

Uncertainty, Restrictions and Reinvented Weddings in Pandemic Hungary

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Abstract: Based on digital anthropological research this paper explores both the wedding planning process as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, with its concomitant uncertainty and myriad restrictions, and the interpretations of tradition that accompanied it through the medium of specific examples. The discussion looks at how couples, in a period of liminality, attempted to organise weddings amidst changeable, unpredictable circumstances; how they used, interpreted and reinvented their own wedding traditions; and to what extent their plans and reinventions were characterised by free choice versus necessity. In conducting this research, I witnessed not mere people defined by restrictions and uncertainty, but agents who worked actively to mould their culture. Under quarantine, legislators strove primarily to ensure that weddings (without services) could proceed seamlessly in the legal, official sense and that everyone could, one might say, 'get their papers'. This legal-political will found itself in direct conflict with the very different interpretations of wedding and reception held by the people themselves and their various service providers, whose expectations went far beyond the issue of mere paperwork.

Keywords: interpreting and reinterpreting culture, tradition, ritual, commitment ceremony, marriage

INTRODUCTION: REGULATIONS AND UNCERTAIN PROSPECTS IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC

This paper explores both the wedding planning process as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, with its concomitant uncertainty and myriad restrictions, and the interpretations of tradition that accompanied it through the medium of specific examples. I will discuss how couples, in a period of liminality, attempted to organise weddings amidst changeable, unpredictable circumstances; how they used, interpreted and reinvented their own wedding traditions; and to what extent their plans and reinventions were characterised by free choice versus necessity. Although this issue is not the main focus of my study, it is essential for understanding the broader social context and my ethnography that, while marriage rates declined significantly in most countries during the pandemic (see Reynolds 2020; Wagner & Choi & Cohen 2020), in Hungary, despite these challenges, the number of marriages not only remained stable but actually increased. In Hungary, strong economic motivations (such as new loans for married people at a favourable interest rate) led couples to actively adapt and reinvent both the rituals and the meanings of the wedding, all with the clear aim of ensuring that their weddings could still take place despite the restrictions. This writing is based on anthropological research I conducted between 2020 and 2022: *Wedding Questionnaire* (N:1083)¹ published in February of 2020; *COVID Questionnaire* (N:490)² published in April of the same year; forty in-depth interviews conducted with brides in 2020 and the first half of 2021,³ and online ethnographic investigation of Facebook wedding planning groups.⁴

In Hungary, as in other affected countries, the spring of 2020 – and later 2021 as well – witnessed the introduction of legal-political and various health measures and restrictions in response to the global pandemic. Starting on 11 March of that year, the first government decree was introduced, which restricted major events, including weddings (Government Decree 41/2020 (III.11)). Effective 16 March, a new government decree then prohibited such events altogether (Government Decree 46/2020 (III.16)). “Section 3: Participation in regular events involving music and dancing as defined under Government Decree 23/2011 (III.8) on the safety of music/dance events held in closed or open spaces (hereinafter: regular organised events involving music and dance) shall be prohibited. Section 4 (2): community religious services, civil weddings, and funerals shall not be regarded as organised events.” Since family events, including weddings, did not fall under the definition of organised events, it was still possible to hold weddings both at church and as civil unions. Beginning on 28 March 2020, the next decree restricted leaving homes and limited the number of attendees permitted at civil weddings (Government Decree 71/2020 (III.27)). Until 1 June, civil and church weddings could include only two witnesses and a minimal number of participants, regulated differently by different local governments.

Pandemic regulations found themselves in the crossfire of daily public discourse not only for their usual restrictive, prescriptive, prohibitive nature, but also for their volatility and changeability. My conversation partners and respondents to the second and third COVID-questionnaires, too, made frequent reference both to the instability they brought, and doubts as to their validity:

I still don't know exactly... in theory we can have the wedding, but not the reception, but the decree doesn't spell it out clearly.⁵

Everything changed. Again, and again. First it was that me, my fiancé, and the witnesses would go to the town hall for a civil wedding – no processional, no candle-lighting, no family – followed by a small dinner with parents and siblings, which we first planned for a restaurant, then switched to having at home instead. So, we reorganised for that. Then, the new leniency came, so my fiancé and the (recently permitted) immediate family could opt for a civil wedding (without siblings, which would have made eleven of us, exceeding the ten-person maximum). Then came the option of a church wedding outdoors... and by the time we had organised that (invited the relatives, bought everything we needed to give us something at least as close to our dream wedding as we could come), that week, permission for indoor church weddings was granted. So, we had to organise all over again. [...] Every week we had to organise differently, adjusting as we went, trying to get the best we could out of it.⁶

Worse than the concrete regulations themselves was the uncertainty that accompanied them, and often, this would even put a temporary hold on organising efforts. Its effect was frequently to push those involved to suspend all decision-making that the planning and replanning of the event entailed. It was this vague, liminal, transient situation that brides amidst planning their weddings found most worrying. In my COVID questionnaire, to the question as to what caused them the greatest discomfort, 337 respondent brides indicated that it was the uncertainty in some form: “The uncertainty, which robbed the planning of its excitement and joy – we couldn’t get into the wedding mood.” “The uncertainty!! It was the worst.” “The uncertainty. We don’t know how much longer this situation will last. We don’t know whether there will be a second wave. We don’t know whether it will be better next year.” “There’s still no vaccine, and until there is, nothing is known for sure. So if we switch dates, when should we switch to? In short, we don’t want a new date that we just have to cancel again. But the uncertainty is killing us.”⁷ At the same time, uncertainty left some room for hope. Both in online discourse, and in the responses to my second COVID questionnaire, it was expressed more than once that couples-

to-be preferred to wait, hoping that the restrictions would sooner or later be relaxed or abandoned:

