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Bridal Symbols in the Don Cossack Wedding

This study presents a new interpretation of symbols of the bride-maiden, already known in the Eastern Slavic, specifically Don Cossack tradition. It is based on findings of ethnographic expeditions of the 1980s–2000s to areas where Don Cossacks are concentrated, and on 19th-century periodicals published in the Don Region. To interpret the essence and meaning of bridal symbols, ritual practices and folklore texts are integrated, viewing both in the context of two principal passages that the bride undergoes during the wedding: 1) transition from the state of maidenhood to that of a married woman; and 2) transition from one family clan to another. Both transitions are related to the ideas of "beauty" (krasota), supposed to be lost during the ceremony, and "lot" (dolya)—part of the life force and benefits allotted to the bride from her family/clan during the rite and added to the common lot of her new family. Material embodiments of "beauty" (the braid, ribbon, and wreath) can be interpreted as symbols of freedom and virginity. These qualities are lost during the rite, whereas their material symbols are either destroyed or passed on to others. Symbols such as a small tree and twig (referring to the folkloric image of the "garden") can be related to the idea of "lot", and rituals in which they feature can be interpreted as a gradual disruption of the braid's ties with her family clan, deprivation of her familial "lot" (symbolic death), followed by rebirth manifested in the acquisition of a new "lot"—that of a married woman in a new family clan. Existing classifications of bridal symbols are revised, while new ones are revealed and interpreted.

Keywords: Don Cossack tradition, wedding ceremony, bridal signs, virginity symbols, object-related symbols, "lot" symbols.

Introduction

Symbolism of maidenhood in the Eastern Slavic tradition is very diverse, but in studying it, scholars have usually focused on the objects and imagery that appear in wedding rituals, such as the braid-ribbon, wreath, tree branch, bird, towel, etc. Most of these symbols and images are associated with the concept of "beauty". This concept was discussed by I.M. Kolesnitskaya, L.M. Telegina, T.A. Bernshtam, and A.V. Gura (Kolesnitskaya, Telegin, 1977; Bernshtam, 1982; Gura, 2011). Symbols of maidenhood and the "transitional state" of the bride have been investigated by S.M. Tolstaya and S.V. Tolkacheva using folklore evidence (Tolstaya, 2010; Tolkacheva,

2013). An interpretation of the bridal symbols was made by A.K. Baiburin, who presented the wedding ceremony as a process of "creating new people" (1993). N.V. Zorin studied the Central Russian wedding ritual and elaborated a classification of object-related bridal symbols (2004). As far as the wedding ceremony of the Don Cossacks is concerned, despite considerable scholarly interest in this topic (Tumilevich, 2012b; Protsenko, 2004; Rudichenko, 2000; Grevtsova, 2013, 2017), object-related bridal symbols have still remained understudied.

This article proposes a new interpretation of symbols of the bride-maiden, which have already been discussed using Eastern Slavic evidence, as well as symbols identified during the study of the Don Cossack tradition.

The published texts of wedding songs (Listopadov, 1947; Tumilevich, 2012a), evidence gathered in ethnographic expeditions of the 1980s–2000s from areas of compact settlement of the Don Cossacks, and data from 19th century periodicals, collected and recently published by the author of this article (Donskaya svadba, 2019), were used for solving these problems.

As the main research method, we tried not only to combine ritual practices and folklore texts, but also to correlate both of them with family-kinship relations, which played a structure-forming role in the traditional wedding. For establishing the essence of the concept of “beauty”, crucial for girls of marriageable age, we suggest addressing the concept of “lot”, which was widely understood in the Russian folk tradition as life force, energy, or benefits, and was subject to constant redistribution in the life cycle rituals.

“Beauty” and “garden”: Images and objects

“Beauty”: braid, ribbon, wreath

Although the concept of “maiden’s beauty” as applied to the group of girls of marriageable age and brides played a key role in the Russian popular tradition, it was shrouded in a fleur of mystery. This may precisely be the reason why scholars have failed to come to agreement in their attempts to reveal the essence of the concept.

