

FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE AND THE NUPTIAL RITUAL: AN ANALYSIS OF INDIVIDUAL CHOICE IN VARIOUS ETHNIC GROUPS FOR THE PROMOTION OF HUMAN DIGNITY AND PEACE

Prof. Manuela G. S. FAZECAȘ PhD(c),

*Doctoral School of Humanities and Arts, University of Oradea, Romania
manuelafazecas@yahoo.com*

Lecturer PhD.eng. Marius FAZECAȘ,

*University of Oradea, Romania
mfazecas@uoradea.ro*

ABSTRACT: Freedom of conscience and the nuptial ritual: an analysis of individual choice in various ethnic groups for the promotion of human dignity and peace.

The article analyzes freedom of conscience through the lens of wedding rituals of various ethnic groups, such as Slovaks, Roma, Jews, and Swabians. It argues that these traditions are not mere vestiges of the past, but a living expression of human dignity and cultural identity. Moreover, rituals function as a form of non-formal education that transmits intergenerational values. By understanding and respecting these cultural manifestations, interethnic dialogue can be built, thus contributing to lasting peace and cultural pluralism.

Keywords: *Freedom of conscience, wedding traditions, cultural identity, education through tradition, globalization, interethnic dialogue*

Introduction

Freedom of conscience¹, defined as the fundamental right of every individual to hold, form, and express their moral, ethical, and spiritual

1 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Key aspects of the Freedom of Conscience", In *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință - Supliment (Journal for Freedom of Conscience)*, Editions IARSIC, Les Arsc, France, 2016, pp. 30-37.

convictions without constraint, is the cornerstone of a democratic and harmonious society. This principle, often perceived in abstract terms, manifests itself in concrete ways that are deeply rooted in the culture of each community. One of the most eloquent expressions of this freedom is found in wedding traditions, rituals that are not mere folkloric manifestations, but a living repository of values, beliefs, and social norms. By analyzing the wedding customs of various ethnic groups, especially those of the Slovaks in Bihor, but also of the Roma, Jews, and Swabians, we can understand how freedom of conscience is not just a right, but an active force that shapes human dignity, education, and, ultimately, lasting peace

Freedom of conscience is inseparable from the concept of human dignity.² Being able to choose your own values, to define yourself spiritually and morally, is an essential expression of your status as an autonomous being. When a community can freely practice its traditions, it exercises this fundamental right at a collective level.

Wedding traditions as an expression of identity and dignity

A society made up of diverse ethnic groups can coexist and thrive while respecting each group's traditions and beliefs. Freedom of conscience allows cultural differences to be expressed rather than suppressed. We can see how each ethnic group translates its consciousness into distinct rituals. Each wedding ritual is a manifestation of the collective conscience of an ethnic group. For example, among the **Slovaks of Bihor**, the *Čepčenie* ritual (the placing of the bonnet) symbolises the bride's transition from maidenhood (*dievča*) to married womanhood (*žena*). This act is not only a change in social status, but also a reaffirmation of cultural identity and moral norms. Through this ritual, the community reconfirms its values related to family, responsibility, and continuity. The fact that this ritual is preserved, even in modern society, demonstrates the community's freedom to honor its own cultural consciousness.

Among the **Roma**, for example, wedding traditions may include elements that emphasize autonomy and blood ties. Unions are often arranged within the extended family, and rituals emphasize the accep-

2 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Plea for Human Dignity", In *Scientia Moralitas. Human Dignity - A Contemporary Perspectives*, The Scientia Moralitas Research Institute, Beltsville, MD, United States of America, 2016, Volume 1, pp. 29-43.

tance of the future wife into the groom's clan. This reflects a deep social consciousness in which group identity takes precedence and individual well-being is often linked to that of the family.

Jews, on the other hand, express their consciousness through wedding rituals **chuppah** deeply rooted in religious texts. Every step, from signing the **ketubah** marriage contract to breaking the glass, is loaded with specific religious and moral significance. The connection to God and the history of the Jewish people is an essential component of their consciousness.³

Finally, the **Swabians** had wedding traditions that reflected, in the past, a more pragmatic consciousness and openness to outside influences. As a settled ethnic group, their traditions absorbed elements from neighboring ethnic groups, adapting to a multicultural environment.⁴ This flexibility shows that freedom of conscience does not mean isolation, but rather the ability to evolve while maintaining a core identity.

