



BALKAN FOLK COLOUR LANGUAGE

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COLOUR LANGUAGE**



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האוניברסיטה העברית בירושלים
THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM



The Department of Russian and Slavic Studies

1.1.1995.

To Whom it May Concern

Dr. Moni Almalech was employed by the department of Slavic Studies of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem for two years as a research associate.

During this time he was engaged in a research project on a semantic of color in the folk cultures of the Balkans.

As his research director I can testify to the high quality of his research. Dr. Moni Almalech proved himself to be a capable and very competent worker.

Prof. D. Segal


THE DEPARTMENT OF
RUSSIAN STUDIES

Chairman of the Department

MARRIAGE CUSTOMS

THE VEIL OF THE BRIDE

The function of the veil is very obvious and clear — to protect and to hide the bride from bad forces and an evil eye. On one hand the colour of the veil is an additional element to the main function, on the other hand, this colour once more enhances its main function. It should support, by its own substance power, the main function of the veil. Therefore, the colour of the veil, from that second point of view, is an independent feature of the marriage rite, it should express the colour as a substance having its own meaning and power.

This is born out by the following:

Bulgaria — At the turn of the century the veil all over the Bulgarian ethnographical areas was red. After the marriage is consummated for the first time, the veil is substituted with a kerchief that is white in colour. We note this because the veil is an important part of the whole attire which protects and adorns the head of the bride. After the marriage, a woman's head attire is substituted from the bridal veil to a maiden-marriage compound one.

During the marriage, the bride is still with momin prochelnic (maiden-marriage compound attire) with a wreath of yellow flowers, with sweet basil and green box-tree. Above prochelnic of the head, the kum (the best man, sponsor) casts over the red veil, and above it he puts the wedding wreath of flowers and above that, two sticks also with flowers. This act the sponsor does in the church.

On Monday, the bride is unveiled. The sponsor with the stick takes the red veil and casts the nevestin prochelnic (bride, woman's attire) over the bride also with semi-rounded form with

diameter 50–60 centimetres at the front side. It is adorned on the front with dry sweet basil and green box-tree, fresh flowers. To this attire are added some bouquets. A woman's kerchief is attached to the back.

These marriage adornments are gradually dying out, but this attire is worn for an obligatory one week. [Mihailova, 1981, 52–54; Ivanova, 1984; Veleva, 1993, 80–140; Gentchev, 1993; Hutchinson, 1897, 189–190; Garnett, 1890–91, 193–195]

Serbia and other Slaves from the former Yugoslavia: it is curious that in the large number of sources and materials about Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia and Slovenia, there is no description of the colour of the bride's veil. [Bosich, 1913, 137–156; Hutchinson, 1897, 193–195; Filipović, 1958, 156–157; Denton, 1866; Lodge, 1941; Filipović, 1954, 359–374; Kemp, 1935; Troyanovich, 1905, 169–198]

But we find the same practice: to substitute the veil by a woman's compound adorn, concluding the typical for a woman's kerchief. Again without any one description of the colour: "In some villages the bride is wearing the bride's veil for three days after the marriage, but there are places she substitutes the veil with a kerchief the day after the marriage." [Miloslavlevich, 1913, p. 183]

Apparently, until such a described colour is found, it could be considered that the south Slaves commonly used the red for the bride's veil throughout last century. This hypothesis is based on the wide use and sign state of the red in the Ukrainian weddings:

[...] if the bride, before entering the wedding chamber, admits her sin (unvirginity), everything is limited only not singing 'good songs' and missing red colour [...] Generally the meaning of the red colour in that case seems to be the same not only for the Slavs and Aryan tribes, but also for all people on the Earth. The merry and stimulation effect of the red dye, makes it a permanent epithet of the sun. Everywhere, from the most ancient tribes to the contemporary primitive tribes, red means fertility and reproducing sources of nature. [Volkov, 1890, p. 228]

Volkov's view supports the possibility to expect that the bride's veil of all south Slavs was red.

