

REKANSKA SVADBA: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN WEDDING CUSTOMS OF ŽIROVNICA (DOLNA REKA, NORTH MACEDONIA) FROM THE 1960s TO THE PRESENT

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Abstract: This paper examines the transformation of wedding rituals in the village of Žirovnica, Dolna Reka, North Macedonia, from the 1960s to the present. Drawing on published ethnography, oral testimony, participant observation, audiovisual sources, and online community platforms, it documents patterns of continuity and change across three generations. The analysis reveals that the ritual's underlying social logic – managing the transition of the bride and the alliance between families – remains stable, while its material, temporal, and expressive dimensions adapt to changing economic and social conditions. Labour migration to Western Europe, economic transformation, and the transnationalisation of community life have compressed the wedding calendar, modified material culture, shortened communal dancing, introduced ritual innovations, and reshaped the relationship between homeland and diaspora.

Keywords: wedding rituals, Žirovnica, Reka, ritual change, migration

Introduction

Weddings are among the most elaborate life-cycle rituals across societies, encoding norms of kinship, gender, economy, and community (Bell 1992). Following Bell's framework, I treat ritual not as a fixed text but as a dynamic practice that generates meaning through performance and adaptation. In the Balkan context, the study of ritual change has been particularly concerned with the relationship between Islam, Christianity, and pre-Ottoman traditions (Bringa 1995; Ghodsee 2009). Palikruševa (2016: 183) observed that Islam did not fundamentally transform wedding customs among Macedonian Muslims, but rather preserved them from the developmental changes occurring among Christian communities. The transformations documented in this paper occur not primarily because of economic, demographic, and social processes – particularly labour migration, economic restructuring, and the increasing integration of the region into transnational circuits of mobility and exchange.

This paper examines the transformation of wedding rituals among Muslim Macedonian-speakers in Dolna Reka, western North Macedonia, from the 1960s to the present. The region's distinctive configuration – a population that is Muslim but whose mother tongue is Macedonian – emerged

during Ottoman rule when local populations adopted Islam while resisting linguistic assimilation (Palikruševa 2016; Friedman 1975). This study focuses on the village of Žirovnica, drawing on published ethnography, oral testimony, participant observation, song texts, audiovisual sources, and online community platforms. Barth's (1969) work on ethnic boundaries provides a lens for interpreting the symbolic markers – such as the Macedonian flag – that appear in contemporary weddings, revealing how ritual serves as a site for asserting identity in a pluralistic context.

The analysis reveals a process of structural continuity and performative variation. The ritual's underlying social logic – managing the transition of the bride, formalising alliance between families, and integrating the couple into the community – remains stable. However, the performance of these rituals has been significantly compressed, modified, and adapted to changing economic and social conditions.

Methodology and Sources

This study is based on ethnographic reconstruction combined with participant observation, oral history, audiovisual analysis, and online community sources. The primary sources include published ethnography, oral testimony, song texts, television documentaries, and the Facebook group “Selo Žirovnica”.

Positionality and Fieldwork

I am an insider in the Žirovnica community by family affiliation; my parents are from the region. This insider status provided me with unmediated access to wedding events, family networks, and oral histories. However, it also requires reflexive caution: personal memories and family narratives may idealize past practices or selectively recall rituals. To counterbalance this, I used oral testimony, written sources (Palikruševa 2016; Лиманоски 1997; Оџески 2000) and audiovisual recordings (the Macedonian Television documentary, 1999). Fieldwork consisted of participant observation at eight weddings in Žirovnica between 2021 and 2026, alongside semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with twelve community members ranging in age from 30 to 85. Additional data was drawn from the author's mother, who married in Žirovnica in 1980, providing a firsthand generational anchor for the 1970s and 1980s practices.

The foundational text is Galaba Palikruševa's (2016) work on the Torbeši, which includes her earlier ethnographic materials from fieldwork conducted in the early 1960s, documenting practices already in decline. Nijazi Limanoski's (1997) research report on traditional wedding food in Reka, based on fieldwork in the 1990s, focuses on material culture. Abdula Odžeski's (2000) collection of traditional wedding songs from Žirovnica provides valuable textual evidence. A Macedonian Television documentary from 1999, *Rekanska svadba*, provides contemporaneous footage of a

Žirovnica wedding, capturing the transitional period when restaurant catering was emerging but home-based rituals still dominated.

