

# The Gaelic Rèiteach: Symbolism and Practice

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Scotland, ritual dialogue as part of a betrothal ceremony is found in the Gaelic-speaking Highlands and Islands. The ritual occasion is the formal betrothal contract usually called *rèiteach*, and besides the dialogue, which in many cases is allegorical in form, there is also evidence of the ritual refusing of ‘false brides’ and of the ‘hidden bride’ custom. There is an initial verbal exchange between the suitor’s representative and that of the girl’s family, in which the girl is asked for or discussed allegorically in a ritualised way. This is followed by the presentation of a selection of female relatives who must each be refused through similarly indirect means. Finally, the bride-to-be appears, or if hidden is located, she is accepted, the ritual concluded and the betrothal pledged with whisky.

The terms *rèiteach* and *an rèite*, whilst denoting a formal contract to marry and the feast accompanying it, also mean ‘agreement’ or ‘reconciliation’, ‘a plane or level place’, and are related to terms denoting ‘harmony’, ‘peace’, ‘union’, and the acts of ‘clearing’, ‘putting in order’ and ‘unravelling’ (MacLeod and Dewar: 467; Maceachen: 233; Dwelly: 754; Fr Allan MacDonald: 200). The *rèiteach* was an important event, sometimes as important as the wedding feast itself, and although normally a prelude to the publishing of the banns and official marriage, it was a solemn and binding contract which could not be broken (cf. Fr Allan MacDonald’s note to the dictionary entry). Before examining the nature and importance of the ritual, it must be placed in the context of the marriage laws of Scotland.

Pre-Reformation Canon law required four elements for a regular marriage:

consent of the parties expressed in their betrothal; the consent of the parties at the beginning of their joint married lives – this consent was the heart of the whole matter – but although there was a marriage in existence after these two sets of consents, it was not a perfect marriage until *copula carnalis* took place . . . and [finally] the blessing of the Church on the marriage, but this was never essential to the complete, legal and perfect marriage (Mackechnie 1: 291).

The espousal was a formal contract preceding the marriage celebration and might be entered into by the parties themselves, or their parents and guardians on their behalf, and was regarded as irregular unless performed in the presence of a priest and before

witnesses. A normal espousal was *per verba de futuro*, a promise by each to proceed to marriage in the face of the church. A breach of this promise led to church censure as well as the legal penalty of breach of contract. A betrothal *per verba de presenti* was a promise that they now consent to marry. The essential difference being that

A contract of future espousals, however regular, did not amount to marriage; a contract of present espousals, where the man said, 'I take thee for my wife,' and the wife said, 'I take thee for my husband . . . was a legal marriage; although *copula carnalis subsequens* in either case made a valid (though irregular) marriage (Patrick: 72).

These 'clandestine' or 'irregular' marriages, amounting to a formal betrothal with consummation, were thus 'valid' in the eyes of the law, and, one assumes, the local community. The early church did not interfere greatly with what were largely continuations of pre-Christian practices; in the eleventh century, 'Irish monasteries were perceived as lax, eccentric and worldly, and Gaelic church leaders tolerated practices (especially a casual attitude to marriage) which the rest of Christendom regarded with horror. Part of the solution was the introduction of continental monastic rules' (Warren: li). The persistent nature of the practices the church tried to eradicate, including well-known customs such as 'handfasting' can be seen in early church statutes. In 1242, the Bishop of St. Andrews ordained that 'no one contract marriage or betrothal unless in the presence of lawful witnesses, by whom the marriage can be proved should any doubt arise about it' and that 'marriage must absolutely not be contracted between persons who are unknown' (Patrick: 63–4). The thirteenth century synod in Aberdeen stated 'no espousals must be celebrated without trustworthy and lawful witnesses'; 'no promise of marriage to be contracted be made to any one save in presence of the priest and of three or four trustworthy witnesses' and 'we also forbid the clandestine contracting of marriages, and ordain that no priest shall presume to have anything to do with such marriages' (Patrick: 39). A century later, the synod in St. Andrews were still engaging robustly with the problem, again in 1551–2 (Patrick: 71–3, 142–3), and in 1559 they observed:

Since it is ascertained that two evil customs or rather corruptions, by the enemy of the human race, have increased . . . namely, that to the hurt of their souls, many . . . make secret compacts and a kind of espousals privately and in a concealed manner, followed by carnal union, before marriage is contracted . . . that many contrary to the laws, after espousals made *per verba de futuro* and before the contraction of marriage and its solemnisation in the face of the church . . . do not hesitate to pass to carnal union. All priests . . . shall strictly prohibit those who have contracted them from having carnal union until marriage has been contracted and solemnised . . . let this be strictly observed by widows as well as others (Patrick: 267–8).

Priests who were still 'not afraid even publicly' to solemnise clandestine marriage were to be suspended and fined. The parties involved, under threat of excommunication, had to be separated for a month and also fined.

The events leading to marriage in Gaelic society formed a three or four-part structure.

First was the ‘agreement’ to become betrothed, which was sometimes the first time the parties had met, and called *còrdadh* or *rèiteach beag* (small betrothal). This was an intimate meeting between the parties to be espoused and their immediate family, at which the girl’s father’s permission was sought. A formal betrothal followed, the *rèiteach* or *rèiteach mòr* (big betrothal). This was a ceremony attended by the main parties involved as well as less close relatives and friends. It was at this meeting that the customs involving ritual dialogue and the ‘false’ or ‘hidden bride’ customs took place. Following this was the wedding itself, the *banais*, and in certain regions a *banais-tìghe*, ‘house wedding’, at the home of the groom. From this arrangement, one might consider the second stage as a form of ‘pre-contract’, or ‘first consent’ with the marriage forming the contract itself, the ‘second consent’. However, given the typical ceremonial elements of the second; having hands joined together, consent uttered in front of witnesses, sharing a single glass; one could conclude that this was the main event, the ‘contract’ with the *còrdadh* or *rèiteach beag* forming the ‘pre-contract’. As we shall see, strong emphasis is placed on the consent of the girl herself, who typically defers to her father, or he to her, often using a formulaic device. T. C. Smout remarks ‘consent made a marriage – the consent of the couple, not the consent of the parents, who in the last instance have no right of veto . . . on the other hand the expectation is . . . that the children will consult their parents and not act without their blessing’ (Smout: 205). The presence of non-kin witnesses, the semi-public nature of the event and the conspicuous role consent plays in the proceedings leads one to conclude that the legal, as well as the traditional significance of the ceremony was understood by the participants. In addition to these components, there is some evidence that the sealing of the contract at the betrothal extended further than sharing a glass of whisky; a minister recalls:

about thirty years ago I knew a man at that time perhaps forty years of age – the last man in the parish of Kilfinan who immediately after the ‘contract’ – *reite*, Gaelic – of marriage, was formally bedded with his wife. Proclamations of the banns was made on the Sunday following the *reite* and the marriage was solemnised forthwith.<sup>1</sup>

Although the minister stresses that the marriage followed swiftly, this may not always have been the case – as is suggested from the church statutes – and perhaps many couples did not progress to marriage in the eyes of the church at all. A betrothal followed by consummation was not an uncommon practice. In Shetland the betrothal custom of the ‘speiring night’ had the same significance; ‘the couple were expected to sleep together that night as a seal of the contract, but not to have intercourse again until after the wedding’ (Smout: 216). Similarly in Germany, ‘protestant authorities . . . prohibited popular mating customs which held that sex between betrothed couples was not sinful’ (Scribner: 62). ‘Handfasting’ might be thought of as a marriage *per verba de futuro* with an option to solemnise after a ‘trial’ of a year and a day; it may be that, as in Breton tradition, the betrothal ceremony was, at one time, a ‘marriage’ in the eyes of the community.<sup>2</sup> Nineteenth-century commentators estimated that ‘up to one-third of

Scottish marriages in the eighteenth century had been contracted irregularly' and by the eighteenth century the Church had given up its insistence that marriages be contracted in a church building or at its entrance (Boyd: 51). In 1847 a commentator noted;

In this session [of parliament] Registration and Marriage bills failed, but they *must* succeed soon . . . I did not imagine that clandestine and irregular marriages could have had any respectable and avowed defenders. Yet almost every presbytery in Scotland has disgraced itself by standing up for them (Cockburn: 190).

Whatever the attitude of clergymen, we must not assume that secular marriage persisted in the Highlands because of a generally prevailing 'lax' attitude to such matters. As in Ireland, 'with a low ratio of priests to people it cannot have been easy to organise even an informal priestly ceremony in the more remote areas of the country, to impose regulations relating to consanguinity, nor to supervise patterns of sexual behaviour' (Clarkson: 241). J. L. Campbell observes that 'some of the couples charged with fornication, e.g. in the Argyll Synod Minutes may in fact have been Catholics so married [by *per verba de futuro*] and awaiting the possible coming of a priest at a time when there were very few priests in the Highland mission. Later observers attested to the superior moral standards of the Highlanders; a nineteenth-century survey on 'licentiousness' revealed that 27 of the 38 parishes reporting 'little or no' examples of the 'vice' were in the Highlands. Four hundred others reported it was 'lamentable' (Boyd: 101). When the *Church of Scotland Commission on the Religious Condition of the People* visited the Highlands in 1891 and 1896–98, they reported that illegitimacy was 'comparatively rare' on Skye, 'rare' in Lochcarron and 'extremely rare' in Tongue. In Tain, 'the moral life of the people' was 'remarkably pure' (Boyd: 116).

It was not until 1834 that an Act was passed which allowed priests and ministers other than the Established and Episcopal Churches to solemnise marriages again, and the Highlands was in any case poorly-served by ministers considering the geographical area to be covered and the communication difficulties involved. The cost of publishing the banns could pose another disincentive to prompt solemnisation.

For comparison, in Ireland 'Celtic secular marriage' was the norm until the end of the old order in 1603, and 'Christian matrimony the exception grafted onto this system' (Nicholls: 73). No more than one in twenty were married in church, and the tenets of the canon law were followed that 'the mere declaration, or even intent of the parties, followed by consummation, constituted a permanently valid and binding, though clandestine marriage' (Nicholls: 73). One commentator remarks that 'the main reason for the continuation of clandestine marriage was the deep-rooted belief that matrimony was a private rather than a public affair, of concern only to the individuals involved and their families (Cosgrove: 40). The three-part structure of the *rèiteach* may be seen as a conscious attempt to reconcile this ancient belief with the obligations placed upon those intending to be married by the law and the church. Another factor may have been the anxiety surrounding consanguinity, where 'the canon law was much more demanding

than common law thinking' and, especially in more isolated areas, 'partners were likely to be related by either blood or marriage' (Corish: 68). The prohibition was perhaps even more irksome for the upper classes; in the fourteenth century Highlands it was claimed that 'there is such a dearth of nobles that it is hard for them to marry except within the prohibited degrees' (Cosgrove: 30). Although tradition held that a marriage was a public affair, it seems likely that a degree of publicity – in many cases the whole community or island was invited – was encouraged in order to avoid accusations of secrecy. The ritual use of eulogy, aside from the honouring of ancestors, may also have functioned to remind community members of degrees of consanguinity. One informant observes, 'it was a tradition – you didn't marry any of your cousins'. This was regarded as some form of incest if it happened; nobody argued about it, there were no rules written for it, but just – it was in the psyche; its roots go back to ancient tradition, it was fear of incest, it just couldn't happen' (Murdo Ewan MacDonald). Another informant is more blunt; 'But in olden times they were all getting married in the home. Mostly some relation of their own they were marrying. That was not right. Not right either' (Donald Sinclair SA1968/248/A1).

As an acknowledgment of their new status special restrictions applied between the *rèiteach* and the wedding. One commentator notes that between the 'contract night' and the Sunday after marriage, 'the bride and bridegroom must not attend a wedding or funeral otherwise their first-born will break Diana's pales or never be married'.<sup>3</sup> In South Uist a man was not allowed out on his own at night between his *rèiteach* and his marriage, as it was said a *fuath* (spectre) would chase him.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. ASKING FOR THE BRIDE

### 2.1 Matchmaking

In early times, young men seldom looked outside the community for their partners, and one informant from South Uist observes that girls were plentiful because they did not go to the mainland to work (D. J. MacDonald MS 57: 5369). Matchmakers were used and verbal skill was a prerequisite. Tailors often featured as matchmakers:

It was generally considered necessary that a third party, in sympathy with the couple and possessing influence with the minister, should be let into the secret. There were one or two men who proved so successful in carrying out such arrangements that they were recognised as almost professional matrimonial agents. One such was Alexander Mackerchar, known locally as the Cripple Tailor (Stewart: 156–7).

The mobile nature of the tailor's trade gave access to information on prospective partners:

One would have expected that, when so many things were made at home, the people would have made their own clothes, but especially in the case of the men, this was not so. They invariably employed a tailor, who used to make the round of the countryside, staying in

one township after another to make the people's clothes and generally bringing a welcome budget of news and gossip (Grant: 244).

Walter Gregor describes the scene in the home:

The tailor was summoned to the house, and great was the preparation for him. He was treated with more than ordinary respect, and on his arrival was installed in the *room*. The goodwife produced her webs, and her orders with many an injunction not to make any *clippans* . . . The tailor handled the cloth knowingly and praised it; and the goodwife looked pleased, and ceased to say one word about *clippans* . . . The tailor set to work, and plied his needle and thread early and late – sometimes assisted by the females (Gregor: 57).

We may note from this account the tailor's verbal skill in praising the object under his attention and in overcoming the resistance of the woman of the house. It is of interest that he is set to work with 'the females'. This perhaps goes some way to explain his marginal status; he is a feminised male, although treated with respect on this evidence, at least by the women-folk. The opportunity for gossip and exchanging information about potential marriage partners is clear. There may also have been an anxiety that the tailor, left alone with the women, may have had an opportunity for activities beyond his remit.

The encounter between two representatives who knew one another could be light-hearted and friendly, if robust; J. F. Campbell remembers:

In the Highlands, a man used to go on the part of the bridegroom to settle the dower with the bride's father, or some one who acted for him. They argued the point, and the argument gave rise to much fun and rough wit. For example, here is one bit of such a discussion, of which I remember to have heard long ago.

'This is the youngest and the last, she must be the worst; you must give me a large dower, or I will not take her.'

'Men always sell the shots first when they can; this is the best – I should give no dower at all.'

The first knotty point settled, and the wedding day fixed, the bridegroom, before the wedding day, sent a best man and maid to look after the bride, and gathered all his friends at home. The bride also gathered her friends, and her party led the way to church (Campbell 2: 23).

The go-between's neutral status gave him a certain freedom of expression:

Say Angus went to ask for my daughter, and most of these old men were very witty and the man that was going to ask for the daughter very often he might be a shy man and he used to take this witty man with you . . . And he used to have an answer whatever the old man asked he wanted for his daughter. 'Are you this or that?' The witty man had an answer for everything he could say. Well, that's the man that was after the girl, [he] might be shy or be . . . might be word-stuck. But this witty man he'd nothing to do with him so he usually got stuck into the old man. He had to be a witty man; he had to win the old man over so

that he could give the daughter away, otherwise he might . . . put the daughter away you see (Roderick MacKillop, 1977).

One informant describes the qualities necessary in a good ‘master of ceremonies’ – the local bard who would take part in the *rèiteach*:

They got together and the two parties . . . the family of the bride – and they’d discuss it. My father and his cousin Big Donald, they were in great demand because they did it well . . . It was an intuitive selection in the community . . . a good sense of humour, a good use of language . . . politeness and drollery mixed up. There are natural bards; natural bards have a facility with words . . . there’s a hereditary streak in it. I knew one family in Berneray, Harris who had that facility and it was passed on . . . some of them were lay preachers and their facility with words was very apparent in that arena, and they would also take part as M.C.’s at weddings . . . not educated in the formal sense of the term but a large vocabulary and a bit poetic (Murdo Ewan MacDonald).

Across the water on the Isle of Man, ‘it was formerly usual for the lover to employ a go-between called a *dooinney-moylee*, a “praising man” . . . to get the parents to consent to the match and to arrange the marriage portion with them.’<sup>5</sup> The following Manx song indicates both the importance of verbal skill in wooing as well as communicating the immense weariness of the unfortunate suitor, who perhaps should have hired a *dooinney-moylee*:

*Nancy t’ayns Mannin*

Nancy t’ayns Mannin t’ee boirey mee-hene  
As er y hon eck ta mee fiojit as creen  
Sooree as moylley as ginsh reddyn bwaagh  
She gialdyn da rheynti nagh gooillean ee dy bragh

Yinnin urree daanys as geddyn woie kiss  
As yiaragh ee room, t’ou maarliagh gyn-yss  
Yinnagh she shin gys focklyn, as bee ginnsh shin cooish  
Ve thousane dy chowag dy reall shinyn dooysht

Megh er yn oie tammylt beg roish y laa  
Rew riect as ansooryn cha man aym dy ghra  
Irrin dy lhiastey neayr as y chorneil  
Goll shiar lesh y darras kiart sheeley myr snail

O less boy, nagh treih eh goll magh ayns yn oie  
Reih dangeyr mooar moddee as drogh aegny sleih  
Goll trooid thoo as thanney shen brishey my chree  
Vea just goll-rish maarliagh veagh geid fud ny hoie

Gys smooinght er sooree te cur orrym craa  
Vea shooyll fud ny hoie as faint fey ny laa  
As share dou ve laccal ben choud as beeym bio  
Cha vel troublit as seaghnit eishtagh myr shoh.

[Nancy in Man, she troubles me so  
 And because of her I'm withered and wizened  
 With courting and praising and saying pretty things  
 She made me a promise she'll never fulfil.

I'd be bold with her and get from her a kiss  
 And she'd say to me, you're a sly thief  
 That would bring us to words and we'd have a chat  
 There'd be burble and chatter to keep us awake.

Out at night till a short while before day (break)  
 Ever running out of answers, I'd not have much to say  
 I'd get up sluggishly over in the corner  
 And make for the door just sneaking like a snail.

Alas boy, how wretched it is to go out at night  
 Running the great danger of dogs and people's ill-will  
 Going through thick and thin, that breaks my heart  
 To be just like a thief  
 That steals all through the night.

The thought of courting makes me quiver  
 To be walking all night and tired all day  
 It's better for me to be lacking a wife as long as I'm alive  
 And not troubled and bothered then like this.] (Broderick: 14–15).

One informant from Argyllshire confirms another quality desired in a matchmaker – his physical appearance.

**Calum MacLean:** Agus a nise am biodh am fear a bhiodh ag iarraidh na mnatha am biodh e toir duine leis, no biodh iad a . . . ?

**Mrs MacLucas:** Bha daonnan fear còmh ris.

**CM:** Agus bhiodh e bruidhinn air a shon.

**Mrs M:** Airson bruidhinn. Bha e car *shy*. Tha t-seans an duine òg bha e *shy*. Agus am fear bha e toirt leis bha e daonnan feum a bhith uamharraidh caran math air bruidhinn a sineach, sunndach dheth fhèin.

**CM:** Agus a robh iad ag ràdh gur e duine a bhiodh crùbach no bacach no meang sam bith ann, nach dèanadh esan a' chùis?

**Mrs M:** O cha robh feum idir air-san. Cha robh. Cha robh feum aca air.

**CM:** Cha ghabhadh meang sam bith a bhith a's . . .

**Mrs M:** A chionn bha feum seasachd suas air son an duine òg.

[**CM:** And now, would the man asking for a wife take someone with him, or . . . ?

**Mrs M:** There was always someone with him

**CM:** And speaking on his behalf.

**Mrs M:** To speak on his behalf. He was rather shy. It seems the young man was shy. And the one he took with him always needed to be rather terribly good at talking, and good-humoured.

**CM:** And did they say that a man who was lame or crippled or had any blemish would not be right?

**Mrs M:** Oh, he would not do at all. No. They did not need him.

**CM:** Any kind of blemish would not be tolerated . . .

**Mrs M:** Because it was necessary to stand up for the young man.]<sup>6</sup>

We may contrast this account with that of the ‘cripple tailor’ described above, active around Fortingall in the 19th century. The informant’s explanation is that the matchmaker required a strong physical presence, in order to put over his case successfully. We may speculate that his physical perfection also had a ritual significance; he was, after all, embodying the young man’s youth, strength, capability and determination; his representative not just in words but in physical manifestation.

The following account from Uist provides a good picture of the background to marriage a century ago, including information on ‘night-visiting’, matchmaking, and a suggestion that participants in a *rèiteach* were indeed aware of its legal implications. It is of interest that the custom is already described as being ‘out of fashion’.

Bha a leithid a rud ri rèiteach ann. A nis ‘se rud a th’anns a rèiteach a th’air a dhol a mach a fasan ann an Uidhist. ‘Se glè bheag a tha pòsadh an diugh a tha deanamh rèiteach idir, ged a tha feadhainn ann ‘ga chumail suas fhathast. Faodaidh sinn cuideachd iomradh a dheanamh air mar a bha na càraidean a taghadh a chèile aig an àm a bha sin. Mar bu trice, nuair a bhiodh fear airson pòsadh, shealladh e timchioll air air feadh nam boireannaich a bh’anns a nàbachd aige fhein, feuch cò an tè bu fhreagarraiche a chitheadh e air a shon fhèin. Mur a deònaicheadh i sin a phòsadh, cha bhiodh ann ach gum feuchadh e tè eile, agus mu stadadh e gheibheadh e tè. ‘S ann gu math ainneamh a bhiodh duine a dol a mach as a’ choimhearsneachd aige fhèin anns an àm ud a dh’iarraidh mnathadh.

Bha na daoine – fireannaich agus boireannaich pailt gu leòr anns an dùthaich, cha robh na boireannaich a falbh a dh’iarraidh cosnaidh gu Galldachd an uair ud mar a tha iad an diugh, agus mar sin bha an sluagh gu math na bu liònmoire. Bha àiteachan ann an Uidhist ‘s an àm ud agus dà theaghlach air feadhainn dhe na croitean.

Nuair a bhiodh fear don teaghlach a pòsadh, thogadh e taigh dha fhèin agus dhan bhean òig air pìos eile dhen chroit, agus rachadh iad a dh’fhuireach ann a sin. A nis, bha gu leòr ann a bha a suirighe agus a deanamh suas ri chèile cuideachd, ach bha an seòrsa eile gu math pailt air a shon sin.

Nuair a bhiodh iad a suirighe anns an àm sin, ‘s ann mar bu trice ann an taigh a’bhoireannaich a bhiodh am fireannach, agus bha gu leòr do chaithris na h-oidhche a dol air adhart.

A nis, ged a bhiodh e suirighe air nighinn agus e eòlach gu leòr oirre, agus fios aige cuideachd gu robh i deònach a phòsadh, dh’fheumadh e an toiseach a’ dhol ‘ga h-iarraidh.’ Bha a toil fhèin aige ri fhaotainn ann an làrach fhianuisean, agus cuideachd toil a h-athar. Chan e e fhèin a bhiodh a deanamh na h-iarraidh idir. Dheanadh e suas ri araide dha fhèin, an oidhche a bha e am beachd a dhol a dh’iarraidh a bhoireannaich, agus gheibheadh iad gnothaichean air dòigh ar rèir sin. Dh’fheumadh e botul uisge-bheatha fhaotainn co-dhiubh, agus nuair a thigeadh an oidhche a chaidh a chur air leth, dh’fhalbhadh e fhèin agus am fear bha còmhla ris, agus ruigeadh iad taigh a’ bhoireannaich.

Mar bu trice, bhiodh fios aig muinntir an taighe gu robh e a tighinn a cheart oidhche bha seo, agus bhiodh gnothaichean deiseil aca air an coinneamh. Bhiodh an nighean a bha e tighinn a dh'iarraidh air a còmhach anns an aodach a b'fheàrr a bhiodh aice, agus an còrr do mhuintir an taighe air a rèir sin. Ach cha bhiodh sin mar sin ach far am biodh fear is tè a bha a deanamh suas ri chèile greis roimhe sin. Am fear a rachadh a dh'iarraidh tè air an eanalas, cha bhiodh deisealachadh sam bith roimhe, a chionn cha bhiodh dad a dh'fhios aig muinntir an taighe, neo aig a nighean fhèin gu robh e ruighinn.

Co-dhiubh, nuair a ruigeadh e fhèin agus a charaide taigh a' bhoireannaich, rachadh iad a staigh. Theireadh iad greis ann a sin an toiseach a bruidhinn 's a seachas. Gheibheadh bean-an-taighe biadh air dòigh agus chuireadh i gu bòrd iad. Rachadh dram a chur mun cuairt, agus dh'innseadh caraide an fhir a bha 'g iarraidh na h-ighinn an turus air a robh iad. Bheireadh a h-athar dha cead a nighean a phòsadh mu bha i fhèin deònach, agus rachadh beagan uaireannan a chur seachad ann a sin le dram is òrain. Dheanadh iad suas an uairsin an oidhche bhiodh rèiteach ann.

Ann an àiteachan 's e "còrdadh" a chanadh iad ris a cheud oidhche – an oidhche bhiodh an duine agus a charaide ag iarraidh a' bhoireannaich. Agus os déigh a' chòrdaidh bha a rèiteach a tighinn. Ann an àiteachan eile bha an còrdadh agus a rèiteach air a ghabhail na aon rud. Agus tric gu leòr ann an Uibhist cuideachd, 's ann aig a rèiteach a bhiodh caraide an duine ag iarraidh toil a' bhoireannaich agus a h-athar.

...

