A Death-Marriage in a Swiss Mountain Village

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This paper deals with the case of a single girl buried as a bride in a Swiss mountain village. It is a local variant of the death-marriage or *Totenhochzeit*, a custom that must have been widespread in rural Europe. In the death-marriage the metaphor of death as marriage mitigates the opposition between life and death, because in contrast to death, the parting at marriage is not irreversible (Danforth 1982). Especially unmarried girls are buried as brides. As untimely dead, adolescents, virgins and symbolic brides serve as mediators in the opposition mentioned. In a village, socially distorted by a loss of life, the death-marriage of the single girl probably was a strategy of the villagers to come to terms with death.

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1. Introduction

On February 2, 1960 a single girl was buried as a bride in Bosco Gurin, a small village in the Swiss Alps. This paper deals with the question why the villagers presented the deceased unmarried girl as a bride. Informants told me of this unusual case while I was carrying out fieldwork in Bosco Gurin in the summer of 1985. The burial of the single girl as a bride differed from the normal adult funeral. The funeral of young single adults, especially single girls, with borrowings from wedding customs is known as death-marriage (also called *Totenhochzeit*). This extraordinary funeral ritual must have been widespread in rural Europe. In the ethnographic literature examples of death-marriages are reported from Germany, Austria, Italy, France, England, Norway, Finland, Russia, Poland, Rumania, Hungary and Greece.[1] The case of the Swiss girl is a local variant of the custom of death-marriage in which the idea of death as a marriage is expressed.

Schrader (1904) introduced the name *Totenhochzeit* for the custom mentioned. *Totenhoch-zeit* appears as an entry in two important German dictionaries of folklore: *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* (vol. 8, 1936/1937: 1068–71) and *Wörterbuch der deutschen Volkskunde* (Erich & Beitl 1955: 764–5). Lawson (1910) tries to explain why – in ancient Greek mythology as well as among Greek peasants at the turn of the century – death was conceived of as a wedding. His view is, as we will see, confirmed by Danforth (1982) who observed the exhumation in a Greek village of a deceased girl five years after her death-marriage. Lawson and Danforth both show that this sort of wedding in a way makes sense. Although their analyses are admirable, we do not learn why especially young single girls are buried like a bride. Neither are we told why it happens in one place and not in another. What are the social circumstances in which the death-marriage will occur? Hence, new questions have to be raised.

First I will describe the funeral of the single girl as a bride.[2] Then I will pay attention to the analogy between death and marriage. This is followed by a discussion of some characteristics of the death-marriage. Finally, I shall place the

case of the unmarried girl buried as a bride in the social and historical context of village life.

2. A bride in the grave

Bosco Gurin lies in a side valley of the Valle Maggia against the Swiss-Italian border, 40 km from the resort of Locarno. It is the only village in the Italian-speaking canton Ticino where the inhabitants use a Swiss German dialect in daily speech among themselves. Bosco Gurin, the highest inhabited village of the canton, is a self-governing parish.

In 1960, the 144 inhabitants of the Roman Catholic Bosco Gurin experienced one of those dreadful and severe winters that a village at 1500 m above sea level has to endure. From the mid of November till the end of February the village was hardly ever exposed to sunlight. The sunbeams were cut off by a mountain ridge in the south. During the winter-months the agricultural activities slowed down in Bosco Gurin. By then the village was covered with a snowcarpet of a few metres deep. The people found themselves isolated in their houses. Small windows showed glimpses of a darkened world outside.

In January 1960 the villagers were eager to hear some news about the local baker's daughter. The-eighteen-year old girl stayed in the hospital of Cevio, the central place in the valley. She got weaker and weaker, due to a blood-disease, cancer. Gradually it grew clear that the girl would die. Among the villagers the death of the 'beautiful' girl was already discussed and considered a great loss to the village. Then, on January 25, the signal came. The parish priest went down to give her the last Holy Sacraments. Six days later she died.

Some strong villagers brought her corpse up to Bosco Gurin. According to the local custom two women laid her out in the living room of the bakery, the house of her parents. The wake began at sunset. It was attended by almost every villager, including the three brothers and four sisters of the girl. There were even more men than usual. Upon entering the room they made the sign of the cross over the corpse in the opened coffin. Behind the coffin stood two burning wax candles and a cross. The girl

was laid in state in a white wedding dress with a white veil.

Those who found a place were seated around the coffin. They prayed nine rosaries. One of the women took the lead. From every family in the village there was at least one representative. The priest never came to the wake. It was a private occasion among the villagers themselves. At midnight most of the people went home. Before taking leave they made the sign of the cross with holy water over the deceased girl. After a pause in which they got coffee and something to eat, the close relatives and friends resumed the wake. They said some prayers and a litany. At dawn everyone except the baker, his wife and children left the house.