The Reka wedding shares a common structure across the region with specific local variations. The wedding described reflects the style of Žirovnica, which shares features with the broader Reka tradition documented by Palikruševa and Limanoski, while maintaining its own distinctive rituals and songs. It also shows similarities to the Galičnik wedding tradition – both belong to the broader Mijak cultural sphere and share elements such as the prominence of *zurli* (pipes) and *tapan* (drum), the role of the wedding flag, and the influence of labour migration on the wedding calendar.

The Traditional Wedding Structure

The Dolna Reka wedding was historically a week-long ritual sequence that mobilized the entire village through specialized roles, communal labor, and deeply symbolic acts. This section reconstructs the traditional structure, attending to its symbolic logic and social functions.

The Ritual Specialists

The wedding relied on a strict and intricate division of ritual labor. The *Strojniki* (matchmaker) negotiated the alliance between families. The *Kolačarki / Celarki* – an odd number of women (15, 17, or 19) – carried ritual round breads and performed the pre-wedding gift rituals. The *Kum* (ritual godfather) held ceremonial authority, shaving the groom and overseeing key transitions. The *Starosvatec* (wedding elder) led the procession, followed by the *Bajraktar* (flag bearer). The *Avčii* (cooks) prepared the wedding feast in large cauldrons, while *Izmetčii* (servers) distributed the food. The *Pletarija* (the bride's close female friend) styled her hair for the first time in bridal fashion. The *Zovači / Zovačici* (male and female inviters) walked door to door to personally invite every household. This intricate network of roles ensured that the ritual was a collective endeavor, not merely a family affair.

Engagement, the Nišan, and Protective Magic

The engagement process formalised the alliance between two families. According to Palikruševa (2016: 217), matchmakers (*strojnik* or *strojnici*) – men sent by the groom's family – requested the bride's hand. Limanoski (1997: 262) notes an older, fascinating protective practice: matchmakers would sometimes bring a handkerchief from a deceased person for protective magic, saying: "As much as the dead person speaks, so much shall the bride's father speak" – a ritual intended to symbolically bind the father's mouth to ensure his consent. In Kosovrasti villages, the first matchmaker's visit included a *nišan* – a bundle containing cloth, candy, small coins mixed with wheat or rice, a box of *lokum* (Turkish delight), and *bosilek* (basil). After agreement was reached, the groom's mother led the *kolačarki* carrying whole

round breads (*celo* or *pogača*) wrapped in white cloth. The odd number of women and the circular form encode completeness and prosperity; the whole, unbroken bread represents an intact, prosperous life for the young couple.

Following the engagement, the *Vrzalenka* (knot-tying) ritual was performed – a simple cord tied around the bride as the formal sign of betrothal. The knot symbolized the binding of the couple and the formalization of their union. Gift exchange (*darovi*) was central: the groom's family brought gifts to the bride's family, and the bride's family returned gifts, often more than they received. This surplus reflected that women traditionally sewed elaborate household items and textiles, giving them more material goods to offer. While purchased items were already common in the 1970s, today the *darovi* are exclusively store-bought.

Oral testimony from the author's mother, who married in Žirovnica in 1980, provides crucial temporal context:

Between engagement and the wedding, in the 1970s up to the 1990s, there was no longer than two weeks. Weddings were held throughout the whole year, and there was no specific season like today. Today, almost exclusively weddings are held in summer, especially in August.

Pre-Wedding Preparations: Monday to Wednesday

The wedding proper began on the preceding Monday with intensive communal preparations. The *Zovenje* (invitation) took place, where *zovači* walked from house to house, and in some cases ritual gunshots were fired to announce the coming festivity.

On Tuesday, the *Trebenje pšenica* (winnowing of wheat) gathered neighbors and kin around a central tray decorated with basil and flowers. Women sang ritual songs during the winnowing, a collective act that transformed raw grain into the symbolic substance – *bungur* (cracked wheat) – used for the wedding *chorbá*. Simultaneously, the *Kumska pogača* (gofather's bread) was kneaded by designated *mesarii* (female kneaders), accompanied by incantatory verses requesting the bread to rise thick and high as a blessing for the young couple.

On Wednesday evening, a *Rizik* (luck) dinner was served at the groom's house – *kačamak* (cornmeal porridge) or *tiganici* (fried dough) with a hidden coin. Whoever found the coin was considered fortunate, promising future prosperity. These preparatory rituals, entirely absent from contemporary weddings, underscore how the traditional ceremony was not merely a single event but a week-long sequence of collective labor and creation of symbols.