*We still don't know what they will do or how they will do it.
#DontSweatIt.⁸*

By mutual agreement, we are waiting until early June. At that point, we'll make a few calls to the required people in charge of local government / ecclesiastical ceremonies and ask if we can hold a wedding, and if so, whether there are any restrictions still in place. Perhaps the hardest thing is that everything is still so uncertain. We really hope that we can have our wedding according to our original plan. What's worse, though, is that a lot of our Italian friends won't be able to come, for understandable reasons – financial and otherwise. They're practically family to us!⁹

As a bride-to-be living abroad put it shortly after the cancellation of the wedding she had planned to hold in Hungary in September, hope, doubt and uncertainty had gone hand-in-hand during the process; sometimes it was one, sometimes the other, and in the end, the event was postponed for a year:

What unfolds inside you is frustration, defiance (better a year later but at least what we wanted – I am not willing to give up on my ideas in an effort to adjust) and, finally, hope, though hand-in-hand with the doubts you now take for granted.¹⁰

Wedding planners, beyond noticing and recognising circumstances and uncertainties arising during the pandemic that might potentially affect their weddings, were not merely passive observers – “sufferers” – of the events that unfolded. Rather, they actively sought information, interpreting and reinterpreting news items as they emerged and, at the same time, the meanings of the traditional and modern wedding, as well. As a result, the rituals and screenplays by which wedding receptions were conducted were also rethought and, occasionally, reinvented.

According to the classic approach of economic anthropology, one has the greatest need for intensive information-fielding where coming to a decision among alternative scenarios proves problematic, producing conflict (see Howard & Ortiz 1971; or the earlier Carter & Meredith & Shackle 1954), and/or where those involved are placed in entirely novel decision-making situations vis-à-vis their original plans and choices (again, see Howard & Ortiz 1971). In the present situation, such eventualities were rendered still more confounding by the uncertainty related to temporary loss of ontological validity on the

part of some practices, traditions and understandings. Those facing decisions found their mental toolkits lacking alternatives that were appealing, comfortable and secure, but strove to plan well and make good choices all the same. Many observers described the altered, temporary situations experienced during the pandemic in terms of the concept of “liminality” as put forward by Victor Turner or even Arnold van Gennep, a state of being characterised by the qualities of ambiguity, uncertainty, isolation and social distance (see Bell 2021; see also Assadourian 2020). Thus, the pandemic period could in retrospect be viewed either as a fleeting socio-cultural “liminal” or “liminoid” state marked by alternative structures and rules, or alternately, as a collective transition in which participants at once honed and called into doubt structures that once featured prominently in their lives. Then, after the pandemic, people either returned to their (former or changed/altered) worlds, or, in some cases, sought to radically transform them (see Turner 1969). As we saw above, the people, too, both precisely sensed and clearly understood the liminality and uncertainty the pandemic entailed.

Clear from both online discourses and actively solicited information was that people planning their weddings during this period did not have the benefit of a consensus built on stable foundations. One novel observation was that fundamentally, modern wedding traditions are, irrespective of the pandemic, many and various; they are themselves uncertain rituals with uncertain meanings. Within this contemporary, non-singular understanding, an element frequently reflected upon was that, ultimately, even individual traditions can bear multiple interpretations. “Your wedding is when you hold a ceremony where everyone you want comes and then celebrates together afterward. Because this means different things to different people, all sorts of things are possible.”¹¹ “The custom is different in every region, village, and family. It’s the customs and traditions of the given place or family that dominate.”¹² The idea that contemporary communities sometimes imbue traditions with multiple meanings was not an entirely new one. Social scientists had previously noted how individuals, as they became cognizant of convictions outside the domain of their own knowledge, beliefs and worldview, could be prompted to reflect on the traditions with which they are familiar, holding the process to constitute a product of modernisation and/or accessory to social change (see Thompson 1995: 93, 131).

Identifiable alongside plurality and the active use of relativist narrative strategies/ideologies, however, were various attempts at absolutism, primarily in cases where, in relation to some specific question (the “first dance”, the Hungarian bridal dance, the white dress, the identities of witnesses, the “old, new, blue” tradition), my partners in conversation/debate proved curious regarding the validity of “tradition” and its central, “true” meaning and consequently argued in favour of some particular, overriding interpretation. British sociologists Julia Carter and Simon Duncan, in their examination of

contemporary British weddings, stress precisely the nature of the wedding tradition – a “highly significant concept” – as an “organising system” toward the regulation and determination of individual behaviour that can at times include a governing set of contested meanings. First and foremost, they emphasized that systems, structures, relationships and regulatory traditions that directly regulate marriages and marriage ceremonies have, over time, been pushed into the background, and the institution of marriage and the ritual have never been so free and devoid of constraints. However, there are also different, “non-declining” traditions, partly inherited from the previous generation, known as “meaning-constitutive traditions”,¹³ which are still active. Carter and Duncan, in accordance with Bourdieu’s concept of the “habitus”, suggest that even in contemporary societies, individuals possess values and interpretive templates that act to shape their practices (Carter & Duncan 2017). The pair go on to describe the ways in which traditions are interpreted and adapted in terms of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s concept of ‘bricolage’, a process by which norms and values are adapted toward new purposes and new rules are essentially validated via the ones inherited from previous generations (Carter & Duncan 2017, 2018: 180–195). Based on this concept, the authors then demonstrate that despite their individualised, individualistic intentions – their attempts to construct otherness – British weddings had, by virtue of their normative nature, reinvented the same old conformist, normative, traditional event (Carter & Duncan 2018). The same conclusion was reached by Katrina Kimport, who claimed that the LGBTQ weddings of 2000s Los Angeles, despite their actual otherness, had also reinvented the symbolism of the traditional, heteronormative wedding ceremony. At the same time, Kimport also noticed that the subjective opinions of those involved differed significantly from her own interpretation as an external researcher (Kimport 2012: 894). In fact, we know from others that, frequently, activists are precisely “fighting” at both the individual and societal levels for a conception of the modern wedding that is radically different from traditional social practices (and the outsider interpretations of them), and for the alternative norms and values this requires (e.g. equal rights, recognition, see Cleuziou & McBrien 2021).