Nuair a chruinnicheadh na daoine, rachadh an cur gu bòrd. B'è seo bòrd a' rèiteach. Bhiodh feadhainn air an taghadh air son suidhe aig a' bhòrd seo, càrdean is daoine dhen t-seòrsa sin. Agus 's ann aig a' bhòrd seo a dh'innseadh caraide an fhir a bha dol a phòsadh an reusan anns an robh iad cruinn air an oidhche seo. Bha athair na h-ighinn a toirt seachad a chead agus a bheannachd dhan chàraid òg an sin a breith air làmhan air a chèile agus bha dram ga chur mun cuairt, agus a chuile duine timchioll a' bhùird ag òl deoch-slàinte na càraid òg a bha a dol a phòsadh.

[There was such a thing as a *rèiteach*. Now the *rèiteach* has gone out of fashion in Uist. Very few who get married today have a *rèiteach*, though some people still keep it up. We may mention how the couples chose each other at that time. Usually, when a man wished to get married he would look around among the women who were in his own neighbourhood, to see which one was most suitable for himself. If she was not willing to marry him, he just had to try another one and in the end he would find one. Very seldom did a man go out of his own neighbourhood at that time to find a wife.

Men and women were plentiful enough in the country; women did not go to the Lowlands to seek work as they do today, and so the population was more numerous. There were places in Uist at that time where two families lived on some of the crofts.

When a man in the family was going to marry he would build a house for himself and his young wife on part of the croft and they would go to live there. Now there were several who were courting and going out together as well, but nevertheless there was the other kind [of marriage] as well.

At that time when they were courting it was usually at the woman's house that the man was to be found, and there was plenty of late-night revelry going on.

Now, though a man who was courting was well-acquainted with the girl and knew that

she was willing to marry him, he had first of all to ask for her hand. He had to get her own acceptance in the presence of witnesses and also her father's consent. He himself did not do the asking. He arranged with one of his friends which night he intended to go for the woman and they planned things accordingly. He had to get a bottle of whisky anyway – and on the night that had been decided he and the friend who was going with him would set off for the woman's house.

Usually the people in the house knew beforehand that he was coming that very night, and things would be prepared for him. The girl for whom he was coming would be dressed in her best clothes, and the rest of the household accordingly. But that was the case only when the man and the woman had been going out together a while before that. The man who went for the girl 'on spec' had no preparations made for him because neither the household nor the girl had any knowledge of his coming.

However, when he and his friend reached the house they went in. First of all they spent a while talking and discoursing. The woman of the house would prepare food and invite them to the table. A dram would be passed around and the friend of the man who was asking for the girl would tell them the reason for their visit. Her father would give him his permission to marry the girl if she was willing, and a few hours were then passed with a dram and singing. Then they arranged a night for the *rèiteach*.

In some places the first night the man and his friend came to ask for the woman was called the *còrdadh* or agreement, and after the *còrdadh* came the *rèiteach*. In some places the *còrdadh* and the *rèiteach* were the same thing. And as often as not, in Uist as well, it was at the *rèiteach* that the man's friend would ask for the woman's and her father's acceptance.

...

When the people gathered they were invited to sit at the table. This was the table of the *rèiteach*. Some were chosen to sit at this table, friends and people like that. At that table the intended bridegroom's friend intimated the reason for their gathering this night. The bride's father gave his consent and his blessing to the young couple. The young couple then shook hands and a dram was passed around, and everybody at the table drank to the young couple's health.](D. J. MacDonald MS 5368–79).

This account provides evidence that a father's permission could be sought 'on spec'; on such an occasion both the girl and her family were unprepared for the visit, and the reference to a matter-of-fact 'looking around' the neighbourhood for suitable partners suggests a distinctly unsentimental attitude to the obtaining of a wife. There is also confirmation that the participants were aware of the legal implications of the *rèiteach*; the consent of the girl, *in front of witnesses*, was one of the purposes of the ritual along with obtaining the father's permission. The two stages of the ritual are also clear, as well as the element of 'replaying' in the second meeting, where the groom's representative's statement of intent, the father's consent and blessing, the couple's symbolic act of union and the communal incorporation rite are performed for the second time. The wider community is also incorporated, with all the guests having a meal and a drink at the 'table of the *rèiteach*' even if this involves several sittings.

Further confirmation that the girl and her suitor may be complete strangers is found in the following account from Cape Breton; it is also of interest that a suitor could find himself rejected.

In a lot of cases, it might be the first time the groom had ever seen the prospective wife – and in a lot of cases it wasn't a very happy episode for the girl, but it turned out quite happily after that for most of them. [In] one particular case . . . it happened the girl had never seen the man brought before her this particular night for the Reiteach. This man had got the marriage garb to marry another, and she had jilted him. It was the custom then the man bought the apparel for his wife to be married in along with his own . . . but the young fellows wanted to have the wedding, by hook or by crook . . . so they concocted a scheme to take him another night and ask for the hand of a girl he had never met ('Reiteach': 2I–2).

The following song, also from Cape Breton, captures the atmosphere surrounding a matchmaking visit.

*Mo Rùn an Cailin*

*Air faill ill éó 's na hó ro hù o*  
*Hùraibh o 's na hó ro hù o*  
*Faill ill éó 's na hó ro hù o*  
*Rùn nan cailin 's gura tù i*

Latha dhomh 's mi falbh 'nam ònar  
 Suibhal gharbhlach agus mòinteach,  
 Nuair rànaig mise 's gun mi eòlach  
 Chaidh mi thaigh nan daoine còire.

Labhair bean an taighe coibhneil  
 'C ò as a thànaig an strainnsear?  
 Deanaibh suidhe 's lasaibh coinnean;  
 Bidh sinn cridheil ré na h-oidhcheadh.'

Labhair mise mar bu dual dhomh  
 Ann am briathran sìobhalt', suairce,  
 'C'ait' a nist a bheil a' ghruagach  
 Fhuair sinn cliù oirr' mun do ghluais sinn?'

'Fhir an taighe na biodh sprochd ort,  
 Cha tànaig sinne gun bhotal;  
 Co-dhiu gheobh 's nach fhaigh sinn tochradh  
 Cha bhi deur air clàr nach cosg sinn?'

'Bhithinn dhut mar bhiodh do mhàthair,  
 'S cinnteach mi gum biodh i blàth riut.  
 Thréiginn mo chinneadh 's mo chàirdean  
 'S reachainn leat thar chuain am màireach?'

*[The Pick of the Young Girls]*

*Air faill ill éó 's na hó ro hù o*  
*Hùraibh o 's na hó ro hù o*

*Faill ill éó 's na hó ro hò o*  
*Of all the young girls you're the favourite.*

One day as I walked alone  
 Over rough country and moors,  
 Arriving in an unfamiliar place  
 I went to call on the kindly people.

The woman of the house addressed me kindly,  
 'Where has the stranger come from?  
 Have a seat and light the candles;  
 We'll spend the night in good cheer.'

I replied according to hereditary custom  
 In words both mannerly and friendly,  
 'Where is the young girl  
 Whose praises we heard before we set out?'

'My good host, be not dejected  
 For we have not arrived without a bottle.  
 Whether or not we obtain a dowry  
 We won't leave a single drop on the table.'

'I'd treat you as would your mother;  
 And surely she regards you warmly.  
 I would leave behind my clan and relations  
 And cross the ocean with you tomorrow.']\*<sup>7</sup>

Although it is not clear whether the matchmaker is alone or accompanied by his charge, we may note that the place he travels to is unfamiliar and he is greeted as a stranger. The characterisation of the visitors as 'strangers' may, however, be a convention. The visit is not made 'on spec', as information, in the form of 'praises' was available to the groom's side beforehand. The reference to 'hereditary speech' clearly alludes to a particular social 'script' appropriate to the situation, and although negotiations, including the discussion of a dowry, would not appear to be conducted allegorically or even indirectly, a degree of what may be special vigilance is suggested – the employment of words 'both mannerly and friendly.' Great stress would appear to be laid on the 'kindly' and 'friendly' nature of the visit; the bringing of a bottle of whisky is, of course, mandatory, and the final stanza would appear to indicate that the bride-to-be is well-disposed to the offer.

An account in the manuscripts of Calum MacLean suggests that the suitor and his representative could be unsure of the reception awaiting them at the woman's house.

Bho chionn ùineachan air ais 'n uair a bhitheadh feadhainn a' dol a phòsadh na paidhir a' dol a phòsadh bhiodh iad daonnan a' dol a dhèanadh rèiteach. Bha sin a' dol a choimhead air a' bhean òg anns an taigh 's an robh i, co dhiubh bha i aig seirbheis na nighean fear an taighe na an t-àite 's an robh i. Ach thachair an rud seo anns an dùthaich gu h-ìosal fodhainn a seo [i.e. Ionbhar Ruaidh]. Fear Mac Phàil a bh'ann is an tè a bha sùil aige oirre bha i aig seirbheis air taobh eile na h-aibhne. Fhuair e gille còmh ris is ràinig iad an taigh. Thuirt

e ris a' ghille gu fuirigheadh esa' a mach is esa' a dhol a staigh leis bha e gu math gear 'san teanga agus e a dh'fhaighinn a mach co dhiubh bha iad *welcome* gus nach robh. Chaidh an gille a staigh is chuir e an cèill a ghnothach. Is thuirt i ris gun gabhadh i an duine uair sam bith is thill e a mach.

"O!," thuirt e, "nach i tha *ready*".

Chaidh am pòsadh a dhèanadh ann an ùine glè ghoirid an deadhaidh sin.

[Some time ago when people were going to get married, or a couple was going to marry, they always had a *rèiteach*. That meant going to see the young woman in the house where she lived, whether she was at service or whether she was the daughter of the house, or wherever she was. But this affair happened in the country below us [i.e. Inver Roy]. He was a MacPhail, and the one he expected to marry was at service on the other side of the river. He got a lad to go with him and they arrived at the house. He told the lad that he would stay outside while he went in – he was very sharp-tongued – to find out whether they were 'welcome' or not. The lad went in and explained what his business was. And she told him that she would accept the man anytime, and he went back out.

'O,' said he, 'isn't she *ready*!'

The marriage was arranged shortly after that.] (Calum MacLean Notebook).

We note the reluctance of the suitor to enter without an indication that his presence would be welcome. This in turn suggests that the occasion could be highly charged, particularly if the young man was not well known to the woman's family. In this example, it would appear that she does not have her family around her; she is a domestic servant. Presumably her ready acceptance is, to some extent, frowned upon; although one could speculate that this had more to do with her circumstances than any defect in her character. Unfortunately, we are not told who 'defends her' or negotiates the marriage in the absence of her own father.

The following example, from the same source, again indicates how, despite the distinctly unsentimental approach, passions ran high when it came to the personal honour of the suitor:

Bha tè eile dhen aon seòrsa ann na b'fhaide air n-adhart 's an dùthaich car mu na h-aon amannan. Chaidh fear a nunn thar a' mhonaidh is gille math leis. Chaidh iad a dh'ionnsaigh taigh an duine chòir a bha seo. Dh'innis a' fear a bha leis dè an turus air a robh iad. Thug e sùil bho mhullach gu bonn air an fhear eile is e eòlach gu leòr air. "O tha sin glè mhath," thuirt e. Cha robh am boireannach aig an taigh. "Tha sin glè mhath is tha an duine glè choltach mar a h-eil giamh ann," thuirt e. Ach a' fear a chuala seo, leum e air a' chois is a mach an dorust a bha e. Is thuirt e: "Dè tha cearr ort?"

"O thuirt e gun robh giamh annam [umam]."

"Cha duirt an duine còir nicheann dhe leithid, ach thuirt e mar a robh giamh unnat [umat]."

Chaidh an rud air adhart is phòs iad ann an ùine glè ghoirid.

[There was another one of the same kind farther on in the same country, about the same time. A man went across the moor along with a good lad. They went to the worthy man's house. The man who was with him explained what their errand was. He eyed the other man from head to foot, though he knew him well enough.

‘O, that is very good,’ he said. The woman was not at home. ‘That is very good, and the man is very suitable unless there is any defect in him,’ he said.

But the man who heard this leapt to his feet and was out of the door.

And he said, ‘What is wrong with you?’

‘O, he said that I had a defect’.

‘The worthy man never said such a thing, but he said *unless* there was any defect in you’.

The affair went on and they got married very shortly.] (Calum MacLean Notebook).

Although this may be viewed simply as an amusing story, the mishearing of the words produces an immediate and rather extreme response which serves to indicate that for the suitor, pride and honour were near the surface during the arduous, and potentially humiliating task of asking for a girl’s hand. The father of the house exploits this to the full, looking the suitor up and down ‘though he knew him well enough’.

## 2.2 Allegorical ‘asking’

In the above examples the ‘asking’ is done directly, and, as we have seen, could lead to potentially unpleasant situations. The request for the girl could be framed allegorically, as the following account from Tìre illustrates, and perhaps one of the functions of this device is to provide a method of refusal which would preserve the dignity of the suitor, regardless of the outcome.

**Eric Cregeen:** Did they have in-between men to arrange marriages at all?

**Donald Sinclair:** Sometimes, yes . . . if this man were thinking of marrying this girl, his chum was coming with him, you know, a good talkative man and a clever man . . . and it was this talkative man . . . the groom-to-be took with him. It was him that was speaking first . . . In my younger days when a man was thinking of getting married he would tell a *sensible* man in the neighbourhood, and ‘will you come with me to ask the hand of the lady?’ This old witty man would go with him, and he would have a bottle of whisky of course, and maybe the old man of the house knew well enough their purpose. This old man that the bride-to-be [sic] took with him, he would turn around and he says to the old man, ‘I heard that you had such and such a thing in the house’. The old man of the house would say ‘Yes’. Well this man that’s along wi’ me is asking you will you give him that thing’. The old man in the house was *sensible* enough and he would say, ‘Yes. By all means he will get whatever he asks of me. Whatever I manage to give him, there will be no refusal’. So they knew all then what happened and what was going on. And the man that was speaking on behalf of the bride they would come out with a bottle and ask for glasses. And then the young lady of the house was preparing a feast (Donald Sinclair SA 1968/247 B7, 248 A1).

The indirect nature of the request and consent is clear; the girl is represented by a ‘thing’ or object possessed by the father; the go-between has ‘smoothed’ the way for a favourable request for it by the suitor. The father’s consent, which may be the ‘green

light' for a formal request by the suitor himself, is expressed in a formulaic phrase. Although there has been no open discussion, 'they all knew then what happened' and the pledge is sealed. There is a suggestion that the young man would not make his request without first knowing the attitude of the girl's father. This may be seen as an important function of the matchmaker; the provision of a mechanism whereby the possibility of conflict between the two parties is avoided.

In another account, the informant describes an allegorical exchange in more detail:

Bha an duine seo dol a phòsadh agus 's ann a mhuinntir baile a's a' bhaile seo a bha an tè a bha e dol a phòsadh, agus 's e ban-Ileach a bh'innnte air taobh a h-athar agus a màthar, faodaidh mi ràdh cuideachd, ach bha i air a togail ann an Tìreadh. Agus 's e seo an tè bha an duine dol a phòsadh. Agus bha posta làmh ris a' fantail, agus bàrd a bha 's a' phosta cuideachd. Bha e fhèin 's am bàrd, am posta mòr aig a' chèile, 's dh'innis e don phosta gu robh e dol a phòsadh. "An tèid thu còmhla rium?" ars esan, "a dh'iarraidh a' bhoireannaich?"

"Thèid," ars am posta.

Dh'fhalbh iad le chèile a dh'ionnsaidh taigh a' bhodaich a bha seo. Shuidh iad aig teine 'gan garadh. Agus Dhia!, bha am bodach Ileach a chaidh iad far a robh e, bha e gleusta gu leòr cuideachd. Thuig e gu math gu dè bha dol a ghabhail àite. Ach thuir am posta . . . 'Se saor a bh'ann gu citùird, "Tha mi trang ag obair air a leithid seo de rud a dhèanamh," ars esan, "agus chuala mi," ars esan, "gu robh maide agaibh-sa, agus nan creiceadh sibh . . . nan toireadh sibh dhomh e," ars esan, "maide eile agam fhìn," thuir esan, "a dh'fhaotas e."

"Bheir mi sin," ars am bodach eile. "Gheibh thu agamsa maide gun teagamh, agus tha mi glè chinnteach nach eil a' dry-rotten ann. Cha chuir e dragh ort ri d'mhaireann."

'S math tha cuimhnam air banais na tè nach robh dry-rotten innnte! Cha d'fhuair mi leithid a chearcan riamh nam bheatha agus a fhuair mi aig a' bhanaid sin.

[This man was going to get married and the girl he was going to marry belonged to a village in this township, and she was an Islay girl on her father's side – and on her mother's too, I may say, but she was brought up in Tìree. And this was the one the man was going to marry. And there was a postman staying near him, and the postman was a poet as well. He and the poet . . . the postman – were friendly, and he told the postman that he was going to get married.

'Will you go with me,' says he, 'to ask for the girl?'

'Yes,' says the postman.

They went off together to this old man's house. They sat down at the fire to warm themselves. And God! the old man from Islay whom they went to see he was pretty cunning too. Fortunately, he understood what was going to take place. But the postman – he was a joiner to trade – he said, 'I'm busy working at such and such a thing,' says he, 'and I am short' says he, 'of wood, and I heard,' says he, 'that you had a piece of timber, and if you would sell or give me it,' says he, 'I'd be much obliged to you. 'I will indeed,' says the other old man. 'You will certainly get a piece of wood from me, and I am very sure that there is no dry-rot in it. It will not bother you as long as you live.' I well remember the wedding of the one who had no dry-rot in her! I never in my life got as many hens as I got at that wedding.] (Donald Sinclair, Tìree. SA 1968/248.A1).

It will be noted the the matchmaker is a mobile member of the community – the postman – as well as a ‘poet’ and a joiner to trade. As well as the obvious symbolism of the two halves of the ‘couple’, and their union providing mutual support for a ‘roof over their heads’, the interdependence of the two families, and the community in general, is emphasised in the father’s willingness to help the ‘buyer’ at his door. The tradition of mutual aid, or ‘thigging’, is an ancient one. A seventeenth century observer notes:

To thig is to beg assistance of Friends which is very ordinary among persons of every Quality. Men thig horses and corn; women thig cows, sheep and goats. When young men of the common sort are to plenish they thig corn, both in seed time and harvest. (Kirkwood: 76).

J. L. Campbell adds a reference to the poem *Mor an feidhm freagairt na bhfaighdheach*; ‘to answer the demands for aid . . . is a big effort’ (Watson: 66–81). Besides the assistance extended to the unlucky crofter ‘thiggin the seed’, Walter Gregor (1881: 88, 178) notes that the tradition also applied to a young man setting up a farm, where ‘it was usual for friends and neighbours to lend a helping hand. Aid was given in ploughing . . . they contributed at least part of the grain to sow the fields.’ This may lend meaning to the nature of the enquiry at the door of the girl, when those outside appeal for help in the completion or donation of some object connected with ‘building a house’ or agriculture. Gregor also notes the practice in connection with weddings; ‘in the interval between the final contract of marriage and its celebration the young women were busy getting in order all her *providan*<sup>8</sup> for her future home. One or more days were given to the *thiggin* of wool from her friends and neighbours. The informant knew of no other approach other than asking for the other half of a couple. Another account of this method of asking is provided by Morag MacLeod:

When the company has had a dram out of the bottle, tea follows, after which the friend contrives to introduce the subject of their visit, in the best form possible. If he is a man of wit, or eloquence, he has the advantage in the use of these gifts, in discharging his delicate task . . . After a few words by way of introduction, the friend went on thus:- ‘We have been building a house, and have got it all ready for the roofing, but we find we are short of the leg of a couple, to match another we have already got. We know you have got such a thing to spare, and as we are wishful to have the best that can be had, and being assured of the good quality of those you have got beside you, we have come to request the favour from you. If you can see your way to oblige us, you will contribute greatly to our house and to our happiness.’ The girl’s father replied in such terms as he considered suitable, signifying his willingness to meet their request. Thereupon, the suitor’s friend (having an eye to the *tochar*), further said, ‘We are very much obliged to you, and highly delighted to get the couple leg, but, of course, it will be somewhat expensive to take it out of here, and place it where it is to be put, besides, that afterwards, everything would require to be kept in a condition worthy of the excellent couple, that are to be over the house.’ When the consent of the parents or guardians of the girl has been obtained, the *dram* is put round again, and the young couple are betrothed, by taking each other’s hand, retaining the hold, while they

share the glass between them. The glass having been handed to the young woman first, she drinks a portion of it and then hands it to the young man who drinks what she has left (Morag MacLeod 375–76).

This account suggests how complex and flexible the allegorical exchange could be; the suitor's representative first praises the 'quality' of the stock in the father's possession, then, once consent has been obtained, shifts his emphasis to the tocher – the expense of relocating the goods and the future 'condition' of their joint project. This clearly shows that it was possible to discuss another potential source of conflict – the dowry – allegorically. In his stressing of the father's role in ensuring the future prosperity of the pair, the device of the 'couples' as symbolising marriage as joint work and mutual aid can be seen to apply both to the young people about to be united and to the two families, who are also embarking on a future together. The 'couples' motif occurs again in an account in the Dewar Manuscripts of an encounter on the mainland:

There were, some time, persons of the Clan Vicar dwelling in a place called Dail-chruinneachd, in Glen Ara, and they were desirous that their son should marry the daughter of a man of the Mackellars, who dwelt in Mam in Glen Shira. Young Mackellar in Kilblaan was courting the same maiden. Macvicar of Dail-chruinneachd and his son and others along with them went to see if a marriage arrangement could be made between young Macvicar and the maiden . . . They knocked at the door and Mackellar cried, 'Who is there at the door?' Macvicar replied, 'A friend. Let us in.' Mackellar said, 'If you are friends I will let you in,' so he opened the door and let them in . . . One of those that accompanied Macvicar took a bottle of whisky out of his pocket and said to the goodwife, 'Have you a quaich?' She said, 'Yes,' and she got a quaich for him. He filled the quaich and offered it to her, saying, 'Here, goodwife, drink to us.' She said, 'But I shall know first before I drink, why I am going to drink?' Macvicar of Dail-cruinneachd said, 'We are building a house in Dail-chruinneachd and putting a couple in it; we have one side of the couple, and we have heard that Mackellar of Mam has a tree that would make the other side of the couple: so we have come to try whether he will give it to us.' Mackellar inquired of what kind of wood the half-couple that he had was. 'It is oak,' said Macvicar. 'The couple that I have,' remarked Mackellar, 'is ash, and these two kinds of wood do not fit each other. Oak lasts much longer than ash.' 'Ash,' rejoined Macvicar, 'lasts long also, if it is kept dry, but I rather suspect that your half-couple is oak too. I do not think you have looked after it properly.' The man of the bottle inquired of the good wife where Euphemia her daughter was. The goodwife replied 'Euphemia has gone to bed. What have you to say to her?' 'I wish,' said he, 'to give her a quaich-full of whisky, as it is going at all events. Where is she?' The goodwife said, 'She is in that room there then,' extending her hand in the direction of the door of the room. 'It would be better for her to rise that we might see her,' said Macvicar's son. Effie arose and put on her clothes; and the man who had the bottle and the young Macvicar took the lamp and went into the room where Effie was. The man of the bottle first gave the full of a quaich of the whisky to Effie and he conversed for a little with her in a low tone; then he went off and left herself and Macvicar together, and these were for a while speaking low and whispering to one another. During this time Dail-chruinneachd and Mam agreed about the piece of timber that was to make the half-couple.

Young Macvicar and Effie now came out of the room and sat with the rest of the company. ‘Oove, Oove! Have you got up?’ said her mother to Effie. ‘Yes,’ said Effie. ‘I have been hearing much merriment among you, and I am for having my share of it’. Said he that was putting round the whisky, ‘We are for putting another couple in the house, and it is young Macvicar of Dail-chruinneachd that we are going to put in one side of it; and how would it please you, goodman and goodwife, were Effie your daughter to be the other side of the couple? Would you give her?’ The old folk did not say a word. The divider of the whisky then said to the goodman, ‘How would it please you, goodman, to give your daughter to the son of Macvicar of Dail-chruinneachd?’ ‘She is there herself,’ said the goodman, ‘and ask her, first, if she is willing’. Macvicar’s spokesman then said to Effie, ‘And are you willing yourself, Effie?’ Effie replied, ‘If I had the goodwill of my parents, I should be very willing myself’. Her mother rejoined, ‘If you agree yourselves I will not put between you’. ‘And, indeed, I will not between them either,’ said her father.

Then they fixed a day for the agreement, and the place they fixed on for the agreement-meeting was the top of the moor between Mam and Dail-chruinneachd, where people were wont to cast the peats.

The day of the agreement had come; and the two parties . . . with their friends met at the place appointed. Each party had a horse and creels with them, carrying a cask of whisky and plenty of food. They sat on the *grianan* where they were wont to spread the peats. A round of whisky was put about, and the terms of the agreement were declared. Many words were spoken and the details of the agreement were settled in a manner satisfactory to both parties. The two young folk were brought before the company and asked if they were of their own accord willing to marry. They both said they were; and they joined hands in the presence of the company. So the agreement was made. Then they fixed the day for the marriage, and invited all those who were at the agreement to come to the wedding (Mackechnie 1: 62–4).

