

## THE NUPTIAL RITES OF PASSAGE - REPRESENTATIVE ELEMENTS

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### Summary:

In the customs of the Romanian folk culture, the fir tree is associated to the marriage ceremony, but also to the funeral one, in both cases symbolizing "the male principle of life"<sup>2367</sup>. In the nuptial ceremony, the fir tree brought to the bride's house represents the groom. In the nuptial ceremonies from the North-Western region, the fir is used as a support for the wedding flag. The fir tree is to be found among the oldest symbols of life, symbolising the vigour and persistence of the male principle

The fir tree ritual described in the nuptial ceremonies from Moldavia and Oltenia takes place similarly with the ritual of the wedding flag from the North-Western part of the country. Our objective in this article was just an incursion into the research of the ritual of the wedding fir tree. For certain, this theme can represent the subject of a new work that opens a new research path for a subject that was not dealt with yet. The totality of actions from the two scenarios had in view the same objective: ensuring the full transition from the status of lad to a spouse, thus facilitating this transitory phase.

*Key words: the fir tree, ritual, folk, ceremony, nuptial*

In the customs of the Romanian folk culture, the fir tree is associated to the marriage ceremony, but also to the funeral one, in both cases symbolizing "the male principle of life"<sup>2368</sup>. In the nuptial ceremony, the fir tree brought to the bride's house represents the groom. In the nuptial ceremonies from the North-Western region, the fir is used as a support for the wedding flag.

Of smaller size than the monography of S.F. Marian, the work of Elena Sevastos – *Nunta la români, Studiu etnografic comparativ, Edițiunea Academiei Române, București\** [*\*The Romanian wedding, Comparative ethnographic study, Romanian Academy Edition, Bucharest*] – published in 1889 has, on the whole, an almost identical structure with the one proposed by S.F. Marian. In the four distinct sections - *Before the engagement, The actual engagement, The wedding, After the wedding* - there are no mentions regarding the flag, but the author describes de fir tree as a ritual element specific for the regions of Muntenia, Oltenia and Dobrogea. The same as in the majority of the regions where the nuptial flag ceremony is a hallmark, the fir tree ritual takes place at the groom's house, with the participation of lads and maidens. The fir tree is made of gilded papers, having figs, almonds, walnuts, hazelnuts, oranges and other fruits attached to the tree with a thread or strand<sup>2369</sup>. The wedding guests set forth from the groom's house, with the fir tree "leading" the wedding procession.

The fir tree ritual displays moments filled with various solemn speeches, profound and numerous meanings, such as the nuptial poem of the fir tree. This nuptial poem embodies the groom's message to his bride, in which descriptive elements of the ceremony are also included. In the beginning, it is described the road travelled by the *brădar\** [*TN: \*lad carrying the wedding fir tree or who dances at the ceremony*] and his group starting from the groom's house and ending at the bride's house, by evoking hyperbolically the obstacles put by the bride's group; afterwards, on the part of the groom, there are communicated the honouring commandments of the fir tree and the preparing commandments for receiving the groom. The "speaking" of the fir tree – accompanying an exchange of ritual symbols – designates another step on the road of closeness between the two young people, of the transition to the new status of spouses, through the medium of certain proofs ritualized by love.

<sup>2367</sup> Ivan Evseev, *Simboluri folclorice, Lirica de dragoste și ceremonialul de nuntă*, Editura Facla\* [*\*Folkloric symbols, Love lyrics and the wedding ceremony, "Facla" Publishing House*], Timișoara, 1987, p. 138

<sup>2368</sup> Ivan Evseev, *Simboluri folclorice, Lirica de dragoste și ceremonialul de nuntă*, Editura Facla\* [*\*Folkloric symbols, Love lyrics and the wedding ceremony, "Facla" Publishing House*], Timișoara, 1987, p. 138

<sup>2369</sup> Sevastos, Elena, *Nunta la români, Studiu etnografic comparativ, Edițiunea Academiei Române, București\** [*\*The Romanian wedding, Comparative ethnographic study, Romanian Academy Edition, Bucharest*], 1889, p. 90

In *Obiceiuri Nupțiale din Moldova, Tipologie și Corpus de Texte*<sup>2370</sup> \* [*\*Moldavian Nuptial Customs, Typology and Corpus of Texts*], in the subchapter - *Bradul și pomul de cununie*\* [*\*The fir tree and the wedding tree*], Silvia Ciubotaru describes this ritual in the localities of Prăjeni – Botoșani county, Cucuteni – Iași county, Vlădeni – Iași county and Moișă – Suceava county. Here below, we will depict the nuptial scenario in the specified regions in order to look into the similarities and differences between the flag ceremony and the fir tree ceremony in different geographical areas, but with similar meanings and a common objective: the easing of the transitory phase from the status of lad to that of a spouse.

