourage before her departure for the home of the groom, when the groom's best man is meant to capture her. Wedding songs of the 19th century quite vividly portray the sudden attack and abduction of the bride.

Another old form of marriage commonplace in Ukraine, which later passed into wedding ritual, was the purchase marriage. This form of marriage was recorded by many peoples.

The Ancient Rus' chronicles contain no evidence of wife purchase. They record a symbolic payment for the bride in the form of a gift, although there were still very fresh signs of ransom, which was called *vino*. Thus in *A Tale of Bygone Years* it states that after marrying the Greek woman Anna, "Prince Volodymyr gave the Greeks Korsun as a *vino*". There are many accounts in the chronicles about the custom of paying ransom – giving *vino*.

With the consolidation of patriarchal order, conditions evolved whereby brides could be taken peacefully by making a payment in the form of a gift for the girl who was being taken from the family.

All the same, the custom of 'purchase marriage' was quite widespread. If such a form of marriage was not accepted as a customary folk right, K.Sakovych would not have talked about it so seriously in his book *Perspektyva*. Sakovych mentions the following custom, among others: "At times women are traded like brood mares... old ones are exchanged for young ones, and a supplement is paid..."

With the strengthening of the patriarchal family unit, the arranged marriage became dominant, whereby the parents of a couple arranged for the marriage of their children in advance. Throughout Ukraine right up until the turn of the 20th century, and as late as the 1930s in Polissia and the Carpathians, the matter of marriage was not decided by a young couple alone. The marriage depended on economic factors, a price was placed on the head of the lad and the girl, and depended on their property, rather than their personal qualities.

Ancient forms of marriage have survived in Ukrainian wedding ritual into the 20th century. Upon studying records made of weddings in the 19th century contradictions in ritual become apparent. After the actual agreement about a marriage at an engagement, after the ritual exchange of gifts at the *divych-vechir* (similar to a kitchen shower), a warlike attack is planned for the Saturday by the groom's entourage against the house of the bride, attempting to take her away by force, and if they are unsuccessful they offer a payment to enter the yard and to sit beside the bride, although the songs state that this is a payment for the bride. Such contradictions in ritual attest to the fact that previously everything which is now the wedding drama was drama in real life.

Two other forms of marriage were rarely practised. The first of these was described by Beuplan, where the girl offered the man her hand in marriage. The girl arrived at the home of a lad and, referring to him by name, said that she could see he was a good person, that she could see his wife would be happy and would have a caring master. She asked him to marry her. This she repeated to the mother and father. The girl would remain in the home of her chosen lad until he married her.

Ethnographic literature from the 19th century shows that a situation such as this could have occurred where a lad had deceived a girl; only in such exceptional circumstances did the girl resort to marriage through wooing. This has been recorded in the customs of other peoples. However, such a form of obviously matriarchal marriage existed in everyday life in the 17th century and was recognised as a customary right.

There was another quite unique form of marriage in Ukraine – salvation from execution through marriage. This was essentially a folk tradition, for the law statute books carried no mention of such a form of marriage. After the death sentence had been handed down and on the way to the place of execution, a girl could save a criminal from death by throwing a kerchief or *zapaska* over the convicted man and announcing a desire to marry him. A maiden, as well as a widow, could save a convicted man from execution. The “liberator” could be a young man if it was a girl being led off to be executed.

Toward the end of the 18th and at the turn of the 19th century the custom of saving someone from the death penalty began to decline under pressure from government laws. Its existence among the Ukrainian people is substantiated by both printed documents, as well as records of oral folk literature.

### **The Ancient Slav Religion Reflected In Wedding Rituals** (edited, check solstice use)

When Christianity arrived to the Slav lands it encountered entrenched customs and traditions, both of family ritual as well as rites which celebrated the changes in the seasons and the work people carried out associated with these changes.

According to written historical records and the scholarly generalizations of archeologists, the Slav religion consisted of the deification of nature.

