

REDISCOVERING A RITUAL. BETWEEN KITSCH AND AUTHENTIC VALUE

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ABSTRACT. Researching and decoding a ritual is a complex analytical and interpretive process, as it takes into consideration the linguistic system, as well as other semiotic systems, such as the visual—the analysis of colors, materials, forms and symbols; the gestural—observing body language and facial expressions; and the auditory—melodic lines, intonation, volume, ambient sounds. This paper aims to capture the constitutive elements of the ceremony of the nuptial flag, characterized by symbolic *polyglossia*. Deciphering the meanings of this ritual is deemed impossible in the absence of the mythical symbolic thought that shapes traditional culture. This ceremony, defined by pomp, novelty and spectacle, marks the transition towards a new stage of existence and adds to the idea of the formation of the couple, which in the archaic mentality represents the foundation of world's entire architecture. The aspect of the wedding flag differs from one region to another, even if there are common prop elements. Also especially important in this ritual is the role of the flag bearer, revealed at three different stages of this ceremony: at the groom's house, at the bride's house, and on the way to church. The manner in which we approach the ritual of the wedding flag is diachronic, since we follow it to our very times, underlining those elements that ensure its uniqueness and places it at the opposite pole of kitsch.

KEY WORDS: ritual, nuptial flag, archaic mentality, symbolic syncretism, lyrical repertoire

Introduction

A ceremonial symbolism regards a syncretic analysis of the ritual in terms of its artistic codes and languages. A series of issues related to signs are, usually, approached, especially given that the ritual absorbs almost all of the forms and species of folk art, such as: dancing, music, drama, poetry, lyric genres, and the language of colors and objects. Thus, the scientific research of a ritual does not settle on a simple description of the facts. This is also the case in the ritual of the nuptial flag, which, like any other nuptial manifestation, comprises various meanings, the symbolic *polyglossia* of this ritual representing clear proof of the unique and organic nature of folk culture.

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There is an interpretation and grouping of the symbols present in the ritual of the flag through vegetal, zoomorphic objects and chromatic symbols, as well as the symbolism of dancing. These all syntagmatically interact in the texts and acts of the ritual.

As any nuptial manifestation, the ritual of the wedding flag contains a number of meanings and forms of expression preserved through the power of tradition. These can be deciphered only through by referring to the entirety of the mythical symbolic thought specific to traditional culture. The picturesque character of this ceremony, the agglomeration of means of expression are dictated by the need to ensure a tinge of novelty, through pomp and spectacle, to the moment of transition from a beardless to a married man. On the other hand, the complexity of the ceremony stems from the participants' desire to ensure maximum magical, ethical, aesthetic and affective efficiency to all moments of the scenario. For folkloric semiotics and hermeneutics, the symbolic syncretism and *polyglossia* of this ritual is clear proof of the unique and organic character of folk culture.

The Nuptial Flag. Customs and Functions

The wedding itself represents an extremely complex ceremony with stages that have to be strictly preserved, while some tohers have an optional character. When staging the wedding process, the researchers, generally show particular interest to the wedding flag (see Chiș Șter 1983: 291-292.) The symbolic sides of the flag are currently preserved but the stages of its making are not that strictly preserved, and the decorations used to make it have not any more the same values. It stands out the flag's role of necessity in the traditional wedding process as previously mentioned.

The symbols that are paired with the ritual of the nuptial flag crystallize the idea of the formation of the couple, which, in the archaic mentality, represents the foundation of the entire edifice of the world. The entire lyrical corpus accompanying the ritual, as well as all of the dramatic, actant elements along with the ritualistic objects, are subordinate to the union of the two youths, to the foundation of a family. The languages, consisting of instrumental, material, zoomorphic, vegetal or chromatic symbols, interweave with the choreographic and musical language in said ceremony.

Generally speaking, the custom of the wedding flag is perceived in Transylvania as a necessary element belonging to the extensive wedding process. The majority of the participants to the ritual has not access to the plenty of the custom's meanings because of a relative indifference towards the traditional mentality and the invasion of modern. The initial meanings often remain undiscovered by people today, who choose to replace these traditional elements with modern ones or simply disregard to organize a traditional wedding, and thus rescind what was once perceived as the sacred

nature of the wedding. The wedding flag ceremonial is an element that has changed its meanings over time, however it has been preserved by certain Transylvanian communities. The reasons are several and we believe that they regard the attitude towards the archaic way of thinking, which is considered to be a source of wisdom and coherence in times marked by uncertainties. As the rediscovering of this ritual proves, the customs may last longer in a community and trace their place in the community once it shows interest towards them.

