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Did the Székelys Have Their Own Marriage Ritual? A Double-Faced Ancient Marriage Ritual from Székelyland

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Abstract. In Sândominic the initiation into a woman, that is, the ritual of accepting the young wife among the women takes place within the framework of the wedding, after midnight. The ritual of elopement and bunning make the turning-point in one's life temporarily acceptable, tolerable by the community, and make the turning-point irreversible.

The author highlights the legal and moral significance of bunning applied as a life-belt ritual, its historical and validity supremacy. He regards it as the promotion of a pagan ritual to the rank of customary law. Bunning is a marriage ritual deriving from the age of the Hungarian Conquest, which was later replaced by the religious, then by the official marriage ritual. It became part of the customary order of the wedding: it became a ritual of initiation into a woman, it survived as a separate initiation ritual, and in the cases presented it is performed as an independent, what is more, autonomous legal ritual.

In the absence of data deriving from elsewhere, and based on a record from the seventeenth century, the author presupposes that in Székelyland (or Székelyföld as it is known in Hungarian) bunning, as a specific strategy of the rites of passage, constituted an independent marriage custom/ritual of folk-right. Its out of turn applicability in exceptional cases is still recognized, the deviant situation is made acceptable by public opinion by resorting to a former profane ritual which has fallen out of the authority of religious and official law.

Keywords: elopement, bunning, rite of passage, initiation, life-belt ritual

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By all means: this must have been the ritual of "bunning" ["*kontyolás*"]. However, the hypothesis without proof is nothing more than a mere question mark.

The custom of bunning is not unknown: the majority of ethnographic descriptions devoted to the wedding also touch upon this ritual, which is defined as "the final step of becoming a woman" (Bakó 209; Németné Fülöp 84-85; Gráfik 47). In Sândominic (Romania) the initiation into a woman, that is, the ritual of accepting the young wife among the women takes place within the framework of the wedding, after midnight.[1]

The "bunning" ["*bekontyolás*"] *as an initiation ritual*

A deputation consisting of godmothers and relatives arrive from the house of the family with marriageable daughter. They ask for permission to enter from the best man, saying that "they would like to exchange a few words with the bride".

The confirmation godmothers or godmothers of the bride and the bridegroom go to the bride and call her out from beside the table: "Come and join us, because we live on bread and salt too!"

Before she goes out, the bride takes leave of her friends, the bridesmaids.

The bride is taken to a dark room, usually to the summer kitchen, and the door is closed behind them. The new young wife takes off her wedding dress, she puts on a woman's dress and then she sits down in order to be bunned. The woman who makes the bun lets the braid down, then she draws a cross onto the bride's head, "do not curse my hand because of having bunned you"—she says, then starting the braid rightwards[2], the bun is made. Once it is ready, she draws a cross onto the head of the young wife, saying: "With the help of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit set out for life!" Then the "bunning headscarf" ["*kontyolókendő*"] is put on, received from her mother-in-law.

In olden times the new woman turned towards the women who made the bun, with a poetic address: "Praised be our Lord, women! Accept me into your company, so that I can take part in it. From now on I will find my place among you. God bless you all!" (Balázs, *Az én első* 145)

I do not go into details about the inset game of hiding the bride, who is looked for by the bridegroom. What really matters is the next step of the initiation ritual.

The bunned young wife is taken back to the company of the wedding guests, the new woman gives a toast, then the wedding guests are offered "bun juice" ["*kontylé*"] (brandy, whose first liter is brought by the women who make the bun,

[1] With the Hungarians this time is quite different.

[2] Because of the change of the women's hairdo, this happens more and more rarely, there remains only the putting on of the headscarf.