The story ends with a mass fight between the supporters of Mackellar of Mam, the girl’s family, and those of Mackellar of Kilblaan, the family of the spurned suitor ‘who had been courting . . . Effie before Macvicar’. The entry exchange at the door and the allegorical exchange take place between the two fathers. The proceedings are, however, presided over by the ‘man of the bottle’, the suitor’s non-kin representative, who addresses the woman of the house and the girl herself, but not her father until the moment of consent. During the preliminaries the two fathers appear to be silent. This may be an example of a young man represented by two intermediaries; his father, the serious, ‘male’ principle, duty-bound to expressing vigour and persistence, whose verbal contribution symbolically joins the two together; the other the ‘feminine’; conciliatory, more affable and sociable, whose duty is to physically bring the couple together through a ‘master-of-ceremonies’ role, less dependent on verbal skill than ritual expertise, for example the procuring of a quaich. Their counterparts are the girl’s father, who expresses robust resistance symbolically through verbal jousting, and her mother, who acts as facilitator, physically bringing about the meeting between the two.

The girl’s mother does not know why she is asked to drink; this may be true, but given that the young couple know one another, and the unusually late hour of the visit,

we may assume she has at least an inkling. Her ignorance may be formulaic; in the Borders of Scotland, on being invited to a wedding 'it was good manners to pretend that the object of their call was quite unsuspected, and the simple little fraud was kept up until the couple rose to take their leave' (Hyslop: 86).

The exchange between the fathers shows that refusal was possible within the allegorical framework; oak and ash 'do not fit each other'; in other words, it would not be a match of like with like. Macvicar's reply gives him the upper hand, and the onward movement of the encounter reveals Mackellar's objection to have been merely a ritual hindering of progress. The editor of the manuscripts is surely mistaken when he comments 'Mackellar at first does not understand what the speaker has in view' (Mackechnie I: 291). The consent of the girl is heavily stressed, and this may be further underlined by the couple's silence when the proposition is first formally put to them allegorically. A direct question follows, which elicits the response that the girl must be asked 'first, if she is willing'. Her response is formulaic, properly deferring to her parents, who in turn offer not direct assent, which, like the girl's ready consent, may be taboo, but a passive statement of non-intervention.

This meeting is equivalent to the *rèiteach beag*, the 'agreement', *rèiteach mòr*, being fixed for a later date. It is of interest that this takes place outside, on a high, neutral space halfway between the two 'camps'. At Lochbroom, Wester Ross, the two camps observed one another with mutual suspicion:

Owing to distance, a trysting place is arranged, where the bride's party meets the clerical celebrant. The bridegroom's house is a little further away than the bride's home from the trysting place. While the bride's party is at breakfast on the morning of the wedding day, a scout is sent out every few minutes to see what is doing at the bridegroom's house, and to guard against surprise by him and his party. The bridegroom's party in the same way are watching the bride's home. When the bride and her party set out, there immediately arises an appearance of great stir and bustle about the bridegroom's house. Presently he and his party are seen to come out, and, as though they were in hot haste to overtake the bride's party, they take a straight line through fields and over streams and fences. They do not overtake the party in front, however, but keep about two hundred yards behind. When the bride's party sits down to partake of a refreshment by the way, the pursuers still keep at the same respectful distance, and sit down to take their refreshments by themselves. While waiting for the minister at the trysting place, the two parties keep at a distance the one from the other, and even when they are obliged to approach for the performance of the ceremony, they still keep distinct. Immediately on conclusion of the ceremony by which bride and bridegroom are made one, the two parties mingle together and are associated throughout the remainder of the day's proceedings (Rev. C. Robertson, quoted in Henderson: 247–8).

In this account we will note the implicit threat of kidnap as the bride's party 'guard against surprise'. The maintenance of spatial boundaries, whether in the open air, over a threshold, or at different ends of a table, is a recurring feature of the ritual. The 'casting of the peats', it should be added, is a luck-bringing practice commonly associated with weddings and 'such as goes about any other work as Hunting, Fishing &c.' (Kirkwood:

60). Although the supposed dispute surrounding the material suitable for the ‘couples’ is between oak and ash, other evidence suggests that the choice of wood may have a greater significance than is at first apparent. In describing the construction of a ‘black-house’, Alexander MacDonald states that ‘the couplings were a certain crooked form of tree from the forest, called “na suidheachan”, or “na maideanceamhail”’ (Alexander MacDonald: 48). *Suidhe* is the ‘beam or supporter of a house’; *maidesuidhe* is ‘the couple of a house’ and *suidheachadh* has the meaning ‘settling, arbitration, betrothing, arranging terms of marriage’ (Dwelly: 913). This may explain why the couples were closely associated with weddings, quite apart from the more obvious symbolism of joint work. It was also held that roofing materials must not touch the ground when they are being transported; a further indication of their special status (Henderson: 306). A similar taboo surrounded the carrying of the whisky used for sealing the agreement, which must not be allowed to fall, and the holy water used for sprinkling in the house (Henderson: 306). There may also be a link between the couples and the sacred ‘need-fire’ or virgin flame, produced by friction between two pieces of wood. The ritual kindling ‘was one of the main ceremonies at the great fire-festivals [and] the most potent of all charms to circumvent the powers of darkness, and was resorted to in any imminent or actual calamity, or to ensure success in any important undertaking’ (MacNeill 1: 59).

Thomas Pennant, in his *Tour in Scotland* of 1769 describes another hill-betrothal similar to that described in the Dewar Manuscripts:

The courtship of the highlander . . . after privately obtaining the consent of the fair, he formally demands of the father. The lover and his friends assemble on a hill allotted for that purpose and one of them is dispatched to obtain permission and wait upon the daughter; if he is successful, he is again sent to invite the father and his friends to ascend the hill and partake of a whisky cask, which is never forgot: the lover advances, takes his future Father-in-law by the hand, and plights his troth, and the Fair-one is surrendered up to him (Pennant 1769: 160).

The hill ‘allotted for that purpose’ is most likely a sacred mound, common all over the country, and the site for regular assemblies, the performance of religious rites, the enacting of laws and punishment. The courts of the Brehons, judges, were held on the side of the hill. These sacred lands were the *neimheadh*, ‘the name given to a Druidical grove in which there was a stone shrine, a magic tree or well, or a fairy mound’ (MacNeill 1: 56). We may compare this with the ancient sanctuary and assembly place of *Tailltiu* in Ireland, linked with sacred and secular marriage. The latter were celebrated at the *Tulach na Coibche*, the ‘mound of the buying’, where the bride-price was paid, and where irregular marriages continued until 1770 (Westropp: 121). Moorland between two communities was also used for betrothals; a Reverend Lamont of Strath reported that ‘so notable for matchmaking was a moor between Strath and Sleat, that on the O.S. map it is still called *Airidh na suiridh*, the bothy of lovemaking’.<sup>9</sup> The following account describes another Highland betrothal of the eighteenth century, where the notion of the two camps being in a state of military readiness is made explicit.

The marriage contracts of the Highlanders were settled in a singular manner. The men of both families assembled, attended by a number of their friends, and the chieftain or landlord was commonly present to do honour to his dependants. While it was the custom to go armed on all occasions, they sometimes went to the place of meeting in a sort of military parade, with pipers playing before them. A hill or rising ground was always chosen for this purpose, generally halfway between the parties. As soon as the bridegroom and his retinue appeared, an embassy was despatched to them from the other party, demanding to know their errand, and whether they meant peace or war. The messenger was told in turn that they attended their friend, who came to demand a maid in marriage, naming the young woman. This being reported, her father and those of his attendants who were advanced in years went aside and considered the demand in form, though that matter was commonly settled beforehand. After weighing the young man's circumstances and connections, they sent to let him know that her father agreed to the match. This, however, produced a second message from the bridegroom, intimating that he expected a portion with the bride, upon which a conference was proposed and accepted. The two companies joined, and many compliments passed between them . . . business began . . . there was no small address shown, and much time spent, in adjusting the articles; though, perhaps, a parcel of sheep or goats, a few cows, or a horse or two, were the subject in dispute . . . A people who transact their business verbally are commonly more tenacious of their word than those among whom writ or oath is requisite. In such a case a breach of promise would subject the party that failed to infamy and shame. And besides, in the Highlands, where the laws were little powerful, he would have been liable to private vengeance . . . (Allerdyce 2: 418–9).

We note the ritual quality of the supposed martial encounter; although the principal business is 'commonly settled beforehand', the bride's family demand to know why the groom's party have assembled, and what their intentions are. This is reminiscent of ritual formulas previously noted, and we suspect this meeting amounts to a conspicuously public, and rather grand, 'replaying' of the earlier, more intimate encounter. The posture of the bride's side is one of strength; it is they who ask if it is to be peace or war, knowing, of course, that in this contest it is they who must inevitably 'lose'. We may compare the structure of the encounter with the dialogues described above; there is a form of dialogue between the intermediaries of the two camps which takes place at a neutral venue with a 'safe' distance between the two parties. Communication is through intermediaries, and the whole conducted in the idiom of the preliminary to a battle. In this ritual 'tug-of-war', honour dictates that the bride's party make a strong showing; and it is just this – a show which presupposes an equality which in reality does not exist. The groom's party will carry off the prize; the only 'dispute' lies in the number of sheep or goats to be 'adjusted'.

With regard to agreements in more modern times, Isabel Grant (363) notes of the *rèiteach* 'this interview is nowadays a pleasant formality but there are older traditions of hard bargaining and the interview sometimes took place outside and was attended by a number of male kinsfolk'.

Promises are also recorded as being exchanged in another liminal space; handfasting

through a holed stone where the man made his choice solely on the appearance of the woman's hand (Westropp: 125). Holed stones also feature in secular marriage in Scotland; Rogers notes that:

lovers pledged themselves to mutual fidelity by joining hands through the perforated Stone of Odin, near Loch Stennis, in Orkney. Even elders of the Church recognised the sacredness of the vow. The married women of Srathearn passed their hands through the holes of the bore stone of Gask, to obtain children (Rogers: 215).

Another liminal space, the joining of two rivers, is also noted in connection with handfasting. Guthrie (46) observes 'a spot at the junction of waters known as the black and white Esk, was remarkable in former times for an annual fair . . . it was customary for the unmarried of both sexes to choose a companion, according to their fancy, with whom to live until that time next year'. Vows were also exchanged across running water: 'When the damsel had accepted her lover's offer, the pair proceeded to the nearest stream, and there washing their hands in the current, vowed constancy with their hands clasped across the brook' (Rogers: 111). Buying and selling may also have taken place over a liminal space; for example, it was held that a bargain made over running water was indissoluble, and in the following description it would appear that a threshold was the location: 'In buying a Horse the Seller holds him by the Bridle without and the Buyer within with a wisp in his hand, which the seller giveth him going sun-gate about [deiseal]' (Kirkwood: 62).

The following account of a *rèiteach* from Marion MacLeod of Lewis describes the couple being united across the centre of a table, the space carefully delineated, as in earlier examples:

At the *rèiteach* the prospective bridegroom chose a speaker from the community, usually a friend, to ask the bride's father for the daughter's hand in marriage. At the actual *rèiteach* a long table was prepared which stretched the whole length of the house. The prospective bride and groom sat at opposite ends of the table at the head. After grace was said, the prospective bride and groom were told to stand up and clasp hands across the table while the *gille-suiridhich*, that was the man who spoke for the groom, addressed the bride's father asking him if he had any objections to the marriage taking place. On being told that everything was approved there was great applause.<sup>10</sup>

The search for the other half of a 'couple' is an example of the 'incomplete object' device; other motifs are noted below. Morag MacLeod knows of another example, although without detail:

A person well-known for his wit (usually an old man) was chosen to represent the groom, and another to represent the bride's parents. I wish I could remember details of one in Scalpay when the ploy was that a weaver was looking for yarn with which to finish the tweed he was making (MacLeod: 384).

Accounts from elsewhere in Scotland provide further evidence of the 'asking' conducted in the idiom of buying and selling, or thigging, though not employing the 'incomplete object' device. Peigi Grant, born in Sheildaig, Torridon, describes her memory of the procedure at a betrothal:

The *rèiteach* was as big a thing as the wedding . . . but I don't think they were such open affairs. I think they were friends of the bride and bridegroom that went to the *rèiteach*. It was to ask the father for the bride, for his consent . . . they approached it in an out of the way habit. They said 'I believe you have a very precious jug' or something in the house like that, and they would go on arguing about this jug, or a car, or something they had. They would never say the girl first – until the whole thing was ironed out and came to an agreement. And then the bride was taken out. I think she was in the other room, and she was taken in and handed to the man . . . And there was singing . . . a little party (Bennett: 141–2).

Although it is not explicitly stated, the most likely interpretation of this account is that the young man's party came to negotiate for the possession of the 'jug' or other object. The 'thing' that needed to be 'ironed out' was surely the financial or material arrangements; in this case what was effectively a 'bride-price'. It is to be noted that the girl is hidden, as in many other European analogues, and that she is brought out and symbolically handed over, signifying nothing less than a change in ownership. The informant stresses that 'they would never say the girl first'; a clear indication of the taboo surrounding any direct reference to the main parties involved. It is of interest that the informant mentions the possibility of using a car to stand for the girl; a remark which places the existence of the ritual firmly in the twentieth century.

An account from 1895 by Constance Taylor describes the custom in Ullapool where the young man's party arrive expressing the wish to buy an animal. They are shown a 'selection'; a dramatic sequence which corresponds to a wider tradition of the ritual refusing of 'false brides':

The betrothal takes place some weeks before the time fixed for the marriage. The relations and friends assemble at the house of the bride's father: and last of all the bride-groom arrives in the character of a would-be purchaser of a cow or a sheep. He is assured that he has come to the right place to have his want supplied; and one by one the sisters and young friends of the bride are presented to him, he making a point of finding some fault with every one, until at length the bride herself appears, when he declares himself entirely satisfied and anxious to conclude the bargain. Whisky is then brought in, and two glasses of it are poured out for the couple, the woman only raising the glass to her lips, while the man empties them both. A man not a native of the place gave me lately a different version of this custom, in which the bridegroom, instead of coming to buy, comes to seek a lost lamb (Taylor: 94).

We may note from this account a ritual sealing of the contract which differs from most in that the girl merely *pretends* to drink from the glass. This strikes the observer as surprising; the sharing of the cup is a powerful symbol, and it seems that most probably the girl would have been obliged to drink, her avoidance tantamount to an insulting

refusal. It may be that the custom had changed in the more temperate Victorian era, or that the author was sparing the reader the blushes which would doubtless accompany an account of what may have been considered un-ladylike behaviour.

We will also note that Constance Taylor mentions use of the 'lost animal' formula in another district. This introduces another of the allegorical devices associated with the *rèiteach*. Symington Grieve describes the tradition on Colonsay and Oronsay:

A short time before the couple intend to get married, the prospective bridegroom makes an appointment to meet the parents of the bride at their house to obtain their consent. Upon the night that is fixed, a company generally attends at the home of the wooer. When he starts upon his errand he has old shoes and burning peat thrown after him for good luck. He generally attends the place of meeting with several of his friends. Upon their arrival they are asked to be seated. Then one of the young man's party begins by informing the parents of the young woman that they have come a long way in search of something their young friend has lost. It might be a quey, or a hog, and he would express the hope that he might find it where they then were. It is now the turn of a friend of the parents of the young woman to speak. He would ask what kind of marks were upon the beast they had lost. This information having been given, the friend of the parents would reply that there was a stray beast among their stock, and that they would produce it to see if they could identify it. The stray beast was then introduced, who was one of a number of young women who had come to join in the fun. The lady was severely criticised by the would-be bridegroom and his friends. One lady after another is produced and criticised in the same way and set aside, until at last the right lady is brought forward, when no fault is found with her and she receives nothing but praise. The betrothal then took place, the young man, taking the right hand of the young woman, gave her a kiss which sealed the engagement. The future bride then sat down beside her young man at a table among her friends (Grieve 2: 280).

In this example, non-kin representatives begin the ritual, the young man's spokesman employing the motif of the 'long journey' as well as the 'lost animal' formula. The request for a description requires the expression in zoomorphic terms of the girl's distinguishing features. The family affirm the presence of a 'stray'; the girl is evidently already in transitional state, that is to say agreement has already been reached, and on this 'night fixed' she is presented as an alien creature who does not belong in their 'stock'. After the refusal of the 'false brides', she signifies the joining of the young man's 'stock' by taking her place beside him. The refusal sequence is 'fun'; the other women have come to the house to 'join in', and it is not only the young man's representative who 'severely criticises' but the would-be bridegroom himself. The rejected women are 'produced', perhaps by the girl's representative, and 'set aside'; presumably remaining in the room to form a growing audience at this dramatic show of verbal skill. The 'right lady' is found to be beyond criticism and is praised by all.

Grieve confirms the suggestion made above that secular marriage existed partly as a result of the lack of clergy to carry out a religious service. The islanders choice of location is also significant:

After the Reformation, when there were no clergy of any persuasion in Colonsay and Oronsay, the people had to devise other means of tying the nuptial knot . . . instead of continuing to use one or other of the old churches which were still standing [they] took the strange course of reverting to what was probably the custom in pre-Christian times. It may have been that among the islanders there was a strong element of the Cruithne who may never have entirely abandoned their claim as magicians, as descendants of the Tuatha de Danann. It was with that people that the green mounds of sand, known as *Sithean*, were associated originally . . . it is therefore not very surprising that the people of the islands living in a superstitious age threw overboard the teaching and practice of the Christian Church. They could think of no way more binding upon the individual, as regards marriage, than to have it celebrated in a site supposed to be the dwelling place of the mysterious people. It was a distinct reversion towards paganism, but it was accepted and adhered to until the beginning of last century . . . The spot chosen for these island marriages was at *Sithean Mor*, Ardskenish, Colonsay, which was the largest mound of a group of three. As far as I can ascertain, the custom regarding the going to the *Sithean Mor* was similar to what now prevails in going to or from the church. However, the actual ceremony at the *Sithean*, without priest or parson, was simplicity itself. The man and woman married themselves by publically agreeing in the presence of their friends to take each other as man and wife. Such a ceremony would be quite valid in Scotland in the present time (Grieve 2: 326–7).

This description is further evidence that sacred mounds were used for marriages, and Grieve asserts that this was revived between the mid-sixteenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries. We may speculate that the betrothal custom described above also formed part of the pre-Christian marriage rites, and that while the location of the public declaration may have shifted, the betrothal remained an essential and more intimate, binding ‘pre-contract’, which was, in a sense, ‘replayed’ in front of the whole community at a later meeting. This arrangement thus resembles analogues outlined above where a public ‘re-asking’ followed a private, but perhaps equally binding agreement.

Another allegorical device found in connection with the *rèiteach* is that of the ‘transplanted object’; the girl is requested to form part of the ‘stock’ of the young man’s party. Dolly Wallace from Harris, interviewed by Margaret Bennett, recalls the tradition, which she revived for the wedding of her daughter in 1985:

**DW:** What I remember about it is it was an informal gathering where the bride’s hand was asked for in marriage. A third party asked . . . He talked about something quite different. He didn’t ask for the woman. When Morag’s *rèiteach* was here Iain MacDonald from Milivaig asked for her hand, it was a ewe lamb . . . He got up and he said that he had heard that Jim [her father] had a ewe lamb that was inclined to stray, and that he would be glad to take the ewe lamb off his hands and put it into a safer place, and that we wouldn’t need to worry about the ewe lamb then because it would be in his own fold as it were. Jim replied ‘Yes’, he was quite happy to let him have the ewe lamb because he knew it was going into good hands.

**MB:** Back to the first *rèiteach* that you were at in Harris, can you remember what was asked for there?

**DW:** No!, but it was something on the same lines. He would have – whatever it was he

had asked for, a boat or whatever was the case, he would have replied that he had this boat that had never been used by anybody else . . . and that he was welcome to take her, and sail her in calm waters . . . I suppose it goes by the trade of the bride's family. I was at one earlier but I was only eight. And that was my cousin that was getting married . . . It ran along the same lines. Her father was asked for the bride and he replied 'Yes'. Now I'm sure it was a sheep that was asked for there; he was a crofter (Bennett: 98).

The motif of the 'ewe lamb which strays' may suggest a perception of the young woman as having begun the process of moving towards the 'fold' of another; a state of transition, explicitly linked with danger, or as we shall see, the notion of being 'unsettled'. Alternatively, it may reflect a personality trait; a rebellious spirit, for example. The allegorical device is flexible enough to permit both readings; the articulation of the mingled resistance and anxiety of leaving the safety of the family, common to many examples above; or as a device which reveals information specific to the individual context. These two interpretations could, of course, occur simultaneously. Similarly, the 'boat which has never been sailed' enables the girl's virginity to be affirmed without the offence such intimate enquiry would cause if directly expressed. The allegorical device in the *rèiteach* provides the vehicle for the communication of this delicate information without the young man's party being obliged to request it; an enquiry which, even in past centuries, could easily have been construed as a grave insult to the whole family. The girl's father can also use the formula as a way to warn the suitor that he expects the destination to be 'calm'; an expression, perhaps, of kin solidarity which will follow the girl wherever she is 'sailed'. It is plausible that the 'boat never sailed' could mean 'never married'; but since remarriage was rare in Highland society until recent times, this reading must be considered unlikely.

Another device noted is the suitor's party presenting themselves as travellers seeking accommodation. Alexander MacDonald describes the betrothal custom in Glenmoriston:

Our wedding of the olden time was invariably preceded by the 'contract' – an institution of long standing and great importance. This function took place in the house of the bride's father, to which the bridegroom and a small party of chosen friends repaired, usually on a certain appointed Friday evening . . . One of the party, probably a near relative, introduced himself and his companions as wanderers, seeking a night's lodgings, and the bride's father, if matters were agreeable to all concerned, received the would-be strangers hospitably. In due time a mere form of contract was entered into by the prospective bride and bridegroom, in the course of which proceeding they for the first time that evening saw each other. On those occasions, as a general custom, there was excellent cheer, all of which was supposed to be provided by the bridegroom. It was not common to have a dance at those contracts, but songs were sung, tales were told, and there was also much good-natured fun (MacDonald, Alexander: 144).

Although the girl's father is expecting the visit, it having been 'appointed' in advance, the suitor and his supporters present themselves as strangers. We may note that the

groom-to-be has a spokesman, and does not make the request for entry himself. Entry would appear to be conditional on 'matters' being 'agreeable to all concerned', which itself presupposes that refusal was a possibility. This mode of 'asking', since it takes place on the threshold, is much more in the character of an entry ritual than the allegorical devices outlined above, where entry itself is not explicitly requested; indeed, in many it seems to have been a foregone conclusion. The motif of the 'wanderers' is, however, as flexible as other devices; if negotiations fail, the father could conceivably state that there was no room inside for the party, and they could thus be turned away without causing offence. One feels, however, that for this to be possible, discussions would have to be carried out using some indirect formula from which the father could then go on to make his refusal; reverting to the allegorical mode from direct matter-of-fact negotiation would defeat the purpose of the custom. Since MacDonald gives no indication of the nature of these discussions, this must remain open to interpretation. In all examples of betrothal customs where the father must be 'asked', the groom's party find themselves in an 'inferior' position despite being the dominant 'male principle'; this is acknowledged through ritual submission to testing and other trials, and the provision of whisky being their responsibility. It may be that a request for entry as travellers expresses the due amount of humility, without sacrificing the equality of status this implies – to present themselves as beggars would, of course, be quite impossible. The 'wanderers' of Glenmoriston adopt a deferential, passive posture, as tradition demands; they do not expect immediate entry and resistance must be made by those inside if they consider their honour worth defending. There is a clear link between this spatial relationship and examples in which the visitors – those 'outside' and 'below' are 'unrecognised' by those 'inside' or 'above'. We may compare this to the near-universal custom of the groom's party being kept waiting at the church, or a race or other device to ensure the bride's party arrive there first. We also note from this example that it is not until business is concluded that the couple are allowed to see each other; a clear statement of priorities and further indication of continuous pressure exerted by the girl's family. A possible relationship between entry rituals and traditions of hospitality will be discussed below.

Some accounts of betrothals make no explicit reference to ritual entry, ritual exchange or a 'false bride' sequence, but contain elements suggestive of these. One example is from Roderick Mackillop of Berneray, who describes how the girl's father deliberately made it difficult for those who had come for his daughter, the conscious prolongation of the event fuelled by more than a love of language and the force of tradition:

Chaidh Seonaidh Choinnich sìos a thaigh Sheumais Thormoid. Agus ò, bha feadhainn eile ann cuideachd, ach 'se m'athair agus Tormod Lachlainn 's iad an fheadhainn . . . Agus nuair a dh'fhoighneachdadh m'athair de Sheumas, dè na bh'aige a chrodh, 's chanadh Seumas, 's dòcha, gu robh sia mairt aige. 'S theireadh Tormod Lachlainn nach robh sin ceart idir, nach robh crodh idir aige, air dìreach airson a dhèanamh doirbh dha nighean Sheonaidh Choinnich fhaighinn airson a pòsadh. Sin a nist mar a bhiodh oidhche a' rèitich. 'Sann.

Agus bhiodh am botal a' dol mu chuairt. 'S mar bu mhotha gheibheadh na bodaich 's ann . . . 's ann a b' fheàrr a bhiodh an spòrs. Sin agad a nist a' rud a theireadh iad ri Oidhche a' Rèitich. Ach cha chuala mi riamh bodach sam bith, ann am Bearnaraigh co-dhiù, nach tug a nighean dhan fhear a thigeadh g' a h-iarraidh.

