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Marital rites in rural areas of Transylvania.
Customs, symbols and pictures
(thesis summary)

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Table of contents

Introduction	4
Research objectives and questions	5
Methodology. Qualitative and analytic approaches	6
The diversity of qualitative methods.....	6
Semiotics, between word and image	15
I. Marital rites in rural areas of Transylvania	18
I.1. Introduction. Rites of passage.....	19
I.2. Marital rites, between feelings and pragmatism	22
I.3. Marital rites in ethnographic regions of Transylvania	29
I.4. Human interactions as theatrical representations. Dramaturgy of the everyday life - Erving Goffman	32
I.5. The stages of the Transylvanian wedding rite.....	36
I.5.1. Meeting and choosing the partner	36
I.5.2. Wooing the bride, parents' consent, and families' commitment.....	41
I.5.3. Godparents and their role	46
I.5.4. Dowry	48
I.5.5. Engagement.....	52
I.5.6. Wedding invitation.....	54
I.5.7. Preparations for the wedding.....	60
I.5.8. Community's contribution.....	61
I.5.9. Preparation of the wedding flag	63
I.5.10. Wedding suits	64
I.5.11. Șiratău, predecessor of bachelor parties.....	68
I.5.12. The wedding morning	68
I.5.13. The religious ceremony	70
I.5.14. At the bride's home. Separation from the family	76
I.5.15. At the groom's home. The party.....	81
I.6. Reconstitution of the Romanian traditional wedding in Sânpaul	103
Conclusions	110

Key words:

rites of passage, wedding rites, Romanian traditional wedding, wedding photography, wedding symbols, semiotic analysis

Introduction

Birth, marriage, and death are the three essential events in the life of each individual, marked, in all cultures of the world, by a series of specific rites, which vary from one ethnographic area to another, evolving and developing as time goes by. In addition to strictly adhering to traditions, these rites are characterized by complexity and adaptability, the changes in society - in this case, referring in particular to the interference between urban and rural - being reflected in the way people mark these crucial moments along their lives.

The purpose of this paper is to present the ways of expressing and conducting the wedding rite and its associated rites, from an ethnographic and semiotic-visual perspective, emphasizing the symbols used and their significance, while at the same time analyzing the wedding photographs.

The research aims to identify the main symbols encountered in the traditional Transylvanian wedding rites and their meanings - in those cultures as well as in other cultures - and the main characteristics / specifications of the wedding photographs taken before the 2000s, on film, when the number of photographs taken during an event was limited to one, two or three film rolls.

In the contemporary society, the semantic and semiotic richness of the wedding rite has dropped dramatically, being heavily shadowed by the impetuous desire to display social status and manifesting originality. Nowadays, weddings seem to be competing in lavish costumes and decorations, extravagant dishes, and spectacular moments. Therefore, the original meaning of most rites was lost, now focusing on the need to remain in the collective memory through the unique and spectacular element brought by the wedding ceremony or by certain key moments of it. This is because, for example, throwing the wheat over the house was replaced with the ignition of fireworks and the release of white pigeons from the hands or boxes, and unbraiding the bride's hair was replaced with the launch of lanterns. None of these habits draw their roots - or at least the inspiration - from the Romanian traditions; they are all adopted from Western cultures, their meanings being, for the most part, completely irrelevant and unknown by brides

and grooms. In this sense, this paper aims to evoke the true meanings of the main moments of rite of the traditional Transylvanian wedding, representing also a possible starting point or a source of inspiration for further research in the field.

Research objectives and questions

Through this paper, I set out to answer the following research questions:

- What are the main customs and moments of the traditional Transylvanian wedding rite?
- What are the most important symbols of the traditional Transylvanian wedding rite and what is their meaning – in this context and in other social-cultural contexts?
- What are the specifics of wedding photography from before the 2000s and what visual stereotypes have appeared in this regard, in terms of subjects, framing, composition, style, etc.?
- What common elements and specificities are found in the wedding photography, depending on the ethnographic area in which they were made?

