LOVE IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS: INNOVATION AND TRADITION IN THE WORLD OF QUARANTINE WEDDINGS

Judit Balatonyi

PhD, Assistant Professor
Department of European Ethnology – Cultural Anthropology
University of Pécs, Hungary
balatonyi.judit@gmail.com

Abstract: International sociological research based on demographic data has shown that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly shaped the way of getting married. According to this research, varying from minimal to dramatic, there was a decrease in marriage rates worldwide. The marriage rate in Hungary showed a different picture. The number of weddings increased by 3%. It can also be seen that the number of marriages per month during the pandemic tended to decrease in periods of severe restrictions and lockdowns and to increase in periods of temporary loosening. While the period of restrictions was characterized by civil ceremonies and micro-weddings, the period of loosening the restrictions saw a mixture of large and tiny weddings, with or without civil marriages. So, people did not postpone or proceed with their weddings but tried to stick to their original plans despite, or rather besides, the changed circumstances; or, abandoning certain expectations and inventing new ones, they rescheduled their wedding. Based on my digital anthropological research, this paper raises questions: why did some people get married during the lockdown periods, or why did others postpone their weddings until after the restrictions were loosened? In the following, I aim to explore the modified wedding practices adapted to newer circumstances and analyze the ways of selecting and constituting the wedding "tradition" ("bricolage of traditions").

Keywords: commitment ceremonies, getting married during COVID-19, marriage rate in Hungary, micro-weddings

INTRODUCTION

According to sociological reports analyzing international demographic trends, the rate of getting married has significantly decreased all over the world during the time of COVID-19. In Japan, the decrease was 37% (Takenaka 2020), while in Italy it was 80% (AFP 2021). The U.S. marriage rate has also been on

a declining trajectory. Analysts primarily blamed the hardships and problems caused by the pandemic for the decreasing marriage rates. Among them, restrictive government measures to curb the pandemic (e.g., curfews and interdictions on public gatherings, the banning of events or the limitations on the number of attendees) were used as an explanation. They also took into consideration the negative psychological effects of COVID-19 on couples and the economic instability that came about in association with the pandemic (job loss, unreliable incomes) as well as actual health problems (Reynolds 2020; Wagner & Choi & Cohen 2020). That is to say, researches so far have highlighted that the majority of people postponed or cancelled their planned weddings due to legal and health restrictions, injunctions, and changed socio-economic circumstances.

The situation was different in Hungary, where the marriage rate showed a different picture. Within the Eastern European context, among the Visegrád countries (V4), it was only in Hungary that the desire to wed did not diminish during the three waves of the pandemic (Szémann 2021). Although the Hungarian government also introduced restrictions, not only did the number of weddings not decrease, but it also even rose. While in 2019, 65,300 couples were married, in 2020 the number was 67,301 (Gyorstájékoztató 2021), showing a 3% increase. What could be the cause of this rise in the number of weddings? My paper seeks to explain the divergence of the Hungarian trends from international processes regarding the willingness to wed during COVID-19 in Hungary. How is it possible that the number of weddings increased in Hungary while it declined elsewhere? I will first discuss macro-contextual factors that influence individual decision-making, replanning, and reinterpretation processes, and will follow up by examining how these processes unfolded. Specifically, I will analyze what pre-existing or new patterns and ideologies couples reinterpreted in their weddings so successfully that throughout the pandemic – with some fluctuation – the rate of contracting marriages remained steadily high.

The research on which this paper is based is the continuation of a research project on marriage I started in 2019, which due to the outbreak of COVID-19 changed course in March 2020. From this point on, I began to focus on the changes taking place during the pandemic, deviating significantly from the research methodology (classic anthropological fieldwork) planned earlier. The new research method was patchwork ethnography. Patchwork here refers to "using fragmentary yet rigorous data" regarding both empirical findings and the knowledge being examined, to the changed platforms of the transmission of knowledge (Günel & Varma & Watanabe 2020). I primarily carried out online ethnographic research (netnography). I was present in Facebook wedding organizing groups; participated in trainings, lectures, and webinars provided by the wedding service providers; distributed online questionnaires; and conducted

in-depth interviews in person. During my research, I archived news and media items, legal and health regulations relating to weddings, and the discourses in Facebook reflections on these among Hungarian-language wedding-organizing and chat-groups. I was present in about 12 groups and was paying the most attention to the four most active groups, monitoring them on a daily basis (the number of members in the groups varied between 2,500 and 29,000). I also paid attention to the debates and conversations related to the organization and reorganization of weddings, as well as to the individual and collective dilemmas the participants presented. I documented several live-streamed civil wedding ceremonies, wedding accounts, as well as the commentary (comprising thousands of supportive statements) accompanying the signatures to an online petition for permitting the holding of wedding receptions in Hungary (Vlasicsné Gajdár 2020).

