

ANTHROPOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE MEANING OF RITUAL OBJECTS IN THE CONTEMPORARY URBAN WEDDING IN BULGARIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the changing symbolic potential of items in the Bulgarian contemporary urban wedding. Based on my fieldwork material regarding the wedding cake and other items, I investigate cultural change in modern Bulgarian society not only as a result of the one-way process of transference, adaptation and incorporation of mass produced commodities into Bulgarian culture but also as a process of cultural change and variation. In that sense, I investigate the alternation between global and local perspectives of the forms of material culture in which certain levels of meaning, inherent to objects, play a crucial role, as for example the social communication factor, kinship ties, cross-generational continuity, local ritual and symbolic systems, local food culture, and even the personal fate and private life of an object's owner. In this article I focus mainly on the wedding cake as a specific ritual item, functioning in the contemporary urban Bulgarian wedding, transmitted during the last decades from West European culture into the Bulgarian wedding tradition, and analyse the specific dialogue between 'global' items and local culture. Furthermore, taking as my example the wedding cake and other ritual objects (the wedding chicken, the wedding bread, and the sponsor's stick) I question the concept of the globalisation, homogenisation and unification of forms of material culture in contemporary society.

KEYWORDS: wedding cake • wedding chicken • wedding bread • wedding rituals
• globalisation • material culture

INTRODUCTION

Many objects, in traditional culture as well as today, possess a dual nature because they can be 'implemented' as objects and as signs. In this sense, in some publications focused on material culture studies, the opinion that every artificially produced item possesses utilitarian and symbolic qualities has been established, and therefore potentially these items can be implemented as object or as sign (Baiburin 1983: 9). Some authors affirm that objects have a communicative function: they wield a code by means of which transference of messages is realised. Objects operate as elements of that code and therefore meanings can be attached to them (Segal 1968: 39). In a broad sense, Jean Baudrillard develops the idea that anthropologists should surmount the hypothesis of the predomi-

nation of the consumer value of objects, i.e. their pragmatic status. Baudrillard (1972: 3–21) establishes the opinion that consumption and function are only two revealed discourses of items, in reference to which their social discourse appears to be fundamental. In other words, the very physicality of an object, which makes it seem so immediate, sensual and ‘assimilable’, belies its actual nature. In that sense, material culture is one of the most resistant forms of cultural expression, so far as culture is understood as a dynamic relationship through which objects are constituted as social forms (Miller 1987: 11). From that point of view, in this article, I will analyse some interesting aspects of the symbolic meaning of ritual objects that today occupy central positions at the urban Bulgarian wedding – the wedding cake, the wedding chicken, the wedding bread and the sponsor’s stick.

Furthermore, in this article, I aim to analyse urban culture in Bulgaria through the prism of globalisation and mass-production, taking as an example the ritual objects used at modern urban weddings. Analysing local-global, traditional-modern and Bulgarian-Western perspectives on these items, I reconsider cultural change in modern Bulgarian society and question the idea of the globalisation and homogenisation of the cultural meaning attributable to items. The case-study of the wedding cake is interpreted in order to argue that ‘ready-made’, ‘global’ items that can be observed in many European cultures or even all over the world, which were thought to have homogenised social or ritual meaning, acquire local meaning when placed in a specific local social situation, in particular in Bulgarian urban culture. It is sure that questions about the meaning of artefacts are increasingly tied up with larger issues like how far artefacts marked with homogenising global meaning are given specific local meaning in the context and in the specific cultural situation in which they are consumed (Miller 1994: 406; 1995). Therefore, the symbolic potential of material culture could be understood not only as a one-way process of adaptation and incorporation of mass-produced objects into Bulgarian culture, but also as a process of cultural variation. In that shift between global and local perspectives of material culture many levels of meaning, inherent to items, play a crucial role, as for example the social communication factor, kinship ties, cross-generational continuity, local ritual and symbolic system and even the personal fate and private life of an object’s owner.

In other words, undertaking detailed research regarding a specific ritual item – the wedding cake that can be observed at weddings in many European countries and worldwide – I will focus my research in this article on the specific ways of dialogue between the cake as a ‘global item’, and local culture. In this sense, some examples can be given: the decoration of wedding cakes adorned with colourful sugar motifs that imitate traditional Bulgarian embroidery; and performing a traditional dance in which dancers hold wedding cake or wedding chicken in their hands. Many similar examples can be given: food and different items constructed of food substances, cloth, clothes and woven items, mass-produced commodities, souvenirs, and domestic possessions and items belonging to popular culture and the built environment are all considered to be clues to understanding global-local interconnections. Christmas, which has emerged as the most promising candidate for the first contemporary global festival has also been the focus of anthropological research (Miller 1993). Thus Christmas souvenirs and other objects ‘imported’ from Western culture into Bulgarian culture serve as another examples of global-local or Western-Eastern dialogue.

The wedding cake has become part of a range of ritual actions in the contemporary wedding ritual in Bulgaria and presents interest for the researcher. For example, a ritual dance with wedding cake and decorated baked chicken is performed during the wedding, which is not observed in other countries, for example, Britain, and could be regarded as a specific regional custom; the ritual cutting of the wedding cake and its apportioning, which is common to many cultures, is regarded as a central part of the Bulgarian wedding. The wedding cake is considered to be an item transmitted from the West European wedding, which has perhaps begun to appear in the contemporary urban wedding ceremony in Bulgaria in the last decades, although I think that it will be very difficult to establish the exact date of its incorporation into the Bulgarian wedding ritual system. Today the wedding cake is decorated by somebody belonging to the staff of the restaurant where the wedding takes place or is bought from a shop, in contrast to another ritual object, decorated wedding bread. Wedding bread is sweet (normally covered with honey) and today, during the wedding ceremony, it is cut into pieces in a similar way to the wedding cake. Today wedding bread is either shop-bought or kneaded, and after that baked by some ritually significant person – the mother-in-law or the bride's mother. The tiered iced cake, covered with vanilla cream and embellished with decorative elements made of sugar, also appears in other festivities in Bulgaria such as, for example, Christmas, New Year's Eve, birthday parties, anniversaries and corporate parties. These tiered iced cakes used for all occasions – from wedding ceremonies to corporate parties – all have similar ingredients, taste and form. The distinction is in the sugar decorative elements and symbols: dolls of newlyweds placed on the wedding cakes; sugar badges placed on the cakes meant for corporate parties; sugar symbols of age or zodiac signs on the birthday cakes.