In the morning the father of the girl baked a lot of white bread. This so-called death-bread (*Tootubroot*) was given to every family that had attended the wake. Two men of the Brotherhood of the Holy Sacrament dug the grave. Someone of the girl's family brought them hot red wine (*Glühwein*). The grave-diggers held an oracle over the open grave. The youngest one pointed to one side of the older man while he was holding a shovel and a pickaxe behind his back. The chosen tool indicated the sex of the one that would die next: the pickaxe in the case of a man, the shovel in the case of a woman. The tools were laid crosswise over the grave with the chosen object below for everybody to see.

Many villagers went to the house of mourning to see the deceased girl for the last time. Again they made the sign of the cross with holy water over the corpse. Older women had made wreaths of larch twigs and paper flowers. The visitors also donated money for masses for the soul of the girl. Nobody condoled with the members of the family on the girl's death. Instead they talked about her life and death and the usual daily subjects.

The girl was to be buried at three o'clock in the afternoon. The participants in the funeral procession (*Chritzgång*) gathered in front of the house. The priest arrived with his servers. When he saw the girl in a wedding-dress he started an argument with the men who had to carry the coffin. In his opinion the girl should have been dressed in black. But he could not

convince the men who believed that the right thing to do was to bury the girl 'as a bride'. The parish priest got the worst of it. With a bad grace he had to cooperate in the funeral of the girl in a white wedding-dress. The priest carried out the normal Roman Catholic funeral for adults. He blessed the deceased girl and the coffin was closed.

In the funeral procession children with wreaths went ahead, in their footsteps a server with a cross. They were followed by a few single men who carried the coffin. These unmarried men were members of the Brotherhood of the Holy Sacrament. After them came the priest and his servers, then the close relatives of the girl, the group of village women, and the group of village men, who concluded the procession. During the procession from the house of mourning to the church the church-bells were rung (*Amènn litta*) by the sacristan, another member of the Brotherhood.

During the funeral mass the coffin stood on the crossing of the paths in the church. On every corner next to the coffin burned a wax candle, and a cross was placed in front of it. In the church the benches of the men were in front of the coffin. Behind it were the women's benches. The wreaths had been placed on top of the coffin. It was a mass in Latin according to the *rituale romanum* that was in use at the time. At the end the churchgoers sang *In Paradisum*, except the mourners, who were not allowed to sing.

From the church the procession went on to the churchyard. It was a few metres downwards. When the men had sunk the coffin into the grave, the priest gave the aspersory to the mourners so that they could bless the coffin. The grave-diggers shovelled the earth back into the grave. All through the ceremony the church-bells had rung monotonously. The bystanders waited until the burial mound was finished. A grave-digger drew a cross in the fresh earth on the grave. After that he drove a wooden cross into the fresh earth of the grave. At that moment the church-bells were silent. Now everybody left the cemetery.

The burial of the single girl as a bride may be seen as an unusual case, though it must have been a widespread custom (with a great variety of treatment given to the idea) in many regions of rural Europe. The burial of an unmarried girl as a bride was not a standard adult funeral in Bosco Gurin. It must be classified as an untypical funeral ritual. But 'even a highly untypical ritual may (...) provide a valuable window into norms' (Thompson 1979: 8). By examining it we can discover unspoken norms and motivations. The death-marriage of the girl hints at values that were important to the people of Bosco Gurin, but that were not so easy to observe in daily life. Though an unusual case, the burial of the single girl as a bride was part and parcel of their culture (cf. Ginzburg 1982: 21). It was something worth fighting over with the mighty parish priest. For the villagers the burial of the single girl as a bride did make sense. One way or another, they felt that the unmarried eighteen-year-old girl should be buried as a bride.

A few questions may now be raised. Why should someone be buried as a bride? Why should especially a young single girl be buried as a bride? In what context did this event take place? And what were the sentiments of those involved in the burying of the unmarried girl as a bride?

3. Marriage and death

Both marriage and death bring about a radical change in the condition and status of specific individuals, marked by a rite of passage, namely the wedding and the funeral (cf. Van Gennep 1960). Leach has remarked that 'from a cross-cultural view the two *rites de passage* which are most consistently given ritual emphasis are those of marriage and death. It is a striking fact that the rituals concerned are often quite closely related and treated as a binary pair' (1972: 340). How do funerals correspond with weddings in Bosco Gurin?