In April 2020, I posted an online questionnaire with detailed, for the most part open, questions that asked about the strategies and specific practices of reorganizing weddings among those planning weddings after March 2020. I publicized the Google Forms-type *self-administered questionnaires (SAQ)* online on Facebook in the form of a paid advertisement. As several researchers have emphasized, the *Facebook Ads* advertising platforms are very well suited to providing the demographics and interests of the people one wishes to reach (making use of the digital footprint of Facebook users), thereby specifying and honing in on those users who are of interest (Iannelli et al. 2020). In the case of my own research, the members of the possible target groups were defined by age (20–60 years), Hungarian residency, engaged or newly married status, and interest shown in marriage ceremonies and weddings. I used Facebook Ads to promote my survey twice in the course of April and May, for three days at a time in the form of a paid advertisement; the April ad reached 23,900 Facebook users (with 1400 activities) and the May ad reached 12,200 people (448 responses). Altogether, I reached 34,531 Facebook users; this figure does not exclude duplications, but for the two periods I targeted partly different groups in terms of social stratification, educational level, and the counties targeted.

The respondents filled in the questionnaires voluntarily, and a total of 490 people did so. 72.7% of the respondents were aged between 20 and 30 years, and 27.1% ranged from 31 to 50. The overwhelming majority declared themselves to be of Hungarian nationality (3 Swabian or German, one Romanian). 60.2% had graduated from university/college, 2% had obtained a PhD, 30.6% had a high school diploma, 7.7% had graduated from vocational or technical high school, 1% had received a post-secondary certificate, and 1% had associate degrees. 25.5% lived in the capital; 29.4% in a county capital or a large town; 25.5% in a small town; 19% in villages; and 3% on a farm. Beyond the questionnaires,

I received numerous responses, reflections, and thanks (in e-mails or Facebook comments). In addition, I recorded 40 in-depth interviews with brides planning weddings at the time of COVID-19. After answering the online questionnaire, the brides volunteered to be interviewed. The call for interviews was included as the last point of the questionnaire. The majority of the brides interviewed lived in the capital or in large towns and county capitals (Somogy, Csongrád, and Baranya counties) and were college graduates aged between 20 and 35 years. Two of them worked abroad.

MACRO-CONTEXTUAL CONSTRAINTS, PRECEDENTS, CONTEXTS

The direct influence of regulations concerning the family and population policy

In my opinion, the number of weddings increased during the time of the pandemic because there had already been a trend in place in recent years. Between January and December 2019, 65,300 couples got married, 28% (14,472) more than in the previous year (what is more, 2019 saw the largest number of weddings take place since 1990). In addition to a variety of personal motivations, including romantic love or the pressures arising from family or societal expectations, the recently introduced demographic policy measures played an increasingly important part – especially such as the Childbirth Incentive Loan (Babaváró hitel) and Family Housing Allowance (CSOK, Családi Otthonteremtési Kedvezmény) offering favorable terms for loans and subsidies. Being married and planning to have a child are necessary conditions for accessing these. It is clear from all the available information that the need to access credit plays a significant and explicit role in planning, timing, reorganizing, and replanning weddings. According to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO, Hungarian acronym KSH), the striking rise in the number of marriages contracted in 2019 coincided precisely with the introduction of the Childbirth Incentive Loan. Thus, the high wedding rate is a direct consequence of earlier social policy interventions aimed to stimulate, in an economic sense, the will to get married. People also got married during the pandemic because they had strong economic, social, and cultural, as well as emotional reasons for it. From my 2019, pre-COVID-19 research, it transpired that people wishing to get married justified their decision with their personal, individualized economic, legal,

and social decisions and/or with their strong emotional motivation, religious ideas, their own biography, or the specificities of their particular relationship.

At the level of motivation, emotions and self-interest may intermingle. Why is this important? The social scientific literature does not reflect much on the multiple motivations for getting married; we do not know much about how these are related. Until recently, social scientists posited that differences between marriages contracted on an emotional basis, citing romantic sentiments and marriages dictated by various practical and economic interests, signaled differences in modernity (Goode 1963; Giddens 1992; Illouz 2012; Fáber 2019). Most recently, Paul Valentine, Stephen Beckerman and Catherine Alès demonstrated for South American marriages that personal desires and various socio-economic and political necessities – trying to attain exogamy or endogamy, or the exchange of women – can be equally found among the motivations (Valentine & Beckerman & Alès 2017). It seems to me that not only is this evident to social scientists, but those involved also interpret it in a similarly complex way.

Beyond the multiplicity of motivations, one must recognize that their relevance may vary situationally over the course of wedding planning. Often, they may be important to members of the couple, their family, or broader or narrower circles to a greater or lesser degree and in different ways. Acceptance, internalization, or rejection of the various, plural motivations of different people (be they supportive or negative) is a constant accompaniment to the organization of weddings. During the wedding process, they can be internalized and be enforced in varying ways: they may define certain ceremonies and events (partly or wholly) and may also influence their interpretation. For example, only one of the members of the couple attaches importance to the civil ceremony for legal or economic reasons (i.e., being married is necessary for some reason); or the bride's or the groom's religious motivations call for the Big Day and within that the church ceremony; or they want to get married in a civil ceremony because of their joint emotional attachment (e.g., romantic love); or they organize the Big Day because of family/parental pressure. At yet other times, they marry because of love and for economic reasons; they organize the Big Day driven by the childhood dreams of the bride; fulfilling the wishes of the grandmother, they also perform the religious ceremony, but they wish to celebrate their own relationship and happiness with the wedding reception. The variations are endless. It also follows from this that a civil ceremony conducted with two witnesses on a weekday may only serve to obtain a 'piece of paper', to qualify for the favorable credit opportunities, but it may also genuinely represent the strengthening of their sense of security, trust, and the relationship itself, or raise the level of the commitment of the couple to new heights. Along with the civil ceremony, church ceremonies, and wedding receptions are often interpreted