COLLECTING AND PRODUCING INFORMATION DURING A PANDEMIC

The government’s announcement of 14 May 2020 (starting 1 June, weddings would again be permitted, subject to appropriate precautions, including 1.5-metre distancing) was preceded by a great deal of social activity and resistance. The membership of Facebook wedding planning groups – chiefly brides-to-be and professional wedding planners – monitored and sought to understand centrally and locally issued pandemic measures, government edicts, press releases, parliamentary broadcasts, local rules and restrictions put out by city governments, and the reflections on all of the above on the part of the media

such as affected wedding planning in general on a continuous basis. Among the groups' moderators, professional planners created 'one-stop posts' of continuously updated content, regularly communicating the latest information – including, typically, the general and special rules issued by local governments – and deleting expired regulations and other items that no longer applied. Also expressed each day were several dozen individual questions and dilemmas. Beginning in the first weeks of March, there began to surface a series of worried – sometimes almost panicked – voices reflecting on the international situation. This was followed by the appearance of the virus itself and its reverberations through the Hungarian media: “What about people’s weddings, what will we do if there are restrictions”; “what will happen with the receptions people have been planning for years”; “what about my childhood dreams?” people asked over and over again, as did various wedding service providers. Then, when the Hungarian government, effective 11 March, limited the number of participants at weddings and other events to one hundred, the general agitation, accompanied by much discussion and guesswork regarding the rethinking of wedding sizes, grew palpable. Most of the weddings planned for the 2020s were not yet affected by these initial restrictions. Though of those responding to my April/May 2020 COVID questionnaire, 65% had been expecting fewer than 100 guests anyway, a smaller group did find their plans in jeopardy: 33.3% of respondents had been planning events with between 100 and 200 guests and something under 2%, big weddings with more than 200 attendees.¹⁴ It was apparent from the responses that people’s fears went beyond mere worry at the hundred-guest restriction. “Will weddings limited to a hundred people even work at their original locations”; “what are the venues saying about this”, or “what’s the situation with church weddings?” (for a long time, during the first wave, there was no official stance on this subject). These were the first and most important questions on the minds of brides-to-be and wedding service providers alike.

Some wedding-related companies, including especially the *Federation of Wedding Service Providers*, consulted decision-makers and enforcers (specifically, the government-instituted *Operational Corps Responsible for the Containment of the Coronavirus Epidemic*) on a continuous basis, publishing up-to-date information in online groups and blogs and on various sites. When in March of 2020, at the time the central government restricted weddings to one hundred participants, local governments, too, began limiting the size of civil weddings, chat groups were flooded with news items in this regard: “in Nyíregyháza [Eastern Hungary] that’s what the ordinance says [...] Because the prohibition affects events involving the Registrar, including marriages, the Mayor’s Office has contacted all couples applying for weddings to be held within the next fifteen days. Couples have been asked to say their “I dos” in the presence of at most twelve immediate family members or, alternately, to postpone their events to a later date [...]”;¹⁵ “I don’t know if anyone’s affected by Galgamácsa

[Northern Hungary]. Here, people usually hold their events at the Community Centre, but that has closed its doors definitively for the unforeseeable future; no minimum party size; nothing”. “I spoke with the registrar of Óbuda, Third District of Budapest [capital of Hungary], and for the time being, all is as usual with no official restrictions. [...]”¹⁶ etc.

In one online wedding planning group at the outbreak of the pandemic, the Prime Minister’s 16 March 2020 proclamation of a state of emergency, the news of press organs called upon to issue public information, and decrees that put all of the above in writing (excerpts from Hungarian Bulletin [‘Magyar Közlöny’] with official infographics) were published and republished innumerable times. “Section 3: Participation in regular events involving music and dancing as defined under Government Decree 23/2011 (III.8) on the safety of music/dance events held in closed or open spaces (hereinafter: regular organised events involving music and dance) shall be prohibited.” “Section 4 (2): community religious services, civil weddings, and funerals shall not be regarded as organised events.” Group members strove to interpret, whether as lay people or with the involvement of lawyers, both the ambiguously worded decrees, and the concepts (like ‘event’) that featured in them. Most relevant to the present study was the variously discussed question of the meanings of words like *házasságkötés* (literally ‘wedding/tying/binding in marriage’): was it limited in scope to the civil procedure or did it pertain to the reception as well? What was it exactly that COVID-19 was forcing people to give up?

Bride-to-be: Since section 4d of the previous Government Decree is no longer valid, it makes no difference how many people I will / would like to have at my wedding. For me, it’s hard to interpret the part of the new rule that doesn’t classify a civil wedding as an event. Should I understand a civil wedding to include only the ceremony or can I have the reception afterwards as well?

Wedding service provider: A civil wedding is a civil wedding. I dos, signatures, and that’s it. It is not a party. You can’t have a party.