In this article the wedding cake as well as other items embodying certain social contexts are analysed. From the social perspective, the wedding cake (and its cutting and apportioning) functions as a connection between people involved in the wedding, for example, as a tie between sponsors and newlyweds. Moreover, it plays a role as an interaction between those present at the wedding in that it is something shared between all the wedding guests, indicating the idea of unity, which is also expressed by the joint cutting of the cake (Charsley 1992). In this way the rite (or system of rites), which is part of the cultural identification of a society, reflects in a dynamic way the interactions between an individual and existing social groups, and in a specific way ritually regulates these interactions (Zhivkov 1981: 4).

Because of the limited amount of research on the chosen subject of investigation existing in Bulgarian specialised literature, my theoretical study is based on my fieldwork, conducted in several Bulgarian urban regions. This work began in 2000 when I started my PhD research project and ended in 2013.¹ My fieldwork continues to the present day and includes interviews, photo-documentation and personal observation. Within the framework of this project, informants living in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, and in several medium-sized towns such as Stara Zagora and Svilengard² were interviewed in groups or individually, with attention focused on the wedding cake and the wedding chicken as ritual objects. I carried out 32 interviews with informants who were all women, except one man who was at that time working part-time as a wedding DJ. My informants belonged to two age groups: 22–26 years old and 45–65 years old. This fieldwork material was completed with my personal observations at three weddings, one in Sofia and two in Stara

Zagora, where I was invited as a guest. In addition, I followed several wedding forums on the web, for example, MyWedding.bg and Сватбен Каталог, which I consider very interesting primary source of information regarding contemporary wedding customs. In this study I compare articles published in wedding journals with opinions expressed in Internet forums. Furthermore, I juxtapose interviews with articles published in popular magazines, as well as with information found on the Internet, which I consider a primary mediator of information in contemporary popular culture. My ethnographic work in these regions had focused on material culture and social symbolism of the material world and my central concern was to collect information indicating how, by means of items, for example the wedding cake and the wedding chicken, people talk about their kinship relations or social position, or express ethic ideas. I also reflect on traditional material culture and contemporary goods, questioning the idea of the globalisation and Westernisation of forms of material culture in Bulgaria.

CONTEMPORARY URBAN WEDDING CUSTOMS IN BULGARIA

The urban wedding in contemporary Bulgaria, as evidenced by my fieldwork, is an extensive ritual with many local variations and which incorporates many complex symbolic actions and objects. Here I will briefly describe the main ritual actions performed in the contemporary urban Bulgarian wedding, taking as example several wedding ceremonies that I attended during my fieldwork research.

The contemporary urban wedding in Bulgaria is not a very long ritual action – it takes one afternoon or one night, unlike traditional Bulgarian weddings which took up to three days. There are noon weddings where lunch is served and night weddings where dinner is served to the guests. First of all, the groom goes to the house of sponsors (the best man and the maid of honour), sometimes accompanied by a group of people playing traditional Bulgarian music. Upon his arrival, the groom traditionally gives wine (or other alcohol) and asks the host whether he agrees to become sponsor at his wedding. Then the wedding procession continues, heading to the bride's home. When the procession of decorated cars arrives, she enters one of the rooms of her house and her relatives guard the door and do not allow the groom to enter until he pays. Sometimes the guards of the room demand a money payment, sometimes the groom makes some kind of promises, for example to take care of the bride or to travel with her abroad, etc. In some cases, the groom, the best man and their friends try to make a breakthrough and enter the room. Then, the groom, the sponsors and the guests are greeted by the bride's parents and are directed to the room where the bride is hidden. The groom pays (about 20 leva) and receives the bride. Regardless of how much money is given to the guards of the bride's room, later they have to return the money to the young family. During my fieldwork I observed an interesting custom – one of the bride's shoes was hidden and the groom had to find it; once he found the shoe, he had to put it on the bride's foot, but she said that the shoe was too big. In this situation, the groom should put money in the shoe to make it comfortable.

There is a tradition that the father or the brother of the bride leads the newlyweds across the threshold of the house holding a cloth, which they hold at the opposite end. Leaving the house, the bride pours water, and sometimes kicks a jug, throws a plate-full

of corn behind her back or breaks a glass. Then the wedding procession goes consecutively to the church and to the Civic Council. When leaving the Civic Council, wheat, coins, and candies are thrown over the newlyweds. Then the wedding procession goes to the restaurant where some elaborate ritual actions have to be performed: the newlyweds step on a white cloth decorated with flowers and petals; the mother of the groom greets the couple and feeds them with bread covered with honey and salt; the bride kicks a small copper jug full of water and flowers so that the water spills, the guests observe the colour of the spread out flowers and in that way predict the gender of the couple's future children. The newlyweds and the guests dance *horo* (*xopo*).

The next ritual action to be performed is the breaking of the wedding bread, which is performed simulating a struggle between the newlyweds – the newlyweds break the wedding bread into two parts. It is believed that if the bride manages to break a bigger piece, she will take the most important decisions regarding the family life of the couple; if the groom breaks a bigger piece the opposite will follow. Afterwards the throwing of the bridal bouquet and garter is performed. Here, it is believed that the unmarried girl who catches the bouquet will be the next to marry and the unmarried boy who catches the garter will marry soon. The next ritual action is the dance with the cake and the chicken, with, usually, the last action being the joint cutting of the wedding cake, which is later offered to the guests.

The wedding ritual system in Bulgaria is much more complex and includes a variety of ritual actions, although I am not going to extend my description of the Bulgarian contemporary wedding as it is not the main purpose of my investigation. However, I think that this context is important for the analysis of the objects on which I concentrate my research – the wedding cake and the wedding chicken.