I shall only mention a few similarities between both rites of passage to illustrate the parallels in ritual detail. Both are ceremonies in which almost every villager takes part. The individuals that undergo the transition from one social status into another are dressed formally: the bride in the case of the wedding and the deceased in the case of the funeral. Both

rites of passage involve processions from a house to the church, and from the church to another place, in which the central characters in the ritual drama are accompanied by relatives and friends. The official part of the religious ceremony is on both occasions carried out in the church (Danforth 1982: 79). During this ceremony a member of the family stays behind in the house; the mother of the bride in the case of the wedding and mostly an aunt of the deceased in the case of the funeral. Flowers figure prominently in funerals, and in weddings as well. The gift of sweet cookies (*barotta*) that the bride and groom (a new family) bring to every house and family in the village on the day of the wedding is analogous to the gift of white bread (*Tootubroot*) that the family of the deceased brings to all the other families and houses on the day of the funeral. The analogy between marriage and death is indeed made very clear and explicit in the case of the single girl buried as a bride.

To understand this analogy it should be taken into account that in both rites of passage parting is a central theme. 'Marriage, like a funeral, implies a grievous parting' (Hertz 1960: 150 note 317). My informants said that the mother of the bride stays away from the wedding ceremony, because she is sad and because she is going to miss her daughter. The bride moves with her marriage from her home and family of origin to her relatives and another house. The same happens to the dead girl who departs from home and leaves her family. She too goes to 'another house', namely the grave. The grave is associated with a house. The inhabitants of Bosco Gurin feel that 'the family is responsible for keeping their graves in order, just like they must take care that their houses do not become dilapidated'. Every cross on the graveyard has a 'little roof' (*Tächtschi*) on it. The correspondence between a house and a grave seemed even clearer in the 1960s when the dead members of a family were buried after each other in the same grave, like they were born in the same house. The grave symbolizes 'another house'. Both the bride and the deceased depart from home and move to 'another house', the house of the groom and the grave respectively.

The funeral of the unmarried girl was also seen as a wedding. She wore a white wedding-dress and a white veil. The villagers buried her 'as a bride'. In marriage as well as in death a departure and separation take place. However, the kind of departure is different. After death one is apart for ever. The deceased cannot come back to life, whereas after marriage the bride does not leave the world of the living. The parting in the case of the wedding is incomplete; a married woman can still visit her parental home and family of origin. Marriage is a 'partial death'; *partir c'est mourir un peu*. As opposed to this, from death one can never return, because death is irreversible. The death-marriage, death as marriage, 'represents her death as no greater breaking of old ties than is marriage' (Lawson 1910: 547). According to Danforth death as marriage is a metaphor:

"By asserting similarity where there exists difference, by demonstrating identity where there exists opposition, metaphors force us to see things in a different light. They establish relations between things that were thought to be unrelated. The power of metaphors lies in their ability to change the way we view our world" (1982: 82).

The metaphor of death as marriage helped the villagers believe that the girl was not gone for ever, not really dead.

Any death is of course difficult to accept. A metaphor, like the metaphor of death as marriage, is 'a strategy to handle a situation' (Colby, Fernandez & Kronenfeld 1981: 438). In general, there are parallels between funeral and wedding customs. But the metaphor of death as marriage becomes obvious in the case of the single girl buried as a bride. The death of a marriageable but unmarried girl confronted the bereaved with a difficult situation. In the next paragraph we shall look at some characteristics of the death-marriage in order to understand why the metaphor of death as marriage was used as a strategy in the funeral of the single girl. Always and everywhere people tend to deny that death is irreversible. The extreme opposition between life and death can be mitigated by means of the metaphor of

death as marriage (cf. Danforth 1982: 83–4). However, this does not explain sufficiently why especially young single adults, mostly girls, receive a funeral like a wedding.

4. Some characteristics of the death-marriage

I will discuss here three characteristics of the death-marriage with reference to the case of the single girl buried as a bride in Bosco Gurin: the untimely death, virginity as a marker of conceptual boundaries, and the dead girl as an inversion of Christ. The last two are of course less applicable to young single men, but it must be remembered that, should the case arise, mostly single girls have death-marriages. Purity in sexual behaviour is more significant for women than for men in a male-dominated society. One characteristic of a bride is that she is pure, while for the bridegroom it is his social and economic behaviour that counts (cf. De Pina-Cabral 1980: 8). I have never heard of a young unmarried man buried as a bridegroom in Bosco Gurin. Such cases seem to be much rarer. Nevertheless, I will mention some valid reasons why this variety of the death-marriage may occur too.

The death of a young single adult is an untimely death. 'Untimely' here means that one is not expected to die at that age. The local saying 'the young ones *may* die, the old ones *must* die' indicates that an untimely death is judged as a disruption of the normal process of life. This type of death does not fit in with the way in which the local community is organized. Adolescents are on the threshold of adult society. In due time they will have to take over responsibilities, human reproduction and economic activities. Hence, their death causes disorder in the fabric of village life and arouses very strong emotions in the bereaved. The death of young people comes as a shock. It is very difficult to comprehend and to accept.