The name of the ritual of “parting with beauty”, widespread in the Russian tradition, was absent from the Don evidence we collected, although the word “beauty” does occur in the lyrics of wedding songs. Object-related symbols, such as the braid, braid ribbon, wreath, branch of a tree or other plant, for example the guelder rose tree (*Viburnum opulus*), pine tree (*Pinus sylvestris*), etc., were associated with this image in the common Russian tradition. Ritual actions with these objects while dressing the bride coincided in the Don and Russian weddings: first the ribbon was unbraided, which was followed by “selling” the braid; in some places, a wreath of flowers and ribbons was placed on the girl’s head. The branch (the Khopyor Cossacks called it the “garden”) was decorated on the eve of the wedding in the house of the bride, and after the wedding night, it was brought to the house of the groom. However, while in the Russian tradition the “garden” was often associated with “beauty” (Bernshtam, 1982: 43), in the tradition of the Don Cossacks, this feature has not been recorded; therefore, in this section, we will focus only on the braid, ribbon, and wreath.

Regarding the Russian tradition, T.A. Bernshtam believed that it was possible to view “beauty” (correlated with the braid, ribbon, wreath, and tree branch) as a personal bridal sign and moreover as the “animated substance of the girl’s ‘self’”, in fact, as the soul of the

girl, which upon dying and then being reborn, undergoes a series of reincarnations during the ritual” (Ibid.: 66). S.M. Tolstaya agreed with this statement, but added that “beauty” correlated simultaneously with the girl’s soul and her virginity, insisting on the particular importance of the latter (2010: 151). Nevertheless, it seems that the search for the deeper meaning of the concept of “beauty” and of the objects associated with it can be continued.

In the Don tradition, virginity was defined by the word “znatá”, and was certainly understood as the personal property of the girl:

Even though she would go out at night,
She would carry her znata with herself,
And she carried it for so many years,
For the council of her Vanyushka

(Mestniye slova..., 1875).

In another song, “beauty” was mentioned in the same context (“Even though she would go out at night, she would carry her beauty with herself...” (Listopadov, 1947: 109)), which confirms the opinion of Bernshtam and Tolstaya that in the popular tradition it was correlated with the personality of the girl and her virginity.

At the same time, “beauty” in the wedding songs of the Don Cossacks, as in the common Russian tradition, was associated with the braid:

My beloved chases after me all the time,
After my girl’s beauty,
After my light-brown braid

(Polevaya zapis Kubrakovoy V.S. 1992...).

The girl’s braid in these lyrics was also mentioned as her personal property and the object of the groom’s desire (in the lyrics of another song, the “girl’s beauty” was also declared to be the reason for the “guy’s yearning”) (Listopadov, 1947: 27).

Some qualities of the combined image of beauty and the braid can be established using plant names. For example, in the Don tradition, the following popular names of plants are known: *girl’s beauty* and *girl’s braid*. The ornamental plant called the garden cosmos (*Cosmos bipinnatus*), which is distinguished by beautiful flowers and a long period of blossoming (“it blossoms nicely and does not stop, like a girl; it has variegated flowers”), was called “girl’s beauty” in the Don region. “Girl’s braid” was the name of a wild weed plant called the creeping woodruff (*Asperula prostrata*) with long stems (Slovar..., 1975: 125).

We should mention that these two plants, which were associated with braid-beauty, had different features. The first plant is decorative, beautiful, and blossoms for a long time; the second one is wild and weedy. Both plants are similar in that they are not expected to give fruit; they are grown for decorating the garden/dwelling and are needed only during the flowering period, while weeds should be

removed altogether. Thus, at least one more quality of “beauty” (short duration) can be established using the plant names.

Correlation of a girl’s braid with weedy wild-growing grass provides an opportunity for further conceptualization by referring to the concept of “freedom”, which characterizes a girl’s condition before marriage. In the Don wedding songs, the girl unites the braid, beauty, and freedom into a single complex:

Vasilyevna was weeping for her braid:
– My dear freedom, my freedom as a girl,
My dear braid, my light-brown braid!
I had freedom, I had freedom at my dear father’s,
I had a braid, I had beauty at my dear mother’s
(Listopadov, 1947: 31).

In the song performed at girls’ bridal showers, “unbraiding” of the ribbon and undoing the braid was described as simultaneous decrease of both freedom (“freedom is being abated”) and beauty (“beauty is being erased”) (Ibid.: 30). The song again emphasizes the short duration of a “girl’s freedom”:

I had my dear freedom not forever, –
At one hour the freedom of a girl passed away
(Ibid.: 31).