as the 'real' rituals of the act of getting married (for religious, spiritual, or individual reasons that are specific to the relationship, and for normative reasons as well). They, too, may strengthen, deepen, or raise the given relationship to a new level. Couples who had already married legally, but because they had not had a wedding reception, considered themselves only engaged to be married, chose to ritualize the routine[1] by bearing witness to their existing relationship and common identity or by trying to bring forth something new from their life together until then: the next level, the next steps to be taken together.

Thus, I am arguing that getting married is primarily constructed from personal, socially contextualized experiences from the given relationship of the couple and can primarily be interpreted from their point of view. On the level of narrative strategies, they always attributed secondary importance to credit and economic factors and always ranked 'love' first – however, when talking about other people's weddings, they often stressed that they knew people who only got married because of favorable credit opportunities. In terms of organizing weddings, these various interests and emotions are manifested differently. While weddings are primarily organized for the sake of entertainment and the sharing of joy and happiness, the celebration of a new level of the relationship – besides conducting the civil and religious ceremony with the expectation of and desire to take vows in front of the state, God, themselves, friends, and family – justified the spectacular celebration with both love and actual legal and economic consequences. Although some of the motivations necessitate a spectacular feast with many participants, others do not at all. It needs to be noted that the increase in the number of marriages contracted during COVID-19 cannot be explained solely by the effect of favorable terms of credit. Among the V4 countries, in 2019, Slovakia also introduced similarly favorable terms of credit (couples under 35 have access to favorable credit from the State Housing Development Fund (ŠFRB) for the purpose of buying and renovating real estate). Nonetheless, during the pandemic there was a significant decrease in the number of marriages.

The reinterpretation of marriage and the rites of getting married

It is important to stress that favorable terms of credit also influenced contemporary marriage trends both before and after COVID-19 in other, indirect, implicit ways. Weddings, popularized and motivated by the availability of favorable credits, functioned as catalysts in themselves: they became increasingly common through the example of family and friends, while the media continually kept alive the idea that there was a wedding boom and that marriage had once

again become fashionable. Thus, for example, the infographics based on the data of KSH (HCSO) published on Facebook in February 2020 highlighted that "there has not been such a boom in marriage in nearly 30 years" (KSH 2020).
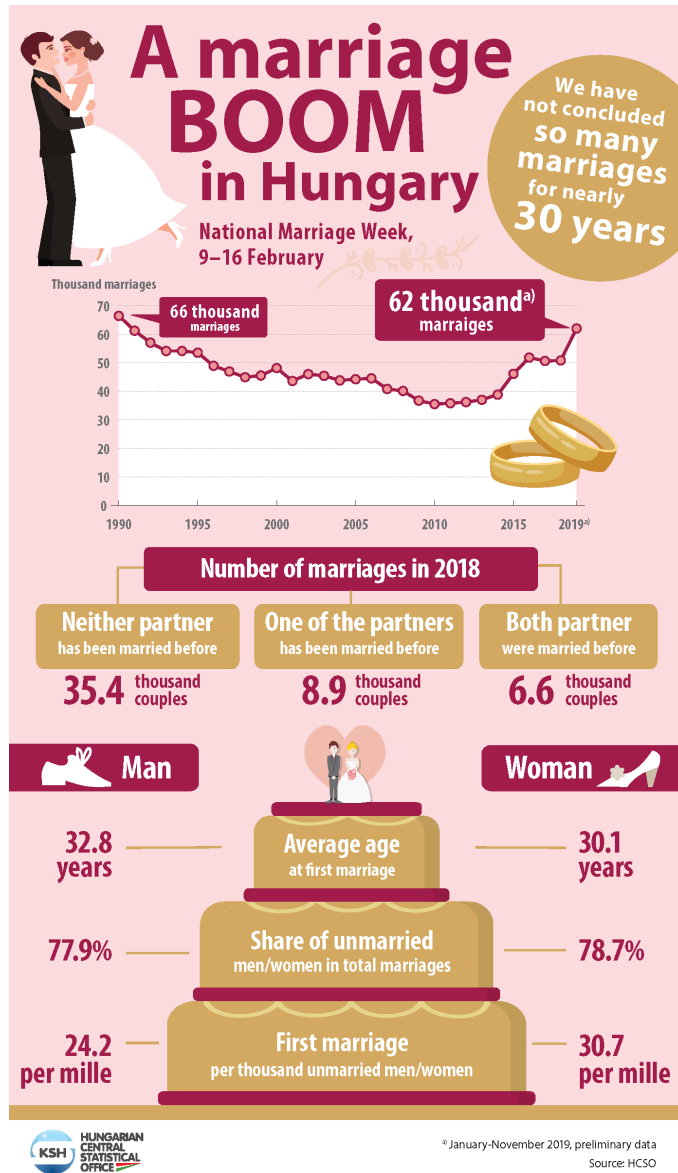

Figure 1. *A marriage boom in Hungary. Infographics by Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2020. Source: https://www.ksh.hu/infografika/2020/hazassag_eng.pdf.*

This popularity not only generated a positive attitude but also set in motion a critical discourse in connection with the phenomenon, which led to a serious societal debate. Numerous critical voices could be heard or read about the dangers of love and marriage dictated by economic self-interest, the worsening divorce statistics, and the crisis of marriage, and the instant weddings lacking festive rites, undertaken for the sake of 'getting the papers'.