[Seonaidh Choinnich went down to Seumas Thormoid's house. Oh! there were others there too, but it was my father and Tormod Lachlainn were the ones . . . And when my father would ask James what cattle he had, James would say perhaps that he had six cows. Tormod Lachlainn would say that was not right at all, that he had no cattle at all, just to make it difficult for him to get Seonaidh Choinnich's daughter in marriage. That, now, is how the betrothal night was. And the bottle would go the rounds. And the more the old men drank the better the sport. That now is what was called the betrothal night. But I never heard, in Berneray anyway, of any old man who did not give his daughter to the man who came to ask for her.] (Roderick MacKillop, 1978).

An example from the MacLagan manuscripts alludes to the formula and indirect preamble which, as we have seen, commonly preceded the formal asking:

Both in North and South Uist, the common custom is when a person wishes to obtain the consent for marriage, of the parents or guardians of his intended, he arranges to come to their house on a certain night for the purpose. This night is called *Oidhche an rèite*. He brings along with him a friend or two. Their coming of course, is known beforehand and they are received cordially and treated to supper. By and bye one of the friends who has accompanied the Bridegroom expresses himself highly gratified by the kind entertainment, but would like to know what does it mean. This leads to freer conversation, and after a little beating about according to the mood and ingenuity of the party the object of the gathering is allowed to eke out. The friends of the young man indicate their hearty good will, and the friends of the young woman indicate that they have no objection, whereupon a glass of the whisky that has already being doing duty is handed to the young man, who drinks the half of it, and then hands it to his intended, in token of his willingness to share his lot with her; she drinks the other half in token of her acceptance, and forthwith they shake hands and the contract is complete. (Donald Ferguson, North Uist. MacLagan MS 2: 216).

We note once again the formula expressing surprise; feigned bafflement as to the purpose of the visit. More indirect discussion is necessary before the purpose of their visit 'ekes' out. This account is a vivid example of the obligation to avoid haste; the visitors must endure a meal and varying levels of discourse, scrupulously avoiding the main topic, before this can be raised. It is of interest that the informant stresses that 'of course' they are expected, the meal is prepared in advance and the groom's party are received cordially. This suggests that although the informant realises his account resembles the confrontation of relative strangers, he is at pains to point out that this is not the case. In the following account from Lewis, again taken from the MacLagan manuscripts, the same emphasis is made:

On the contracting night (*Oidhche na reite*) the bridegroom, accompanied by one or two of his most intimate friends goes to the bride's home, where, of course, the fact of his coming

is known beforehand, as well as the object of his coming, and they are prepared to receive him. There is tea and a dram, and when they get the length of talking about the business of marriage, and it is understood that all are agreed, the principal actor on the bridegroom's part – usually the one who is to be the best-man at the wedding, when it comes, takes the bridegroom's right-hand and holds it up. Similarly the chief actor for the bride – usually the one who is to be best-maid, lifts the bride's right-hand and places it in the bridegroom's. This is called *Car laimb* (MacLagan MS 39: 8806).

Although ritual language would appear to be absent, the pressure to avoid unseemly haste is obvious. This account is remarkable for the presence of a female ceremonial counterpart to the best-man or master-of-ceremonies role; the only instance found where the moment of union is effected by third party, non-kin representatives of each sex.

Similar rules of engagement applied to marriage customs elsewhere in Scotland. In the Borders, 'bidding' the guests was accompanied by the same awkward decorum:

After the 'crying' came the 'bidding', when the shy young groom, accompanied by his equally shy best man, had to go round inviting his relatives and friends to the marriage . . . the couple would come awkwardly into the house, where they had been nervously expected for some time, and would be furnished with seats near the fire. It was good manners to pretend that the object of their call was quite unsuspected, and the simple little fraud was kept up until the couple rose to take their leave. It was probably when his hand was on the sneck that the prospective bridegroom would make a sudden dash at the object of his visit, which during the interview had been uppermost in every mind, excepting in that of the gudeman who, when the conversation seemed to be heading straight to the point, had a perfect genius for diverting the talk into another channel. The invitation was not a formal one, and it was good manners to express great surprise at receiving it. Sandie Thomson, who was always an awkward man, instead of giving a definite 'bid', said 'he supposed they would be comin' to this turn-owre.' But that was recognised as a clumsy way of doing the business. (Hyslop: 86).

Walter Gregor's description of a betrothal is remarkable for the presence of a particularly terse ritual dialogue:

Two men, called the *sens*, were dispatched from the house of the bridegroom to demand the bride. On making their appearance a volley of fire-arms met them. When they came up to the door of the bride's home they asked:

'Does — bide here?'

'Aye, faht de ye wint wee ir?'

'We wint ir for —,' was the answer.

'But ye winna get ir.'

'But we'll tack ir.'

'Wil ye come in, in taste a moofu o' a dram till we see about it?' (Gregor 1874: 114–5).

This is a good example of marriage negotiations taking place in the idiom of a battle. Guns are fired, and the threat of abduction is explicit. From this account, it appears

that the shots are fired by the girl's side, since the groom's party are those being 'met'. The tradition of the 'courting shot', however, is described in the *Scottish National Dictionary* as 'a shot fired by a wooer to indicate his arrival to ask formally for the girl's hand' and it may be the signal is fired by his representatives, who have gathered at the young woman's house in advance. It would, of course, be quite in keeping with the tradition of mock hostility and resistance for the girl's family to fire the shot themselves. According to the same reference source, the term *sens* is derived from the *send*, the individual whose task it was to announce the groom's arrival. However, there may also be a link with the Italian *sensale*, the name given to the marriage broker who specialised in 'the initial negotiations and the preliminary agreement between the two parties' (Klapisch-Zuber: 183).

The ritual surrounding the 'fetching the bride' in Shetland may be interpreted as a form of ritual dialogue. The scene last century is described by Robert Jamieson:

About six o' clock, the 'aff gang', or bridegroom's breakfast, is put on the table, and his men, who have been invited, assemble; and about the same time the bride's maidens, twelve or fifteen in number, meet at her house. Breakfast over at the bridegroom's (generally a work of three hours), he and his men walk to the bride's house, draw up in line before the door and fire a shot. The door is shut, and no response is made. A second shot is fired; still silence. After a third shot, the door is opened, and the bride, leading all her maidens in single file, walks to the spot where the bridegroom is standing, when every lad must kiss every lass. On re-entering the house, an ancient and peculiar custom is observed. The bride, with her maidens, on coming out of the house, does not walk direct to the spot where the bridegroom is standing, but turns to the left, and goes so as to form a half-circle, following the course of the sun; and on re-entering, the circle is completed. Observing a custom as old as the hills, they walk to the manse. There is a married couple at every wedding, called the 'honest folk', whose duty it is to walk before the bride and bridegroom in procession, and attend to the comforts of the whole company (Reid: 60–62).

The closed door signifies resistance; the 'request for entry' at the door is made through gunfire rather than poetry; and the groom's party are ignored until finally the bride and her supporters appear. The ritual has the character of a 'battle of the sexes', where division and resistance to union are presented dramatically, leading to eventual union. This union is not only between the couple at the centre of the ritual, but all the supporters, who are unmarried. The 'honest folk', the master and mistress of ceremony, who perhaps represent the ideal partnership, also perform the incorporation ritual, the man dispensing wine or brandy and the woman biscuit or cake. A similar picture of mass 'pairing off' is described by Jessie Nicholson and took place before a wedding on Skye in the 1930's:

On the wedding day they would all gather to the bride's home and there were couples there, boys and girls were partnered and they would go arm-in-arm to the church for the marriage and when it was over, they would walk home together again.<sup>11</sup>

### 2.3 *Eulogy*

As in Brittany and Wales, the bards were involved in the celebration of marriages, at least those of the nobility, and in which eulogy played an important part. Martin notes:

The orators, after the Druids were extinct, were brought in to preserve the genealogy of families, and to repeat the same at every succession of a chief; and upon the occasions of marriages and births, they made epithalamiums and panegyrics which the poet or bard pronounced. (Martin Martin: 115).

In certain areas, the formal asking for the bride is characterised by the exchange of eulogies, rather than indirect discussion of the girl. F. G. Rea recalls the occasion he and his three brothers were invited to a betrothal on South Uist:

I was rather interested, as well as amused, at learning that the Uist people were very careful as to what family they married into. I was told that the Mac X's were sly, the Mac Y's were wild, the A's bad tempered, the Mac Z's were liars, and so on, and no one would marry into a family whose ancestors had ever done a bad turn to theirs. Sandy duly called for us the next evening, and I with my two brothers accompanied him across the braes to the widow's house. With solemn decorum we were motioned to take seats on a bench beside a long table, near the end further away from the fireplace. At this end of the table sat two men, one brown-bearded about fifty years of age, the other, seated beside him, considerably younger, and clean-shaven with the exception of a dark moustache. Round the fire were gathered the widow and her family, and at the end of the table near them sat a huge man who I knew well, the brother of the widow. I felt rather ill at ease for there seemed to be two camps, Sandy, I, my brothers, and the two silent men at our end of the table forming one group, while the others formed a whispering group near the other end.

Then there came a dead silence which seemed to be a signal, for the bearded man at our end stood up and, in a mixture of English and Gaelic, began a eulogy of the younger man beside him. He spoke of his companion's strength, his skill with a boat, of his knowledge of farming, and his success as a fisherman; he praised the man's parents and forefathers and their achievements. He then intimated that his friend asked for the hand of the youngest daughter in marriage, and wanted to know what would be given along with her in the way of dowry. He then sat down, and the widow's brother stood up and eulogized the girl, her family, her qualities, honest, clean, kind, and so on. Then followed a contest between these two men as to what would be given with the girl, one trying to obtain as much as possible, and the other endeavouring to part with as little as possible. As far as I can remember a bargain was made at last that a stack of corn, a calf and some fowls should be given with the girl.

All this time these two men had held the field, and no one else had spoken a word: the would-be bridegroom had sat with bent head and downcast eyes throughout, while I and my two brothers had sat and listened with very mixed feelings. At this stage the widow's brother left the table and joined the group at the fire, whence there then ensued much emphatic talk but in subdued voices; we sat at the table in silence. Eventually the man from the group at the fire returned to the table and announced that the girl refused the offer of marriage, but that her eldest sister would be willing to accept it. The spokesman at our end bent down

and consulted the would-be bridegroom, who looked up for the first time, nodded, and said: 'Ach, aye! It's all the same.' Immediately all came and stood around the table; a bottle and a wine-glass were produced; and, in turn, each drank to the health of the pair who in due course were to be married (Rea: 141–3).

The hosts' 'solemn decorum' is the first indication that this is no ordinary visit, but a clearly-structured ritual event. The spatial separation of the two 'camps' is clearly delineated; the girl's family are gathered round the fire, physically aligning themselves with their representative who occupies the 'superior' end of the table. The table is a 'male' space which becomes the 'duelling-ground', and the visitors are conducted by their hosts to their 'inferior' place at the end of the table furthest away from the hearth. This arrangement is comparable to the separation of the two 'camps' by the threshold, where those inside occupy the 'higher', 'regulated' space, and those outside the 'lower' and 'unregulated'. This may seem rather inhospitable; the rules of hospitality are, however, modified in order to satisfy the demands of the ritual. Indeed, the normal rituals associated with hospitality; unrestricted entry, welcoming words and drink, position by the fire, are *inverted* for the ritual occasion. Silence plays an important part in Rea's description, and it is this which contributes most to his discomfort; in another violation of conventional norms they are guests, but not spoken to. The 'signal' of dead silence which begins the verbal battle is evidently a customary one; the two men engage in solo combat while the others remain silent; and the groom, like Chaucer's *Troilus*, sits in ritual silence with 'bent head and downcast eyes'. The ritual is clearly structured, and the representatives' verbal skills are centred on two distinct areas. The first is the bardic tradition of eulogy; solemn, creative and self-consciously 'poetic'. Then the spokesmen shift registers to a much more prosaic mode of expression; the cut-and-thrust, hard bargaining of the mercantile world.

Margaret Fay Shaw provides another example from South Uist:

One old custom still kept up was the *rèiteach* or formal betrothal. The young man took an older friend with him to call on the parents of the young woman. After conversation about many things, the friend would begin to extol the young man's character and his qualities for making a good husband for their daughter, while she would make her feelings known by staying in their presence with obvious pleasure or by leaving the room. Whatever the opinion of the parents, unless there was some serious reason for their refusal, the daughter made her own decision. If she stayed, she would seat herself at the table opposite the young man. Her father would say '*Ma tha ise deònach, tha mise ro-dhèdnach, agus mura bi sin mar sin, cha bhi so mar so*' (If she is willing, I am very willing, and if that weren't so, this wouldn't be so). The young man would catch the girl's hand, and they would divide a dram between them, drinking from the same glass (Shaw: 15).

It is interesting to again note that there is some preamble, 'conversation about many things', before the eulogy of the young man begins. This suggests that another feature of the structural form of the ritual was the deliberate prolongation of the trial; the young man's representative cannot simply arrive and begin his task; he must introduce

the purpose of his visit in an artful way, after a seemingly period of small-talk. Haste, on either side, would be indecent, perhaps even risky. In the previous example, this prolongation was achieved by a period of separation and of being ignored, finally broken by the signal of absolute silence.

In the former example the girl's representative offers a corresponding eulogy, indicating an acknowledgment of a degree of equality which is the basis for the contestatory situation which results; a verbal battle. In Shaw's account, no eulogy of the girl takes place; indeed, her family have total control over the proceedings. Her consent is heavily stressed, and it is clear that the couple have not met before. It is of interest that both refusal and agreement are expressed non-verbally; to refuse, she removes herself physically from the situation; to accept, she sits opposite (but not next to) the young man. This may be said to illustrate two of the main recurring features of the betrothal ritual; the ritual silence of the girl and her suitor removes them from the verbal interaction, the discussion, and emphasis is placed instead on the expressive gesture – from downcast eyes (in the former example) to simply leaving the room. Such non-verbal communication is no less potent than words, but it has clear advantages. As with the allegorical exchange, no offence could be taken by the young man – the fiction could be maintained that the girl had simply left the room. Of course, the significance of such a symbolic action in this highly-charged context is understood by all; but what seems important is that *no words were spoken*, an action which also serves as another example of the inversion of traditional hospitality. Whilst the suitor's silence ritually removes him from direct confrontation, possible or actual, the girl's silence fulfils another function; the articulation of the taboo against ready acceptance, which, it appears, is as undesirable as open refusal. Even the father's response – clearly formulaic – avoids the direct expression of acceptance. The tone is one of acquiescence – indeed, one commentator states that he 'capitulates' – the father is no longer actively resistant, but neither is he openly welcoming.<sup>12</sup> Typically, the girl defers to her father, who in turn defers to her; a rather ambiguous and unemphatic expression of assent. Only after the ritual sharing of the same cup can normal traditions of hospitality be resumed. Although the free consent of the girl is central to this account – we are told that the family would have to have a 'serious reason' for their refusal – arranged marriages were known, as one informant (John MacDonald, Kyles Paible) confirms:

Q: Who were the people who came with the bridegroom to the house?

John MacDonald – Oh, his very close relatives, such as his uncle or cousins or . . .

Q: Male relatives, were they?

JM: Male relatives, yes, and well, his near closest neighbours too, whether he was related to them or not. Always one of his closest neighbours was taken along.

. . .

Q: Now, were marriages arranged, arranged without regard to the wishes of the parties concerned, the young people?

JM: Yes, at times it was, in the old days.

Q: Before your time, it would be, would it?

JM: Before my time, yes.

Q: In your father's time.

JM: Yes, definitely in my father's time. Oh yes. Marriages were arranged between the parents of the groom and maybe the parents of the bridegroom. [sic]

Q: What other considerations would they have in mind when arranging these?

JM: Oh they would just . . . say, now, if there was a . . . a girl was looking at . . . in those days a boy had a good piece of land or anything like that, they were just looking . . . that's the only thing they could look for in those days.

We may note that it was important that a non-kin member be among the suitor's supporters; perhaps another method of 'insulating' the two sides from one another.

Another account of a *rèiteach* involving the exchange of eulogies is described by Annie Sinclair, a native of Barra:

(Nuair a bha) rèiteach dol a bhith ann bha fear na bainnseadh a' dol a dh'iarraidh caraid dha fhèin, agus bheireadh e leis e a dh'ionnsaigh a' rèitich gu taigh na tè a bha e dol . . . dol a phòsadh. Agus bhiodh . . . bhiodh ann a shin bòrd air a sheatadh 's biadh gu leòr 's dram, agus na càirdean aice mun cuairt ann. Agus bha esan a toirt leis, an duine bha seo, caraide dha fhèin a bha ri bruidhinn air a shon, mar gum biodh, dol a dhèanamh *speech*. Agus nuair a rachadh iad a thaigh a' rèitich bha . . . bha iad a' suidhe sìos aig bòrd, agus bha dram a' dol mun cuairt. Agus nuair a bha . . . dram no slàinte a thoirt seachad bha an gille bha seo 'g èirigh suas agus ag ràdh gu tàinig e le charaide às a' bhaile seo eile agus airson cead nam pàrantan fhaotainn airson 's gu toireadh iad seachad nighean, canaidh sinn Tormod, do Thormod a seo. Agus as a dheaghaidh sin thòisich e ri moladh Thormoid ann an dòigh shònraichte, 's bhiodh e 'g innse na deagh bheachdan 's an deagh dhuine, ghille bh'ann, 's gu robh e o dhaoine matha, 's mar sin. Agus bha an uair sin fear an taighe, athair na h-ighinn, ag èirigh suas agus a' toirt taing dhaibh airson cuireadh a chur air airson bruidhinn airson na h-ighinn, 's bhruidhneadh e airson na h-ighinn aige fhèin. Agus bheireadh e seachad cead. Agus chanadh an uair sin am fear a bha 'g iarraidh na mnatha dha . . . dha charaid, chanadh e, "Eiribh a nist 's beiribh air làmhnan air a chèile." Agus dh'èireadh i seo far a robh i agus dh'èireadh esan. Thigeadh e nuas agus bheireadh e air làimh oirre. Bha an dà . . . an duine, an gille bha dol a phòsadh, an duine a bh'air an taobh eile 's shuidheadh iad sìos 's thòisicheadh . . . nuair a chaidh an drama mun cuairt rachadh a' rèiteach a dhèanamh mar sin.

[When a betrothal was to take place the bridegroom would go to a friend of his own and take him along with him for the betrothal to the house of the girl to whom he was to be married. And there a table would be set with plenty of food and drink, with her friends gathered round. And he, this man, took a friend of his along with him to speak for him, to make a speech, as it were. And when they went to the betrothal house they sat down at a table and a dram was passed round. And when they had had a dram or toasted good health, this lad got up and said that he had come from this other village with his friend to get the parents' permission to give away the daughter – let's say Norman – to this Norman. And after that he began to praise Norman in a special way, and he would relate the good opinion people had of him and what a good man . . . lad he was, and that he came of good people, and so

on. Then the man of the house, the girl's father, would get up and thank them for inviting him to speak for the girl, and he would speak on behalf of his own daughter. And he would give permission. And then the man who was seeking a wife for his friend would say, 'Rise now and shake hands'. And she would get where she was and he would get up. He would come down and shake her hand. The two . . . the man who was going to get married and the man on the other side would sit down, and a dram was passed around and the betrothal was celebrated in that way.]

In this account the ritual hostility and resistance of the girl's family is absent, although some time must pass before the subject can be broached. Again, the girl is represented by her father, the young man by a non-kin representative. Unfortunately, the 'special way' of praising is not described, but we may speculate that this referred to a particular, specially marked form of language, a rhetorical style appropriate, perhaps reserved for the occasion. His eulogy evidently ends with an invitation for the father to respond, who thanks the visitor for the 'invitation'. In addition to delivering the eulogy, the young man's representative performs the role of master-of-ceremonies, co-ordinating the final movements of the young couple towards union. Once the father's consent is secured he abdicates his 'higher' ritual position; control and ritual responsibility pass to the groom's side. The groom would appear to approach the girl, who may be sitting in a 'separate' space; at the end of the table or nearest the fire. Their union is reinforced by the symbolic union of the two families as all sit down and share the glass of whisky.

Another *rèiteach* on Barra is recalled by Kate MacColl:

**Mary MacDonald:** Cò nist, an rèiteach mu dheireadh air a robh sibh, a' Cheit?

**KM:** Rèiteach Màiri Nèill.

**MM:** Agus cò dh'fhiathaich sibh?

**KM:** Flòraidh.

**MM:** Seadh. Bha ise fia . . . fiathachadh air a taobh fhèin?

**KM:** Bha, 's bha esan air a thaobh fhèin. Bha.

**MM:** Agus co mheud a bhiodh ann?

**KM:** O bha sguad mòr ann. Bha sguad làn an taighe ann.

**MM:** Làn an taighe?

**KM:** Seadh.

**MM:** Agus cò na bha tighinn còmhla ri fear na bainnse?

**KM:** *Well*, bha cuideidin ri bhith ann a bheireadh seachad ise.

**MM:** Seadh.

**KM:** Agus bha fear aigesan 'ga h-iarraidh.

**MM:** 'Ga h-iarraidh.

**KM:** 'Ga h-iarraidh. Agus bha . . .

**MM:** 'S dè bha tachairt an toiseach? Robh iad a' faighinn . . . 'N e am biadh a bha . . . a bha tachairt . . . a bhathar a' dèanamh an toiseach, neo robh . . . robh a' rèiteach 'ga dhèanamh mu faigheadh iad am biadh seachad?

**KM:** Bhathar 'ga h-iarraidh nuair a bha iad aig am biadh, tha mi 'm beachd.

**MM:** Seadh, seadh.

KM: Nuair a bhiodh . . . bha iad ‘nan suidhe aig a’ bhòrd, ‘s bha iad an uair sin a bruidhinn. Am fear bha ‘ga h-iarraidh-s bha e bruidhinn.

MM: Bhiodh an dram a’ dol mun cuairt?

KM: O bha an dram a’ dol mun cuairt. Bha, bha. Bha an dram a’ dol mun cuairt.

MM: Agus an e a h-athair bu trice bhiodh ‘ga toirt seachad?

KM: *Well*, nam biodh a h-athair ann.

MM: Ann.

KM: Mur a biodh, an duine bu dlùithe.

MM: Agus bhiodh cuid athar-san neo cuideigin air a thaobh fhèin aigesan.

KM: Bhiodh.

MM: Nach ann a sin a bhiodh am moladh air an nighinn?

KM: O, m’eudail! ‘S ann-san a bha sin.

MM: Agus tha mi creidsinn gum bithte ‘ga mholadh-san cuideachd?

KM: O bhiodh, bhiodh. An aon rud.

MM: ‘S a robh danns ann as deaghaidh . . . ?

KM: As deaghaidh sin? Chan eil mi am beachd gu robh. Cha robh, oidhche rèitich.

MM: Robh òrain ann?

KM: Orain ‘s bruidhinn. ‘Se.

MM: Agus oidhche na bainnse ‘s ann a bhiodh an dannsa?

KM: Seadh.

[MM: Now, Kate, which was the last betrothal you attended?

KM: Mairi Neill’s betrothal.

MM: And who invited you?

KM: Flora.

MM: Yes. She invited those on her own side?

KM: Yes. And he on his side.

MM: And how many would be there?

KM: Oh, there was a big crowd. A crowd that filled the house.

MM: A full house?

KM: Yes.

MM: And who all came with the bridegroom?

KM: Well, somebody had to be there to give her away.

MM: Yes.

KM: And he had someone to ask for her.

MM: To ask for her?

KM: Yes. And . . .

MM: And what happened first of all? Did they get . . . was it food that was . . . that was prepared first of all, or did the betrothal take place before the eating was over?

KM: She was asked for while they were eating, I think.

MM: Yes, yes.

KM: When they were . . . they were sitting at the table, and then they were talking. The man who was asking for her was talking.

MM: The dram would be passed around?

KM: The dram was passed around. Yes, yes. The dram was passed around.

- MM: And it was usually the father who gave her away?  
 KM: Well, if her father was there.  
 MM: There.  
 KM: If not, the nearest relative.  
 MM: And he would have his father's relatives or someone on his side?  
 KM: Yes.  
 MM: What praises would be bestowed on the girl!  
 KM: Oh! my dear, yes. Indeed, yes.  
 MM: And I suppose he would be praised also?  
 KM: Oh! yes, yes, similarly.  
 MM: And was there a dance after . . . ?  
 KM: After that? I don't think so. No, not on the betrothal night.  
 MM: Were there songs?  
 KM: Songs and talking, yes.  
 MM: And the dance took place on the night of the wedding?  
 KM: Yes.]

In this account one may detect a further movement away from the solemn and highly charged betrothals of earlier times. Invitations are made, a crowd is gathered, and the meal taken together is the occasion for the exchange of eulogies rather than the symbol of the successful outcome. Apart from the use of third parties to speak for the couple, the lingering ritual significance of the occasion is suggested by the fact that no dancing took place at the *rèiteach*. Perhaps in this communal act of censorship the participants, whether consciously or not, acknowledge the former solemnity of the ritual.

Another example which would appear to suggest a 'one-way' eulogy is from Cape Breton. In this account we also have evidence for the motif of the 'buyers', a ritual preamble, eulogy, and the 'false bride' sequence. The presence of all these ritual elements may indicate one of the most 'complete' examples of the custom .

The bridegroom-to-be and an older friend, someone respected in the community, would come to the home of the girl he hoped to have for a bride. The father would usually know why they had come, but nothing would be said outright. Instead, they would pretend they had come to buy a cow or a horse or a boat – and everything they said had a double meaning. If it was a boat they were claiming they were wanting to buy, they would ask such a question as, Is she broad in the beam? Eventually they would get down to talking about the real purpose of the visit, and when the older friend had finished speaking well of the bridegroom-to-be and asking for a certain girl's hand, the father would then go through the formality of first offering his other daughters. Sometimes, in fact, the offer was quite serious, as he perhaps wanted to marry off a particular daughter and would actually refuse to give up the girl the young man had come for.

