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Elopements of Bosnian Women

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In a study of families and marriage practices carried out before World War II in what was called the Kingdom of Yugoslavia at that time, Vera Stein Erlich described a distinctive feature of marriage in Bosnia. She said that "In patriarchal regions [referring to Montenegro, Macedonia, and Serbia] the bride was chosen almost exclusively and autonomously by the parents of the young man" (Erlich 1966:183). She then asserted that, "In Bosnia, the independence of young men is considerable.... 'Marriage is arranged by the children'" (Erlich 1966:188). One way in which young people arranged their marriage was by elopement, called "ukrala se." A girl and boy collaboratively and secretly eloped without the knowledge of the girl's parents.¹

An elopement is different from a bride abduction, called "otmica," although studies often discuss the two phenomena together (Kudat 1974). An elopement occurs with the consent of a young girl albeit without her parents' knowledge or permission. A bride abduction occurs when a girl unwillingly is kidnapped into marriage.

An elopement is also different from a traditional wedding ceremony, called "svadba." A traditional wedding follows either from an arrangement between household heads or after the parent's permission is received (Hart 2010). In Ivo Andrić's (1977) novel, *Bridge on the Drina*, the beautiful Fata commits suicide by leaping into the Drina after her father arranged an unwanted marriage. Fata's father ignored his daughter's right to choose whom to marry, which, from her viewpoint, justified suicide.

Like Erlich, the two well-known anthropologists, William G. Lockwood (1975) and Tone Bringa (1995), observed elopements in the villages they studied in central Bosnia. In the village he studied Lockwood (1974:260) reports that "by far the majority of marriages, easily ninety percent, are formed by elopement." Bringa (1995:123) wrote that "The most common form of marriage during my stay in the village and I believe over the last thirty years was marriage by elopement." Lockwood carried out his studies in the seventies; Bringa in the eighties.

An elopement results in a change in a girl's social position. In a short period, she moves from being an unmarried girl, "cura," to a married woman, "žena." When the woman marries, it is called "udala se." When the man marries, it is called "oženio se." Traditionally in rural areas, the girl moves into the boy's home with his parents. When a young man moves into his wife's home, an uxori-local marriage, it is called "udao se,"

using the verb for a women marrying in the masculine form. Uxorilocal marriages are infrequent and disparaged (Bringa 1995).

Before an elopement, the girl's position is stable as "cura." Her role is ascribed by her family, community, and upbringing. The elopement is a state of becoming. As the anthropologist Victor W. Turner would say, the elopement is "at once de-structured and restructured" (1964:7). The girl is no longer "cura." Nor is she yet "žena." This liminal space is undefined as when water boils from liquid to gas. During this period there seems to be little community support and few social rights. In her husband's home, the girl, now "žena," will again have a stable status as her husband's wife, likely living with her husband's family and being subject to her mother-in-law in her new home.

Turner invites anthropologists "to focus their attention on the phenomena and processes of mid-transition" (1964:19). He theorizes that they "paradoxically expose the basic building blocks of culture just when we pass out of and before we re-enter the structural realm" (1964:19). The difficulty of accepting Turner's invitation is that these phenomena are also the least observable. One is not meant to know when or how an elopement occurs. It is a secret except to the couple eloping and perhaps one or two go-betweens.² At best, there is a suspicion within the family and among neighbors. An investigator cannot participate in an elopement as a participant observer. Still, there is one old ethnographic account, narrated to a Croatian ethnologist, [Anton Hangi](#) (2011), from his book *Život i običaji muslimana u BiH, Sarajevo* [*The Life and Customs of Muslims in Bosnia Herzegovina*], first published in 1899. Hangi retells a dramatic eye witness account of an elopement. Such an account suggests that elopements are a long-standing but still inadequately researched cultural custom in Bosnia. This study explores what elopements mean to women today after the recent war.

The following discussion is based on in-depth interviews with women in Bosnia who married by elopement and one man who aided in two elopements as part of a bridal party. The women were Muslim and Serbian Orthodox Bosnians. The interviews were arranged by Žene Ženama (Women to Women), who found subjects who had eloped and agreed to be interviewed.³

The first story is told by a subject approximately eighty years old. The subjects' ethnicity is not stressed unless relevant to the story. Moreover, the location of her home is not disclosed to protect her anonymity and confidentiality. At the age of fifteen, the subject wanted a life with her boyfriend. Her mother, though, would not allow her to marry. They were poor, and she was the oldest daughter. Her father had passed away, and she was needed at home. She, though, continued to see her boyfriend secretly, never touching given the traditional courting customs of their time. When her mother heard about these meetings, she was forbidden from speaking about him.

