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"BUTCHERING BEEF"  
(On a delicate nuptial custom)

Summary

The article discusses a modern nuptial custom in the village of Lobar, in Croatian Zagorje. It is difficult to establish whether the custom was known and practiced in the past. Ethnological literature does not mention it, and it is not included in a description of nuptial customs from the same village written at the beginning of the century (Kotarski 1915, 1917, 1918). The beef butchering goes on at night, when the newlyweds retire: a group of boys on a hill above the village imitate the butchering and preparation (chopping up into pieces) of a steer (calf). Shouting, they discuss who will get each cut of the imaginary meat among their neighbors, and they pretend that they are chopping off the pieces while instead they hit a tree; in the silence of the night the entire village can hear their revels. The principle of dividing up the "meat" is that the parts of the animal allude to a certain quality or fault in the person or family they refer to, or an allusion to some event related to that person (for example they will save the hooves for a bow-legged woman, a woman chaser will get the rump, and an old bachelor will get the balls). The comments and allusions heard in this sound performance ought to be light and witty, with the objective of entertaining those who listen, they might "tease" those they refer to, but shouldn't insult them. However the custom can be quite unpleasant for those referred to and their families, and the commentary is often insulting.

In relation to this custom, there are several ethnologically relevant questions to pose:

1. Was it perhaps omitted from the writings from the beginning of the century because a priest did the recording (the parish priest) or does the custom date to a somewhat later period?

2. Can this custom be observed from the point of view of a conflict of interest between the individual and the community or as a case of conflict between various systems of norms?

3. Might it be related to other customs and folklore phenomena from the same region, such as: a) noise making and practical jokes during the first nuptial night; b) jokes customary while carving the roast turkey at a wedding, the pieces of which are also intended for certain people, with joking commentary in prose or verse; c) the fictitious butchering (and possibly distribution of the meat) that is performed as a play or dramatic scene at weddings or carnivals, and is also known as a child's game?

The butchering and preparation of an animal (steer) and the distribution of its meat with joking commentary, related specifically to a wedding, is the common element shared by all these occasions; although we do not know how to explain it now, their similarities are striking.

The author has recorded, along with the "butchering of beef", several other similar, delicate details related to weddings, which also allude to the loss of the bride's virginity and recall customs known elsewhere for the first morning after the wedding, when proof of the bride's virginity is sought.

(Translated by Ellen Elias-Bursac)