Malcolm Angus Macleod of Birch Plain remembered having seen only one Reiteach. He said the table was prepared for a little feast, and everyone except the young girl herself sat at the table. Her chair was left empty at the table. And the young man who wished to marry her had brought an older man to speak for him, and this older man described the future groom's qualities and love for the girl and asked for her hand. And when all the other

arrangements were made, as the final act of agreement, the young girl would come to the table and sit – and strong drink was available, and the feast was served ('Reiteach': 20).

It is of interest that the girl is hidden during the eulogy and the discussions which follow, and makes a highly dramatic appearance at their conclusion, to fill the empty chair – another essentially 'dramatic' element. There is an acknowledgment that the dialogue carries a 'double meaning', and that the presentation of women for refusal could carry a serious as well as comic intention. On the level of joking, the bride may be 'broad in the beam', but the clear suggestion is that her father could use the ritual as a way of refusing to allow the match. We have previously described a jilted suitor from the same source.

Writing of the Western Islands in 1782, Rev. John Buchanan described a betrothal in which, as with these examples, only the groom is praised:

Marriages among the gentlemen are attended with no greater pomp than among the better sort through Great Britain; they are commonly attended by their friends, who make merry on this happy occasion. Contracts are only known to a few. But it is not so with the common people. They invite the friends on both sides, to make up the contract of marriage and as all the poor people retain that part of their former importance that entitled them to the honour of gentlemen, *duine uasal*, at least in words, it is supposed that the lady's parents will not make a trifling offer of portion to their intended son-in-law. A pompous promise, if they fail in the performance, adds much to the dignity of the match. Being present at one of these meetings of friends, I observed that the friends of the young man began with a set speech, by informing the parents of the cause and design of their meeting, which was, to pave the way for an alliance with the family to which the woman belonged; and then launched out at considerable length on the great and good qualities of the young man who aspired at the connection. Meanwhile, they remarked, that the friends of the young gentleman were such as ought not to be received with indifference. It ought, they proceeded, to be esteemed a very happy turn of Providence to cast such a hopeful youth, and good friends to back him, to solicit their friendship. They hoped, therefore, they would make an offer of such a portion to the young woman, as might do honour to themselves, and worthy of so promising a man. The portion formerly was paid in cows, sheep and goats, these being more valuable to them than money; and this old practice is continued in full force. Even if the family should have none, they must name a number of cows, and a handsome number too, otherwise the young man would think his dignity suffered in the eyes of his neighbours. Twenty cows are among the most moderate portions promised, and many of them considerably above that number. If the young couple had reason to be satisfied with each other during the courtship, the affair is generally settled to the satisfaction of the parties, after which they began to make merry . . . as their cows are but few, they must take, at the time of payment, a kind of representative value of it. Accordingly I was told that a year old cow stood for one; three ewes for another; a spinning wheel for a third; two blankets for a fourth; a small chest for a fifth; and so on until the number agreed upon was completed (Buchanan: 163–8).

This account is valuable for the light it sheds on the explicitly ritual aspects of the betrothal. The young man's representative delivers a 'set speech', suggesting the existence

of an unwritten script which formed the basis of the spokesman's task. The essential elements are revealed as an opening announcement as to why they are assembled; an expression of the desire for union; a lengthy eulogy; a veiled challenge, rather boastful in tone; and an offer of terms. This concluding challenge, almost a threat, seems designed to provoke a reply in kind, although the account provides no clear evidence of this. The 'paving the way' speech may be Buchanan's translation of the name given to the entire ritual; it was noted earlier that the term *an rète* is linked to the idea of 'smoothing' and 'clearing' away obstacles. A veiled threat accompanying the proud boast is suggested by the friends of the suitor outlining the kind of reception they expect, defying the girl's family to treat them with indifference, and in a later reference to their 'support', of the young man's suit. The implication is that to scorn the suitor is to scorn the whole group – precisely the situation that indirect forms of expression seem designed to avoid. Whether this is a genuine challenge, or the combatants are merely following tradition, Buchanan's account is a most vivid picture of the two camps 'squaring up' for a verbal battle. The assertion of the equal worth of the two parties is stressed, and this is further underlined by the ritual system of equivalence surrounding the marriage-portion. As with the template outlining the script of the speech, custom dictates that cattle must be given, whether or not the young man is in possession of any. Unless he is a complete stranger, this information will be known to all; but, as with the suspension of normal hospitality, special rules of engagement apply, and those assembled are complicitous in the communal fiction of an ideal suitor, well endowed with wealth and noble qualities. This ritual behaviour, allied with the construction of an elaborate tariff outlining the value of objects in relation to the ideal currency of cattle, is indicative of an archaic relationship between a man and his property. Indeed, cattle were most probably the most common form of currency, as in Ireland. There, the basic unit was the milch cow (*lulgach* or *bó mlicht*) accompanied by her calf. A cow in calf was worth two thirds of this, and a *samaisc*, a three year-old dry heifer half the value.<sup>13</sup>

Just as the suitor's friends boast of his fine qualities, underscoring his masculinity and greatness with their own pride and strength, his potency, success and ability is also evident in the number of cows which make up his marriage portion. Whether he can make good this promise is not important; in the ritual world, the young man is the embodiment of ideal perfection; a match impossible to refuse, a worthy successor to her father in the care and protection of the girl. In the same way, every eligible woman is a laughable assemblage of imperfections except the chosen one, the perfect image of the ideal partner. As we have noted, a belief exists that even the young man's representative must be physically perfect; nothing can be left to chance.

### 3. THE REFUSAL SEQUENCE

Several accounts of the *rèteach* give descriptions of what we have termed the 'refusal sequence' following a ritual dialogue; others are associated with a diminution or total

lack of the verbal elements of allegorical exchange or eulogy. The ‘false brides’ are either refused allegorically, as ‘unsuitable animals’, for example, or directly, by making reference to the personal qualities of the participant.

Flora MacCuish from Berneray (1969) gives two separate accounts of the meeting she terms *còrdadh*, equivalent to the *rèiteach beag*. The first has a short exchange preceding the bringing out of the women for refusal:

FM: An còrdadh a’ cheud rud a bh’ann, ‘s bha iad a’ coinneachadh aig an taigh an oidhche sin. Cha bhiodh ann ach dìreach corra dhuine, ò dìreach caraidean dhe na daoine air gach taobh. Bhiodh . . . ha . . . dithis no trìuir aicese ‘s bhiodh dithis no trìuir aig an fhìreannach. Agus bha am fireannach a’ dol a staigh, agus bhathar a’ dèanamh biadh dha ‘s gnothaichean. Agus nuair a bha e nis a’ suidhe aig a’ bhòrd . . . tha . . . dh’innseadh . . . chanadh am fear a bha ‘g iarraidh a’ bhoireannaich, “Well, chan eil mise ‘dol a dh’ithe greim no ‘dol a dh’òl a seo a-nochd gus an toir . . . toir a mach an toiseach brath na h-Inid as an Ròimh gu bi fhiosam carson a thàna mi.”

“Carson a thàna tu?” chanadh am fear air a robh e ‘dol g’a h-iarraidh. “Carson a thàna tu?”

“Thàna mi dh’iarraidh . . . tha . . . searbhanta no bean a leithid seo a dh’fhear.”

Agus nuair a thàinig e . . . Chaidh i nuair sin . . . Bhiodh na boireannaich air am fàgail a muigh.

**Ian Paterson:** Seadh dìreach.

FM: ‘S dheadhadh fireannach a mach an uair sin agus bheireadh e staigh tè dhe na boireannaich. Agus: “Dè mu dheaghain na tè sa, ma’s ann ag iarraidh boireannach a tha thu a leithid seo a dhuine? Dè mu dheaghain na tè seo?”

“O cha ghabh mi i sin idir,” ars esan. “Dè dhèanadh,” ars esan, “na pliantan beaga tha sin,” ars esan. “Dè dhèanadh na pliantan beaga sin,” ars esan, “dol a bhleoghan dà mhart no trì dhomhsa ann am bàthaich, no idir dol a chartadh bàthcha, no idir,” ars esan, “dol gu cliabhadh feamaid? Cha dèan i càil dhomh,” ars esan. “Dhèanadh i rud-eigin,” ars esan, “nam biodh i aig Peigi Iain,” ars esan, “gu spìonadh chearc ‘s rudan dhen t-seòrsa sin, aig do mhàthair.”

IP: Agus nise, ‘se . . . ‘se rèiteach àraid a bha seo.

FM: O chan e. ‘Se còrdadh a bha seo.

IP: An còrdadh.

FM: An còrdadh a bh’ann.

IP: ‘Se. Se, ‘se fear aig a robh sib’ fhèin a tha seo, an e?

FM: ‘Se. ‘Se.

. . .

IP: Seadh dìreach. Agus cò bhliadhna mum biodh sin? A’s na 1920’s an ann, no . . . ?

FM: ‘S ann gu dearbh, tha mi ‘creidsinn, no 1922 no 23.

IP: 22 no 23. Seadh. Ach bha sibh a ‘ràdh bha iad a nise a’ toir a staigh na clann-nighinn.

FM: Bha.

IP: Tè as deaghaidh tè.

FM: ‘S bha . . . Thug e staigh a Nurse an uair ud. Agus thug e nuair sin a staigh . . . Chaidh

i sin a thilleadh air falbh. Thug e nuair sin a staigh Curstaidh 'ic Ruairidh. Agus ò bha i sin glè mhath 's glè cholach air son bean do dh'fhear sam bith, ach "tha i car aotrom."

"Och ma tha," arsa Ruairidh, "ma tha i car aotrom leat," ars esan, "chan fhaca tusa dad riamh as fhasa na dèanamh trom."

IP: O dìreach.

FM: Agus ò cha ghabhadh e i an deaghaidh sin. Dh'fhalbh Ruairidh a mach an uair sin agus thug e staigh Raonaid Dhòmhnail. Agus: "Dè mu dheaghain na tè sa?"

'S ò bha i sin comharraichte math. Bha colas oirre gu dèanadh i snìomh 's gu dèanadh i clòithtean, 's bha i stòlda 's bha i stèidhte, 's cha robh mathas nach robh oirre. 'S cha robh ach i sin a chur 'na suidhe aig a' bhòrd còmh ri Seonaidh Iain 'ic Alasdair Bhàin. Chaidh an uair sin am botul thoir a mach, 's fear na . . . am fear-comhailtiche dh'èirich e, Dòmhnall Iain Chaluim, dh'èirich e nuair sin 'toir drama dhan a chuile duine shìos.

IP: Bha sibhse 'còrdadh còmh riutha.

FM: Bha. Mì-fhèin 's Dòmhnall Iain Chaluim.

IP: Agus 'se nise, Ruairidh Alasdair a bha 'g iarraidh . . .

FM: Ruairidh Alasdair, 'se bha 'g iarraidh a' bhoireannaich air Ruairidh Dhòmhnail Mhòir, ged a 'se a bràthar a bh'ann.

IP: Bha fhios aige cò an tè bha . . .

FM: Bha fhios aige cò an tè bha e 'g iarraidh. Ach bha na h-igheanan air an cur am falach gus an toireadh iad air tè mu seach aca.

[**Flora MacCuish** – The agreement was the first thing, and they gathered in the house that night, only a few of them, just friends from each side. She would have two or three and the man would have two or three. And the man went in and food and such like were got ready for him. And when they sat down at the table the man who was asking for the girl would say,

'Well I'm not going to eat a bite or have a drink until first of all you bring news of Shrovetide from Rome, so that I know why I have come.'

'Why you have come?' the man for whom he was asking the girl would say.

'I came to ask for.. a servant or a wife for such and a man.'

And when he came . . . the women were left outside.

**Ian Paterson:** Quite so.

FM: And a man would go out then and bring in one of the women. And 'what about this one, if it's asking for a wife for such and such a man you are? What about this one?'

'Oh, I won't take that one at all,' says he. 'What use would these small hands be for milking two or three cows in a byre, or for mucking a byre, or at all for gathering seaweed in a creel? She won't do anything [be of any use] for me,' says he, 'She would do something if Peigi Iain had her,' said he, 'for plucking hens and things of that kind.'

IP: Was this a particular betrothal?

FM: No! This was an agreement.

IP: An agreement.

FM: It was the agreement.

IP: It was one you were at yourself, was it?

FM: Yes, yes.

. . .

IP: Yes, and which year would that be? 1920?

FM: Yes indeed, I believe it was 1922 or 23.

IP: 22 or 23. Yes. And you were saying that they were bringing in the girls.

FM: Yes.

IP: One by one.

FM: Yes. He brought in the nurse that time. And then he brought in ---, she was turned down. Then he brought in Corstaidh nic Ruaraidh, and oh! she was quite good and quite suitable for any man, but . . . 'She is light'. 'Och then,' says Ruairidh, 'if she is too light for you,' says he, 'you never saw anything easier than to make her heavy.'

IP: Just so.

FM: And oh! he would not have her after that. Ruairidh went out then and he brought in Raonaid Dhòmhnail. 'What about this one?' Oh! that one was particularly good. She looked as if she could spin and make tweeds, and she was sedate and steady, and there was no good quality hat she didn't possess. And there was nothing but to put her sitting at the table along with Seonaidh Iain Alasdair Bhàin. Then the bottle was brought out and the best man, Dòmhnall Iain Chaluum then got up, got up to give a dram to everybody.

IP: You were at the agreement along with them?

FM: Yes, myself and Dòmhnall Iain Chaluum.

IP: Now, it was Ruairidh Alasdair who was asking for . . .

FM: Ruairidh Alasdair was asking Ruairidh Dhòmhnail Mhòir for the girl, though he was her brother.

IP: He knew the one . . .

FM: He knew the one he was asking for, but the girls were hidden until they were brought out one by one.

The presentation of the women for refusal is preceded by a ritual dialogue in which both parties claim not to know why they are assembled, a feature common to several examples of betrothal rituals described above. The reference to 'news of Shrovetide from Rome' (needed to calculate the date of Easter) forms part of a traditional saying. As Ronald Black observes, 'Rome's authority has long been symbolised in the saying . . . 'knowledge of Shrovetide comes from Rome . . . as a proverb, *fios na h-Inid as an Roimh* is also used to describe any peremptory command' (Black: 94).

The refusal to eat and drink is another inversion of the norms of hospitality, and this is parried by the host's enquiry as to why they are there. The exchange again takes place at a table, and although the food is prepared, it would appear that the feast itself is reserved for the conclusion of the ritual. The asking for the girl is made in direct terms, and one can assume the reference to their seeking a 'servant' is meant humorously.

The women have been waiting 'offstage' in another room, which emphasises the essentially dramatic nature of this stage of the ritual, as well as indicating that the young man's representative had no opportunity to prepare his responses, since he would not know which women were to be brought in. The 'performer' may have a good idea of which women are likely to be in the room; but the notion of a 'trial' is clear – he must think on his feet. This task would, of course, increase in difficulty if the representative is confronted with women he does not know well, or at all. The first

woman mentioned is rejected because of a physical feature; her small hands make her an inferior worker. A joke follows; there is woman in the community who could teach her about hard work. The nurse follows, and then another woman, who receives praise but is also rejected, presumably because her 'lightness' makes her less able for physical work. There is a pun on the word *trom* 'heavy', which also means 'pregnant' – a good example of wordplay by the girl's representative. The bride-to-be is praised for both her potential as a worker and for her character, the emphasis being on the ideal feminine attributes of industry and mildness. The ritual is concluded in the usual way; she is brought to the table, placed symbolically beside the groom, and the dram is offered around by the 'master-of-ceremonies'.

Flora MacCuish (1967) described the bringing in of the women on another occasion:

Bha an còrdadh an toiseach ann.. Readh duine agus 's dòcha an duine 'na ònrachd, readh e dhan taigh a dh'iarraidh a' bhoirionnaich. Agus bhiodh iad còrdte gu leòr air son gum biodh rèiteach ann. Bhiodh a nis an ceann – chan eil fhiosam dè an ùine. An e mìos no fichead latha – thigeadh rèiteach, 's bhiodh an uair sin, triùir na cheathrar air gach taobh a' tighinn a staigh. Agus bhiodh nigheanan a' tighinn a staigh. 'S bha na h-ighneanan bha seo a' tighinn a staigh, agus bhiodh fear ag iarraidh a' bhoirionnaich dhan an duine seo. 'S bheireadh iad a staigh an tè seo 's ò cha robh cron nach robh oirre sin. Cha dèan i sin. Cha tog i buntàta 's cha bhleoghain i crodh, 's cha dèan i siod 's cha dèan i seo, 's cha robh i brèagha gu leòr, no rud air choir-eigin ceàrr. A chuile tè bha rud ceàrr oirre, gos a tigeadh an tè bha iad ag iarraidh. Agus cha robh fhios gu dè na gothan èibhinn bha iad a' toir air na h-igheanan. 'S bha dìreach oidhche mhòr aca. Agus thigeadh a nis an tè bha iad . . . O bha i seo math. Cha robh math nach robh air an tè bha e dol a phòsadh. Nuair a bha an rèiteach seachad bha nuair sin partaidh aca le deoch is òl gu biodh e uaireanan 's a' mhadainn. Agus bhiodh a nis, . . . readh an oidhche sin, bhiodh a' fiathachadh cuin a bhiodh a' bhanais ann, 's cò bha ri'm fiathachadh 's an fheadhainn bh'air am fiathachadh robh am baile air fad 'ga fhaighinn, no cò na daoine bhiodh ann.

[First of all there was the agreement. The man, and perhaps the man by himself, would go to the house to ask for the woman. And they would have agreed up to the point where there would be a betrothal. Then, at the end of – I don't know how much time – was it a month or twenty days? – the betrothal would take place and three or four from each side would come in. And the girls would come in, and a man would be asking for the woman on behalf of this man. And they would bring in this one, and oh! there was no fault not to be found in that one. That one will not . . . will not lift potatoes and will not milk a cow, and will not do that, and she will not do this, and she was not beautiful enough, or there was something wrong. Every one had something wrong with her, until the one they were asking for came in. And who knows what witty taunts they said to the girls. And they had a great night. And then the one they wanted would come. Oh! this one was good. The one he was going to marry had every good quality. When the betrothal had taken place they had a party, with drink and drinking until all hours in the morning. And then, that night the invitations, when the wedding would be and who was to be invited, and was the whole village to be invited, or what people would be there.]

In this account the informant clarifies the distinction between the various stages of the ritual sequence. First, there is a private meeting between the suitor and the father of the girl in which he formally asks for the girl's hand in marriage – the *còrdadh*. It is of interest that this could be accomplished by the young man alone. The second meeting, at which the verbal exchange and refusal sequence take place, is evidently more public, and clearly amounts to a public, 're-asking' custom of the kind noted elsewhere. The reasons for rejection in this example are centred on the woman's refusal to work. This can be understood as an affirmation of marriage as joint labour; the outlining of the responsibilities and conduct expected of the girl is, as we have noted, a recurring feature of the ritual. We may note that the 'witty taunts' are delivered by more than one individual on the groom's side; the criticising of the women was evidently a 'free-for-all'. It is also of note that the informant makes no mention of dancing, although the drink is flowing freely.

Another account of a *rèiteach* in Berneray is found in the nineteenth century MacLagan manuscripts. The informant is Ann MacLeod, 'domestic servant':

The intending Bridegroom appoints a Friday night for visiting the parents or guardians of his intended, with the view of obtaining their consent, and making the arrangements for the marriage. This meeting is called *An rèite*. When the Friday [sic] in question comes, the young man appears, accompanied by an unmarried male relative. They are received in an apartment of the house, while in another part, his intended, together with six other women conceal themselves. When the visitors are seated, the father or guardian of the to be bride asks 'What is the meaning of this?' To which the friend of the bridegroom replies 'We are come for a wife.' The young women are then introduced, one after another, with the question 'Will this one do?' The answer is always 'No', until the right one comes who is always purposely left till the last, and when she appears, the friend comes forward and says 'This one will do', and taking her by the hand presents her to her intended, who places her beside himself on his right hand, until refreshments are partaken by the whole company, after which they amuse themselves according to their inclinations until the following morning (Berneray, collected by Elizabeth Kerr, Port Charlotte, Islay, 1895. MacLagan MS 2: 213).

In this account the role of ritual dialogue is clearly shown. The visitors are shown in and seated, whereupon the father opens the proceedings in the now familiar way of asking the reason for their visit. The response is formulaic and extremely direct, as are the terse exchanges during the presentation and refusal of the women. These are remarkably blunt; no reason is given by the suitor's representative for their rejection, no mention of their physical or other characteristics. There is neither poetry, wit nor humour. One is left with the impression that the verbal element of the ritual has diminished, while the dramatic content has remained well-developed; the informant is quite clear in specifying six women. The artful refusal of six 'false brides' would indeed have been a considerable challenge and test of verbal skill, and it is interesting that the number should have remained constant while the verbal component is reduced, on one side, to monosyllables.

Several accounts from Harris show that the refusal of the women could also be effected allegorically. Morag MacLeod interviewed two sisters (Christina Shaw and Mrs. Peggy Morrison) from Bun Amhuinn Eadarra:

**Peggy Morrison:** . . . *Well*, nuair a phòs tè dha mo pheathraichean bha ceithir tursan, bha 'n rèiteach beag 's an rèiteach mòr 's a' bhanais a staigh againn fhèin 's a' bhanais a's an taigh aige-san. Bha na ceithir . . .

**Morag MacLeod:** Dè neise bha tachairt aig an rèiteach bheag?

**PM:** O cha robh càil ach mar gum biodh seòrsa do *pharty* dìreach. Cha bhiodh cruinn ach dìreach beagan dhaoine, air an rèiteach bheag. Agus a neise an rèiteach mòr – bhiodh iad a' cur air leth an oidhche – an latha bha am pòsadh go bhith ann. Agus mar bu trice 's ann seachduinn o'n a bhiodh e – mar gum bhiodh air Diardaoin, agus seachduinn o'n ath Dhi-Màirt bhiodh a' bhanais ann . . . Agus an rèiteach m'òr, bhiodh e cheart cho . . . a cheart urad do dhaoine air, 's do cheòl 's do bhiadh 's dha'n chuile seorsa 's a bhiodh air aig na bainnsean.

**MM:** Bheil cuimhne agaibh air rudan a bhiodh iad a' deanamh aig an rèiteach mh'òr?

**Christina Shaw:** Bhiodh dithis na triùir air an cur air leth, dha na gillean a bha staigh – bhithheadh 's na bodaich – a' falbh air feadh na cloinn-nighean agus iad a' breith air tè thall 's a bhos 's 'ga slaodadh suas a cheann a' bhùird, 's uaireannan 'ga riasladh. Agus bhiodh sinne dol falach leis an nàire man toireadh iad suas sinn go fear na bainnseadh. Agus nochdadh iad a's an doras le tè a siod 's a seo, 's dh' fhoighneachdadh iad, 'An e seo i?'

'O chan i. O chan i, tha i sen ro dhuilich a geamhrachadh.'

Agus bha tè cho grànda 's bha tè cho reamhar, 's bha tè ro chaol 's bha chuile càil ceàrr . . . coire air a chuile tè. 'S bha iad a' toir suas nan cailleachan cuideachd. Cha robh e go dibhear c'ò choinnicheadh riutha, 's bha tòrr dha na h-ingheanan a' teiche 's a' dol a mach dha na bàthchannan mam beirist orra. Ach ma dheireadh a neise, bhathas a' faighinn greim air an tè cheart, 's bhathas a' dol suas leatha sen a cheann a' bhùird 's 'ga cur 'na suidhe ri taobh an fhir. 'S chanadh a' fear a bha 'g iarraidh na bean òige, 'O seo i, seo i. Gabhaidh sinn i sen.' Sen mar a bha iad. 'Ni i sen an gnothuich.'

. . .

**MM:** Agus a neise, nuair a bhiodh iad ag iarraidh bean-na-bainnse, robh càil sonruicht aca dha ràdha, na robh iad a' . . .

**CS:** *Well*, bha. A 'fear a bhiodh ag iarraidh bean-na-bainnse, bha fear-na-bainnse a' toir leis fear, 's fear a bha math air briodhann an còmhnuidh – duine èibhinn mar gun canadh tu, 'se sen ma bha e ri fhaighinn, a bha iad a' taghadh, airson gum biodh tòrr aige ri ràdha 's gum biodh spòrs ann. Chanadh e, 'Thàine sinne nochd ann a sheo,' na, can, rud colach ris a seo, 'ach a faicemaid a robh boirionnach ri lorg dhan chulaidh-thruais a tha ann a seo.' 'C'ò a tha sibh a' smaoineachadh – A bheil gion ann a sheo air a robh sibh a' smaoineachadh?' 'S dh' fhalbhadh iad an uairsin, dithis na triùir dha na gillean. Bhithheadh 's na bodaich . . . a muigh . . . air feadh nam boirionnach, 's bheireadh iad air tè a siod 's a seo, 's dòcha gun toireadh iad suas dusan mas beireadh iad air an tè cheart.

[**Peggy Morrison:** . . . *Well*, when one of my sisters married, there were four occasions, the small rèiteach, the big rèiteach, the wedding in our own house and the wedding in his house. There were the four . . .

MM: Now, what happened at the small *rèiteach*?