To identify the answers to these four questions, I set out to achieve the following goals:

- identifying the main moments of the rite of the traditional Transylvanian wedding and establishing a chronology in this regard, by studying the literature and by analyzing the testimonies of the interviewed persons;
- identifying the main symbols used in the wedding rites (objects, animals, plants, characters, gestures, etc.), by studying the literature and by analyzing the testimonies of the interviewed persons;
- carrying out a semiotic analysis on the main symbols identified, in order to determine their significance in the rite;
- determining the specificities of the documentary and artistic photography and including wedding photography in one of the two categories;
- identifying the main characteristics of the photographs taken during the traditional weddings in rural regions of Transylvania.

Research and results

The traditional wedding, as it is described in the first chapter of this paper, has undergone significant changes over the years, and many of the rites have been lost on the way. What seems to me rather dramatic, from the point of view of preserving traditions, is that many of the meanings of the still existing rite moments have also been lost, being now unknown by those who see them and implement them at every wedding. The transition of the archaic Transylvanian society to a modern society was made at a slow and very subtle pace, with no sudden milestones, so that the years or periods in which certain rites or customs were abandoned and others were adopted cannot be accurately indicated.

The Transylvanian wedding encompasses both secular and religious aspects, sometimes interspersed, all heavily loaded with symbols presented in different forms, the large majority of them having the role of attracting fertility, well-being, and wealth. The roles of the characters are clearly defined, and the representation is made at every moment of rite.

The paper has four chapters:

- I. Marital rites in rural areas of Transylvania
- II. Sign and meaning
- III. Semiotic analysis of wedding rites
- IV. Photography and visual anthropology

In the first chapter, *Marital rites in rural areas of Transylvania*, I encompassed a detailed, chronological description of the traditional wedding stages in rural archaic Transylvania, based on the specialized literature and on the interviews and observations made. I took into consideration and analyzed also the steps preceding and following the actual wedding, starting with creating contexts for the youngsters to get to know each other, the wooing, the consent of the families and the public announcement of the wedding, continuing with the engagement, negotiating the dowry on both sides, the religious ceremony and the party, and ending with the braiding of the bride's hair after the party and with visiting the godparents, a few days or weeks after the big event. I have also described the variations, both in terms of the order of moments and their manifestation, between several ethnographic regions of Transylvania and even between villages or communes located nearby or adjacent.

At the same time, I also paid attention to the roles of the characters during the rite moments, considering not only the main and secondary characters, a.k.a. the bride and groom, but all the characters who participate in the organization and preparation of the wedding, including the socaci, the callers, the priest and the guests.

I have reached the conclusion that, in general, the organization of weddings and associated rites, in various areas of Transylvania, is similar, with very small differences that do not significantly affect the rite as a whole.

Another very important conclusion that I have drawn from this study is that related to the importance given by the couple - at the wedding and in the stages before and after - to the various other entities. The grooms give the utmost importance to the families, especially to the parents, for whom, most often, they have such great respect that the very decision to marry depends solely on their acceptance. Subsequently, and in the other stages before the wedding, the families of the two have an important role: they go into the fray, they go on sight, they organize a true ceremonial around the time when the bride separates from the family, as well as around the moment when it is integrated into the new family, etc.

I would like to remind here that the godparents, considered to be spiritual and integrated parents, thus belonging to the family, have at least the same role, if not even more important role than that of the in-laws: without godparents, the wedding cannot even take place. Another important entity is the church, and the religious marriage represents an absolutely mandatory stage of the wedding, in the archaic Romanian society, strongly marked by orthodox Christian religious orientations and by an unconditional submission to God, the church, and its representatives. Traditions, popular beliefs and superstitions, dependent on place and time, are also of undeniable importance. Many moments of the rite do not have an explanation per se, but are organized only because tradition demands it, without analyzing the meanings of the gestures and sayings.

If one can say about the religious marriage that in the very religious communities it is of particular importance in the rites of the wedding, not the same can be said about the civil marriage. This, very strict and very rigid from the perspective of the organization, and at the same time devoid of symbols and meanings, is often omitted from the testimonies of the people and most of the ethnographic studies. There are even testimonies according to which, in the first half of the twentieth century, the civil marriage, the "counseling" marriage, did not even take place for some of the young people married in the Transylvanian villages.

In the literature studied for this chapter, I did not find any mention of wedding photographs or photographers. At the same time, from the interviews conducted for this research, I found very little information about these aspects. I was looking, among other things, to find out:

- how photos are chosen;
- what are the working rates and how were the negotiations going;
- how many photos are negotiated upon;
- who is in charge of booking the photographer;
- whether there is a contract or other type of written, formal agreement;
- how much creative freedom does the photographer have;
- what kind of preferences do customers express, etc.

