Cross-Cultural Children in Melbourne: Thoughts of getting married in Greek- and Ukrainian-Australian families

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This paper is an ethnographic portrayal of Greek and Ukrainian cross-cultural children in Melbourne at an age where marriage is a topic of discussion between parents and children, when ethnic traditions are discussed, comparing the views and expectations of these two ethnic cultures. Parents mention their pre-migration experiences of marriage, also encompassing their parents' life stories. Marriage, as a rite of passage, is explained through the theory of Arnold van Gennep.

Introduction

This paper focuses on cross-cultural children and parents in regards to maintenance of ethnic values associated to marriage practices.¹ A comparison of their expectations will bring to light the traditional marriage practices remembered from Greece and Ukraine, i.e. matchmaking, wedding ceremony and celebration, and discuss various objects of material culture such as dowry, trousseau and the family heirloom. Arnold van Gennep in his theory of “rites de passage” argues that life is made up of a succession of stages. For every stage there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another. His liminal and post-liminal stages will be applied to emphasise ethnic traditions remembered by parents in order to identify transition and incorporation rites. Liminal or threshold rites are conducted during the transitional phase and post-liminal rites are typified by rites of incorporation, placing the individual in their “new world” (Arnold van

¹ This paper is dedicated to Halina Kokan.

¹ For an account of sex role attitudes to marriage among Greek-Australian youth see Callan and Gallois, 1985. For an account of the influence of cultural identification on family behaviour see Jacobson, 1972. For an account of the parental characteristics of Greeks in Australia see Parker and Lipscombe, 1979. For an account of the Greek family in Australia see Rodopoulos, 1978.


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Gennep, 1960:21). This study will attempt to identify the kinds of expectations before and during the marriage ceremony and interpret the types of liminal and post-liminal rites that are known before and during the ceremony and celebration. The research included a sample size of three Greek and three Ukrainian girls who were interviewed. Information pertaining to their parents was relayed by them during interviews.2

**Part One: Expectations and conflict testing. Selected factors likely to influence marriage**

**Traditional material culture for marriage**

All families practise traditional material culture for marriage. One Greek and one Ukrainian girl have retained the practice of dowry (explained in Part Two). In both cases, parents expect their daughters to have a dowry before marriage, but it is not expected by the daughters. In the case of trousseau (explained in Part Two), it is not expected by any of the Ukrainian girls, however, it is expected by two Greek girls, Isobel and Dianne, and their parents. The heirloom seems to be the most popular type of traditional material culture practised for marriage. The significance of the heirloom for both Greek and Ukrainian marriage was seen by the overall response: expected by all three Ukrainian and two Greek girls, and their parents.

Trousseau was expected by two Greek girls, Isobel and Dianne, and their parents.3 Trousseau is not practised by Ukrainian families because it is not part of their custom. However, for Greek families, the dowry may not be continued as it is the only material culture on which parents’ and daughters’ responses are not in agreement because all daughters do not expect to practise dowry. Family heirloom seems the more popular

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2 *The Greek-Australian respondents*

**Anthea** 23 years old; mother from Sparta; father from Kastoria; first born of two daughters; tertiary graduate; biochemist; lives with her parents; no boyfriend.

**Isobel** 23 years old; parents from Rhodes; second born of three daughters; tertiary graduate; chemist; lives with her parents; boyfriend of Greek origin but not spoken for or engaged.

**Dianne** 25 years old; parents from Florina; second of three daughters; tertiary graduate; nurse; still lives with her parents; boyfriend of Greek origin but not spoken for or engaged.

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3 For an account of trousseau and Greek families, see Sant Cassia and Bada, 1992:122–125.
item of material culture, expected and practised by all families except Anthea’s family which is the atheist Greek family.

Responses of parents and daughters for the marriage ceremony and celebration display a consistency among expectations. All Ukrainian daughters and parents expect marriage in the Ukrainian Catholic Church, indicating that religion was the most popular characteristic chosen by all mothers, two of the three fathers and two of the three girls, Helen and Mariana. Similarly, all Ukrainian parents and daughters expect that the marriage celebration will include ethnic traditions. The Ukrainian girls said that their fathers chose ethnicity as an important characteristic, whereas all mothers chose religion as an important characteristic. This echoes the diverging responses between Ukrainian fathers and mothers. By comparison, no Greek girl placed religion as an important characteristic. Two out of the three Greek parents expect their daughters to marry within the Greek Orthodox Church and expect that the celebration will have ethnic traditions. However, none of the Greek parents chose religion as the most important characteristic. This may suggest that religion has been incorporated into cultural life and that the two are not seen as separate.

