

Weddings and family celebrations

Contributed by Administrator

Wednesday, 11 October 2006 22:13 - Last Updated Tuesday, 25 March 2008

Marriage was the most important event in a person's life. It marked the passage from childhood to adulthood and was the sole means of attaining personal autonomy. Contingent on marriage was the transfer of property from one generation to the next, in the form of the dowry, agreed upon formally or informally in negotiations between the contracting families. As a rule the wife becomes part of her husband's kindred, which is why the celebration is largely the concern of his relatives and commences with the exchange of wedding crowns and the newly-wedded couple's entry into their new home. For the bride's family the ceremony is essentially one of farewell, culminating in the bride's departure from her paternal home.

When considering the dance customs associated with marriage, it should be borne in mind that the rite of matrimony culminates and seals a process which may have gone on for many years. Protagonists in this "rite of passage" are two adolescents who scarcely know each other, each surrounded by a group of peers. Its "stage directors" are, in the main, the older women of the village and its cast consists of all the relatives on both sides. Almost the entire village is involved and each person knows his role, which he has learnt from past experience. Although everyone is poor, it is incumbent on them to endow this event with the greatest possible splendour.

Since there was no notion of romantic love, young people thought it quite natural that their spouse be chosen by others and that their father had the last word in this respect. Choice was, anyway, inevitably limited since in a village there are, at any one time, very few boys and girls of marriageable age who are not relatives. Usually the choice has been expressed in childhood, then cultivated with stolen glances and furtive whispers until the parents finally formalise the relationship. Elopement, though much discussed, is actually rather rare, since it presupposes the complicity of the girl, the negligence of her parents and the ability of the groom to settle somewhere away from her village.

As a rule a match-maker acted as an intermediary between the interested parties and no time was lost in enlisting her services. From the moment a daughter was born her parents were aware of the prospective husbands and desirous of making an arrangement as soon as possible. On the other hand the boy's family was anxious to recruit another pair of hands to help with the tasks and to have grandchildren to care for them in their old age. Because men often left the village, as seasonal workers, sailors, merchants and emigrants, a wife at home was one way of ensuring their return.

The actual proposal of marriage was always made by a match-maker since neither side could risk a point-blank refusal. This role was usually assumed by an elderly woman, experienced, discreet and loquacious, whose age allows her to make the necessary visits without arousing the neighbours' suspicion. When negotiations involved two young people from different villages the most suitable person to act as a go-between was the embroiderer. He lodged with the girl's family whilst preparing her dowry and thus had the opportunity of observing her virtues and the time to extol those of the prospective groom. The match-maker was always invited to the wedding and special songs were sung in her, or his, honour.

Once the match-maker had a positive response to the initial overtures, a meeting was arranged between the fathers. This was held in secret to avoid gossip and each declared what he was willing to settle on his child: fields, house, olive trees, livestock, clothing. Since each man was well aware of the other's economic standing and number of children still unmarried, these negotiations were merely a formality. On reaching agreement they shook hands and from that moment the machinery of marriage was set in motion: shots were fired in the air, drinks were ordered all round in the coffee shop, congratulations exchanged and preparations begun.

The couple was thenceforth regarded as betrothed, silver rings were ex-changed and they were allowed to meet in the presence of a relative. Both families organised a party (gléndi) to celebrate the betrothal and special food was prepared. All evening the couple sat at opposite ends of the table, surrounded by their friends and once the meal was over the singing began. First there were table songs and after these the young couple took to the floor. This was a very important moment since it was the couple's first appearance together in public. At first they danced a facing dance (antikrystós), then they led a syrtós and the carousing continued all night long. Just before the guests departed the girl presented her new relatives with kerchiefs or scarves: she bowed before her father-in-law and mother-in-law and proffered a kerchief, an embroidery, woollen socks or similar gift, which they placed on their

Weddings and family celebrations

Contributed by Administrator

Wednesday, 11 October 2006 22:13 - Last Updated Tuesday, 25 March 2008

shoulders and danced.