THE WEDDING CAKE AND ITS CUTTING

In British wedding tradition, as developed from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries (Charsley 1992: 141), the wedding cake³ was developed not as an integral part of any meal but as a festive or celebratory elaboration of bread (Charsley 1988: 232–241). It was much later, and in a different way, that it was worked into a pattern with other foods as part of a distinctively British afternoon tea. Other food items have been associated with weddings, often more or less ordinary dishes given a special use in the wedding context (Charsley 1992). Later on, the wedding cake appeared looking like the contemporary item. Bread and cakes are commonly used in weddings in many European countries. Today the wedding cake is a common item in weddings all over the world and has provoked the interest of many anthropologists. For example, the tiered iced wedding cake is an important element of the contemporary Latvian wedding meal (Spalvėna 2011: 12). The Western-style wedding cake in modern Japanese weddings is another example of a borrowed element incorporated (as a symbol of fertility) into existing rituals that presents a problem for symbolic analysis (Edwards 2009). The wedding cake has also been subject to fieldwork research and has been analysed as a ritual item functioning in the context of Macedonian wedding customs (Dimishkovska 2008). It is remarkable that this food-item has been located even in African societies by anthropologists who raise the question of why and how particular ritual changes occur and

what the symbolic content of the cake is (Wilson 1972: 187–201). Here, I give only a few examples and will not widen my analysis by making a comparative study of the meanings of the wedding cake in different cultures as my fieldwork is restricted to Bulgarian culture. Therefore, in this article I am going to centre my research on the symbolism of this object in the context of the Bulgarian wedding ceremony. Nevertheless, a comparative analysis among several cultures is an interesting and promising issue that could be undertaken in further investigations of the subject.

The tiered and iced wedding cake is a widespread item in the wedding tradition in Bulgaria today and often occupies a central position at the wedding ceremony. It is not difficult to notice that its taste, form and ingredients are identical to any contemporary British wedding cake or similar to any Western-style wedding cake. The Bulgarian wedding cake is flour-based sweet food made of sugar, flour, eggs, cocoa, sour cream, vanilla, baking powder, milk and butter. It is glazed with chocolate cream or white sour cream and normally it has a round form and a sweet chocolate, vanilla or fruit taste. The cake is decorated with sugar or plastic flowers, wedding rings, butterflies or birds – these are normally very detailed and elaborate decorative motifs, requiring great confectionery artistry. It often has one to three or five levels and therefore is brought on a big hand-cart. According to one of my informants, sometimes at its top plastic or sugar dolls of newlyweds are placed and the names of the newlyweds are written on the surface.⁴ Generally, the base is white or has soft yellow or brown tones; the decorative motifs normally obtain soft red, yellow or violet tones. Sometimes, instead of sugar figures of newlyweds, a sugar limousine is placed on the top, even sugar or plastic dolls dressed in traditional Bulgarian garments.

The wedding cake is not a homemade object – it is a gorgeous item that is always bought from a pastry shop and is made by a professional confectioner. Nonetheless, it is not an expensive item – its price-range varies from 50 to 250 leva⁵ and therefore everyone can afford it. My informants often denominate this big and sumptuous tiered wedding cake the “bridal cake”, distinguishing it from the “sponsor’s cake”. It would be interesting to see how the cake reveals social distinction, if its size is important, where and by whom it is made, but my fieldwork does not give me substantial material to make such a conclusion as all cakes are purchased, economically affordable items, and my informants did not give me any hints to make me think that the size could be regarded as a sign of social status. In contrast, an expensive wedding dress, bought from a brand shop or an expensive wedding limousine are considered by my informants to be objects revealing social distinction. Bearing in mind that status seeking is regarded in ethnology as part of a complex of behaviours in which individuals consciously or unconsciously strive to be the focus of attention in order to improve their positions in the rank hierarchy of the group (Wiessner 1997: 2–5), in this study I regard the competitive dance with the two food-items – the wedding cake and the wedding chicken – as a way to increase the social status of a person within the group and as a method of establishing new family relationships between the family of the groom and of the bride.

In the Bulgarian magazine *Свамба* (Wedding), which in the context of the urban social environment operates as a popular medium and spreads a certain type of ‘urban mythology’ (different urban beliefs, legends and instructions regarding wedding customs), newlyweds receive information concerning the wedding cake. Thus, I read in an article published in the magazine that “by tradition”, the wedding cake has several

tiers, that it is white or has soft tones, is garnished with sugar figures, is round or heart-shaped as a sign of love and that it can echo colour and form from the wedding dress. It is supposed in the article that the cake could even suggest the character of the groom:

If you do not want to be traditionalist, you could use your fantasy in order to choose a different and original cake, suggesting your character and habits... A special table should be placed in the restaurant and on it has to be placed the wedding cake. Some plastic flowers have to be spread out on the table as decorative complements. Generally, the wedding cake has to be cut into pieces and served during the official dinner, immediately after the main dish.⁶

In the pages of *Свамба*, distributed at newsstands in many big cities, prospective newlyweds can view photos and choose a wedding cake. On the Internet they could, on the basis of profound visual material distributed by wedding agencies, choose not only a wedding cake but also the sugar newlywed figures that decorate the top, and select a DJ⁷ and a wedding programme. The DJ (who can be male or female) has a very fundamental role in the Bulgarian wedding and he or she could be regarded as a ritual figure. Well-informed about traditional customs and gifted with a sense of humour, on many occasions the DJ administrates the wedding ceremony in entirety, reducing in that way the role of the main participants in the event – the parents and sponsors (who in traditional culture were central and very honoured figures) – to mere observers. In this sense, many popular magazines function in the contemporary urban situation not only as a way of advertising commercial products and everyday information, but as mediators of information similar to that of folklore type, where cultural experience is not transmitted verbally (for example, in traditional culture) but in written form. Therefore, magazines, television, cinema, the Internet, world-wide tourism are today mediators of information and one of the conduits of cultural globalisation, placing us in a world of constant flux, fundamentally characterised by objects in motion (Appadurai 2001: 1–21).