The *Kana* and the *Gorabija* Omen

A central pre-wedding ritual was the delivery of the *gorabija* – a sweet bread baked in the groom's house – and the *kona* (henna). The ritual was

performed by *kanarčina*, children who carried the *gorabija* and henna from the groom's house to the bride's. According to oral testimony from the author's mother:

The children who carry the *gorabija* are called *kanarčina*, because they also bring the *kona*. The *kona* lies on the *gorabija*. The *gorabija* is wrapped in a white clean cloth. The *kanarčina* do not perform the *kanasuvanje* (henna application) themselves. That is done by a woman who knows how, and is usually done a few days before the wedding. With the *kona*, the fingernails and also the hair are coloured. The bread must not break, because a broken *gorabija* represented a bad omen that the marriage would not last.

The children were carefully instructed to guard the bread on their journey. Upon arrival at the bride's house, they were received and offered *bakardan* (a traditional sweet treat). The henna ritual marked the bride's transition from girl to woman. Palikruševa (2016: 220) describes the scene: women from the groom's side (*k'nariči*) went to the bride's house with lit torches and singing. The bride resisted and two groups of women formed: one protecting her, the other grabbing her. After a prolonged struggle, the bride sat and her fingers and toes were hennaed.

This resistance is documented in the song recorded by Odžeski (2000), sung on Thursday, two days before the wedding:

Begaj, begaj, ubava devojko,
Te ftasale lični kanarčina,
Te ftasae so ličnata kona.
Begav, begav, ama me vtasae,
Me ftasae i me kanosae.

*(Run, run, beautiful girl,
The fine kanarčina are catching you,
They catch you with the fine kona.
I ran and ran but they caught me,
They caught me and they hennaed me.)*

The evening before the wedding, the *Kana* (gift-giving to the bride) took place. Married women (*nevestite*) from the groom's side came to the bride's house. According to oral testimony:

At the *kana*, the bride, dressed in traditional clothing and hennaed, is gifted by the women. Standing beside the bride are close women who receive the gifts, while the bride kisses the women's hands. This hand-kissing is called *zakanuvajne* and exists to this day. The hand is taken, the bride lowers her head slightly, then brings the hand first to her chin, then to her forehead, and finally back down toward her mouth without touching the hand with her lips.

A humorous call-and-response song documented by Odžeski (2000) playfully negotiates the tension between the bride's girlfriends (*devojki*) and the groom's married female relatives (*nevesti*), underscoring the bride's

ambivalent transition. The girls welcome the married women, who respond with playful taunts about the bride's fate, ultimately conceding that "the bachelor will take her":

Devojkite: Kanarke ubavi, dobre ni dojdovte!

Nevestite: Devojke ubavi, dobre ve najdovme!

Devojkite: Kanarke ubavi, kaku vi se sviĝat

Nevestite: Devojke ubavi, mnogu ni e liĉna.

Devojkite: Kanarke ubavi, mnogu ste zaspali.

Nevestite: Devojke ubavi, ne si sme zaspali.

Devojkite: Kanarke ubavi, da vi posteleme.

Nevestite: Devojke ubavi, poste ne nimate.

Devojkite: Kanarke ubavi, poste ne nimate,

Kanarke ubavi, papradi imame,

Kanarke ubavi, ne vi ja davame.

Nevestite: Devojke ubavi, sama ka ni doet.

Devojke ubavi, bekar ka ja zemat.

Devojke ubavi, sedite so zdravje.

(The girls: Beautiful kanarke, welcome!

The married women: Beautiful girls, we found you well!

The girls: Beautiful kanarke, how do you like her?

The married women: Beautiful girls, she is very fine.

The girls: Beautiful kanarke, you seem very sleepy.

The married women: Beautiful girls, we are not sleepy.

The girls: Beautiful kanarke, we would prepare a bed for you.

The married women: Beautiful girls, you have no bed.

The girls: Beautiful kanarke, we have no bed,

Beautiful kanarke, we have ferns,

Beautiful kanarke, we will not give them to you.

The married women: Beautiful girls, they will give themselves.

Beautiful girls, the bachelor will take her.

Beautiful girls, stay in good health.)