*Bride-to-be: Thank you for the response! I’ll have to wait until this is repealed, then, because to me, a wedding isn’t just signing papers, but a whole lot more!*¹⁷

Other aspects of the event placed under the microscope as a result of the pandemic included both the relevant concepts in national law and public life, and their “imaginative” and “evocative” dimensions – the various influences on mood, emotion and mentality that evoke the notion of a wedding on the part of those involved (see Meyer & Girke et al. 2016). One example of this occurred in April of 2020, when a group of wedding photographers and video service providers were excluded from wedding work under ever-tightening restrictions (e.g. weekend quarantines). Though no specific regulation barring the

participation of such figures had been issued, the matter emerged regardless in relation to a slate of concrete questions submitted by service provider legislative and enforcement representatives at various levels (local governments, the *Operational Corps*, doctors' offices, etc.). In this specific instance, wedding service providers (wedding planners, the *Federation of Wedding Service Providers*, photographers, video service providers) crafted an open letter to ask about restrictions on video and photographic work and whether these applied to participation in civil ceremonies. The letter also aimed to discover whether, under quarantine, such participants were permitted to engage in creative photography in out-of-doors locations outside the mayor's office. The response to both questions was negative: under quarantine, permission to leave one's private home/domicile was granted only in extraordinary circumstances. According to the relevant paragraph of Section 4 of the applicable government decree, such extraordinary circumstances included weddings, but only concerning the immediate family (see Government Decree 71/2020 (III.27)). Photographers could not participate in the ceremony, a restriction that applied equally to caterers, and wedding planners. This meant a loss of income for providers, while also threatening consumers with a loss of opportunity for capturing those precious moments.

Thus, the everyday legal/official and personal/emotional meanings stood in visible confrontation with each other, rendering the differences and tensions between them all too obvious. While it turned out, for example, that a legally valid marriage required the presence of only a registrar, the couple-to-be and two witnesses, from an emotional perspective, this barebones formality of a ceremony could not always be regarded as an actual wedding. While legal commentators held that "there [was] no reason, to quote the Operational Corps, that a wedding should be photographed or filmed",¹⁸ the happy couples themselves regarded such documentation – *visual memories* (as an instructor for the *Bridal Academy* referred to the practice) – as an integral part of the ceremony: "It preserves one of the most important days of your life, one I'd like to look back on and show to others. Why should I have to give that up?!"¹⁹ Another concept to be called into question was that of the immediate family, as the definition did not necessarily apply to household members only. Who, then, did it cover? Who could be chosen as a witness? Did it have to be an immediate relative? And so on.

Also subjects of active discourse were the government's press conferences of 29 and 30 April 2020, the latter held in clarification of the former, as well as the issue of the 96th edition of Hungarian Bulletin with all its latest rules: some more, some less restrictive (see Hungarian Bulletin 2020). The first of the press conferences featured the announcement by government spokespersons of a nationwide prohibition on gatherings of over 500 people and of the continued applicability of "the previous restrictions on funerals, weddings, and religious services". The announcement was followed by public guesswork regarding

the permissibility of weddings of fewer than 500 participants and continued epistemological discussion of the concept of the wedding itself. What the public was attempting to comprehend was whether legislators and enforcement bodies understood the restrictions to apply to civil or church weddings and whether they extended beyond the ceremonies themselves to receptions and post-wedding festivities. Later, in April of 2020, the Operational Corps clarified their intent, indicating that until repealed, the measure would prohibit any event of any kind involving more than 500 people: civil and church weddings would be permitted, but receptions would not. “So, I mean, these concepts are chaotic, you know. Civil ceremony, wedding, wedding festivities. Of these, only the first two are named in the decree, both being permitted in rural areas. So what’s the deal?”²⁰ “Yesterday we were all happy; today I’m back to being upset.”²¹ “I was as disappointed as others. We have no way of knowing what’s coming down the line. Our date is set for 28 August. So we’ll have to wait until the week of 18 August to find out whether we can have the whole event or not. In other words, we’ll be in stitches until then as to whether we can have it two weeks after the fact or not, making our guests wait to find out.” “If a restaurant can open and have sixty people in its outdoor section, that’s ok, but a wedding with sixty guests can’t occupy that same space?”²²

When, starting in May of 2020, it became possible to plan and hold weddings and wedding festivities again, the word in the Hungarian Bulletin was that, with the exception of Budapest, family events of less than 200 participants – including weddings with receptions – would be permitted everywhere in Hungary from 1 June onward. These temporary liberties were rendered uncertain again in September of 2020, during the upsurge of the second wave of the pandemic, as restrictions on entering and leaving the country (and an 11:00 p.m. curfew on event participation) were reintroduced. For the most part, this new situation jeopardised the time frames and screenplays of “traditional” weddings, those affected seeking primarily to discover what could (be) fit into such narrow time constraints and how previous plans could be changed or shortened to centre on what was truly essential in order to accommodate. Also of interest to both brides-to-be and service providers was the issue of how flexibly the various wedding venues and hotels would be handling the time limitations that the new rules prescribed. As successive waves of the pandemic unfolded, people again and again found themselves faced with new problems and dilemmas, including the closing of facilities aimed at slowing the disease’s spread, various periods of quarantine and rules applicable to social distancing.

