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Latvian wedding ceremonies in 18th-21st century

To establish a family is one of the most important events in any person's life, therefore it is still believed that the wedding should be celebrated according to the ancient rituals that guarantee the happiness and sustainability of the young couple in future. The wedding celebration is a traditional ceremony for settling down a family and it is also the family ritual which has survived most completely through the centuries. Each generation adds something to the rituals. Today the notion “traditional wedding” is polysemantic in terms of contents. It contains different meanings from “great fun for the entertainment of young couple and their guests” as well as the “inherited system of customs and rituals intended to prepare the young couple for the marriage” with many diverse variants in between.

Latgale and Kurzeme regions in contemporary Latvia are the regions where the ancient wedding traditions are best preserved.

Latvia folk songs contain testimonies of how in ancient times the bride was kidnapped or carried away by force, or she could also be engaged agreeing with her family on dowry size and its redemption.

Traditionally it is believed that autumn is the best season to celebrate the wedding as the harvest of the year is collected and all the large agricultural works are completed, but the best time to select the bride is considered to be the spring. In the previous centuries young people used to meet each other in church, in fairs, in joint work events and different celebrations. When a young man has chosen his eventual bride he shall visit her family for engagement or for asking her parents and brothers for the hand of his beloved. Receiving a positive answer, they agree on wedding date.

Formerly the wedding was celebrated both in bride's and groom's houses and the duration of the celebration varied between three days until entire week.

The wedding procedures include different trials for the young couple as the wedding is first of all a transition ritual. One of the trials is to deal with struggles or ‘gate of honor’ which is erected by the invited or even uninvited guests in the path the young couple must walk. Usually it was

some task to complete or just a redemption fee required. It was believed that the bigger the gate of honor, the better conjugal life of the couple as the redemptions paid or completed prevent the problems in family. On their way to a wedding banquet the groom and bride are tested through performing daily housekeeping activities. Usually the groom is required to chop the firewood and the bride is asked to wash a dirty doll. Besides, the groom shall carry the bride over the path of towel with a plate hidden under it. Going over the plate it shall be broken in many pieces. The more pieces the more luck, richness and fertility in the conjugal life. A particular attention in wedding procedure is paid to the door and the threshold; special protective rituals before entering the house are carried out. The culmination of the traditional wedding is "mičošana" or "tuckering" when the crown of the bride is taken off and the headdress of a wife - a kerchief or a tucker is put on. Afterwards the bride's crown is put on the head of one of the unmarried female relatives or friends. Sometimes it is done blindfolded, guessing the next couple to be married.

After the tuckering the young couple is accompanied to bed while singing songs - usually the young couple slept in a granary. The first marriage night in ancient traditions was very important since it proved the chastity of the bride - if she was virgin until the wedding, of which the new husband use to announce publicly the next morning. Also the awakening of the new couple is ritualized. Normally the husband and wife are awakened by the guests, who try to make noise with drums, voices, pans and cooking pots. Afterwards they wash in the same bowl and wipe in the same towel as well as offer a present to a person bringing the water.

A particular ritual in the wedding was teasing songs sung by the relatives of the bride and ushers - the relatives of the groom. Usually the teasing was started by the best singer and text maker singing a quatrain which was repeated by the others. In bride's house the teasing is started by the relatives of the bride, in groom's house by the relatives of the groom. Sometimes the teasing can be quite offensive, yet nobody should take umbrage. In case the teasing is addressed to the bride, she should not reply herself as the answer should come from the relatives. Formerly in the wedding there was another custom practiced - the bride was made to cry before leaving her parent's house. The related songs told about the leaving father's house and the loss of flourishing youth, yet the meaning of this ritual prescribed to leave all tears in home in order to avoid crying in the new house.

The property of the bride related to the new life - dowry - contained clothes, household objects, cattle etc. According to the rules of wedding ritual, the dowry was supposed to be redeemed by the relatives of the groom, it was not allowed to put the chest on the ground and the carriers were required to deal with the struggles - overloaded cart, hobbled horses etc.

Very important ritual of the wedding is gift giving to all the relatives, gifts offered to the new house, auxiliary buildings and other places further supervised by the new wife.

The wedding house usually was decorated with flowers. One of the most important elements of the wedding is an abundant banquet with much food and drinks both with symbolic and erotic meaning. Traditionally the wedding ended up with eating stewed sauerkraut, therefore an entire system of customs is related to the cooking and hiding the sauerkraut as without them no wedding ended. The guests never left if they were not offered the sauerkraut.

Nowadays many of traditional wedding rituals have lost the initial magic meaning and have become just turned into the entertainment for the guests. Nevertheless, nobody will deny that the

revival of the traditions and their adaptation to the contemporary life is individual choice and the opportunity to be taken.

Source: <http://www.latvia.eu/>