In the song “No more walking around, no more strolling around for me”, which was also performed at girls’ bridal showers, the bride-maiden leaves her freedom to the care of her girlfriends (“I entrust my girl’s freedom to you, my girlfriends”), but they only have to “welcome” it, after which the freedom will go into an open field and disappear in the dark forest (Ibid.: 30).

Let us note that the concept of “freedom” in the Russian popular tradition appears in link (dichotomy) with the concept of “lot”: a girl’s lot – a married woman’s lot. Precisely the acquisition of her own lot by the girl and further inclusion of that lot into the total lot of her new group of relatives was the culmination of the wedding ritual (“*karavai* bread”, “gifts” in the groom’s house). All the previous rituals were aimed at symbolic destruction of the “free” (wild) state of the girl and her “cultivation”. At the same time, the girls underwent gradual separation from the family clan collective and collective of peers with which the braid ribbon was probably associated.

Zorin believed that the ribbon which fastened (locked) the braid (freedom) of the girl was the main sign of her belonging to her social and age group. In order to transfer the girl to the biosocial group of women, it was necessary to remove the ribbon and undo the braid. Zorin also observed that neither the braid nor the ribbon passed into the possession of the “buyer”; the “purchase” only eliminated the ribbon and gave the right to undo the braid (Zorin, 2004: 117). However, we suggest

paying attention to the fact that the ribbon and braid in the “bride purchasing” ritual turn out to be connected with different people: the braid with the groom, while the ribbon either with girls who were the friends of the bride, or with the bride’s sister (that is, a relative on the female side). In addition, as scholars have observed, the ribbon (most often red) in Russian popular tradition was correlated with the girl’s menses and her “beauty” (see, e.g., (Madlevskaya, 2005: 163)). Consequently, it had to stay with one of the girls (but not with the groom).

The destiny of the braid both in the ritual and in the lyrics of the Don wedding songs evolved in a different way. For example, in the Cossack village of Gundorovskaya in the Don region, before the wedding feast, the battle for the braid between the bride and groom began. The bride held the braid with both hands, and the groom with the help of bridesmaids tried to get it. This scene was blocked from the eyes of the public by a large shawl, which was held by the best man and his assistants, which clearly reveals the hidden essence of what was happening. Immediately before that, they would sing a song about how the “light brown braid” was asking the “watchmen” to help it hide under a stone mountain, while the groom threatened to find it and trample it with his horse:

The light brown braid was standing at the Liturgy,
It was praying to God;
It bowed down to the watchmen:
“My watchmen, the tsar’s watchmen!
Watch me, watchmen
While I, the braid, hide.
I, the braid, will hide
Under the stone mountain,
From under the stone mountain –
Underneath the edge of the crescent moon,
From under the edge of the crescent moon –
Underneath the wings of a falcon”.
Alyosha says the words:
“I’ll trample [you] on horse
From under the stone mountain,
I will ask [you] of God by my prayers
From under the edge of the crescent moon,
I will kill the splendid falcon with an arrow”

(Popov, 1876).

The destruction of the braid during the ritual (its unbraiding, fragmentation) is related to the motive of destruction (dispersing) of “beauty” in other wedding songs. The beauty “departs” to the open field and forest (that is, becomes dispersed in nature), and the braid is destroyed by the groom. In both cases, the girl’s freedom is destroyed, and from our point of view this was an act needed before obtaining the lot.

As concerns the symbol of maidenhood of a wreath of flowers and branches, no special actions with it (the alternative name *svyatki*) have been found in the descriptions of wedding rituals of the Don Cossacks,

although its descriptions were present: “We put on a wreath: a gauze veil, flowers, and ribbons... These ribbons – now you cannot get them, such ribbons. Now they are all nylon and capron ribbons, but back then there were all sorts of ribbons. Both paper flowers and ribbons – red, yellow, green, long ones...” (Polevaya zapis Shapkinoy R.V. 1997...).

Bernshtam observed that the wreath was not identified with either the braid or girl’s “beauty” in the Russian and Ukrainian-Belarusian wedding (1982: 51). However, a Don wedding song speaks of a girl who wears her beauty on her wreath:

I wore beauty with me, –
On my silk belt,
On my flower wreath
(Listopadov, 1947: 109).

