

Bread in the Folk Culture of the Serbs In Its Pan-Slavic Context

Abstract: The Slavs do not consider bread to be a common foodstuff, but a sacred object, a symbol of wealth and happiness. Almost all significant rituals (holidays, rites from the life cycle of a person, occasional magical activities) use bread. In some of them, such as marriages or the Serbian holiday *krsna slava*, it is the main ritual object, which has great symbolic value. This paper addresses the use of bread in the ritual behavior of the Serbs and related peoples, where bread has the characteristics of a symbol and therefore gains a communicative function (it is used to convey or to receive information). It also points out that the symbolic function of bread changes depending on the grain used to make it, whether it is leavened or unleavened, and the shape of it.

Keywords: bread, rituals, customs, folk culture, Serbs, Slavs

One can assume that at the beginning of the new era the Slavs, in their ancient homeland, used unleavened millet bread as a daily nutriment, in addition to cereal porridge. According to the testimony of Byzantine historian Pseudo-Maurice, in the late sixth and early seventh century, of all the field crops, the Slavs mainly farmed millet (VIZINJ 1955: 131–132). The name *kruh*, *kruv*, *krušac*, which remains in Slovenian, Croatian and some western Serbian dialects, once denoted unleavened bread (most likely made of ground or chopped millet or rye), which was brittle and easily crumbled and broken (Trubačov 1996: 60). The modern name *proja*, which designates cornbread among the Serbs, once denoted millet bread and is derived from the word *proha* (*proso*, millet), since corn did not come to Europe until after the discovery of America. The name *hleb* for bread is most likely a Balto-Slavic borrowing and adaptation from the Gothic *hlaifs*, Old High German *hleib* < **hlaiba*. This name designates leavened bread, baked in a pan (later in an oven), unlike the unleavened breads baked in the hot ashes, i.e. *kruha* (ESSJ 1981/8: 27–28).

It is believed that the knowledge of preparing leavened bread was adopted by the Greeks from the Egyptians in the eighth century BCE, and that at the time the yeast was prepared using flour and grape stum, and that later this practice spread to other European peoples.

The wide use of bread for ritual purposes among the Slavs has been the subject of a number of studies, starting in the nineteenth century, and up to the present. One should mention the still current interpretation of

the symbolism of ritual breads by the Russian Slavist A. Potebnja (1835–1891) (new ed. Potebnja 2007: 92–156), the comparative studies on bread in rituals and poems by N. Sumcov (1854–1922) (new ed. Sumcov 1996: 157–248); the detailed description of Bulgarian ritual breads by D. Marinov (1846–1940) (new ed. Marinov 1994: 372–388). Among more recent studies, one should mention the monograph by S. Yaneva on Bulgarian ritual bread (Yaneva 1989), A. Strahov on the cult of bread among the East Slavs (Strahov 1991), and J. and A. Kubiak about bread in the folk culture of the Poles (1981), as well as the collection of papers from the scholarly conference in Sofia “Bread in Slavic Culture” (HVSK 1997). Significant contributions about bread in the culture of Slavic peoples have also been published by V. Ivanov and V. Toporov (1974), A. Gura (1977: 131–180), I. Sedakova (1994: 130–138), S. Tolstaja (SD 2012/5: 412–420), A. Plotnikova (SD 2012/5: 424–431), T. Agapkina (SD 2012/5: 421–424), etc. The thematic bibliography of Lj. Andrejić provides many sources about ritual breads among the Serbs (Andrejić 1977: 253–319).

Bread — a holy object

Bread was not a common foodstuff for the Slavs, but a holy object, the symbol of wealth and happiness. In Bosnia they used to say “Everything else is fine, but it’s bread that feeds you”¹ (Dvorovi; Majstorović 1908/HH: 437), and in Macedonia “May the Lord provide bread and salt, and the house will be full”² (Radoviško; Miladinović-Petrović 1938/XIII: 66). On the island of Hvar (Croatia), bread is called “the Lord’s blessing”, and there was a belief that a child will be protected from spells if a piece of bread is placed in its swaddling (Carić 1898/X: 159–160). The Russians (Novgorod region) say “Bread is above everything”³ (Vlasova & Žekulina 2006: 41); the Czechs call bread “God’s gift”. The widely used expression “to have enough bread in the house” means to live without shortages. The fact that bread was a symbol of wealth is supported by the maidens’ spell for marriage among the Russians in the Urals. Maidens would place bread, salt and a ring in the home and bring in a rooster. If the rooster pecked the salt, she would marry a vagabond (a pauper); if it pecked at the bread, a wealthy man; and if it pecked at the ring, she would surely get married that year (Vostrikov 2000: 47).

Bread was used for oaths: “I swear on bread.”⁴ (Bosnia). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the event that a stranger entered the house, they would

¹ “Sve je hvala, a hljeb je hrana.”

² “Neka Gospod dava hleb i sol, pa je kućata puna.”

³ “Хлеб – всему голова.”

⁴ “Tako mi hljeba.”

immediately be given bread and salt “with the thought that then he/she could do no harm” (Lilek 1899/XI: 710). In the same region if there was no more incense in the house, a breadcrumb would be cast into the fire to provide scent, so that “evil things” (apparitions, spectres) would flee (Zovko 1901/VI: 300).