It is obvious, in what concerns the props of the nuptial flag that they preserve the archaic elements, loaded with deep meanings decoded by the community. There are common prop elements, but, obviously, each region displays elements that set it apart. An example of this is the very pole that the nuptial flag is placed on, but the examples can be much more numerous.

Sometimes, a single, large bell nailed to the tip of the flag is used, and, other times, the flag bearers use several, smaller bells nailed to leather belts attached across the flagpole. Obviously, each region has prop elements of the flag that set it apart. Given the importance of the flag bearer in the ritual, throughout time, the duties and traits of the flag bearer have crystallized in each folkloric area. The flag bearer is captured during three important moments of the ritual: at the groom's house, at the bride's house, and on the way to church. The lyricism specific to the flag bearer and his pack (provided by performers) in each ritualistic moment can be analyzed. The functions of the flag and flag bearer are easy to deduce from the very lyrical corpus. For example, an oration from Bihor county presents the role of the flag bearer in leading the nuptial procession to the bride's house:

Lăzlăușu-i om dă samă!/ Pă uliță lume chiamă/ Și merem după mireasă/ Ș-o ducem la noi acasă! (The flag bearer's a big shot!/ 'Sembling people by the lot/ So that we can take the bride/ Put her in our home beside!)

Other lyrics, recited by the flag bearer himself, represent his physical traits in a comical register:

Nu ți uita că-s micuț,/ Că am fost la oi desculț/ Și n-am putut crești mari,/ Că mi-o fost frig la picioari! (Don't you mind that I am small,/ Herded sheep, no boots at all/ And I couldn't really grow/ As my feet were cold as snow!)

After highlighting the functions of the main actors of the ceremony, it is also necessary to draw parallels between the flag bearers of various traditional regions. The emphases always fall on the detailed description of the male costume of the flag bearer (wherever the case), as well as on a comparative analysis of the flag bearer's duties in the context of the ritual.

At the end of the 19th century as the renowned folklorist and ethnographer Simeon Florea Marian said, in Transylvania and Hungary there was no wedding without a flag and it was seen as a symbol of the groom's heroism (Marian 2009:186). Usually the flag is done before the wedding itself and just in exceptional cases in the same day with the wedding. The kerchief or the clothes used for making the wedding flag are specific to each area and wear the symbolic colors, shapes, zoomorphic or anthropologic elements of that specific area. In their turn, the plants used for the flag have their meanings established in the community and known by its members and maybe some others that choose to show interest towards the hermeneutics of these folkloric customs. The apotropaic proprieties of the wedding flag and those with reference to the union of the wedded pair are obvious along the flag dance, the object being gifted with magical powers that contribute to the couple's happiness. The flag's dance also symbolizes the breakup with a certain age, the uninitiated stage that the wedded used to belong to (Șeuleanu :30). The wedding itself starts with the making of the wedding flag.

The point-by-point research of this ritual proves the apotropaic and propitious function of the flag. Even though we live in the 21st century, it seems that in numerous folkloric areas of the country superstitions have not been given up. They can also be found in the ritual, which unveils novel practices in archaic mentality. The apotropaic function of the nuptial flag is remarkable through "the charms of the flag" or "the spells of the flag", whose role it is to protect the newlyweds from evil spirits, while also ensuring prosperity and fertility. These symbols encounter alterations from one area to another: „farmecele steagului: cărbune, grâu, busuioc, mercur, usturoi—să fugă ă! cu cornițe de steag“ (“the charms of the flag: coal, wheat, basil, mercury, garlic—so the horned one runs away”); „vrăcili steagului—să pun cărbuni, grâu de la litie, tămâie, bani“ (“the spells of the flag—to set down coal, processional wheat, incense, money”); „sare și tămâie într-o batistă“ (“salt and incense in a handkerchief”). Also ever present are humorous superstitions meant to ensure fertility or to pay heed to the bride's chastity: „La mnireasă subsuoară să băga câte un ou crud cu care mere la cununie, și apoi când vine acasă de la biserică și trece pragu păstă steag, mnireasa trebuie să dea drumul la ou în timp ce trece pragu, să pice și așe di ușor să nască copiii—cum pică ou să pice și pruncu.“ (“A raw egg was fastened at the bride's armpit, with which she would go to the wedding, and when she has returned from church and crossed the threshold over the flag, the bride ought to let go of the egg so that it fell: that is how easy her children would be born—as the egg drops, so may the infant”); „...Mirii trebuie să treacă pragul casei peste steag. Stegașii țin steagul și o ridicau pe mireasă peste steag să vadă dacă-i fată mare... ziceau.“ (“...The newlyweds had to cross the threshold over the flag. The flag bearers held the flag and raised the bride over it so that

they could see if she was a maid... they said”). „Când era gata steagu, mnireasa bătea steagu cu pumnu, îl bătea ca să fie bărbatu bun.“ (“When the flag was ready, the bride would hit it with her fist, so that her man was vigorous.”)

