Carneval Customs in the Lobor Region

Summary

Lobor is a town in Hrvatsko Zagorje, fifty miles or so from Zagreb. It is the burrough seat for nine neighboring villages, some of which have almost merged with Lobor. At the turn of the century Lobor was the parish center, with jurisdiction over about fifteen villages. A monograph on the life and customs of the people of the Lobor region was written in this period by parish priest Josip Kotarski [Kotarski, 1915, 1917, 1918]. The author's research of carnival and other customs in the Lobor region was conducted from 1974 to 1984, and she started with Kotarski's article. She first tried to establish how well known the customs that Kotarski registered are to the current population of Lobor, distinguishing between customs that are still practiced and those that people still recall. She then tried to determine possible changes from Kotarski's day to the present and register the current state of carneval customs, following the changes that ensued in the course of her years of study.

There are three main groups of customs that Kotarski recorded. The first are facts about what one should or shouldn't do on Carnival Tuesday. These are data on customary procedures founded on certain beliefs, that are done with the intent of insuring prosperity in farming and personal lives, as well as facts on bans or actions forbidden on that day, in order to avoid undesirable consequences. Information on the food prepared for Carnival Tuesday can also be associated with this group, for the selection of these dishes is far from chance; it is part of an obligatory, or at least desirable inventory of Carnival Tuesday, and the dishers serve other purposes besides mere nutrition.

The second group of data in Kotarski's text consists of adages with which weather conditions and other forecasts are made, and third group of data is on masks, costumes and the routes made by costumed people.

Most of the information that Kotarski recorded on carneval customs is familiar to the residents of the Lobor Region, but not all of these have survived as living customs; they remain a part of living memory. The largest number of data in Kotarski's text are on masks and routes made by costumed people, and such customs also dominate today in the carnival. In this research project several carneval customs have been registered that, according to the memory of the older generation informers, must have existed during Kotarski's time, but he failed to mention then [for example small groups of masked men who go from house to house, draw a circle on the ground with a stick, dance and express good wishes for the turnip harvest].
About twenty years ago the central event of the carnival activity in Lobor and its surrounding area became the carnival wedding. The carnival wedding is described by Kotarski as well. The continuity of the carnival wedding in Lobor regional customs was never brought into question. The fact that it was occasionally not practiced, during, for example, the war and post-war years, was due to circumstances beyond their control, like in places other than Lobor. The changes that they experienced are more quantitative than qualitative: the number of participants and the forms of their organization have changed, but the basic subject matter always remains the same. The carnival wedding really reached its zenith in the Lobor region in the 1960s. Then the carnival events were organized by small groups of agile local people, who gathered together informally and spontaneously. In the 1970s the carnival embraced forms of organization which the broader society respected and provided support for. The inhabitants of Lobor and its surrounding villages founded the Lobor Culture and Art Society in 1973 with a particularly lively brass band section. The society has taken over organization of the carnival events, of which the carnival wedding was still the most important. Organizationally the carnival wedding was thus raised to the level of cultural activity, a cultural performance, with support [financially as well] from social organizations. Changes in organization resulted in changes in the carnival wedding as well, but they have occurred gradually; the basic content of the Lobor carnival wedding has still not changed in essence.

Participants in the carnival events are not just those who live in Lobor and surrounding villages, but also those who have moved away temporarily or permanently from the area, due to employment or schooling in near-by or more distant industrial centers, and abroad. One gets the impression that working emigrants abroad [guest workers], and some of the Lobor inhabitants living in other cities and in Zagreb, have never really become part of their new environment or felt at home there, so they compensate for this by coming back to take active part in the life of their native region. Individuals show considerable initiative, organization and other ambitions.