The *Primary Chronicle*<sup>2</sup> makes several mentions of the gods who were respected and worshipped by the Eastern Slavs. The six referred to most often were Perun, Khors, Dazhboh, Stryboh, Semarhl and Mokosh. Legend had it that Svaroh, the Father of Light, reigned on

Earth. He taught people the smith's art and marriage relations, and after him came his son Dazhboh, the patron of marriage.

The chronicles and later religious literature provide information about other deities such as Stryboh - the god of wind, Mokosh - the deity of flood and rain, Veles or Volos - the god of cattle, a domestic Slav god, the god of wealth and weal, guardian of the household.

Later came the names of Svarozhych - the god of fire, Yarylo - the sun god, Lado - the god of marriage and so on. And while the *Primary Chronicle* mentioned only six gods, the number referred to in the *Hustyn Chronicle* had almost doubled.

The environment of the Ancient Slavs was filled with good and evil forces, which were personified in good and evil deities. There were also other good and evil beings born of the human imagination: mermaids, nymphs, various ogres and other folk demons which survived in legend into the 21st century.

Good and evil deities accompanied the Ancient Slav in all his activities. Family relations and prosperity in the home also depended on domestic gods. The people prayed to deities, brought sacrifices to attain their benevolence.

A description of the customs of the Ancient Slavs, in particular sacrificial offerings, is contained in the chronicles, in memoiristic literature by natives and foreigners, while the survivals of these primitive beliefs have reached us in calendar and family rituals.

Interesting facts of a purely everyday nature are contained in *Slovo Khrystoliubtsia* (Word of the Christ Lover), whose author, in speaking out against paganism and pagan gods, paints a picture of sacrifices. 'And in this fashion they bring sacrifices to them, by crumbling up *korovay*... the ground flour they offer up and consume... they place before the idols sacrifices of *kutia* and of a sacrificial meal for the gods Rod and Rozhanytsia.'

This glimpse of sacrifices performed by the Ancient Slavs shows the deification of human social relations. The people worshipped the gods Rod and Rozhanytsia to gain their favour. Thus among the Ancient Slavs, as among other peoples, we observe phases of the initial process of religiousness – the deification of natural forces and the deification of social relationships. Having created gods, people also created various forms of ceremonies and rites to serve them, which to a degree is reflected in the everyday life of the Eastern Slav peoples in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The rituals of the Ancient Slavs show that even in those distant times people were guided not only by a fear of unknown forces of nature, striving to be freed from their oppressive control, but they also tried to force various deities and incomprehensible natural phenomena to serve their ends through prayer and incantation, magical actions, sacrifices or threats.

A certain stasis developed in the rituals. Worship brought results only in the event that certain rituals were adhered to, including marches, dances and movements. Words which were spoken during rituals were also rhymed and rhythmical, for they were more easily remembered that way.

While reading their prayers, the Ancient Slavs abided by magical actions, which contained specific demands. In his accounts Ibn-Roste<sup>3</sup> mentions a Slav prayer for seeking a good harvest, where the magical actions are clearly observed: the people went out into the fields during the harvest, raised sacks of millet to the sky and asked that they be assured of a good crop in the current year, just as they had received in the previous year.

Such methods of agrarian magic in agricultural rituals survived until the turn of the 20th century among all Eastern Slav peoples.

The chronicles, church and memoiristic literature throw some light on the life of the Ancient Slavs, providing details about sacrifices and rites of worship, quite often stating that these were normally performed by the prince himself, or by the boyars, the merchants or the farmers,

rather than by any special individual. This tradition survived in annual calendar festivals into the 20th century. People once prayed to gods, for example, during Christmas the head of the household, in the presence of his family, would perform various magical actions to ensure a good harvest, prosperity and happiness for the household for the year ahead. Such traditions have survived in wedding rituals, where the running of the wedding depends on the elder or *starosta*, the patriarch of the clan, who controls all the rituals of the wedding drama.