The renowned folklorist and ethnographer Simeon Florea Marian shows (2009: 186) that at the end of the 19th century there was no wedding in Transylvania and Hungary without the flag, seen as a symbol of the groom’s heroism. Usually the flag is done before the wedding itself and just in exceptional cases in the same day with the wedding. The kerchief or the clothes used for making the wedding flag are specific to each area and wear the symbolic colors, shapes, zoomorphic or anthropologic elements of that specific area. In their turn, the plants used for the flag have their meanings established in the community and known by its members and maybe some others that choose to show interest towards the hermeneutics of such popular customs. The apotropaic proprieties of the wedding flag and those with reference to the union of the wedded pair are obvious along the flag dance, the object being gifted with magical powers that contribute to the couple’s happiness. The flag’s dance also symbolizes the breakup with a certain age, the uninitiated stage that the wedded used to belong to (Șeuleanu 2000:30). The wedding itself starts with the making of the wedding flag.

Based on a valuable ethnographical and folkloric material, Ernest Bernea (1967) attempts at sociologically interpreting the wedding in the belief that

the wedding is a collective manifestation with an organic character in its multiplicity of elements and forms, it is an animated braiding of spiritual, religious and magic elements and forms, of aesthetic, legal and economic elements and forms. (Bernea 1967: 54)

Here we find an analysis of this phenomenon that brings forth a new methodological point of view, a novel one when it comes to research of this type, the analysis of the elements that comprise the phenomenon, the manner in which they are structured, the highlighting of the particular and general functions of this phenomenon in the life of the Fagaras village. The ethnographer reconstructs the wedding based on material gathered through direct observation and through inquiry, analyzing the main moments of the phenomenon. We should keep in mind the events preceding the wedding that take place both at the groom’s house, as well as the bride’s house, which are an integral part of the rites of passage to family life and leaving behind the bachelor life. These are then followed by the engagement and wedding, along with all of their rites for the fulfillment of the Christian bond between the bride and groom, as well as by the events occurring at their new home, carried out in order to strengthen this bond and to bring forth prosperity. The second point of view presents the events in a concrete manner, analyzing the ten parts of the nuptial ritual in ten distinct chapters: summoning people

to the wedding, placing the engagement ring on the finger, organizing the cooks, adorning the bride, taking the bride, the engagement and wedding, welcoming the bride and accepting the dowry, the feast and the bestowing of gifts, the dancing and the aspects that come after the wedding.

The ceremony of the nuptial flag in itself is less abundant in ritualistic practices. The deep dissection of the investigated reality shows that the most popular superstitions refer to the fact that the flag bearer must have both parents alive, because otherwise the newlyweds would separate. The same symbolism of separation is suggested by the detachment of the bell from the flag: „dacă să rupe țângalău, aduce ghinion la miri; trebuia legat bine“ (“if the ringer breaks off, it brings bad luck on the newlyweds, so it should be tied well”). We can also find the propitious function of the flag here: „cu cât dă lăzlăușul mai sus de tari cu steagul, cu atât le mere mai bine mnrilor“ (“the harder the flag bearer waves the flag, the better the newlyweds shall have it in life“). We conclude that these archaic superstitions are in close connection to the investigated ritual. These should not be interpreted as an expression of lack of culture, as they crystallize the respect paid to the archaic mentality which has created a system of unwritten rules for itself that are dictated by a rational prudence.

Even if the ritual of the nuptial flag manifests in a unitary fashion, there are numerous differences, even within the same ethnographical and folkloric area. Although, throughout time, there have been alterations in terms of the content of this ceremony, emphasizing the ceremonial and spectacular function to the detriment of the ritualistic one, the fundamental meaning is preserved. Even if, currently, the aesthetic and entertainment function is at the forefront, the practical function is not cancelled.