Thus, “beauty” is understood as freedom, virginity, and beauty. In the Don folklore evidence, “beauty” appears as a kind of generalized quality of a girl preparing for marriage. As for the braid, ribbon, and wreath, they can be primarily interpreted as symbols of various manifestations (signs) of “beauty”, and only secondarily as a girl’s personal signs. During the wedding ritual, the girl first lost her freedom, and then her virginity and beauty. The objects that symbolized these qualities were either destroyed or passed over to other participants in the wedding together with them.

“Beauty” – “garden”?

Scholars often call a specially prepared and decorated plant (burdock, pine branch, birch branch, etc.) or “garden” one of the symbols of girl’s “beauty” in the Russian wedding ritual. While analyzing evidence of the Central Russian wedding, Zorin noticed coincidence of time and place of the functioning of the braid ribbon and tree-garden. On the basis of this observation, he concluded that both symbols of “beauty” were used at the wedding at the same time, performed similar functions, yet did not substitute one other. In his opinion, only in the 19th century did the decorated branch start to be perceived as a symbol of the bride-maiden (personifying “beauty”). Zorin pointed out that originally it was a symbol of the group of girls of marriageable age, which included the bride, and referred to the fact that it was the girls that decorated the branch (or burdock), tied their ribbons on it, and then sold it (2004: 118). Yet, Zorin did not analyze the folklore texts containing the description of the “garden”. Meanwhile, in the lyrics of wedding songs (including the songs of the Don Cossacks), the girl calls the “garden” not only her own (“my garden”), but also her “father’s and mother’s”. It is not the “garden” that appears in the texts mentioning the bride’s girlfriends, but “green gardens”, in

the plural. These observations alone make it difficult to unconditionally accept Zorin’s interpretation.

Other interpretations of the “garden” have also been suggested. For instance, according to Bernshtam, the “garden” of folklore texts is the place of birth and death of the girl’s soul. In the wedding ceremony, the object-related embodiment of the folklore “garden” from Bernshtam’s point of view was the table (*posad*) (1982: 58–63). Tolstaya suggested that the variety of flowers and fruits in the “garden” could have symbolized the multiplicity of possible incarnations of the girl’s soul (she turns into a tree, flower, bird, etc.) (2010: 158–159). Baiburin also correlated the little tree (or branch) with the “beauty” of the bride, believing that preparation of such a tree for the ritual symbolized the beginning of the process of separating “beauty” from the bride (1993: 68).

Before accepting or rejecting these suggestions, we should turn to the descriptions of the “garden” appearing in the wedding songs of the Don Cossacks. Again, we should emphasize the abundance of different plants in the “garden”: there grow sweet-smelling cornflowers, curly carnations, fragrant mint, green (field) cherry, guelder rose berries and raspberries, ripe grapes, sweet cherries, pine tree, etc. The garden as a concentration of a multitude of plants in the same place could be the symbol of the multiplicity of possible incarnations of the girl’s soul (according to Tolstaya). It is possible, however, that this multiplicity also reflected various qualities of the bride-maiden: the red color of guelder rose berries and raspberries was a symbol of her blood, the prickliness of the fir tree was a symbol of innocence and readiness for the “love battle”, etc. In addition, the presence of various species of trees, flowers, and herbs, as well as birds in the “garden”, may also serve as an argument in favor of defining it as a symbol of the collective (family clan, female) lot. This is also indicated by the fact that after the bride leaves her family, the “garden” remains with her mother:

I feel so bad for you, dear mother, –
You are giving your daughter away;
All my flowers are left to you:
Sweet-smelling cornflowers,
Yellow curly carnations,
Fresh and fragrant mint
(Listopadov, 1947: 32).

In the lyrics of the songs, the girl asks her mother to water the “garden” with “scalding tears” after she leaves home. The ban imposed by the mother is also telling: the daughter cannot return to the “garden” before seven (in one version three) years have passed:

My dear mother told me not to
Come for seven years.
On the first year

I lived all right.
 On the second year
 I started to yearn.
 And on the third year
 I will fly as a bird.
 I will fly to the green garden
 I will heave a deep sigh...
 (Polevaya zapis Porvina V. 1992...).