Scholars consider that *vesillia*, the Ukrainian word for ‘wedding’, derives from the pagan festival in honour of Dazhboh, the sun god. The sun, which personified light, warmth, the birth of all living things on Earth, was a god in the minds of the Ancient Slavs. They celebrated every phase of the solstice and every season of the year with appropriate rites. The most solemn of these rites were associated with the spring equinox, after which the length of a day began to grow longer, which was associated with the birth of the sun.

The festivals of the Ancient Slavs in honour of the sun god were filled with merriment, dancing, chanting and dramatical acts; they were called *vesiliya*. It was on days of great festivity signifying the victory of Dazhboh over the god of darkness, Chornoboh, that people were married.

In celebrating the renewal and the fruitfulness of the Earth, the pagan himself felt an aspiration toward love, marriage, the establishment of a family. In analyzing the languages of various peoples and their wedding customs, Sumtsov came to the conclusion that in ancient times a marriage was concluded at the same time as the celebration of the new solstice<sup>4</sup>.

Kavelin<sup>5</sup> even expressed the thought that the time for weddings was an annual event among the Slavs, corresponding to February on the present calendar. Later the time for weddings became separated from the annual festival, however it retained its old name.

This theory has been supported by Y.Holovatsky<sup>6</sup>. Without declaring an actual time for weddings, he postulated that during the spring worship by the pagan Slavs, groups of youths and maidens necessarily took part, and they had to enter into wedlock at the end of the festival, beforehand expressing their mutual love in games and songs.

The god Lado stood out among the countless gods whom the Ancient Slavs believed were responsible for the successes and failures of people.

In the lists of the Hypatian and Laurentian chronicles there is no mention of Lado. As was mentioned earlier, he was referred to in the *Hustyn Chronicle*. It is probable that during the celebrations connected with the equinox there were solemn rituals in honour of Lado. He was extolled and hymns were sung to him. It is also quite likely the echoes of worship of a god of marriage can be found in refrains with mentions of grandpa Lado in Ukrainian spring songs (*vesniankas*) and Easter songs (*hahilkas*), in Kupalo songs (June 24), in original *ladkannia* wedding songs among the Boykos, which still carry this name in some regions of Lviv Province; as well as the name of the wedding chest, the *lada*, in which Lemko brides brought their dowry.

Therefore the time of the great festival in honour of the sun god coincided with the time of marriage of members of the clan, although later the wedding became separated from the annual festival, beginning to exist separately as a consecration of a new family.

Of course at such festivals it was considered that various deities were present. They were appeased through sacrifices, treated to various dishes, all this being done to the accompaniment of prayers and hymns.

The *korovay* (wedding bread), wedding garlands, the *hil'tse* (wedding tree), burning torches and later candles – all were indispensable attributes of ancient weddings, symbols of the sun god. In the opinion of M.Sumtsov, these objects had the same significance in their ritual use and played the same role in people's lives as icons and religious sculpture did much later.

Apart from the ancient ritual wedding worship, there were also such rites as the sitting of the young couple on a sheepskin coat, wedding bonfires lit before a bride's entry into the groom's yard, a bride's picking at the stove and the tossing of alcoholic liquor onto the ceiling and so on.

Some wedding attributes were symbolic in character (the shape of the garlands and the *korovay*), while separate actions were initially sacrificial rites (the cutting of the *korovay*, the cutting of a young couple's hair). Ancient wedding songs were in effect prayers directed to the gods, the patrons of marriage, with entreaties from the newly-married couple and the whole clan for patronage over the young family, to endow it with wealth and all earthly bounty. In time, the ancient prayer-hymns in honor of the deities began to include more and more solely mortal motives associated with practical activity, the family and social life of the people.

Ritual and sung wedding greetings and exaltations, which once had the form of incantations and prayers, eventually took on a completely symbolic character, becoming wishes of good health and prosperity for a young couple, their parents and the whole clan.

### **Traditions of the Folk Wedding Ritual and the Church Ceremony**

The tradition of the church marriage ceremony has been reflected in wedding ritual. Records made of weddings, especially in the second half of the 19th and the early 20th century, to a degree reflect ritual associated with the church marriage ceremony: they speak of the parents giving their blessing before the church ceremony, about the wedding procession to the church and back, with a description of songs sung by the wedding guests during this time.

