

Marriage Rituals: Ritualistic Conditioning of Slavic Women

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More than a millennium has passed since the Slavs were baptized as Christians; however, the pagan roots of Russian and other Slavic cultures are still noted till this day. Life-cycle rituals of the Slavic peasants, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were composed of symbolic texts and actions derived from pagan ideology. Public intellectual, Pierre Bourdieu proposed a theory entitled habitus, which is a system of conditioning concentrated on shaping and guiding a person's psychological development. Bourdieu theorizes that an accumulation of cultural inclinations determines how a person may act as well as form habits of thinking and evaluating. The necessary habits of a young Slavic girl can be analyzed through examining Slavic marriage traditions. Bourdieu's theory of habitus instigates the notion that from a young age, Slavic girls were preconditioned for marriage through religious beliefs and traditions.

Women are conditioned from a young age to begin their role as wife and mother in a Slavic household. Since around age eight or so, Slavic girls begin creating their dowry under the watchful tutelage of their mother. Laura Olson and Svetlana Adonyeva indicate, on page 109 of *The Worlds of Russian Village Women*, "...now she must embroider the skirts and the towels that will be given to the members of the groom's family. As Mary B. Kelly has shown, the production of these pieces involves skills akin to learning a language, the symbolic language of shapes and forms." It is important for a young girl to know this symbolic language because the skill to produce and work with fine thread is an important aspect for a bride to have. In order to serve a ritualistic function, the authors conclude, the cloths

must be both traditional and original. The girl's work must show ancestry embroidered patterns along with her own incorporations, this to indicate her creativity.

Handmade clothing and gifts were constantly being added to the dowry, however, beginning in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, furniture or objects signifying wealth replaced the hand made items. The replacement of dowry is unfortunate in terms of traditional Slavic practices. The towels and shirts served as public record of the bride's skill and creativity. The function of the dowry also serves a spiritual purpose as well, as stated, "The basic purpose of the towels was to address the spirits of the bride's family's ancestors, to ask for their help and protection... 'At the wedding, in the groom's home, they'd hang the towels for everyone to see, they'd hang them on the wall, to show that she had a big dowry, on nails: towels and tablecloths she's woven" (Olson and Adonyeva, 109). The towels hanging in the home of the groom, suggests further that they may have served as a kind of sacrifice to the ancestors of the groom's clan. Also, by making the bride susceptible to the groom's ancestors as the new member of the family, the towels may have had a protective function for the new bride as well. Ancestry paganism

Folktales are an oral tradition among Slavic community. The tales are composed of heroes and villains, magic, wonder, and animals. Used as a cultural teaching tool, folktales were told by adults to their children over many generations. Valued ways of life along with pagan ideologies for Slavic peasants are reflected within tales. The standards of Slavic marriage are among the values common in peasant life. The series in fairy-tale studies, *An Anthology of Russian Folktales* by Jack Haney, introduces "The Petrified Tsarevna," a tale of heroes and villains. The tale of the Tsarevna is a Slavic rendition of fairy-tale, Sleeping Beauty. The tale displays behavioral expectations of the young female peasants. As

mentioned on page 69 of *Russian Folktales*, “The tsaritsa arrived back at the palace, she called her daughter into her chamber. ‘Dear Daughter, let me search your hair, let me finger your russet locks.’ Now the young tsarevna sensed no misfortune. She humbly came and sat on a chair.” There is an importance within 19<sup>th</sup> century standards for women to possess obedience and do as they are told. The tale concludes when a young suitor rescues the petrified tsarevna from her prison. Taken from page 70 of *Russian Folktales*, “They came home and were married in the church. Then they had the celebration. The whole city was there, and I was there, too. I drank mead and beer, the beer was warm, it flowed over my moustaches, but never got into my mouth.” The symbolic union of the two characters relays the message, if young girls do as they’re told, their obedience will provoke marriage as a rite of passage.

Wedding lamentations are another form of Slavic female tradition. A complex sort of mourning, the poetic improvisation symbolically reflects the farewell to a bride’s old life. Poetic traditions within popular laments have been worked out in the course of centuries to complete a series of unchanging formulas, patterns, and compositional devices. Implementing these devices while lamenting enables for better memorization of fragments and makes improvisation easier for the lamenter. The ritualistic performance requires temporarily setting aside one’s thoughts and beliefs. The ritual reflects the lack of freedom and vital obedience of a young bride for it is possible the marriage is not consensual.

The wedding ritual was accompanied by what author of *Russian Folklore*, Sokolov, describes, “On the bride herself, and particularly on the professional ‘weepers,’ ‘wailers,’ ‘criers,’ these singular poetess-improvisators, who were specially invited to the wedding, depends the ability to call forth in themselves, and in others, a definite mood to awaken

specific emotions and thoughts” (213). It was expected for a bride to mourn the symbolic death of her old identity before she could start her new role as wife. The bride was essentially abandoning her family for another but in doing this her ascent up the social ladder can begin. This reflects the vertical social plane, enacting the bride’s own passage.