In Kotarski's time women did not take part in the carnival wedding. In the post-war years they have gradually begun to get more involved in carnival events: first by joining the procession in small groups or individually among the other masked participants, and then by joining the main actors of the carnival wedding, among the "wedding party" and as the entourage of the "bride" [who continues to be played by a man]. The total number of participants in the carnival wedding has increased with time, but among them are most of the obligatory figures.
mentioned by Kotarski. Where once there were tambouritzas or improvised musical accompaniment, today is the impressive, continuous music accompaniment of the Lobor brass band.

The route taken by the modern carneval parade covers more territory than just the center of Lobor. It passes through several villages and covers distances of a number of kilometers, imitating the routes of real wedding processions: from the house of the "groom" it goes to the house of the "bride", and then the "wedding party" stops at a number of places, in front of the homes of prominent individuals, at inns and stores, where they are treated to drinks and food. They always stop at the parish residence and the former castle of the Keglević Counts where there is now an institution for the aged and ailing. For years now the carnival has an arrangement with the administration of the institution: the carneval wedding cheers up the patients and staff of the institution, and in return they are treated to food and beverages [sometimes the castle serves as the home of the "bride" where the "wedding party" picks her up]. In order to cover the distances it must, the carnival has been motorized; outside of Lobor its participants drive for the occasion in adapted trailers pulled by tractors, and when they reach each major place, they get down from their vehicles and form a procession according to an established order and go the rest of the way on foot. The procession of the carneval wedding ends with a "wedding ceremony" held in the middle of Lobor. The "marriage ceremony" used to be "performed" before the gathered crowds and other participants without particular preparation, to be later raised to a stage built for the purpose, equipped with a loud speaker system. Today the carneval wedding ends with entertainment in the social hall [at the Fire Station or Hunting Lodge].

The article presents a detailed analysis of the composition and route of the carneval wedding procession, the equipment of the carneval wedding party, the verbal content of the carneval wedding, performances of the Lobor carneval wedding outside Lobor [at a hotel, and performances on television and radio], and other carneval events are described in Lobor and the surrounding region.

In closing, the author discusses the role and meaning of the contemporary Lobor carneval customs. In the Lobor carneval wedding it is easy to recognize a search for identity in one's native region, as well as attempts at re-evaluating traditions. It is also easy to see that the people of Lobor, with the help of the inverted world of the carnival, want to announce their existence to the world. Their customs, which were hardly known beyond their villages, are now centralized in Lobor from where they go out into the world. Today's Lobor community consists of the
eight villages of the Lobor Burrough, and today's carnaval
customs reflect this community, confirming that it is not just
an administrative, but a living entity, with all the advantages
and drawbacks, benefits and conflicts that emerge from such a
community. Individuals from outside, those who have left this
community, return to it to assume prominent positions in the
carnaval events, and thereby, in the hierarchy of the community;
they wish to reinstate their identity in this community, at
home. In a new environment, in a large city and abroad they can
not count on such prominent roles and their skills and talents
[music, performing, organizational] will not be called upon or
valued in that environment.

The Lobor carnaval customs of the past were important in the
sphere of cult and entertainment; cult and magic belonged to the
sphere of power, although not human power, but a supernatural,
abstract and certainly a slow, immediately harmless power.
Today's carnaval events are in good part entertainment; only
fragments of the cult and magic elements remain, but the sphere
of power is present in a new, concrete form. Socially entrenched
and acknowledged forms of organization of cultural activities
that the people of Lobor turned to primarily for the necessary
funding, brought them, aside from financial support, a social
evaluation of their activities, a social repute, and through this,
power of sorts. Not a great deal, but power, nonetheless. It is
therefore no wonder that an observer of many years notes chan-
ges in the cast, conflicts of interest, attempts of individuals and
groups to maintain a decisive role in organizing the Lobor
carnaval events, as well as intolerance, disappointment, com-
petitive interaction. One needn't, of course exaggerate in this,
these are not pivotal issues, but they are not chance nor entirely
distinct from the greater community and society as a whole;
moreover they are a reflection of certain phenomena in the
global society as such.

[Translated by Ellen Elias-Bursać]