The fir tree is included in the sequences with the bringing of the hen, unveiling the bride and with the dedication of the knot-shaped breads in the house of the groom and bride's godparents. In the hen-related sequence, this bird is given to the groom in exchange of the fir tree. When the fir tree is received, humorous extempore verses can be heard:

”O bătut vântul din jos,  
 Și-o rădicat bradu sus!<sup>2371</sup>  
 Acest brad frumos rotat,  
 Cu crengile la pământ lăsat,  
 Nimeni nu-l va putea ridica,  
 Decât eu cu-ntreaga oaste-a mea!<sup>2372</sup>  
 Acest toiogaș di brad,  
 Trebuiești îmbrăcat!  
 Nici cu fir, nici cu mătasă!  
 Numai c-o basma frumoasă,  
 Di la cucoana mireasă!  
 Fie și de in  
 Și-i fie bucuria deplin!”<sup>2373</sup>

At this moment, the bride has a handkerchief prepared and ties it up at the top of the fir tree and a specific dance – *hobut* – begins to unfold in the presence of the wedding guests.

In Pleșani – Botoșani county, *vornicul*\* [*\*TN: In Romania, ceremony chief at the folk weddings*] gives the fir tree to the bride and says:

”Bună sara, bună sara,  
 Domnișoarî mireasî,  
 Ci stai după masî,  
 Ca o garoafî frumoasî!  
 Iaca, mirili-o vinit  
 Și-l îmbraci,  
 Cî –i gol goluț!  
 Și-l îmbrăcaț,  
 Cî cum va fi îmbrăcat bradu,  
 Așa va fi îmbrăcat și bărbatu!”<sup>2374</sup>

<sup>2370</sup> Silvia Ciubotaru, in *Obiceiuri Nupțiale din Moldova, Tipologie și Corpus de Texte*, Editura Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza\* [*\*Nuptial Customs from Moldavia, Typology and Corpus of Texts*, Publishing House of ”Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University], Iași, 2009, p. 330

<sup>2371</sup> Idem, Ibidem, p. 330

<sup>2372</sup> Idem, Ibidem, p. 331

<sup>2373</sup> Idem, Ibidem, p. 331

<sup>2374</sup> Idem, Ibidem, p. 517

or:

– Domnișoarî, mireasî,  
 Poftim acest brad,  
 Di Dumnezeu blastămat,  
 Ramurile s-o uscat,  
 Frunzăli i-o picat,  
 Șî sî ceri de la dumneavoastrî,  
 Cinstitî mireasî, îmbrăcat!  
 Și cum va fi îmbrăcat bradu,  
 Așa va fi și bărbatu!”<sup>2375</sup>

At this point, the bride puts the handkerchief on the fir tree, and *vornicul* dances with the fir tree around the group of wedding guests. To be noted that beauty is rendered graphic with the help of flowers, by comparing the bride with the carnation. And similarly, the groom is like the fir tree. The efficiency is increased through the wide comparison between two similar actions, the compared terms being two nouns: the fir tree and the groom. One comparison is introduced through the conjunction *cum*\* [*TN: as*], while the other one starts intentionally with *așa*\* [*TN: so*]... This type of comparison can be seen often in the Homeric poems.

In Deleni – Iași county, when the hen is brought, *vornicul* brings the fir tree to the bride and says:

”Acest toiegel di brad,  
 Di nouăcezi di ani căutat,  
 Nimi n-o fost vrednic,  
 Di-mbrăcat,  
 Dicât giupâneasa mireasî!  
 S-o fălit că l-o-mbrăca,  
 Drept ciudi, vom videa!”<sup>2376</sup>

The bride puts an embroidered kerchief on the fir tree, *vornicul* takes it and says:

”Di nouăzeci di ani căutat,  
 Nimeni n-o fost vrednic di-mbrăcat,  
 Decât giupâneasa mireasî,  
 S-o fălit că l-a-mbraca!  
 Șî, drept ciudî, l-o-mbrăcat,  
 Rog pi nunul ceal mare,  
 Dimprenî cu toți mesenii,  
 Și-mi dea o mână di agiutori!”<sup>2377</sup>

Out of the need to have a more empathic expressiveness, the folk creator uses the exaggeration. This folkloric exaggeration introduced through the opposition *nimeni*\* [*TN: no one*]... *decât*\* [*TN: \*but*] is intended to draw the attention on what is unusual, thus denoting the singling out. This *ex abrupto* approach of the theme is all in all a folklore-specific feature and serves for a better delimitation from reality, accounting for an insulation process, a sort of delimitating frame where the mirrored fact can be better grasped.