The form of the church marriage ceremony arose in the Slav lands in the tenth century with the acceptance of Christianity in Rus', and throughout history the church has attempted to consolidate the church marriage in the life of the people.

The Ancient Rus' chronicles say little about church marriage. They relate more about customary-judicial marriages. The chronicler does not even provide many details about the first church marriage in Rus' between Prince Volodymyr and Anna, merely stating: 'After being christened, he brought the princess to be married'.<sup>7</sup>

However chronicles describe the ritual traditions which accompanied marriage. There is mention of the *vinno*, the groom's payment for a bride, the custom of the groom's mother meeting her daughter-in-law at the threshold, the traditions of celebrating the marriage with a wedding feast, about the unshodding of the groom by the bride as a symbol of becoming his wife, and so on.

The church marriage entered everyday life very slowly, even though the church fought hard for its acceptance after the introduction of Christianity. The decrees of Metropolitan Heorhiy (11th century) chastise people stating: 'Without church marriage no one is to take a wife, whether he be rich or poor, a pauper or a worker'. In legalizing the spread of Christianity through Rus', the Metropolitan Heorhiy's successor, Metropolitan Ioann in his *Epistles* (12th century) on various penalties, barring from communion and epitymies, chastises the aristocracy – the princes and boyars – for taking two or three wives and still receiving the church's blessing. About the customary wedding traditions of the common folk Metropolitan Ioann says that the common folk marry without the blessing of the church, according to their own rituals: 'They take their wives with much dancing, singing and clapping.'

As the centuries passed the tradition of a church marriage entered very slowly into everyday life. Thus in the circular of Poland's king Sigismund I (1509) we read: '...And the appointed Metropolitan of Kyiv and of all Rus', Iosyf, told us that many Rus' people from those parts live illegally, taking wives without marriage and have no desire to christen their children or to attend confession.'

Marriages not consecrated by the church had the same power in the eyes of the people as those performed in church. But the church, which was also forced to recognize non-church marriages, took the side of church-married people in various court actions, defending children born in church wedlock.

In the second half of the 16th century the king's officials carried out a census of Ukrainian village elders in Podillia. Apart from other everyday facts, they also listed the laws of the folk marriage right:

“a) When a man resorts to the high-handed frontier custom and takes someone's maiden, or widow, or divorced woman for his wife and wishes to live with her, he must pay three *hryvni* appropriation tax to the castle;

“b) Where a man wants to divorce a woman or a woman - a man, then the one instigating the separation must pay the castle three *hryvni* ‘divorce money’.”

Records of wedding ritual in the 20th century in certain areas of Ukraine such as the Sumy and Chernihiv regions, attest to the existence of a custom to undertake a church marriage at the engagement some two to three weeks before the wedding. After the church ceremony the couple went to the home of the bride to ‘gnaw at the stove’ or for a ‘stove inspection’ (*pechohliadyny*). The bride and groom then lived apart, with their respective parents, until the wedding day.

Customary folk law viewed marriage as a voluntary agreement between a man and a woman, which was, however, sanctioned by public acceptance through the performance of a whole string of wedding rituals. In Ukraine this tradition was still very commonplace even in the 18th century. Special church decrees attest to this. In 1774 the so-called ‘supreme edict’ of the synod was accepted, which warned priests ‘not to let married couples leave the church’ without obtaining a written agreement from them that they would live as husband and wife immediately after the ceremony, without waiting for the wedding. Those married couples who lived apart were to be sought out and subjected to anathema, just as someone who committed adultery.

In 1789 an edict of the ecclesiastical deanery of Novgorod-Siversky in the Chernihiv region declared: ‘It has come to our notice that in the Novhorod-Siversky eparchy clergy perform marriages in church, and afterwards allow these married persons to return to their respective homes, where they live apart for several years until their traditional wedding ‘veseliya’, and some of them part forever after taking vows...’