PM: Oh, there was nothing but a sort of party. Only a few people would be there for the small *rèiteach*. And the big *rèiteach* now – they used to decide on the night – the day on which the marriage was to be. And usually it was a week from when it would be – say it was on a Thursday, a week the following Tuesday would be the wedding . . . And the big *rèiteach*, it was just as – just as many people at it, and as much music and food and everything as there was at weddings.

MM: Do you remember any of the things they did at the big *rèiteach*?

Christina Shaw: Two or three were selected, of the boys who were in – yes, and old men – to go amongst the girls, grabbing one here and one there and dragging her along to the top of the table, and sometimes manhandling her. And we used to hide, from shyness, in case we were taken up to the groom. And they would appear in the doorway with this one and that one, asking, ‘Is this her?’

‘Oh no. No. That one’s too difficult to winter.’ And one was so ugly, one so fat, one was too thin, and everything was wrong – each one had a fault. And they took old women up too. It didn’t matter who they came across, and a lot of girls hid and went out to the byres in case they were caught. But at last, now, the right one was got hold of, and she would be taken up to the top of the table and seated next to the man. And the man who was asking for the young woman would say, ‘Oh, here she is, here she is. We’ll accept that one.’ That’s how they were. ‘That one will do.’

. . .

MM: And now, when they were looking for the bride did they have anything special to say, or were they . . .

CS: Well, yes. The man who was asking for the bride, the groom took a man with him, and always one who was a good speaker. It was a witty man, as you might say, that they chose, that is if he was available, so that he would have lots to say and there would be some fun. He would say, ‘We came here tonight,’ or, say, something like this, ‘to see if there was a woman to be found for this pitiful object here.’ ‘Who do you think – is there anyone here that you had in mind?’ And they would go off then, two or three of the lads, yes, and old men too, outside – amongst the women, and they would grab one here and one there, they might take a dozen up before they would catch the right one.

In this very vivid account allegorical and direct refusal appear to be mixed, and it may be that the informant has more than one *rèiteach* in mind. ‘Too difficult to winter’ is a zoological term, whilst the other criticisms could apply to the women themselves. The large number of women involved and the stress placed on the indiscriminate nature of their selection are indicative of a custom which has lost its formal and ceremonial character and has instead the twin aims of prolongation and entertainment. The women, whom we note are reluctant to participate, are presented for refusal at the doorway to the room in which the groom’s party is gathered, or physically ‘dragged’ to the groom’s end of the table farthest away from the door, to be turned down at close quarters. Part of the amusement (although the informant’s choice of language indicates an ambiguous reaction, bordering on the negative) centres on this dramatic ‘delivery’ of the women. There is a forced journey to and from the territory of ‘one’s own’ to that of the ‘alien’;

further dramatising the choice made by the young bride as she is delivered and left to take her place by the side of the groom, whose representative has publicly accepted her. It is of interest that the *rèiteach mòr* is described as an event equal in popularity with the official wedding, and it may be that the informant intended to say that the event was just as *important*, before correcting herself. As with other accounts, the verbal skill of the representative is clearly acknowledged, and a good example of his rhetorical ability is shown by the inverted eulogy with which he opens his performance on behalf of his '*chulaidh-thruais*', 'pitiful object'. This mocking opening gambit could, of course, only be appropriate in the context of a 'sort of party' where all the details of the marriage had been settled beforehand. Notwithstanding the reluctance of the women, it would appear from this account that any tension between play and seriousness has been lost; the atmosphere is convivial and informal, and a communal delight in the drama and wordplay is the surviving component of the archaic ceremonial sequence.

The following account is taken from the memoirs of F. J. MacDonald, a native of Harris. The *rèiteach* he describes took place around 1915, his father playing the role of master of ceremonies.

Here now was Peter . . . in full flight with a wedding song which was, in today's terms, 'explicit' in the extreme, bringing half-hearted protests from the women and roars of approbation from the men. It went on for verse after verse, and it was beginning to pall on me because its innuendo (if that isn't too delicate a word) was far above my head . . . Song followed song. Somebody played the bagpipe, and somebody played the trumpet as the Jew's Harp was called. Now and again Donald John Murray was prevailed on to lay down his drink and pick up his melodeon and the company erupted into dancing which involved frequent lurchings into the table . . .

'Silence!' . . . the voice was my father's . . . he assumed to himself a strange and pompous voice which was untypically forceful . . . 'My friends', he said, 'the time has now come!' . . . my father, by dint of reason and persuasion and hectoring managed to divide the motley throng into two groups . . . Mary's old father . . . stood erect and patrician looking. My father, having got the company ordered to his satisfaction, launched into a measured, flowery, speech. On behalf of himself and everybody within and without the parish he thanked the old couple for their hospitality, and for 'the use of their roof', as he put it, for one of the best parties he had ever attended. Now, he wondered if they would extend their kindness and good-will still further and receive a stranger who had arrived unexpectedly at the door.

Mary's father bowed graciously and said that his home had ever been open to the stranger and asked that this one be brought forward. A man who was, indeed, a stranger to me stepped forward and bowed gravely to Mary's parents . . . if my father had been flowery, this fellow was worse. It turned out that he was a sailor home on leave and though he had been at parties in every corner of the globe this was, by far, the best he had ever enjoyed and he was sorry to be the one to introduce a note of solemnity into the proceedings.

'I am here', he went on, 'representing my good friend James, at whose shoulder I will be standing if and when the day comes that he gets married. James himself cannot be here tonight because he is practising the great art of looking after children, and it is to be hoped that he is learning well in case the day comes when he was to tuck in his own . . .' He went on

to explain that he had been sent, because of his great experience of boats and the sea, to buy a boat for James! It had to be a good boat – a boat that had not been ill-treated in any way; a boat that could stand a tall mast; a boat that would last well and would not be expensive to maintain . . . It was a long speech, made longer by the gales of laughter that greeted every apparently innocent sentence, and he described a boat that was out of this world.

‘And finally’, concluded the stranger in his smooth Gaelic, ‘it must be known to you that my friend James is a man of great experience with boats (howls of laughter from the company) and a man who knows a good boat when he sees one and will not be taken in by paint and varnish! I am asking therefore, if you can sell me a boat that is sound from prow to stern (more laughter), one that will stand up to whatever weather comes her way, and will not ever drag her anchor’. The stranger gravely acknowledged the applause and stepped aside. Mary’s father stroked his beard and held a serious whispered conversation with his wife. He then moved slowly forward and took my Great Aunt Rachel by the hand. She was creased with laughter and I noticed that she had put her teeth in for the party. ‘Here’, said the old man, ‘is a boat which has weathered many storms, but she’s good for a few years yet. As far as we know she’s only ever had one mast (complete uproar) and only her present owner has hoisted her sails.’ (Pealing laughter again.) ‘This boat has been well cared for. She may look weather-beaten but her beam is sound!’

It was some time before the stranger could reply, but when he did it went something like this: ‘A fine boat I have no doubt but not suitable for the shallow waters around these parts. Top heavy too unless my eyes deceive me. But, worst of all, old boats have characteristics of their own and they are not always obedient to a new hand on the rudder. No. If you can’t do better than that I must look elsewhere’.

My Great Aunt Rachel squeezed herself back into her armchair with her bosom heaving and tears of laughter streaming down her face . . . Mary’s father proceeded to bring forward, one after the other, four or five women from the neighbourhood . . . and one after the other the stranger turned them down – sometimes with ribald comment where the candidate was a buxom adolescent; with great graciousness where she was a modest matron. At last he seemed to lose patience and made as if to go, but before he could do so Mary’s father took his daughter by the wrist and pulled her, protesting coyly, into the ring. ‘Very well,’ he said, ‘this is my last offer to you. Here is a boat I have always meant to keep for myself. But if your friend James will promise to look after her I might consider letting her go’.

The stranger beamed. He took Mary and spun her round and round, pretending to be running his hands over her but not touching her at all. ‘My friend,’ he said at last, ‘this is the very boat for James, and, if I mistake not, perfect for the kind of cargo he has in mind for her . . .’

I was not to realize till much later . . . that I had been privileged to witness an old Highland wedding custom that I was never to see again (MacDonald, Finlay: 87–92).

This account is remarkable for the vivid impression it creates of the ritual occasion. The master of ceremonies separates the audience into two groups, creating a ‘ring’ into which the women are brought. This image immediately calls to mind the ring into which animals are led for inspection by potential buyers at the cattle-market; in this case it is the girl’s father who ushers them in, in other accounts there is an escort

to perform this task. The strikingly physical final inspection of the bride-to-be by the groom's representative reinforces the impression of a 'market-place'. It is also the space in which the speeches are performed. Those of the master of ceremonies and the 'stranger' are described as 'flowery' and 'long', and both are accompanied by a mock seriousness. The MC's voice is 'strange', 'pompous' and 'forceful', and this theatrical feature of the performance is mirrored by the representative's apology for his 'solemnity', his pausing for laughter to subside and his 'grave' acknowledgement of applause at the conclusion of his speech. Aside from the inflated rhetoric, creation of a performance space and provision for the audience, there are other dramatic elements; the motif of the stranger seeking hospitality is employed as a pretext for entry, and we may therefore consider the representative to be performing 'in character'; the father bows 'graciously', the stranger 'gravely' before their speeches begin; the 'buyer' twice makes as though to leave – another 'market-place' image; and the bringing forward of the women into the ring and the final inspection of the bride-to-be are highly theatrical in nature. The representative's opening speech is clearly a eulogy, and it is of interest that the motif of the 'boatsman' is employed at this point and not only during the rejection of the 'boats' themselves. He is the future best-man, and works a boastful reference to his own 'experience' into his speech. An air of pronounced sexual charge pervades the proceedings and the speeches and exchanges are replete with sexual innuendo. This finds physical expression in the concluding 'inspection' of the bride. Before the opening speeches there is a bawdy wedding song, 'explicit in the extreme'. The risqué nature of the content is, of course, made more amusing by the 'grave' and 'pompous' method of delivery. Reference is made, however, to a more 'gracious' tone adopted when the sensitivity of the woman to be refused warrants such treatment. Recurring features of the ritual other than the 'trader' motif may be noted; refusal of a woman is on the grounds of 'impossible transplantation' – she is not suitable for the water around the groom's location; the girl 'protests coyly' as she is brought to the representative, the groom himself being absent; the father reluctantly agrees to part with his favourite, on condition she is cared for (this recalls the proviso 'welcome to sail in calm waters' noted elsewhere); and her fertility is stressed – she will be able to bear the groom's 'cargo'.

The audience enjoy the occasion hugely; and their pleasure is mainly derived from the verbal skill involved in sustaining this prolonged allegorical exchange. The description of its ribald nature, preceded by spirited dancing, is in stark contrast to the sober ceremonial exchanges noted elsewhere in Scotland, and is rather at variance with the account by another Harris informant which stressed the lack of 'crudity' and the 'dignity' of the occasion (Murdo Ewan MacDonald: see below). Both informants are in agreement, however, that the *rèiteach* died out after the First World War.

That the function of the *rèiteach mòr* is a form of more public 'replaying' of the *rèiteach beag* is further suggested by the first lines of the following account from Scalpay:

Nuair a gheibheadh e i, dh'fheumadh iad a cuir a nuas ach a faicist i. 'S dòch gur e chailleach bu mhotha bhiodh am broinn an taighe dhe'adh suas, bheireadh iad suas. Bhiodh iad toir

suas té ma seach go nochdadh bean na bainnseadh. Nuair a dhe'adh bean na bainnseadh suas bha i 'na suidhe ri thaobh. Bha 'a fear comhailteach a' lìonadh glainn uisge-bheatha 's bha e dha thoir a dh'fhear na biannse 's chanadh e ris: 'Bheir a neis an còrr – dàrna leth – dha 'n duine 's fheàrr leat.' Bheireadh e dhì-se – dh'òladh iad a' ghlainne le chéile. Bha nuairsin an rèiteach a' dol air adhart.

[When they had agreed that he could have her, they had to bring her in so that people could see her. It might be the biggest old woman in the house who would come in . . . they'd bring in. They'd bring them in one by one till the bride-to-be appeared. When the bride-to-be came in she sat down by his side. The best man would fill a glass with whisky and give it to the groom and he'd say to him: 'Now give what's left – half of it – to the one you like best'. He'd give it to her – they'd drink the glass together. Then the (rest of the) *rèiteach* went ahead (Catherine Morrison).

This account suggests that the formal consent of the girl and father, accomplished at the 'small betrothal', and the more open 'big betrothal' have been combined. Once the 'private' element is concluded, a further stage is necessary so that 'people can see' the bride-to-be. It would appear that the groom is placed at the end of the table ready to receive the 'false brides', and once she has taken her place, all witness the solemn incorporation ritual of sharing of the cup. The 'rest' of the *rèiteach* may refer to the feast and the discussion of practical arrangements with regard to the official wedding. It is of interest that the informant emphasises that even the old *cailleachs* are brought to the young man as potential brides, as if to express the indiscriminate nature of their selection. The informant acknowledges the distinctive logic of the ritual; *any* woman can be presented, even the oldest, who could not possibly be considered a rival partner.

The following account is also from Harris. The informant, Murdo Ewan MacDonald, describes the betrothals he attended in the 1920s and how young people met one another:

[The] closely-knit community met often at various times . . . at spring, autumn, the fishing, the ceilidh; they met each other very often at the ceilidh . . . they took communion very seriously – it only happened twice a year . . . it was a festivity in a way . . . one of the signs was if you saw a young man or a young woman walking back from communion together – that was a sign . . . you were always watching for that. I remember my mother and my father saying 'They're going to get married – they always walk back from the communion' that sort of thing. It was done most discretely . . .

The informant goes on to describe who was invited to the *rèiteach beag* and *mòr*, and what took place:

The *rèiteach beag* was very intimate; the nieces, the nephews, the uncles, the aunts and maybe one first cousin or so, and the next-door neighbour . . . a little meal, and the father of the bride would get up and thank them for coming . . . They would come to ask my father 'we'd like you to be the master of ceremonies at the *rèiteach mòr* . . .' [there were invited] close relatives . . . not so close relatives, second cousins or third cousins, close friends who were not necessarily related, not at all related – they may have been on the same fishing boat – and

the neighbours, whether they were related or not . . . The whole community contributed to these feasts – it didn't fall on the family . . . It was at the *rèiteach mor* that they had this kind of acted drama; it was quite funny and some people specialised in it. They appointed a 'master of ceremonies' and they invited some women in and the M.C. 'interviewed' . . . 'No, No, you're not suitable . . . you can't weave, you're not good at it and you're not houseproud enough; och, there was all kinds of ridiculous reasons, and it's obvious from the way you dress that you're not dress-conscious and it was very funny . . . then the bride came; she was perfect, she was beautiful, she was well-dressed, she was houseproud, she could weave and do this and that . . . [it was] very good-natured and funny, everybody took it good-naturedly and the people who were dismissed took it even better.

The informant also recalled one of his father's methods of refusing the women; 'you're not going to be accepted, you're overweight and he just can't afford to feed you . . . she left the place roaring and laughing'. During the proceedings, there were 'some standing, some sitting; the older people sitting and we children stood around the wall and looked on'. The master of ceremonies was

at a table where he could command the whole, he stood behind the table and harangued . . . one by one – there was an escort bringing them in – one by one dismissed for various reasons. [The groom-to-be] was watching and laughing . . . the M.C. was in sole charge and he dismissed those who didn't qualify in very charming, non-rude and humorous terms; it took an immense amount of skill, and everyone enjoyed it – it was very dramatic . . . my father was very good at that, he worked at it beforehand and he knew the people who were going to be escorted in . . . There was a *pattern* about the thing you see, the *rèiteach beag*, the *rèiteach mòr*, the drama – that comic thing – which was very amusing . . . it was never crude, it was humorous; whenever the woman was dismissed people were laughing, for it was so absurd the reason for dismissal, and she was laughing loudest . . . 'I remember when you were young, you were very good looking; but you're not young now' and he left the . . . he didn't say 'you're not good looking' – that kind of thing – it was very well done. They looked forward to that dismissal, and then of course we knew it would happen – the bride would come in dressed up 'Oh great! no wonder he asked you to marry him!' . . . This was the stage that they were accepted; the *banais* was going to proceed; the penultimate stage; there was that kind of formality, though not expressed – but it was there . . . They let their hair down at wedding times; that's another part of the institution. They can be solemn, religious and pious. I suppose that goes back to the medieval Catholic feast, where you were given, they were allowed certain . . . you were allowed to let your hair down for a short time. Now, the nearest equivalent in the Protestant Hebrides is the *rèiteach beag*, *rèiteach mòr* and the *banais* . . . people behaved in a joyful manner, but [with] dignity; marriage was taken very seriously; [the bridegroom] remained as modest as possible.

This account confirms the clear distinction between the stages of the ceremonial sequence. The *rèiteach mor* is attended by those who attended the earlier *rèiteach beag*, with the addition of those still considered as belonging to the 'inner circle' of the family, whether kin or not. This leads to the wedding, the *banais*, where the whole community, perhaps the whole island is invited, personally, by the bride and groom. The sequence

can be visualised as a series of concentric circles; at the centre the ritual couple and their intimates exchange consent and come to agreement on sensitive matters in a secluded, non-public space. Following this, these events are 'replayed' for the benefit of a larger number of kin and non-kin with an interest or stake in the marriage. This takes place in a space large enough to accommodate a crowd and allow the dramatisation of the groom's selection of a partner from among their number. The very act of refusing cousins, friends and neighbours acknowledges and articulates their perceived involvement in the process. This is also accomplished by leaving certain things undecided until this stage, such as who is to be invited to the church, allowing a wider range of opinions to be heard. The third stage involves travelling through the community dispensing invitations to the 'outer circle'. The informant describes how in Harris the bride and bridegroom invited the guests from door to door, and 'every house had someone represented'. Then the couple make their promises again; this time in full public view and in the eyes of God, outdoors and under the heavens. The informant describes the return of the couple from the church: 'they would prefer to walk . . . on the way back everybody waved towels, shouted at them and wished them well, and some people got up to the hills above and fired volleys; my father fired the shots and Donal John piped'. The elaborate provision for, and articulation of community involvement makes one certain that it was not the couple who 'preferred to walk' but custom which dictated that they did so.

This account confirms the participant's perception of the ritual as 'a kind of acted drama' which everyone looked forward to. There is a sizeable audience, and the verbally skilled main performer, described as a 'specialist' has prepared his witty retorts in advance, confirming our earlier suspicions that as he is of the community, he would have a good idea of which women were likely to appear. It may be that the women were selected some time in advance of the occasion, giving the 'master of ceremonies' time to prepare his 'script'. He has an assistant, the individual charged with escorting the women in. One suspects that some element of cueing and signalling would be necessary in order that the 'false brides' are delivered at the correct time. A large number and wide variety of women would obviously provide an opportunity for virtuosic verbal display, which is appreciated by all, and the informant acknowledges the level of skill involved. The refusals are, however, non-allegorical; rejection centres solely on physical characteristics. These are delivered without causing offence; the informant places great stress on the 'dignity' of the proceedings and the good cheer which prevailed, especially among those rejected. The example of verbal skill singled out for praise by the informant is of interest; the bard sets up the joke in such a way that he disclaims responsibility for the reading 'you are ugly', which is the logical conclusion of the joke: 'I remember when you were young and good looking. You're not young now . . .' As we may expect, the bride is accepted and praised as the ideal partner, lauded as 'perfect' in her appearance, house-making skills and ability to work. The tendency to indirect expression is suggested by the description of courtship, and the communal enthusiasm for fairly direct insult sanctioned by custom is tentatively compared to the licence allowed by the Catholic

church on saints' feast days. The final significance of the ritual is made plain by the informant; 'they were accepted; the *banais* was going to proceed'. This suggests another function of the ritual; with each movement away from the centre of the inner circle, and with each progression of the ceremonial sequence, the marriage becomes more certain to take place. As community involvement increases, momentum is gained and the breakdown of the betrothal progressively less likely. The second and third stages could be seen as mounting 'insurance' against the fickle humanity at the centre of this community drama, ritually 'acting out' the restructuring of social relations. The couple's new status brings restrictions, and the period between betrothal and marriage is closely policed in many cultures. This may be the prosaic aspect of the superstitious belief that the groom-to-be was in mortal danger between the *rèiteach* and his marriage.

The scrupulous invitation of the whole community is again suggested by the following account from Donald Morrison of Mull.

Bha rèiteach aig cuid, aig cuid. Bha rèiteach, oidhche rèiteach ann.. Tha cuimhne agam gu math air, bhith air falbh aig rèiteach, 's mi 'nam bhalach. Bha iad sin oidhche aca, lathaichean mun tigeadh a' bhanais, agus ò tì is dram 's gabhail òran aca ann a sin a's an taigh sin. Bha. Agus nuair a gheibheadh tu cuireadh gu na banais, ann an cois cò thu 's e an aon ruith a bha chuile duine faotainn, on bhalach gus an duine bha cheann liath. Bha e faighinn an aon ruith. Bha e aig a' phòsadh. Ma bha am ministear gam pòsadh, agus nuair a bha iad aig bòrd na suipeireach mar a bhiodh iad ris bha e sin cuideachd. Bha iad cruinn còmhla a sin. Cha robh nì dealachadh air an darna h-aon seach an t-aon eile. Bha sin ann.

[Some people had a *rèiteach*. Yes, some had a betrothal. There was a betrothal evening, I well remember it, going to a betrothal as a boy . . . And when you got an invitation to the marriage, it did not matter who you were, everyone got the same invitation, from the boy to the one who was grey-haired. They all got the same invitation. They were at the marriage. If the minister was going to marry them, when they arranged the supper as was their wont, he was there too. They were all there together. There were no distinctions made between them. There was that.]

The couple's incorporation into the community continued with rituals during and after the marriage, and at their 'kirking'. Marion MacLeod from Lewis recalls:

The day of the actual wedding a piper came along and the piper preceded the procession to church. The bride on the way to the church was led by a groom's man. On the way back home the bride and groom led the procession, after the piper. The people were taken in to the wedding table in relays after which they would go out to the barn where the dancing went on till two in the morning . . . the bride and groom had to sit it out at the head of the table while relay after relay of guests sat at the table and toasted their health. Now the toasts were individual, so it took quite a while . . . it would have been a terrible disgrace if someone had gone away and not taken of the meal that had been prepared. The following night they had what was called the *banais-tighe*. Now that meant another celebration in the bridegroom's house for the elderly and for the people who just couldn't sit it out the night before (Kay: 94–5).

She also describes the kirking, the couple's first appearance in church, which was also carefully structured:

On the following Sabbath they had what was known as the Kirking. This meant going to church; the bridegroom and his bride, the best-man and the best-maid . . . the best-man went into church followed by the bride and the groom and the best-maid and they sat in that order in the pew. The best-man led the way into church. He stood at the end of the pew while the bride and groom and best-maid went into the pew and he took his seat at the end . . . that was the Kirking.

In the following account from Scalpay, it appears the groom had to chase or find his bride, and catch hold of her hand before the ritual could be concluded. Billy Kay notes that the groom had to 'catch his bride from all the other young women in the room, who were often pushed in his direction. At first the bride is hidden, along with her bridesmaid, until brought up to the room where the groom is sitting with 'the old men'. These seem to dominate the proceedings, perhaps the 'ritual experts' who are responsible for the eventual union of the pair. The allegorical device employed would appear to be that of the 'couples'.

The Friday before the wedding, all the old men and women gathered together in the bride's home. And the bride and the bridesmaid was in the bedroom, hiding in the bedroom, and all the old men were cracking away and in about half an hour they would say 'Oh well we'd better see about this *rèiteach* in the house'. And one of the old men would get up and go down to the bedroom and get a hold of the bride-to-be and the bridesmaid would follow her. And the bridegroom was sitting along with the old men and one of the other old men would get up and say 'Well, I think this bride will be well-fixed to this one'. And they would try and get hold of one another's hand, you know, the bride and bridegroom. And one of the old men would say 'that's fine, they're nailed together now'. They would carry on and sing songs and have tea until about two in the morning (Jessie Nicholson, Scalpay in Kay: 94).

#### 4. HARRIS RÈITEACH, 1970 – EXTENDED DIALOGUE

The only recording of the procedure at a *rèiteach* is of a wedding in 1970 on Harris, and takes the form of an improvised allegorical dialogue and 'false bride' sequence. This recording was passed to Morag MacLeod of the School of Scottish Studies and her transcription and translation forms part of her essay 'Rèiteach'. The marriage is between Bella Morrison and Donald MacDermid. In her introduction to the text, the author notes:

Bella's family all have curly hair and her father and only brother are nicknamed Curly. Bella is the youngest of Kenneth Morrison's seven daughters and all the others had already married. On the bride's side the speakers were Norman MacLeod, one of her brothers-in-law and a bard, and John Morrison, a neighbour who has always been a popular entertainer at weddings. John is a confirmed bachelor. On the groom's side the speakers are two neighbours, one a schoolteacher, Neil Campbell, the other a shopkeeper who, alas, died

recently, Calum MacSween . . . the introduction of English words and of topical allusions adds to the causes for merriment. The prospective bridegroom sits at the top of the table, with the four protagonists facing each other across the table, two on his left and two on his right. Friends and relatives who have been invited are crowded round this group as closely as possible, so as to hear what is said. There may be as many as seventy to eighty people crammed into the room (Morag MacLeod: 385).