<sup>2375</sup> Idem, Ibidem, p. 517

<sup>2376</sup> Idem, Ibidem, p. 517

<sup>2377</sup> Idem, Ibidem, p. 518

The same unfolding of the ritual can be found in Pârcovaci – Iași county; when the hen is brought to the bride and groom's table, the groom takes the hen and tears it, and at this point *vornicul* lifts the fir tree up and says:

”Acest brad nant,  
Di 99 di ani uscat,  
Multi țări o-mblat!  
Și nime n-o fost vrednic  
Di a-l îmbrăca!  
Ș-am auzât,  
Cî numai domnul mire  
Și jupâneasa mireasî  
Sânt vrednici di a-l îmbrăca!”<sup>2378</sup>

The bride puts a handkerchief on the fir tree, and *vornicul* says for the second time:

”Acest brad nant,  
Di 99 di ani uscat,  
Multi țări o-mblat  
Și nime n-o fost vrednic  
Di a-l îmbrăca!  
Numai jupâneasa mireasî,  
O fost vrednicî și l-o-mbrăcat!  
Dacă nu credeți,  
Puneți mâna și vedeți!”<sup>2379</sup>

In order for the fir tree to be worthy of admiration and the proper worship, the folk creator makes use of the hyperbole. The hyperbole serves for the extension of dimensions in order to differentiate them from the ordinary ones.

In Bobulești – Botoșani county, the fir tree ritual is marked by the sequence designed to the *vornicel*\* [*\*TN: In the Romanian villages, a lad charged with the invitation and treating of the guests at the rural weddings, with the announcement of gifts and delivering the nuptial poem*] named the lifting of the fir tree:

“Bună zâua, bună zâua!  
Horî mândrî și voioasî!  
Pe-această masî frumoasî,  
O căzut un măr frumos  
Ș-un brad luminos  
Cini va fi vrednic  
Și puternic  
Sî ridici năframa,  
Di noauî meșteri lucați !  
Di noauî ani călcați!  
Dumnezezău în ziua dintâi,  
O făcut ceriu și pământu!  
A doua zi l-o-mpodobit,  
Cu luna, soarili și stelili!

<sup>2378</sup> Idem, Ibidem, p. 518

<sup>2379</sup> Idem, Ibidem, p. 518

A treia zi o făcut pe Adam.  
 Și văzând că nu-i bine  
 Să locuiască  
 Om sângur pe pământ,  
 I-o dat somn lui Adam.  
 O luat oasă din oasăli lui,  
 Carni din carnea lui  
 Și-o făcut  
 Pe strămoașa noastră Eva  
 Și i-o blagoslovit:  
 Creștii și vă înmulțiți,  
 Umpleți pământul  
 Și-l stăpâniți!  
 Și de-atunci pân-acum,  
 Mulți mai mulți crescură,  
 Pân-au ajuns la acești doi tineri,  
 Care stau cu capetele plecate,  
 Cu fețele rușinate,  
 Se roagă cu smerenie,  
 Să le dați blagoslovenie,  
 Căci binecuvântarea părinților,  
 Întărește casele fiilor!  
 Noi bradul l-am închinat,  
 Năframa am ridicat  
 Să fie-ntr-un ceas bun,  
 Cu noroc”.<sup>2380</sup>

In these verses, we come across the metaphor of the apple – a fruit packed with erotic implications – which is associated with the biblical motif of creation of the first human beings, as well as the cosmic motifs: the moon, the sun, and the stars. The verbal abundance is a straightforward testimony of vigour filled with efficient virtues.

Unlike these localities where the fir tree is brought by the *vornic* to the bride, in Poiana Mărului – Iași county, the fir tree is put on the bride and groom's table, and these humorous extempore verses can be heard when lifting the fir tree up:

”La tânăru nostru împărat,  
 Pe masă,  
 Îi un brad cu cetina grasă,  
 Cu cetina de argint,  
 Cu ramurili pân-n pământ!  
 S-o pornit vânturili,  
 Di pe tăți munți!  
 O vinit un vânt di la răsărit  
 Și bradu nu s-o clintit,  
 O mai vinit unu de la asfințit  
 Și bradu pe cinstita masă  
 L-o prăvăli!  
 Iar dumneavoastră, mesăni,  
 Dacă vreți să mă agiutați,

<sup>2380</sup> Idem, Ibidem, p. 516-517

Odată bradul să ni-l ridicăți!”<sup>2381</sup>.