In another version of this song, the daughter comes to her mother in the fourth year and sees that “little paths” in her garden have become overgrown with grass. In these and other texts, the mother acts as the keeper of the girl’s “garden”. It is no accident that in the wedding ceremony, it was the mother of the bride who was punished if the daughter turned out to be “dishonest”. But then we should not speak about the “garden” as a place of reincarnation of the soul (T.A. Bernshtam) or collective lot-freedom of the group of girls (N.V. Zorin). It is quite possible that the “garden” symbolized the female family (clan) lot, from which a part (lot) of the bride-daughter (small tree or branch) was separated:

The boyars were riding, the Moscow nobles.
 They began to think, to ponder
 They began to chop down the pear tree...
 (Listopadov, 1947: 27).

In the Don wedding songs, girl’s pre-marriage state is described as the shedding of blossoms; her figure is presented as a broken branch:

O garden, my garden,
 Young garden.
 Why are you blooming early and shedding

The last time I walked around the garden,
 I broke the top off my beloved apple tree.
 Grow, my dear apple tree forever without the top,
 Live, dear mother, forever without me
 (Polevaya zapis Ryblovoy M.A. 2001...).

In another wedding song, the bride’s entry into a pre-marriage state is described as breaking the “golden top” off a pine tree (Popov, 1876). In the song of the Nekrasov Cossacks, the girl says that her “dear fir tree” was cut down “with three axes”, and oars and a boat were made out of it, on which she was taken away (Tumilevich, 2012b: 157). The broken top of a blooming tree or a cut tree are the symbols of damage and loss (decrease of the total lot), which reflect the state before the girl obtains her new status.

It is interesting that before the time of its damage, the girl’s garden appears in the wedding songs not only as blooming, but also as a gold or silver garden (the golden top of the fir tree, golden cones, etc.). Girls of marriageable age possess the same qualities: they wear silver and gold rings, which replace copper rings.

However, immediately before the wedding, the rings lose their gilding and color:

Beautiful Annushka,
 Beautiful Mikhailovna
 Was sitting in her chamber
 With a despondent heart,
 Putting down her hands
 Dropping her finger-rings.
 – My brother Philyushka,
 My dear brother!
 Pick up the finger-rings
 Put them on your fingers
 So they won’t lie around,
 So the gold won’t be soiled,
 So the silver won’t wear off
 So Alekseyushka will not get them
 (Popov, 1876).

Notably, the bride gives the ribbon (in the ritual) or “little flower” (in the song) to her younger sister, and gold and silver rings to her brother, that is leaves both in the family clan. In another song, the girl on the eve of her wedding gives golden keys to her father with the words: “These are, dear father, golden keys/ I am no longer a key keeper for you, dear father” (Ibid.). The keys in this transitional situation are associated with the motive of “closure”, that is termination of not only the previous condition of the girl (maidenhood), but also of her previous family relationships. However, it is important for us here that on the eve of the transition, the bride-maiden remains not only without keys, but also without gold, and also compares herself to a dried/broken branch. All these images symbolize her dying.

After examining the image of the “garden” in wedding songs, which was most often associated with the time before the wedding night, we should turn to the ritual of the second day of the wedding (after the wedding night), in which the object-related symbol of the “garden” also appears. This could be a branch of the following trees: the guelder rose, willow, or cherry (among the Lower Don Cossacks), pine or fir (among the Upper Don Cossacks). For example, in the bride’s house in the villages along the Khopyor and Buzuluk Rivers, on the second day of the wedding, a pine or fir tree branch, which was called the “garden” (in some villages, it was called the “henhouse” (*kurnik*)), was decorated with ribbons and sweets usually with the help of the bride’s mother and other relatives. Then, the “garden” was brought from the bride’s house to the groom’s house. Already on the way there, the groom’s relatives would attempt to break the branch apart; relatives on the bride’s side would try to prevent them from doing it. Informants mentioned that “smart guests” would allow the branch to be brought to the groom’s house intact. And only there, the relatives on groom’s side would break the “garden” into parts and divide it among themselves: “On the second day, people would decorate a pine tree. They

would walk with the garden. They would decorate the pine tree with bottles, sweets, cookies, pretzels – this is how they would decorate it. A pine – a large branch, or a fir tree. They would carry it to the gate. The bride's parents and relatives decorated it. When the newly married couple came in the morning to invite for the 'next day party', this was called 'the garden will be carried away'. And treats would be put on a platter, tasty things. Then they would carry them, and the bride's relatives would approach with this garden. While the groom's relatives would grab, reach for, and tear at these treats. While those guarded it, so the newly married couple could get them first. And often the groom's relatives would tear everything up, break everything, and scatter everything, and not allow the newly married to get it. Sometimes they would just joke, and that was all. And sometimes a person who was drunk would break it off, and that was all. And when they would bring it in, they would put it on the table – and the newly married couple would take things. And then everybody would start taking until it was empty, ending the whole thing" (Polevaya zapis Sorokinoy E.G. 1997...).