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from the house of the family of marriageable daughter, the rest is provided there) and Hungarian wedding cake ["*kürtőskalács*"], in turn, in sitting order, and she shakes hands with everybody. The new husband pours the brandy. "Everybody is obliged to accept the bun juice, even if he/she does not wish to drink it. This is so because in this way the young couple, now already as a married couple, shows respect towards the married people" (Balázs, *Az én első* 145). I underline that this is a highly important profane ritual behavior rather than an autotelic moment. With a modern expression, the offering of the bun juice is the first truly diplomatic step of the new couple, with the aim of getting into contact with all the guests present, and through them with all the families, those who offer and those who are offered the drink are brought into the same situation by the magic of words and of feasting together.[3]

The people who perform the act of bunning are invited to the celebration, a song is played in their honor and they are danced with. For long, this dance was traditionally danced on a song called *németes ('German style')*, sung also by the wedding guests. In order to illustrate its content and message, I quote the first stanza:

"*Young wife, young wife,*
Don't go into the forest,
Because the snake bites you
In the shape of love. "

["*Menyecske, menyecske,*
Ne menj az erdőbe (re),
Mer a kégyó megmar
(*Mer megmar a kégyó*)
Szerelem képibe."]

A very interesting sexual prohibition, taboo, deriving from the new social position of the bride, is formulated in these lines, which, discreetly in my opinion, show that that moment was crucial indeed, so it was necessary to transmit, there and in that moment, the message, the norm of behavior valid from then on, by means of the universal symbol of the snake[4], in the specifically prohibiting language of folk culture.

[3] In more detail see Balázs, *A vágy* 378-79.

[4] Gábor Lükő considers the snake as an erotic symbol (66); Róheim regards it as the symbol of the male genital organ (90). The Biblical Fall relates Eve's seduction by the snake. According to Vulcănescu, the snake awakens the sexual desire (522). I found a surprising belief/prohibition parallel in Sumner's book: "The Makusikis living in British Guyana forbid the women's entrance into the woods during their period . . . , lest they should be bitten by a snake turned on passionately" (762-63).

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Ferenc Bakó's record from Palócland is also important for me: "In the private life of the married couple, the consummation ["*elhálás*"] put an end by right to the actions of getting married, but in the eyes of the villagers the change in the girl's hairdo[5] and clothes, bunning ["*kontyoló*"] and the procedure of dressing meant the belonging to the new age group of women. When the new wife appeared in front of the public in a headscarf or a scarf tied behind, that moment signified her being accepted as a woman" (Bakó 210). József Faragó further clarifies the significance of the ritual: "Besides the official and church marriage ceremony, bunning is the real folk ceremony of the act of becoming a woman" (Faragó 209).

Perhaps it is enough to conclude here that bunning is a very interesting example, a specific strategy of the rites of passage, as Eliade formulated it, of sequential transition. The girl, who passed through two marriage rituals—through a civil and a church ceremony—in the meantime, is now repeatedly separated from her previous state, and is initiated, maybe only now in fact, into her new social status: that of a woman, by bearing the signs of a woman. This is an initiation having an expressed female point of view.

Bunning as a "life-belt" (separating and unifying) ritual

However, in Sândominic another function of bunning is also known. In the absence of data deriving from elsewhere, and based on a record from the seventeenth century, I almost dare to believe that in Székelyföld bunning constituted an independent marriage custom/ritual of folk-right. Its validity, more precisely its out of turn applicability in exceptional cases is recognized until now, because the pressure of the circumstances has not become outdated, and also because people have always been liable to soothe their sin, they have always tried to have their deviant situation accepted by public opinion, even by resorting to a former profane ritual which has fallen "out of the authority of law". And it is of particular interest that in this matter there is a community agreement, even if it is not acknowledged with satisfaction, but rather with grumbling and dislike.

As A. van Gennep stated in his volume on the rites of passage, on the occasion of any of the turning-points of the individual's life, the relative standstill of the concerned community gets disturbed. The everyday continuity, monotony of life—no matter which event takes place: birth, marriage or death—is regularly interrupted, and it has to be restored as soon as possible, so that the community can function further. However, I do not consider this state—contrary to Van Gennep—as a crisis state. My research has convinced me that the crisis state rather sets in if the change, the transition is not carried out in accordance with the traditions and

[5] Van Gennep classifies the change of the hairdo among the rites of passage. The form of the hairdo can show the person's age, social status, his/her belonging to a particular group (see 147-48).