All these examples demonstrate that freedom of conscience does not lead to uniformity, but to cultural pluralism. The right to live and express one's values is an essential aspect of human dignity, and wedding traditions are a living testament to this right.

Education through traditions and values

Education is not limited to school.⁵ Wedding rituals are, in fact, a form of non-formal pedagogy, through which the community transmits its essential values. The Slovak custom of *Odberanka* (farewell) is an eloquent example of moral education. In this ritual, the bride and groom kneel before their parents and ask forgiveness for „any offense ever caused.” This gesture is repeated three times and has a strong religious significance.

3 Chuppah: (חופה) is a canopy under which the Jewish wedding ceremony takes place, symbolizing the couple's future home. The ritual ends with the breaking of a glass, reminiscent of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

4 The name „Swabians” refers to the German communities that settled in the Carpathian Basin, especially in Banat. Their wedding traditions combined German elements with local influences, adapting to the multicultural environment.

5 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, “Current Values of Education and Culture”, In *Proceedings of the 23th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities*, edited by Nicoleta Elena Heghes, Princeton, NJ, United States of America, 2021, pp. 87-92. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5507021.

ce. *Odberanka* is a practical lesson in respect, humility, and gratitude. The ritual teaches young people the importance of forgiveness, of washing away past sins and obtaining blessings for the future; it is a transmission of values. The *Odberanka* speech is not just a formality, but an emotional bond between generations. With the words *Ďakujem vám mamko, ďakujem vám tatko*⁶ (Thank you, mother, thank you, father), the bride and groom acknowledge their parents' efforts and take on the responsibility of continuing the cycle of life, an essential lesson for future parents.⁷

Each ritual is a way for a community to educate its members. Among the Swabians, an important role in the education of young people was played by the detailed preparation of the wedding, which was an opportunity to learn about work, cooperation, and responsibility. Among the Roma, wedding rituals may include moments when the older generation teaches young people about social roles and responsibilities within the family and community, but religion also plays an important role. „With regard to customs or family relationships, some of these are preserved because they are considered moral, while others are changed or improved. For example, in traditional Roma families, the custom of the bride being a virgin is preserved by Evangelicals. But in the case of early marriages, the tendency among Evangelicals is to raise the age of marriage. Atanasov notes that the traditional Islamic courban dance, the use of alcohol and tobacco are strictly forbidden in Pentecostal Roma communities. The same author considers that Pentecostalism has produced a revitalization of culture among Roma communities.⁸ In a diverse society, an education that respects these traditions promotes a deep understanding of the values of others. Instead of annihilating differences, education should celebrate them, using traditions as a living „library” of moral and ethical lessons.

6 Rončák, Gejza, *Svadba bihorských Slovákov*, Vydavateľstvo Ivan Krasko, Nadvorník, 2005, p. 15.

7 *Odberanka*: Citat din cartea lui Gejza Rončák, *Svadba bihorských Slovákov*: „ Po prvíkrát vás prosím, tatko a vi mamko, pre Boha, pre sina Božeho... odpustíte, čo som vás kedí rozhňeval/rozhňevala.”

8 Năstase, Rafael, *Ecce Romo: o perspectivă teologică a transformării comunităților de romi din România după 1990*, București, Editura Universității din București, 2025, pp. 68,69.

Sustainable peace and inter-ethnic dialogue

Lasting peace does not mean the absence of differences, but the ability to coexist and build on common values, even when forms of expression are different. Interethnic conflicts can often arise due to a lack of understanding of cultures. Wedding traditions are an excellent starting point for dialogue. The Slovak custom of symbolically negotiating entry into the house, *Žiadanie nevesty*, can be compared to similar rituals in other cultures, where the „fight” for the bride is an element of play. By understanding the symbolism behind these actions, we can overcome stereotypes and build a relationship based on respect.