There is a belief among Russians that the forest spirit (lešij) has his bread far from the human world. If a person that he abducts eats from this bread, they cannot return home any more. According to a legend from the Russian north (the Terska region, on the White Sea), a maiden who had been kidnapped by the forest spirit because she had been cursed by her mother, finds in his home a woman with many children, who gives her the following advice “Girl, if you want to return home, don’t eat our bread. I too was taken like you”⁵ (Vlasova 2004: 360).

Bread can articulate multiple symbolisms, on several grounds: the symbolical meaning of the *constituent elements* — flour, salt, water and, in the case of leavened bread, also yeast; the symbolism of the *manufacturing process* — crushing the seeds, sifting, wetting, storing, fermenting, baking (placing in the fire, retrieval); of the *shape* — round, twisted (braids), hollow, cruciform, zoomorphic, etc.; of the *time* when it is prepared — before holidays, after the birth of a child, before or after a wedding, after a person’s death, in the dead of night, after sunset, during a full moon, during a solar or lunar eclipse, on a certain day; of the *place* where it is prepared — in the home, watermill, outdoors.

The preparation of bread for magical purposes requires that some other conditions be met, such as the flour being from a new watermill, or from a mill that rotates counter-clockwise, the flour being sifted through an upside-down sieve, the sieve being held behind the back while sifting, the flour coming from multiple homes, the bread being dried in the sun, etc. (for more see Radenković 1997: 145–155).

In the process of kneading the dough and baking the bread, the flour (dough) in a short time passes from unleavened to leavened, from the amorphous state to the desired form, from the unstable to stable, which can symbolically communicate the idea of the cycle of birth, death and resurrection: through ripening, harvesting and reaping the wheat “dies” but its seed is born; through milling the seed “dies” but flour is born; flour “dies” but dough is born; dough “dies” but bread is born. The Serb ritual that is performed in the case of premature birth of a child speaks of the connection between the birth of a child and the baking of bread (accordingly the womb is the oven): when such a child is born it is placed on the peel, and when the

⁵ “Девушка, јесли хошь быть дома, дак не ешь нашего хлеба. Я, говорит, тоже такая была и тоже унесена.”

bread is removed from the oven, the child is placed briefly in the oven “so that the next would be born full term” (Miodragović 2009: 82).

The yeast, which is kept in a cold and dark place, and which is constantly used and renewed, can be associated with the ancestors, who yield offspring. The Serbs believe that when moving from an old house to a new house, the yeast in the old house should be destroyed (probably so that the patronage of the ancestors would be linked only to the new house). In Bosnia and Herzegovina (Vlasenica) it was believed that if mixed dough did not rise (if it did not ferment) it was a sign that someone in the house would die (Dragičević 1907: 332). In Bulgaria it was said that it was a bad thing for the house to run out of yeast (salt or vinegar). On the island of Hvar (Croatia) it was believed that while dough is being kneaded evil spirits circle around the house. In order to protect small children they would place a little dough in their swaddling-band before the bread is placed in the oven, and also a little warm bread after it was baked.

Wheat — millet/corn bread

The name for wheat (*pšenica*) is derived from **pšeno* (ground, crushed); **pšati* (to grind, to crush). Wheat or white bread was initially mixed and used only for ritual purposes (family feast, Christmas, Easter, St. George's Day, baptisms, weddings). According to data from the early twentieth century, in the mountain regions of Bosnia people ate wheat bread only several days after the harvest and on important holidays. Otherwise they ate barley, *pirov* (hard, einkorn or emmer wheat), rye, millet or buckwheat. In the plains they mainly ate cornbread (Dvorovi; Majstorović 1908/XX: 437). In eastern Serbia (Boljevac) they mainly ate *proja* (cornbread), and rarely wheat or *pure* bread. When corn was scarce dough was made by mixing barley, rye or oat flour (Grbić 1925: 193–195). In Serbian epic poetry eating or serving *white bread* was an indication of gentry or the hero's prestige. In Russian epic poems (*byliny*) this also applies to white wheat bread, which is called *kalačrupivčatyj* (Bobunova & Hrolenko 2006: 149). In Slovenia in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century bread was mainly made out of rye, while the gentry ate wheat bread. In addition to grain flour, chickpeas, peas, potatoes and chestnuts were also added to the dough (SEL 2004: 262). One Bulgarian ceremonial song, which was sung on St. George's Day, recounts how St. George visited the fields and referred to wheat as the holy grain (“Oh grain of wheat / be you sweet, be you holy”),⁶ and he said to the oat that it was only for looking at but that it was bitter for eating, and not for communion (“And you grain of oat / nice to look at /

⁶ “Oj te žito, pšeničivo, / Milo bilo, sveto bilo.”

bitter to eat / not for communion”) (Marinov 1994: 595). In Russia the term *bleb* is used only for rye bread, while only ceremonial breads (*kalaci*) were made out of wheat flour, for holidays (Sumcov 1996: 173). Also in Russia (Samara district), wheat bread is called *pirog* (Gvozdikova 1981: 211), which is otherwise used in Russian for various kinds of filled dough.