GREECE:

If we take a look at the ethnographic albums for Greece, we can find that the most popular colour of the veil was red. [Ioannou, 1984] Regretfully in the various texts from different sources there was no data on the colour of the veil. However, we had the luck to find research about ancient Greece and Rome. The single description of old-Greek marriage that, can be used, is that of a poem:

"[...] many curved bands of gold and purple robes and intricate playthings, countless silver cups and ivory [...]" [Lefkovitz, Mauren, 1982, p. 6]

The facts about Rome are much more clear:

The bride's toilette was part of the festivities for the women of the family. The dress prescribed by the antiquarians was a woollen tunic woven on an archaic upright loom (tunica recta) fastened by a girdle (cingulum) knitted with a complicated 'Herculean' knot (which the bridegroom would have to untie). On her feet she wore orange slippers (lutei socci). Her hair was parted and plaited into six braids. For a spear should be used the Hasta caelibras. The hair style was fastened with woollen fillets and crowned with a garland and then a flame coloured veil. This flammeum is undoubtedly archaic, since it was also the daily ceremonial garment of the wife of the priest of Jupiter. It continued as one of the main symbols and components of the wedding ceremony routinely mentioned by many authors. [Dana, 1919, p. 14]

We shall give some details about the ancient veil, because we want to stress the function of the veil as a protective piece of clothing:

It must not be associated with the veil worn by the bride today, for it was not an accessory part of the bridal costume, but a robe in itself which covered the whole figure from head to foot. [Dana, 1919, p. 14]

The second garment which was essential to the completion of a woman's dress, at least when she appeared in public, was the κρήδεμνον or καλύπτρη, which served both as cloak and veil. It was probably put on over the shoulders like a shawl, without being folded, in such a way that it could be drawn over the head without

difficulty and across the face, serving as veil. [...] that is was worn over the head is clear from *Odyssey*, v., 229, where Calypso puts on her *φᾶρος; κεφαλῇ δ' ἐρυπερθε καλύπτρην*, [...] and over her head a veil [...]. From the constant use of the epithets *λιπαρός* and *λαμπρός*, 'shining' or 'bright', we may infer that the *κρήδεμνον*, was usually made out of linen and in summer, at least, it was probably a fine, light garment, possibly even semitransparent. [Abrachams, 1964, 34–35]

It was by far the most important and noticeable portion of the wedding attire by reason of the size and colour. [Treggiari, 1991, p. 169]

There is no doubt that the veil was one of the main features of the wedding, as mentioned also by S. Treggiari:

Tacitus lists the routine components of a formal wedding twice. In the mock wedding of Nero and Pythagoras they are the veil, the auspices, dowry, the marriage bed and nuptial torches, Juvenal on the same event, selects for the mention, the veil, the lectus genialis decked in purple, dowry, espies and witnesses. [Treggiari, 1991, p. 169]

From these quotations on the basic part of the veil in the weddings, the preserving-hidden function of that garment, the whiteness of the everyday veil and the redness of the marriage are obvious attributes. Dana claims:

On the ancient marriage veil, exclusive of the Roman, there is no direct evidence, though Wachsmith believes that the ancient Greek veil was of reddish hue. But a true parallel may be found in the modern Greek custom, in accordance with which the bride wears a flame coloured, gold fringed veil. [Dana, 1919, p. 15]

According to Homer, Hera was also adorned with something very close to the shine of fire:

Only once is yellow mentioned, and this is the case of 'saffron robed dawn'. The veil of Hera, that was 'Bright as the sun', might have been yellow-gold." [Abrachams, 1964, p. 37–38]

Moreover: the commentator of M. Dana gives the opportunity to decode the mystical-religious basis of the colour of the veil preferred in the human mind:

In the marriage ceremony fire played part second only to that of flammeum, and number of passages of literature would substantiate the view that the two were connected in thought and that yellow was the chromatic symbol of fire. [Dana, 1919, p. 15]

We should have in our mind that fact that during all centuries after Rome the psychological basis of that mystical opinion continued. Red was used as a symbol of the strength of the fire, which purifies and gives life with its warmth. We should notice that the Romans were more precise, keeping to the reddish-yellow *flammeum* as the colour symbol of the fire.