Hertz already stated that 'in one and the same society the emotion aroused by death varies extremely in intensity according to the social status of the deceased' (1960: 76). This may be illustrated for Bosco Gurin by looking

at two other types of death: the death of little children on the one hand, and the death of the aged on the other hand.

In the past a dead child who had not yet started going to Communion was called an angel (*as Engalti*). The villagers conceived of it as still belonging to 'the other world'. Such a child was seen as someone without sin or moral knowledge. Instead of the expression of grief the villagers showed joy. They congratulated the mother on having an angel, someone in the 'other world' now. The church-bells were rung by children like on great holidays (*Chleecha*). The deceased child was buried in white ritual colours, and joyful hymns were sung. Other children (or, in the case of a baby, one of the godparents) carried the coffin. Only children and close relatives attended the funeral. The graves of these 'angels' in the churchyard are apart from those of adults. The 'angels' had no history in the local community, nor earnings for it yet. Children first reached a certain social status in the community with their first Holy Communion. At the same time they became members of the Brotherhood of the Holy Sacrament which took care of all other funerals (digging the grave, ringing the church-bells, and carrying the coffin). The sentiments concerning the death of a little child would of course be different nowadays. In Bosco Gurin the last child died in 1953. It was buried as 'an angel'.

Many informants referred spontaneously to the deaths of a few elderly villagers as their ideal way of dying. These deaths were regarded as examples for others. These elderly people had raised their children and given the care of their property to them. They had also taken care of spiritual matters. This type of death is often called 'the good death' (cf. Goldey 1980). For the villagers the right time to die was at the age when the social, economic and religious goals in life were achieved. Some of the aged lived beyond that point. They gradually became marginal members of the local community. Two older people told me that they longed for their death.
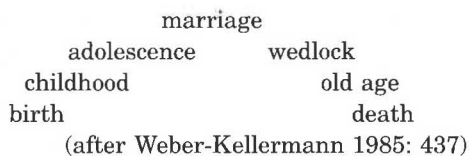
One woman (80 years old) said: 'I would like to die, but I stay alive and grow older and older'. An old man (85 years old) remarked: 'I want to die now. All my friends have left. They

are all dead'. In short, the proper time to die for an adult is when life has been completed. The inhabitants of Bosco Gurin feel that 'the old ones *must* die'. The death of the aged invokes a less strong emotional response on behalf of the community because of their reduced social status.

Adolescents are on the threshold of adult society. An adolescent is a young person who is no longer a child but who has not yet become an adult. Although adolescents may be seen as capable members of the community, they are still second-rate citizens. As long as they are single, they do not belong to the 'real' community consisting of adults. Van Gennep asserts that in rural France it was from this point of view abnormal to mourn for the unmarried. When fate had interrupted the natural course of events the funeral ceremonies had to be replaced by wedding ceremonies (1946: 814). Marriage namely brings about a double change of status. The bride does not only go from her parental home and family of origin to her relatives and another house, but she also goes from the group of unmarried women to the group of married women in the village (Hertz 1960: 80). In Bosco Gurin the latter change of status was emphasized by young single men shooting their guns during the usual wedding ceremony, and by the fact that merely only young, single men carried the coffin in the coffin in the case of the single girl buried as a bride.

In rural Europe the wedding was the highlight of one's lifecycle. Weber-Kellermann graphically illustrates by means of a *Lebensbogen* ('life-bow') how life was marriage-orientated:

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marriage

adolescence   wedlock

childhood   old age

birth   death

(after Weber-Kellermann 1985: 437)

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The villagers experienced marriage as the forthcoming change of status for a young single adult. In Roman Catholic Bosco Gurin, where contraception was forbidden, marriage coincided with the start of the reproductive cycle (cf. Van de Walle 1975: 455). Therefore, the death of a young single adult, especially a single girl or virgin, was felt 'in the loss not only of one life but in the loss of a future generation, in the failure of that life to reproduce itself' (Linebaugh 1975: 113). The untimely death of the single girl urged people to reconsider the normal course of life and the continuity in the chain of generations. No doubt, the death of the single girl was mourned with bitter regret. Her funeral, analogous to marriage, implied 'a grievous parting' from her parental home and family of origin, and from the group of single villagers. Thus, the death-marriage can be seen as a strategy to loosen the social bonds and expectations in the local community in relation to the deceased young single adult.