The cult contrast between wheat and millet (oat, corn) bread is apparent from the fact that in western Serbia on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day bread was made only from wheat flour, while on St. Basil's Day (January 1/14) corn-flour bread was made for cattle, so-called *vasilica* or *mumuruzna česnica* (which was the replacement for what had previously been millet bread or porridge), and decorated with a “weaving tube” (Kostić 1984: 329). This ritual included two elements — corn (previously dark millet, probably unleavened bread or porridge) and the weaving tool, indicating the duality of the cult. On the one hand it is directed towards the protector of the cattle, and on the other — towards the protector of women's activities. In some places in Russia the St. Basil's Day porridge was prepared by the oldest woman in the house with the assistance of the oldest man (Sumcov 1996: 184). According to one tradition from Kosovo and Metohija, a man had found his brother's killer in a foreign land, but he could not kill him until, following the advice of some man, instead of wheat (sacral) he had his fill of corn bread (profane). “One does not strike a man on wheat bread”⁷ (Bovan 1976: 87–88).

Restrictions when kneading dough and using bread

Special rules applied to mixing dough and using bread. In Bulgaria the bride would make the dough for her first bread on St. George's Day. The mother-in-law would prepare the flour, sieve (sifter) and kneading tray, and invite the daughter-in-law to knead the bread. The daughter-in-law would kiss the mother-in-law's hand and start kneading, while the maidens around her would sing the ritual St. George's Day song. The bride was only allowed to knead the dough, while the dough would be shaped by the oldest woman in the house (Marinov 1994: 595–596). In Bosnia married women would wear their wedding ring while kneading dough so that they would not become widowed (Majstorović 1908/XX: 437). Apparently separating and scraping dough from the hands after the kneading was associated with the loss of the husband. When the bread was removed from the oven, the hole in the ashes would be evened out so “that the devils would not bake their own bread in that spot”, and so that a person would not be in a predicament (be killed, fall ill) if he stepped in such a place (Majstorović 1908/XX: 438). When

⁷ “Na pšeničan leb se ne bije čovek.”

Belorussians placed the bread in the oven no one was allowed to leave the house, so as not to take away the prosperity of the home (Romanov 1912/8: 299). In Herzegovina, bread was not to be broken until it was cool “because it weeps before God when it is broken [while] hot” (Zovko 1901: 159). In Montenegro (Zeta), during lunch, it is bread that was placed first on the table, making sure that it was not upside-down (Radulović 1936: 54). Among the Serbs, the table was carefully wiped after the meal so that breadcrumbs would not fall to the ground and be trampled. If someone accidentally stepped on bread on the road, they were required to pick it up, kiss it and place it by the road so that birds or other creatures might eat it. It was a sin to curse bread (Leskovac; Djordjević D. 1958: 109; Metohija; Radunović 1988: 313). In southern Serbia it was required that the bread on the table not be turned with its side towards those who were eating, otherwise the bread would “push away” the person; it was not permitted to eat lying down. Lunch started with the host taking a piece of bread, kissing it, crossing himself and saying grace (Djordjević D. 1958: 549, 109). It was believed that it was a sin to hold bread behind one’s back (Metohija; Radunović 1988: 331), and in Herzegovina it was wrong to buy bread in town, but rather one should make it at home (Zovko 1901: 301).

Common (everyday) bread vs. pogača, kravaj, kolač

There is a difference between bread for everyday use and ceremonial or celebration bread. The latter bread has a clear symbolic function and it is used as a form of communication within the community as well as with the divine or demonic world. As a rule, ceremonial bread was made out of sifted wheat flour and it differed in the way that it was prepared, in the place and time that it was used, as well as in its shape. D. Marinov states that in Bulgarian tradition when kneading certain types of bread it was compulsory for the woman doing it to be dressed in new clothes, for the maiden to bring water from the spring early in the morning without saying a word the entire time (*m’lčana voda*, silent water), and the water jug was to be decorated with flowers (*cvetna voda*, flower water), the water used to make the bread had to be poured from a full jug, i.e. without any being poured off previously (*nenadžeta voda*, whole water). When kneading certain breads for weddings, the act was accompanied by certain songs (Marinov 1994: 372–373). Among the Slavic peoples the ritual function is mainly linked to three types of bread: *pogača*, *kravaj* and *kolač*. Although over time many of the differences in the use of these breads have faded, some of them can still be pointed out.

The *pogača* is a round flat wheat bread made without yeast, which is why in Bulgaria it is also called *prjasna pita* (unleavened flatbread). The name can be found among all the South Slavic peoples, as well as other peo-

ples in the Balkans (Greeks, Romanians, Albanians, Turks, etc.). The exception is the Czechs, who call it *pagač*. It is believed that it is an adaptation of the Italian word *focaccia*, which comes from the Latin word *focacius*, “bread baked on the hearth”, from the Latin word *focus* meaning hearth (Skok 1972/II: 694). In Russian a similar bread is called *lepěhal/lepěška* where the root word is probably the Slavic **lěpiti*, to stick or glue. It may be assumed that the *pogača* made of wheat flour is an innovation, and that in the old Slavic homeland *kaša* (porridge) was used instead. This is supported by the ritual practice involving porridge among the East and West Slavs. In thirteenth century Russia the wedding feast was called *kaša*. Among the Slavs porridge was a ritual food for Christmas holidays, for the birth of a child, at weddings, funerals, etc. In the Tver Governorate two porridges were prepared on the day that a child was born — one thin with milk, and one thick with butter. If it was a day of fasting, the porridge was prepared using millet and buckwheat (Smucov 1996: 184, 189).

The opposition between leavened bread and *pogača* is apparent from reports from Herzegovina — as long as leavened bread was in the oven, no one was to mention *pogača* because then the bread would not rise (Vukova gradja 1934: 30).