Fire as a cultivated element of the nature appears very often during the marriage custom; at the period of negotiations, at the moment of entering the new house by the bride — at these important parts of the ceremony is started anew in the hearth. This practice is common for all south Slavs [Ivanova, 1984, p. 30]. Here we should notice the existence of fire as a variously loaded symbol. The hearth as a sign for the cultured space — the home, as well as an element of warmth of human relations, necessary for building of the family, especially a patriarchal one. Before the marriage, in the negotiation period, members of the groom's family visit the house of the bride. A woman rakes the fire in the fireplace and accompanies it with the words of an old charm: "As this fire is burning — so to burn our bachelor for your maiden" [Ivanova, 1984, p. 30]. The author, R. Ivanova, claims that: "to rake up the fire in the fireplace is a wide and common practice" [Ivanova, 1984, p. 30].

After the church ceremony, the bride enters the house of the groom, and many rites take place. Two of them are: "The racking of the fire in the hearth by the bride" [Ivanova, 1984, p. 30] and "The Passing of an infant boy before the hearth to the bride". [Ivanova, 1984, p. 120] The Serbs have the absolute same practices: "When the bride enters the new house she stays at the front of the fire place and says, 'As the smoke of this fire is curling, may the happiness be curled from this house'." [Hutchinson, 1897, p. 226] It is the same in Switzerland: "So much is the shouldering dreaded that in the

Obwalden the young wife and her companion poke the fire fiercely to make it blaze, and then kneel down to pray for good fortune while the wreath is burning". [Hutchinson, 1897, p. 157]

In the climate conditions of Mediterranean Rome they did something similar was performed: "Still at the entrance, she was offered fire (another torch) and water, *aquae et ignis communicatto*, as these elements are essential to human life, most obviously cooking and washing. It has deep roots in the Roman idea of home and rights between citizens, host and guest, and family members." [Treggiari, 1991, p. 169]

All these widely distributed practices, show the importance of the fire as part of the cultural realia, the home, during the marriage.

We can distinguish two different levels or areas of fire functioning in the cultural context: the first is the hearth as a symbol of the house in opposition to the non-culture fire, and the second is the colour red (among the Romans red-gold *flammeum*) as a chromatical symbol of the fire.

The pre-Christian sources of that belief of knowledge are categorised in that respect. In Serbia the sponsor goes over the ritual bread with incense three times not the priest: "He is censuring three times above the ritual bread and the candle [...]" [Miloslavlevich, 1913]

In a Bulgarian heroic folk song the sultan gives an order that forbids Bulgarians, slaves of the Turkish empire, to "build churches and to wear red". The mystical hero, Kral Marko, wears red (red jacket — "*chervena alma*") [Collected Bulgarian Folksongs, 1990, p. 90] as a free man. The importance of the red as a symbol of normal and free life is stressed in that song. We can translate the order of the Turkish sultan as a ban to practice the cultural fire in the life of the Bulgarians. Such a sophisticated order shows complete acceptance by the Muslim Turks of the secret knowledge and pure understanding that such ordinary use of the colour red not only stands for freedom, but for life. Here we find the basis and facts for the universality of the meaning of the colour red in the Balkans. The equal emphasis on the temple (the church) and on the colour red demonstrates convincingly the importance of the colour red related as a complex symbol of life keeping power — as a symbol of the culture fire.

In that context it should not be a surprise that the Turkish Muslim bride wears a red veil: "Virtually everything she wore was ornamented.

