

## WEDDINGS IN BULGARIA AT THE END OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> AND THE BEGINNING OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

**Milena Marinova**

*6 A Moskovska str., IEFEM-BAS, 1000 Sofia, Bulgaria, e-mail: mmarinova1977@abv.bg*

### СВАТБИТЕ В БЪЛГАРИЯ В КРАЯ НА 20 И НАЧАЛОТО НА 21 ВЕК

**Милена Маринова**

*Московска № 6А, ИЕФЕМ-БАН, п.к. 1000, София, България, e-mail:*

[mmarinova1977@abv.bg](mailto:mmarinova1977@abv.bg)

#### РЕЗЮМЕ

В статията се проследяват промените в сватбите през последните 25 години. Представят се церемонията по сключване на граждански брак, отношението към църковния брак в различни по тип селища, както и ролята на сватбените агенции за утвърждаването нови модели на сватбите. Основните изводи, до които се достига са, че през разглеждания период в сватбите навлизат както много елементи присъщи на чужди култури, така и все по-често срещащи се възстановки на отделни традиционни обичаи, а и цялостни реконструкции на „автентични фолклорни сватби”.

*Ключови думи: граждански ритуал, църковен брак, сватбени агенции.*

The present paper deals with the major tendencies in weddings as evolved after 1989. The changes in civic rituals involved in contracting a marriage are traced the role and significance of the church rite (the wedding ceremony) are highlighted as regards the representatives of various social groups in bigger as well as smaller settlements, the impact of wedding catering agencies, newly sprung up over the last few decades is considered upon the evolvement and assertion of new models of conducting weddings.

During the period considered civic wedding retains its status of the only act of wedlock legally recognized. This is the basic reason for the lack of essential changes in the civic ritual in that period (Ivanova 2002: 252). The ceremony is held in ritual halls built in the 1970s, which have not been renovated over the following decades. To „escape” from the cheerless surroundings an increasing number of wedding couples are inclined to have their marriage contracted at the restaurant where the wedding celebration is to take place or at another preferred spot. According to the Family Code in force at present civic marriages can be contracted exclusively at places appointed for that purpose (Tzankova, Petrov 2009: 22-23), which more often than not results in the wedding couple “signing” at the municipality on a weekday whereas on the wedding day the official or another person re-enacts the ceremony at the restaurant or at another place preferred by the newly married. In recent years the practice has been gaining increasing popularity for wedding couples to take their oaths of fidelity to each other in places rich in cultural and historical significance or spots famous for nature beauty. For instance, around 2014 the Ledenica Cave in the Balkan mountain near Vratza has been one of the widely recognized “settings” to hold a civic ritual in (The Telegraph, July 26, 2014). Other favorites for the ceremony have been the fortress on Cape Kaliakra, the Baba Vida fortress, etc. The impersonal civic ritual taking place at municipal halls has frequently evoked ironic descriptions on the part of wedding catering agents who offer more attractive options for contracting a marriage.

Although civic marriage remains the only valid one, church weddings are often held subsequently. The option to recognize church weddings as an equivalent to the civic one was subject to discussion over a long period: however, the motion was rejected and, according the new Family Code coming into force in 2009; the religious ritual has no legal value (Tzankova, Petrov 2009: 22). In 2010 the Bulgarian Orthodox Church attempted regulations the effect that church weddings were to

be held exclusively on Sundays but this failed to be put into practice (The Telegraph, Oct, 23 2009), what was probably taken into consideration was that the reason for the prevailing preference for church weddings and wedding celebrations to take place on Saturdays stems from the fact that Sunday is day of following immediately and the celebration can continue until late on Saturday night. The marrying couples choosing to have church weddings predominantly inhabit the bigger cities of the country and therefore through this type of weddings greater solemnity is sought, also due to the fact that the ceremony is performed in some of bigger and impressive churches of the town. In our days the emulation in impressiveness and solemnity of the ritual between the ritual hall and the church has been won by latter (Ivanova 2003: 123, Krusteva-Blagoeva 2002: 267).

In smaller settlements of the country civic marriage is less often followed by church wedding. One of the reasons is the assumption that since marriage is regulated through the civic ritual further sanctioning through church wedding is unnecessary. A considerable number of the respondents from such places find church rituals boring (D. Z. born, 1947, town of Vratza; R. K., born 1953 town of Byala Slatina) and the greater part of them consider church weddings a matter of fashion rather than of necessity (S. A , born 1946 town of Vratza; S. S ,born 1959, town of Vratza ; N. K , born 1971 town of Vratza). In many villages church weddings are almost an exception also due to the fact that people there see no point in following the fashionable tendencies in this respect. A church wedding is not viewed, as a source of impressiveness and solemnity for the wedding, largely contributed to by the church ceremony in cities. The music along with the gifts, the number of the guest as well as the amount of “food and drink” provide the most important criteria trough witch a village wedding is judged to be “good”. One must also bear in mind the fact that a great number of village church buildings are not well maintained display no imposing appearance – unlike the civic ritual halls which offer more solemn and appropriate surroundings. In this case, the typical way of response from the predominant part of the Bulgarians (sharing the traditional world outlook) becomes strikingly manifest - i.e., the view of the Church, as “an architecture fact” rather than an institution (Markova 2011: 67). The tendency was successfully made use of by the authorities during the period of socialism-only after civic ritual halls had been build, imposing in their size (as compared to the settlements size) as well as cosily equipped (evoking memories of the atmosphere of a home from bygone times) did these structures succeed in acquiring their integration within the wedding day procedures.