When asking the girls whether they or their parents believed in maintaining traditional practices for partner selection (matchmaking), and dowry, the answers were predominantly negative, with the exception of one Greek and one Ukrainian girl’s parents, who were in favour of maintaining dowry. For parents, matchmaking and dowry are predominantly discontinued. These traditional premarital rites will not continue to be practised (Cox, 1975). The reason for the discontinuation of dowry is because two thirds of both Ukrainian and Greek parents are of working class background and none of them was able to supply a dowry. Isobel’s and Mariana’s parents are the sample’s middle class families and both are able to supply dowries. Nine of the twelve parents in the sample have lived in Australia for more than twenty-five years.4 All parents of the Greek sample met and married in Australia and none practised the traditional matchmaking rite of proxenio. One Ukrainian couple, Helen’s parents, who were married in Poland, did not marry by the matchmaking rite of svattania. Of the Ukrainian sample, only Mariana’s mother experienced the svattania at her first marriage. Five of the six girls are completing or have completed their tertiary education and agree that parents migrated for the educational aspirations for their children.5 Traditional values of matchmaking are replaced with modern ideas of education. The educational aspiration for their daughters was stressed by almost all parents, as a more important factor than marrying without traditional methods of matchmaking (Marjoribanks, 1985:207–209 and 1988:69–84).6

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5 For the importance of Ukrainian tertiary education see Koscharsky, 1992. For an account of the importance of academic achievement for Greek families see Allen, 1973:69–84.
6 For an account of student achievement in Greece see Katsillis, 1990. For an account of Greek parental
Greek and Ukrainian premarital rites of partner selection remain an oral tradition passed down to daughters through the female line of the family. Isobel and Helen were told of proxenio and svattania by Isobel’s grandmother and Helen’s mother.

Helen explained that her mother told her how svattania was practised by her grandmother in Poland, and explained how her grandmother married the wrong partner because he was chosen by her parents. Her grandmother wanted to make sure that her daughter would not have a similar experience, and allowed her to choose the age and the partner she was going to marry. Helen’s mother described how in her grandmother’s village inquiries (dopyty) were made for the bride (divots’ki) by the groom (parubots’ki). And then the inquiry was made by groom’s family to the bride’s family and from there it became the responsibility of the bride’s parents to perform the inspection of the groom’s household (vozhiadynyi). The ceremony was conducted by the matchmaker (svaty) of the bride and groom, at the bride’s house. While the ceremony was taking place the parubots’ki usually waited outside with his best man (druzhko). He would only enter the house of the divots’ki after the lengthy ceremony amongst the parents was completed, and the bride’s parents accepted. The bride then proceeded to accept bread from the groom and gave her consent. She then tied the ceremonial towel over the shoulder of the matchmaker and placed an embroidered cloth in the parubots’ki’s belt. Both parents then gave bread to the matchmaker and he in turn offered liquor to the parents of the divots’ki.

Van Gennep argues that rituals pertaining to the door or threshold rites mark the boundary between foreign and domestic worlds in the case of the ordinary dwelling. Therefore, the crossing of the threshold by the parubots’ki at the door of the female’s home is to unite him with a “new world”. Van Gennep argues that “threshold rites” are preparation rites of union, and inspection rites involve preparation for the “transitional” or “liminal stage”, thus, the rite at the door is a “transition rite” (Van Gennep, 1996:132).

Isobel was able to learn about proxenio, the arranged marriage organised by matchmakers (pro xenites), from discussions with her grandmother while in Greece. Like the svattania, the proxenio is a premarital rite that involves a matchmaker initiated by the gambros’s parents to call upon the nifi’s parents. The matchmaker would visit the nifi’s house for up to a week, until a final answer was given by her parents, then the answer was given to the gambros’s parents. If the answer was not the desired

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views concerning the education of their children in Australia see Appleyard and Amera, 1978 and Noble and Ryan, 1976.