When she was twenty, she met with her cousin who was married to a girl in another village. He recommended someone to her from his village. The cousin arranged a meeting, and the boy and the subject talked over coffee for fifteen minutes. He asked

her if she wanted to marry him, and she said yes. Her reasoning was that she was twenty years old, and nobody would now want to marry her because she was this age. They arranged the elopement in three days. At midnight, three cousins and an aunt came for her. They took her to another village far from her own, walking through forests. Her mother did not know where she was and looked for her for two days. Her cousin told her mother she had eloped. The cousin acted as a go-between, "provodadžija." The role is discussed in Erving Goffman's (1958) account of discrepant roles.⁴

When the subject came to her husband's village, they had a wedding ceremony prepared with many village guests. When she approached her husband's home, they put her on a horse. The horse was big and beautiful, and she had never ridden a horse before. Here an elopement leads immediately to a traditional wedding. In Hangi's (1898) narration, there is a similar transition. The two rites, while distinct, are not mutually exclusive. The elopement is what Turner calls a transformative rite of passage. The wedding ceremony is a confirmatory rite of passage.

Fourteen days after the wedding ceremony, the couple had as well a civil and religious ceremony, both at the same time. There are several rites of passage here with which to confirm a marriage, and from the stories collected during the study, subjects indicated they could occur singularly or in combination with each other, depending upon circumstances and social conditions. This subject eloped, had a traditional wedding, and then had a civil ceremony and Muslim religious ceremony. We asked about the religious ceremony, and the subject had trouble remembering it.

She recalled that at the wedding ceremony there were many guests. There were several cousins of the groom, and for a while she was not sure who her husband was. She got confused given their brief acquaintance. While telling this part of the story, the other women present, relatives and friends, laughed merrily and the older subject said, "Please, please, don't laugh, this is not so funny." In the liminal period, "there is a certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence" (Turner 1964:15). The subject's inability to discern other boys from the one she was marrying reflects, not just an observational limit, but an existential uncertainty about what one actually is doing.

When she arrived at her husband's house, she had nothing to wear. In most elopement stories recounted, clothes were a feature or, rather, missing feature. Lacking clothes suggests vulnerability on the part of the subject during the elopement when it seems she is more in the state of nature than in society. After her mother learned of her daughter's elopement, she sent the subject's clothes and things to her new home.

The second story is from a younger woman approximately thirty years old. She was seventeen when she eloped. In high school she was a good student, receiving high marks. Her husband and she were young. They were out walking, and he just asked her, do you want to get married. She said yes and asked when. He said now. They were speaking on Monday, and they married on Wednesday. She knew that her parents would not allow her to marry. His boyfriend's family, though, knew of the marriage, and prepared a wedding ceremony. Notice that the boy has less autonomy in the marriage decision than the girl because to bring a wife into the family home, the

boy needs some sort of permission from his parents. The boy may even need approval of his choice for a wife since she will live in the family home. Her boyfriend came in a car, she went out, and they went to his uncle's wife. There she changed her clothes, put on new clothes, which she still keeps to this day for memory's sake. She regrets having lost her shoes from that day.

The elopement occurred during the recent war in an eastern Bosnian town. Her brother was swimming in the river and saw the event unfold. He went to their parents and said, "It looks as if your daughter got married." Her father was angry and cried. Her mother "went nuts." Her mother's hands shook so much that she could not pour juice. During the wedding ceremony at her husband's home, they gave her a Koran as she entered the home, the wife of her husband's brother took off her shoes, and they gave her a cup of salt, wheat, and candy to throw, the wheat going into her husband's ear. They now laugh about this when they recall their marriage. They did not have a religious ceremony. Two years later, when she was pregnant, they had a civil ceremony. The municipal clerks assumed that she was getting married because she was pregnant, which was amusing.

She recollected that now that she had children she understood why her parents thought she was too young to marry and recalled how friends remained in school and went out. The subject was happy as she recollected her elopement and her life and she seemed proud to have married this way. Her husband and she made their marriage. She, though, said that she still feels a little sad when she remembers the time she first visited her parents' house after their marriage and her father refused to shake her hand. Elopement defies patriarchal authority over the daughter's decision of whom and when to marry.

A crucial feature of the elopement is that the girl chooses to elope. While circumstances and social conditions, often quite difficult and sometimes extremely oppressive, constrain and define the event, it is still a choice, a decision made autonomously. The choice makes the elopement more than a behavior. The choice makes the elopement an action. While the elopement is a behavior governed by external circumstances and social structures, it is also an action where the action takes into account external circumstances and social conditions but because of the choice being made is not ruled by them (Parsons 1968).