In settlements where church weddings are infrequent a number of elements from the church wedding ritual have been incorporated into the civic one. Thus, in the town of Vratza the rite official exchanges crowns over the wedding couple heads. Another loan from the church ritual is the lighting a candle by the bride, which is also associated with certain moments of the traditional wedding, since the candle is lighted a vessel brought in for this specific purpose where a fire burning, which is held by the bridegroom’s mother while the bright is lighting the candle. According to wedding catering agents from Vratza this rite symbolizes the transfer of the heart warmth from the mother-in-law to the bride who becomes its protector. In the village of Borovan in Vraza region a similar rite is performed on meeting the newly married couple.

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the essential differences between weddings in town and those in villages concern the number of the guests and their scope. Village wedding include a great number of the wedding couple’s relatives, which is atypical of town weddings generally encompassing a smaller circle of people, fewer relatives whereas more friends and colleagues of the newly weds are invited (E. S., born 1950, village of Borovan; V. V., born 1973, town of Vratza). The latter mould today’s urban weddings which are “more youthful, more modern” (T. G. born 1942, town of Vratza). The younger people interviewed believe that weddings with fewer guests are to be preferred. When organized by young people weddings incorporate new elements which the respondents find interesting. At wedding in brought a great number of helium – filled balloons to decorate the restaurant with, witch were flown at later moment. At the ending of wedding fireworks were let off. Another wedding celebration was held around a hotel swimming pool in the

neighborhood of the town where an arch was constructed for the wedding couple to take their vows for a happy family life under; the chairs and tables were decorated with veils the decorations included a great amount of flowers. All this according to the respondents makes present-day weddings interesting, beautiful, much more festive (P. Y., female, born 1973).

Over the recent years the organization of a wedding could be effected by an agency which may take on overall preparation of the event as well as merely one of its elements, e.g. the restaurant decoration. The wedding catering agents make a point of having each wedding appear unique, in keeping with the wedding couple's wishes. A woman agent from the town of Vratza introduces "traditional rites" and, according to her, brides are eager to have such rites as part of their weddings although unfamiliar with what they consist in (I. N., born, 1963, town of Vratza). Originally, I. N. employed traditional "elements" in cases of inter-marriages, or "bi-cultural" (Rot 2006: 10). The first wedding of this type which she prepared was that of a Scotsman and a Bulgarian woman. The number of the guests present was approximately 100, half of them Scottish, the other half Bulgarian. The Scots made a striking appearance, all of the male guests wearing traditional Scottish kilts, a fact particularly worthy of admiration, in the agent's opinion, was that Scotsman of various ages present at the wedding took pride in their knowledge concerning the history of the costumes they were wearing as some of the components are handed down from generation to generation. Almost invariably, with intermarriages, the wedding is rich in numbers of elements demonstrating features specific of traditional Bulgarian culture as viewed by those participating in the organization of the wedding (partners or agency). With Bulgarian weddings, incorporation of folklore elements likewise enjoys great interest. At restaurant celebration the agent presented ritual shaving of the bridegroom meanwhile the bride was being dressed in a costume and having a *kossichnik* (a specific way of tying a kerchief on a woman's head) fixed to her head. The idea occurred to the agent while studying traditional wedding rituals.

In another version performed by I. N. mummers follow the shaving of the bridegroom to drive away all evil which might possibly be lurking around the new family. By integrating traditional elements into a wedding the agent aims,

In our days, big weddings which involve ample funding are still held by the representatives of the gipsy ethnical community. With them, big weddings are not merely a manifestation of certain value models but also a way of "maintaining the social coexistence of the separate subdivisions of that community" (Marushiakova, Popov 1994: 187), minority representatives rank among the agencies' favorite clients (I. N., wedding catering agent born 1958, town of Vratza; I. D., wedding catering agent, born 1967, town of Vratza).

In conclusion, one could summarize, that weddings in Bulgaria at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century exhibit influences from foreign cultural models as well as ever – increasing attempts to incorporate a number of traditional elements and even complete re-enactment of "authentic folk weddings".

### **Bibliography**

1. Ivanova, R. 2002. Urban Wedding. In: Customs of life-cycle in urban surroundings. Beograd.
2. Marinova, M., Georgiev G. 2014. Images of cultural and historical heritage in a present-day Bulgarian wedding. In: Days of heritage 2013, Prof. Marin Drinov Academic publishing house.
3. Markova, M. 2011. Local urban cultures. Ethnological study of the Reduta district in Sofia and the town of Strelcha during the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Rouse: University of Rouse.
4. Marushiakova, E., Popov, V. 1993. Gipsies in Bulgaria. Sofia: Club 90.
5. Rot, K. 2006. Argument about food? Feeding behavior in bi-cultural marriages and families. *Bulgarian ethnology*, 3, 10-24.
6. Sources:
7. The Telegraph newspaper