Thus, in many Bulgarian wedding web pages I found information concerning the wedding cake and regarding its history and meaning. This information is spread widely on the Internet, is repeated in some Internet forums and is converted into some kind of urban mythology. I will give an example:

History of the wedding cake – customs: Today the cake symbolises the first meal shared by the couple. It comes from ancient Rome; it was made only of flour, salt and water. The bride did not eat it. She was peppered with it – an ancient ritual of fertility and numerous progeny. British people used to hide a ring in the cake; several young men had to search and find it. There was a belief that whoever found the ring acquired happiness and luck. A tray with a piece of cake placed on it had to be thrown through the window. If the tray broke into pieces, the couple would have a happy life. The more pieces there were, the more happiness was destined for the couple.⁸

There are many Internet forums where women who are planning to get married soon exchange photos of wedding cakes, express opinions about the decoration and symbolism of the cake, tell each other where they can buy a tasteful one and how much it costs. In one of these Internet forums I found different opinions, for example this one, written in 2012 by a woman living in Varna:

When cutting the cake, the newlyweds feed each other, putting a small morsel of cake in each other's mouths in order to have a sweet and happy family life. After that, they have to feed the sponsors and the unmarried couples, placing in their mouths a piece of cake. In some regions they keep a piece of cake for the first anniversary (of the marriage), and the figure atop is given to a couple who will get married soon.⁹

In one Bulgarian Internet journal I found another point of view expressed in an interview with a food designer who explained her interesting interpretation of the symbolism of the wedding cake:

[Interviewer:] Tell us briefly about the symbolism of the wedding details.

[Designer:] The wedding cake should be a reflection of the trinity – it presents masculine and feminine, which are united at the top. The cake has a pyramid structure with a very clearly defined base and top. It is therefore important to highlight it with a figure – a lily that blooms, the sun or something else. Masculine and feminine must also be represented at the base. For this purpose decoration is implemented consisting of two parrots, two doves or two rings. We live in a duality – the duality of 'up and down'; we do not have to be very enthusiastic and we do not have to be very earthbound – that is typical of our society – we are too material. There must be a harmony – we have to be mundane, but at the same time we have to strive for the spiritual.

[Interviewer:] Do you find the small figurines of bride and groom out-dated?

[Designer:] No, they are widely used. The cake can also be completed with some live flowers or one flower, an orchid, a rose, one or two birds, and rings.

[Interviewer:] What about cakes decorated with embroidery?

[Designer:] I loved the cake with Bulgarian embroidery, especially this one that looks simpler. A long time ago I wanted to make a cake like this. It is neatly and very precisely made.¹⁰

Several wedding cakes embellished with decorative motifs representing traditional Bulgarian embroidery were presented at this culinary exhibition in Sofia, the presentation of the achievements of the alumni of Sofia High School of Bakery and Confectionery Technology. I think that maybe cakes with similar traditional motives could be found functioning in Bulgarian wedding ritual system. One of the wedding cakes mentioned above is decorated with sugar motifs representing colourful traditional Bulgarian embroidery with, on its top, two sugar figures of newlyweds, dressed in traditional Bulgarian garments.

In the interview, the designer explained her amusing personal interpretation of the item, which made me think that often the interpretation given by the informant may differ from the interpretation of the anthropologist and that objects can be interpreted differently depending on the observer's position. There are three possible positions: the position of the person who produced the object, the position of its consumer and the position of a bystander, which sometimes leads to "incongruity" in the item's interpretation (Segal 1968: 39). The impact of the item is related to the fact that everybody 'reads' the message from a certain level, at which many factors play crucial roles, for example, professional activities and interests, education background, age, the social context of the object's production and implementation.

The cutting of the wedding cake today can be observed in different variants in Bulgaria. At many weddings today the newlyweds hold out their hands, cut the cake together and afterwards put a piece of cake in each other's mouths (*захранване*).¹¹ According to one of my informants, the newlyweds hands come together when holding the knife and cutting the cake.¹² Normally the newlyweds have only one plate, fork and knife. At some weddings the bride places her right hand over the hand of her future husband. One of my informants told me that the first slice is meant for the sponsors.¹³ At some weddings the maid of honour puts her hand over the hands of the newlyweds while they cut the first slice and then gives a small slice of cake to the bride, putting it in her mouth. In other wedding ceremonies the bride must hold the knife with her right hand and the bridegroom must place his hand over hers to cut the first piece together. If the cake has several tiers, they have to start cutting it from the upper layer. Sometimes a ribbon is fastened on the knife. The bride and groom have to eat the first piece together, which according to my informants is a symbol of the "beginning of their life together".¹⁴ Subsequent pieces are cut by the bride and served to her new relatives; the bridegroom offers pieces of cake to the rest of the guests. At some weddings a friend of the groom must cut the pieces of cake that will be offered to the rest of the relatives. If the wedding cake has decoration of flowers, the flowers have to be removed and placed in a basket. My informants told me that the flowers can be removed only when the newlyweds have already eaten the first piece of cake.¹⁵

RITUAL DANCE WITH A WEDDING CAKE AND A WEDDING CHICKEN

In fact, in many contemporary weddings in Bulgaria, two wedding cakes are needed – one large, tiered, wedding cake that many informants name the "bridal cake", which is involved in the action of the joined cutting – and another, smaller, wedding cake that my informants denominate the "sponsor's cake", which is involved in the "out-dance" (*надиграване*).¹⁶ This is a traditional dance or a dance competition that is performed between two or more people, usually sponsors of the wedding, who have to prove that they can dance a certain traditional Bulgarian dance longer and better than the opponent. The sponsor's cake is normally smaller than the bridal cake – it has to be small enough to be carried in one hand and it must be possible to dance with it. It is a round iced cake, made of the same ingredients as the bridal cake and is decorated with some sugar flowers. If there is only one small wedding cake, it is used for both purposes – the cutting and the dance.

There is another object involved in the dance – a chicken, which is often called the "sponsor's chicken" or the "wedding chicken". Generally, this is a baked or boiled chicken, decorated with some additional elements in order to acquire anthropomorphic features. The cooked chicken is put on a flat round bread and an egg is placed where the chicken's head used to be. The egg is decorated as a head with eyes and a mouth drawn in pencil, and sometimes a kind of a beak is fashioned from a piece of carrot with a red pepper put over the egg as a hat. A jacket is made from a pancake and an apron is made from red peppers. Around the decorated chicken, eggs decorated as piglets, lambs or chicks are placed and sometimes yellow plastic chicks are used as decoration.