The next story tests this last point about social agency. The subject was fourteen when she married. We asked her to recount her elopement while family and children were present. The subject was approximately ninety years old. When she was fourteen she begged her parents to allow her to go to a festival. She was very pretty with long braids of hair coming down to her feet. She promised her mother she would do anything if she could go the festival. Her future husband, whom she had never seen before in her life, saw her at the festival and flirted with her. She did not pay attention because so many other boys were interested in her. He was twelve years older than she. After the festival, there was another kind of gathering called "teferič." "Teferič" where young people sing and dance in "kolo," a circle dance. Her future husband taunted her, "You can sing till ten, but after ten you will not sing." Her cousin was frightened because she heard that they were going to abduct her. If a boy pulled a girl out of a "kolo," if he touched her, she had to marry him. Muslim tradition forbade that

an unmarried girl be touched, and it a shame if she was. During the “kolo,” young men grabbed her and pulled her out of the “kolo.” She, though, was so strong that she pulled other people along with her into the corn field. There was a scene, and police came to establish order. The police asked our subject whether it was her good will to marry, and she answered no. She heard the young boy’s mother call out, “I will not take her into my house. My son still has to serve in the army.” If married to this young man, the girl would remain in his house while he served in the army, and his mother did not want that. Army service lasted two years.

The subject, though, worried that, since everyone saw how she was pulled from the “kolo,” news would get back to her parents and she would not be allowed to return home. The police told her, if it is your good will, you can marry, but, if not, you can stay and dance. They would not let him touch her again. One policeman, who knew her father, confided, “I know his family and he is a hard worker and a good man. It would be OK if you did decide to marry him.” (Here it is the policeman who plays the discrepant role of the go-between.) The subject said that she was so young she did not know what marriage was. She decided to marry because she wanted to see what it means. She did not know if she liked this guy, but getting married seemed like it would be fun and exciting. The subject laughs with the other women as she says this.

She went to her husband’s home, but nobody was there. The family vacated the home because they did not want to receive her. Based on her knowledge of traditional marriage customs, she stood in “budžak,” meaning corner, describing a custom the bride follows standing in a corner with her hands in a certain way on her hips wearing a red scarf while neighbors and relatives visit. Nobody, though, came to the house because the family opposed the marriage. Indeed, she did not even have a scarf to wear because it was left on the field after her husband had pulled it off. The husband’s brother was living upstairs, and his wife came downstairs and gave her a scarf. At his point, since his family was not there, the young man said to her, “Stop. Don’t do this anymore. It makes no sense.” The brother’s wife later brought them milk because they had nothing to eat. She stayed three nights, and then her mother and aunt came to take her home. She, though, did not want to return home with them. She had already spent three nights with her husband, and she would have returned in shame. Her friends would have said she is “žena” rather than “cura.” She had crossed from one state of being to another, the journey being not just dramatic, but transformative.

The subject had ten sons, giving birth to the first at the age of fifteen. She has thirty grandchildren. Every time she had a child, her husband wanted a daughter, but she always had a son. She laughs a few minutes as she recounts this. After she had her first child, her husband went into the army and she went to live in her own parents’ home because it would have been difficult to stay with her husband’s family. She was young and did not understand household politics. Her father accepted her back and had her age changed on her birth certificate so that she would be legally married, which would give respectability to the situation while she and her child stayed with her parents and her husband served in the army. Her husband served eighteen months rather than two years since he was newly married and had a child.

Is this story one of bride abduction, “otimica,” or elopement, “urala se”? The phenomena are not mutually exclusive. A young boy stole a young girl into marriage.

She was unwillingly pulled out of the “kolo.” At the same time, the girl had opportunities to escape this coercion, first, when the police intervened, established order, and promised she would not be touched again in the “kolo,” and again, when her aunt and mother came to retrieve her after spending three nights with her husband in his home. Ignoring the hostility of her mother-in-law, the girl made a decision, her own decision, resulting in a marriage having a distinctly achieved rather than ascribed status, which is what she wanted and what she was happy about.

Given Pierre Bourdieu’s (1976) critique of structuralism, it would be a mistake to frame the subject as a “structural victim.” Machismo and traditional patriarchal social structures were significant features of her life-world, but her relation to them was not one of obedience to fixed rules. The police allowed her to discern what she wanted. The social rules, in fact, broke down, which did not result in the subject falling into a void. The subject exemplified an embeddedness in what Bourdieu calls *habitus*, “a whole system of predispositions inculcated by the material circumstances of life and by family upbringing” (1976:118). *Habitus* provided the subject a system of schemes rather than rules guiding her choice. Unlike rules, this system of schemes existed “without ever becoming completely and systematically explicit” (Bourdieu 1976:119).