> *ZG (male): Money is pouring in.*
> *XY (woman): I guess it* [the number of marriages contracted] *rose at such a rate because of Family Housing Allowance, Childbirth Incentive Loan and the like. …*
> *XX (woman): It is rather positive. …*
> *XZ (woman): What is positive, dear XX? That, let's go Mary, I'll marry you, we'll make 3 kids in exchange for 10 million forints? For me what is good is that my husband married me out of love, and we'll make as many children as we can raise without the help of the state. But each has her own preference, of course.* (12 February 2020, KSH 2020)

> *YY (woman): The many CSOK-marriages...* [Family Housing Allowance]
> *In 5 years the divorce statistics will rise, and the lawyers will have a field day.* (12 February 2020, KSH 2020)

The debaters are looking at the significant rise in contemporary marriage rates from the outside and based on the structural connections they recognize and in the public discourses they participate in, they primarily connect the increase to the appearance of various forms of credit tied to getting married. These discourses in turn qualify and, on the level of hegemonic representations, create the crisis of contemporary marriage, highlighting the paradoxical relationship between the act of getting married and the institution of marriage (see also the problematic of the wedding paradox, Carter & Duncan 2018; Willoughby & James 2017).

Looking at the paradox from within, from the point of view of brides and wedding providers, the picture is different. In the case of one's own wedding and marriage, the 'wedding paradox' seems almost irrelevant, or both brides and wedding providers attempt to consciously push aside this meaning and association. The institution of marriage that from the outside (because of divorce or cohabitation without marriage) seems to be in crisis, from the inside, from the point of view of those planning to get married or those newly married, does not seem to be in that much of a crisis since they are looking at it through the prism of their own marriage and wedding. This, to start out from one's own

relationship rather than from contemporary societal or genealogical (e.g., family) knowledge and experience, is what brides advise each other and this is what wedding providers call attention to, too:

> *I agree that there are positive examples. I think it is unnecessary to generalize and approach our own wedding with the idea that we'll get divorced because that is what is typical for this society. You should look at what is typical of you and your partner, not what is typical for millions of others.* (Bride, April 2019)

Although brides are well aware of the public discourses related to the decline and crisis of marriage (of crises related to divorce, infidelity, mistrust, or resulting from the juxtaposition of economic interests and sentiments, etc.), they rarely thematize them in connection with their own wedding. Primarily, they mention them in connection with actual crises, setbacks, or problems (infidelity, divorce).

These criticisms elicited various reflections from the couples to be married. Thinking about their weddings, they partly gave clichéd (hegemonic) responses and partly began to formulate their individual, personal responses about what exactly marriage and getting married meant, as opposed to the criticisms. For example, those concerned interpreted their planned marriage individually and situationally in light of their own relationship, also reflecting on their wedding. Marriage itself was often defined through the relationship of the given couple. Through undergoing the ceremonies entailed in getting married (at a city hall or at church); getting through the Big Day (commitment ceremony and/or church wedding); signing the (official) papers; but much more so through the promises, wows made to each other, the exchange of rings, the ceremonies and the feast shared with others, the relationship of the couple can reach a(n individually) new level. What precisely this new level means also depends on the individual conditions and biography of the relationship: moving in together (if earlier they lived apart); having a child (if they did not already have a child); buying real estate (if they did not already own their own real estate); a closer, stronger connection (if they consider their relationship to be strengthened by getting married); legal unity (if earlier they were not declaring their taxes jointly). Thus, much depends on the prehistory of the relationship prior to the marriage. Marriage is interpreted in individual, particular ways in close connection with the relationship and the wedding but also in adjustment to communal, family, and other public discourses – in concert with or in opposition to them.

Thus, this novel popularity and the accompanying critical discourses, as well as the reflections and answers would-be married couples formulated in response to these, made them rethink the new-old functions and meaning of

getting married and marriage, which, according to some views, had become an unpopular, outmoded, individualized, destabilized institution (in light of various modernization processes, this has long been the general trend in the social sciences; see, e.g., Cherlin 2004; Treas & Lui & Gubernskaya 2014).

Looking for further social scientific explanations for the drastically different trajectory of Hungarian wedding trends as compared to international practices, one can see (and from the point of view of the current paper this is going to be the most important factor) that – in connection with the strong economic, social and emotional motivations and taking into consideration the partially related fact of the novel popularity of getting married and the relevant critical discourses, factors and processes – during the period of the pandemic some innovative experimentation with rituals and the construction of traditions in the realm of weddings was taking place.