There are occasional contributions from those nearby, including Finlay MacDermid, the father of the groom, and Kenneth Morrison, father of the bride, but three of the four main protagonists are non-kin neighbours, whilst the other is a non-kin relative. It is to be noted that one of the bride's representatives is described as a 'bard' and the other as a popular choice at weddings – corresponding to the sought-after 'master of ceremonies' described by an earlier informant from Harris.

The dialogue opens with an overt acknowledgement of the two 'camps' symbolically arranged on opposite sides of the table with the groom between them. He is referred to by his representative as '*an duine bochd*', a 'poor soul', which inverted praise recalls the example above where the groom was described as a 'pitiful object'. The inversion continues as the subject moves to hospitality; the groom's side criticise what has been presented to them on 'the table', while the hosts defend the arrangements, which are complete '*co-dhiù cho fad 's a chù sinne*', 'as far as we can see'. What the table lacks, of course, is a partner for the groom-to-be. The inversion of hospitality, here represented by the guests' criticism – has been noted in other accounts. The game is continued by the hosts 'in a mock-defensive tone', according to MacLeod's marginal comment, and they thank the visitors for coming.

The hosts remark that their guests are lacking 'hogs', and that this must be the purpose of the visit. They do not have many left – a reference to the fact that of his seven daughters only Bella, the bride-to-be, remains unmarried. The guests are asked whether they are looking to start a new stock – in other words, to get new blood into their own. Transplantation as an allegory of marriage was noted earlier as a theme present in an account from Harris and will recur later in the dialogue.

The visitors make a reference to the 'good price' they are willing to offer, and a suggestion that they might find a suitable animal there is cut short by the host's retort that the 'selling' of his other beasts, his daughters, has cost him dear. His intervention, supported by his partner, ensures that the dialogue does not progress too quickly, and is a clear articulation of resistance and deliberate obstruction. The girl has been allegorised first as a hog, then a generic 'beast' and now as a dog, a favourite and irreplaceable pet. This is a form of eulogy, the praise and expression of reluctance to part with the girl placing further pressure on the groom's party. They counter hopefully that perhaps the cat could replace his pet, but this suggestion is emphatically rejected – it's not that easy – a remark that also refers to the task their adversaries face in winning them over.

The hosts confirm that they do have hogs for sale, and the 'buyers' confirm that they

are of same stock as the girl's father – they must have a curl in their wool, a reference to the curly hair shared by the members of the family. This remark demonstrates the flexibility of the allegorical mode; skilfully employed, a commonplace zoological feature can be used to reveal details of the specific context to which the dialogue relates, as well as articulating general qualities which are common to 'any animal' and 'any woman'. The bride's side link tightness of curl with youth, and the visitors confirm that they are looking for young stock, new blood for their part of the island. The hosts affect not to understand why they have come to their croft in their search; we have noted this as a recurring feature of the ritual, and it represents a further example of resistance and deliberate prolongation; the visitors must justify themselves again. They praise their hosts' land, and the stock that prospered there; a reference to the large family they have raised. The bride's representatives present another obstacle; there are many things with curly hair, including men; how can they tell the difference? (the dialogue was recorded in the 1970's, when the 'perming' of men's often lengthy hair was fashionable). The groom's party insist – they want a female. Her defenders counter with a bawdy pun; they are not going to start shearing the sheep to find out (the word '*riusgadh*' can mean 'shearing' or 'stripping'). To 'go further' than stripping obviously carries a risqué meaning. The groom's representative states that in order to make a correct identification one must look for a 'tag'. The motif of the tag will later enable the groom's party to reject the women offered, quite apart from any other 'objections' which might be raised.

The bride's representatives are, for a moment, more encouraging; they invite the visitors to confirm they believe themselves to be in the right place to find good stock, and suggest that the visitors' own 'herd' is exhausted. That they have come to the right place is emphatically affirmed. Then follows another obstacle; the father has lost a lot of stock; he is reluctant to part with any more; and all that remains is 'a big dry ewe'. This is most probably a reference to the bride's mother, as Morag MacLeod points out. We will also recall the lower value that 'dry' animals represented in the currency of cattle noted above. Then there is a correction; they have a hog, but refuse to sell it; or they may, but point out that '*ghabh sùil oirre*', 'an evil eye has got at her'. This has made the beast 'terrible for wandering', which the groom's party may be able to cure. The animal is not 'settled', and cannot be described as 'sedate'. Aside from the suggestion of an initiation into sexual maturity, the animal motif also articulates what Lonsdale, speaking of Greek ritual, describes as 'a . . . transformation of a young girl from a wild, disorderly creature to a tame and nubile being'.<sup>14</sup> This in turn is linked to notions of domestication and submission; young women need someone to lead them, as well as belong to.

Perhaps it is the groom's influence, his excessive praise, for example, which has caused the 'evil eye', and results in her straining against the confines of her father's house. The situation can only be settled by her leaving for new pastures; the solution offered, we recall, for the 'ewe lamb that strays' in an earlier account from Harris. Another topical comment on society follows; young people are like this – they roam widely. They

*might* have a sheep, a 'dry', that is non-milk producing one. If it cannot produce milk, then they will not part with it. But it will not always be dry; even their own stock can dry up. This is just as well, replies his partner. In other words, their women are not always pregnant. They would not part with it if it were to remain dry; in other words a condition of sale is that it produces a new breed. The important issues of praise, the 'unsettled animal', milk-production and the evil eye are dealt with in detail below.

It should be noted that the reference to 'silver water' alludes to the common charm against the evil eye. George Henderson describes the procedure:

In the averting ritual water had to be lifted in a *wooden* ladle at a stream over which the living and the dead passed; it was not suffered to touch the ground, and when taken up it was done in the name of the Sacred Trinity; silver coins were put into the ladle and also a copper coin; the whole was blessed with the sign of the cross, and according to a ritual of divination it was thought that a wise person could tell whether it was a male's or a female's eye that had been the bewitching agent. Thereafter the patient was sprinkled with some of the lustral water, and what remained over was dashed against a huge boulder-stone not likely ever to be moved. Evil was thus transferred for ever to the stone, and the 'evil eye' was lifted from off the sufferer (Henderson: 301).

Another condition is raised by the girl's team; it depends on what meadow the sheep would be sent to. This provides the opportunity for the groom's side, who have been silent all the while, to praise the young man: '*cha bhi dìth innis oirre*', there will be no lack of grazing for it – if they can get hold of it. The bride's team reply with a maxim; 'it is easy to be generous in times of plenty, but in hard times . . .'; her defenders are still resisting every attempt at forward movement made by the groom's party. They repeat; the father had plenty of stock, but this has diminished; if he gives away the last, he will have no replacement. This remark turns into bawdy praise of the bride's father; when he was younger, he could have provided a replacement quickly. Now of course, his 'ewe' is also 'dry'.

The groom's side suggest that the bride's brothers-in-law could produce some 'reinforcements'. These reply that one of them, Finlay, is shy; Finlay replies that he has nothing to offer, which produces another bawdy remark from the bride's team.

They have a dog, they persist, continuing the defensive posture. The groom's party try to make progress, but the quick repartee gives way to a comic story from the bride's side, on the subject of late marriage and a man's reluctance and distaste for the institution. It includes a reference to a local woman who had recently got married in her seventies. It should be remembered that the audience at the *rèiteach* numbered between seventy and eighty people, and the occasion is perhaps used to provide the licence for a rather belated *charivari*. The point of the story is to offer an inversion of the ideal state; the forced marriage of a bachelor and the late marriage of an elderly woman are the antithesis of the marriage about to take place between the young couple. Other remarks – by both sides – relating to the misprizing of the institution of marriage and the absence of love are intended to express quite the opposite.

The story seems to have exhausted the patience of the groom's party, who press hard for progress. This is the signal for the beginning of the 'false bride' sequence, although the bride's side express doubt to the last possible moment: '*N toir sinn dhuibh an té a tha againn?*', 'will we give you the one we've got?' They express doubt that their visitors will be able to recognise the animal they want; the groom's side are sure – they have it 'tagged', the mechanism for refusal introduced earlier in the dialogue. Referring to the women, they are told that '*Tha crowd anns an fhaing*', there is a crowd in the fank. It is not clear whether the women are gathered in a separate space, perhaps through a doorway, or are simply taken and returned to their seats. As in other accounts there is an escort to deliver the women for inspection. Appropriately, he is a shepherd, and his experience is approved by both sides. The suggestion is that this is a role he has performed in the past.

The first 'sheep' is produced, and the salesman assures the buyer that it is 'dry', that is, not pregnant. She receives faint praise, followed by doubt that she has the identifying tag. The bride's side enquire as to whether she has the curly coat of their stock. The groom's side reply that she does not, and is therefore too closely related to their stock to consider for breeding. The woman is a relative of the groom, and the woman is therefore dismissed on thoroughly legitimate grounds. This is both skilful and humorous, although one will recall the reference made above by another Harris informant to the deep-rooted fear of incest shared by the islanders, and the remark may be said to have a more significant resonance than is at first apparent.

The groom's party are invited to try again, especially where the rebellious, that is, the young ones gather. The next candidate, Morag MacLeod notes, is, however, a 'confirmed spinster of middle age or more'. The reason for refusal employs the 'transplantation' motif; the sheep is used to a certain kind of pasture and would not remain with them.

Another woman is presented, this time an incomer. The hosts apply some pressure; the visitors cannot possibly refuse this creature. Their refusal is blunt; again, she is accustomed to life in the mainland, where it is not as wet as on the island. A comic episode follows when it is noticed that the beast has already been sold – she is married – and the hosts protest that they should not be thought dishonest. The observation '*tha marc oirre siod*', 'she is marked', presumably refers to her wedding ring.

The groom's side again show signs of impatience – they want to see a young animal, and the escort assures him that one is on its way. Such expressions of restlessness on the part of the groom's side find their parallel in the threats of the representative to leave and look elsewhere, as noted in the example from Finlay MacDonald above. The hosts remark that their visitors are difficult to please, and produce another incomer, to encouraging remarks reminiscent of animal herding. She is rejected for the same reason as the others; she is not of the right stock to thrive on the groom's land.

The hosts keep their resistance up until the end, claiming not to know what kind of animal the groom's party is seeking. The escort finally ushers in the bride-to-be; she

has the 'tag' and is a '*caora an earraich*', a spring sheep. The dialogue ends with the bride's party exhorting the production of a 'good breed' by the couple.

One of the most striking features of the dialogue is the relative passivity and silence of the groom's party in comparison with the bride's. Of 173 separate utterances, the groom's party make 53; a contribution of around 31 per cent. In character these are short, matter of fact, rather humourless and often made with the explicit intention of advancing the ritual to its conclusion rather than actively participating in the allegorical invention of the dialogue. It could be argued that this merely reflects the personalities involved, or their verbal skill; the most likely reason, however, is that the discrepancy between the two parties is entrenched in tradition. We have already remarked that the groom's party represent the male principle and are physically dominant; this finds expression in, for example, the firing of weapons. Despite having instigated the meeting and being relatively certain of success, they find themselves, however, in a lower, passive, submissive role as they are obliged to ask the father's permission to carry off the girl. She is the 'property' of her father, and we have noted the use of indirect forms including allegory and the motif of buying and selling in order to control and limit the discussion to 'safe' modes of expression. The ritual asking is not, therefore, a battle between equals. Like ritual entry, the girl's representatives are in total control of the discussion, which itself resembles a trial or ordeal more than a competition. The performance of the bride's party in this example from Harris is characterised by the exercise of control, obstructive verbal behaviour and teasing, as well as a variety of examples of verbal skill, such as puns, jokes, maxims, tale-telling, topical references, satire and praise. The groom's party have a far more limited range of expression, tending towards more reactive, prosaic language which is serious in tone. This is appropriate; the *rèiteach* is an occasion for the bride's family to indulge in a proud verbal display which reflects their (temporarily) superior position and aggrandises their 'stock'. The audience are gathered to watch not a bardic contest as such, but to appreciate the inventiveness with which the girl's family obstruct and frustrate the efforts of the groom's party to achieve union. The polar opposites of comic and serious represented by the two parties contribute much to the hilarity; if the groom's representative were just as funny, or worse, even more inventive, witty and amusing than the bride's, the result would be utter confusion. Final union is the purpose of the meeting, a 'clearing away', a 'disentanglement' which leads to an affirmation of 'harmony'; but this is achieved after a period of 'chaos' and disorder, from which 'cosmos' emerges. Such disorder is, however, carefully stage-managed; the natural hierarchy may be inverted, but the rules of engagement and the boundaries applying are known to all and are as durable as the four walls against which the audience are leaning.

This account also makes clear the desire of the participants to be entertaining. The audience, formerly quasi-official 'witnesses' are gathered mainly to the delight in wordplay and the ritual drama of the 'false brides', as well as witnessing the 'sharing of the cup' which surely followed. In this example, besides the working in of specificity to

the allegory, genealogy and social censure are also featured; the audience is reminded that  $x$  is related to  $y$ , as well as hearing an affirmation of shared community values in the form of a satire of an errant contemporary. These messages are communicated through burlesque inversion of normal codes, for example of modes of address and hospitality, and as such do indeed resemble the periods of licence afforded during certain religious festivals, as one informant remarked.

## 5. RÈITEACH AND THE EVIL EYE

### 5.1. *Introduction*

In the above account from Harris, reference is made to the availability of a ‘hog’ tainted by the evil eye, and we have interpreted the introduction of this topic as being related to lactation and milk produce generally. Closer examination of other evidence suggests that traditions surrounding a fear of the evil eye play a role in many, if not all the examples found. The impact of this anxiety is not confined to milk production, and the evil eye may be said to inform the ritual exchanges in the following areas:

- a. threats relating to milk and other fluids
- b. praise and dispraise
- c. buying and selling
- d. thigging
- e. concealment, distraction and silence

### 5.2. *The evil eye and ritual exchanges*

#### 5.2.1 *Threats relating to milk and other fluids*

The impact of the evil eye on lactation and the production of milk products such as butter, as well as crops and other products is well-documented and widespread. In Alan Dundes’ *Casebook* (81, 86–106, 145, 216, 230, 264–6) for example, one can find references to the topic of milk produce and the evil eye from Hungary, Ukraine, Macedonia, Slovakia, Greece, Sweden, Spain, Lebanon and Islamic and Hindu cultures generally, as well as from Scotland and Ireland. In a cross-cultural survey, John M. Roberts found the highest correlation with milking and dairy production, and the highest incidence with the presence of bovine species (Roberts: 241, 243). The oral quality of the evil eye, ‘devouring with the eyes’ is evident; the act of looking too intensely, or the mere glance of an ill-favoured person is equivalent to the removal, redistribution or incorporation of the milk and the animal’s future capacity for production. In the case of butter-theft, the potential for the fluid to become solid is removed – in other words, the evil eye results in the milk remaining at the liquid stage. In his *Evil Eye in the Western Highlands*, R. C. MacLagan (1902: 61, 92, 123) notes also butter becoming ‘a kind of grainy substance’, a mother’s milk turned into water, and cows in addition to giving

no milk 'running and roaring like mad'. Henderson, in his *Survivals*, gives a variety of charms and countermeasures for the return of the *toradh*, or milk produce, and several such charms are to be found in Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*.<sup>15</sup> In this context, we may re-examine the Harris *rèiteach* exchange collected by Morag MacLeod.

The bride's father asserts that he has lost a lot of stock and retains only a 'dry ewe'. This most obviously is a reference to a woman past child-bearing age; it could, however, be a reference to the bride herself. This interpretation is suggested as a result of his next remark, which is that he has a hog for sale, but one *tainted by the evil eye*; the animal is prone to wandering, unsettled, but could be 'cured' by the 'sale' to the groom's party. He then refers to a 'dry sheep' that is for sale, an animal which, however, 'would not always be dry', again suggesting that the remedy for the 'dryness' is for the transfer of 'ownership' of the girl to take place. We have previously noted that reference is made by the speaker to a common cure for the evil eye, that of 'silvered water'. The girl is unsettled and prone to wandering, just as the animals are 'running and roaring' in MacLagan's account. She is also temporarily 'dry', another consequence of the evil eye. This is not to suggest that the participants in this *rèiteach* believe in such bewitching; the girl may be 'dry' because she is not breast-feeding, and this is the situation which can be 'cured' by marriage. The subtext of this may be, however, the quoting in a parodic spirit of an anxiety which was formerly widely held; the belief that the evil eye would affect fertility and result in the diminishing of the woman's or animal's capacity to produce milk. They may still 'believe in the old things', as one speaker remarks. We have noted above the structural similarity of the rites of milk stealing and those of 'stealing' the goodness of the house in the form of the bride. Indeed, a section of MacLagan's study is entitled 'Giving Away Milk Dangerous', and details how, once a person with the evil eye has been given milk, the remainder of the milk will be spoiled and the cow injured (MacLagan, 1902: 89). Gregor notes of the North-East of Scotland,

When one entered the house during the process of churning, the hand of the one who entered had to be put to the churn. This was done to show that there was no evil intended against the butter-making, and to do away with all effects that might flow from the 'ill-e'e' or the 'ill-fit'. There were persons whose entrance was dreaded during the process of butter-making. If such did enter there was either no butter, or it was bad in quality, or less in quantity than it should have been (Gregor: 1881: 194).

This may be a further indication that the groom's party are linked, however seriously meant, with those who would steal the *toradh* of the house. Their entrance meets with the same resistance which would also accompany those wishing to enter during a 'sensitive' time such as butter-making. Those who lacked a productive animal of their own were particularly suspected; an informant of MacLagan's reports

The butter was taken from myself last year. We churned until Ronald and Donald and myself were running with sweat, but although we had continued at it till now we could not get a bit of butter. It is in the barn that we gather the milk, and a man who has not got a

cow of his own came the way one day and he looked on the milk in the barn, and we were making out that it was he who had done the harm. The friends were advising me not to be allowing people to see the milk, but that I should remember that every person is not like myself. Well, from that time we are taking care that nobody will get an opportunity to go where the milk is, and now we are getting as much butter as we ought to get in every churning (MacLagan 1902: 82).

This not only recalls the girl's family's reluctance to let the stranger enter, the 'buyers' looking for a beast to purchase, but may also provide an explanation as to why the bride was hidden. As long as she remains secluded from sight, she is safe from the effects of the evil eye. The connection between milk, the evil eye, and animal and human fertility is further suggested in this fragment of a charm from *Carmina Gadelica* against bewitching:

Calum caomh da m' sheoladh,  
 Odhran naomh da m' dhion,  
 'S Bride nam ban buadhach  
 Cur bhuaadh anns an ni.

Mar a dh' orduich Rìgh nan rìgh,  
 Bainne chur an cìch 's an carr,  
 Mar a dh' orduich Rì nan dul,  
 Sugh a chur an uth 's an ar.

Ann an uth bruc,  
 Ann an uth brac,  
 Ann an uth murc,  
 Ann an uth marc.

Ann an uth urc,  
 Ann an uth arc,  
 An uth gobhar, othasg, agus caora,  
 Maoiseach, agus mart.

Le bliochd, le blachd, le bladh,  
 Le bair, le dair, le toradh,  
 Le laoigh bhoirionn, bharr,  
 Le al, le agh, le sonadh.

Gun fear mi-ruin,  
 Gun bhean mi-shuil,  
 Gun ghnu, gun tnu,  
 Gun aon donadh.

The kindly Colum directing me,  
 The holy Oran protecting me,  
 Whilst Bride of women beneficent

Shall put fruitage in the kine.

As the King of kings ordained,  
To put milk in breast and gland,  
As the Being of life ordained,  
To put sap in udder and teat.

In udder of badger,  
In udder of reindeer,  
In udder of sow (?),  
In udder of mare.

In udder of sow (?),  
In udder of heifer,  
In udder of goat, ewe, and sheep,  
Of roe, and of cow.

With milk, with cream, with substance,  
With rutting, with begetting, with fruitfulness,  
With female calves excelling,  
With progeny, with joyance, with blessing.

Without man of evil wish,  
Without woman of evil eye,  
Without malice, without envy,  
Without one evil ('An Torranan' ['The Figwort']; Carmichael 2: 86–89).

That brides and bridegrooms were particularly at risk from the evil eye is mentioned by several commentators on other Indo-European and Semitic cultures. At a Hindu wedding in South India, the couple, sitting opposite one another, show each other, and then drop, salt, chillis and cakes. This is done because 'on account of their attractive appearance, and being the central figures in the ceremony, they are the subjects of the gaze of everybody, and particularly susceptible to the bad influence of the evil eye.' The rite is intended to 'avert any calamity from this source' (Woodburn: 64). In the Jewish tradition 'the new-born baby is apt to be influenced by the evil eye and should, therefore, not be shown to strangers. The bride is exposed to the danger of the evil eye and should, therefore, be veiled during the wedding ceremony' (Brav: 49). This last reference further suggests a common link between the rituals surrounding infants entering human society for the first time, and the marriage couple who are undergoing a social 'rebirth'. MacLagan also details the importance of hiding new-borns from sight (MacLagan, 1902: 45). Whilst brides affected by the evil eye may lose their fecundity and so their ability to produce milk, grooms were also at risk from malign influence which could affect their potency. The following account is from Greece, collected in the early 1970s:

Although [the couple] had carried such such prophylactics as blue against the evil eye . . . it was obvious to the villagers that the couple had been bewitched during the marriage service.

The groom was unable to consummate the marriage . . . in a society where the wedding sheets are publicly displayed, this became a well-known fact. The groom took ill and was bedridden for four months. He began to waste away . . . (Dionisopoulos-Mass: 58).

As the bride ‘dries up’, so does the groom, whose equivalent milk-like product is also under threat of removal, as his impotence results in non-production. We may compare this to MacLagan’s descriptions of the inability of a liquid to become solid, and of a solid becoming ‘grainy’, a condition which occurs again through a lack of liquid. This connection of the breasts and male genitals is further suggested in the charms of the Greek villagers in the above account, where evil is returned to the possessor of the evil eye with ‘if it is a woman crush her breasts and if it is a man crush his genitals’ (Dionisopoulos-Mass: 54). A charm from *Carmina Gadelica* against the evil eye (‘Cronachdainn Sùla’ [‘Countering the Evil-Eye’]; Carmichael 4: 158–61) calls for a redirection of the malign influence in a similar way:

A laighe air am fearaibh sgothach,  
 A laighe air am mnathaibh torrach,  
 A laighe air am macaibh morrach,  
 A laighe air an nigheanaibh comhach.

May it lie on their potent men,  
 May it lie on their pregnant women,  
 May it lie on their virile sons,  
 May it lie on their conceptive daughters.

Another (‘Casgadh Beum Sùla [‘Checking the Evil Eye’]; Carmichael 4: 176–77) urges

Masa sùil fir i,  
 I a lasadh mar bhith,  
 Masa sùil mnà i,  
 I bhith dh’easbhaidh a cìch.

If it be eye of man,  
 May it flare like pitch,  
 If it be eye of woman,  
 May she want her breast.’

Alan Dundes notes phallic gestures such as the *fica* used to ward off the evil eye, and the practice of males touching their genitals ‘upon seeing a priest or other individual thought to have the evil eye . . . it is not unreasonable to assume that the evil eye threatened to make men impotent . . . the evil eye is as dangerous to female breasts (including cow’s udders) as to male genitals . . . in symbolic terms, a pair of eyes may be equivalent to breasts or testicles’ (Dundes: 264, 266). Dundes develops this ‘wet and dry’ theory to assert that ‘wet’ equals life and ‘dry’ death, and that

if one individual possesses a precious body fluid, semen, for instance, this automatically means that some other individual lacks that same fluid. Life entails an equilibrium model.

If one has too little wealth, one is poor or ill. Such individuals constitute threats to persons with sufficient or abundant wealth and health (Dundes: 266–7).

Dundes cites further evidence to suggest that the conception of the diminishing of the life force as the gradual loss of liquid ‘probably made sense in light of what was empirically observable in the case of fruits, among other items’ and the magic liquids which revive the thirsty dead (Dundes: 274). In this connection, perhaps the imbibing of ‘silver water’ is intended to counter the dessicating influence of the evil eye, and we may compare this with other liquid preventative measures such as saliva and urine.

We may conclude that there is a further suggestion that arrival of the groom’s party is linked with the evil eye and the stealing of the *toradh*, analogous to the milk-stealing rites of May and the preventative measures taken to protect the fertile, wealth-giving members of the household. In this respect the bride in Highland tradition is clearly linked with the ‘milk producing’ higher mammals.

### 5.2.2 Praise and dispraise

During the ritual element we have termed the ‘refusal sequence’, the groom’s representative is obliged to turn down the women presented to him before finally accepting the bride. Whether employing allegorical or non-allegorical language, the women are refused through a certain degree of dispraise. As ‘animals’ they may be unsuitable for transplantation or difficult to winter; as ‘women’ their hands are too small or they are too lazy or fat. In both traditions the ritual concludes with high praise of the bride.

This may appear quite straightforward; the verbal skill of the groom’s representative is tested through his being obliged to refuse female relatives and friends in an entertaining way, without causing offence; it is appropriate that an assertion of the bride’s superior qualities should precede her ‘handing over’. Praise of the bride, is, however, also linked to the evil eye complex. Eugene S. MacCartney in his essay ‘Praise and Dispraise in Folklore’ (Dundes 9–38) finds the link among the ancient Greek and Roman cultures, besides more contemporary Mediterranean countries, Egypt, Scotland, Ireland, India, Malaya and among the Jewish community in Germany. Of traditional Gaelic society John Shaw observes

both praise and dispraise subsume dual aspects according to the intention, positive or otherwise, of the speaker or bard. The presence/absence of benevolence opens up a level where the magico-religious effects of speech come into play and are duly reflected in the vocabulary (Shaw: 17).