The only information of this kind received from interview respondents were that in the past, there were very few photographers and that, on average, a photographer had to cover for several villages, based strictly on spatial proximity. The amount of photos from each wedding was low, often not even large enough to take all the twenty-four or thirty-six positions that a standard photo film roll has. This statement is also supported by the sets of photographs that I analyzed in the fourth chapter, which contain, in their vast majority, very few images.

The lack of importance given to wedding photography is due to the popular custom, to a large extent, but also to financial considerations. The traditional Transylvanian wedding is an event not only of the brided pair and their families, but of the whole community. The contribution of the community to the wedding is also manifested by contributions with animals or other raw material for the food and cakes that are to be served at the wedding. The actual costs of organizing the wedding, however, remain high, and the payment of the services of a photographer to document the whole event, including, the costs of the photo rolls and prints, was not too often one of the families' priorities. This has changed radically over time, due to the technological development and affordable prices of the cameras, as well as to the complete elimination of the costs associated with the printing. Nowadays, professional photographers are hired at most weddings, whether they are organized in rural or urban areas, and the number of photographs taken during a wedding often reaches the order of thousands.

In this first chapter, I mentioned in many moments the existence of objects or gestures with powerful symbolic significance, at different times of rite. I have only rarely explained their

role and I have not gone into details about the meanings of these gestures and objects, as these aspects have been the subject of the study in the following chapters.

In the second chapter, *Sign and meaning*, I made a synthesis of the theory of signs, as stated by Ferdinand de Saussure, respectively by Charles Sanders Peirce, two of the pioneers and main theoreticians of modern semiotics. I also made a review of the main aspects and concepts related to semiotics, explaining, at the same time, the importance of this science, in the context in which all human relations are based on different systems of signs, since the beginning of human existence.

In the third chapter, *Semiotic analysis of the wedding rites*, I analysed what all the signifiers, whether they were in the form of objects, characters, plants or animals represent, to some extent, in the rites of the wedding and in the rites associated with it. I could notice a very high tendency towards recurrence and repetitiveness, both in terms of the signifiers (for example, elements such as wheat and basil are found in several rite moments, having different meanings and being used in different ways in each context), as well as regarding the expected effects of the rites (for example, many of the wedding customs are aimed at attracting luck or fertility to the young couple, even if their mode of manifestation and performance is different and even if they occur in different stages of the wedding).

Another finding, following the analysis made for this chapter, is that the secular and sometimes even the pagan symbols are often combined with the clerical ones in the wedding. In the Romanian archaic rural society, there is a permanent relation to the deity and an almost pressing need to obey the rules and teachings of the Bible. There is, at the same time, the constant need to obtain and maintain divine protection, within each new step and each individual or collective decision. Through the power of habit and the pressure thus existing, the community somehow requires the organization and conduct of all the clerical rites associated with the wedding, thus becoming a kind of validation mechanism.

The natural elements are very common in wedding rites. Starting with the sun and water and continuing with plants such as wheat, flax or basil or animal products, such as peacock feathers or eggs, all these elements have well-defined roles and very strong meanings. Some of them maintain their magical and superstitious significance that they had during the pre-Christian period or, during the Christian period, in pagan rituals. I have noticed that this ideological contradiction between the strong orientation towards religion and the embracing

and implementation of pagan customs is not a problem or a dilemma for communities and is never challenged by them, the two coexisting as integral parts of often imperious rites of marriage. The superstitions created around these objects have, in many cases, origins that are hardly identifiable and / or meanings long lost, but are perpetuated as such, without looking for meaning or logic behind this approach.

I considered that an analysis from a multicultural perspective of the symbols and their meanings is vital to this study, as it could contribute to a better understanding of the whole phenomenon, as well as the role of the various elements and gestures within the wedding. Regardless of the differences from the geographical, historical-temporal, ethnographic or social-cultural points of view, it was at least interesting to look at the symbols from the point of view of other cultures, in order to generate an overview of how they are viewed not only in the context on which the present work is focused, but also in relation to the universal representations and landmarks.