Dialogue through traditions and values

A Roma wedding is a complex event that can last for days, often accompanied by specific music and rituals that emphasize fertility and prosperity. While an outsider might see only a noisy party, a careful observer would understand that it is a manifestation of a vibrant culture, full of joy and a strong sense of community. Jewish weddings, with their solemn and meaningful rituals, offer insight into spiritual values and continuity.

Respect for freedom of conscience allows us to see beyond appearances and appreciate substance. A peaceful society is one in which the Slovak *Odberanka*, the Jewish *chuppah*, and the rituals of Roma weddings are not perceived as threats, but as elements of a rich cultural mosaic that together form national identity.

Ritual and Rebirth. Slovak wedding customs as a compass of cultural identity in the modern context

Intangible cultural heritage, through its rituals and traditions, represents a dynamic force in defining human identity. These manifestations are not mere vestiges of a distant past, but veritable compasses that guide a community in the face of rapid changes imposed by modernity and globalization. The phenomenon of cultural revitalization, observed globally, illustrates how traditions adapt and survive, taking on new functions and meanings in contemporary society. The revitalization of Slovak wedding customs in the third millennium is an active process of globalization, a fusion between deep-rooted local tradition and the global dynamics of

self-expression. This trend is motivated by a search for authenticity, a redefinition of personal identity, and the emergence of a new cultural entrepreneurship. Thus, rituals with an initially pragmatic and social function are transformed into aesthetic and personal experiences, adapted to the requirements and values of modern couples

In traditional rural society, marriage was not primarily a romantic union, but a community institution that marked a fundamental social and economic transition. The choice of partners was strictly controlled by the community, which placed particular emphasis on the social and financial equality of the future spouses.⁹ Marital alliances were often concluded on the basis of agreements between families or, in exceptional cases, through subterfuges such as simulated „kidnapping,” intended to avoid the high costs of an official wedding.¹⁰ A revealing aspect of the social structure was the status of the daughter-in-law in her in-laws' home. A young wife „ was not allowed to sit at the table until she had given birth.”¹¹ This strictly pragmatic historical function of marriage (ensuring the continuity of the family and resources) is in fundamental tension with its modern function. In contemporary society, the wedding has transformed from an act of social conformity to one of personal affirmation. Initially, rituals were designed to integrate the new couple into the group of married men and women, an essential process of community integration.¹² Today, they serve more the nuptial event, directed by specialized characters whose function went beyond simple organization. The central figure was the *starejší*, a man dressed in folk clothes, who often carried a *valaška*, a traditional shepherd's axe. His role was to ensure the smooth running of the rituals, to remind guests of the order of events, self-expression, and aesthetic experience. The evolution of the role of the *starejší* mirrors social change. From a figure of ceremonial authority, with a role of control and validation, he became a „presenter or good organizer.”¹³ This change reflects a decline in the community's supervisory function and an increase

9 <https://www.iabsi.com/gen/public/traditions.htm>, accessed August 19, 2025

10 <https://slovander.sk/netradicno/tradicna-ludova-svadba-viete-odkial-pochadzaju-dnesne-svadobne-zvyky/> accessed August 19, 2025

11 <https://camineinmiscare.ro/traditii-slovace-la-nadlac/> accessed August 19, 2025

12 <https://www.iabsi.com/gen/public/traditions.htm> accessed August 19, 2025

13 <https://barborapalovicova.sk/en/services/traditional-wedding-ritual-cepcenie/> accessed August 19, 2025

in its role in providing entertainment and amusement. Ritual authority is gradually being replaced by organizational professionalism, which allows traditions to persist, but within a redefined framework.

The traditional costume, or *kroj*, was more than just festive clothing. It was a powerful symbol of ethnic identity, social status, and cultural resistance. Historical texts show that the use of the *kroj* served to proclaim „Slovak ethnic identity,”¹⁴ especially in the 19th century, when it was threatened by Hungarian and Austrian domination. Its value was often enormous, with a festive dress (*leveska*) being equivalent to „the price of a hectare of land.”¹⁵ There was social stratification, and clothing reflected this. The colors of the wedding dress varied by region, sometimes being mourning colors (black, purple), but always containing a piece of red fabric to protect against spells. An analysis of how the *kroj* evolved from everyday wear to a „stage costume” demonstrates its adaptability as an instrument of cultural representation. Its use by Slovak students and intellectuals in the 19th century, in national colors, as a protest, directly links clothing symbolism to the affirmation of dignity. This creates a tension between its original function as a rigid social marker and its modern, democratic function as a „brand” of identity, accessible to anyone today.