Indications that the bride's relatives (usually the mother) made the "garden", and that representatives of the bridegroom's relatives, as well as the young couple, tried to "destroy it" (tear it into pieces, divide among themselves) are important in this description and in other testimonies.

We should also point to the fact that in the ritual prior to the wedding night there occurred a gradual symbolic destruction of the bride (deprivation of freedom, virginity, and beauty), diminishing of her life forces (drying of the "garden", shedding of gilding, etc.). Conversely, a ritual "gathering" occurred after the wedding night – revival, and new flowering was reproduced not only in a new capacity, but also in a different "composition". For instance, in those settlements where it was not customary to decorate a tree, a *karavai* round loaf was decorated with branches reminiscent of pine branches. They were inserted into the middle of the loaf and were tied with a red ribbon. When the offering of gifts began, each gift-giver was given a piece of this loaf and a branch. There is a description of the round loaf (it was baked in the villages in the Lower Don region), similar to the folklore image of the "garden": "It looks like a round loaf of bread with the top decorated with gilding; long thin sticks are stuck into it, which are wrapped around like a spiral with narrow jagged strips of dough; the ends of the sticks are decorated with figures of birds, the sun, the moon, etc." (Avramov, 1875). Those present at the wedding (on the second day) were given rolls called "cones"; sometimes their tops were "gilded". In the late 20th century, during the expeditions to the Cossack settlements in the Middle Don regions, we observed simplified versions of wedding round loaves: with branches, but without figures of celestial bodies and birds. Wooden sticks with wound "jagged" ("needle-like")

strips of dough served as twigs. Sometimes candies were tied to the top of the sticks (replacing the "birds").

In the Cossack villages of the Lower Don region, on the second day of the wedding (after the wedding night), the best man (a representative of the bridegroom's family clan) would cut a round loaf with golden top into pieces and give them to the guests during a song, which also mentioned silver and gold objects:

The best man is cutting the round loaf;
He has a golden knife;
Golden stalks
On a silver plate

(Ibid.).

Giving the guests pieces of the round loaf and receiving reciprocal gifts were the symbols of the inclusion of bride's life force into the total lot of the new collective of relatives. Thus, the "garden" in the form of a little tree symbolizing the lot (life force of the bride) ceased to exist as an independent image, and on the second day of the wedding was embodied in the image of a new "garden"—round loaf, renewed, with a gilded top. Cutting of the loaf and distribution of cones symbolized redistribution of the total lot, but now all relatives, both from the bride's and groom's sides, participated in it. Gold returned to the bride: one of the wedding songs speaks about a blacksmith and young smiths, who are forging and smelting a new (wedding) ring for the girl Annushka (Popov, 1876). (Hence, blacksmiths appear in the group of mummers on the second day of the wedding, who "forge" the new bride and groom). In the later tradition, the main metal symbols of the new status will be golden church crowns (at the time of the church wedding) and wedding rings.

Objects associated with images of birds (female swan, duck, or hen) should also be considered as bridal symbols. Ornithomorphic wedding symbolism is not analyzed in this article owing to the limits of space, but we cannot ignore object-related symbols that capture certain personal qualities or states of the bride-maiden; for example, her marital status: whether she is an orphan, has one parent, or both parents: "If both parents of the bride were alive, her hair would be braided all the way down, under the veil. If only the father or mother was alive, her hair would be braided halfway. If the bride was orphan, a ponytail was made" (Polevaya zapis Ryblovoy M.A. 1984...).

Particular attention during the wedding ceremony was given to checking and announcing how the wedding night ended. If the bride did not preserve her virginity before the wedding, it was symbolically broadcasted to everyone present in different ways and using different objects: a spoon with a hole was placed on the table at the bride's place; they beat a pot with a hole against the floor, or "kicked a rusty bucket with a hole around the yard",

etc., that is, used objects possessing so-called pronimal symbolism. Berries and twigs of the guelder rose tree, as well as honey, which is a well-known symbol of lot (cf. collective drinking of mead by the Cossacks at *bratchina* feasts), were the symbols of the “rightly” spent wedding night. In some Don villages, bunches of guelder rose tree branches, along with honeycombs, were put on a dish and placed on the table where the round loaf had been before (Polyakov, 1875).

