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# "BUTCHERING BEEF" ON A DELICATE NUPTIAL CUSTOM

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**A contemporary recording of a delicate nuptial custom motivated the author to pose several questions relevant to ethnology on the relationship of the recorder and his record as well as with problems of interpreting that record. Comparisons arise with other customs and folklore phenomena; they share a fictitious or true slaughtering of an animal (usually cattle, a heifer) and dividing up the meat accompanied by witty commentary. The "Butchering Beef" and other recorded wedding customs allude to the defloration of the bride, which is the source of their delicacy. Perhaps for this reason there are no such recordings in the Yugoslav ethnological literature.**

In the *Zbornik za narodni život i običaje Južnih Slavena* (On the Folk Life and Customs of the South Slavs) that came out in five volumes between 1915 and 1918, a monograph was published about Lobor, i.e. the Lobor parish, that then encompassed fifteen villages with its center in the town of Lobor, where, the parish priest of that period Josip Kotarski compiled it based on Radić's *Osnova,* (Principles) (Radić, 1897). Kotarski was born near Samobor, and first served in Lobor as a chaplain, while later, from 1881 to 1922 he was parish priest.*

Since 1974 I have been visiting Lobor and the surrounding villages from time to time

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with the intention of researching the customs. Based on Kotarski's recordings I was mostly studying the carnival customs (Rajković, 1986), with a side interest in several other topics. I attempted to explore on several themes how much had been preserved at the time of my research from what Kotarski recorded, and then I aimed to establish possible changes that took place in the meanwhile and record the current state of individual custom. This research strategy came out of my previous study of customs, during which I met with the need to situate my information about customs in a time framework, in order to date them as accurately as possible. Examining how familiar the information from Kotarski's recording was to the current population of Lobor, I first had to distinguish between what had been preserved in living memory, i.e. the fund of knowledge about customs, and what was still alive in practice.

Here I will be speaking about an element of nuptial customs, in order to shed at least partial light on it from the aspect of the overall problem of researching customs. This theme is somewhat related to the theme of carnival customs: it is related by the circumstance that in Lobor, as part of the carnival costuming, a mock wedding party appears. This carnival wedding experienced changes that are due, in part, to changes in the real nuptial custom from the beginning of the century to the present day. On the other hand, the carnival wedding has acquired over the last decade the partial significance of a culture and art event which receives support from social organizations, which has elevated their custom for the Lobor inhabitants to a higher level, and has brought them acknowledgement from outside their community. It seems that this circumstance has effected the Lobor population in the sense that it has effected their awareness of the customs and increased their readiness to talk about them, even when these are delicate details, such as the ones I will touch upon here.

When I talked with one informant, it happened that I failed to notice his attempt to tell me about a particular nuptial custom; I realized this only later, as I listened to the tape recording. This has happened to me in the past, and it probably happens to other researchers who work with a recording: due to concentration on the subject of study, on the questions that must be asked, channeling and urging the informant on, we do not notice when he or she is trying to tell us something else, usually something that we haven't planned on, something we know nothing about, and didn't know to ask. I managed to uncover this bypassed theme, however, during the same site visit, because it came so naturally to the informants that it disclosed itself. So this is how I heard the details of a nuptial custom that Kotarski did not register, and I know of no registration anywhere else in ethnological literature. Here is a descriptive model of this custom, compiled on the basis of several sources:

When the newlyweds go to bed after the wedding celebration, a group of young men up on a hill above Lobor "butcher beef" or "chop beef". This happens at night, so usually nothing can be seen. All that can be heard are the sounds. First they blow a horn, trumpet or make some other commotion to draw attention to themselves. Then they begin to call to one another negotiating about how to cut up the meat of the supposedly butchered steer, or rather heifer or calf. They act out the cutting by pounding on a tree. In shouts they discuss who will get what, and certain parts of the butchered animal can be designated for an explicitly named individual or family, or the division of the meat reminds them of some event related to that person, which may be supported by additional commentary. Commentaries and allusions should be witty and light, with the intent of arousing predictable associations and entertain those who listen, while possibly "stinging" those who are named, but not insulting them. The performers, usually from the household that is giving the wedding, are then sent food and

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drink, with the expectation that the joking will stop.

These are the facts that seem to be repeated from source to source. The talkers also share, to a certain degree, the joking tone with which they talk about it, with which they hope to convey the humor of the event, and some claim that this is an entertaining game. The examples that they state do not seem so, even if we take into consideration the relativity and differences in what "funny" means. For example a lame man or woman with a crooked leg will be given the leg, to another woman whom they ridicule in a different way for her hair-do they will give the head, a ladies' man will get the hind quarters, while a bachelor is given "that thing" - as my informants told me, though commenting that when the performance is authentic, the real words are used. They interpreted for me the meaning of the scene, its connection to the wedding and the first nuptial night, when it is held. The idea is based on another association, that ought to connect two parallel events: the bride's loss of virginity and the acted butchering of a heifer.