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the moral norm system. In other words, it sets in if the individual acts against the tradition. Such an illegal state, for instance, having a not yet baptized child in the house. If the community rules work well, the community is peaceful, being in good spirits, having a productive atmosphere. If the individual lives in accordance with the norm system accepted by the community, then the community takes part in the feast of the individual (each transition constitutes a holiday at the same time), acknowledges the change in the individual's fate, and makes the transition ceremonial and memorable, shows solidarity with the individual and his/her relatives, supports and helps the individual also materially, and finally, by all these, creates an atmosphere reinforcing the cohesion of the community among its members. And this is equally the interest of the individual, of the small community and of society. Peasant communities did not accept at all the confused, uncertain situations and attitudes with respect to the turning-points of life, as this might undermine and erode the existential security of the community. According to Vilmos Keszeg, "Peasant culture excludes the alternative possibilities of interpretation and action. By this it reinforces the feeling of security of the community members" (37). Turner remarks that "the rules undoubtedly reduce deviance and eccentricity in most part of the manifested behaviours" (51).

With respect to the turning-points of life, in the community thinking from Sândominic I have identified three principles which everybody must comply with: 1. The children should be born in families, 2. Marriage should take place after public courting, after a choice of one's life partner in accordance with the interests of the individual and of the family—often only of the family—, with family approval, in accordance with the expectation of the church and of the community, 3. The person, the individual should not interfere into the work of the Creator, should not throw away life with his/her own hands, and should be paid the last honors for a life lived in dignity, spent with honest work. These principles are carried out by means of and thanks to the institution of customs. Customs are our rules! The system of customs of every community constitutes its legal system at the same time. That is why it has ethnical, religious, regional and local traits as well. However, they are also universal, as they fulfill basic human needs. Ernő Tárkány Szücs writes: "in the form of folk customs there are inner, independent legal regulations that had to be kept by everybody" (8). Ortutay formulates the related idea that "in every aspect of the social behavior, from shaking hands to getting married, behind the gestures of behaviors and customs there was the norm system of the community, this peasant law ran the show. The life course of the individual was drawn up by this law from birth to death" (18). By the joint effect of the norm systems—beliefs, religion and religious morals, public morals—the individual is prevented from breaking the rules by much more complex fears; by committing a sin, he/she generates dissatisfaction in the community, and psychically experiences

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the consequences of his/her sins in a much more complicated way. He/she is afraid of God, of death, of law, of shame.[6]

As the title of the paper suggests, we are hereby interested in the matter of sinning against the customs of choosing a life partner, of marriage, and out of these acts, we primarily focus on the issue of elopement.

The custom of elopement has not perished definitely: it has a past and it has survived into the present. Ernő Tárkány Szücs describes elopement as a custom practised all throughout Transylvania, and by alluding to Gyula László, he writes the following about the region of Ciuc: "In Ciuc county the elopement without parental approval was still practised not long ago" (261).[7] No statistics are made about elopement; however, according to my informants "maybe more girls are taken away by elopement than in earlier times."[8] The reasons are manyfolded: the girl got pregnant, but often it is also a conscious response to the parental prohibition disapproving of marriage. This is one way of forcing the marriage disapproved of by parents. In other words, it is one way of the enforcement of desire, commanding a high price. "Many times the girl runs away, because she is forced to get married. She runs away even from the altar. There were cases when she ran away before the wedding, and the wedding had to be cancelled, and there were also cases when the wedding was in full swing and the young wife eloped before bunning (!)." One reason for elopement may be the material situation of the parents, who cannot assume the costs of the wedding. In such cases elopement is pretended: it takes place with the agreement of the two families, as the shame of elopement was smaller than that of a poor wedding. The girl suffers the shame of elopement, the family gets somewhat exempted from it. "The family could not afford to organize a big wedding, so, with a dinner, they simply acted that the girl eloped with someone. It was pretended." The other reason for elopement is the competition, rivalry for the girl: "Elopement is carried out lest the girl should marry someone else. Especially if the girl has several suitors. One of them beats the rivals." "If the girl's dowry was ready, there was no time to hesitate, because she was stolen in an instant. There were lads who stole the girl from the dance, while the one who had taken the girl to dance looked aside for a moment . . . Then the eloper had to be given the girl, there was no other choice." "Many times the girl was stolen from the *guzsalyas* ('place where women worked with the distaff'), then

[6] To my question whether the person who got rid of a baby committed a sin or not, one of my informants replied: "Definitely, in the eyes of God and of the people! It is a sin in the eyes of God, a shame in the eyes of the people. We consider that person as a murderer. We always think about her deed when we see her in the street. Then she gets mingled in the community, however, she will be always looked at with the thought of what she has committed. "

[7] The author makes reference to Gyula László's book entitled *A honfoglaló magyar nép élete* [*The Life of the Conquering Hungarians*] published in 1944.