The Wedding Day: The Bridal Procession

On the morning of the wedding day, the bride's hair was prepared for the first time in a bridal fashion by her *pletarija* (a close female friend who specialized in braiding). The hair around the ears was arranged, leaving a small strand in front of the ear known as *culufi*, which was cut as part of the ritual preparation. Her hair was then styled into multiple braids (*viulki*). Her face was adorned with *pulajki* – small decorative patches creating ornamental patterns – and her fingers bore the henna applied two days earlier. The groom, simultaneously, was shaved by the *kum* with accompanying humorous songs.

The wedding party (*svatovi*) then assembled to fetch the bride. According to Palikruševa (2016: 220), the bride was mounted on a white horse; in some villages, her brother led the horse until the groom's house. The procession returned with drums and songs. The 1999 documentary *Rekanska*

svadba records that before the bride is fetched, the *Zoven* (inviting) custom takes place: men (*kumovi* and *svatovi*) walk from house to house to personally invite guests, sometimes accompanied by dancing and ritual gunshots to announce the festivity.

Oral testimony from the author's mother provides a detailed account:

Around 10 to 11 o'clock in the morning, the *svatovi* come to fetch the bride. The *svatovi* are the same people as the *kumovi*. Nowadays women also come along; back then only men. The horse, so that the saddle doesn't remain empty, has a boy placed on it. They come with music, prepare the bride, and the horse is led by three people. Then she is paraded through the village by a different route back. The bride is covered with a veil. The eating at the groom's place is not served until the bride arrives. A flag is carried. Back then the Yugoslav flag. Today still the Macedonian flag.

En route to the groom's house, at the first village fountain, the bride's right shoe was removed, filled with a small amount of water from the fountain, and she drank from the shoe before it was put back on – a purification act ensuring the journey's auspiciousness and symbolically "cooling" the transition. The flag-bearing is a significant marker of identity, illustrating the role of weddings in ethnic boundary maintenance (Barth 1969). The exclusive use of Macedonian flags in the official Žirovnica wedding processions, despite the presence of an Albanian population in the village since the 1960s, underscores how ritual performance asserts community identity in a pluralistic setting. While private yards may occasionally display Albanian flags alongside Macedonian ones, the official procession uses only the Macedonian flag, sometimes with a *šamija* (headscarf) and flowers tied to the flagpole.

Arrival at the Groom's House: Incorporation and Transition

Palikruševa (2016: 220–221) describes the arrival: the bride is brought into the courtyard, the groom's mother gives her a bread roll and cabbage, and the groom's father takes off his cap and places it three times alternately on the bride's and groom's heads. The groom attempts to take the horse's reins; the bride's brother resists several times.

The groom's father comes with a sack of bread tied shut and circles it around the bride. Then he comes with a *tepcija*, a metal tray, and places it on the ground. He helps the bride off the horse – then it is important to land on the tray. Then one must step off the tray with the right foot, and until the door of the house, it is important to step again with the right foot. While the bride goes to the house, *urgus* (rice and coins) is thrown on her. Arriving in the house with the right foot, she must first go to the hearth, and her head is gently hit three times against the chimney pipe. She then touched the hanging chain above the fire and mixed flour with her hand – gestures rooting her to the household's domestic continuity and her future role as its keeper. Then she

goes to the kitchen table and “bakes” – she takes flour, dough, and rolling pin and pretends.

The veil (*dulak*) is central. The bride is veiled throughout the journey and arrival. Before the unveiling, a boy is placed on her lap to bring luck; she removes her glove and gives him the money inside, then removes her shoe and gives him money from there. The unveiling is the moment of transition. Then the father-in-law comes with the rolling pin and makes attempts to lift her veil with it. Once that is accomplished, she takes the father-in-law’s hand and he gives her money. She also does this with the mother-in-law. The bride is now unveiled. Then the bride goes upstairs to change into her traditional costume and she is now the bride of the house.

The wedding feast followed, prepared in large cauldrons by the *avčii* over wood fires, while *izmetčii* distributed the portions. Dining was strictly segregated, with men in the *konak* (guest chamber) and women in a separate room, reflecting the community’s gendered spatial codes. All ate from the same communal bowl (*sa’an*) placed on a low table (*sofra*). Traditional dishes – *pača* (calf’s head), *škembe čorba* (tripe soup), *pilav* with calf’s liver, *valangi* (baked pastries with oil and walnuts), and *alva* (sweet confection) – were served in this order, each with specific symbolic weight.