No sooner than the betrothal ceremony was concluded, preparations for the nuptials commenced in earnest. The house in which the couple was to live had to be built, or a room added on to the paternal home, and the comestibles to be consumed at the wedding feast had to be ordered and stored. The final touches were speedily made to the bride's dowry which she had been preparing for several years. The abundance and generosity of the wedding feast contrasted markedly with the frugality of everyday village life, for this was the only social occasion when such excesses were permitted. It is not for nothing that the wedding was frequently spoken of as *chará* (joy), as if this were the only truly joyous time in man's life.

From the point of view of music and dance this rite of "joy" comprised a series of episodic events. Just as in a play, each episode took place in a specific order, had its own particular plot and casting of roles, its own associated songs and dances marking its conclusion. The strong aura of theatricality which surrounded these events added weight to their significance and elevated them above banality.

The following description of the ritual of marriage is, for practical reasons, a hypothetical and composite one: it is not the ritual of a particular village, which would be methodologically correct. It is mainly intended to highlight the episodic articulation of events and the role of dance in the development of the whole. It goes without saying that every village has its own particular procedure, which may vary slightly from wedding to wedding, but differs from the procedure in other villages. The details of every phase of this important rite, including the special songs and dances, are inculcated from childhood: little girls play weddings as a game, while their keen-eyed mothers and grandmothers correct them along the way. The roles are complex and any transgression of protocol invokes censure, but each participant rarely acts in isolation and has the reassuring support of his or her peers. As in ancient tragedy, the chorus plays a vital role in the enactment of the rite: the bride has an entourage of girl friends (*bratímises*), her mother a circle of other matrons who help her in everything, and the old women are ranged on the periphery, like another chorus. Exactly the same applies to the groom and his family.

Though the nuptial scenario in each village has been established and standardised by frequent repetition, there is still some leeway for personal preferences. When the bride is from another village the ceremony is often a mixture of the two scenarios. Each of the kindreds observes the mores familiar to it, yet willingly joins in those of the other. Thus, where village exogamy is common, customs tend to become much alike in all the villages which exchange brides.

Kneading the bread

Since the wedding service is always performed on a Sunday, preparations begin several days in advance when the bride's friends gather at her home to bake the special breads. A formidable quantity of bread will be consumed at the feast, as well as the different kinds of special bread rings (*koulouría*) and sweet bread, such as the ones which the children distribute to the villagers when inviting them to attend the wedding. All the women of the family cooperate in cooking and baking for the feast, pots and pans are borrowed from the neighbours and the men folk are mobilised to procure the necessary provisions. After the dough has been left to rise the young girls dance and sing special songs and end up throwing flour at one another and making playthings with the dough. The young men indulge in similar horse-play, singing and dancing when they meet to whitewash the groom's house.

Displaying the dowry

The following day the bride's dowry of coverlets, blankets and linen, mostly woven and embroidered by her, is displayed in her home. The entire village comes to see, to assess its worth and praise her skills. The furniture and household utensils she will take with her to her husband's home are also shown. The visitors leave money on the dowry goods as a token of their esteem. As they fill the mattress they sing special songs, then dance round it carrying it above their heads.

Decorating the banner

The banner or *flámbouro* is the symbol of the nuptial procession and is held by the *brátimos* (the groom's

Weddings and family celebrations

Contributed by Administrator

Wednesday, 11 October 2006 22:13 - Last Updated Tuesday, 25 March 2008

best-man) as he strides out alongside the musicians at the head of the groom's entourage, or rides to the fore when the groom goes to collect his bride from the next village. The flámbouro consists of a flower-bedecked pole, festooned with brightly coloured scarves, embroidered crosses, apples, pomegranates etc. As the young boys and girls decorate the banner they sing special songs and once it is ready each takes it in turn, holds it on high and dances with it. They fire shots into the air and finally set it up atop the roof of the groom's house.

