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### THE MYSTICAL PLOT OF GREEK WEDDING SONGS

The three phenomena, birth, wedding and death are the most important phases in everyone's life, regardless of religion, epoch and culture. Since these stages, whether qualified as basic or transitional, exceed by their relevance the turning points of the ageing process, the function of their rituals is altogether distinct, the mystical implications of the accompanying songs are unique and the implicit message conveyed through the ritual texts is highly valuable. All the three stages are important not only to an individuals, but also to a family, kindred, clan, who would traditionally view these events from the perspective of household economy as well: as addition or loss to the family manpower.

I have considered rituals and songs associated with death in another article<sup>1</sup> and will not dwell on them now. As concerns birth rituals, they are not reflected in any category of folk songs. The Greeks do not have songs dedicated to the birth of son, which are so traditional and characteristic of Georgian folklore. Ideas and rituals associated with human birth cannot be traced even in lullabies.

On the other hand, the special attitude of the Greeks to marriage and the wedding party is evident in all types of folk songs: mothers sing of their children's happy marriage and of preparing their dowry already in lullabies; young people never forget about their future spouse at any stage of seasonal rituals; they appeal to saints in songs to reveal the them the right person and perform the magic summer solstice rituals and songs with the hope of finding their life companion. The significance of marriage is accentuated even in the mourning songs. However, the high moral es-

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<sup>1</sup> Abulashvili M., On Two Unusual Rituals, Phasis. Greek and Roman Studies, 5-6, 2003, 9-15.

sence of the event and the associated rituals are best of all manifested in wedding songs, which can be regarded as the most elaborate manifestations of the wedding mystery.

If other wedding-related verbal folk patterns - verses, riddles, saws and prayers - can scarcely be heard nowadays, the oldest wedding songs remain surprisingly viable. They convey rich centuries-old information about wedding rituals typical of various epochs, nations or social strata and are illustrative of their evolution. These songs are very interesting in terms of folklore studies as well.

The practice of performing bridal Greek songs with special content and purpose is evidenced from ancient times. The wedding hymns of the Homeric epics are similar to later wedding songs.<sup>2</sup> Below I will analyze these as well as some non-ritual songs to foreground the Greek bridal rites. They can be grouped with respect to several most important points of the traditional practice: betrothal, wedding preparations, the bride's farewell to her native environment, her arrival to the new family, the wedding festivity and the wake-up of the bride and the groom.

Preliminary agreement through a match-maker was apparently an indispensable prerequisite of marriage:

Μρε παλλικαράκι σαν μ' αγαπιάς, τι παρνοδιαβαίνεις και δε ρωτιάς  
*Lad, if you love me, why do you stride up and down and do not ask*  
 στείλε προξενήτρες σαράντα δυό και προξενητάδες πενήνδα δυό...<sup>3</sup>  
*Send forty two middlemen and fifty two match-making women...*

Some songs express gratefulness or disappointment with the match-maker, depending on how successfully the couple was chosen:

Ποιός ήταν προξενητή, οπού να ζεί στον κόσμο  
 που σμίξε το βασιλικόν αντάμα με το δούσομο...<sup>4</sup>  
*Who was the match-maker, wherever on earth he may live,*  
*who matched a dandelion with a pennyroyal...*  
 Ανάθεμα τους γέρονδες και τους προξενητάδες...  
 που ταίριασαν τον κόρακα με την περιστερούλα.<sup>5</sup>  
*May the old men and the match-makers be cursed ...*  
*Who matched a crow with a turtle dove...*

<sup>2</sup> Sappho, Lyrics, translated from Greek into Georgian, introduced and commented on by N. Tonía, Tbilisi 1997, 18; Πετρόπουλος Δ., Αι παρομοιώσεις εις τα δημοτικά άσματα και παρ' Ομήρω, Ανάπτυπον εκ της Λαογραφίας, τ. 3, Αθήνα 1960, 379; Καρκίδης Θ., Ομηρικές έρευνες, Αθήνα 1944, 121.

<sup>3</sup> Passow A., Τραγούδια ρωμαίικα, Αθήνα 1928, 429.

<sup>4</sup> Πετρόπουλος Δ., Ελληνικά Δημοτικά Τραγούδια, τ. Β', Αθήνα 1959, 132.

<sup>5</sup> Αραβαντινος Π., Ηπειρώτικα τραγούδια, Αθήνα 1996, 184.