Another characteristic of the death-marriage is that the deceased are nearly always virgins. Informants stressed the importance of the fact that the single girl buried as a bride was a virgin (*Jung-gfrö"w*). The white wedding-dress and veil demonstrated her sexual purity. We have to draw here upon the anthropological theory of body symbolism to see that virginity may be used to mediate in a sequence of discriminated categories. According to Mary Douglas the body is a model of society. Its boundaries can represent any conceptual boundaries. The bodily boundaries used as social markers necessarily differ from the opposed normal categories. This is because ordered society, without which we cannot live, depends on such demarcations. These conceptual boundaries are betwixt and between the established categories; they constitute a third category, which is ambiguous (1980, 1975, 1978; Leach 1964, 1976). Virginity is such a category. In the words of Hastrup, a virgin is an 'unspecified woman' (1978: 59). 'Neither a woman nor a man', says Blok (1986: 29). The biological fact that her body has not been penetrated helps to symbolise the demarcation line between the categories of men and women. Indeed, this is an important symbolic aspect of virginity in male-dominated societies (see Blok 1986). Conceptual boundaries not only separate opposed categories but also connect them. They bridge the gap between binary oppositions. Virgins serve as mediators. In the first

place they mediate the opposition between men and women. But this mediation may extend into the religious domain. The Holy Virgin, who mediates between this world and 'the other world', is a well-known example (Leach 1964: 39; Warner 1986; Blok 1986: 28). Let us now return to our virgin.

In contrast to ordinary women, virgins were highly respected in Bosco Gurin. Whereas men saw married women as second-rate persons, even 'mules', they admired the 'beautiful' girl, who was a virgin.[3] She stood out because of her sexual purity. She had mastered her sexual impulses and was judged as someone free from sin. A strong emphasis placed on female chastity and virginity, mainly enforced by religious doctrine, helped to maintain male dominance in the local community (cf. Blok 1986). It would lead too far to discuss this point in greater detail. In the local belief system the opposition between men and women (e.g. expressed in the division of labour and the separate grouping in funeral ritual) was transformed into the opposition between good and evil. Premarital sex and adultery were so-called 'mortal sins'. Sins that would deny the believers (especially women) eternal life in 'the other world'. Female informants assured me that there was much stress on these religious values at that time. It had to do with the body-soul dichotomy, a crucial issue in the Roman Catholic belief. It is believed that, at the moment of dying, the soul leaves the body and goes onward on its way to 'the other world' (Rahner 1959: 17–8).

The virgin is outstanding here, because it is clear that she, more than anyone else, observed the moral rules. Her sexual negation of the body (while being attractive at the same time) in life ensures a continued spiritual life after death. We can now see how the virgin mediates between the binary oppositions mentioned above: men and women, good and evil, body and soul, and life and death. By equating virginity with (spiritual) life – once ended both physical conditions are irreversable – it is metaphorically suggested that eternal life is guaranteed as long as the girl is physically intact. In a way the virgin remains 'alive' in death. However, the cultural valuation of the physical fact that the virgin has not been penetrated by a man, tends to accentuate the demarcation line between the conceptual categories rather than to express their bonds. This is where the bride comes in. The representation of the bride draws attention to the transitional phase in the ritual drama.

In several respects the bride contrasts with the virgin. Whereas a virgin is free from any relationship, a bride is involved in a sexual one. Unlike a virgin, who has a neutral sexual status, a bride becomes a woman. Though her bond with a bridegroom is pure and legitimate, the forthcoming defloration of the bride will be in some sense impure and polluting. Furthermore the bride is a faithful wife, because she has not yet had an opportunity to deceive her groom. Every woman can become a bride, whereas a woman once she has lost her virginity can never become a virgin again. In contrast, as a bride every woman 'is able to begin again with a fresh start and a clean slate. Even a whore can regain the purity of a bride' (Maltz 1978: 36, 32–5). The bride does not simply have a relationship, but one that implies emotion and intimacy (ibid.: 32). The virgin, however, is not within reach; she is untouchable for all men.

The bride is an ambivalent category, 'betwixt and between' the married and the unmarried. We can now understand Danforth's argument – that death as a marriage metaphor mediates the opposition between life and death – and proceed to look at the mediating capacity of the bride. The bride bridges the gap between clear-cut category oppositions. The female bride is linked to a male groom. She is supposed to be a virgin but will soon become a non-virgin. Because of her liminal (from *limen*, threshold) position the bride may be used as a mediator in many different contexts. The bride can metaphorically express a relationship in any transitional stage whatsoever. Ritual symbols like wearing a white wedding dress, lifting the veil, throwing away the bouquet, being carried over the threshold of the new house and the wedding night, all demonstrate the transition into a new status (the crossing of a conceptual boundary). In death-marriage, as a double rite of passage, this symbolism is evoked. The metaphor of death as marriage

brings the non-experience of death down to earth. It becomes an experience of mortal human beings. So the ultimate opposition between life and death can, as Danforth has shown, be mediated.