Additional songs from oral tradition were traditionally sung by women during the wedding. These songs have largely died out in recent years, as weddings are no longer held at home and the intimate setting where such songs were performed has disappeared. One example, a song from the groom’s perspective to the bride, invokes the theme of labour migration – a recurring motif that foreshadows the transformations discussed below:

Rano si stanala nevesto dvorovi da metiš,
Dvorovi metam i tebe te gledam.
Daj mi izin na gurbet da oda.
Izin davam milo libe, do dervente tetoski.
Od dervent tetoski nazad da se vratiš,
Na porti ka čekam i altani ka reda.

*(Early you rose, bride, to sweep the yards,
I sweep the yards and I see you.
Give me permission to go abroad.
I give permission, my dear, to the Tetovo pass.
From the Tetovo pass you shall return,
At the gates I will wait and gold coins I will arrange.)*

During the engagement, songs also expressed the bride’s sorrow and ambivalence, as recorded by Odžeski (2000):

Što mi ti je, mila ćerko, što solzi mi roniš?
Strojnicate mi došle, midžo, od dalek daleku.
Ti se molam, mili midžo, da ne me davate.
Ti da pukneš, mila ćerko, tamo ka si odiš.

*(Why, dear daughter, do you shed tears?
The matchmakers have come to me, uncle, from far away.
I beg you, uncle, do not give me away.
You may burst, dear daughter, but you will go there.)*

Another love song, equally poetic, captures the intimacy between the young couple through pastoral imagery:

Ajde legнала e Džemila na zelenata poljana,
Na zelenata poljana na Jusofovo koleno.
Ajde Jusuf mi ja budeše, belo i lice ljubeše.
Aj stani mome Džemile da vidiš čudo golemo,
Čudo golemo na sred selo.
Temen se oblak zadade, od visokite planini,
Što ke sitna rosa da zarosi, reki poroj da dojdekat,
Nas dvajca da ne odvlačat vo majkinite dvorovi.

*(Džemila lay on the green meadow,
On the green meadow on Jusuf's knee.
Jusuf woke her, kissed her white face.
Rise, girl Džemila, to see a great wonder,
A great wonder in the middle of the village.
A dark cloud gathered from the high mountains,
That fine dew might fall, rivers and floods might come,
And not carry us away into our mothers' yards.)*

Shaving the Groom

The shaving ritual is the counterpart to the bride's henna ceremony and unveiling. When the guests have finished eating, the groom is shaved by a close family member. A large cloth is held up where people throw money in. One takes some time with the shaving so that money can come in. When finished, the groom is splashed with water by his friends. According to Odžeski (2000), during the shaving:

Sednal zetče na srebreno stolče,
I mi sedet i bog mi molet:
“Pridaj, bože, uš pogolem perčin,
Da posedat babovi pazue.”
“Dosta, berber, dosta ne mazni go,
Samo ni e zetče izmaznato.
Imaš race kaku iglenice,
Imaš oči kaku konjski ploče.”

*(The groom sat on a silver chair,
And sits and prays to God:
“Grant, God, an even bigger lock of hair,
So that he may sit in his grandmother's armpit.”
“Enough, barber, enough, don't stroke him,
Our groom is already smooth enough.*

*You have hands like needles,
You have eyes like horse's plates."*)

Post-Wedding Rituals

Post-wedding rituals extend the transition beyond the wedding day. *Vigjalenke*, as described by Palikruševa (2016: 221) and Limanoski (1997: 272–273), are female visitors who come to see the bride. *Prviče*, the first visit of the bride's parents to the newlyweds, occurs one week after the wedding and involves up to thirteen specific dishes including *prvičarsko ćufte* (meatballs) and *sutlijač* (rice pudding). A few days later, the reciprocal visit completes the cycle of formal introductions.

A final closing ritual, *Zaoduvanje*, formally introduced the bride to her new kinship network. Carrying ritual breads kneaded at her natal home, she visited each of her husband's relatives, gifting them a loaf. The following day, she repeated the act with breads from her mother-in-law's house, visiting her own family – a reciprocal exchange that symbolically wove the two lineages together through the medium of bread. In the third week, the bride could visit her parents for one day; in the fifth week, three days; and in the seventh week, five days – a gradual reintegration into her natal home that mirrored the gradual extension of her social mobility after marriage. Post-wedding songs capture the bride's transformation, as recorded by Odžeski (2000):

Moma li, mome, sum bila,
Sum bila belaj crvena.
Se izlagav, si se omaživ,
Se storiv žoltaj zelena.