The fact that the *pogača* is prepared quickly, baked immediately, does not change shape while baking (it does not rise), eaten the same day, and broken as opposed to cut by knife, defines its specific ritual function — it is most often linked to immediate irreversible change. By breaking it during the ritual this change is confirmed and reaffirmed in an obvious manner, i.e. it is codified in a visual manner. In Vojvodina as soon as a child is born, the midwife or a female relative brings a *pogača*, and the members of the family break it above the child’s head (Milutinović 1971: 129); in the Leskovac area before the wedding a *grabena pogača* is prepared in the bride’s home, which young men and women break above the bride’s head (Stojančević 1979: 175); when someone dies, three *pogača* are made in a neighbour’s house. One is carried and broken at the cemetery, and two are used for the funeral meal (Milutinović 1971: 128).

Kolač and *kravaj* are leavened, usually round breads made out of wheat flour. The first name is Pan-Slavic (**kolačъ*) and it most likely comes from the round shape of this bread (**kolo-akъ*, Bulgarian *kolak*). The second name (**korvajъ*) is commonly known among the East and South Slavs, but it does not exist among the West Slavs (ESSJ 1984: 112–116). In Russian imperial and princely weddings the *kravaj* was so large that it was carried out by four officers. Among the Ukrainians of the Saratov Governorate the *kravaj* was also very large, covering almost the whole table (Smucov 1996: 196). Starting in the second half of the nineteenth century the name *kravaj* (*korovaj* in Russian) came to be linked to the word for cow (**korva-ajъ*).

This connection is also notable among the Baltic peoples. In western Polesje (Belorussia) one encounters the adaptation from Lithuanian *bonda* (cow) but meaning *bread*, from Lithuanian *banda*, meaning horned cattle, but also *kolač* (Nepokupnyy 1976: 190–191). N. Sumcov believes that the *kravaj* is a sacrificial bread, which represents a substitute for the sacrificing of a cow. This is also supported by the fact that some such breads made by the Bulgarians and Belorussians have dough additions in the form of horns (Sumcov 1996: 240). A. Potebnja has put forth the hypothesis, which is supported by the authors of the *Etymological Dictionary of Slavic Languages* (Moscow), that the *kravaj* is the groom's symbol and that, being a male principle, it is in opposition to the cow (which is also how the bride may be called among the East Slavs): “the *kravaj* is the bull-groom” (Potebnja 2007: 132–133; ESSJ 1984: 115). V. Ivanov and V. Toporov (1974: 243–258), in addition to the abovementioned symbolism of *kravaj*, also see in it the embodiment of the world tree.

If there is a difference to be noted between these two types of ceremonial breads, it can be assumed that *kolač* in the Slavic homeland was a sacrificial celebration bread for general prosperity, which had variously shaped surfaces (dough applications in the shape of a crucifix, sun, wreath, flowers, etc.) depending on the specific purpose. *Kravaj* is a sacrificial bread that more closely concretizes fertility and fecundity — for the bride to be fertile (*svadbeni kravaj*), for the mother to have enough milk for feeding the infant (*kravaj za porodilju*), or for sheep to produce milk throughout the year (*ovčarnik kravaj, košara*, etc.).

The ceremonial role of bread

As a ritual object, bread is an integral part of many ceremonies. Almost all important ceremonies use bread: birth, weddings, funeral rites, the family and village patron saint's day, annual holidays, ceremonies in crisis situations.

Bread in annual customs

Among the Serbs the largest number of breads was made for Christmas. In addition to the Christmas *kolač*, in the early twentieth century breads of different shapes, called *zakončić* were made: *volovi* (dough on the crust depicted horns, a yoke, a switch); *ovčarica* (a round bread with a dough band depicting sheep); *svinjarica* (folds in the crust depict pig teats); *šljivar* (plum orchard); *bačva* (barrel); *vinograd* (vineyard); *guske* (geese, two beans used for the eyes); *golupčići* (young pigeons); *polaznik* (first Christmas guest), etc. On Christmas Eve the household head would take each *zakončić*, cut off a piece of it, dip it in wine and put it aside to be given later to the livestock.

The other breads would be eaten for dinner, with the exception of *ovčarica* which was given to the shepherd. He would remove the balls from the bread and give them to the sheep so that they would breed/reproduce (Daničić 1900: 98–99). In Timočka Krajina on Christmas Eve the lady of the house baked twelve different breads: the bread for the young God-Christ; *za volove* (for the oxen); *ovčarnica* (shepherd bread); *lojze* (vineyard); *njiva* (crop field); *guvno* (threshing floor); *svinja* (pig); *bačva* (barrel); *kola* (cart, wagon); *golubovi* (pigeons); *kosir* (sickle); *sunce* (sun); and *mesec* (moon). All the breads were placed on straw covered by a sack woven from goat hair. The man of the house would place a piece of each in a glass of wine, which the members of the household would use for communion on Christmas Morning (Stanojević 1929: 48–49).

In the case of the Serbs in Kordun, ahead of Christmas the lady of the house would make the *božičnjak*, a leavened bread of wheat flour decorated with a pattern. If it was cracked when it was removed from the oven, it was considered a sign that the man of the house or another member of the family would die that year. It was placed on the table in a sieve (sifter) with three candles inserted into it, and it was not eaten until St. Basil's Day. The candles were on Christmas Eve and the following three days during lunch and dinner (Bubalo-Kordunaš 1931: 118–119).