7 Expectations from daughters and parents for partner selection show relatively little conflict. The only evident conflict was that Greek parents were more insistent that their daughters marry at a certain age. However, this was less evident because they chose to agree with the daughter’s decision to complete tertiary education. Conflict was also evident between Greek daughters and their fathers over the latters’ expectations of having some authority over the final approval. All Greek respondents stated in interviews that they do not share a close relationship with their fathers and often the mother acts as mediator in family matters (Hearst, 1985:143).
one, the *proxeniti* was not expected to give reasons. After the formal acceptance was given through the *proxeniti*, the *nifi* and her parents would visit the *gambros’s* house, offering sweets called *melekounia* and *pasteli*. After the visit, both families were free to visit one another and the *proxeniti* received a gift from the *gambros’s* parents. Unlike the *svaty*, who offers liquor to the bride’s parents, the *proxeniti* receives a gift from the *nifi’s* parents. The exchange of visitations by the Greek and Ukrainian families for *svattania* and *proxenio* are part of what van Gennep calls “rites of incorporation”. This is significant because it is uniting individuals to new groups and the groups involved to one another (van Gennep, 1960:132). Firstly, in the case of *svattania*, this is seen when the *svaty* offers liquor to the *divots’ki’s* parents, secondly, when the *svaty* accepts bread from both families, and, thirdly, when bread is accepted by the *divots’ki* from the *parubots’ki*. In the case of *proxenio*, gift giving is evident when the *proxeniti* receives a gift from the *gambros’s* parents. Van Gennep argues that the acceptance of a gift places a constraint not only upon those who accept it, but also upon the ones who offered the gift (van Gennep, 1960:120).

Isobel explains that dowry was a sum of property produced from a rite of negotiation between families as legal parties and that it has lost its traditional value. Isobel also believes that dowry is not legally binding and fewer Greeks continue to practise this expensive tradition. She believes that no demands will be placed on her parents because she will not marry by *proxenio.* The written document for dowry (aglavi) was drawn up after the *logos* was celebrated. The *logos* was a ceremony celebrated by two families over a dinner prepared and eaten at the *nifi’s* house to formally announce that the couple were “spoken for” and it was the occasion when the dowry (prika) was to be negotiated. During the dinner, the parents of the *gambros* would ask the parents of the *nifi* what they were prepared to give their daughter when she married. The aglavi was then drawn up and normally it consisted of a house, fields, animals, various amounts of grain and jewellery. It was a legally binding document and had to be taken to the mayor’s office in the city, where it was approved by the bishop. A levy was imposed on the aglavi and tax was normally taken in the form of gold to go to the Greek Orthodox Church. Isobel believes that the rites of *proxenio*, *logos* and *prika* together formed the betrothal. Similarly, Helen stated that the Ukrainian betrothal (zaruchyny) also occurred during matchmaking rites. The zaruchyny was conducted in the house of the devots’ki and, like the logos, was a rite performed to announce the betrothal. However, the zaruchyny, unlike the logos, was an occasion

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8 For an account of the declining practice of dowry in Greece see Lambiri-Dimaki, 1972. For an account of the changing aspect of dowry see du Boulay, 1983. For an account of how the dowry in Greece has declined during internal migrations see Allen, 1979. For an account of terminological and historical aspects of dowry see Herzfeld, 1980.

9 For an account of dowry see Sant Cassia and Bada, 1992:230. For an account of dowry and inheritance see Friedl, 1963. See also the work on dowry and inheritance by Levy, 1956 and 1963.

10 For an account of the Greek Orthodox Church and civil authority see Papadopoulos, 1967.
which involved extended family, and ritual songs were sung to the betrothed couple. Van Gennep argues that the dowry rite of the Bashkivs, like the svaty, is an economic rite of negotiation, settling the amount and date of payment of dowry (kalymn) that legally belongs to the bride-to-be (van Gennep, 1960:119–122). He further argues that the complexity of rites must take into account that the economic aspect of marriage is important and that dowry is an establishment of economic nature for the niši. The groups are interested in economic “rites of negotiation” and arrangement (van Gennep, 1960:119). He also argues that betrothal is a “liminoid” period between adolescence and marriage and involves a special series of rites for transition, incorporation and negotiation into the betrothal condition, and the passage from the transitional period to marriage (van Gennep, 1960:41).

**Trousseau and family heirloom: the acquisition of birthright**

Unlike dowry, trousseau and family heirloom are forms of traditional material culture practised by two thirds of Greek respondents, with heirloom practised by all Ukrainian respondents. The only rite associated to trousseau and family heirloom is birthright, as explained by the respondents.

From the Greek sample, Isobel and Dianne are both second born with trousseau (prikia), and stated that before their prikia could be prepared, their older sister's had to have been fully completed. They both made the point that their mothers did not prepare prikia for the first and second born at the same time. Of the remaining sample, Anthea is the only first born female without prikia. This is an indication that although prikia is an important kind of material culture it is not retained by some Greek families.