*(I was a girl, a maiden, was white and red.
I adorned myself, I married,
I became yellow and green.)*

The color imagery – from vibrant white and red to yellow and green – symbolizes the bride's transition from the vitality of maidenhood to the more settled state of married life. At the same time, within Macedonian folk symbolism, yellow is associated with the chthonic and earthly realm and, by extension, with fertility, while green symbolizes both fertility and youth (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1983: 783–786; Cooper 1987: 40, 42; Перпеcka 2002: 426). The song therefore not only reflects the bride's change in social status but also evokes broader symbolic associations with fertility, youth, and the continuation of life.

The *Begalka* (Fleeing Bride)

However, a fascinating counter-narrative exists alongside these official rituals: the *Begalka* (fleeing bride). In cases where families disagreed or the groom was disliked, the bride would escape and go to the groom's house without the official horse procession, avoiding the ritual entirely. This was

considered shameful and brought dishonor to her family, who would be angry and insulted because the ceremony was circumvented. The *begalka* was not brought by horse and lacked all ceremonial apparatus. Yet, it represents a form of female agency outside the rigid patriarchal structure – a silent subversion of the entire ceremonial apparatus, even if socially condemned.

Transformations Across Generations

This section documents transformations from the 1970s to the present, attending to temporal compression, changes in material culture and performance, ritual innovations, the shortening of communal dancing, and the impact of migration.

Temporal Compression: From Week to Weekend. The most significant transformation is the compression of the wedding timeline. Palikruševa (2016) describes week-long weddings, with the ceremony beginning on Monday and ending the following Monday. By the 1970s, according to oral testimony, the wedding had been compressed to Friday-Sunday. Contemporary weddings are even shorter, often confined to a single day or weekend. The preparatory rituals of Monday-Wednesday – *trebenje*, *kumska pogača*, *rizik* – have entirely disappeared, as the extended communal labor required for them is no longer viable in a wage-labour economy.

This compression reflects several intersecting processes. First, the shift from an agrarian economy to wage labour and migration has reduced time for extended celebrations. Second, the transition from subsistence agriculture has changed the valuation of time. Third, the concentration of weddings in summer – particularly August – reflects the rhythm of labour migration: Today, almost exclusively weddings are held in summer, especially in August. Since the major power outage in the region in 2012, where the region remained without electricity for several weeks, the return of the *pečalbari* (labour migrants) shifted increasingly and only to summer.

The Shortening of the Oro. One of the most noticeable changes is the shortening of the *oro* (communal dance). In the period from the 2000s to the mid-2010s, the wedding *oro* would last until 1-2 AM. In contemporary weddings, the *oro* often breaks up by 11 PM to 12:30 AM. Several factors explain this transformation. First, the role of the *oro* as a social space for meeting potential partners has diminished:

Back then, you used the *oro* as a tool to get next to the girl you liked so you could be in touch with her and talk with her. So, when this was reduced, due to phones, social media, etc., it got less interesting.

(Male informant, mid-40s, Žirovnica, 2024).

Second, changing lifestyles and work schedules have reduced tolerance for late-night celebrations. Third, the increasing use of restaurants has changed the temporal structure of the wedding. Despite these changes, the

musical instruments *tapan* (drum) and *zurla* (pipe) remain central to the wedding celebration.

Changes in Material Culture and Performance. Food preparation has undergone significant change. Limanoski (1997) documents that by the 1990s, rice had replaced *bungur* (cracked wheat) in the *chorbá*, and cooking equipment had modernised. The core dishes remain, but preparation is no longer exclusively in large cauldrons, and restaurant catering has become common. The specialized roles of *avčii* and *izmetčii* have largely disappeared, replaced by restaurant staff.

Musical accompaniment has also changed. In the 1970s, *zurli* and *tapan* were the primary musical instruments. By the 1990s, singers with ensembles were added. The 1999 documentary *Rekanska svadba* captures this transitional period, showing both traditional musicians and early amplified ensembles.

The location of weddings has shifted from home to restaurant:

From the early 2000s, some families began holding the daytime portion of the wedding in restaurants, while home weddings continued in parallel until the 2010s. The main *svadba* was still celebrated at the village square. Since a few years ago (primarily since the COVID-19 pandemic), nighttime restaurant weddings have become common, which means there are no longer village-square weddings in which the whole community participates

(Male informant, mid-60s, Žirovnica, 2026).