In the Homolje region, the lady of the house made the bread called *povojnica* on Christmas Day. When she had prepared the dough, she would smear the doors of the stables and pens with her dough-covered hands so that the livestock would be healthy (also probably so that they would reproduce, grow like the leavened bread). If the lady of the house did not have any children, she would smear dough on her forehead and her husband's nose so that she would become pregnant (Nedeljković 1990: 20). In northern Metohija the *dašik* bread was made for Christmas (Bukumirić 2012: 121). The name most likely comes from *dad-snik*, "the one who gives, who brings wealth".

In addition to *kolač*, the Serbs also made different, smaller breads on Christmas Day. For example, in some Serb regions when a man from the house (usually the household head) went to the forest to collect the *badnjak* (branch of a tree that is cut down in a ritual manner on the day before Christmas, carried into the home and placed on the hearth to burn in two halves), he would carry a *lepinja*, which he would break on the stump of the tree that he cut down for the *badnjak*, then he would eat half, and leave half on the stump. In Kosovo and Metohija when the *badnjak* was placed on the hearth an ornate *pogača* would be placed on the edge, and on it, honey and salt. All members of the household would cross themselves and kiss the *pogača*. On Christmas Day, before sunrise, the *pogača* would be taken to the field (Nušić 1986: 181). In southern Serbia (around Leskovac) several

smaller breads called *koledjanke* were baked for Christmas and one of them was intended for the *zmija poljanka* (field snake) “to defend the field from hail” (Djordjević D. 1985: 59).

A widespread custom among the Serbs is to make *česnica* for Christmas, most often a kind of unleavened bread made out of wheat flour. In some villages, grain, pieces (slivers) of wood from the yoke or a coin, usually just a coin, were also put in the dough for the *česnica*. When the bread was baked all the members of the family took part in breaking it (or the man of the house did this, giving each person a piece), which was followed by the search for one of the abovementioned items. It was believed that whoever found the coin in their piece of bread would have the most luck that year. Among the Serbs in Sarajevo the *česnica* was sometimes made by the man of the house. Before Christmas he would fetch water for the *česnica* at night, wearing gloves, and he carried wheat as a tribute for the spring from which he took the water. In addition to the *česnica* he also made two hollow breads, which he left until St. Basil’s Day. After kneading the dough he would go outside with his eyes closed and touch the nearest tree with his dough-covered hands, saying “May bees spread here”. He would cover the bread with embers in the hearth to bake, also while wearing gloves (Lilek 1894/VI: 383). In western Serbia (Užice) the *česnica* was broken before lunch by the man of the house together with the *položajnik*, not with their bare hands, but wearing gloves. They would turn it three times in the direction of the movement of the sun, then break it, kiss, exchange pieces and then sit down at the table. If a crumb were to fall while the *česnica* was being broken, it was believed that someone from the house would die that year (Milićević 1894: 174). In Bačka the *česnica* was made from several leaves of dough, each leaf being strewn with honey, chopped walnuts and raisins (RSGV 2010/10: 80).

It is obvious that the *česnica* symbolized overall happiness, with each member of the household getting a piece. The name of this bread is the noun form of the adjective **čestv* “piece” (this is also the root of the verb *pričestiti se*, to receive communion).

In Šumadija the *šuplji kolač* (hollow bread) was also made for the first ritual guest on Christmas — the *položajnik*, *položajnik* — so that a bundle of hemp could be put in its opening. In northern Kosovo and Metohija the *položajnik* *pogača* was made for the *položajnik* (Bukumirić 2012: 448–449). In Bosnia and Herzegovina and western Serbia, an ox was brought into the house on Christmas Day as the *položajnik*, and was covered with barley, with a hollow bread hung on his horn (Lilek 1894/VI: 381–382).

On St. Basil’s Day (January 1/14), or Little Christmas, the *vasiljica* bread was made in western Serbia, which was called *vasuljica* in eastern Serbia, *vasilopita* by the Greeks, or *bosilica* in Hrvatsko Zagorje and Dalmatia. In the Užice region the *vasiljica* was made with corn flour, then crumbled

into hot lard and eaten after lunch. In the Homolje region on that day the *vasilice* wheat breads were fried in lard and given to the children, for the souls of the dead. The *gruvanica* or *česnica* was made in Temnić, *barenica* in Kosovo, *bakradan* (polenta) in Skopska Crna Gora, *poparenica* in the Preševo area. In Kosovo, Metohija and Resava it was believed that bears gave birth on St. Basil's Day and that bread should be made for them, which was called *mečki povojnica* in Resava and Skopska Crna Gora. In Kosovo every house made *kolombočna barenica* (cornbread made with fat, usually made by adding cheese). In Skopska Crna Gora it was believed that when the bear gives birth on St. Basil's day, she goes blind and that her sight returns after forty days (Djordjević T. 1984: 72–74).

For St. Theodore's Day bread in the shape of horseshoes was baked in Banat. Such breads were called *todorići* or *kopite* in the Vršac region (Filipović 1986:49). In the area around Boljevac the *bušan kolač* was baked, which a rider could put his hand through while riding a horse (Nedeljković 1990: 237–238).