The next step was the betrothal which, according to the songs, could have occurred before the couple reached the nuptial age: in one song a lad tells his mother the name of his beloved and in return finds that he was engaged to that very girl:

Μ' εκείνη, γιέ μου σ'έχουμε μικραρρεβωνιασμένο  
κι' ακαρτερούμε το καιρό να κάνουμε το γάμο.<sup>6</sup>  
*But we engaged you to her in your childhood  
and we wait for the time to hold the wedding.*

The symbol of wedding is a ring, which is pointed out in many Greek songs. In one of them a girl request of her beloved to give her a ring to make sure that his intentions are earnest ('ζητά η κόρη δαχτυλίδι...')<sup>7</sup>; the latter, however, answers that he is against their engagement ('μη μου ζητήσεις μοναχά, κυρά, τον αρραβώνα/But, my lady, do not ask for engagement'). In another song, presenting a ring is equaled to marriage ('Κόρη ο καιρός θα σου φέρει δαχτυλίδι<sup>8</sup>/Daughter, time will bring you a ring'). The same tradition can be observed in Russian, Bulgarian, Serbian, German and Italian folklore.<sup>9</sup>

It is known that these peoples, as well as Georgians, used to have a tradition of 'buying a wedding'.<sup>10</sup> Greek folk songs point to the same practice:

Με πούλησες, μαννέ μου για ένα δαχτυλίδι,  
*You have sold me, mother, for one ring,*  
δωσ' το μαννέ μου πίσω και ξαναγόρασέ με.<sup>11</sup>  
*Give it back, mother, and buy me out.*

In another song the bride is delighted with her suitor's gifts:

μυρίζουνε τα δώρα μου που μου'φερε ο καλός μου<sup>12</sup>  
*Fragrance comes from the gifts that my sweetheart brought me.*

Both the ceremony of engagement and the wedding rites were associated with certain restrictions. In one song a young man asks the girl not

<sup>6</sup> Λύντεκε Ε., *Ελληνικά Δημοτικά Τραγούδια*, τ. Α', 'Ελληνικά κείμενα', Αθήνα 1947, 254.

<sup>7</sup> Καψωμένου Ε. Γ., *Το Ελληνικό δημοτικό τραγούδι*, η αισθητική, ο μύθος και η ιδεολογία του, Ρεθύμνου 1978, 47.

<sup>8</sup> Μέγας Γ. Α., *Ελληνικαί γιορταί και έθιμα της λαϊκής λατρείας*, Αθηναι 1956, 76.

<sup>9</sup> Karpeles M., *Folksongs of Europe*, London 1956, 171.

<sup>10</sup> Ivelashvili T., *Bridal Rituals and Customs in Georgia*, Tbilisi 1999, 160 (in Georgian).

<sup>11</sup> Μέγας Γ. Α., 1956, 72.

<sup>12</sup> *Ελληνικά δημοτικά τραγούδια*, βασική βιβλιοθήκη, 1958, 117.

to step over the threshold of her fiancé's house until she becomes a bride and until their parents have agreed on the betrothal:<sup>13</sup>

Π' αὐτὴν τὴ θύρα μὴ διαβῆς, πρῶτὸν νὰ γίνεις νύφη!...  
*Do not enter through this door, first become the bride!...*  
 Ἡ μάννα σου καὶ ἡ μάννα μου ἀντάμα κουβεντιάζου  
*Your mother and my mother are talking to each other*  
 ἐμὰς τὰ δὴ τὰ νιοῦτσικα νὰ μὰς ἀρραβωνιάσουν.<sup>14</sup>  
*to engage us, two young people.*

According to the songs, blood relationship between the couple makes no allowance for engagement and wedding. Several epic songs denounce cross-cousin marriage. They normally feature a mother cursing her son, who has fallen in love with his cousin:

Γιάννο, νὰ πέσει ἡ γλῶσσα νά'χε κάει ἡ καρδιά σου...  
*Yanno, may you swallow your tongue, may your heart burn down*  
 ποὺ ἡ Μάρω εἰν' ξαδέλφη σου...<sup>15</sup>  
*Because Maro is your cousin...*  
 Καλλιὸ ν' ἀκοῦσω σάβανα γιὰ νὰ σε σαβανώσω  
*I would rather hear of your death and wrap you in a shroud*  
 Παρά ν' ἀκοῦσω στέφανο γιὰ νὰ σε στεφανώσω...<sup>16</sup>  
*Than hear of your wedding and put a crown on you...*

The epic songs have preserved a very scandalous episode, when mother (or a step-mother, a widow, a priest's wife or a nun) makes up her mind to marry her son,<sup>17</sup> which is so unacceptable in ethical, moral, traditional and psychological terms that:

... ὅτι ἀκοῦει ὁ θεός, τρεῖς χρόνους δε μὰς βρέχει,  
*If God hears of it, it will not rain for three years,*  
 ὅτι τ' ἀκοῦει κ' ἡ μαύρη γῆ, τρεῖς χρόνους δε χορτιάζει<sup>18</sup>  
*If the black soil hears of it, it will not bear grass for three years.*

Greek songs offer some information about the nuptial age as well. Considering that in the Byzantine period the age of maturity was thirteen for girls and twelve for boys<sup>19</sup>, it is no surprise that a twelve-year old girl is married in well-known epic songs about the dead brother ("Τοῦ νεκροῦ

<sup>13</sup> A similar restriction applied to the bridegroom in the Georgian tradition: according to the custom practiced all over Georgia, the bridegroom was not allowed to enter the bride's home (Ivelashvili T., 1999, 79).