Photo 1. Wedding chickens dressed as shepherds. The wedding chicken in the middle is female and therefore holds a spindle. Sofia, 2011. Photograph by Stoyan Ivanov.

Generally, the wedding chicken represents a peasant surrounded by chicks or piglets. In an Internet forum in Bulgaria where people exchange information and photos of their weddings, I found many pictures of sponsor's chickens and also some interesting explanations. Here I will cite one of these opinions, written by a woman from Sofia in 2012 who got married about ten years ago in Vraza, a small town situated in north Bulgaria:

At my wedding, there was such a dance with the chicken and if you allow me I will explain to you first-hand. So, the chicken is boiled whole and is pinned on round bread. The chicken has to resemble a bride – it is pinned in a standing position, the head is made of a boiled and peeled egg, a headscarf is also made; the eyes, the nose, and the mouth are painted. It could be even decorated with a bunch of flowers. The chicken is dressed in garments and an apron. It becomes a true bride this chicken and that's it. A few hours at least are necessary in order for it to be prepared: it's tricky work. There is a tradition in the wedding – dancing in front of the sponsor. Girls and women from the bride's family dance with chicken, cake and pastry. The idea is that the sponsor steals or buys the chicken and the other things. He throws money over the chicken but the person who dances with it doesn't give it to him. It is a grate dance! You know.¹⁷

Usually, the ritual dance consists of the following: a friend of the bride, usually a woman, dances in front of the sponsor holding in her hands a tray with the baked chicken and the sponsor has to out dance her by showing that he can dance longer and better, otherwise he has to buy the chicken by giving her money. A friend of the groom has to dance holding the wedding cake in his hands in front of the best man's wife. The best man and his wife (the sponsors) make a redemption payment at the end of the dance. In some Bulgarian weddings, on the day after the wedding the couple visit the sponsor's home and they all eat the wedding cake together. In some weddings, wedding cake, roasted chicken and some sweets are placed on the table in front of the bride and the competitive dance is performed. Sometimes the bride's sister and the groom's cousin dance *horo*¹⁸ in front of the guests; afterwards they dance a distinct traditional Bulgarian dance called *rachenitsa* (*ръченица*). According to the people interviewed, at various weddings the bride's sister and the groom's cousin perform a dance in which they step onto the wedding table.

One of my informants told me that the person who wins the competitive dance, receives as a gift the wedding cake, the loser receiving the chicken.¹⁹ In several wedding ceremonies in Bulgaria, the chicken, cake and wedding bread are placed in front of the couple. All wassail and thereafter the best man or the mother-in-law gives a greeting speech followed by the competitive dancing. The sponsors have to be bestowed with a wedding cake, chicken and bread while they are dancing. In this case, some friends of the bride dance holding in their hand the wedding cake or the wedding chicken. The dance-off is performed and in the meanwhile the best man and his wife try to grasp the appropriate objects – either the chicken or the cake - bribing the boys with money to help them. Then, according to one of the people I interviewed, the sponsor brings a basket full of apples, pears and eggs, and bribes the opponent with these instead of money.²⁰

Another of my informants told me that at a wedding in Svilengrad the *rachenitsa* dance was performed with a very big wedding cake, placed on a hand-cart and that a hand-cart was used for baked lamb rather than chicken. At this wedding, the groom's sister danced near the hand-cart with the lamb opposite the best man while a young man danced with the cake in front of the best man's wife. In this case the sponsors have to steal the objects or buy them but later on, and at the end of the wedding the wedding cake has to be gifted to the sponsor. The same informant told me that there are very interesting weddings where the dancing competition is performed between two professional dancers wearing traditional Bulgarian garments, and the sponsors.²¹ Sometimes



Photo 2. Wedding chicken, surrounded by chicks. Plovdiv, 2010. Photograph by Stoyan Ivanov.



Photo 3. Wedding chicken, decorated with sunflower and pumpkin seeds. Sofia, 2013. Photograph by Ivo Nikolov.

the sponsor does not even dance but takes a seat, observes the professional dancers and bribes them, throwing money over them and on the floor.

Several years ago I received an invitation to a wedding at which I observed how the best-man danced in front of the bridesmaid, who held the wedding cake and also danced. The duration of the dance depended on the cunning of the sponsor and his desire to gain the objects. On this occasion he threw money around and over the cake in order to buy it back. In the course of the dance he grasped the bridesmaid in his hands, held her up and continued dancing with her in his arms, trying to prove in this way that he was a better dancer.²²

INTERPRETATIONS

In this section my central concern is to analyse the meaning of the wedding cake in relation to the phenomenology of cultural change. As an item, 'imported' in recent decades from Western culture, it exists in local culture as an object that both preserves some of its imported Western meanings and acquires local features when placed in a different cultural context. Thus, I question the cultural globalisation and homogenisation of the forms of material culture and trace the dialectic of cultural dialogue expressed through objects.



Photo 4. 'Dancing' wedding chicken. Sofia, 2011. Photograph by Nadia Soyanova.

The cutting of the cake by the newlyweds who join hands and place a small piece of cake in each other's mouths is obviously a custom popular in many cultures, although here I will analyse the joint cutting of the cake in the Bulgarian wedding based on my fieldwork materials.