Laments also emphasize the horizontal transition of two families coming together. After the engagement, the girl and her female relatives visit the groom’s home and begin to lament about the town. Later that night, the bathhouse is warmed, flowers placed on the girl’s head and she spends her evening lamenting within the bathhouse. Before sunrise, someone younger would sneak up behind the bride and steal the flowers from her head. The loss of flowers indicates the loss of freedom as a young girl. After her flowers are taken her mourning would continue. Before the wedding, the bride would wear funeral clothing of white or black and if her parents were dead she would be taken to the cemetery to lament over their graves. She would lament her parent’s deaths for there was no one to bless her on the wedding day. The morning of the wedding the bride would wake and continue to lament until the groom came to retrieve her.

As in many early religions, a belief in spirits and demons of various types seems to have had a large role in early Slavic traditions. Hostile spirits were a concern in daily life among the community. For example, in pagan belief bad omens are indicated if a person were to die before completing all life-cycle rituals, such as marriage. Rituals were conducted for women who died before they had a chance for marriage. As described by the author Olson, the girl would be dressed in her wedding gown while other wedding ceremonies were incorporated into her funeral. The girls of the community would sing about the deceased being a white swan. This was all done with the hopes of stopping the

unmarried spirit from wandering. Pagans believed the unmarried corpse would become a *Rusalka* or water spirit. This, however, is curious because within pagan ideology water has significance in terms of its properties in purification. Pagan folklore also uses water to divide the land of the living from the world of the dead. It is from the world of the dead that many water spirits derive. Protective measures are taken when an incompleteness of life cycle rituals hinder the ability for the deceased to rest comfortably. Incorporating wedding rituals into funeral ceremonies is an example of the caution used in order to dissuade any unclean power.

Various methods of pagan ideologies were used to oppose hostile or unclean powers before and during wedding ceremonies. It was believed possible to deceive the evil power through trickery or secrecy. When a groom and his family had chosen a bride, they set about to make a wedding agreement with the girl's family. A member of the groom's family, female relative or someone of the same age as the bride, would visit her house and metaphorically talk about the match to be made between the bride and groom. Matchmakers of the two families conversed with the deliberate attempt to be vague or evasive. As specified, the matchmakers used metaphoric language to state their purpose, "The metaphorical expression both protected the desired outcome from potential harm from the evil eye and also emphasized the material basis of the exchange" (Olson and Adonyeva, 96). It was important for the groom's matchmakers to remain unseen when approaching the house because if rejected the boy's honor would be damaged. Evil spirits were kept at bay with trickery as well, such as fooling the spirits with someone else dressing as the bride. Loud noises were also used to drive out unclean spirits for example, a gun would be shot off while the bride and groom said their 'I Do's.'

The glory of a young Slavic girl was determined by her intelligence, whit, body health, and the wealth of her family. At times, suitors and their families would wish to see a girl's ability to work or partake in activities such as dancing or singing. Girls were not only judged by a boy's family but were also judged by the community based on her behavior. Girls were expected to behave with dignity in social situations not only for themselves but also for the sake of her family's honor and reputation. For example, for a girl, her honor was symbolically tied to her virginity. Those who were unmarried and no longer virgins were labeled as 'ruined girls,' as stated in the reading, 'ruined girls' were, "...excluded from community activities, were harshly punished and even beaten or killed by their fathers, might not marry, and might be forced to leave the community. Weather they managed to marry or not, they were said to be subject to humiliating maltreatment by husband and other men, women told us that no one would protect them, because of their reputation" (Olson and Adonyeva, 52). Fear of what may transpire if they do not behave properly was a prime motivator for the young girls. Socializing at evening work-parties with boys of their own age was expected. Socializing and behaving as expected were merely the beginning preparations of marriage.

Following the Soviet period, Slavic marriage traditions became a more loosely structured process. A generation gap developed between the old and young causing a strain on the old Slavic traditions. In general, before the fall of pagan customs, young people who were unmarried obeyed not only their parents but also villagers of the same age. This is considered a vertical relationship, showing obedience before marriage. After marriage however, the obedience structure shifted from the bride's parents solely to her newly found husband and his family. As can be examined from the text, "Having become a

young wife, a bride ceased to be socially subordinate to her own parents. Instead, she obeyed her husband's family: her husband and her new in laws" (Olson and Adonyeva, 55). The bride was put through trials during the first days of the new marriage. The in laws would conduct rituals designated for showing signs of a girl's virginity as well as including an evaluation of her domestic abilities.

Young people learned what was expected of them through informal means, within the family, through oral tradition and observation of examples and pagan rituals. For example, from a young age, a girl would start preparing her dowry for when she was to be married later in life regardless of if she accepted the marriage or not. It was expected of girls to marry and once married they were to break all ties with unmarried friends because of the different social statuses now in place. This was the outcome of married life. As Bourdieu theorizes, habitus structures a young persons action throughout life. A girl is conditioned from a young age to become married and climb the social ladder. After she is married her status can only rise depending on other rites of passage such as having a child or becoming keeper of the domestic hearth.

## References

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