The symbolic marriage of the dead girl is not consummated. As a bride she becomes immortal: an eternal bride. Not a sexual but a spiritual relation is at stake here. This special bride serves to bridge the gulf between this world and 'the other world' and between mortal man and the immortal God:

"A remote god in another world may be logically sensible, but is emotionally unsatisfying. To be useful gods must be near at hand, so religion sets about reconstructing a continuum between this world and the other world... The gap between two logically distinct categories, this world/other world, is filled in with tabooed ambiguity... marginal, ambiguous creatures are specifically credited with the power of mediating between gods and men" (Leach 1964: 39).

The posthumously wedded corpse of the Swiss virgin – a marriageable but unmarried girl – is highly ambiguous. She neither belongs to the category of the living nor to the category of the dead. The deceased girl is as such taboo and impure. Physical contact with the corpse, which is considered polluting, is avoided. Nevertheless as a virginal bride she is the most sacred and pure person one can imagine. Single men have the honorable task to carry her coffin. She is admired as a 'beautiful girl', although in the meantime the corruption of her body sets in. Her funeral coincides with her wedding. The dead girl is presented as a bride, but none of the single men figures as her groom. The statement of the dead girl being a 'bride of Christ' remains implicit.

In the 'Great Tradition' of Roman Catholicism a metaphorical marriage with Christ is quite common. The church itself is viewed as a bride, whereas the invisible Christ (represented by the priest) is called 'bridegroom'. Another example is the nun, who becomes a 'bride of Christ' when she definitely enters the cloister. In the symbolical marriage with Christ,

like in the death-marriage, ritual objects (dress, veil, ring etc) of a secular marriage are used. Both our Swiss girl and a nun are 'consecrated virgins' (cf. Van Gennep 1960: 98). Their symbolic marriages are not consummated. On the contrary, a sexual relationship with a man is taboo for them. The nun as well as the dead Swiss girl are believed to go to 'another world'. The nun is going to live in the seclusion of the cloister, whereas the unmarried girl buried as a bride goes into the seclusion of the grave. Their symbolic marriages suggest a spiritual relationship, not a sexual one. According to Maltz 'sexuality provides a convenient and useful metaphor for religious experience because of the structural (and emotional) similarity between the two. The "bride of Christ" provides a metaphor for the correct spiritual relationship with Christ, and as such, its sexual component is religiously valued' (1978: 33).

There is some evidence (in songs and prayers) that female chastity and virginity were equated with the mythological suffering of Jesus Christ. At the same time love and longing for Christ in heaven was expressed. The Christians have the death of Christ on which to model their own death. 'Dying with Christ' is a Christian ideal (Rahner 1959: 61–7). We saw it already in the ritual drama of the funeral in Bosco Gurin. The funerals were at three o'clock in the afternoon, the moment at which Christ is said to have died. The funeral procession is called *Chritzgång* (literally 'Cross way'), the route that Christ must have walked with the Cross. The deceased is placed on the cross-roads in the church, like Christ was placed on the Cross. The distribution of white bread and wine in the funeral ceremony is analogous to the Eucharist, the 'sacramental death' of Christ (Rahner 1959), in which Christ's last supper with his disciples is remembered and celebrated. The Brotherhood of the Holy Sacrament (by which again that 'sacramental death' is meant) performs important tasks in the funeral ritual. Some men of the Brotherhood in their black coats carry the coffin with the deceased in the same way as the wooden statue of the Dead Christ was carried on Good Friday. Because Jesus Christ died on a
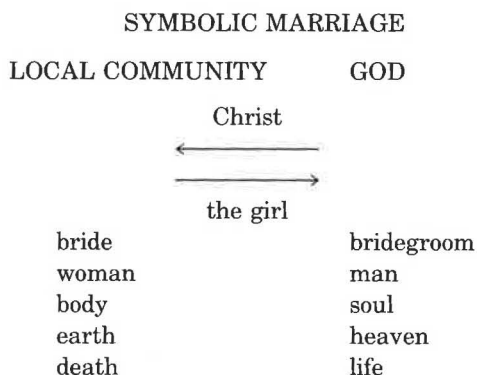
cross, it is the most important symbol of the Christian belief. There are numerous crosses and crossings in the funeral rites. Crosses mark the corpse, the funeral procession, and the grave. Christ (and the Cross) serves as a mediator between this world and 'the other world', between life and death. The association of one's own death with the death of Christ has also an emotional value. It brings the distant God back to the human experience of mortality, and the belief that Christ rose from the dead strengthens the hope of an afterlife in the invisible 'other world'. Symbolically and emotionally Christ is near at hand in the ritual drama, so that the gulf can be bridged between the opposed conceptual categories, namely this world and 'the other world', and life and death.