Her fine white tulle shirt was worked with tiny gold spangles and pearls, her *salvar* (trousers) with ribbons and surma. The *entary* (a dress) she wore over this was a handsome deep red or sometimes purple-velvet, heavily embroidered in gold or silver and, in a family of high rank, with pearls. Pearls and *surma* decorated her calfskin boots. A single-strand necklace, called *akarsu* (flowing water) and made up of precious stones, hang about her neck, and earrings of jewel clusters were fastened to her ears. Bracelets dangled at her wrists, rings, usually with large single stones, shone on her fingers. The front of her *entary* sparkled with gems.

Her hair was elaborately braided in eight or ten small braids that hung down her back, and each braid was plaited with *Tel* strands of silver or gold tinsel. At the end of the braid both hair and *Tel* were released in a tuft. In each temple a lock of hair was left to curl. Her bridal veil was of crimson tulle worked with silver or gold thread and hung long over her *entary*. Long streamers of *tel* descended from the edge of her veil at her temples. On her head over the veil were fastened the bridal aigrette of finely cut glass in whatever colour she chose and diamonds in a setting called *divanhane vivisi*. This last consisted of an elliptical gold cup, like the end of a fine egg, into which small diamonds were set as if nailed. Finally, the decoration that gave the day its name, *yuz yazzisi*, took place. The bride's face was whitened and rouged and gold dust, spangles and even diamonds were affixed to her forehead, cheeks and chin." [Davis, 1986, p. 90]

We have the whole description of the costume, because we want to mention the similarity between the costume of the Bulgarian bride and the Turkish costume. However it may appear surprising the Bulgarian bride's costume demonstrates a unity of a red-white. The veil is also red. The colour message in the Bulgarian costume has four colours: white, red, gold and green. The colours of the Turkish bride's costume are: white, red and gold (from the total ornamenting).

The universality of the colour language will be discussed in details after the description of the wedding flags from the Balkans, when more information on that topic is gathered. One more reason is the further study of differences between the Muslim bride's costume in Turkey and Albania.

ALBANIA:

They then draped her with the red silk handkerchief, sent her yesterday, and pinned it to the top of her head [...] One of the bridegroom's relatives unpinned the red handkerchief from the bride's head and held it as a screen before her. Behind it her headdress was changed. The white veil was removed and a yellow flowered silk one was substituted.

The greatest moment had now come. We were to see her face.
[Durham, 1979, p. 74]

The data is from a book published in 1928 and it was not quite sure about the original colour of this first (white) veil at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Neither can we establish the meaning of the yellow of the second veil, which precedes the "greatest moment" — when the face of a Muslim bride is revealed. It could be a cultural influence from ancient Rome to neighbour Albania. It could be a transformation of the fire symbolism from *flammeum* not to red, but to yellow, keeping in mind that at the moment of substitution we have the red "screen" and the yellow veil together in one compound symbol and action. To show the face of a Muslim bride seems to be a modification of the common Muslim practice, influenced by the cultural surroundings.

The element of substitution we can observe in two cases — replacing the white veil with a yellow one in the Albanian Muslim marriage, and the substitution of the red Slavonic veil by a white kerchief after the first night. These cases are essentially different. In the first case, the veil is replaced by another veil during the ceremony. In the second case, the veil is substituted by a kerchief after the ceremony. The white kerchief is a sign that the woman who wears it is married. The married woman uses the white kerchief in everyday life. Also Roman women wore white robes serving as a veil in everyday life. The Slavs and the ancient Greeks believed that a woman without a kerchief, of veil, is a very bad sign, "[...] for the house, for the family, for the children. A woman with uncovered hair is equal to a naked woman." [Marinov, 1993, p. 220]

In Slovakia the white kerchief was the regular sign for the matrimonial state of a woman: "In Hornácko [...] the kerchief nowadays worn among the younger women is usually the "Turkish-

print" (*turecký šátek*), red and flowered. The older women wear so-called "Leipzig" kerchiefs (*lipské šátky*), white with "scattered" brown leaves and coloured flower. The Leipzig kerchiefs are beginning to disappear. The older women wear blue and yellow printed kerchiefs, home-dyed [...] [Bogatyrev, 1971, p. 70]