Isobel's and Dianne's mothers had prikia prepared for them, and it was brought to Australia at the time of migration. In Greece prikia was an important cultural practice, displaying Greek women's handicraft passed down from mother to daughter. Handicraft was inherited (paradosiaki tehni). From Dianne's mother's experience in Australian factories, she explains that the inherited technique was lost as some mothers were separated from their daughters during the migration process, because children and young adults migrated to Australia without their parents. Subsequently, many daughters who became mothers worked in factories with different machines for different production purposes.¹¹ Many Greek mothers only had access to the needle as handicraft, because the loom was left behind. Because of this, and their preoccupation with factory work, Greek mothers did not furnish their houses with items from their prikia but offered them as part of prikia for their daughters. The only way to preserve handicrafts was by passing these items down to their daughters. Isobel's and Dianne's older sisters have remnants of these handicrafts in their prikia. Isobel's

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¹¹ For an account of sex roles in Australia and Greece see Bottomley, 1975. For an account of women, the family and social change see Bottomley, 1977.
sister has been given a number of items. One of them is an embroidered cloth that was usually placed above the main mirror (kentriko kathrefti) in the lounge room (sala). She was also given a cloth which has a family portrait of Isobel’s great-grandparents stitched in the centre, with elaborate designs of hand stitched flowers on the cloth. This was made by Isobel’s grandmother for her mother to frame and put in her lounge room once she got married. Dianne’s sister has been given a number of embroidered pillow cases and cloths which traditionally were placed upon furniture and the mantelpiece.

Because mothers have access to needlecraft in Australia, they taught themselves embroidery and made tapestries and other handicraft for their daughters. Isobel’s mother has made a “marriage blanket” for her oldest daughter which is to be placed on the marital bed and used in the marriage rite of krevatia (explained later) and is proceeding to make one for Isobel. Dianne’s mother has made a number of tapestries for her, but she does not embroider.

Heirlooms are items that have been kept in the family for generations in both Ukrainian and Greek families and are normally passed down to the first-born, irrespective of sex (this was evident in the Ukrainian case where two out of three respondents had older brothers; none of the Greek respondents had an older brother). What the interviews further indicated for the Greek responses is that the families seem to place more emphasis on the female and her seniority as first born for receiving heirlooms. The responses for the Ukrainian families indicated that heirlooms were given irrespective of the sex of the child.

All Ukrainian respondents regarding family heirlooms mentioned the traditional feather doona (perenna) made with Ukrainian goose feathers. The perenna is made by mothers for their daughters to take to their new marital home, and it has to be mentioned that it is not a conventional doona because when it is made it is piled up very high. The reason for this is warmth, but an interesting response by Helen indicated that perenna is piled up high not only for warmth, but that as an heirloom, high piling has an important significance: other perennas are to be made from the one for the eldest child. Helen stated that her mother brought a very large perenna from Poland and from that she made one for her eldest son. Later, Helen’s grandfather came from Poland with more goose feathers so that her mother could make perennas for Helen and her younger sister. Helen and Mariana commented that along with the perenna the mother’s wedding ring is placed inside for good luck. Mariana has commented that when she marries, her mother will place her wedding ring inside her perenna. The significance of the ring inside the perenna is a token for a prosperous married life, passing down the luck from one prosperous life to another. However, the wedding ring is not always placed in the perenna, rather it may be given to the first born as an heirloom separately after his or her marriage.
Part Two: Marital rites: a discussion of marriage ceremony and celebration — van Gennep’s post-liminal stage

All respondents and their parents, with the exception of Anthea, hope to continue traditional rites of marriage during the wedding ceremony or celebration. From the interviews the respondents gave a number of examples from the ceremony and the celebration that correspond to van Gennep's liminal or post liminal stages. Van Gennep argues that traditional rites associated to marriage firstly characterise rites of fertility defining ceremonies for induction of fertility (van Gennep, 1960:117). This type of rite was explained by Isobel, who wants to maintain the traditional rite of the making of the wedding bed (krevatia). Mariana also wants to maintain this rite in the making of the wedding bread for the ceremony (korovai). Secondly, transitional rites or rites of the threshold pertain to the transference of an individual from one world to another (van Gennep, 1960:129–130). This kind of rite was explained by Julia who believes that the initiation of the wedding ceremony will be the most important aspect of her wedding. Lastly, rites of separation separate the newly wedded individual from their old world environment (van Gennep, 1960:130).