On the day of the Holy Forty Martyrs of Sebaste (March 9/22, celebrated by newlyweds), small unleavened flatbreads (*kravajčići*, *kolačići*), so-called *mladenčići*, were made. These breads were given to the shepherds. In Timočka Krajina, for this feast forty small breads called *mladenci* or *mladenčići* were made with a design incised using a twig. Unleavened breads were baked in one earthenware dish, while the rest were leavened (Stanojević 1929/IV: 44). For this holiday in some places a larger bread was made for the shepherd, which was called *mladenac*. Among the East Slavs there is a widespread custom that breads in the shape of birds are prepared for this holiday, commonly known as *žavoronki* (larks). This custom is linked to the belief that this is when the first birds return after spending the winter in warmer southern areas (Agapkina 1997: 48–62).

For Easter in Vojvodina women made the *veliki uskršnji kolač* (large Easter bread), in a round and braided form, with a dyed red egg placed on top. In Srem, in the villages of Mt. Fruška Gora, the tradition was to make a braided unleavened flat bread with a raw egg placed in its centre before baking. This bread is called *buzdovan* in Srem, *jajčanik* in the villages west of Sremska Mitrovica (Bosić 1966: 268), and *kovržanj*, *kovežanjac* or *kovrčanjak* in eastern Serbia (RSANU 1975/IX: 701). These breads were used as Easter gifts (this custom also exists in southern Serbia).

For St. George's Day, in the Homolje region a leavened bread without any markings was baked. It was kneaded in silence and a basil branch was placed on it. It was intended for livestock and was called *stočni poskur* or *stočni kolač* (Nedeljković 1990: 73).

The celebration of the family patron saint's day (*krsna slava*) among the Serbs is unimaginable without the *slavski kolač*. Even if the family was

not able to mark this holiday with a *slava* feast, they would make and break the *slavski kolač* (for more on practices involving the bread for the *krсна slava* see Jastrebov 1889: 4–17; Radenković 2013: 9–23).

The *zavetina* collective ritual, which is also known as *krstonoše* (processions of people that went to the fields carrying icons and red banners in the spring, between Easter and Pentecost), included the breaking of bread, which was brought by the designated ceremony participant — the *kolačar*. A piece of the bread was given to the person who was to be the *kolačar* the following year (Milićević 1894: 155–156).

It is notable that the two main calendar holidays, Christmas and Easter, also featured significantly different ceremonial breads. For Christmas the bread was round with various figural representations of everything that was important in the lives of people. These breads sent a message to the *sacredones* (God, ancestors) to protect the lives of the members of the household and to increase the size and wealth of the family. For Easter “twisted” forms of bread predominated, often with the addition of a whole egg. The names of these breads were often derived from the verbs *viti* (to twine) and *verteti* (to spin), which were especially marked in folk culture. It may be assumed that such shapes were created under the influence of the belief that between Easter and Pentecost the souls of the deceased were “released”, and that they were in the fields and around their former homes. This is why the breads were dedicated to them. The life–death polarity appears in the Easter bread code as the right–wrong polarity.

Bread in life cycle rituals

Birth of a child

As soon as a child is born a female neighbour or relative immediately bakes a *pogača* and takes it to the mother. In the Temnić Serb region the custom was that a male child should take three bites from the *pogača*, without eating them, so that the newborn child would be healthy and have healthy teeth (Miodragović 2009: 76).

In Banat (Jasenovo), the third evening after the birth of the child, a *pogača* would be placed on the table, along with a glass of water and a shirt because it was believed that on that night the Fates would come and set its fate (Milutinović 1967–69: 129).

While the mother was recovering from labor, women would bring her a *povojnica*, which obligatorily consisted of a *pogača* and a gift for the child. In western Serbia for the baby shower the new mother would receive a hollow “colorful bread”, through which water was poured “so that the child would have enough milk” (Blagojević 1984: 228).

In the Leskovac region, forty days after birth, when the child was brought back from the church where a prayer was said, it would be placed in its crib and given a little bread to eat (Djordjević D. 1985: 83); in Lužnica (eastern Serbia) bread was the first solid food that the infant would receive, as soon as it started sitting up (Nikolić 1910/XVI: 171).

In the *strižba* ritual (celebration of the ritual first hair cutting of the child, carried out by the *kum*, or godfather), in the Vranje region, first bread and salt are brought out and placed in front of the *kum*. This explains that the bread means happiness and that the child should never be without bread or salt (Veljić 1925: 392).

When the child starts to walk, a special *pogača* is made, the *postupanica* or *postupača*. In Mol (Bačka) this is a leavened *pogača* wrapped in a sheet and placed on the threshold of the house. The child is walked three times over it, and then the *pogača* is broken and eaten. One child eats the *pogača* while running so that the child that has started walking would be fast (Milutinović 1971: 129).

When the child stops breastfeeding a special flatbread was made and given to it, which in the Užice region was a hollow bread (Blagojević 1984: 224).

In the Užice region in the event that the child did not start speaking for a long time, the grandmother or mother would take the child to the watermill where the miller would bathe the child with water from under the waterwheel and the *čeketalo* (the rod that rests on the millwheel and the grain hopper, agitating the hopper so that the grains would fall on the millstone, which produces noise), make a flatbread and bake it in the hot ashes on the hearth (Blagojević 1984: 231). In Bosnia in such cases the child would be given bread from the Gypsy bag (beggar's bag). This is the origin of the expression for a talkative person "He talks like he has eaten bread from a Gypsy bag" (Lilek 1894: 667). In Herzegovina a *pogača* is made and broken above the child's head, and then given only to the children to eat (Vukova gradja 1934: 28).