In particular, the word *aibhseachadh* (making a loud report, exaggerating) ‘has the more specialised meaning of ‘overpraising’ (‘praising up’ in Cape Breton English)’ and ‘would often be resorted to when a fine animal excited envy, and the result of the exaggerated praise was to bring the force of the evil eye (*droch shùil*) on the animal’.<sup>16</sup>

Walter Gregor, writing of the North East of Scotland, describes the vice of ‘forespeaking’:

praise beyond measure; praise accompanied with a kind of amazement or envy was followed by disease or accident . . . it was not deemed proper to bestow a great deal of praise on a child; and doing so would have been interrupted by some such words as ‘Gueede sake, haud yir tung, or ye’ll forespyke the bairn’. Such a notion of forespeaking by bestowing excessive praise was not limited to infants, but extended to full-grown people, to domestic animals, and to crops’ (Gregor 1881: 8–9, 220).

Gregor details the woes that follow over-praising. MacLagan, in his study of the evil eye in the Highlands, gives many such examples, including a description of its effect on a woman:

An Islay man said: ‘My late wife had a sister, and she was as pretty as you ever saw. Once a woman came in and commenced praising the girl excessively. Well scarcely was that woman gone out of the house when the girl began to yawn, and it was not long till she was so bad that they thought that she would be away’ (die) (MacLagan 1902: 52).

Whilst the effects of overpraise could be dire, any degree of praise was unwise; MacLagan remarks, ‘the mere expression of admiration should be avoided by those who wish to escape the accusation of the Evil Eye’ (1902: 76). If an object was praised by another it was, to some degree, ‘tainted’ and had to be removed from the house if the malign influence was not to linger. MacLagan relates the story of a confrontation between two neighbours, one credited with the evil eye which had killed a third neighbour’s chickens:

another neighbour came in carrying a growing plant, which she presented to the complainer, saying: ‘Mrs. X. told me that you had your eye on this, and ever since it has done no good; the leaves have been withering and falling off. Now! – there it is to you! keep it’ (MacLagan 1902: 9).

In the context of courtship and marriage, the expression of praise becomes especially problematic, since one may reasonably assume a positive, flattering, complimentary mode to be the one most appropriate and natural for the suitor or his representative, whether this is directed towards the girl or her family. Given that this is effectively forbidden, to freely indulge in praise of the bride at the conclusion of the betrothal rite is, in effect, to cast the evil eye upon her.

The bride is brought forward and explicitly praised; the result is that she can no longer remain under her father’s roof, since she is now ‘tainted’ by their ‘unwelcome’ attentions. The eye is ‘in’ her; and him that put it there is not to be refused. Although dispraise could also be a method of hexing through the evil eye (MacLagan, 1902: 17), the women who are rejected, although criticised, are not desired. It would appear, therefore, that it is the notion of explicit praise in order to bring about the giving or selling of the object desired that is in operation, whether in a spirit of parody or in earnest.

Three methods to neutralise the harmful effects of praise are described by MacLagan (1902: 116–18). One is to immediately dispraise the object concerned, another to praise it even more highly, and the third to bless it when praised. From the available evidence, in no example collected does the bride's father or representative attempt to undo or reverse the effect that praise of his daughter will undoubtedly bring. If there is a blessing, it is one which unites the couple. Praise could be countered with dispraise or exaggeration; this one can identify as a ritual dialogic form, and one which could be integrated in the ritual dialogues described above. The absence of this verbal form indicates that once the bride appears, the time for ritual combat is over. The father's failure to counter the praise of his daughter confirms that he *wishes* it to happen, again, whether this is expressed in a spirit of play or not. Once she is praised, she must leave with the groom's party, a process that was set in motion as soon as they crossed the threshold, and perhaps from the day that she was admired by the groom himself.

That as a general rule direct praise was to be avoided is clear; yet the ritual exchanges from Barra and South Uist outlined above are plainly eulogies – a direct praising of the couple by their respective representatives. MacLagan (eg. 1902: 33) gives several examples of the need to avoid praising one's own stock, and although he does not mention these areas in particular, it seems unlikely that the traditions of the evil eye did not operate there in any form. One explanation may be that the rules governing praise were suspended for the period during which the two families had by necessity to form and cement the bonds between the couple and their families. The good qualities of each had to be articulated – this would be especially important if the families were relative strangers and had had no advance information from third parties. Indeed, one account from South Uist described above details the potential for just such a 'surprise attack' (from Donald J MacDonald, DJ MacDonald MS 5368–79). Although the author does not deal specifically with the subject of praise, an account of a temporary cessation of its prohibition appears to be suggested by a commentator on Greek tradition; commenting on the evil eye, Regina Dionisopoulos states:

The village secretary once told us how difficult it was to levy taxes or take a census, as the people maintained they had nothing. Their lands were poor and few, their animals were diseased, old and dying, their health was so bad they were unable to work regularly. But when a peasant farmer is trying to impress another about the qualities of his children in regard to a possible marriage, he cannot praise his health and wealth enough. While the peasant's attitude may appear to be incongruous, there is an explanation. Concern about assessments and fears about evoking the evil eye are reasons for not bragging about one's wealth and health. However, when the issue is a match, modesty is out. This, of course, makes the potential couple an object of envy, since the dowry is in order and since they are considered to be desirable (Maloney: 56).

The author goes on to describe the various methods employed to defeat the 'eye'. The suggestion is that in order to secure a match, a degree of praise was thought unavoidable, even though this would inevitably attract the evil eye. A mutually beneficial union

could only result if the contents of one's 'shop window' were displayed; although this carried a degree of risk, it was the 'lesser of two evils' and worth the hazards entailed, especially since elaborate precautions were then taken 'after the fact' to protect the couple and their goods from malign influence. This in turn implies that the evil eye was thought to be, to some extent, manageable. Perhaps this was the view held in Barra and parts of South Uist, but not shared in other localities. There, the ritual forms seem to suggest that the avoidance of praise until the last moment, until it was 'too late' for the transfer of the bride to be reversed, indicates a very real belief in the risks posed by excessive praise.

### *5.2.3 Buying and selling*

The groom's party who arrive at the bride's house posing as buyers are also 'acting out' a situation based on fear of the evil eye. Whilst praise of an object may force a change of ownership, the expression of a desire to buy could have the same effect. Among buyers, marginal figures were especially feared:

Drovers are not, of course, complete strangers in the districts in which they do business, but as a class they are looked on with some suspicion. Thus we are told, 'Some drovers are possessed of the Evil Eye, and in consequence it is considered foolish not to sell any animals to them if they appear anxious to have them'. (MacLagan, 1902: 48).

Once an offer is made for an animal, refusal can lead to death:

A man taking a valuable horse from the West coast of Kintyre to Tarbet was, after leaving Musadale, offered a considerable sum for it. He said he would not, could not sell the beast, and though the offer was raised to sixty pounds, he still refused and went on his way. Before he reached Tayinloan the horse fell dead on the road. (MacLagan, 1902: 88).

The following example is particularly reminiscent of the groom's party arriving to 'purchase' a father's valuable daughter:

A native of Killean, Kintyre, tells of a fine cow his father had, and on which the family set a considerable value. A man who had known something about the cow came all the way from Campbeltown purposely to buy her, but the owner declined to sell her. 'If he did, he hardly got any good of her thereafter, for in a short time she became unwell, and lingering for a time, died. The neighbours thought it was a real case of the Evil Eye'. (MacLagan, 1902: 49–50).

We will recall an example from Gregor quoted earlier in connection with the concept of non-completion:

there were those who were dreaded as buyers, if the purchase was not completed by them. In a short time the animal began to 'dwine', or an accident would befall it, or death speedily followed. Such had an 'ill-ee'. It was alleged that they were well aware of the opinion entertained of their power, and offered a price less than that of the market, fully aware that the seller would rather give the animal at a low price than risk a sale in the market, or no sale at all, for the same men were believed to prevent the sale to any other (Gregor: 1884: 184).

MacLagan describes a possible remedy for the curse that follows non-completion of a sale:

The reciter's grandfather was a Stratherrick man (Loch Ness), and when attending the market there, was approached by another man to sell him a stirk. There was a good deal of bargaining. No agreement was come to, the offerer leaving as if dissatisfied. Before the market closed the stirk fell to the ground and could not be got to rise. F.'s suspicions of course fell on the rejected offerer. An acquaintance . . . drew the palm of his hand up the stirk's back against the hair, repeating words which the reciter, however, had never heard. The stirk got to its feet and was soon brisk and well (MacLagan 1902: 196).

There is a clear connection between an offer to buy an animal and the risk the seller runs if he refuses, and the attentions paid by a young man to his preferred partner. Even the look of a young man was enough to start in motion the chain of events leading to marriage, as MacLagan relates:

A girl had taken suddenly ill. A young man in the neighbourhood was desirous of marrying her, but the suitor was not acceptable, and the girl took every opportunity of letting this be seen. A neighbour, supposed to have special skill and whose method of hanky-panky was the dropping of melted lead into water, was consulted. She went through her performance and showed the lead . . . in the form of a heart with a hole through it. She explained to the sick girl, 'Look at that, his eye is in you and you are far better to take him'. The match was made, and the girl recovered her health . . . the idea on the part of the reciter was that actual illness was brought on by the desirous eye of the young man, not merely that the lad had an eye to her as a satisfactory partner (MacLagan 1902: 198–9).

She became, one might say, 'settled'. The underlying pattern is the same as with the incomplete sale and the broader issues of 'non-completion' detailed above. Once the process has begun, only its resolution can bring about peace. The young man expresses the wish to obtain the girl just as the buyer does an animal. The extent to which he is 'uncanny' is unclear; but the result is the same as for the 'dreaded' buyers who possessed the evil eye. The groom's party may pose as 'marginal' and as 'buyers' to ensure the bringing about of this *fait accompli*; they want the girl, and once the demand has been made it is certain that she will be delivered to them. Not to do so would result in the same affliction that affected the girl in the above example. It is possible that unscrupulous individuals, perhaps like the young man in the above example, could play upon the evident fears of looking and praising in order to secure a match. In the examples we have obtained, however, it would appear that the groom's party's performance in the character of buyers with the evil eye is intended to provide amusement for all concerned. The similarity between the bringing in of the women during the refusal sequence and a cattle sale has already been noted. It would appear that this is more than merely a burlesque of a familiar situation that provides the opportunity for amusement. Beneath the 'horseplay' lies the belief that once an offer had been received for an animal, it was safer to let it go, since it would be 'tainted' and difficult or impossible to find another buyer. This obviously invites comparison with the situation of a girl and her preferred

‘buyer’ or suitor; if she or her family were to refuse the offer, particularly when already set in motion, this would reflect badly on her reputation and make her less attractive to other ‘buyers’, quite aside from the question of buying, selling and the evil eye.

Another feature of the *rèiteach* which would appear to be related to commerce and the evil eye is the effect of close examination of the bride, as if the buyer were inspecting her in detail. To do this, one must look intensely at the object under examination, which in turn leads to the evil eye. MacLagan provides several examples:

he went for her and brought her home by Kessock Ferry, where some people examined her and admired her. She was a dun, and a fine looking animal. Having reached home the quey was tied in the byre, apparently in good health . . . after examining the beast [a woman with knowledge of the Evil Eye] told them it was blind.

For a considerable time none of her cows had quey calves, but at length she got one, a nice beast, of which she was particularly careful . . . while she was watching this calf this neighbour came out of her own house, and putting her hands on each of her sides, stood and gazed for a few seconds at the calf. While she was staring at it the calf gave a ‘loup,’ rushed as if it were mad through the place . . . it seemed as if it could not rest . . .

Recently a servant-girl in Islay, having the charge of attending to the feeding of a pig, requested a man who had never been suspected of possessing a hurtful eye to look at the pig to see how it was thriving. The man refused, adding quite seriously that he did not like to look at a beast that way, in case of any harm being done (MacLagan 1902: 58–59, 59–60, 33).

In the first example, reference is made to ‘examining’; in the second, to ‘gazing for a few seconds’; and in the last, another suggestion of ‘examination’. These are acts clearly distinct from normal ‘looking’; *closely* looking at an animal would appear to increase the resulting likelihood or degree of the evil eye to a level above that of the malign glance. The ‘inspection’ of the bride, as she is brought forward for the groom’s party’s perusal, seen, for example, in F. J. MacDonald’s account of the groom’s representative spinning the girl ‘round and round, pretending to be running his hands over her’ may be seen as a method of further guaranteeing that she will be ‘sold’.

Reference may also be made to the belief that the jealous guarding of any object attracted the evil eye. MacLagan (1902: 45) remarks, ‘without any suspicion of the owner of a beast having the Evil Eye himself, his desire to retain it is supposed to render it specially liable to the evil influence of any one possessed of the power’. In the context of a *rèiteach* exchange, the bride’s father or representative’s stated reluctance to part with the ‘animal’ and frustrating of the bargaining process can be seen perhaps to amount to the deliberate attracting of the evil eye in order to further secure the girl’s departure.

#### 5.2.4 *Thigging*

Examples of the ritual ‘asking’ were found where the groom’s party were not ‘buyers’, but fellow farmers who requested assistance of some kind. The tradition of thigging has already been mentioned, and may now be included as part of the evil eye complex.

In our earlier discussion of thigging, we noted the obligation to observe this community norm, no matter how arduous. One may speculate that although drifters and strangers were most often suspected of having the evil eye, this may have extended to all 'non-producers'; it would appear that fear of the evil eye was part of the general anxiety which surrounded a visit from an itinerant beggar-bard aside from harm resulting from their maledictions.

If refusal of help to those starting up a croft was not an option, then turning away those suspected of being in possession of the evil eye was unthinkable. In his study, MacLagan offers a whole chapter entitled 'People Should Give When Asked'. Although this deals mainly with the perils of not proceeding with a sale, the same principle applied to those merely seeking assistance. Of one woman believed to be in possession of the Eye, MacLagan states plainly that 'the danger of refusing a request is great, not so much from the purely Christian-charity point of view, as from that of escaping the Evil Eye'. Describing a woman feared for her evil eye, MacLagan (1902: 48, 69) remarks 'people would do almost anything than offend her, so general was the impression that she could injure any person if she wished to do so . . . she could have almost whatever she chose to ask, so much were they afraid of her Evil Eye'. We may conclude that to refuse a request for assistance was to run an equivalent risk to the refusal to sell, or failure to complete a sale once an offer had been made. In other words, in terms of the evil eye, no distinction can be made between the groom's party employing the motif of the fellow farmers seeking assistance and those expressing an interest in buying an animal or other object.

### 5.3. *Concealment, distraction and silence*

The evil eye may also be in operation in connection with the customs of the 'hidden bride' and the procession of 'false brides' refused by the groom's party.

Although the effects of the evil eye may begin before the groom's party's visit, shown in the bride's 'tendency to roam' or 'unsettled state' we have noted many cases in which the bride is deliberately hidden before their visit. Hiding a prized object was a recognised preventative measure:

There is one simple way of keeping your property safe from the Evil Eye: viz., by not letting it be known that you have what may be affected . . . a certain Calum Ban, having the name of the Evil Eye, others kept things out of his sight for fear that he might hurt them . . .

My mother said that she . . . was not in the custom of showing the butter to any one . . . 'be sure that you do not let the whole of the butter be seen by anybody' (MacLagan, 1902: 37, 86).

An account from the eighteenth century Highlands would appear to confirm this link between the 'hidden bride', the visitors and the evil eye:

If the preliminaries were adjusted, the whole company repaired to the bride's house, where an entertainment was provided. Then it was she made her first appearance, for before

agreement it would have been reckoned indecent, and even ominous, to have seen her, or to have entered the house where she was. (Allardyce 2: 419).

It is of interest that ‘agreement’ has to be reached before the bride is seen. To have done so would have marked her in some way, although this could be in terms of her ‘value’, linked with the evil eye and trade, or with her fertility, linked with traditions of milk-spoiling. We may compare this with the account from the Dewar manuscripts where the suitor’s representative not only enters the house, but the girl’s bedroom. We have previously noted that this action is a violation of the norms of hospitality, normally only breached during specially licenced seasonal rites. We may now also speculate that this latter action is a deliberate violation of the norms of visiting a bride-to-be, and can be seen as a deliberate act which places the ‘ominous’ eye upon her, more or less ensuring her departure.

We might add that the bride’s family’s refusal to acknowledge that they are in possession of the object requested can also be seen as a method of protection from unwelcome eyes. Silence, another feature of the ritual, may also be effective; George Henderson (297) states ‘It is not right at milking time if a person passes who is suspected of having the evil eye to *answer* him even though he addresses you. Your silence, or the animosity signified thereby, has an influence in checking any harm that may come from him’. This may also explain in part the hostility and lack of hospitality we have already noted. One account from Mull given by MacLagan would appear to centre on the refusal of entry; a woman’s cow is sick, and she has approached a friend for help:

he advised her . . . not to allow anyone to see the cow on any account, for three would soon pass, he said, and if she would allow them in to see the cow, the cow would be gone. The three were strong, and she would need to use all her strength to keep them out . . . Having got tubs she filled them with stones and placed them against the byre door with spades and everything she could think of to keep the door from being opened. She was not long there when a man passed with a horse and a dog. He came to the kitchen door and asked the children where their mother was, but they did not tell him. He then came to the byre door, lifted the sneck, and when it did not yield tried to force it open with all his might, saying.. ‘Kate, John’s daughter, are you there?’ My mother knew his voice as that of a near neighbour, and answered: ‘Yes, John, the cow is unwell, and she is lying behind the door and you cannot get in’. My mother had to tell the lie, or he would force the door open. The man went away . . . the man, the horse and the dog . . . and the cow got better (MacLagan 1902: 84–85).

In this account entry is resisted in order that the person in possession of the evil eye cannot lay eyes upon the stricken animal, and kill it. We might compare this to the girl-as-animal already afflicted by the evil eye, and her family resisting the stranger-neighbours as they attempt to cross the threshold. Once the groom’s party have gained entry, the girl’s fate is sealed. We may note the high incidence of cases involving the evil eye where the animal is female and the suspect either a stranger or near-neighbour. MacLagan (1902: 114) remarks that visitors to a house, if they do not wish to be suspected

of ill-will, should bless both the home and its occupants before entering – something the groom's party pointedly fail to do.

We must also consider the possibility that the purpose of the presentation of women other than the bride is intended to draw the evil eye away from the real one. In the first stage, all the women are hidden; then one by one, substitutes are offered. Since, according to one of MacLagan's informants it is 'always the best and prettiest of beast or body that was most liable to be injured by a bad eye', it seems reasonable that the 'false brides' are rejected because they lack just these qualities. Analogues from other cultures suggest this theory of concealment; the Shilluk of Sudan, whose beliefs and practices are 'almost certainly cognate to the evil eye complex found throughout the Indo-European and Semitic world' protect their cattle from the evil eye in the following way:

A very fine appearing cow is not permitted to go into the village by herself but is kept with the herd, and she is to be kept in the middle of the herd so that she may not be seen, and the curse come on her. A very fine cow is always kept hidden. (Oyler: 81).

We will note that this is highly reminiscent of the constraints on the movement of brides and grooms previously discussed. In India, a royal wedding entailed the participation of false brides. A. Stewart Woodburn (63) reports that 'in 1906 when a royal wedding was in progress in Travancore, a group of Nayar girls, attractively dressed, went in procession before the royal palanquin to avert the evil eye from the wedding group'.

In *Folktales and Reality*, a study dedicated to tracing links between folktale motifs and actual practice, Lutz Röhrich details examples of tales which correspond to the hidden bride ritual, where discovery leads directly to marriage. In folk practice the bride need not actually be hidden; the groom may be faced with a group of identically-dressed women and be forced to identify the true bride from the false. Röhrich concludes that the purpose of the 'hidden bride' custom is 'to deceive the demonic and evil powers so they cannot identify the actual couple getting married, i.e., the people in danger because of their transitional status'.<sup>17</sup>

It is of interest that Juliette Wood has noted the motif of the hidden bride in Welsh versions of the Fairy Bride legend. In these the suitor must identify her from among her identical sisters, and in one example a pre-arranged signal helps him make the correct decision.<sup>18</sup>

#### 5.4 Conclusion

The elements common to the *rèiteach* and linked with the evil eye may be summarised as follows:

1. the visitors are strangers, beggars, bards [marginals feared, especially as buyers]
2. they request assistance or express wish to buy [refusal is risky]
3. after denial or resistance they cross the threshold [the girl is hidden]
4. substitutes are revealed and dispraised [evil eye is on them, but they are not desired; attempt to distract or dilute evil eye]

5. the girl is revealed to them or she is located [impact of buyer's eye, produce or object now 'spoiled' if not previously compromised]
6. she is accepted [agreement of sale cannot be revoked without causing harm to object]
7. she is examined closely [intensification of impact of looking]
8. she is praised [further intensification of the 'eye' in her; she must now be transferred to buyers to avoid harm to both the girl and family.]

The tradition of the evil eye would appear to lie beneath many of the motifs and actions identified in the *rèiteach*. The overall sense is that the groom's party use this tradition not as a threat of any kind, but effectively 'quote' from it, in order to gain entry and secure delivery of the girl. One could argue that this absolves the girl's father of the responsibility for *freely* agreeing to her departure; he lets his daughter go, not through choice but through necessity. The same logic could be said to underpin the dramatising of her departure as being the result of 'abduction'; again, the father is absolved of responsibility and so retains the highest possible status for himself, his family and his protesting daughter. This pattern provides a method by which the bride's family can preserve the maximum status, a means of presenting the loss of their daughter as a 'no-win' situation, just as the verbal contest incorporates a fixed outcome. The family do all they can; they do not welcome the visitors but resist them, but community norms on entry and/or fear of the evil eye dictate that they must enter, or be helped. They hide the girl or present substitutes, but once afflicted or the object is bargained for or praised it must be given away; to save the girl's life and the prosperity of the family she must be allowed to leave. We must see the tradition of the evil eye as providing another 'template' for action in a highly-charged situation which, unregulated, could lead to ill-feeling and conflict.

To some extent, however, and in some contexts, this anxiety may have been actual. For families who were not intimate with one another, in the context of a 'surprise attack', for example, community norms governing entry and hospitality, and fears of the evil eye, satire and cursing would give the strangers a distinct advantage.

#### NOTES

- 1 Rev. P. N. MacKichan, Inveraray. Letter 7, 3rd September 1893. MacLagan MS. From the unarchived MS in the School of Scottish Studies.
- 2 The Breton word *dimézi* denotes both 'betrothal' and 'marriage'.
- 3 Rogers: 220. Sometimes a 'cautioner' was needed who 'became bound that they would not cohabit before receiving the nuptial benediction' (367–8).
- 4 D. J. MacDonald MS 57: 5383. In a supernatural tale, a groom-to-be in this liminal state narrowly avoids death from a shape-shifting monster which is following him. Rev. Norman MacDonald, Skye. SA 1956/13/A4, SA 1957/97/A7. Recorded by James Ross.

- 5 Moore: 158. See also Killip: 78.
- 6 Mrs. MacLucas. This and all subsequent transcriptions and translations by Ms. Cathie Scott and Ms. Peggy MacClements, School of Scottish Studies. Spelling as transcribed.
- 7 Lauchie MacLellan, Broad Cove, Cape Breton. Source: Neil MacLellan. I am grateful to Dr John Shaw of the School of Scottish Studies for drawing my attention to this source. He notes that 'no other versions of the song are known to have been recorded in Cape Breton'.
- 8 The *providan* is the bride's marriage outfit.
- 9 Rev. D. M. Lamont of Strath, quoted by Ronald Black, article in *West Highland Free Press* 13.7.90.
- 10 Marion MacLeod, Lewis. Kay: 90.
- 11 Jessie Nicholson, Skye. Kay: 94.
- 12 Commenting on the same account, Isabel Grant (363) notes 'the girl would show her concurrence by staying in the room, and the father would capitulate'.
- 13 Kelly: 113–4. Below the three year-old heifer was the two year-old colpthach, worth a third of a milch cow, the dairt or yearling at one quarter, and the dartaid or yearling bullock at one eighth. Values below this are calculated in sheep, fleeces and sacks of grain.
- 14 Lonsdale: 184. The author details several female initiation rites in which the girls are given animal identities, and animal or bird metaphors are used to symbolise such attributes as submission – which presupposes a prior state of restlessness or lack of control (196–205).
- 15 See MacLagan, 1902: 114–176, 192–198; Henderson: 294–301; Carmichael 2: 43–71, 85–89.
- 16 Shaw: 17. In a footnote the author cites a Cape Breton informant who observed 'Ma tha thu 'gam moladh suas ro mhòrdh' faodadh an t-each sin gun sgath feum a dheanamh do dhuine'. 'If you praise them [animals] up too much that horse could be of no use to anyone'. The author also notes that 'the same debility could be brought about by an unreasonably high offer for an animal' and that 'the practice was also known to the Gaelic aristocracy' citing an example from the first quarter of the 18th century.
- 17 Röhrich: 101. The author mentions Grimm tales (KHM) 11 'Little Brother and Little Sister'; 88 'The Liling, Leaping Lark'; 135 'The White Bride and the Black Bride'; 198 'Maid Maleen'.
- 18 Wood: 69. She identifies the motifs as H161.0.1 Recognition of person among identical companions, prearranged signal; H324 Suitor test: choosing princess from among identically clad sisters; H335.0.1 Bride helps suitor perform tasks.

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