In summer single girls went bare-headed on Sunday afternoons, with three ribbons in their braids. In winter they tied white kerchiefs around their heads, just like the married women [...]" [Bogatyrev, 1971, p. 70] A red kerchief worn by married women is mentioned by Bogatyrev as a "special red kerchief": "In some places, over the pad around which they wound their hair, they used to wear a special red kerchief *na talíř* (in the form of a dish) tied behind the ears. Quite a bit of hair was thus visible over the forehead and temples." [Bogatyrev, 1971, p. 72]

That means the usual basic colour for the married woman also in Slovakia was the white. The red was "a special" case. Also we should recall, the fact that an "woman whose hair is uncovered is equal to her being naked." And the kerchief for maidens was based on red and "flowered" pattern.

The use of a white cover for the hair for daily purposes (a kerchief veil) was seen as an attribute of the married woman showing the taboo element that is placed over the body of the married woman, especially on her head. The white colour is a popular and ancient symbol of purity.

We can link the whiteness of the modern veil all over the Balkans with this understanding of the white colour, however the last century it still was red. Not only the Balkan people have used red as the colour of the veil and colour of the bride's dress. We can site a number of examples:

For Druses:

At Druse marriage the bride was hidden in a long red veil, which is removed by the groom in the bridal chamber.
[Hutchinson, 1897, 82–83]

For the Germans:

The Thuringian bride is clothed in black, with a gorgeous display of coins and chains. On her head she wears tall, tower like

scarlet covering, round which circles of myrtle or rosemary. We shall not discuss here in details circumstance that Thuringian bride's dress is black instead of the customary red bride's costume. At the same time the similarity of the colour phrase is amazing. From Thuringia: red, gold or silver — from the coins; green — from greenery. From Bulgaria: a red dress, veil and apron, white shirt, gold — from the coins, green — from greenery. From Turkey: white shirt, red dress, golden ornamentation on every piece of clothing. From Greece: a red veil, white woollen tunic (the data on Rome), metal garland which shines, greenery everywhere during the ceremony. [Hutchinson, 1897, p. 228]

In the Introduction we showed only one case, in Greece [Ioannou, 1984, 84—85], when the red colour of the bride's costume was replaced by the black. Here we have the second example: in Thuringia the white colour is also missing instead there is a "tower like scarlet covering" of the head. At the same time, red is still the most popular colour for wedding custom. Here is position for the Armenians: "The bride's dress is very curious, her whole figure is enveloped in crimson silk, a silver plate resting on her head. Also a large pair of cardboard wings, covered with feathers, are fastened on to her head." [Hutchinson, 1897, 82—83] There is also red, a shiny silver colour, white feathers and no doubt, no marriage without flowers which means green. In ancient Rome, ritual significance was given to the greenery: "The houses of the bride and bridegroom would have the doorway and vestibule garlanded with green boughs and flowers, the facade decorated with hangings." [Treggiari, 1985, p. 163]

And the case with Seffardi Jews: "These dresses were usually made of dark red, blue or purple velvet [...]" [Juhacz, 1990, p. 221]

There is a good reason for the substitution of the red colour — the colour of life-giving and protective colour with black. In any case from old Greek times, black was associated with the darkness, night, and death; "Horace depicts death with black wings [...] daughter of the night and sister of the sleep. Death is related [...] to the range of colours from black, through the earth coloured shades, to green." [Garland, 1985, p. 178]

Both isolated cases of substitution (in Thuringia and in Greece), of red with black are evidence of a process that was underway in the 19th

century in the consciousness of the people of European-Mediterranean civilisations. This process was a general change of the acceptance of colours in antiquity as language code. Red changed its status in the context of colour's basic terms. White completely replaced red in clothes and the veil — in Christian, Muslim and Jewish interpretation.