It is possible that a live and successful performance of this event might be judged, according to criteria shared by the Lobor inhabitants, as joking, entertaining and not insulting, or at least they might consider it that from the point of view of public opinion in the Lobor community. It is something else to listen to the audio performance with the ears of someone who has been mentioned, someone who is a butt of the joking. One girl from Lobor told me how she listened with fear to the nocturnal performance, worried about whether her family would be mentioned, what part they would be assigned, and what would surface as a result, and the next day and later be commented and re-told. I did not have a chance to talk with anyone who had been personally mentioned in an unpleasant context, or perhaps I did, but they didn't care to mention it.

With these considerations I am touching upon an issue that I consider ethnologically relevant in terms of the described phenomenon. It could be considered from the aspect of a clash of interests between the individual and the community or as a case of a conflict of various systems of norms. Hermann Bausinger wrote about something similar in certain customs which were merciless in terms of the individual (for example ridicule and persecution of pregnant girls). Not only did the community used them in the Sixties of this century, but the community was granted the advantage in subsequent court proceedings because the local tradition was given the upper hand over written law. Even ethnology had a hand in it as well, by writing in praise of such customs (Bausinger, 1972: 129-135).

Since Kotarski makes no mention in his monography of the described procedure, the question arises of whether this was a custom in his period, or Kotarski neglected to write about it for certain reasons. Since the parish residence is centrally located, such a thing could never have taken place in Lobor without Kotarski hearing it. My recordings apply exclusively to Lobor. In other villages I did not inquire about this. And at this point, I cannot conclude whether the custom was practiced during Kotarski's time. In general, the informants state that the custom dates back to earlier times. Attempts to determine more closely the periods, based on statements of concrete cases from the lives of the informants did not provide reliable results, because for understandable reasons they were reluctant to talk about their personal experience with it. I did not intend to discuss any final results, here, rather the point was to mention an unexpected recording and try to shed light on it in ethnological terms.

The described event could be related to the customs of the first nuptial night that we know to happen after the newlyweds retire, that boisterous jokes are included about the newlyweds, or noise is simply made, that young men make the noise and that they may be

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pacified with some gift. In his description of the newlyweds as they retire in Lobor, Kotarski recorded that at that moment musicians at the door of the *chamber* where the newlyweds have gone play their instruments and sing:

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| Stara majka hižo zmeče, | Old mother sweeps the cottage |
| Mlada sneha spi; | Young daughter-in-law sleeps; |
| Stara majka kašu hajka, | Old Mother cooks the porridge, |
| Mlada sneha spi. | Young daughter-in-law sleeps. |
| | (Kotarski, 1917/2: 211) |

Elsewhere in Hrvatsko Zagorje (NW Croatia) it has been recorded that musicians and the wedding party make bawdy jokes and they must be pacified with gifts (Rajković, 1973: 188).

Regardless of whether further research will more precisely determine the age of this nuptial occurence in Lobor, it is fact that this custom is side by side in the consciousness of Lobor inhabitants with the other customs. The occurence with the "heifer" is somewhat reminiscent of a nuptial custom from the same area: the humorous carving of a roast turkey, the parts of which are also intended for certain people. Kotarski registered that at a wedding, after midnight, the 'elder carved' the turkey and musicians played music and sang a song that describes the procedure with humor. Here is one of several recorded verses from this song:

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|---|---|
| Rež'te ga pri kuku, | Carve it near the hip, |
| Dajte mome Jurku; | Give it to my Pip; |
| Režite ga, režite ga, | Carve it, carve it, |
| Oček starešina. | Father Elder. |
| | (Kotarski, 1917/2: 211) |

Elsewhere, however, joking speeches have been recorded on the same theme at the same moment of the wedding (Kozina 1970, 44-46; Bošković-Stulli 1972), and in certain versions of this nuptial event there is considerable similarity to the carving of the "heifer". While parts of the turkey are served to individuals as dictated by the rhyme in the Lobor song (kuku-Jurku, batu-Matu, vratu-bratu; similar rhymes in English might be: hip-Pip, leg-Peg, back-Jack), in the humorous "speech" given by the *bridesman* as recorded by Antun Kozina, a slightly different logic appears when serving the meat (the head is served to the groom, because he is the head of the wedding, the neck to the bride so that she will stay by the groom's side, the legs to the costumed party that will come to the wedding during the night, because it is hard to walk at night).