The single girl buried as a bride and Christ have in common that both were young single adults and died an untimely death. Like children buried as 'angels' in white ritual colours, the dead girl buried as a bride to the villagers was an ideal of the way to be. It reminded the adults who organized the funeral ritual, that they were no longer pure (cf. Christian 1972: 156). Marriages in Bosco Gurin, an ethnic minority community, were highly endogamous. The intact body of the virgin may represent the ideal of keeping the conceptual boundary of the local community pure and unpenetrated by strangers. The single girl buried as a bride as such represents the physical and moral integrity of the community. The distortion of the moral order, caused by the death of the girl, may be compensated for by marrying her off to God, the ultimate moral authority. Like a wife is subjected to her husband in this male-dominated society, so the community subjects itself to God, whereupon the moral order can no longer be questioned. At the symbolic level a reciprocal relationship with God is created, to whom the power is attributed to take and to give life. The local community symbolically acts in the funeral ceremony as 'wife-giver'. God is supposed in this metaphorical marriage exchange to be the 'wife-taker'. We can see now that it is not by accident that the single girl buried as a bride is an inversion of Christ.

Christ is presented as a bridegroom, the girl as a bride. The girl is a daughter of the local community, whereas Christ is the son of God. Christ is a man and the girl is a woman. The girl will live a (spiritual) life in heaven, while Christ died on earth. Christ got a physical body and the girl lost it. Christ came into the world, the girl, however, would go to 'the other world'. Christ and the girl make opposite movements in this symbolic marriage exchange. This may be demonstrated graphically as shown below:

SYMBOLIC MARRIAGE

LOCAL COMMUNITY   GOD

Christ
$\longleftarrow$
$\longrightarrow$
the girl

bride	bridegroom
woman	man
body	soul
earth	heaven
death	life

The dead girl was privileged as a 'bride of Christ'. The unusual funeral ritual might have helped to restore the confidence in the moral order. The death of a marriageable but unmarried girl shook the small community to its foundations. With the described symbolic marriage the villagers could come to terms with her death. Lawson confirms this point:

"to transfer some of the usages of marriage to the funeral-scene was to infuse one ray of hope where all else was sorrow and darkness, to teach that, though the dead and the mourners might grieve for their parting, yet by that parting from the old home the dead was to enter upon a new life, a life of wedded happiness, in the unseen world" (1910: 560).

The aim of a normal Roman Catholic marriage is human reproduction: a married wife should give birth to children (cf. Beemer 1983: 16). Children are considered, as we have seen as coming from 'the other world'. The villagers conceive of them as 'angels'. In the Christian tradition a child is regarded as a 'present from God' (Warner 1959). Although I do not have enough evidence for this, I suggest that the

death-marriage here acts as a metaphorical strategy to ascertain the metaphysical stream of human fertility. In marriage the birth of children is never completely certain.

So could the loss of a marriageable but unmarried girl be compensated for by a new and metaphysical assurance of the bond of the local community with God, who takes and who gives life? Might this have been the reason why the inhabitants of Bosco Gurin collectively resisted the parish priest and buried the dead girl as a bride? We cannot answer these speculative questions yet, but we may look at the context of village life: the lives of many unmarried girls and single women remained unfulfilled because of a local shortage of marriageable men. In 1960 Bosco Gurin was severely depopulating and the decreasing number of children may be regarded as a threat to the continuity of the local community.

5. The context of village life

Like any metaphor, the metaphor of death as marriage is a strategy to handle a situation; a difficult situation in this case. As I have demonstrated already, the inhabitants of Bosco Gurin laid much weight on their belief that the dead were not really dead (e.g. informants spoke of 'living dead', a 'come-back' of those who had died, see Venbrux 1988: 35–9). Probably they felt strongly about the deaths of their fellow villagers. Especially the death of a marriageable but unmarried girl seemed difficult to accept. Danforth made clear that the metaphor of death as marriage turned the irreversable parting at death into a reversable one at marriage (1982). But the question remains why in some villages people felt the need to perform a death-marriage, whereas in other villages they did not or no longer did so.

Of course it is difficult to say what kind of emotional value a particular ritual had for people, but we can look at the circumstances under which the villagers lived in 1960, when the single girl was buried as a bride. Maybe this brief sketch will shed some light on the emotional dimension of the death-marriage rite.

