

ETHNOLOGY

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WEDDING FOOD OF GERMANS LIVING IN SIBERIA: SYMBOLS AND SIGNS

This article presents an analysis of the food consumed during the wedding ceremonies of Germans living in Siberia, and describes the main functions and characteristics of this food. It explains the symbolic meaning of many ritual meals in relation to each element of the wedding ceremony, from matchmaking to the final day of the celebration. Bread was the most important type of food in these rituals; it was present throughout the wedding ceremony as a symbol of wealth and prosperity as well as a sign of agreement and marital union. Elements of productive magic such as grains and legumes symbolized health, wealth, and procreation. Meat (pork and chicken) and the dishes prepared with it were seen as possessing powers of fertility.

Keywords: Siberia, Germans, wedding food, symbol, sign, ceremony, ritual.

Introduction

The study of traditional food and its components is an important field in modern ethnology. Ethnic character is expressed comprehensively through food, as the essential component of the system of subsistence. This applies in full to the wedding food of Germans living in Siberia. Such food is characterized by conservatism, stability, and symbolism.

The wedding food of Germans in Siberia, as well as the food of many other peoples, comprises an entire system of symbols and signs. Some types of food were commonly ascribed supernatural qualities such as healing, producing, and apotropaic functions. For example, meals made of legumes and cereals were regarded as symbols of rich harvest, and thus of family prosperity. Sauerkraut was thought to possess healing properties, and symbolized wealth and prosperity. Bread, present in all wedding rituals, was also a symbol of wealth and prosperity.

Following Yu.M. Lotman (1996), this study defines symbols as “texts with singular intrinsic meanings and distinct boundaries.” As source material, the study used ethnographic data from expeditions to the areas inhabited by compact German communities in regions of southwestern Siberia. From 1989 to 2010, the expeditions visited German settlements in the Topki and Yurga regions of the Kemerovo Province; Bagan, Karasuk, Tatarsk, and Chisto-ozernoye regions of the Novosibirsk Province; Azovo German National, Gorkovskoye, Isilkul, Lyubinsky, Maryanovka, Moskalenki, Nizhnaya Omka, Russkaya Polyana, Odesskoye, Omsk, Tarsk, and Sherbakul regions of the Omsk Province as well as Blagoveshchenka, Suetka, Kulunda, German National, and Tabuny regions of the Altai Territory.

The materials collected during the expeditions are stored in the archives of the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography of F.M. Dostoevsky Omsk State University (MAE OmsU). They are organized by thematic clusters including the history of German settlements, family

and family relationships, religion, traditional rituals, traditional economy, housing and household buildings, clothing, and food.

Matchmaking and inviting guests to the wedding

Symbolic features are a part of any rite, and the wedding ceremonies of Siberian Germans were no exception. Particularly vivid symbolism was associated with the ritual of matchmaking, through the ritual significance of the dishes presented on the table of the house of the bride. If her parents put bread and salt, pies, and cheese on the table, this signified consent to the marriage; pumpkin and sandwiches on the table meant that the match was highly undesirable (Smirnov, 2002).

After matchmaking, preparations for the wedding would start. One significant component of this stage was inviting guests to attend. The task was entrusted to the masters of the celebration (*Hochzeitsvater*, *Hochzeitsbitter*, *Hochzeitslader*, *Brautdiener*) and was carried out the day before the wedding. In the Azovo German National Region of the Omsk Province, the master of the wedding, inviting guests to the feast, would proclaim, “You are invited to the wedding, but the pies (*Kuchen*) are very hard and you need to take an axe with you to cut them” (MAE OmSU. F. I. 1998). This signaled to guests that they were to bring their own tableware.

Among the Volyn Germans of Siberia, the master of the wedding invited guests while seated on a horse. The speech of the master (*Brautdiener*) in Litkovka village (Tarsk Region, Omsk Province) began with the words, “I left a black crow on the street, but I myself came here.” This was followed by an invitation, jokes, and comments, such as, “A hundred meters of sausage was made for the wedding. If anyone does not like it, let him bring something else!” In every house the master was offered vodka, so that frequently by the time he reached the end of the village, he could no longer climb up onto his horse. Elderly members of the community note that this custom survived until the late 1970s–early 1980s (MAE OmSU. F. I. 2008).

Polterabend

An integral part of the German wedding was *Polterabend* (lit. “evening of noise, rumble”), or *Poltervent* – an evening dedicated to bidding farewell to bachelor life similar to the modern bachelor party. If the wedding was a religious ceremony, *Polterabend* would be organized on a Saturday, and the wedding ritual and feast would follow on a Sunday. If the wedding was celebrated according to folk customs, *Polterabend* would take place on a Friday.

The next day, the young couple would be registered or married, and the wedding feast would continue through Sunday (Rublevskaya, Smirnova, 1998).

On the eve of the wedding, the bride and groom would gather in the house of the bride and bring treats to eat. The bride and groom would be seated in the center of the table and given tableware, clothes, fabric, etc., as well as symbolic gifts such as roosters and hens. The bride and groom would sing, dance, have fun, and break old cracked dishes which were brought specifically for this purpose (Ibid). In this case, breaking dishes signified wishes of happiness for the young couple. This custom had an apotropaic meaning, the loud noise driving away evil spirits from the couple. The ceremonial breaking of dishes at weddings in Siberian German communities continues to this day.

On the same evening, the bride would treat the guests to wine, tea with pie, or coffee with buns. Traditionally, the day before the wedding during *Polterabend*, groomsmen would steal chickens from the neighbors. The girls would pluck and cook these chickens, and all would share a symbolic meal together (Ibid.). According to E.A. Bryukhnova (1998), the ritual involving the chicken echoed pagan sacrifices to Loki, God of Fire. This is particularly significant as the rooster was a symbol of fertility, the spirit of vegetation, and was closely related to the pagan solar cult of the ancient Germanic people.

The first day of the wedding

Typically, the wedding was celebrated at the home of the groom. However, among the Volyn Germans mostly living in the Lyubinsky and Tara regions of the Omsk Province, it took place at the home of the bride. According to historical sources, the wedding and matchmaking both took place at the bride’s house, because each stage of the wedding cycle was considered a continuation of the previous stage (MAE OmSU. F. I. 1995).

The time between matchmaking and marriage was used for intensive preparations for the feast. E. Seib describes this time: “Two days before the wedding, everything was upside down in groom’s house where the celebration would take place. Everyone was busy from early morning until late at night: the hosts slaughtered livestock, butchered meat, and prepared drinks; the hostess invited neighbors and friends to help. They cooked and baked, stewed and fried” (1967: 147).

Relatives, friends and neighbors participated in preparations for the wedding. Among believers, weddings also had a collective, communal character. If the wedding involved members of a religious community, the community would provide material goods to help the newlyweds. The creation of a new family was considered not only a private matter for the young couple, but also

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