The fictitious butchering of beef (cow or steer) does appear in folklore as a game or dramatic scene which is performed in some cases at a wedding, though it may also be related to the carnival, or it is a play put on at spinning bees and other similar events. The "steer" is played by a man in costume, only rarely by two men, usually covered by a blanket of some sort, and holding a cane in one hand, with a pan on it that represents the head of the animal. The humorous scene shows how the "boss" sells the "steer", the bartering goes on for a long time and is much like the bartering at livestock fairs, and the "steer" is bought sometimes by a butcher, or the "cook" at the wedding, because, as they claim, meat has run out for the guests. After agreeing on a price, the butchering of the "steer" then follows, usually with a

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blow to the head, i.e. the pot, and the "steer" falls down "dead". In certain versions the carving and sale of the meat then follows. The sale and butchering of the pretend steer is also a popular scene with which musicians wind up a wedding. The versions mentioned here, and others, have been collected and presented in one place by Nikola Bonifačić Rožin under the title *Svadbena igra s bikom* (Nuptial Games with a Steer, Bonifačić Rožin, 1962: 92-97). I should add that the games were not always with a steer, but also included a cow, which is important when comparing this with the description from Lobor.

We find a similar subject as a children's game, i.e. a game for spinning bees in the northwest part of Croatia (Čakovec and Šušnjevo Selo) as well; the game is called *Vola tuć* (Beat the Ox) and consists of a lengthy dialogue before selling or bartering between a "butcher" and the "master of an ox" who is played by a boy cloaked in a fleece vest. When they agree to a price, the "butcher" pays for the "ox" and then "butchers" it, skins it, i.e. removes the fleece vest, and proceeds with an imitation of all the stages of preparing the butchered ox for sale. The meat is then sold, first to the men, then to the women. And a joke comes up with the first woman customer, when she is supposedly too late to by "that thing", but this is the only similarity of a lascivious nature with the Lobor carving and distribution of the meat. In the subsequent description of the game the customers "pay" for the meat: each customer is hit on the palm as many times with a stick as he bought pounds of meat. Only the men "pay", while the women do not receive blows. After it is over, the "ox" comes back to life, the boy arises from the floor.

Butchering an animal (steer) and dividing up its meat with joking commentary, in specific conjunction with a wedding, are the elements that all these performances have in common; although we can not explain them yet, their similarities are nonetheless striking.

As I inquired further about the "butchering of the beef" in Lobor, I discovered several unexpected facts. During a joint session with two narrators, a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (the first born in 1899 and the second in 1934), the daughter-in-law when telling about "butchering the beef", continued spontaneously to talk about something that happened, as she had heard, when her mother married. The mother-in-law added that her father told a similar story. This is what they said: the day after the wedding, i.e. after the first nuptial night, two men came into the house carrying between them, on their shoulders, a wooden pole and on it an iron ring which was supposed to be a scale for measuring the weight of blood sausage. The second man who came in was carrying a *puta,* a wooden vessel in which grapes were carried. They told the members of the household that they had come for blood sausage stuffing, the men asked if the household members could give them anything that could be used to stuff blood sausage. The informants understood all the hidden meaning of the props, the symbol of the cane that penetrated the ring, the shape and size of the ring and the meaning of looking for blood sausage stuffing. All of this delighted them immensely. Once more there were allusions to loss of virginity, and a comparison suggests itself with customs for the first nuptial morning aimed at seeking confirmation for the bride's virginity that are well known from other regions and recordings.

Aside from the above mentioned information, I have no further corroboration on this custom; I have not started to look for it yet. Kotarski recorded a "joke" or game, with which the wedding party amused itself the second day of the wedding. After the newlyweds retire, everyone rests for a while and then congregates once more to continue the festivities, in other words at the same stage of the wedding events as the above mentioned recordings. I quote Kotarski: "Before they start to eat, the wedding party members make jokes, for example, they

go to 'pull the roll'. Two members of the wedding party take a wooden bar, they hang a curved roll on it, and they place it on their shoulders such that they are back to back, and then each pulls in his own direction, and someone takes a stick and urges each of them on; so that the two of them pull. When they have had enough of the 'parade', then one turns, quickly grabs the sack with the roll, and then scampers into the house, and everyone goes after him; here they carve, eat and drink" (Kotarski 1917/2: 211).

What about all of this in the end? Aside from the honorable formula that further research will probably provide greater clarity in the future, these recordings can be taken as an illustration of the difficulties we face in our research today. The interview, the conversation with a speaker, is our most important fieldwork method; one must take into consideration the frailty of human memory and nature. The themes which touch on personal and delicate spheres are elusive, and without sure information on individual, concrete cases, we cannot date our information, or avoid generalized and temporally undefined recordings about the past. I believe that ethnologists today do not feel it necessary to sidestep such themes and remain silent on them, which our predecessors may have done, and which in the case of the Lobor parish priest - if he did refrain from mentioning certain things - must be accepted with understanding and tolerance, considering his vocation and the time in which he lived and recorded. It is up to us, however, to take the period in which information has been recorded into consideration as well as the person making the recording, i.e. the profile of our predecessor, whoever he or she may have been and what sort of insight and relationship was possible towards the subject under description. The recordings that Kotarski has left us, as well as many others, comprise an invaluable fund of knowledge about the past and serve us as an impulse for our current research, which must be significantly different in methods employed, and in the sensitivity of the researchers, from the research of the past.

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