

Role of Dowry in Marriage Contracts in Early Nineteenth Century Moldavia

(Abstract)

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The paper analyses, on the basis of documents (some of which unpublished ones) the role that dowry played in Moldavia in the first half of the nineteenth century. This is an interesting period, considering that society was impregnated with old traditions, oriental customs and at the same time new ideas.

Novelty tries to find a place and leads to a clash between the old people, more conservatory, and the youth, coming back to the country from abroad, especially from France, where they had studied. The French language, which everybody being a member of the elite speaks, books, travels and contacts with the people coming to visit us are also ways to change mentalities, culture and daily life.

Marriage remains however an element of the traditional sphere, even though it is marked by these new ideas. Dowry preserves its decisive role in the contractual engagement of a marriage, without exceptions, even in the situation when the two young persons love each other. The numerous appeals to court having dowry as the main topic of litigation and sometimes taking one whole decade lead us to these conclusions. From this point of view, the archives of the local judicial courts or courts of appeals provide several generous opportunities of information.

The documents reveal that marriage is marked by tradition and dowry plays the same role as it had played the previous century, i.e. this is the guarantee of a good marriage. Many of the documents refer to the woman's dowry, and not to what men used to receive from their parents on that occasion.

The sources regarding the dowry are preserved at the National Archives and more than 95% of them are inventories of the assets that women received from their parents on the occasion of marriage. The inventories are made starting with properties, silverware, jewellery, to livestock and cattle, to lines, clothes or even to Gypsy slaves.

An interesting aspect is that the judicial regime allowed for the husband to administrate his wife's dowry assets in her name and to even get these goods in case of a divorce or of his wife's death. The married woman could not renounce for good a part of her dowry without her husband's agreement. He could administrate the dowry, spend the profit and other resulting incomes, but he had no right on the initial capital.

That fact that dowry, wealth and social position played an important role in contractual marriage in the Romanian society in general and particularly in the Moldavian one did not exclude marriage for love. However, many of the couple lived happily even if their marriage had been made for financial reasons; they realized that dowry could not be the guarantee of happiness.