My informants believe that the wedding cake is a part of the Roman marriage ceremony, symbolising fertility and good fortune. This information circulates on many Internet sites in Bulgaria dedicated to the wedding ceremony. On the same Internet sites, and on some international websites, I found information about preparation of the wedding cake, for example, the best components have to be used in the preparation and the mix has to be as rich as possible because a rich mixture signifies abundance. Possibly people believe that, in this way, with proper witchcraft, more of that profundity will be attracted to the couple. It is interesting, in my opinion, that the quality of fertility ascribed to the wedding cake is very similar to the wedding bread in traditional Bulgarian culture, which is decorated with nuts, beans and other products symbolising fertility. Today, according to beliefs circulating in popular urban culture, a wedding cake with a good round form is regarded as sign of a well-shaped marriage. The first piece of the cake has to be cut by the bride so that the couple will not be childless. Today the husband has to help in that procedure, placing his hand over the bride's, the common cutting signifying that the couple announce that they will share all possessions. The bride feeding her husband the first piece is thought to be a symbolic sacrifice by means



Photo 5. Wedding chicken with a cigarette in its mouth, holding a stick decorated with olives, and surrounded by two loaves of wedding bread. Sofia, 2013. Photograph by Ivan Todorov.

of which the bride invites the bridegroom to take everything that she possesses and could offer (Mikkelson 2005). It is a sign of bad luck if somebody other than the bride cuts the first slice. In England the bride cuts the cake with a sword which she takes from the groom; she cuts a part of the first slice, after which the groom cuts the other part. The bride does not have an active role in the social activities except cutting the first slice of the cake and making a wish. (Opie, Tatem 1989: 434) Although this is an example from a very different cultural context I give this example to demonstrate how some Western customs are incorporated into contemporary Bulgarian culture almost without changing them, unlike some other ritual situations where Western customs are mixed or dissolved into local ritual system.

Prior to the cutting of the cake during the wedding rite in Bulgaria, the newlyweds cover their faces with cake cream – an action that the parents sometimes do not agreed with. One of my informants told me: “The thing that I can not approve of is that they cover their faces with cake cream and that action is performed while the background music is playing. The mother-in-law thinks that thereby their life will be sweeter.”²³ The wedding cake, as sweet food, expresses the idea of a happy life and fertility and therefore with the action of spreading of cake substance on the faces of the newlyweds apparently some of its quality will be ‘transmitted’ to them. This is additionally expressed by the gesture of mutuality in the joint cutting.

The wedding cake's function as a ritual object in the urban wedding in Bulgaria, may be regarded as a culturally defined substitution of traditional sweet ritual bread and therefore it acquires the meaning of fertility. In many urban weddings today I observed both items, cake and bread, functioning in the ritual system. The cake as a ritual object is duplicated in some weddings at which two cakes are bought and both are placed on the wedding table or are involved in the ritual dance. A similar dance was performed in the traditional Bulgarian wedding but with ritual wedding bread (*сватбен хляб*) rather than with wedding cake. Nonetheless, these objects are not replacing each other but are used in a particular sequence. Often two or three loaves of wedding bread are prepared: one of them is baked by the mother-in-law, who feeds the newlyweds small morsels; another is shop-bought and is broken by the newlyweds simulating something like wrestling. These ritual actions are performed in the restaurant, followed by the dance with the wedding cake and the wedding chicken, after which the joint cutting of the cake is performed.

It is well known that many sweet dishes operate as ritual objects in the Bulgarian wedding today – wedding cakes, ritual breads (*ритуален хляб*),²⁴ sweets, raisins, and honey. The cake itself is multiplied in some Bulgarian weddings as sometimes as many as three wedding cakes are made for one wedding ceremony. As sweet food it duplicates the symbolism of fertility, well-being and a 'sweet life', meanings, expressed by other items operating in the wedding ritual such as round ritual bread covered with honey and decorated with ornamentation and raisins, glazed with chocolate walnuts, sweets, etc. Many forms of material culture and objects with ritual significance are constructed of synonymic elements. They are organised on the principle of repetition, substitution and duplication of substances and meanings because the semantic designation of the rite is often contained in a condensed form in every one of its constituent parts (Mikov 1983: 37–42). Thus the notion of fertility is multiplied in a number of objects used in the contemporary wedding.

Analysis of the joint cutting of the cake could go further by means of a comparison with some ritual actions in the Bulgarian traditional wedding, the meanings of which can be easily read. Regarded as a rite of passage (van Gennep 1909), the marriage in traditional society is designated by many symbolically significant objects. One example is the mutual nourishment of the newlyweds that is performed not with a piece of cake, like today, but by interchange of morsels of bread and salt. For example, in the Bulgarian village of Znepole a table is laid in front of the newlyweds with only one dish, and with one fork and one spoon placed on it. Salt is placed on their knees; the groom dips a piece of bread in the salt on his wife's knee and eats it; the wife dips a piece of bread in the salt on her husband's knee and eats it. The one dish, fork and spoon placed on the table signify the unity of the newlyweds, as are the wishes that they "never be separated, be united".²⁵ An interesting comparison could be made here between this traditional custom, as documented in the archive materials, and contemporary Bulgarian weddings where a single plate and fork are placed on the table and after cutting the cake the couple serves the first slice on only one plate and eats it together using only one fork. The interpretation of the mutual nourishment with cake, which means the "beginning of the common life of the newlyweds",²⁶ is common in many cultures.

As stated by some anthropologists, sharing is a standard interpretation of food distribution in culture, although the process of cutting presents some problems because

it is ruled by a clear prescription. The joint cutting is what separates the wedding cutting from other festive cutting, for example of birthday cakes. Given the main theme of unity, of unification and of matrimony – a notion that some authors see most strikingly expressed in the Biblical image of the couple becoming “one flesh” – it is not difficult to note that two people cut the cake, which is normally the prerogative of one and thus confirms their unity (Charsley 1987: 94–110). Food cutting and apportioning for serving is not done in normal domestic conditions by two people, rather than by only one person. By this means, the bride and the groom could be seen as appropriating the cake – they apportion it, on an occasion in their lives when they are also distributors. They both make that object theirs – it belongs to them in order to share it with their guests in one situation where that activity is, in most cases, the obligation of the parents. In spite of the fact that the bride and the groom get married and are placed at the centre of the event, more often the parents take the role of hosts and the who are expected to pay for the wedding. In that situation the newlyweds are treated at the same time as guests, because the wedding party is organised and paid for by their parents, and as hosts because they cut and apportion the cake, a host’s responsibility in another situation. They offer pieces of cake to their parents as hosts offer food to their guests. Therefore there is ambiguity in the possession of this item, which is the centre of the ritual (ibid.).

Another reading of the item identifies the wedding cake with the bride, who, veiled and dressed in white, approximates the form and the colour of that sweetmeat and in this way the cake cutting could be considered metaphorically; in such a scenario the cake is the bride and its cutting the cutting and eating of the bride. Hence the cake and its cutting could be interpreted as a sexual metaphor (ibid.: 106–109). In that sense, is interesting that some urban beliefs in Bulgaria stipulate that the wedding cake should take the colours of the bride’s dress and should resemble the wedding dress in shape.