Traditional wedding rituals marked the transition to a new life, both physically and symbolically. One of the most widespread customs is breaking a plate, which symbolizes cooperation and good luck, and its shards, according to some interpretations, represent the children the couple will have. Another custom is for the groom to carry the bride over the threshold, an apotropaic act meant to protect her from lurking evil spirits. At the end of the ceremony, throwing rice at the bride and groom is a fertility ritual. Initially, these rituals had a magical function, deeply rooted in popular beliefs. Today, they are reinterpreted as romantic metaphors for cooperation and the beginning of a new life. Their meaning is recontextualized from the sphere of popular beliefs to that of romantic symbolism, a necessary adaptation to integrate into the modern mentality.

Food and dance customs emphasized the unity and future prosperity of the couple. Newlyweds eat from a single plate with a single spoon to symbolize the sharing of their lives, a tradition that emphasizes

14 <https://journals.openedition.org/civilisations/2369?lang=en> accessed August 19, 2025

15 <https://camineinmiscare.ro/traditii-slovace-la-nadlac/> accessed August 19, 2025

the idea that from marriage onwards, the couple will share all joys and sorrows. Another custom was to throw grain, bread, or holy water to ensure prosperity. This is also the context for the bride's ball or *redovy tanec*, a dance in which each guest pays a sum to dance with the bride. The money, intended for the couple, served both a symbolic function (recognition of the bride and groom by the community) and a pragmatic function (financial support at the beginning of their life together).

Čepčenie: The supreme rite of marriage

The *čepčenie* ceremony (bonnet ceremony) is considered by many to be the most beautiful part of the wedding. Held at midnight, it symbolizes the transformation of a single girl into a married woman. The focal point of the ceremony is the removal of the *vienok* (flower crown) or *partei*, a symbol of purity and maidenhood. It is then replaced with the *čepiec* (bonnet), worn exclusively by married women. The *parta* also had an apotropaic function, with red ribbons protecting the bride from evil spirits and spells. The ritual was accompanied by ceremonial songs sung by older women.

Today, this perspective has been reinterpreted. The ceremony has become a ritual celebrating femininity and transition, often professionalized and staged for guests. Thus, *čepčenie* exemplifies a process of adapting tradition to modern values. Unacceptable elements, considered part of a patriarchal social system, are eliminated or reinterpreted, demonstrating a „freedom of conscience” applied to tradition. The ceremony, which was once „intimate,” has today become a public spectacle, an „unforgettable” event, transformed by folk groups into artistic moments.

Personal identity and globalization

The motivations of young couples have changed. The texts show that more and more young couples are honoring traditions. A telling example is that of an American bride who, although she does not speak Slovak, wants a traditional wedding with *kroj* and *čepčenie* to celebrate with her husband's family. In a globalized world, the choice to include traditions becomes an act of self-expression and a sign of personal or family identity, an act of reclaiming one's roots. Just as wedding photography is transformed into „destination wedding photography,” tradition becomes

a destination of identity. The process is a form of globalization in which the global (the American bride) meets the local (Ruthenian traditions), and tradition becomes a common language.

Digital platforms play a crucial role in revitalizing local traditions. For example, Facebook and Instagram are used by couples and photographers to search for, promote, and share information about traditional Slovak weddings. Internet searches show a specific interest in Slovak wedding traditions. The online environment transforms customs from an intimate „collective memory” into a public „calling card” and spectacle. Visualizing traditions not only popularizes them, but also simplifies them, emphasizing aesthetics at the expense of their deeper ritual function.