TRADITION AS A FRAMEWORK FOR INTERPRETATION: WEDDING TRADITIONS IN THE TIME OF THE PANDEMIC

In the following, the concepts and notions of old-new, traditional, or modern themes will be relevant to us primarily in the light of internal, emic interpretations, norms and ideologies. I interpret the distinction between modern and traditional as discursive constructions, understanding tradition not as an externally limiting, coercive force, but rather as an internally enabling meaning-constitutive framework. As early as the 1980s, Eugenia Shanklin showed by examples how people native to a given culture recalculate, rework and reinterpret the cultural elements they use, for the purpose of achieving their economic and political rights and privileges (Shanklin 1981). According to Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin, tradition, as a model of the past, determines the interpretations of present traditions, a common interpretive practice: “doing something only because it is traditional means reinterpreting and thus changing tradition” (see Handler & Linnekin 1984: 281). Indeed, change, appropriation is an interpretive process that creates a rhetorical construction between the past, tradition, and the present, indicating the active, political processes of creating historical meaning (Antonnen 2005: 106).

During the period under study, intended brides not only actively sought information regarding restrictive rules and limits, but also strove to plumb the depths of contemporary wedding fashion and tradition. The users of pandemic-time websites frequently inquired as to contemporary practices in relation to marriage, weddings, civil ceremonies and wedding festivities (rural, urban, traditional and modern) and their various meanings. In the meantime, there also repeatedly arose issues of general and special wedding-related norms, regulations, traditions, fashions and expectations, and of whether and how these were manifested over the course of the pandemic. Brides-to-be were particularly interested in what rules, guidelines, traditions and ideas (e.g., church weddings, white dresses, lengthy guest lists, catered festivities, etc.) there were out there to choose from, who upheld them to what extent, and – most of all – why and in virtue of what this was done.

Bride-to-be 1: *First, I'd like to ask who is supposed to be whose witness? What's the tradition, who respects it, and how much? I'm not really clear on what the custom is. [...]*

Bride-to-be 2: *For the bride, it's her godfather. For the groom it can be either his godmother, or godfather! 😊*

Bride-to-be 3: *The tradition says your godparents. My fiancé will be having his godfather. For me it'll be my cousin.*

Bride-to-be 4: *I think you can ask whoever you like. We're not having our godparents as witnesses either. I'm going to be having my younger brother play the part and my fiancé is having his uncle. Choose someone you're close to. [...]*

Bride-to-be 5: *Our parents made a fuss about making the traditional choice, too, until it turned out that the custom was different on the two opposite sides of the country. In the end, we gave in to pressure, but when we asked our chosen witnesses, neither of them was jumping for joy. It was just our parents who made such a big deal about it. In retrospect, we probably should have been pushier about what we wanted.*²³

The individual plural and normative-regulative definitions and redefinitions of marriage – pre-or during-COVID vs. post-COVID, old vs. new, modern vs. traditional – proved one of the most relevant and important areas of inquiry examined by my project. Accordingly, a thorough evaluation of the meaning and validity of tradition formed an essential part of both the individual wedding planning and replanning processes. Other important parts included the transformation of wedding services and legislation aimed at regulating and, in part, restricting weddings and wedding festivities.

As new restrictions continued to emerge, partners-to-be and, in part, their families and friends, in concert with various wedding industry actors, all strove to adjust traditional and modern wedding practices to meet the changing rules, while also satisfying the wants and needs of their own society. They began picking and choosing from a variety of customs and rituals – old and new, traditional and modern, Hungarian and foreign – whose new internal meanings, traditional and modern, merit examination here.

One activity of particular importance to the planning and replanning process, it turns out, was the identification and consideration of the ceremony's various traditional and modern elements. As my first (February/March 2020) Wedding Questionnaire revealed, both a person's attitude toward traditional and/or modern wedding customs, and the value preferences he/she assigned to each were important factors during the planning process. 80% of respondents were considering a traditional wedding and 41.8% a modern one (29.2% a mixture of the two, 12.9% an exclusively modern, and 41.8% an exclusively traditional one).²⁴

At the individual, everyday level, people's understandings of tradition and modernity were found to be infused with individual experiences, knowledge gleaned from sources of greater than regional or local reach, such as the media and online forums, and the musings of family members, relatives and friends (cf. Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus*, Bourdieu 1977; or the nature of contemporary meaning-constitutive tradition, Gross 2005: 296). The question is: what do tradition and modernity actually mean in the context of a wedding?

One common denominator within the broad range of interpretations arose in the tendency to see a contrast between urban and rural weddings, a phenomenon that included the distinction between modern and traditional; though there were some who regarded both rural and urban as traditional enough, seeing the difference rather in the puritan simplicity of the urban ceremony versus the *big fat* character of the traditional country wedding, dominated and supervised by immediate and extended family. “No folk customs, but nothing crazy either: a short, urban ceremony + dinner (NO country wedding music and WITHOUT the folksy bridal dance)” (16 February 2020, Budapest).

Placed into the category of traditional were primarily customs – old-fashioned or held to be – that were/are present in both rural and urban weddings: the best man’s visit to the bride’s parents, the bride’s farewell, the bridal dance, the candlelight waltz, the coin toss, the kidnapping of the bride, the best man’s speech, the street dancing, the escorting of guests, live music (brass bands and wind ensembles, traditional wedding and folk music), the groom’s black suit and bride’s white dress, etc. Among traditional wedding customs, ‘folk costumes’ were mentioned by Wedding Questionnaire respondents only six times out of 749. Church and urban civil ceremonies were both associated with the traditional wedding, their simplicity and puritan quality being held as the true essence of the wedding itself. “A simple church wedding, then a cheerful lunch/dinner with the immediate family. The ceremony should be a symbol without pretensions: a rite, and not some swanky, superficial show of pomp and circumstance.”²⁵