The wedding tree is made of a stick of about 2 metres at the bride's place. It was embellished with flowers, four candles and *șuvăietii* (beads) were surrounding it, and the basil was placed at the top: "That mace represented the honour of the wedding. Once the bride was brought into the house, the groom had to break the mace on his knees. The part that was covered with flowers was kept in the house, and the empty one was thrown over the house. The part covered with flowers represented the house's luck"<sup>2382</sup>.

In Moişa – Suceava county, the tree is made of a plum tree decorated with apples, walnuts, candies, chocolate, biscuits, a towel and two cups. This tree – named the wedding tree – is given along with the knot-shaped breads to the groom and bride's godparents before the wedding<sup>2383</sup>.

In Milcov, two fir trees were made – one was put at the groom's door, and the other one at the bride's door: "There was a time when the groom had to plant a tree for the luck of the new family, but nowadays this custom is less frequently. But back in the day, it used to be practiced. The young people planted the tree and watched it growing, believing that their marriage would be the same"<sup>2384</sup>.

The same fir tree ritual can be found in Oltenia - Vâlcea county, already described since 1928 in the work *Nunta în județul Vâlcea*\* [*The wedding in Vâlcea county*], with an Account presented by Constantin Brăiloiu<sup>2385</sup>. The *making* of the fir tree takes place at the groom's house with the participation of young and old people in the village. The activity starts only after the groom's friends are treated with plum brandy. The fir tree is decorated with basil and flowers made of crepe paper. After ending this activity, the fir tree is sunk into a bread specially prepared for this moment and then placed on the table in the middle of the room. The young people start to dance the *hora* around it, after which the table with the fir tree on it is moved to another room. The next morning, *brădarul* will bring the fir tree to the bride and will put it up on the house.

Mounted on a shod horse, with flowers on the halter, holding in his hands a cart whip, and a handgun at the waist belt, *brădarul* sets forth to the groom's house. To be noted the resemblance between the *brădar* and the hero in the folk tales. Much like a fairy tale character, *brădarul* begins this journey – the travelled path – being equipped with 3 props playing the role of adjuvants that can be met in any folk fairy tale: the horse – a real travelling companion, a messenger of yearning, a wise guide for the fairy tale hero, the whip and the weapon that will carry through different functions when walking on the path and will help him in fulfilling his role. These elements are specific to the *brădar* and are missing from the props of the standard bearer.

Arrived at the bride's house, he announces his arrival by firing three shots upwards. The young lady's parents open the door for him, and the bride's father welcomes him with this greeting:

”Bine-ai venit,  
Bine-ai gândit,  
La noi bine-ai statornicit!  
Și bradului mă închin cu multă sănătate,  
La fața dumitale și la acelu ce te-a trimis. Amin!”<sup>2386</sup>

<sup>2381</sup> Idem, Ibidem, p. 518

<sup>2382</sup> Idem, Ibidem, p. 331

<sup>2383</sup> Idem, Ibidem, p. 332

<sup>2384</sup> Idem, Ibidem, p. 332

<sup>2385</sup> G. Fira, *Nunta în județul Vâlcea*, Editura Cultura Națională, București\* [*The wedding in Vâlcea county, National Culture Publishing House, Bucharest*], 1928, p. 11

<sup>2386</sup> Idem, Ibidem, p. 13

*Brădarul*, getting close to the house, says the words of the fir tree:

”Tânărul nostru împărat,  
De dimineață s-a sculat!  
Și plecând prin sat la noi,  
M-a găsit la o turmă de oi!  
Și tare m-a rugat,  
Să fiu brădar,  
Ca mândru arțar!  
Să-i iau truda de-o noapte,  
Stropită cu lacrimi de lapte.  
Ș-așa am plecat,  
Cu murdu-nstrunat,  
Cu paloșu – ntr-o mână,  
Cu bradu-n altă mână!  
Ș-am trecut văi,  
Am ocolit pe după clăi,  
Pe drumuri nebătute,  
Prin ape nescăzute,  
Ca să ajung la dumneavoastră”.<sup>2387</sup>

Taking over the basic techniques from the traditional folk genres, the words of the fir tree weave elements of folk lyrics with elements of cult lyrics\* [TN: \*type of lyrics where the author is known or which displays singularity], thus being able to identify the influences of written literature through the usage of comparisons, recitals and through the novelty of artistic images. Likewise, the intersubjective aspect remains well-tied in the thinking system and sensitivity of folkloric type. Through the entire ensemble of meanings, values and images, the verses are linked to the universe of mentalities, folk customs and beliefs, displaying symbols crystallised over the centuries.