Revitalizing traditions strengthens dignity, providing a cultural anchor in a changing world. Folklore played a crucial role in maintaining Slovak identity during centuries of foreign domination. Today, learning about and participating in local celebrations contributes to the discovery of components of collective memory and the formation of identity. What distinguishes revitalization from mere survival is the act of freedom of conscience of the modern couple. The conscious choice to reintegrate these often modified rituals is not only an act of preservation, but an affirmation of the right to cultural self-definition in a pluralistic society. This is a form of self-imposed dignity, of claiming one's roots in a personal way.

Cultural dialogue

In the context of mixed marriages, traditions become a common language. The case of the American bride who familiarizes herself with Slovak family traditions demonstrates how these can facilitate integration and mutual understanding, overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers. In inter-ethnic weddings, traditions are not barriers, but bridges. The process of learning and participating in foreign rituals is an act of respect and tolerance, contributing to a form of peace at the micro level. This demonstrates that cultural identity can be fluid and shared, not rigid and exclusive.

Conclusions

Freedom of conscience is more than a legal concept; it is a driving force that supports human dignity, enriches education, and builds peace. The

wedding traditions of the Slovaks in Bihor, with their rituals such as *Odberanka* and *Čepčenie*, offer a window into a value system that has survived the test of time, demonstrating the resilience of a community. By comparing these customs with those of the Roma, Jews, and Swabians, we can see that, despite their differences, all communities honor their freedom to believe and live according to their own principles. Protecting and promoting this right is a shared responsibility, because only in a world where every conscience is free can we hope for lasting peace, profound education, and a truly dignified society. Rituals, once pragmatic and imposed by social context, are now reinterpreted as acts of identity affirmation, cultural pedagogy, and intercultural dialogue. This phenomenon is fueled by new technologies, a growing cultural awareness, and a search for authenticity among young people.

Bibliography:

- ✦ ATANASOV, Miroslav, „Gypsy Pentecostals: the Growth of the Pentecostal Movement Among the Roma in Bulgaria and its Revitalization of Their Communities”, Lexington: Emeth Press, 2010.
- ✦ BRIE, Mircea, „Căsătoria în nord-vestul transilvaniei (a doua jumătate a secolului XIX – începutul secolului XX) condiționări exterioare și strategii maritale”, Oradea, Editura Universității din Oradea, 2009.
- ✦ CIOBAN, Florin, „Perspective antropologice culturale”, Ungaria, Ed. Cronica, 2018.
- ✦ NASTASE, Rafael, „Ecce Romo: o perspectivă teologică a transformării comunităților de romi din România după 1990”, București, Editura Universității din București, 2025
- ✦ RONČÁK, Gejza, *Svadba bihorských Slovákov*, Vydavateľstvo Ivan Krasňák, Nadlak, 2005.
- ✦ ROTARU, Ioan-Gheorghe, „Plea for Human Dignity”, In *Scientia Moralitas. Human Dignity - A Contemporary Perspectives*, The Scientia Moralitas Research Institute, Beltsville, MD, United States of America, 2016, Volume 1, pp. 29-43.
- ✦ ROTARU, Ioan-Gheorghe, „Current Values of Education and Culture”, In *Proceedings of the 23th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities*, edited by Nicoleta Elena Heghes, 87-92, Princeton, NJ, United States of America, 2021. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5507021.

- ✦ ROTARU, Ioan-Gheorghe, „Key aspects of the Freedom of Conscience”, In *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință - Supliment (Journal for Freedom of Conscience)*, Editions IARSIC, Les Arsç, France, 2016, pp.30-37.

Online resources:

- ✦ <https://peterandivanamiller.com/gallery/a-fabulous-wedding-in-slovakia/>
- ✦ <https://barborapalovicova.sk/en/services/traditional-wedding-ritual-cepcenie/>
- ✦ <https://journals.openedition.org/civilisations/2369?lang=en>
- ✦ <https://camineinmiscare.ro/traditii-slovace-la-nadlac/>
- ✦ <https://www.iabsi.com/gen/public/traditions.htm>,
- ✦ <https://slovander.sk/netradicno/tradicna-ludova-svadba-viete-odkial-pochadzaju-dnesne-svadbne-zvyky/>