From the listed examples it is obvious that the ritual use of bread was necessary for each phase of the development of the child. Since the growth changes of the child are irreversible, it is most often unleavened bread (*pogača*) that is made.

Wedding

As a ritual object bread holds an important place in all the stages of the nuptials. Special breads were made for the engagement, the wedding day, the post-wedding visit, and they were treated differently (Sumcov 1996: 175–187; Ivanova 1997: 22–28; Gura 2012: 239–254).

In western Serbia when a girl accepts to marry a man (in some places this is expressed by her taking an apple with a gold or silver coin in it) then the future in-laws break the *šareni prijateljski prošeni kolač* (patterned in-law engagement bread) which the groom's party brought. Each of the people present takes a piece of the bread, and the unmarried men and women "fight" for it so that they too might get married quickly (Blagojević 1984: 245).

In Srem, seven days before the wedding the groom's father would go to the best man to invite him to the wedding. He would bring with him a flask decorated with flowers and a towel, a *pogača* and apples. At the best man's house they would eat the *pogača* and drink wine. The following day the best man's wife would bake a *pogača*, fill the flask with wine, place the towel in a sack and send it all to the groom's house, which was confirmation of acceptance of the offer and of their presence at the wedding (Milutinović 1971: 130).

In Montenegro (Perast), on the Thursday before the wedding, the groom, his brother and four more young men would go to get the bride's dowry. At the bride's house they would be offered *kokot*, a bread specially prepared for that occasion (in the shape of a rooster without legs), made out of white flour, with eggs, butter, sugar, walnuts and almonds, which they broke above the dowry chest and share with the girls and members of the household who are present (Vukmanović 1958/VII: 143). Since the rooster has a breeding function, the breaking of the rooster-shaped bread by the groom and the lads from his party, above the dowry chest apparently symbolically represents the expressed model of a successful impregnation of the bride. The antiquity of this ritual symbol is indicated by the fact that it exists in other, geographically distant Slavic regions. In Russia (Kaluga Governorate) the wedding bread, decorated with branches and twists of dough, was called *kurnik* (from *kurica*, Russian for chicken). In the Pskov Governorate the *kurnik* was a bread that had a rooster baked in it, and it was given to the bride and groom for lunch on the second day of their wedding (Gvozdkova 1981: 208–209).

In the villages around Leskovac and Vranje on the Friday before the wedding the unmarried young men and young women from the family and neighborhood would gather in the groom's home, for the ritual sifting of the flour and kneading of the wedding bread. At the bride's home (in the Leskovac area on the same day, and on Saturday in the Vranje area) young people would also gather, where the *grabena pogača* bread was made and broken above the bride's head (Stojančević 1979: 175).

In many Slavic areas the beginning of the wedding ceremony is linked to the sifting of flour and kneading of a special ceremonial bread made of wheat flour, which in Serb areas is most often called *sabornik* (Radovanović 1998: 30–32) and *sad* (garden) among Russians (Gvozdenikova 1981: 204–

205). In Jagodina three branches are stuck into such a bread and a dough pigeon placed on each of them. A three-pronged branch is stuck into the center of the bread, and a "gold" apple (an apple wrapped in yellow foil) was stuck on each prong. The *sabornik* was placed on the table in front of the best man during the wedding feast. It was only at the end, when the *šareno kolo* line dance had passed, that the best man, bridesman, and the groom's brother put their heads together and the *sabornik* would be broken above them (Trajanović 1983: 69–70). The breaking of the *sabornik* marked the end of the wedding.

Among the Ukrainians in Srem, after the dinner the *korovaj* wedding bread would be brought out. The *korovaj* was decorated with carvings and figural representations of the Moon, Sun, pigeons, small wreaths, grapes and the newlyweds. The groom danced while holding a forked branch (*riska*), which was decorated with tissue paper strips in different colors, with an apple on the tip. After the dance he would stick the *riska* in the *korovaj*. After this ritual dance the groom's brother would cut the bread and hand it out to the guests, for which they gave gifts of money to the bride (Radulovački: 1955: 161–162).

Among the Serbs in Bosnia (Tavna monastery region), the *devojački kolač* was brought out before the wedding party started out from the bride's home, and was then broken by the groom's father and the bride's father, after which a *kolo* was danced around the table and through the house, to the exit (Drobnjaković 1937: 84).

Bread was a compulsory element in many Slavic areas when the bride entered the groom's home. In Bosnia the bride was given two breads, which she placed under her armpits and entered her new home like that (Drobnjaković 1937: 86). In eastern Serbia (Svrljig area) the bride would enter the groom's home with a bread under one arm and a bottle of wine under the other (Petrović S. 1992: 99–100). Among the Slovaks (Velka Lesna), the mother-in-law would greet the bride in front of the house and give her the *kusek*, a round bread made specially for that occasion. She would take three bites of it and throw it above her head. The guests would catch it, share it among themselves and eat it immediately. It was believed that such a bread brought luck to those who ate a piece of it (Horvátová 1970: 74–75). In Russia, in the Kursk Governorate, the mother-in-law would uncover the bride's face with a bread (Sumcov 1996: 198).