Traditional customs were sometimes regarded as negative, that is, as either backward, wasteful, unnecessary, or distant from respondents’ own tastes and expectations – “What comes to mind when I think of a traditional Hungarian wedding today are things like the best man getting drunk and embarrassing himself, and the bride’s being forced to do that dance with everyone”²⁶ – or as positive, that is, as normal, ideal, expected, customary, or perfectly fine: “The best man should escort me from my parents’ place to the church accompanied by a band. This should be followed by a church wedding, with the civil ceremony afterwards on the same day. My father should escort me to the altar with my godfather as witness. There should be flower girls, traditional food, and a coin-tossing ceremony, and I should wear something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue. BAND + best man. No master of ceremonies.”²⁷

The following interview excerpt provides an example of how customs and traditions (as old, obsolete things) were rejected by a couple-to-be who found them fundamentally distasteful, and though they believed their guests expected to see them (in particular, the more comedic, playful elements), they stuck firmly to their decision not to have them:

*Like for other people, for us the problem with tradition and the all-traditional wedding was that we just don't like the customs that come with them. [...] And so we agreed that, fine, we'd have a wedding, but we'd have it without them. Obviously, anyone who's bothered by this simply won't come. [...]*²⁸

The category of modern also included a variety of things: elements that have entered the repertoire only recently (after-the-fact repetitions of vows, MCs, sundry new services, new ceremony types, themed weddings), new titles, new service providers (e.g. DJs, wedding directors), new foods, new catering solutions, and new locations (outdoor weddings, forest weddings, barn weddings, etc.)). At the same time, the concept of modern also meant the obsolescence or abandonment of elements seen as traditional. To my mind, an important common thread where modern weddings were contrasted with traditional ones was the phenomenon of individualisation: the manifestation of a couple's own ideas and wishes. Here, as a counterpoint to the traditional wedding's rigid structure, which is set out and overseen by family, community and society, respondents emphasised the injection of freedom and flexibility: "What defines the modern wedding] is that the whole thing goes the way I planned it, and no outsider, family member, etc. has any say in it."²⁹ Other defining marks of the modern wedding/reception, ones that come up with equal frequency, include the shorter guest list, in which friends are overrepresented and distant relatives play an increasingly minor role, and the replacement of the traditional Hungarian wedding feast or other large, ostentatious reception with eating and dancing in favour of a smaller dinner with family and friends: "A small family dinner with a few friends. [...] No banquet, and no traditional bridal dance at midnight".³⁰ "A civil ceremony, the immediate family, and a dinner in place of the traditional feast. These days it's unusual not to have a huge reception."³¹

SCRIPTS OF RITUALISATION: ORIGINAL AND REPLANNED

During the pandemic, both couples-to-be and wedding service providers created new types of ceremonies featuring new rituals in place of the ones public health restrictions had placed temporarily out of reach. People in the process of planning their weddings – with particular reference to women – described weddings and wedding receptions prior to and during the pandemic in terms of traditions, customs, practices and norms (old and new) on the one hand; and sameness vs. differentness, individuality, exceptionality, etc. on the other. These expressions can easily be sorted into the ethical and scientific analytical categories of old normal, old abnormal, new COVID normal, not wholly new normal, new abnormal, and not wholly new abnormal. Respondents tried to "hammer together" or reforge their own ideas to suit the new legal and economic structures and contexts by using wedding elements (rites, norms,

ideologies, events) known, identified, or recognised as modern or traditional as either models, or “anti-models” in an emic register. What I will examine here is how those in question, in planning their weddings, strove to “make them distinct” – traditional, modern, local, regional, urban, rural, individual – or, alternately, “indistinct” – to construct sameness by discursive means.³² In crafting their events, people, reflecting on both the critical discourse surrounding the contemporary wedding and the popularity of the wedding in general, were primarily cognizant, individually and as a community, of the plurality of rites, practices and related ideologies – in other words, that there was not one local, regional, religious, ethnic, national, urban, or rural wedding tradition, but many, none of which were mandatory.

Of those responding to my COVID questionnaire during the COVID crisis, a 57% majority of individuals planning their weddings already had some sort of coherent idea of what the event would look like – of their *dream wedding* – prior to meeting the person they were engaged to marry. At the same time, 33.8% admitted to having no idea at all. Amply represented among these dreams and preferences were both traditional and modern ideas, including big, ostentatious weddings, traditional banquets with friends and family, conventional urban and rural weddings with receptions, weddings held outdoors close to nature, and weddings with immediate family or even no guests at all: “A huge, traditional wedding with family, a real Hungarian wedding feast”; “A folk wedding”; “Traditional with an outdoor ceremony”; “A traditional wedding with all the extended family”; “It shouldn’t be traditional”. For 67.3% of respondents, these prior preferences – “A wedding for two”; “an enormous wedding ☺”; “a big wedding with a white dress and escort from my parents’ house”; “a gorgeous/long / snow-white/etc. wedding dress” – would make their way into the first iteration of their wedding plans. For 32.4%, prior conceptions took backstage and defined neither the planning and organisational processes, nor the actual wedding.

A majority of people planning their weddings during COVID did so in possession of prior plans and concrete event librettos. A smaller percentage of COVID weddings were originally planned as two-day events. 8.4% had planned for a small civil ceremony on one day, with a church wedding and reception/feast to be held the day after; 4.1% a separate civil wedding, followed the next day by a larger ceremony and reception/feast led by a wedding director; 2.7% a separate civil service and feast, the latter including both a church wedding and a ceremony led by a wedding director; and 1% a small, separate civil ceremony and next-day wedding feast without marriage rites. Most people originally hoped to celebrate on one day only: 40.3% planned to hold their civil wedding, church wedding, and reception/feast; 34.2% their civil wedding and reception/feast; and 6.5% their civil wedding and intimate dinner on the same day.