Discussion

1. Object-related symbols that scholars usually attribute to a girl’s personal signs indicating her attainment of marriageable age, or to the symbols of her soul (braid, ribbon, and wreath), in our opinion, can be interpreted as material embodiment of the main characteristics of the generalized concept of “beauty”: freedom and virginity. During the wedding ritual, the girl lost these qualities, and the objects that symbolized them were either destroyed or were passed over to other people. The latter feature of the ritual was associated with the bride leaving the group of girls of marriageable age, who were in a kind of spiritual relationship with her. The bride passed a red braid ribbon (associated with the motive of blood) to her girlfriends in many versions of the Russian wedding ritual. In the Don tradition, passing of the ribbon to the younger sister of the bride is more frequently observed. One gets the impression that the girl’s “beauty” correlated not only (and not so much) with the “spiritual substance of the girl’s ‘self’”, but with her bodily aspect. In contemporary language, this aspect can be designated as psychosexuality, which (according to popular beliefs) was in need of being limited and placed into the cultural framework.

2. The concept of “lot” is clearly manifested in the wedding ritual along with the concept of “freedom”. As applied to the bride, it was embodied in the image of the “garden” and its part (tree, branch). During the entire long wedding ritual not only the girl became separated from the group of her girlfriends, but also her family ties were gradually broken, and she was deprived of her lot in the family (symbolic death), followed by new birth associated with allocation of a new lot—the lot of a married woman in a new family. The object-related bridal symbols recorded and marked the changes that were taking place with her: flowering garden – broken branch, dried-up tree – new garden with gilded top, gold objects.

The conclusion of Zorin that the correlation of the “garden” with the “beauty” of the bride in the ritual was relatively recent, can be extended to the correlation of the “garden” with the group of girls-bridesmaids. It can be assumed that initially the “garden” was associated with the bride’s family clan (and its common lot), and the decorated tree (or branch) was a symbol of the girl’s separation from

the clan-family and allocation of her own (individual) lot. In any case, in the Don wedding (both in the lyrics of the songs and in the rituals), the “garden” was always associated with the mother of the bride—the keeper and distributor of the common lot of the family clan.

3. The classification suggested by Zorin can be supplemented with the bridal symbols, which reflected some of the bride’s personal qualities and states. This is primarily her relationship with her deceased relatives (orphan; has one living parent). It was no accident that precisely the girl’s hair (as one of the containers of life force) marked her connection with deceased relatives, which in turn was meant to determine their “shared” participation in the ritual. Since in the Russian popular wedding the theme of presence of “dead relatives” and ancestors (for example, in the form of mummers) is distinctively pronounced, the use of object-related symbols marking some connection of the bride with them seems quite logical in the context of the family clan’s lot, which has to be redistributed with the participation of both the living and the dead relatives.

As for the objects indicating the state of virginity of the bride before the wedding night, they practically did not differ in the Don Cossack wedding and in the Russian tradition.

Conclusions

Analysis of the evidence associated with wedding rituals of the Don Cossacks has shown that bridal symbols reflected the changes that not only affected a bride-maiden as a person, but also her position among her own relatives and among the relatives of her future husband. All these changes were associated with the freedom, soul, and virginity of the bride, as well as her lot—a part of the life force and benefits, which were given to the bride from the family/clan lot during the ritual and were newly included into the general lot of the new family. And if the symbols of the collective image of “beauty”, such as the braid, ribbon, and wreath, were correlated with the personality of the bride-maiden, the “garden” and branch corresponded to the family (clan) lot, the changes of which occurred along with the bride’s transfer from one group of relatives to the other. The main guardian and distributor of the family lot in the group of the bride’s relatives was her mother. This role of the mother once again emphasized the initiatory nature of the wedding ritual in relation to the bride-maiden.

Thus, the search for the meanings of the object-oriented bridal symbols, using the evidence of the Don Cossack wedding, has made it possible to reveal the deeper layers of this ritual associated with inter-family relations in the context of the concept of “lot”, crucial for the Russian popular tradition.

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