<sup>14</sup> Πετρόπουλος Δ., 1959, 109.

<sup>15</sup> Ἑλληνικά Δημοτικά τραγούδια, Ακαδημίας 1962, 431.

<sup>16</sup> Ἑλληνικά Δημοτικά τραγούδια, 1962, 430.

<sup>17</sup> Ἑλληνικά Δημοτικά τραγούδια, 1962, 437-439.

<sup>18</sup> Ἑλληνικά Δημοτικά τραγούδια, 1962, 438.

<sup>19</sup> Κοκκουλέ Φ., Βυζαντινὸν βίος καὶ πολιτισμὸς, τ. Δ', Αθήνα 1951, 76.

αδελφού')<sup>20</sup>, while one love song (*Δώδεκα χρονών κορίτσι*)<sup>21</sup> features a widow of the same age. Some songs even mention a ten-year-old girl who is eager to get married, but her mother will not let her until she turns eighteen.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from engagement, a traditional Greek wedding was preceded by intensive preparations which, according to Greek scholars, lasted twelve days.<sup>23</sup>

Preparing the dowry, the wedding bread, the nuptial bed, washing the bride and the bridegroom, combing their hair and embellishing them – all this was accompanied by appropriate songs and featured in the lyrics: 'Όμορφα να στολίσετε της νύφης τα προίκια.../The bride's dowry is wonderfully embellished... θα ζυμωθούνε του γάμου τα προζύμια.../the wedding yeast will be kneaded... φέρτε χτένια να πλέξουμε την περδικά, που θα διαβή στα ξένα.../bring the comb, to comb a partridge, who will move to strangers'... η νήφη μ' ποιος σε στόλισε; Η μάνα μ' με στόλισε, τ' αδέρφια αρμάτωσαν.../Bride, who has adorned you? My mother adorned me, brothers and sisters embellished me... στολίσετε τον γαμπρό να μη του βρου ψιχιά...<sup>24</sup>/Adorn the bridegroom so that no fault be found', etc.

The songs accompanying wedding preparations include the first blessings: 'Ζήσε νύφη μας...<sup>25</sup>/Many a happy day to you, our bride.../γαμπρέ χρυσέ, σ' ευχομαι εγώ η μανούλα σου να ζήσεις να γεράσεις...<sup>26</sup>/Dearest bride, I, your mother, wish you to live and grow old' ... and the like.

Playing a hostility scene must have been part of the Greek wedding ritual, which is suggested by the following lines:

Δώστε το γαμβρό χρυσό μαντήλι και αργυρό σταυρό να πολεμίσει.  
*Give the bridegroom a golden scarf and a silver cross to fight.*  
 Κάστρο βούλετε να πολεμήσει ... παλλικάρια μου, βοηθήσατέ με ...  
*The fortress is going to fight ... lads, help ...*  
 κι άσπρα αν πάρωμε, δικά σας θά'ναι, κόρ' αν πάρωμε, δική μου θά'ναι.<sup>27</sup>  
*If we take money - it will be yours, if the girl - she will be mine.*

<sup>20</sup> Ιωάννου Γ., Τα δημοτικά μας Τραγούδια, Αθήνα 1994, 45/13.

<sup>21</sup> Greek Folk Love Songs, translated from Greek into Georgian, introduced and commented on by M. Abulashvili, Tbilisi 1999, 20-21.

<sup>22</sup> Οικονομιδης Δ. Η., Γαμηλιά έθιμα, Λαογραφία Α', Αθήνα 1953, 158.

<sup>23</sup> Μιρσαγέζη Μ., Έρευνα στη δημοτική μας ποίηση, τ. Α', Αθήνα 1965, 128.

<sup>24</sup> Πετρόπουλος Δ., 1959, 109 α', 110 α', 112 α', 114 β'.

<sup>25</sup> Πετρόπουλος Δ., 1959, 114 γ' /1-2.

<sup>26</sup> Πετρόπουλος Δ., 1959, 112 α' /10.

<sup>27</sup> Πετρόπουλος Δ., 1959, 114 ε' /1-5, 115 ε' /9-10.