In the lyrics of the *brădar*, the central motif – the fir tree – represents the male symbol par excellence. The fir tree appears in comparisons meant to underline the proud stance of the groom, his youth and vigour. Symbolising the undying youth, the fir tree is present in the comparisons referring to the lad's portrait.

The semantic line joining the three images – fir tree – distaff (met in Moldavian villages, but also in certain localities from Sălaj) – lad – is based on a double metaphoric and metonymic transfer. The fir tree is to be found among the oldest symbols of life, symbolising the vigour and persistence of the male principle. The Romanian ethnology is filled with many folkloric works and materials designed to confirm the existence of a cult of the fir tree in the Carpathian-Danubian region: R. Vulcănescu, *Coloana cerului*, Ed. Academiei R.S.R., București\* [\*Column of the sky, R.S.R. Academy Publishing House, Bucharest], 1972, p. 50-56; T. Herseni, *Forme străvechi de cultură poporană*, Ed. Dacia\* [\*Ancient forms of popular culture, "Dacia" Publishing House], Cluj-Napoca, 1977, p. 181-185; G. Mușu, *Din mitologia tracilor*, Ed. Cartea Românească, București\* [\*From the Thracian mythology, "Cartea Românească" Publishing House, Bucharest], 1982, p. 106-109; O. Papadima, *Literatura populară română. Din istoria și poetica ei*, EPL, București\* [\*The Romanian folk literature. From its history and poetics, EPL, Bucharest], 1968, p. 85-86; N. Boboc, *Motivul premioritic în lumea colindelor*, Ed. Facla\* [\*The pre-pastoral motif in the universe of Christmas carols, "Facla" Publishing House], Timișoara, 1985, p. 159-163.

<sup>2387</sup> Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 13

The monographic description - *Nuntă la români*\* [*\*The Romanian wedding*] written by S. F. Marian in 1890<sup>2388</sup> assigns two pages to the subchapter - *The fir tree*. We find here the green fir tree bushes serving for the decoration of the bride's carriage in certain parts of Transylvania. The day when the carriage is prepared is known as the fir tree day<sup>2389</sup>. Likewise, in Bucovina, the green needles of the fir tree are used in the decoration of the groom and bride's houses. In Dobrogea, the ethnographer notices the presence of the tree – the fir tree – embellished with flowers and coloured paper, carried by two lads in front of the bride's carriage. They dance the fir tree dance until entering the church. Both the tree – the fir tree – from the weddings in Dobrogea and the fir tree bushes from Bucovina and Transylvania signify rejoicing *i.e.* just like everyone enjoys the fir tree's greenness, so should the wedding guests and especially the ones to get married rejoice, praying for God to give them a joyous life together and to be for a very long time strong and sturdy as the fir tree, which is always green, be it summer or winter<sup>2390</sup>.

We've reached the conclusion that the fir tree ritual described in the nuptial ceremonies from Moldavia and Oltenia takes place similarly with the ritual of the wedding flag from the North-Western part of the country. Having been observed from one region to another, these rituals present surprising similarities as regards the unfolding, practices and the props. Our objective in this article was just an incursion into the research of the ritual of the wedding fir tree. For certain, this theme can represent the subject of a new work that opens a new research path for a subject that was not dealt with yet. The totality of actions from the two scenarios had in view the same objective: ensuring the full transition from the status of lad to a spouse, thus facilitating this transitory phase. We can conclude from the studied material that the two rituals take place before the proper wedding, with the participation of young people.

TN – translator's note

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<sup>2388</sup> Marian, Simion Florea, *Nunta la români. Studiu istorico-etnografic comparativ*, Editura Grai și suflet – Cultura Națională, București\* [*\*The wedding at the Romanian people. Comparative historico-ethnographic study*, Speech and soul Publishing House – National Culture, Bucharest], 1995, p. 264-265

<sup>2389</sup> Idem, Ibidem, p. 264

<sup>2390</sup> Idem, Ibidem, p. 265

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