An interesting aspect, relevant to the wedding cake, are the ritual enactments involving the cake in a range of rituals, for example the dance. The sponsors dance in front of professional dancers or family members and try to bribe them or to steal the ritual objects – the cake and chicken. Hence, we could observe how an individual (or entire community) ‘enters’ into certain ritual role, which is common to many ritual practices and is regarded as a kind of a ‘play’ model (Zhivkov 1981: 23). The re-embodiment, which is considered a fundamental theatrical feature, could be observed in the performance of many rites, customs and magical actions. Usually, the performers represent different people, animals or objects although there is a lack of dialectical contraposition between stage and auditorium, which is the main focal point of every theatre (Bogatyrov 1971: 75).

In the Bulgarian traditional wedding several kinds of ritual bread are documented that are meant for different parts of the wedding ceremony. Similarly, in the contemporary wedding ceremony, two kinds of wedding cakes can be observed: the sponsor’s cake and the bridal cake. Today, the sponsor is supposed to buy back the sponsor’s cake, giving money to his opponent, but afterwards the cake is given to him as a gift and is placed in front of him on the wedding table. The central placement of the cake, and the ritual enactment are comparable with the sponsor’s stick (*кумово дръвце*) in traditional Bulgarian culture. The sponsor’s stick is a ritual object made of the branch of a fruit-tree or pine tree that is decorated with flowers, green apples and red strings. This decorated branch is fitted in a strait position in the middle of a round ritual bread cov-

ered with honey and nuts. In the traditional Bulgarian wedding the sponsor's stick is delivered to the sponsor for ransom money (*baksheesh*), is placed on the wedding table in the groom's home, and positioned in front of the sponsor (Ivanova 1984). Documental sources prove that similar ritual dance was performed in the region of the village of Provadia, where a maiden belonging to the bridal family dances *krivo horo* with the sponsor's stick and consequently the maiden gifts it to the sponsor.

I have never seen this ritual object in a contemporary wedding ceremony and my informants never mentioned it in the interviews²⁷ but the proximity of the terms designating two different objects – the sponsor's stick in traditional culture and sponsor's cake today – is interesting. Both items are sponsor's objects, belong to the sponsor, and are gifted to the sponsor or he receives them after winning the dance competition. Both objects have a round form and a sweet taste, and are decorated with flowers, fruits and nuts. This comparison could be very interesting, provided that the wedding cake is considered a Western item incorporated into Bulgarian culture in the last decades. This formal and ritual proximity between these items demonstrates the methods of transformation within the forms of material culture. Apart of the sponsor's stick, in traditional weddings was documented the existence of live chickens that were delivered to the sponsor the same way, by bargaining and by giving a redemption payment. Usually, bride's friends bargain in order to receive the cock (or chicken), which is alive and usually decorated with a towel, strings of threaded popcorn, a wreath and strings of red peppers.

On the basis of these studies, it could be assumed that the cake is a ritual item, probably involved in the process of mediation between people in the Bulgarian family; for instance, it could be a ritual way of establishing new kinship ties, perhaps between sponsors and newlyweds, i.e. it is a means of incorporation and of social communication. Sociologists who examine social networks in cross-national comparison, especially the assumption that in modern societies kin ties are loosening while non-kin ties are gaining importance in people's social networks, conclude that this assumption applies only for the northwest European cultural area while Italians, Hungarians and other nations from South and East Europe do still maintain very close kin relations (Höllinger, Haller 1990: 103–124). This can be assumed for the Bulgarian and Balkan family as well. According to ethnologists there are many indications that the Balkan family pattern maintains archaic patterns (Kaser, Halpern 1997: 63–72).

According to my fieldwork, kinship relations and in particular sponsorship continue to play a very important part in contemporary Bulgarian society. Social relationships, displayed through sponsorship today, can be juxtaposed with the traditional concept that the matrimony of the man at whose wedding one has acted as a sponsor, symbolically depends on the sponsor himself and the sponsor is obliged to assure that matrimony (Ivanova 2001: 71). In a broad sense, in traditional culture and in contemporary urban society, the wedding appears to be a reorganisation of entire kinship groups. Both in the past and today, the social statuses of newlyweds and family members are changed through the wedding. Family members are supplanted in the upper age group; for example, the maiden and the groom become wife and husband, the parents of the newlyweds become father-in-law and mother-in-law (*ibid.*: 4).

CONCLUSION

By drawing examples from various cultural contexts the dialectic of tradition and modernity is seen in this study through the prism of material culture. I think that it is obvious that the meaning of objects is not taken for granted even in today's global culture in which some objects like the wedding cake can be seen in nearly every European country. Therefore, if the meaning of objects derives from the orders into which they are incorporated, that means that the same artefact may change its implication and signification simply by being introduced into some new environment (Miller 1994: 400). Anthropologists develop the idea that the tension between homogenisation and heterogenisation of culture, seen by means of material culture studies, appears to be one of the problems of global interaction. Therefore, the new global culture can no longer be seen by the anthropologists through centre-periphery models, rather as a complex, disjunctive order. Americanisation and commoditisation of material culture has another dimension as far as forces from various metropolises when brought into new societies tend to become indigenised in one or another way (Appadurai 1996: 32).

Hence, in spite of the numerous and to some extent contradictory meanings that could be deduced from the wedding cake and dishes functioning in the contemporary wedding as ritual objects, it could be concluded that they are ritual objects, involved as mediators among members of the family. Through these objects new kinship relationships are ritually signified. In that sense, food items acquire the function of social communication. They are created for common eating, and in that sense for destruction and therefore in some respect they acquire meaning only when eaten and destroyed. As Roland Barthes points out, food is "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior" (2008: 29). Bread is not just bread – different types signify different situations. Food is a highly structured need, anthropologically speaking. The sense of food is not elaborated at the level of its cost, but rather at the level of its preparation and use (*ibid.*: 30).

