

Wedding Custom of the Month December/ January: *Oczepiny*

Oczepiny is the name of the Polish capping ceremony. In this ceremony, the bride's veil or wreath is removed and the traditional cap of a married woman is placed on her head. The ceremony remains very popular among Polish couples as well as couples of Polish descent throughout the world.

The *oczepiny* is performed several hours into the wedding reception, often at midnight. The maid of honor or another unmarried woman leads the bride to a bench or chair to sit – or, traditionally, to a dough bin covered with a sheepskin (a fertility symbol), woolly side up. Lights are dimmed, and sometimes the married women in attendance hold lit candles. The maid of honor unfastens the veil or garland from the bride's hair while other unmarried women stand close to the bride, singing traditional songs for the occasion, some of which are quite bawdy. Traditionally the bride's hair might be cut at this time as well. When the wreath or veil falls, the unmarried women and girls circle the bride, dancing and singing traditional songs of farewell to the woman who is no longer one of them.

Polish brides did not typically wear veils until the 19th century, but girls and unmarried women did wear wreaths made of herbs and flowers for all special occasions, including their weddings. Married women did not wear such wreaths, so the wreath was an important piece and symbol of maidenhood. Now most brides wear veils instead of wreaths, and it is their veils that are the object of the unmarried women's ritual. Some Poles have found room in the *oczepiny* for the foreign custom of tossing the bouquet: the bride tosses her veil into a crowd of unmarried women in order to predict who will marry next.

Until recently, the typical married Polish woman wore a cap – in Polish, a *czepiek* – most of the time. The style of this cap varied greatly from region to region.

After the bride loses her wreath or veil during the *oczepiny*, the married women and the unmarried women might fight playfully over which group the bride belongs to. But in time the unmarried women let the married women surround the bride. One of the married women attempts to cover the bride's head with a *czepiek*. This *czepiek* was traditionally made by the bride's godmother for the new wife to wear on special occasions. The bride resists being capped for a few minutes, but eventually she gives in. This remains an important ritual despite the fact that the typical bride will not wear a *czepiek* from day to day in married life. Once the bride consents to wear the *czepiek*, the married women introduce her as one of their own by singing another song. Until recently, it was only after the bride was capped that she was considered a married woman.

In many modern Polish-American weddings, the groom is also given a hat to wear. His hat is ridiculous, and usually includes such items as baby dolls and phallic vegetables.

After the *oczepiny*, guests greet the newly married woman by dancing with her. Traditionally the bride danced with each person or group in a formal sequence that varied by region. Now this

series of dances often blends into the money dance (or "dollar dance"), the well-known custom in which guests pay to dance with the bride. The Polish claim to have coined this custom, and they usually perform it near the end of the wedding reception.

Until recently the typical Polish bride spent the evening before her wedding at home making the final preparations with her unmarried girlfriends in what was called the "maiden evening." Making the bridal wreath was one of the most important activities of the maiden evening. The wreath was made from a twisted branch or wire frame, flowers, and, most important, herbs that bore magical qualities desirable for a wedding: rue, rosemary, lavender, myrtle, and/or periwinkle. The herbs and flowers came from the bride's garden. Every girl kept such a garden, in large part for the purpose of supplying herself with wreaths for special occasions. Many weddings were held during the winter, and, if she was marrying in winter, the bride might make her wreath from paper flowers and periwinkle, an evergreen. In many Polish regions and periods, unmarried women wore their hair in a single braid most of the time. On the maiden evening, the bride's hair might also be unbraided, perhaps by her brother or another male relative, and prepared for the both the wedding day and the haircut that often preceded the wedding night.

While I don't know nearly enough about Polish culture to interpret the *oczepiny* with any authority, maybe you'll indulge my speculation about its traditional significance. I find it interesting that, in this ritual, the bride exchanges one head covering for another. Traditionally, of course, she would have been covered by her father's roof and then her husband's; striking out on her own was not an option. So that liminal moment when she was uncovered – after she was unwreathed or unveiled and before she was capped -- must have been charged with energy. She was revealed in that moment, she was vulnerable, and she belonged to no one. The moment must have prefigured a moment fast approaching, when, for the first time (in theory at least), her naked body would be visible to a lover, but at least for an instant it would not yet be possessed.

Yet men have little part in this ritual, and they sometimes even stay in another room while it is performed. Two groups of women vie for the bride's membership. This is especially odd in light of the similarities between the traditional *oczepiny* and the bride's loss of virginity: the *oczepiny* occurs late the night of the wedding, when the lights are dimmed so that a piece of clothing can be removed from the resisting bride, after which she is dressed in a piece of clothing that symbolizes her new identity and she is considered a married woman for the first time. Indeed, the *oczepiny* might be considered a symbolic deflowering of the bride, and it is performed by two groups of women. Maybe scholars can make something of this; I cannot.

Of course the modern experience of the *oczepiny* must be quite different. I don't know anyone who has undergone it – if you have, I would love to read your comments about the experience, so please email me. I would guess that the typical modern woman experiences this ritual as a public representation of several shifts of identity she experiences when she marries. Perhaps she experiences the transition from being bareheaded to being capped as particularly important, because that can feel like a representation of the transition from freedom to security, from aloneness to companionship, from desire to fulfillment, or from question to answer.

By what acts could you represent your experience of transformation from an unmarried person to

a married one? Do any of these acts involve putting on or removing items of clothing, cutting your hair, or altering your body in some way? You might answer this question to learn more about your experience of your upcoming marriage, and you might ask your partner to answer it so that you can learn more about her/his experience. You might also choose to include rituals of individual transformation in your wedding. Remember that it's fine to represent your own transformation during your wedding with a different act from the one your partner chooses. If you want to carry out a ritual you've imagined, but you can't find a place for it in your wedding or you don't feel like it requires an audience, you might perform it in private with your partner. In addition to easing your transition into marriage, performing this ritual can help you connect with your partner during the frantic weeks before the wedding or it can give you something meaningful to do together during the lull that depresses so many couples in the months following the wedding.

Reference: Sophie Hodorowicz Knab, Polish Wedding Customs & Traditions. New York: Hippocrene Books, 1997. In this book you can read more about the *czepiek*, the herbs in the bridal wreath, and many other interesting Polish traditions such as the couple's parents publically blessing them before their wedding and offering them bread and salt afterwards.

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