[8] My data refer to the 1970s and 1980s, but I also have new data in this respect.

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her parents were sent the message to drink the bun juice, because the girl was already bunned."

In order to illustrate the bunning applied as a life-belt ritual, I will quote an elopement narrative, as follows:

"Our wedding with my bridegroom was already announced, and its date was fixed. There was one more day left. The lad that I loved came to our house. I was sitting on the table in the first room, in order to be closer to the lamp, and I was sewing. I noticed through the window that there was someone outside. Dressed just in the clothes in which I was sewing, with only a waistcoat on me, bare-headed, I went out.

'What's up, big girl, are you getting married?' the lad asked me.

'Yes, but I don't feel like it,' I replied.

'Well, don't you love Gyuri?'

'No, I don't love him, but my parents force me to marry him, because he is rich, and they say that I would have a better existence with him.'

'Would you marry me now?' he asked.

'Yes, I would,' I replied.

The lad, my future husband, was wearing a short coat, he put that on me, he put a cap onto my head, he disguised his head with a handkerchief and I eloped with him. Up in the field, in Kicsimező.

The assisting women noticed that I had disappeared. She must be by the neighbors, they said. Then they asked again and again, where Teréz was, where Teréz was. They were looking for me everywhere, they made a big fuss and then one of them realized that perhaps I had been stolen.

They put the horses to the carriage, and started chasing us. We lived down the village, so I could have been taken only upwards. We already reached the bridge of the stream when I recognized the bells of our horses. We hid under the bridge. We could hear them speaking:

'If we catch up with them, we will hit them with the axe!'

They suspected the lad, my future husband. His father was called Zsiga Kristály. The chasers entered his house and asked where Gergely was.

'I do not know where he is, as a lad, he must be walking somewhere,' my father-in-law said, may he rest in peace. 'They wanted to turn the house upside down.'

'Nobody should turn my house upside down, as I have seen neither my son nor anybody else. There was no elopement here.'

The old man behaved roughly, and they went away. When we heard them coming backwards, we entered through a gate. Then we went home. When the old man saw us, he took a stick and gave my future husband a good thrashing.

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> 'You,' he was shivering with anger. 'They wanted to turn my house upside down and they wanted to cut me up with an axe, asking where my son was!'
> 'She is my wife from now on,' my husband replied. 'Nobody should scold her!'
> 'I don't mind,' my father-in-law said. 'But she will go to bed with your mother, and you will sleep with me. Tomorrow morning we will see what we can do.'

In the morning we went to the old priest.

The other bridegroom sued us for the expenses. A big wedding had been prepared; they had already spent much on it. This happened to me in the 1930s."

Here we witness a special and peculiar case of folk-right, which is, in my opinion, the preservation of one possible ancient ritual of marriage, by the very mode, differing of tradition, of choosing a life partner. The first "saving" act is for the elopers to get the stolen girl *bunned*, and by this, to make her a young wife.[9] In order to carry out this act, they asked/ask a confidential neighbor, who accepts to perform the ritual and does not disclose the "plot" or the lad asks his mother to perform the ritual, and from time to time, so that there should be outer witnesses as well, they invite the lad's godparents. Only a trustworthy woman was and is allowed to perform the bunning, as she guarranteed the authenticity of the ritual.[10] In Sândominic, according to the principle of folk-right, "once the girl was taken to the lad's house and was bunned, she could no longer be taken away from there".[11] This is well illustrated by the above mentioned story and by many other similar stories: by an official legal procedure they could ask for material compensation for the expenses of the wedding, but they no longer tried to win the girl back by force. As folk-right does not grant an appeal, the fact of *bunning* obliged them to surrender.