Ritual Innovations. Contemporary weddings have introduced new elements not present earlier:

Since the 1990s or 2000s onwards, the buckets contained more than just water – sometimes bones from animals slaughtered for food, or eggs are broken on the groom’s face while he is being shaved. This kind of “humiliation” did not exist earlier and is viewed by some older people as nonsense, while others find it amusing

(Male informant, mid-60s, Žirovnica, 2026).

These “humiliation” rituals – eggs, bones, furniture destruction – represent innovations that older generation view with scepticism. They may reflect broader trends in global wedding practices or generational shifts in the valuation of ritual solemnity versus festive transgression. In some contemporary cases, the bride is fetched with traditional *tapani*, but the actual wedding feast takes place six months or even a year later, further decoupling the ritual sequence from its traditional temporal framework.

Ritual Attrition and Intensification. Contemporary wedding celebrations with music are bigger, but the rituals themselves have greatly diminished. This reflects a shift from ritual density to celebration intensity. The compression of the ritual sequence, the outsourcing of food preparation,

and the reduction of participatory roles have decreased the ritual content while increasing the scale of the celebration.

The traditional songs sung by women during weddings have largely died out in recent years, as home-based weddings have disappeared and the intimate settings where such songs were performed no longer exist. This represents a significant loss of oral tradition.

However, the frequency of weddings has intensified. Data from the Facebook group “Selo Žirovnica” indicates that in 2025 and 2026 alone, there were twelve weddings each year in Žirovnica.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the transformation of wedding rituals in Žirovnica, Dolna Reka, from the 1960s to the present. The analysis reveals that the ritual’s underlying social logic – managing the transition of the bride and consolidating alliance between families – remains remarkably stable. What changed were the material, temporal, and expressive dimensions, which adapt to shifting economic regimes, labour migration, generational sensibilities, and diasporic rhythms.

Several analytical patterns emerge from this case study. First, structural continuity persists alongside performative variation: the basic sequence of engagement, *kana*, bride-fetching, arrival rituals, shaving, and post-wedding visits endures, even as its duration and material expression transform. Second, the transnationalisation of community life, particularly labour migration to Western Europe, has profoundly reshaped the wedding calendar, concentrating celebrations in the summer months and increasing their frequency. Third, the shortening of the *oro* reflects broader shifts in courtship practices and sociality, accelerated by digital communication technologies. Fourth, the loss of women-centered, home-based song traditions represents a significant erosion of oral heritage, tied directly to the shift from domestic to commercial wedding venues. Finally, the use of Macedonian flags at weddings reveals how ritual serves as a site for ethnic boundary maintenance, asserting identity in a context of ethnic pluralism (Barth 1969).

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focuses on a single village, and generalisations to other Reka villages should be made with caution. The reliance on oral testimony requires careful attention to issues of memory and selective recall. Future research should document contemporary wedding practices in diaspora contexts, where rituals may take different forms, and conduct comparative studies with other Reka villages to determine whether the patterns observed here reflect local specificities or broader regional trends.

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РЕКАНСКА СВАДБА: КОНТИНУИТЕТ И ПРОМЕНИ ВО СВАДБЕНИТЕ ОБИЧАИ НА С. ЖИРОВНИЦА (ДОЛНА РЕКА, СЕВЕРНА МАКЕДОНИЈА) ОД 1960-ТИТЕ ДО ДЕНЕС

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Резиме

Овој труд ја истражува трансформацијата на свадбените обичаи во селото Жировница, Долна Река, Северна Македонија, од 1960-тите до денес. Врз основа на објавена етнографија, усни сведоштва, теренски набљудувања, аудиовизуелни извори и заедници онлајн, трудот документира обрасци на континуитет и промена низ три генерации. Анализата покажува дека основната социјална логика на обредот останува стабилна, додека неговите материјални, временски и изразни димензии се прилагодуваат на променливите услови. Трудот ги документира следниве промени: компресија на свадбениот календар (од целогодишни на летни свадби, особено во август), скратување на траењето на орото, замена на традиционалните состојки во свадбената храна, воведување на ритуални иновации, поместување на свадбите од изведување во домашни услови во изведување во ресторани, промена на музичкиот состав и интензивирање на фреквенцијата на свадбите поради враќањето на дијаспората во летните месеци. Трудот го истакнува симболичкото значење на македонското знаме како маркер на етничката припадност во контекст на етничкиот плурализам во Жировница.