This edict again stressed the necessity to put an end to such disgusting customs and priests were given pointers on informing on those who failed to adhere to church directions. As we can see, even in the late 18th century the church hierarchy was forced to resort to administrative means to force church marriages into everyday life. This eternal conflict between church ceremony and the folk wedding was decided in the 19th century under pressure from state legislature and the church, and the church yielded to the folk tradition by performing the church ceremony on the day of wedding. The tradition of a church marriage on the day of the engagement survived in various localities of the Kyiv, Sumy and Chernihiv regions into the 1920s.<sup>8</sup> In countless ethnographic records from the early 20th century we come across the assertion that people considered the wedding feast and not the church ceremony, as the crowning act in the creation of a new family.

Lytvynov-Bartosh wrote in 1900: ‘In our parts, as elsewhere in Ukraine, the wedding is one thing, and the church ceremony quite something else. There are instances of people living without a church marriage, that is in common law, having celebrated quietly at least a small wedding feast; without having celebrated a wedding feast a couple may not live together, even though they may have been married in church.’<sup>9</sup>

The author gives the example of his conversation with grandpa and grandma Chubun. Old Mrs. Chubun confirms the indissolubility of their marriage with the words: ‘I didn’t marry Sava any old how, but the proper way. Sava came with bread and vodka and a matchmaker; he took me from my father and they drank a *mohorych* (a drink consummating the deal) and shook hands – he dare not desert me now.’

A. Onyshchuk wrote about common-law relationships and the recognition of such marriages by the Hutsul community: “It happens that a lad finds refuge with a grown maiden and they live without marrying in church. There are many such instances...”

Ethnographic materials from all over Ukraine confirm that even in the 19th century there were instances where a great deal of time elapsed between the church ceremony and the wedding feast, and in the mind’s eye of society the family as a social unit was recognized only after the wedding, not after the church ceremony.

If one of the young couple happened to die after the church ceremony, but before the wedding, they were buried as a single person. Church marriages could take place several times in the event of the death of one of the couple, however the common people were convinced that wedding ritual could sanctify marriage only once in a lifetime. All this shows the great social importance placed on wedding ritual in the life of the people and the age-old traditions of its formation and currency.

---

<sup>1</sup> Text selected from N.I.Zdoroveha, “Pokhodzhennia ukrains’koi vesil’noi obriadovosti” in *Narysy narodnoi vesil’noi obriadovosti na Ukraini*, (Kyiv: Naukova Dumka, 1974) and also excerpts from *Vesillia*, Book 1, (Kyiv: Naukova Dumka, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> Pochatkovyi Litopys – Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei, vol.25, Moscow 1949, p. 358.

<sup>3</sup> Ibn-Roste (late 9th – early 10th century) – Arab encyclopedist.

<sup>4</sup> N.F.Sumtsov, O svadebnykh obriadakh, preimushchestvenno russkikh, pp. 61-69.

<sup>5</sup> K.Kavelin, Kriticheskie stati i rassuzhdenia, otnosiashchiesia k narodnomu bytu, pover’iam, prazdnykam i t.p., no. 4, StPetersburg 1859, p184.

<sup>6</sup> Ia.F.Golovatskii, Ocherk staroslavianskogo basnosloviia, ili mifologii, Lviv 1860, p. 93.

<sup>7</sup> Letopis’ po Ipat’evskomu spisku, StPetersburg 1871, p. 80.

<sup>8</sup> ‘As late as 1930 in our parts of Dnipropetrovsk Province it was considered a ‘poor wedding’ if the church marriage and wedding feast took place on the same day, rather than being held 2 to 3 weeks apart’ – Evdokia Tkacz, 1992.

<sup>9</sup> P.Lytvynova-Bartosh, “Vesil’ni obriady i zvychai u s. Zemliantsi, Hlukhivs’koho povitu v Chernihivshchyni” in *Materialy do ukrains’ko-rus’koi etnolohii*, vol. III, 1900, p. 70.