Bathing the bride

The bride either takes a bath at home or goes to the public bath-house (hamám). There her kinswomen offer sweetmeats and refreshments to the groom's female relatives who have the opportunity of seeing whether the girl has a fine, healthy body. Afterwards they prepare kinás (a yellow dye), dance around the plate ringed by burning candles, and then apply it to her palms. In Thrace there is a special dance, called the dance of the gíkna, to mark this act.

Dressing the bride

The bride is adorned in her complex wedding finery by the stolístres, women renowned for this special skill, under the supervision of her godmother. Bedecking the bride in her clothes and ornaments takes several hours and all this time the women waiting outside her chamber sing songs in praise of her beauty. Once ready, the bride emerges into the courtyard or parlour where she sits, demure and silent, flanked by two guardians lest anyone approach her. As she waits the women and girls dance and sing, without musical instruments.

Gathering of the guests

Meanwhile, the groom leaves his house with his kinsfolk and friends. The merry company, headed by musicians playing processional tunes (patinádes) and the brátimos with the banner, wends its way through the streets, first calling to collect the groom's godfather who is also the koumbáros (wedding sponsor), then the match-maker, the bride's godmother, the priest and perhaps other guests. In Northern Greece they all dance as they go, elsewhere there are brief stops for dancing at crossroads or clearings. On arrival at the bride's house they are welcomed and offered a drink, while the bride treads a farewell measure with each of her girlfriends. The dowry is loaded on a mule or donkey and all set forth together for the church. In olden days the ceremony of exchanging crowns was performed at home. As the couple comes out of the church it is not uncommon for the villagers to break into dance, quite often led by the priest.

Reception of the bride

The bride is received into her husband's home by her mother-in-law, who takes her ritually inside and shows her round her new household. The male and female guests sit in separate rooms and the bride stands amidst the women in silence. Then it is that the groom lifts the veil from his wife's face (in the past this was the first time she was seen by all) and songs are sung extolling her beauty. The guests are treated and then the dance of the in-laws begins: the koumbáros leads the groom's relatives, in strict order of precedence, and then those of the bride. Each one takes his turn at leading the local syrtós. Wedding dinner

As gargantuan a spread as possible is provided and the meal is punctuated throughout by toasts and counter-toasts to the health and happiness of the newlyweds. When everyone has eaten his fill the women begin to sing. Then the men enter into the jovial spirit and sing songs of their own until the time is ripe for the couple to rise and take to the floor. The first dance is led by the koumbáros, the bride or the groom, depending on the region, but the hierarchical order of the relatives in the circle is inviolable and strictly observed everywhere. Everyone in turn dances the bride. As the merry-making reaches a crescendo, protocol is relaxed, the young people join in the dancing, performing lively, intricate dances in pairs, not at all like those danced at the panigyri.

Finale

Weddings and family celebrations

Contributed by Administrator

Wednesday, 11 October 2006 22:13 - Last Updated Tuesday, 25 March 2008

When the night is no longer young, jokes and innuendoes about the couple's physical union tend to dominate the conversation. Bawdy songs are sung and dances such as pos to trívoun to pipéri ("how the pepper is ground"), perhaps the only truly panhellenic dance, are performed in order to embolden the bride and put the couple in the right frame of mind for the deflowering. In Asia Minor the consummation of the marriage took place before witnesses, rifle shots were fired and the blood-stained kerchief shown in public. On the Greek mainland the couple did not sleep together on the first or the second night. The feasting on Sunday night ends with the departure of the bride's relatives en masse, whereupon the groom's kin resume dancing and his comrades carry on carousing until the following Wednesday.

Antíchara

It is customary for the bride and her husband to return to her paternal home a few days after the wedding. This somewhat eases the strain of her necessary departure and a feast like the wedding feast, the antíchara, is organised, but only for close kin. The dances are danced in the same order and the celebration lasts no longer than daybreak. Needless to say, there is an infinite number of variations on this wedding theme. If only there was the chance of describing events in detail for those villages where elderly informants still recall them, then conclusions could be reached on society in each region and the customs could be preserved, albeit as "museum pieces". The music and dance can be quite easily salvaged, all it needs is a video-recorder, but it would be far better if this operation were combined with systematic ethnographic research.