Those getting married, their families, friends, as well as the actors of the wedding industry, paying attention to the new rules of the restrictive regulations and their own needs and those of their social circles, attempted to adapt the traditional-modern practices of getting married to the new possibilities. Not only did they decide to postpone or go ahead with their weddings, but despite or rather in tandem with the changed circumstances, they attempted to hold on to their original ideas; or giving up on certain expectations, they formulated new ones and replanned their weddings. Those concerned began to choose from among elements of old and new, traditional and modern, Hungarian and international wedding practices and rites. The would-be married couples tried to realize their own ideas through invention and bricolage. Or, under the influence of the changed judicial-economic structures and contexts, they reinvented them using identifiable, recognized elements, rituals, norms, ideologies, and events, constituent parts of weddings, seeing them emically either as models or as anti-models, counterpoints. In the course of bricolage, the parties concerned, reflecting the critical discourses on contemporary marriages and also the marriage boom, primarily recognized both individually and communally the plurality of rituals and practices and the related ideologies. They realized that there was not one but many local, regional, denominational, ethnic, national, urban, or rural wedding traditions, and that adhering to these traditions was not mandatory. Thus, in connection with getting married, there is no stable moral consensus. Besides this recognition of pluralism as well as the active use of relativist narrative strategies and ideologies, we also find various hegemonic tendencies. For example, when in connection with a certain question, the discussants or debaters were interested in the validity of tradition and its central, 'true' meaning, they were arguing in favor of a definitive meaning that overwrote any other meaning.

In this respect, the question of social control often crops up. That is to say, who the wedding belongs to, who can interfere in its organization, who defines who gets invited, who can pick the venue and the rituals: the couple, the parents, the wedding providers, or possibly, friends? There is no universal moral consensus in this respect. While many emphasized the couple's own expectations, others stressed the importance of joint family decisions. It can be stated that in connection with decisions concerning weddings, an increasing role is allocated to the personal experiences, ideas, and online discussions of contemporaries and fellow brides, as well as to the normative ideologies of wedding providers. The latter are also voiced in online spaces for the most part. Among relatives-friends, the ideas of female relatives (mother-in-law, mother, grandmother) and, less often, male relatives (primarily father and father-in-law) were incorporated into the planning process. They mostly stuck to the elements, rituals, and rules interpreted to be traditional, such as the more general wedding traditions, reception of guests, opening dance, church ceremony, the presence of the parents at the civil ceremony, bridesman and groomsman (*vőfély*), guest list, a traditional sequence of dishes, the order of rituals performed, wedding script, etc.

I consider these reinterpretations and revision of the functions, modes and meanings of marriage and getting married a distinctive contemporary Hungarian practice, a cultural factor that played a decisive role in determining the number of weddings during COVID-19. Although I would not say that there are no international parallels to these processes of reinterpretation, this is, for example, what is happening with the newly popular Central Asian bride abductions (Werner 2009; Nedoluzhko & Agadjanian 2015: 861–882). Sociological studies examining the pre-COVID situation primarily emphasized that although it was true that the systems, structures, and relations that earlier directly regulated marriages and weddings and the 'regulative traditions' that flowed through these had in the course of time receded into the background, weddings have never been as free and devoid of restrictions (Carter & Duncan 2017: 4); there are, however, "other", "not declining" traditions (Gross 2005) that have been inherited from previous generations and are still active today. Referring to the ideas of Neil Gross (ibid.), the researchers state the following:

> *The regulative traditions of systems and institutions, with transgressions punished by communities or state authorities, are everywhere in decline. In contrast, 'meaning constitutive traditions' around cultural meanings and personal identities, which operate internally to the agent, continue to be passed down between generations.* (Carter & Duncan 2018: 58)

These play an important implicit role in the structuring and directing the decision-making of individuals regarding personal relationships and in providing information in connection with this. For example, traditional weddings or the ideal of a life-long marriage are fixed as hegemonic ideals of such meaning-constructive traditions. In connection with British marriages, which are at a historical low, never have there been so few people getting married. Authors argue that weddings essentially reproduce traditional gender roles, the oppression of women, and traditional meanings (Carter & Duncan 2018; Carter 2022). The status competition, the conspicuous consumption manifested in lavish weddings, serves to represent the prestige and social status of the couple and especially of the family. A beautiful, large-scale wedding is a kind of prize for the woman who contracts to serve her husband and his family in her married life – she devotes her life to them. That is to say, she reinforces male dominance and the subservient position of women. In their opinion, then, large-scale weddings serve to strengthen the institution of marriage and support its stability, even if the divorce rate continues to grow. In essence, they reinvent the traditional white, middle-class weddings and thereby the traditional, old meanings of contemporary marriages (Carter & Duncan 2017, 2018). This is related to the fact that according to those studying the question, although British weddings strive to be unique and personal, due to the social embeddedness of the couple, they are remarkably the same (Carter & Duncan 2018: 4, 16).

> [T]he bricolage process will tend to re-serve tradition, hence emphasizing habitual adaption more than reflexive, intensive and active creation of relationships and weddings. This project of the couple is not limited to the couple; it is linked to, and cannot be separated from, relations with others … this display demands something special, but the process of creating something special inevitably draws on tradition. (Carter & Duncan 2017: 16–17)

Julia Carter and Simon Duncan refer to this as individualized conformity (ibid.). The situation is significantly different in the case of Hungarian weddings.