Of respondents to my COVID questionnaire, 38.4% (187 out of 487 respondents) had already worked out an order of events – a screenplay or libretto – for their wedding (its first, pre-COVID version), while 39.5% (175 respondents) had their order of events partially worked out. For 13.6% (66 respondents), no order of events had yet been developed, while 11.9% (58 individuals) had not even conceived of creating one – they had not been planning on any complex schedule of rites. When asked to do so, several brides-to-be even provided me with their original wedding plans, i.e. the ones that reflected the legal, social and economic order prior to the COVID restrictions and prohibitions, including both rural and urban events:

Example 1. *In the morning, preparations; at 1:00, greet guests on site without the bride; at 2:00, best man fetches the bride from her parents' house, followed by a lunch, the farewell to the parents, and procession to the site of the wedding; at 5:00, civil ceremony, followed by photography and procession back to the wedding site; standing receptions, then the married couple's opening dance, dance with the in-laws, then a party. At 9:00 or 10:00, dinner; at 1:00 a.m. cake cutting and new wife's dance (red dress); food all night and party until dawn; in the morning, cleanup and left-overs party with close friends and family.*³³

Example 2. *At 4:30, church ceremony, followed by savoury snacks; in the evening, dinner; in one section of the hall there would have been folk music for our friends with dance instruction; otherwise, the guests would have had recorded music to dance to. We didn't want the usual procession from my parents' house or anything like that, nor did I want the traditional bridal dance. Neither of us was interested in a traditional wedding cake, or more than just a few party games. The idea was just to party until dawn.*³⁴

Though at first glance, these wedding programmes might all appear quite similar in that they all feature a more-or-less predictable number of elements that are varied and repeated, under the surface one finds numerous differences. If we look closer, we see that the similar elements that appear in them often play out in different orders. Additionally, the wedding elements in question are sometimes interpreted in plural-individual ways. The post-ceremony red dress, for example, can be and is frequently regarded as a modern or a traditional custom, the candlelight waltz as a local or a national ritual, etc. The biggest differences arise with individual preferences related to the wedding ceremony itself. Civil weddings, repetitions of vows, and church weddings can be held as public or private rites; they can form part of the entire event or be held separately. There are also differences in the sequence of customs,

events and rituals, as in whether the civil or the church wedding takes place first, the time for photography, creative or otherwise, and the number of days festivities last. One also finds various regional, social, cultural and economic differences. Regional differences include, for example, those between country and city: the bridal farewell and escort, the coin toss, the bridal dance, or the absence of these. Economic differences are most visible in relation to the choice of foods (fine dining, barbecue, hamburgers, multiple courses, traditional meals, stuffed cabbage, etc.) and the decision to include a church wedding or not. A good many of the wedding programmes included genuine, individual, personal touches or personal performances to colour the fixed or semi-fixed order of events (films, photo exhibitions, guest books, personal memorabilia, memorials to deceased relatives). Though fundamentally, the order of events of the rural, village wedding is seen as *more traditional* and the urban ones more modern, elements labelled as traditional, modern, local, or Western cropped up in the celebratory librettos of urban and rural weddings alike.

How did weddings and wedding programmes change during the COVID period? For the duration of the crisis, wedding planners either sought out new and innovative ways of conducting festivities or identified and leveraged such unusual practices as had been in use before the pandemic hit. Under quarantine, where future partners did not immediately choose to postpone or wait it out – as was, in fact, the strategy of most – individual rites (the civil wedding, the church wedding, and the reception/feast) were held separately (25.6% had their civil wedding on its original date and 5.8% at a prior time). So that a wedding feast held separately from the civil wedding would feel like a “real” celebration, a true rite, 18.1% asked a *wedding celebrant* to conduct a repeat civil ceremony (celebrated with a *commitment ceremony*), 13.4% postponed the church wedding along with the feast, and 2.5% added a church wedding to the original plan. A commitment ceremony is a non-legally binding ceremony. Following contemporary wedding fashion, this new ceremony tries to present biographical, personal aspects of the couple’s relationship, but also, according to traditional norms, tries to perform and mime the official civil wedding. During the COVID period, I observed two different strategies employed in replanning: one was a rejection of tradition, along with related innovations; the other was replanning motivated precisely with reference to norms and traditions. In such cases, traditions that were lifted up, reinterpreted and adapted tended to be seen as positive, i.e., as preferences, norms and adapted models. Sometimes both strategies might be applied to a single wedding, making an unusual mixture of innovation and tradition the practice most frequently seen during the time of the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

So, what do we see? How did engaged couples use, shape and interpret their own wedding traditions during the time of the pandemic? How did they react to uncertainty, perpetually changing circumstances, new regulations and new restrictions? The answer, as we have seen, is very actively and very constructively. In conducting this project, I witnessed not mere people defined by rules and restrictions, but agents who worked actively to mould their culture. Under quarantine, legislators strove primarily to ensure that weddings (without services) could proceed seamlessly in the legal, official sense and that everyone could, one might say, “get their papers”. This legal-political will found itself in direct conflict with the very different interpretations of wedding and reception held by the people themselves and their various service providers, whose expectations went far beyond the issue of mere paperwork. What the above has shown is that despite – or perhaps, in the face of – their changed circumstances, the vast majority of the people in question stuck to their original, habitual (see Bourdieu 1977) ideas and dreams, while only a small percentage gave up more expensive, frivolous, unnecessary services in favour of cheaper, more strictly necessary ones. This latter group opted for safer, good, or adequate-seeming solutions because their initial preferences, expectations and ideas ran into economic and legal barriers, or because circumstances beyond their control prevented them from bringing them to fruition. As they sought out new possibilities, new adaptable models, they simultaneously recognised and worked to interpret the rules that could potentially influence their outcomes, navigating between them, overstepping them, avoiding them altogether, or at other times, striving to create new opportunities through individual and community practices. Another finding was that emergency decisions made during the crisis period were only partly shaped by societal and legal pressures. In other words, many of these decisions were actually quite rational, cognizant, carefully planned, or rooted in emotion – or alternately, were reflective of other factors that had arisen during the planning and decision-making process, such as free choice, public discourse and the new ideas it presented.