According to sources such as Brăiloiu (2002: 311-314), in Bihor the flag bearer was called *lăzlăuș*, a young lad from the village who had both parents and carried the flag (*lazlău*). In Bihor County, the person with the flag is the leading wedding from beginning to end. However we can see that the act of adorning the wedding flag sees variations. Thus, in Bulz, it has the name of *zazlău*, being crafted by the girls in the bride's group from a large headscarf attached on one end to a stick in a triangular shape, and smaller, flowered drags (*cârpe*) and tassels (*ciupi*). In Căpâlna it is called a *lăzlăuș*, and crafted from towels (*ștergare*) set on a long stick by girls and women. In Ceica it is called *lazlău*, and is made by women and waved by the summoners, being crafted from a long club cloaked in ribbons, kerchiefs, a green branch, and the tricolor flag. In Gurani, where both girls and boys used to gather at the groom's house, it was called *lazlău* and was crafted from a 2-3 meter long club with colored kerchiefs, flowers, a bell and ribbons (Bernea 1967: 89). In these areas the flag of the wedding was seen as an object of prestige. The flag was

also a sign for the villagers that the young people in the house who waved a flag they were married.

In Roșia, the pre-wedding party held on a Saturday evening, a dance in which the youths, along with the relatives, participate at the groom's home. The flag was made of ribbons, kerchiefs, and a green branch, and was waved by the summoner. In Tărcăița, the flag was called *lazlău*, and was crafted just days before the wedding by elderly women and also the girls in whose home the wedding was to take place. Towels (*ștergări*) were fastened to the stick along with tablecloths, tricolor ribbons, natural flowers and kerchiefs (Bernea 1967: 92).

The Nuptial Flag. The Crafting

There cannot be said that there is an ideal wedding ceremony even if there is a certain pattern for each specific region, in the given case, Bihor county. In the same pattern there are to be found differences, being underlined certain gestures signs or symbols or even moments of the rituals in spite of others. It is mentioned that, in Tinca, a fiddler party was organized one night before the wedding in the bride's home, where girls and boys gathered. The flag (*lazlău*) was crafted by women, from among the relatives, who adorned a club with ten kerchiefs on both sides, a white lace tablecloth, small handkerchiefs, decorative ribbons and bells, etc. In Vadu Crișului the flag was commonly tricolor, so that everyone would know that was a Romanian wedding (Bernea 1967: 92). The same flag is done in the picturesque Maramures, where it is decorated with ribbons, handkerchiefs, bells and wheat ears, these being considered a symbol of male power and vitality. The tradition says that that all the decorative elements of the flag are collected from the grooms' former girlfriends. After the wedding, only the ears of wheat are kept, which are used at the baptism of the couple's first child.

Given the importance of ritualistic poetry in the general context of rituals, as the lyrical texts grant force to the act and sacred substance to the gesture, the discussion of the ritual cannot be torn from the analysis of the gestural system. Progressively carried out on the village stage, the acts and scenes that compose this ceremony cement, based on a traditional protocol, the attributions of the actors playing their roles according to the tradition, before the village community which preserves and carries on praising the most spectacular folkloric ceremony: the Romanian wedding.

Approaching the ritual of the nuptial flag on several levels—historical, ethnographical, aesthetic, contextual—proves a continuity and consistency in forms, thematic, techniques and functions. Between the nuptial flag of the past and the one of the present, one can notice a series of similarities, a common spiritual vibration passed on from generation to generation. The particularities of this ritual have been preserved to this day. The ritual is

organically integrated in the stylistic consistencies of the spirituality of the investigated regions. Certainly, the ritual has seen certain metamorphoses due to progress, but this has not led it to slip down the slope of hybridization and non-value.

The ritual of the nuptial flag distances itself from kitsch through the very emotion it incites both in the actors and the receptors. The ritual, through its forms and all of the practices and functions associated with it, entails a deep emotion that moves both the insiders and the receptors. Even if, in certain regions, the first part of the ritual—knitting the flag—has regressed, since renting the nuptial flag is preferred, without the organization of an evening dedicated to the flag, the role, as well as the functions preserved by the ritual should be retained. The ceremony of the nuptial flag represents, to the 21st century, an axis of perpetuity adorned with archaic elements.

The narratives and descriptions recorded throughout the specialized research of the past decades represent an ethnographical material collected from performers with acting roles in the ritual. In each investigated area, there are those competent persons who have been involved in the conduct of the ritual, describing, thus, the perspective of an insider. It is only in this way that the solemnity of the atmosphere dominated by an amalgamation of feelings, sometimes of joy, other times of sadness, could be described, generated as they are by the emotions felt by the actors. From these materials, we can deduce certain parallelisms between the old and the new, between the traditional and the modern that the insiders experience. For example, in our times, in certain areas, the youths prefer to rent the flag, which is already adorned and has been used for several nuptial ceremonies. Whereas, for the elders, this suggests the separation of the future bride and groom, the young generation no longer respects these preconceptions. What seemed interesting to us was that the local youths are those who prefer to rent a flag, violating the unwritten rules of the traditional village, while the youths who are abroad return to the roots, preserving the archaic tradition of crafting the flag. The latter probably learned to appreciate the true Romanian values.