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OF QUARANTINE WEDDINGS

In my view, it follows from the above that during COVID-19 couples were more or less willing to enter into new situations, dared to swim against the tide, dared to innovate and transform – since the normative possibility for this was

already available in social discourses. Paying attention to the new rules of the restrictive regulations, social expectations, and their own needs, the couples attempted to adapt the new-old practices of getting married to the new possibilities. In keeping with the new rules, at times transgressing them, they reinterpreted and replanned their weddings.

The question of who had the right to participate in organizing the wedding and the individual-communal interpretations of the new-old traditions is frequently on the agenda during the bricolage and improvisation processes accompanying the replanning activities during COVID-19. What was the valid tradition? Were there multiple, legitimate traditions? Did they have to be followed and invoked? Was it possible to stray from the paths marked out by them? On online surfaces during COVID-19, brides often asked each other about the various modes (rural, urban, traditional, modern) and meanings of marriage, of getting married, of civil weddings and wedding receptions. In the meantime, questions about both general and special norms, rules, traditions, customs, fashions, and expectations related to getting married were raised several times, and about how these could be met and validated during COVID-19. Brides were especially keen to find out about the available regulations and guidelines.

I observed two kinds of strategies in the course of the replanning of weddings during COVID-19: the rejection of traditions and, interrelated with this, the acceptance of innovations; and also that reorganization was justified by references to norms and traditions. The reinterpreted and modified traditions thus evoked were seen in a positive light; they functioned more as preferred patterns, norms, or models to be adapted (Shanklin 1981; Handler & Linnekin 1984: 281). The two strategies were not mutually exclusive, even in the case of a single wedding. The wedding practices most characteristic of the pandemic period came into being as a result of the distinctive intermingling of the two strategies: evocations of both innovation and tradition. Simple, puritanical weddings with few or only the strictly necessary number of participants at civil ceremonies, or so-called mini, micro-weddings, minimonies, elopements (lacking viable options, wedding providers advertised and proposed these too) – all have numerous international parallels. During the relaxation of the rules (primarily in late spring, summer, and early fall), large wedding receptions returned temporarily, but at the same time, smaller weddings remained popular. Weddings bringing together characteristics of small (personal) and big weddings have also become common – different features of the wedding are separated in time and functions, resulting in the holding of civil weddings early and putting off the (large) wedding reception until later.

During COVID-19, both large and small, simple weddings were interpreted variously as either traditional or modern, and wedding providers, brides and

their families rethought their normative significance in getting married. Several argued for the intimacy and simplicity of small weddings based on personal experiences, family legends, and other knowledge and personal convictions. One bride wrote a few inspiring lines and accompanied them with a faded picture in support of small weddings about the modest, but all the more intimate wedding of her grandmother.

> *It was not a big wedding, there weren't many guests, but there were 3 children, 9 grandchildren, and a life-long marriage. Unfortunately, neither of them is with us anymore. I would be happy if others could gain strength from this story in these hard times! Hang in there everyone!*

A young woman who had already been married for three years wrote this on April 29, 2020. "She is right; we should remember that marriage is what is important and not the wedding or the circumstances surrounding it," agreed several others. These can be seen as personalization, intimacy, or at times, metaphors of modernity and personal freedom.

Tradition during the time of COVID-19 did not only mean small, simple weddings; more often, it meant large, luxurious weddings with many participants. The petitioners often recalled that in the pre-COVID period, large-scale weddings were the norm and used this to challenge the government's restrictions. Thus, it also became a tool of collective resistance. The signatories of the above-mentioned online petition for holding wedding receptions referred to Hungarian 'custom' in connection with weddings in thousands of comments. Namely, that the wedding reception was an essential, traditional part of getting married, which was needed for moral, customary, and emotional reasons. There were dozens of references to tradition, customs, and traditional weddings among the contributions. That is to say, they argued that by holding wedding receptions they were merely trying to keep tradition and customs alive: "I am signing because it is fitting to keep traditions alive"; "We would like to hold our wedding reception along with the civil ceremony according to tradition"; "I intend this to be a one-time event in my life and want to experience it with the family and friends in accordance with tradition" (May 5, 2020); "I am signing because our Big Day will be on July 18; we would also like to hold a reception with 30 people as it has always been the custom"; "I would like to be able to hold the wedding ceremony and the reception in keeping with the Hungarian custom" (May 3, 2020).

Let us look at the strategies of those who postponed and only held their wedding and reception after the lifting of the restrictions or organized a small wedding during the restrictions or shortly thereafter. We will also see examples

of the coming together of the two strategies; how and why, after a small and puritanical wedding ceremony, the couple also held their big reception.