Lockwood (1974,1975) and Bringa (1995) argued that elopements were a distinct cultural heritage for Bosniak women, not practiced to the same degree by Bosnian Serbs who more commonly married through traditional weddings. Following the recommendation of the director at Žena Ženama, Nuna Zvizdić, who said women in Bosnia from each ethnic groups, including not only Bosniaks, but also Croats, Serbs, Roma, and Jews, elope to form a marriage, interviews with Serbian Orthodox women also were conducted. Spring 2011 Prism Research, a research group based in Sarajevo, included a survey question submitted by the investigator in its omnibus survey. The results were that 22% of 861 subjects selected randomly with cluster sampling from the population reported marrying by elopement. The percentage was lower for Bosnian Croats (11%) than for Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Serbs (26% and 22% respectively). Among Bosnian Serbs in rural settlements the percentage was higher than it was for Bosnian Muslims in rural settlements (29% versus 24%). It is unproductive, Fredrik Barth (1960:257) argues, to study ethnic groups in isolation, as “pelagic islands.” It is better to investigate the ethnic group within a larger society rather than in terms of singular values.

The first Serbian Orthodox woman chose to tell the story of her mother’s elopement. Her mother was born in 1914. Her father had been employed in the city and passed her mother’s home daily while she was in the garden. Her father and mother would see and greet each other. When he was coming back one day from his job, they met. Her mother’s mother-her grandmother-found out and did not permit her daughter to see him anymore. Her mother had other boyfriends, but she favored this man. One day he was passing in his car, and he asked if she wanted to go now. They had not made any agreement or arrangement beforehand. Her mother said yes and he just took her. This action, according to the subject, is a true example of what “ukrala se” is. While her mother had known her father, she did not know what day they would elope or even if they would elope. She just left from her garden with nothing.

Her grandmother was very wealthy, owning and running a “han,” a guest home for

travelers, as mentioned and described in Andrić's *Bridge on the Drina*. Her grandmother was angry that her daughter left the city to make a life in the mountains. A half year later, her mother's sister came to her mother's new home in the mountains with some clothes, but her father's mother told her that they did not need to bring anything. Her father's mother was so happy to have a daughter-in-law. When her father went to work and passed by his wife's former home, he left news about her mother with her mother's sister. Her father was seized by the German army during World War II and taken to the concentration camp, Jasenovac, where he was killed. At the age of twenty-eight her mother became a widow. Her mother never remarried. Marrying the way she did made her happy such that she wanted no other. Her mother had a hard but good life, raising five children very well. Another subject, who had eloped and had lost her husband in the recent war, indicated that this marriage was such that she could neither wish for nor imagine another. This subject was in her late forties at the time of the interview.

The next subject who was older than the other subjects when she eloped said that when she eloped, she had a good job and was helping support her family. Her family knew she had a relation but expected her to keep working to support the family. Her boyfriend and she kept their intentions secret. Without her parents knowledge they planned a honeymoon to Dubrovnik and a civil ceremony. She packed a bag and walked out without her shoes one night so that nobody would hear her. This action was different from just starting to live together, which involves no real rite of passage into a marriage. The subject reflected that during the socialist period of her country wedding ceremonies were seen as a kind of kitsch, an event displaying what Thorstein Veblen (1912) would call "conspicuous consumption," spending considerable money as a sign of economic wealth for others to see displayed. After the recent war, weddings ceremonies are becoming more common, and the subject lamented this change. The subject recommended a book of stories on these customs titled *Naša Snaha i Mi Momci* [*Our Daughter-in-Law and Our Boys*] by the Bosnian author, Ćamil Sijarić (1983).

This study will conclude with one more story, even though there are others just as distinctive that have not been reported. The last subject was fifteen when she married. She was a strong high school student. She came from a wealthy family. Her husband, from another region, was visiting for his work in her town. He was a policeman and seven years older than she. Her friends and she were very open and hospitable to him and his friends, inviting them to cafes and showing them the town. While she had a boyfriend, she started to ask herself whether this person meant something to her. She was young and did not really know. One day he picked her up and said he would like to marry her that night. He was so confident, she remembered with admiration, and this decision was a big risk for him because of his career. She was underage and it might harm his career. She agreed to marry. She colluded with her neighbour, who kept her things. Her neighbour said, "This is not right, but I will support you." Her neighbour, who acts as a go-between, had also eloped. One hour after midnight, they eloped while her parents slept. Her boyfriend and she went to Dubrovnik for a honeymoon that lasted seven days, and her neighbour told her parents. After two days, she called her mother. Her mother was very sad, thinking she could resolve the situation with a conversation, hoping to un-do what had happened. After the honeymoon, they went to her husband's family's village, close to Montenegro. His