The extreme ecological setting did not have sufficient *carrying capacity* for the growing population in the middle of the last century. Many men from the Valle Maggia emigrated to Australia and the USA. In this century the outward move was followed by a migration to towns, like Zürich and Locarno. The total population of Bosco Gurin decreased from 420 inhabitants in 1858 to 144 in 1960 (Tomamichel 1982: 57).

The elderly and the women stayed behind. The women formed the main local labour force in the *Alpwirtschaft* which was to a large extent a subsistence economy. The men traditionally tried to gain an additional income through seasonal migration. When many men did not return to their village of birth anymore, this resulted in a local shortage of marriageable men. In general there were more men than women in rural areas in Switzerland. On the contrary, in Bosco Gurin the women outnumbered the men. In 1959 it had 98 female, but only 59 male inhabitants. In the same year there were twice as many single women in Bosco Gurin as there were single men.[4] A lot of Guriner girls stayed behind in their village without men. Older women outlived their husbands. Between 1950 and 1959 five more people died than there were born in this village, while at the same time there was a surplus of marriageable single girls (Imboden 1960: 8–10). Perhaps, we can form an idea of the tragedy of the death of such a marriageable but unmarried girl in 1960, when we know that the last local marriage had taken place eight years before, in 1952.[5]

The only thing the villagers could do was to give her for 'the other world' what they could not give her on earth: the social status of a married wife. The waste of an unfulfilled (or not reproduced) life was denied by focussing on the belief in an afterlife. She remained in a sense a member of the community, a 'dear soul' (*liabu Seala*), like all the other deceased villagers. With the burial of the single girl as a bride, the village celebrated so to speak its own funeral. To give the negative fate a positive appearance must have satisfied the bereaved and the unmarried people in the village.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we have dealt with the custom of death-marriage or *Totenhochzeit*. We have focussed on one case, namely the case of a single Swiss girl who was buried as a bride in 1960. The two rites of passage, wedding and funeral, have in common that they, in the words of Hertz, 'imply a grievous parting'. They differ however, because as a matter of fact death means a farewell forever whereas after marriage it is still possible for the bride to return to her family of origin and parental home. By the inclusion of wedding customs in the funeral of the single girl her irreversible parting was weakened emotionally (cf. Danforth 1982).

The death-marriage probably was given mostly to young single people, especially girls, because it was felt that with their untimely death their lives – while not being reproduced – remained unfulfilled. It was against the natural course of events. Adolescents, on the threshold of society, were neither children nor adults. Their liminal position made them suitable as mediators between this world and the other world. This becomes very clear in the case of virginal brides (comparable with nuns). Symbolically the single girl buried as a bride is an inversion of Christ. I argued that the death-marriage of the Swiss girl restored the communication between the local Roman Catholic community and their God.

Our case took place in a remote mountain village that was severely depopulating and had a shortage of marriageable men. The social distortion meant that only a few girls could marry in the village and that the others had to remain single. The burial of the unmarried girl as a bride might be seen as a symbolic strategy to counteract the untimely death of a potential mother and the ill-fated future of a village in the process of dying out.

Notes

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1. For references to death-marriages in Germany (Erich & Beitl 1955: 764–5; Segschneider 1979), Austria (Huber 1981: 155–6), Italy (Pitrè 1978: 223; Taylor 1983: 185), Switzerland (Netting 1981: 115; Hoffmann-Krayer 1940: 30), France (Van Gennep 1946: 814–6), England (Linebaugh 1975: 113–4), Norway, Finland (Taylor 1983: 185), Russia (Kaindl 1916: 109; Fahrenfort & Van de Graft 1947: 42–3), the Balkans (Muşlea 1925) and Greece (Danforth 1982; Lawson 1910: 546–61; Vermeule 1979: 55, 223–4 n. 25). Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens (1936/1937: 1068–71), Ploss & Bartels (1913: 815–20), Taylor (1983: 181–7), Segschneider (1979) and Schrader (1904) refer to death-marriages in Europe in many regions.
2. My account of the case of a single girl buried as a bride is a reconstruction of an event that happened in the past. I have tried to complete what it was like by combining the descriptions of eyewitnesses and contextual information. It is apparent that this kind of recollecting a story produces certain kinds of distortions. However, there is no doubt that the unmarried girl was buried as a bride. The main point is that this happened in Bosco Gurin in 1960.
3. See also Von Bonstetten (1982: 53) and Binda (1983: 84).
4. According to Van de Walle, 'in Valle Maggia, as late as 1930, almost 50 per cent of the women did not marry' (1975: 456).
5. In the opinion of Alexiou the disproportionate emphasis on death rituals in the village studied by Danforth is in part due to a 'corrosive distortion caused by social transformation and large scale emigration, which threatens the very fabric of village life' (1983: 450). The resemblance with Bosco Gurin is remarkable.

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