Mini-weddings, micro-weddings, and civil wedding ceremonies

The results of my questionnaire examining the decisions of those planning or replanning their wedding at the time of COVID-19 showed that about 41.1% of the respondents looked upon mini-weddings, held with just a few guests in keeping with the anti-virus restrictions, as the new normal. Primarily, people who held their COVID-wedding separately from the wedding reception were those who needed the 'papers' as soon as possible, and thus scheduling the wedding was important to them. 19.8% (also) wished to get married because they wanted to obtain credit (more precisely, the Childbirth Incentive Loan). 2% of them were expecting a child, and 41.8% were planning to have a child; 18.6% were preparing to buy a house, build or expand a house, partly from loans and/or monetary wedding gifts. 3.1% were also motivated by various tax breaks. 27.5% of them simply did not want to wait any longer and postpone the long-planned wedding. For 8.8%, a puritanical wedding was just fine as it was all about them and this was what was important to them. In other cases, a small, personal wedding was the couple's preference, and they took advantage of the regulations to organize such a ceremony.

It often happened that in such cases, the couple used the restrictions imposed by the pandemic to justify their own ideas that differed from the expectations of the community or the family. The restrictions came in handy for those couples who did not want to have much hoopla at their wedding, who did not want to be the center of attention, who did not want to partake in various wedding games representing sexuality and patriarchal gender roles expected by society, wedding guests, and family. Rather, they had always wished for a small, intimate, and personalized wedding, and because of the restrictions they could easily achieve this. Because during COVID-19, this is what normal, fashionable, and normative weddings became. These weddings also acquired their own denomination, such as minimony, micro/mini/COVID/quarantine wedding. Couples tried to replace 'real', traditional weddings with these miniaturized versions that evoked big weddings in their details.

In such cases, couples got married at the city hall or in a church ceremony in front of two witnesses or the immediate family, without a wedding reception, without wedding providers and services. The wedding day then continued with just the couple or with an intimate family circle, or friends and/or neighbors, accompanied by friendly conversation and a reduced feast. It was not uncommon

for couples to visit a fast-food restaurant or to order pizza following the wedding ceremony. At the same time, the newly married couple tried to carry out some of the ritualistic elements of traditional wedding receptions. For example, dancing the first dance on the balcony, the slicing of the cake and partaking of it.

This phenomenon has attracted plenty of lively media attention from the very beginning. Most often, the newlyweds documented the civil or church ceremony audio-visually (photographed or filmed themselves or streamed live in some form or another (Zoom, closed Facebook group, YouTube, Vimeo, etc.)). The only provider whose services the organizers of mini-weddings tried to insist on was the photographer. During those periods when the number and identity of the participants in civil wedding ceremonies were determined by two people besides the couple (or according to official rules, wedding providers were not allowed to participate in the ceremony), they often substituted the photographer for (one of) the originally designated witnesses. Although a legally valid marriage requires the presence of an officiant, the couple to be married, and two witnesses, couples felt strongly that their wedding memories needed to be recorded visually. Based on family recollections, the experiences of others, and personal convictions, they tried to assure themselves that small weddings could also be 'real', or that in the recent past, for example, during the two world wars or during the period of early socialism, this was precisely what wedding traditions had to be like. According to a 1967 article by the weekly *Magyar ifjúság* (Hungarian Youth): "Earlier, the urban wedding used to be a family celebration; nowadays [in the 1960s], it belongs to the wider community, or at least this is how young people feel, even if the family does not always understand this" (Kovács 1967: 18).

Postponing or separating/detaching wedding receptions from the official wedding

Those who postponed, that is to say, tried to reorganize their wedding for some time after the lifting of the restrictions, basically voted for large 'traditional' weddings with many participants – in keeping with their own original plans and because of parental expectations. From my 2020 questionnaire examining the decisions of those planning and replanning weddings, filled in by 500 brides, it can be stated that 47.4% of the respondents did this. For example, many of the wedding planners and redesigners insisted on big weddings, big family celebrations, spectacular rites and ceremonies, and at the same time rejected puritanical, guestless, simplified civil ceremonies because they thought the

former to be traditional and normative. They considered it to be a legitimate model that they tried to conform to because it "has always been like that". Decisions concerning the postponement or redesigning of weddings, and especially the cancellation and postponement of wedding services, were legally justified by the situation of force majeure due to COVID-19. The most popular and economically viable strategies proved to be restructuring, deferral, searching for new dates, and waiting. The biggest structural barrier to postponements and reorganizations, primarily from the point of view of the service industry, was the well-founded fear of the piling up of fall-winter and future weddings and receptions. That is to say, together with the weddings that were being postponed and those originally planned for the following year, as well as the newly scheduled weddings, it would hardly be possible to find free dates, because couples still preferred weekends for their Big Day. Not surprisingly, wedding service providers began to argue for – still neglected – weekdays as wedding days. The interests of wedding service providers were best served by postponements, renegotiations of dates with the customers, holding on to reservations and advances, and planning of the following year's expenses and revenues (possible increase in service fees). They primarily supported cooperation, finding mutually satisfactory solutions and compromises, as well as decision-making that pointed in this direction. In the case of cancellation, customers were hoping to get their deposit back, and in the case of postponement, to find and hold on to 'good' dates and venues. Decisions to cancel were primarily motivated by the necessity of reducing costs. Because their financial situation had become precarious, couples decided to cancel certain services, reduce the overall budget for the wedding (4.7% of respondents) and limit the number of guests (8.4%).