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NOTES

- 1 Of respondents, 92.2% were women. A total of 43.9% were aged between 20 and 30 years, 45.4% between 31 and 50, 7.3% between 51 and 80, 3.3% between 14 and 19, and 0.02% over 81. Regarding levels of education, 66.7% had graduated from university/college; 28.9% had obtained at most a secondary school diploma, and 5.4% had received only an elementary school education. A total of 12.5% indicated residence in Budapest, 38.6% in a county seat or other large city, 24.7% in a small town or village, and 0.6% on a rural farm. In terms of household type, 49% lived in two-generation households, 39.4% in nuclear families (one couple, married or otherwise), 6.8% in three-generation households, and 0.2% lived alone.
- 2 Of respondents, 92.2% were women; 72.7% 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 were Swabian or German, and one was Romanian); 60.2% had graduated from university/college, 2% had obtained a PhD, 30.6% had at most a high school diploma, 7.7% had graduated from vocational or technical high school, 1% had received a post-secondary certificate, and 1% had an associate's degree; 25.5% lived in Budapest, 29.4% in a county seat or major city, 25.5% in a small town, 19% in villages, and 3% on farms.
- 3 Each interview lasted two or three hours. Most of the brides lived either in Budapest, or one of Hungary's larger rural towns, had advanced degrees, and were between twenty and thirty-five years of age. Five of them worked abroad. Having first filled out the online questionnaires, these women then volunteered participation in the follow-up discussions. The invitation to do so had been contained in the questionnaire's concluding item. The interviews were conducted online and were recorded.
- 4 I was present in twelve groups, but paid most attention to the four most active, monitoring them daily (the number of members varied between 2,500 and 29,000). I also monitored debates and conversations related to the organisation and reorganisation of weddings, as well as to the individual and collective dilemmas their participants faced.
- 5 4 April 2020, Budapest.
- 6 Responses to one of the questions from my online questionnaire: "What changes, great or small, did you have to make? Was your original wedding programme subject to alterations?" 19 May 2020; Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County.
- 7 Responses to a question from my COVID 2 Questionnaire, 2020.
- 8 Responses to the following question from the online questionnaire: "How did the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and related measures affect the organisation of your wedding and wedding reception?"; 30 March 2020, Baranya County.
- 9 Responses to the following question from the online questionnaire: "How did the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and related measures affect the organisation of your wedding and wedding reception?"; 29 March 2020, Zala County.
- 10 Excerpt from an e-mail from a woman of Hungarian nationality, approx. thirty years of age, Vienna (Austria); date of exchange: 5 September 2020.
- 11 18 February 2020, Budapest.
- 12 18 February 2020, Baranya.
- 13 Niel Gross's concept. Gross also specifically highlights the different functions of "regulatory" and "meaning-constitutive" traditions: while he believes the former externally restrict and compel, the latter internally authorize and enable various actions and practices (Gross 2005: 296).
- 14 These were the typical group sizes in previous years, as well (according to my questionnaire of February-March 2020): among those getting married in previous years, 38.8% planned to invite less than 50 people, 40.5% between 50 and 100 people, 17.8% between 100 and 200 people, and 2.8% more than 200 people to their weddings.
- 15 Facebook wedding planning group, 15 March 2020.
- 16 Facebook wedding planning group, 16 March 2020.
- 17 16 March 2020, Facebook wedding planning group.

- 18 Facebook wedding planning group, reception services, 18 April 2020.
- 19 Facebook wedding planning group, bride, 18 April 2020.
- 20 Facebook wedding planning group, 29 April 2020.
- 21 Facebook wedding planning group, 30 April 2020.
- 22 Facebook wedding planning group, 1 May 2020.
- 23 14 March 2017, Facebook wedding planning group.
- 24 More than one answer could be selected. Since respondents were allowed to select more than one wedding type (e.g., both traditional and modern), the percentages reflect overlapping categories and therefore do not sum to 100%.
- 25 20 February 2020, Baranya County, Pécs.
- 26 13 February 2020, Budapest.
- 27 13 February 2020, Baranya County.
- 28 Interview excerpt, female, 23 years old, Somogy County, 7 May 2020.
- 29 13 February 2020, Baranya County.
- 30 13 February 2020, Tolna County.
- 31 13 February 2020, Budapest.
- 32 See Goldstein-Gidoni's concepts of "distinction" and "indistinction". In her view, social actors tend to create ritual practices and wedding ideologies that are either very different or very conventional. In other words, people strive for distinction or indistinction according to their intentions and objectives through the medium of their weddings. In forming these concepts, Goldstein-Gidoni is building here on the theory of Appadurai (Goldstein-Gidoni 2001: 22; see also Appadurai 1990: 5).
- 33 30 April 2020, non-religious, Budapest.
- 34 1 May 2020, Methodist, Komárom-Esztergom County.

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