Similarities regarding the meanings of the symbols encountered are most often very important, especially when we refer to natural elements, such as the sun, the divinity of monotheistic cultures and religions, the circle, the ring, the wheat - the plant and the seed - and others. At the same time, some of the symbols encountered are so specific that their meanings cannot be extrapolated to other contexts. For example, the crying of the young bride on the wedding day, the exchange of handkerchiefs between the pair, the peacock feather hanging and then being taken down from the groom's hat, the wedding flag and its decorations, etc. contain so many very specific elements and are accompanied by sayings and other gestures, that they can be encountered in identical form and with very close meaning only, sometimes, in adjacent or close ethnographic areas, but not in cultures from other periods or geographical areas.

Most rites incorporate elements and gestures whose purpose is either to attract luck or prosperity, or to attract fertility, or to attract good understanding between the wedded pair. In the context of a predominantly pragmatic justification of the wedding, in the archaic culture, as I explained in the chapter dedicated to the wedding and explaining its rites, the reproduction and perpetuation of the family and the clan are two of the main purposes for which young people choose to marry, so it is easy understandable why it is so strongly insisted on attracting fertility from young brides. Moreover, couples marry at a young age - either around the age of twenty, or just before that, at sixteen or seventeen - which favors biological, psychological and social conditions for procreation.

The fourth and final chapter, *Photography and visual anthropology*, is divided into a theoretical and a practical part, clearly delimited, but strongly interconnected. Within the theoretical part, I have brought into discussion elements such as the accuracy of the interpretation of the visual message transmitted photographically, the need for a minimum cultural knowledge for the effective interpretation of the photographic message, the ways in which photography can be used as an anthropological research tool, as well as a synthesis meant to include wedding photography in a sphere at the intersection of documentary photography and artistic photography. In the practical part, I analyzed a group of two hundred and sixty-four photographs from fifty-eight weddings organized in villages from ethnographic regions of several counties in Transylvania. The photographs were taken in the period 1950-1996, on film, and the object of the study was the cluster consisting of the positive, printed formats of the images.

I analyzed the images from the point of view of composition, on the one hand, and from the point of view of the characters, signs and symbols encountered, on the other hand. I had assumed that there would be great similarities in the types of frames and characters in the photo sets, as well as their position, as over the years, I noticed that there is an inclination towards standard shots, such as brides and sisters-in-law standing and smiling at the camera, brides and godchildren standing in front of the flowers received at the wedding, brides in the foreground and the priest in the background, during the church service, etc. Another element that favored this reasoning is that, given that the shooting was on film, involving a number of additional costs for materials, and any inappropriate movement would result in the loss of a film position of the twenty-four or thirty-six available (considering that they will have, on average, only one film roll for each wedding), both photographers and clients would opt for directed frames rather than snapshots or any other types of frames that involve more creativity, but eventually are more risky on the creative side.

Indeed, I found these shots and standard approaches during many weddings. At the same time, I noticed a number of other predilections:

- most of the photographs were printed in black and white (which is easily explained, in the context in which color films and photographs became popular and widespread in the late '80s - early '90s);
- most of the photographs were shot on landscape orientation (again, very easy to explain, given the original position of the camera and the instinct, to which is added the comfort, to photograph from the original position of the camera);

- most of the photos were directed, but here I must mention that the difference between the directed and the snapshots was very small, less than 11%, which I did not expect;
- most of the photographs have, among the characters, the married couple - again, somewhat intuitive;
- the overwhelming majority (92.8%) of the wedding dresses of the bride and groom are modern costumes, consisting of white wedding dress, respectively black or dark colored suit, with tie or bow tie, for grooms, and not traditional costumes, as I had originally assumed that it will be.

Another conclusion I have drawn from this analysis is that, despite my initial expectations and assumptions, it is very difficult to identify a clearly defined specificity of rural wedding photography in Transylvania. The differences are so significant from one wedding to another, both at the level of general approach and at the level of details, that there cannot be established a clear profile of wedding photography, not even at the regional or local level, as I initially hoped that I would be able to identify a specific pattern.

Of course, there is also the hypothesis that the sample chosen for analysis is too narrow and, for this reason, is not representative and cannot serve to identify specific common elements, in the generalized way. I discussed more about the limitations and obstacles encountered when searching for wedding photos in the conclusions section of the dedicated chapter. Whether or not it is too small an image cluster to be able to draw any relevant conclusions from the analysis, it is certain that both this analysis and the entire paper can be used as a basis for further similar research.

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