Simple mini-weddings with few participants were complemented by large-scale 'real' wedding receptions after the lifting of the restrictions. In these cases, one can speak of wedding rites separated from each other in space, time, and function. Those who were not thinking of an official mini-wedding alone but also of a large wedding reception at a later time, wanted to experience a truly festive, communal event with friends and family, thereby also meeting various family and social expectations on the second occasion. An important consideration was to ensure that this second wedding had a rite of passage aspect: for example, by making the first wedding ordinary, not wearing the wedding ring after the ceremony; or by introducing other wedding rites on the day of the second wedding ceremony. They either celebrated with a church ceremony (15.9%) or with a new ritual, that of a confirmation ceremony (18.1%) officiated by a ceremony leader. The smaller, two-witness civil ceremonies held earlier and the Big Days (wedding receptions and confirmation ceremonies) complementing them at later

dates are not the product of innovations during COVID-19 but have been part of Hungarian marriage practices for several years.

However, during COVID-19, their popularity increased significantly, and their earlier sporadic occurrence became a trend. Hungarian confirmation ceremonies are a distinctive subtype of commitment ceremonies practiced internationally in cases of unregistered, unofficial wedding ceremonies. We have relatively little ethnographic data about these. Contemporary anthropological research has primarily written about the phenomenon in connection with certain minority groups, such as European (e.g., British Muslims), as cases of unregistered, unofficial marriages (Akhtar 2018), and LGBTQ weddings as alternatives to Western ones (Marzullo & Herdt 2011: 535–536; Reczek & Elliott & Umberson 2009). Although unregistered, unofficial unions are very frequent not only among the minority groups but among the majority, ordinary cases (they occur from the United States through Great Britain in many places), lacking social scientific analysis, we can only get information about these from wedding portals on the internet. Based on this, it seems that worldwide, the most important argument in favor of separating the confirmation ceremony and the Big Day, thus liberated from the burdens of the formal wedding ceremony, is to allow the couple to pay attention only to themselves, their families, friends, and acquaintances. On the one hand, in the Hungarian case, couples choose 'piecemeal' weddings with a confirmation ceremony on the Big Day primarily because of the 'congestion' of marriage rites and events or because of the extravagance and extraordinary nature of the wedding venue and date, as well as some other family-related or economic circumstances (e.g., illness, pregnancy, the wish to take out a loan). On the other hand, it also seems that by planning their wedding, brides seek to take control of it by making a conscious choice between a formal wedding and a confirmation ceremony. I also suppose that these narratives of wedding providers and brides that put the couple's and the bride's personal ideas, individuality, and their relationship on the central stage also constitute a reflection on the crisis of the institution of marriage in contemporary discourses (i.e., that there are many divorces, while at the same time numerous marriages are contracted primarily for economic reasons), therefore all this could be interpreted as a kind of cultural response.

CONCLUSION

What transpires from the above? People not only postponed or held their weddings, but they rather thought tactically. Despite the changed circumstances, or perhaps along with them, they either tried to stick to their original ideas – and

thus tried to postpone their wedding to such a time when they thought holding large wedding receptions with many guests would again be allowed (this strategy at times could have meant multiple postponements, even as many as four); or letting go of some of their expectations, and formulating new ones, they downscaled their wedding, or postponed or held the official wedding and postponed the wedding reception. It is my contention that the differences that can be observed in Hungarian wedding practices are the result of the context created by pre-pandemic social policies that encouraged getting married and the not unrelated individual decisions of couples. The high number of marriages contracted during COVID-19 is connected to the contemporary general trend of a rise in getting married in Hungary and to the successful and active experimentation and reinterpretation at the level of rituals and the institution. Worldwide, the restrictions during COVID-19 made impossible the holding of large weddings, considered to be the norm. In other countries, this led couples to cancel weddings, although several innovations, such as minimony, the popularity of mini- and micro-weddings, could also be observed elsewhere. In Hungary, despite restrictions due to the strong motivation to get married and social discourses that reinterpreted getting married and marriage itself, people tended to reorganize, replan, or hold small weddings and to schedule large celebrations for later.

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NOTE

[1] The sociologists Joseph C. Hermanowicz and Harriet P. Morgan use this term to refer to rituals that create and preserve collective identities. They argue that "patterns of affirmation indicate which customary activities a group considers sacred since affirmation occurs when a customary practice invested with the sacred is celebrated" (Hermanowicz & Morgan 1999: 211).

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Judit Balatonyi, PhD, is a Research Fellow supported by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA) Premium Postdoctoral Research Fellowship. She has also been a lecturer at the Department of European Ethnology – Cultural Anthropology and at the Institute of Education Department of Romani Studies (University of Pécs). She has authored a book titled *A gyimesi lakodalmak: Közös kultúra és különböző identitások?* (Weddings in Gyimes: Common Culture and Particular Identities? Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2017). The title of her current research project is "Marriage and Marriage Rituals in Hungary in the 21st Century: Tradition and Change – Global and Local Connections". The purpose of this project is the study of the changing meanings, patterns, roles, and functions of marriage and weddings at multiple sites and in several social milieus in 21st-century Hungary.

balatonyi.judit@gmail.com