In the region around Leskovac the bridesman would bring a special *blepčić za mladu* (small bread for the bride), tied in white and red thread. The bride would eat the bread and leave the threads so that she could start knitting socks for the child when she got pregnant. In Strupnica this bread was thrown into the bride's lap, and she would immediately drop it on the

ground, so that she might have an easy childbirth (Djordjević D. 1958: 475).

In Šumadija (Jarmenovci) the *starojkova pogača* would be brought out during the lunch at the groom's house, and each person gave money for it "so the bride could buy whiteners (makeup for the face)". At the same time, the *kumova* (best man's), *deverova* (groom's brother's) and *vojvodina* (witness's) *pogača* were brought out, decorated with red, white and blue wool, with a piece of soap, comb and mirror on each of them (Knežević-Jovanović 1958: 95). In Bosnia, after the third drink at the groom's house the wedding breads and all the gifts would be presented by the master of ceremonies (Drobnjaković 1937: 87).

In Russia, in Western Pričurie the bride and groom were blessed using bread wrapped in a napkin, instead of an icon. On the morning of the second day of the wedding the bride would bring the bread to the table and say "The way that you love bread in the family, so too should you love me" (Gvozdikova 1981: 208–209). Also in Russia (on the Don River) a special bread was prepared for the wedding, with the inside removed and a live pigeon placed in the hollow space, which would peer out of the hole. The bread would be placed in the room where the newlyweds were to spend their wedding night (Gura 1997: 615).

In Vojvodina eight days after the wedding the bride would be visited by her young close relatives (the parents did not visit) who brought her a *pogača*. This ritual visit is called *pogačari*. In Mošorin (Bačka) the bride was visited by her brothers and sisters, who brought her a *pogača* filled with walnuts and raisins. This *pogača* was broken above the bed (Milutinović 1971: 130). In western Serbia, when the parents visited the newlyweds, they would bring the *šareni prijateljski kolač* (Blagojević 1984: 271).

Postmortem rituals

When a person dies in Vojvodina three unleavened *pogača* would be made, however not in the deceased's house, but at a neighbor's. One was taken to the cemetery and broken after the burial, with all those present taking a piece, and two were eaten at the home, after returning from the cemetery, during the funeral meal (Milutinović 1967–1969: 128). The *pogača* was made for all the *podušje* (funeral meals for seven days, forty days, semi-anniversary, anniversary, Saturday of Souls). In eastern Serbia (the Svrlijig area), the older woman who was in charge of the funeral (as a rule a woman whose first child had died) would make and half-bake as many dumplings as there were people staying for the funeral meal. All the participants were required to immediately eat these half-cooked dumplings (personal observation in Plužina). A specificity of Bulgarian tradition is the preparation of

a special unleavened bread, *patnina*. In northeastern Bulgaria the dough for this bread was made with the water used to bathe the deceased. The name of this bread indicates that its purpose was to send off the soul of the deceased, i.e. for his/her voyage to the other side. It was believed that when the bread was broken and eaten the person's soul would separate from the body and fly over the house (Lozanova 1997: 41–42).

Special breads were also prepared for Saturday of Souls. In Šumadija *babica* and *krsteljak* breads were taken to the cemetery; in Levač and Temnić it was *zadušnica* or *poskurica*, etc. (Nedeljković 1990: 96). In the areas around Leskovac and Pirot for the funeral meals the *krsnik*, a small bread in the shape of a cross, was taken to the cemetery (Petrović V. 1900: 297; Živković 1987: 72). In Vojvodina the *poskurice* breads were made for Saturday of Souls, taken to the cemetery and handed out to the poor (RSGV2007/7: 32).

Trade rituals

Special breads (*pogača*) were made also for the first day of ploughing, for the first harvest, etc. In Kosovo the *obraždaonica* flatbread was made for the ploughman who went out to plough or sow for the first time that year, and it was broken over the yoke in the furrow or over the seed that was brought to the field (Filipović 1967: 195).

In south-eastern Banat there was a custom of *ovnova čast* (ram's honour) which represented the ritual introduction of the ram among the sheep, and which took place around Michaelmas. Each man of the house would bring a *pogača* that was decorated with twists in the form of five circles. He would break it with the shepherd, keeping the part that remained in his hands (Banatske Here 1958: 117).

House building

The testing of whether a location was good for building a house included the rolling of bread. If the rolled bread fell on "its head", in Levač and Temnić it was considered that the location was advantageous for building a new house (Mijatović 1909: 266).

In Nadalj (Bačka) when the hole for the foundation of a new house was dug, the man and lady of the house would go down into it, break a *pogača* and share it (Milutinović 1971: 132).

When moving into a new house in Jablanice a whole wheat bread, kneaded and baked in the old house, would be brought in (Trojanović 1930: 173); in Kosovo and Metohija the lady of the house entered the new house first and carried in an earthenware dish and baked bread (Podrima), or a *pogača* and sieve (Suva Reka) (Vukanović 2001: 502); in Montenegro (Zeta),

the first things brought into a new house were a whole bread and a vat full of water (Radulović 1936: 54).

In Ukraine and Belorussia, in the event of a fire, bread would be carried around the house that had burned down (Sumcov 1996: 213). The same was done with an icon, which shows that bread was considered a sacred object.

This overview of Slavic customs and beliefs related to bread, which illustrates the extensive ethnographic material related to this matter, indicates its great importance as an artifact for folk culture.

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