Fertility rites

The krevatia is a Greek fertility rite associated with the bride's transitional stage, from being single to becoming a married member of her community. Isobel wants to maintain this traditional significance through the making of the bed ceremony. This is normally performed the Friday before the wedding. Isobel explains that the wedding bed is normally dressed with a wedding blanket that her mother is currently making for her. It will be taken out of her glory box with other items of her prikia such as bed sheets and pillowcases. The bed will then be made by the bride's single female friends and relatives. During the ceremony, traditional ritual songs of departure will be sung by her relatives. Once the bed is made, rice, sugar coated almonds as well as money are thrown on it and lastly two young children (an older male and a younger female) are placed on it. The rice symbolises firm foundations for the marriage, the sugar coated almonds symbolise a sweet life together, money is thrown to symbolise wealth, and the children placed on the bed symbolise fertility and, more importantly, that the first born be a son to uphold the family name. All material culture and the children come to represent the direct result of consummation in the wedding bed.

The korovai is wedding bread which Mariana would like to maintain for her ceremony, and which will be baked by her mother. The bread is decorated with two eggs and a branch with three sub-branches placed through the centre between the two boiled eggs. After it has been baked, these branches are decorated with flowers. The bread symbolises fertility, and the branches symbolise consumption and growth.
The *korovai* is baked on the day of the maidens’ evening (*divych*), that is the day before the wedding ceremony. The baking of the *korovai* is a rite celebrated by the bride, her mother, her friends and other female relatives. Mariana explains that in older times, a wedding tree was made from the boughs of a cranberry tree decorated with colourful ribbon and wheat. Boughs from the cranberry tree were used because they symbolised maidenhood or virginity. During the maidens’ evening, girls tell stories, give advice to the bride and joke about her wedding. At the ceremony, the best man and the matron of honour give the *korovai* to the bride and she dances holding it.

**Threshold rites**

For Julia, the Ukrainian wedding ceremony is a significant event because the most sacred rite is performed at the door of the church, and not at the altar, as a threshold rite. The priest conducts the liturgy there and rings are exchanged there; only the bridal party proceeds to the altar at the time the vows are to be pronounced. At the altar, the wedding cloth (*rushnek*), prepared by the mother, is placed on the floor for the couple to kneel and take their vows. The crowns (*myrt*) are exchanged at the end of the ceremony.

**Separation rites**

Separation rites normally represent the transition of the pre-liminal stage to the liminal stage through a ceremony of cleansing and incorporation (van Gennep, 1960:130). Helen believes that the customary welcoming of the newlyweds by parents at the ceremony is very important. At the door of the reception hall, the parents of the bride and groom await them with a tray of bread, salt and a bottle of vodka. Salt symbolises purification, because to be separated from their parents is to be purified first, and their subsequent incorporation into a new world with new parents then begins. A toast with vodka is then given and the glasses are smashed on the floor by the parents and newlyweds to symbolise the separation from their parents. Van Gennep argues that breaking something is a rite to symbolise a stage of separation (van Gennep, 1960:30).

**Conclusion**

From the interviews, it was evident that while the Greek fathers believe they should have some authority over final approval of a partner, mothers believe they should not.12 This distinguishes Greek from Ukrainian responses about the position of fathers and mothers in the decision making process.13 Traditional material culture was

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12 For an account of Greek women and men see Friedl, 1975 and Macrakis, Lily and Allen, 1983.

13 For a traditional ethnographic account of the masculinity of Greek society see Campbell, 1974. For an
a shared response by daughters and parents. Responses for ceremony and celebration were overwhelmingly consistent. Expectations amongst Ukrainian daughters and parents indicate that traditional material culture shows more positive responses in the choosing of traditions for the ceremony and wedding celebration.

Traditional rites associated with this ceremony are practised amongst Greek and Ukrainian families. Although some premarital rites are not practised as they would be in the countries of origin, they are still to be followed to some degree by the second generation cross-cultural children. There is a general consistency in both Greek and Ukrainian daughters and parents, to uphold most rites and most traditional material culture for future marriage. All girls believe that parents should not take part in the selection of a partner, because new life patterns give the girls freedom of choice in selecting their partner. This indicates that partner selection is no longer a family affair the way it was in the countries of origin. However, over two thirds of fathers and one third of mothers believe it should remain a family decision.

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