Να μπει ο γαμβρός με τα σπαθιά...<sup>28</sup>  
*Let the bridegroom enter with swords...*

I cannot help recalling the Georgian song containing wedding symbols:

Boys, take guns,  
 Let us get up, go to the river,  
 Kill the female pheasant,  
 And hang it over our shoulders.<sup>29</sup>

OR

The king has had a hunt...  
 He has killed a stag.<sup>30</sup>

The mournful character of the songs that accompanies the bride's departure from her father's home attracts special attention, and is dwelt upon in my article<sup>31</sup>.

After the bride leaves her native home, the wedding party proceeds to the church ('Εκκλησία μου... δέξου τους νιόγαμβρους<sup>32</sup>/My church... receive the newly-wed couple'). The church rite is performed by the ceremony of entering the bridegroom's household, which is accompanied by blessing songs ('Στο σπίτι το πεθερικό, στη γειτονιά οπού'ρθες ... σαν δέντρο να ριζώνεις<sup>33</sup>/in your husband's house, in the neighborhood where you have come may your roots grow deep') and the compulsory ritual song to the mother-in-law, who is to welcome the wedded couple ('Εβγα μανούλα του γαμβρού και παθερά της νύφης να δεις τον ακριβό σου γιό, μια πέρδικα που φέρνει.<sup>34</sup>/Come forth the bridegroom's mother and the bride's mother-in-law to see your dear son, who has brought you a partridge;<sup>35</sup> Πήγε μόνος, ήρθε ζευγάρι<sup>36</sup>/He went out alone and came back coupled').

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<sup>28</sup> Πετρόπουλος Δ., 1959, 125 ε'.

<sup>29</sup> Georgian Folk Treasury, Poetry, vol. I, Tbilisi 1991, 88.

<sup>30</sup> Georgian Folk Treasury, Poetry, 1991, 89.

<sup>31</sup> On Two Unusual Rituals. Phasis. Greek and Roman Studies, 5-6, Tbilisi 2003, 9-13.

<sup>32</sup> Αραβαντινός Π., 1996, 187.

<sup>33</sup> Πετρόπουλος Δ., 1959, 124 α'.

<sup>34</sup> Πετρόπουλος Δ., 1959, 124 β'.

<sup>35</sup> In Greek wedding songs partridge and dove are the bride's metaphors, and eagle stands for the bridegroom (Πετρόπουλος Δ., 1959, 113, 117 στ', 121 θ', 128, etc.). Georgian wedding poetry has exactly the same metaphors for the bride, while the bridegroom is presented as a falcon or a hunter (Georgian Folk Poetry, 1960, 264, 271 (in Georgian)). Scholars believe that symbolical and metaphorical reference to the bride and bridegroom in the ritual songs point to the custom of tabooing their names (Wilson W., 1953, 816).

<sup>36</sup> Πετρόπουλος Δ., 1959, 126 ι'.

The ritual continues with wedding festivity. Songs offer scarcely any evidence about this stage<sup>37</sup>, which, in my opinion, invites the following explanation: there is less necessity for magic songs at this stage as it is believed that after the church rite the threat from the evil weakens, and the wedding festivity goes on with various non-ritual songs.<sup>38</sup> According to the songs, the final point of the nuptial rite is the wake-up of the newly-wed couple ('Ξύπνα νιέ νιόγαμβρε... Ξύπνα νιά νιόνυμφη<sup>39</sup>.../Wake up, young man, newly-made son-in-law.../Wake up, young lady, newly-made daughter-in-law'), which is rooted back in the ancient period.<sup>40</sup>

As we see, the Greek wedding songs vividly feature nuptials as an integrated artistic phenomenon. The lyrics suggest that songs, whether charged with symbolic implications or not, accompanied each ritual stage of wedding preparations or the marriage ceremony itself. Although not so much diverse thematically, the songs are distinguished by an elaborate plot and style.

The Greek folk songs show that wedding is the only ritual with a mystical plot including culmination (the bride's departure from her native environment) and denouement (the festivity in the bridegroom's household). While the main participants of the wedding ritual are characterized by limited dynamism and emotional restraint, each song reveals the high respect which the couple's family, relatives and friends have for every mystical detail related to this most important event, and the anxiety and vigor which never abandon them during the lengthy ceremonial stages. Their words and actions clearly reflect the high responsibility, delight and reverence, with which the Hellenes used to perform wedding rituals throughout centuries.

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<sup>37</sup> I have come across only several songs where the wedding ceremony also includes the bride's dance, e. g. 'Έμπηκ' η νύφη στο χορό με χαρά της/The bride joined the dance with delight' (See: Πετρόπουλος Δ., 1959, 128-129).

<sup>38</sup> Οικονομίδης Δ., 1953, 171-172.

<sup>39</sup> Πετρόπουλος Δ., 1959, 128.

<sup>40</sup> Αναστασιάδου-Λεβαντή Α., Ο Συμβολισμός εις τα δημοτικά τραγούδια και εις τα αρχαία ποιήματα, Αθήνα 1937, 49-50.