The emotional weight of detaching from the patriarchal universe appears allegorically here, through suites of metaphors, comparisons, epithets and inversions. After analyzing the history of research on the nuptial flag, it is remarkable how, until the present day, there has been a lack of attention given to interviews authentically describing the manner in which the nuptial flag is crafted. As it is a nuptial ritual rooted in the mentality of the archaic collective, it is necessary to reproduce a corpus of narratives and descriptions detailing the insiders' perspective every single time.

The evening dedicated to crafting the nuptial flag is part of the category of rites separating the young groom from his previous self, similar to the crowning night for the bride. The evening before the wedding is dominated

by the nuptial flag, as a symbol of virility, and the garland, as a symbol of purity. We can deduce that both ritualistic moments occur at night, a time associated to sexual relations. Sexuality is introduced as an element specific to marriage. This sexual function is also characteristic to the lyrical repertoire of the flag bearer's pack: „La mnireasă sub rochiță/ Iest-un pui chie veveriță/ Oare cine l-o-mpușca?/ Mirili când s-o culca!“ (“Under the bride's white dress/ There's a squirrel closely pressed/ Wonder who'll take it away?/ That's the groom when he shall lay!”).

The ritual of separating the young man from his celibate self is similarly performed in most parts of Romania. There are, of course, differences. Some variations can be picked up even within the same region. For instance, the very regional name given to the flag fluctuates. Another conclusion that is easy to notice from the descriptions of the performers has to do with the main actors crafting the flag. Sometimes, the main actors are the so called “stegași” (“flaggers”) or “drujbe” (“friendlies”), yet other times the sewing of the flag is left to elderly women and its completion is celebrated through “the flag dance”. The evening dedicated to the flag is itself a particular in the wedding ceremony. The crafting of the flag is celebrated by the flag dance, the music of the cetera players and the sound of shouted incantations (“țâpurituri”). The flag crafting evening is meant to re-actualize the wedding orations and accommodate them to the social and familial context of the bride and groom. From this perspective, this moment is also considered to be the rehearsal evening before the packs' confrontation. Obviously, the women must preserve their reputation as the most skilled in the village in perfecting this ceremony. Throughout the wedding, the flag would always be subject to a veritable aesthetic analysis by other women specialized in the bride's pack. Thus, even the slightest transgression shall be noticed by the eye of a rural aesthete.

The functions that the nuptial flag are also suggested by the lyrical repertoire. An oration from Bihor county defines the double function fulfilled of this “lazlău” (flag bearer) on his way to the wedding:

Lazlău îmbrăcat cu flori,/ Leagă feti și feciori!/ Și-i duce la cununie./ Dumnezău cu
iei să fie! (Flag bearer in flowers covered./ Bind the girls and boys, now lovers!/
Take them to their very wedding./ May God give them all His blessing!)

On the one hand, the flag bearer's role is highlighted, namely that of *binding* new relationships between the young unwed actors involved in the flag bearer's dance before the nuptial procession, which could lead to the creation of other marriages. In this context, the flag represents the witness to the initiation of future loves, and their binding agent. On the other hand, the flag is the leader of the entire nuptial procession. It is present all through the wedding ceremony as a sign and symbol of the happy event where all the

traditional community is invited. The flag's dance represent the vitality and the metamorphoses that take place both at individual and community levels. Moreover, it is observed in the newlyweds' house the first week after the wedding as a sign of their happiness.

Conclusions

The values of the past are processed and developed through ample folkloric manifestations, while the wedding flag remains the same symbol of virility in our times, spoken of in old books, and by the elderly and young alike. Rich in embellishment and loaded with symbolic value, it is plain to see that the flag and its bearer become ceremonial elements just as important as the bride and the groom. The traditional is not completely eluded from the nowadays individual prospect, as proven by the revival of the wedding flag in some Romanian weddings. Its rediscovery entails a search for coherence, founded on its patterned and preserved structure. Thus kitsch is far from the intentions of those who choose to preserve the wedding flag ritual, even though its original meanings are no longer at hand.

The ceremony of the wedding flag is, without a doubt, a picturesque folkloric manifestation. It encodes deep meanings about the relationship of man with their surrounding world, with nature, about inter-human relationships, about the usual development of social life. As an act of traditional communication, the ritual of the nuptial flag bears a complex language. Verbal expression combines with musical and choreographic expression, with gestures and facial expressions. The ceremony deserves our attention, and, in order for us to grasp its full meaning, the ritual needs to be examined in depth. In so doing, our eye is not caught by its spectacular and picturesque elements only, but also by its profoundly encoded human essence.

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