In my opinion, the legal and moral significance of bunning ["*békontyolás*"], its historical and validity supremacy is also illustrated by the fact that the elopement could/can be carried out during the wedding as well, despite the fact that the civil and religious ceremony of marriage had/has already taken place, but by no means after bunning. Thus in the moral-legal timing of the elopement the customary law is of primary importance.

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[9] Until the Council of Trent (1563) the church act was not necessary for the validation of marriage. "Marriage had a folk character and remained within the family." (see Sumner 612)

[10] It can be read in the volume by Gazda–Haáz that bunning has always had a master of ceremony: "a woman taking care of the trousseau, a bunning woman or an initiating woman" ["*cempelasszony*, *kontyolóasszony vagy avató asszony*"] (32).

[11] In ancient India and Rome, with the Germans, from ancient times "...the legal requirements of marriage became valid from the moment the married couple had been covered with the bedcloth. This had to be testified by the witnesses" (Sumner 606).

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This way of choosing a life partner, of getting married could not be approved of by a legal summary proceeding. In this way I consider it acceptable that regarding the exceptional cases of choosing a life partner, of getting married, we can speak about the promotion of a pagan ritual to the rank of customary law, since the declaration of marriage started to belong to the authority of state and church institutions. This was made possible only by the fact that bunning was a marriage ritual, which was later replaced by the religious, then by the official marriage ritual. As many other similar rituals, it became part of the customary order of the wedding: it became a ritual of initiation into a woman, it survived as a separate initiation ritual, and in the presented cases it is performed as an independent, what is more, autonomous legal ritual. The bride's wreath as a sign, decoration and symbol has to be ignored because of having sinned—this is the sanction!—however, the illegal transition has to be legitimized: the solution to this is the ritual of bunning and putting on the headscarf. At the same time it is a message towards the community, as "the bunning or putting on the scarf . . . objectified the new status of the woman" (Gazda–Haáz 32).

In other words, it presented visually what could not be told by other means of communication within the community: namely, that the girl was no longer a girl, she had become a woman. The ritual of elopement and then bunning exempts the relationship, established in this way, from under the labeling "they have teamed up with each other", it makes the turning-point in one's life temporarily acceptable, tolerable by the family and by the community, and, what is even more important, and this is a legal point of view, it makes the turning-point irreversible.

In what follows, I will present the reason why I consider bunning as a double-faced ritual.

My hypothesis regarding the former importance of bunning as a separating/initiating ritual is also confirmed by Tárkány Szücs: "The function of bunning, namely, marking the change of social status may also be concluded from the fact that the girls who got pregnant, were also bunned, mostly by godmothers or friends. So it was made public even in such a case" (400).[12]

The highly moral, ethical, social, but also material sanction serves to repress the act of the elopment. Bunning, associated to elopement, only soothes the sin;

[12] The author also quotes a Presbyterian record from Zemplén county in connection with a girl who got pregnant, who " . . . was bunned by the judges of the Locality at the Village Hall . . ." (Tárkány Szücs 400). In some Romanian villages from Transylvania, but mostly in the Metaliferi Mountains the girl who got pregnant was taken to a fence, a poplar or a locust, she was bunned, people walked around her three times, saying: God's servant, get married to the fence post, to the poplar or to the locust. By this ritual she is acknowledged as a woman. The same rule of behavior applies to her as to a widow (See Marian 518-19). In the region of Ciuc it is said about the girl who eloped or was eloped that "She got married to the fence or gate post."

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however, it does not exempt the person who has committed it from the whole burden of sin.

Is bunning a special marriage ritual of the Székelys?

It remains an open question for me whether the act of getting married performed by the ritual of bunning was, among the Hungarians, indeed only characteristic of Székelyföld, and besides, how far it extended within Székelyland. I have come across it in Sândominic, the rest of the villages from the regions of Ciuc and Gheorgheni do not know of it (although no custom research was carried out in fact), as far as I know, it is not mentioned in the specialist literature either.[13]

As a partial response to my question, surprising data can be found in the record of a hearing of witnesses, taken in Tg. Mureş in 1631 (Vígh 109-12). The subject of interrogation is the nuptials of a Székely couple, seemingly not accepted, not acknowledged by the people from Tg. Mureş. It is important to mention that the collection containing testimonies from the seventeenth century "is about many lewds", who are Hungarians of course, still, only the accused of this case and those taking part in the offence are consistently considered as *Székelys*, as if they consciously wanted to distance themselves from the sinners.