parents had three sons and were happy to get a daughter-in-law. Her husband's parents lived in a mixed village of Serbian Orthodox and Muslim Bosnians. All the neighbors gathered to see the bride, but when they came, they asked where the bride was. She was so youthful and full of energy she was playing soccer on the field with other children. The Serbian Orthodox guests brought money as wedding gifts, and the Bosniak guests gave jewellery and rings. One older Bosniak woman, who had no daughter, gave her mother's family ring to her, a Serbian Orthodox girl marrying into a neighbor's family.

Since she was so young, her husband's family excused her from standing, sitting, and serving guests. Still, she took coffee and sugar to the women neighbors as gifts and cigarettes to the men. She also gave gifts to everyone in the family—sheets, shirts, socks, and fabric to make clothes. Later, her husband's family visited her own family. Before she could attain the required papers for a civil ceremony at the municipality or city hall, she had had to be interviewed by two different doctors to certify that she was of sound mind and body. She also had to go to the police station and be interviewed to confirm that the marriage was with her good will and she entered the marriage willingly.

The subject returned to school. She felt lucky because her husband was not so patriarchal or possessive. She even went to her school prom. Their decision to marry this way changed her life. She said that your family prepares you to make this kind of decision, and without a good upbringing she would not have had the courage to elope. Each elopement, she said, is special in its own way. Her case shows that elopements empower women, elopement being magical, giving you a stronger feeling about yourself and your marriage. Turner writes on the liminal period, "To 'grow' a girl into a woman is to effect an ontological transformation. . . . It is not a mere acquisition of knowledge, but a change in being" (1964:11). A special knowledge about gender and self arises out of the liminal period of this rite of passage called elopement or "ukrala se." The special knowledge gives a young woman confidence in herself as she transitions to adulthood. At the end of the interview, the subject mentioned that the brightest girl in her class, a student who in the socialist period carried flowers to Tito, a national scholastic honor, married by elopement. This study provides an exploratory investigation into a cultural heritage of a poly-ethnic society. Tone Bringa (2003:31) writes: "Neither Bosniak, nor Croat, nor Serb identities can be fully understood with reference only to Islam or Christianity respectively but have to be considered in a specific Bosnian context that has resulted in a shared history and locality among Bosnians of Islamic as well as Christian backgrounds."

This study gives reason to support Bringa's claim, focusing on one rite of passage known as elopement or "ukrala se." In Bosnia, there are multiple cultures co-residing in the same vicinity. There is also a singular culture which encompasses her multiple ethnic groups. Svetlana Broz's *Good People in an Evil Time: Portraits of Complicity and Resistance in the Bosnian War* (2004) provides a range of testimonials that reflect this shared culture during extreme moments of social violence. Multiculturalism is perhaps a misnomer for understanding Bosnia's cultural heritage, even though the term is frequently used. Drawing upon anthropology and its inductive understanding of culture's central role in the functioning of every society, there is evidence that there not only was but still is a cultural heritage shared by Bosnians from different

ethnic groups.

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Notes

1. The author is the beneficiary of several generous conversations with Professor William G. Lockwood in Ann Arbor, Michigan and Professor Victor Ayoub in Yellow Springs, Ohio. The author alone is responsible for whatever errors and flaws are in this study. ↩
2. See Georg Simmel's (1950) work on the functional and necessary role of the secret within interpersonal relations and various types of social structures. ↩
3. The author would like to thank the director of Žene Ženama [Women to Women], Nuna Zvizdić, in Sarajevo and the interviewer and the translator during the field work, Emina Pilav. Without their help the author would not have been able to carry out this study. Žene Ženama is a self-organized women's group which contributes to the development of civil society through the empowerment of women and women's groups. Žene Ženama advocates for respect of women's human rights in all spheres of private and social life. The NGO has developed a program which integrates a gender perspective in the interpretation of human rights, democracy, and non-violent communication employing a unique and creative model focused on education and activities of women and women's groups in Bosnia-Herzegovina. ↩
4. Erving Goffman (1959) accounts for various discrepant social roles (the informer, the circus shill, the wiseguy, the shopper, and the go-between) and the different motives with which the social member keeps various kinds of secrets (a dark, an inside, a strategic, an entrusted, and a free secret). ↩

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