The "role" of black in the practice of covering the hands of the Turkish bride with henna is quite notable for the universal acceptance of that colour in the context of the marriage: "The bride is allowed to repose until the henna is considered to have stained her skin to the requisite hue of a ruddy orange, when it is washed off. If left too long, it turns black, which is considered an evil augury for her wedded life." [Garnett, 1891, p. 487]

There is one more opinion for the function of the veil: "Sight as a method of contagion in primitive science and the idea coincides with the psychological aversion to see dangerous things with the sexual shyness and timidity. In the customs noticed we can distinguish the feeling that it is dangerous to the bride for her husband's eyes to be upon her and the feeling of bashfulness in her which induces her neither to see him nor to be seen by him." [Crawley, 1927, p. 330] Crawley's opinion can be accepted as part of the most general idea of the protective power of the (red) veil. But if one wishes to hide, night is the best way and place, i. e., the black colour offers the most successful way of concealment. Nevertheless even in Thuringia, the head covering remains red. Black is associated with death, darkness and underworld, but not as a protective colour for the body.

From our point of view the veil has a wider meaning than that to keep the bride from the eyes of the husband or to protect the bride from her own shyness. This wider meaning is to preserve her from the much more powerful and unknown forces of evil. This is the greatest mystery in the marriage colour code built up in positive direction, aimed at preserving the woman's place as the person that gives life to the future child, but nothing more. It was no simple thing to instil a soul in the new piece of flesh. From that point of view marriage is a complex of magic designed to achieve this goal. The magic rites for the mother and for the child that take place after child birth constitute a form of more complex magic.

Obviously positive protective magic of the marriage complex is beyond space and custom and are focused on the future.

It is essential to mention the veil as a head attribute. The head is the object of customs throughout the burial rites, which destroy what has been done at marriage; the widow cut her hair or left it uncovered, or scratched her face with her own nails. The face was expected to stream with blood and tears. There are no veils, no golden embroideries, no festive wreath or crown (except in a case of death of a newly married woman or a maiden). Practices related to the death rituals are the reverse practices related to the marriage rites. The detailed comparison of the two customs in will be dealt within a chapter further on. It is obvious that what has been performed at the marriage ritual is destroyed during the burial ritual. The display of grief in the customs is not only simple grief.

Here colours are fewer and very often we meet the occult phenomena of the interpretation of the meaning. The power of the colours is positive, negative and neutral. Nevertheless the phenomena rises from the life itself: "*Cone Vestes* are frequently mentioned by Latin poets, chiefly Horace, Tibulus and Propertius. From them we learn that they were chiefly worn by *Heterae* and were of transparent texture. Sometimes they were purple and had gold threads, interwoven or embroidered." [Abrachams, 1964, p. 78]

The function of the colours is much more universal than the nature and the substance of natural languages. Therefore colours are elements of a language much stronger affecting the area of psychology, or the subconsciousness. The philosophy of colour languages, mystical religious secret knowledge and notions — gives us more complex levels "divine", "sacred" and "profane" language. In folklore, especially in the marriage, we can very clearly distinguish the positive features of magic, including the colours.

The philosophy of the colour language (mystical religions notions) provoke priestly defined feelings and senses. This colour language is characterised by its ambiguity — something familiar in nature language. On the other hand in natural language we lack the positive, negative, neutral forms — they are expressed through other lexemes. In colour language, negative, positive and neutral stand for the same lexema, which could assume some 16 meanings, similar to the

ambiguity of a lexema of language. The neutral, positive and negative is clear from the context of practices and the ritual as a whole.

In fact ambiguity in colour language combines the ambiguity of natural language and feeling and senses with negative, positive and neutral shades. Colour language operates with tens of words; natural language operates with tens of thousands. And this explains why one "word" from the colour language has so many shades of meaning and less precision in its notion.