The two young Székelys committing illegal nuptials (their origin is not mentioned, there is a faint allusion to Háromszék/Three Chairs) were sleeping at György Bácski's place, "but then they did not do anything outrageous". Then they went to "Miklós Szabó to harvest, there they got to know each other—then they went to Mrs Márton Fazakas, and there happened what happened between them".

Mrs Fazakas Márton confessed before the court about what had happened: "on Sunday at dawn they slept together . . . in my barn—I was the one who shut the door of the barn." They worked off the annoyance of the people from Tg. Mureş with the fact that soon they had the girl bunned by a woman also from Székelyföld, and from that moment, as one witness said, "I heard the woman calling the lad as her husband, and the lad called her as his wife." Another witness noticed an essential change in the girl's appearance: "Surely, she was a girl yesterday, she had cambric on her head, and now she is wearing a bun."

Gergely Komlósi said "he had seen how that woman had been bunned next to the fence". Mrs György Bácski was speaking about the fact that "*the woman who bunned her, who put the scarf on her, was a Székely woman*". Mrs György Szegedi also mentioned "*Székely brideswomen*" (emphasis mine).

[13] For example in the volume of studies entitled *Lakodalmi szokások. Mátkaság, menyegző* [*Wedding customs. Engagement, Wedding*] (ed. Erzsébet Györgyi) four studies deal with bunning and elopement, one discusses the customary law aspects of elopement, however, neither of them mentions either of the versions of bunning described by me.

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Mrs. Márton Fazakas's confession also contains other ethnographical data that are important for us: after bunning ["*kontyolódás*"], putting on the scarf ["*keszkenődés*"] and changing clothes, the new couple "went to the pub in order to have a drink". When she asked, with a "reprimanding" tone, from the *Székely* András Forgács, whose wife was the "brideswoman of the young wife", why "they had not got married before already", that is, why they had chosen this way, they answered that "it was better for us to spend the money that we should have given to the priest, on drinks". Then she also mentioned the following in her detailed confession: "I asked him: 'You lad, where did you find this young wife so quickly?' he answered 'God gave her to me, madam, this is the way the people live'".

The order of the church wedding had already been introduced, but still, bunning was chosen even 68 years after the Council of Trent, the new position was legitimated by that, clearly referring to customary law.

If we take into account the elements and moments of the "nuptials" from Tg. Mureş, we can realize that it covers almost wholly the bunning marriage ritual from Sândominic, and also the fact that before the church version of the marriage ritual, the folk ritual had been widely practised, and it had been satisfactory, but it was rejected in the urban environment, though Tg. Mureş constituted an integral part of Székelyföld.

A quick procedure is characteristic of both nuptials: the element of long courting, the series of separating rituals—getting acquainted, visiting the girl's family, parental agreement, presenting oneself, handing over the dowry etc.—in other words, the phases of the rite of passage are absent, and as a consequence, community validation is absent. However, the gesture of communicating towards the community cannot be absent. This function is fulfilled by the ancient marriage ritual presupposed by me: the change of the hairdo and of clothes. The magic which forms the community, the ritual of eating and drinking together plays an outstanding role.

The fact that bunning was indeed a marriage ritual in Székelyföld, is confirmed by a ritual blessing formula, told by a woman who had performed the bunning in Sândominic, still accompanying the event in our days: "God bless you with reason, a lot of luck and a good family; God may give you good luck, and do not mind that we are now putting the bun onto your head; start life with the help of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." Besides its marriage function, it should not be forgotten that if the fate of the young wife turned into bad, in her despair bunning became the reference of the curse instead of the civil marriage or the church wedding, instead of the notary or the priest. "If the marriage is not successful, there are some who curse the person that has performed the bunning: Damned be the hand that has bunned me. The parents curse like this: If only the

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hands and legs of the person who bunned the stolen bride had been broken, so that she could not have gone there."[14]

(*Translated by Judit Pieldner*)

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[14] The texts of informants quoted in the study are from my collection in Sândominic. In more detail see Balázs *Az én első*.

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