The wedding cake operates in the ritual system as an expression of the idea of fertility. The common eating of the cake is common 'eating' of the values that it expresses. In this way the symbol of abundance and fertility is multiplied in a range of similarities such as form, function, preparation, and semantics objects similarly to traditional culture that operates with identities and repetitions inasmuch as many forms of ritual material culture are constructed of synonymous elements (Mikov 1983: 37–42). They are organised on the principles of repetition, mutual substitution and selection because the functional and semantic purposes of the rites are contained in a 'reduced' form in every one of its constituent parts.

Thus, the wedding cake, the wedding chicken, and the wedding bread in the Bulgarian wedding 'talk' not only about their purpose as objects, but also indicate the position of their possessor in the social space. By means of these objects, the social positions of the family members can be identified as well as their transition from one social status to another. Therefore, the order of things is culturally constructed. The fact that we not only order things but are in turn ordered by things indicates that artefacts obtain a multiplicity of meanings and identities, and that the connection between form and meaning is complex and sometimes ambiguous (Miller 1994: 406). Furthermore, objects express a certain social position that can be interpreted differently depending on the observer's

position: the position of the person who produced the object, the position of its consumer and the third position of onlooker, which sometimes leads to incongruity of the item's interpretation; therefore the item's impact is related to the fact that everybody reads the message from a particular level.

NOTES

1 This article is based on my PhD research realised at the Institute for Ethnology and Folklore Studies with the Ethnographic Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia. I studied comparable forms of material culture, and developed the structure and theoretical framework of the article at the University of Vienna thanks to an OeAD scholarship.

2 Sofia is the largest city in Bulgaria. It has a population of around 1.2 million. Stara Zagora is an important economic centre that has a population of 138,272. Svilengrad is a town situated at the border of Turkey and Greece with population of 18,132.

3 In my article I use the definition of Simon Charsley (1987) concerning the wedding cake as an item. In that sense I define it as material object, referring to its physical properties.

4 The informant is a 25-year-old university student living in Sofia. She told me about her wedding in 1999.

5 50 Bulgarian leva corresponds approximately to 25 euros and 250 leva to approximately 125 euros.

6 *Сватба*, 1996, vol. 2, pp. 3–22. All the explanations, articles and opinions in this magazine were written in Bulgarian. In my article I offer English translations.

7 The DJ (disc jockey) is normally employed by the newlyweds or by the restaurant, he generally works for discotheques and nightclubs but in recent years many DJs started working for wedding parties as well. Their tasks are to play music in the restaurant and to announce on the microphone the order of the wedding rituals, sometimes offering explanations or ironic comments in order to entertain the guests.

8 See Svatbenata torta.

9 I found this post in an Internet forum (see Tedy 2012)

10 I translated from Bulgarian a part of an interview with an artist-designer and lecturer at Sofia High School of Bakery and Confectionery Technology. She was a member of the jury of the "Wedding Cakes" contest – a presentation of bread, food and drink in Sofia. The interview was published in the Internet journal *Az-jenata.bg* (Lolova 2012).

11 *Zahranovane* is a traditional Bulgarian custom consisting of the action of putting a piece of food (normally bread) in someone's mouth (it is generally performed between two members of a family). Today it is a widespread custom and is performed during the wedding ceremony.

12 The informant is a 23-year-old student born in Svilengrad and studying in Sofia. She talked about her brother's wedding in Svilengrad city in 2001.

13 The informant is the above-mentioned woman from Svilengrad.

14 The informant is a 54-year-old art teacher, who works in a secondary school and who narrates about her son's wedding.

15 The informant is the above-mentioned 54-year-old art teacher.

16 I translate this Bulgarian word (*nadigravane*) as 'out-dance'. This is a traditional Bulgarian dance in which two or more people compete through dance. Generally, the opponents dance traditional dances, for example, *horo*.

17 The comment was written by Valentseto in an Internet forum at the Bg-mamma web portal (2010).

18 *Horo* a circle dance originating in the Balkans. The traditional Bulgarian dance *horo* does not necessarily involve being in a circle, but more commonly in a curving line. In Bulgarian tra-

ditional culture the *horo* dance had an important social role. Today more than five types of *horo* are usually danced at every Bulgarian wedding. They differ in the rhythm of the music and the steps taken.

19 The informant is a 65-year-old pensioner who worked all her life as a teacher in a secondary school teaching history and German. She told me about her daughter's wedding in Stara Zagora city in 1996.

20 The informant is a 54-year-old teacher who teaches art in a secondary school and who talks about her son's wedding.

21 The informant is the girl who narrates about the wedding in Svilengrad.

22 The informant is a 45-year-old man who works as a teacher of mathematics and in his free time works as a DJ for weddings and celebrations for some extra money. I was invited by him to a wedding ceremony where he worked as a DJ. The wedding took place in 2002 in Stara Zagora.

23 The informant is a 54-year-old teacher who talks about her daughter's wedding that took place in Stara Zagora in the year 1999.

24 Ritual bread is an indispensable component of any popular custom in traditional Bulgarian culture associated with marriage, birth, funerals, the popular calendar, medical practice and the construction of buildings. As a bloodless sacrifice, ritual bread symbolises the fertility and well-being of the family or clan. Richly decorated ritual breads are made for weddings, Christmas, Easter, and St. George's day. Ritual breads are decorated with dough birds, dough chicks, vines, the shepherd's crook, and the ploughman. Today, for almost every Bulgarian wedding, ritual bread is made or purchased. It is generally decorated with dough flowers and birds, and is covered with honey. Regarding the wedding bread see Janeva 1989.

25 Archives of the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with the Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, vol. 150, p. 16.

26 *Сватба*, 1996, vol. 6, pp. 3–24.

27 Nevertheless, I acquired a wedding photography, dated from 2008, where the way in which a young man is gifting the sponsor's stick to the newlyweds can be clearly seen.

SOURCES

Archive materials from the Archives of the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with the Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

Internet pages and forums:

Az-jenata.bg – <http://www.az-jenata.bg>

Bg-mamma – <http://www.bg-mamma.com>

MyWedding.bg – <http://www.mywedding.bg>

Сватбен Каталог – <http://www.svatbencatalog.com>

Interviews conducted between 2000 and 2004 in the possession of the author.

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