

The Mythic and the Traditional in Bread- Baking Pans Making in the Stara Planina Region

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- **Making of bread-baking pans in the Stara Planina region belongs both to domestic industry and to traditional practices fields. It offers a most interesting insight into the life of people as it was half a century ago when this activity came out of practice.**
- **The paper illustrates the magical and traditional practices in the entire area of the western part of the Stara Planina Mountain where I conducted researche from June 2003 to March 2011.**
- **38 villages have been visited and about 140 tellers have been interviewed, covering the area from Dimitrovgrad and from Pirot to Minićevo and Ošljan.**

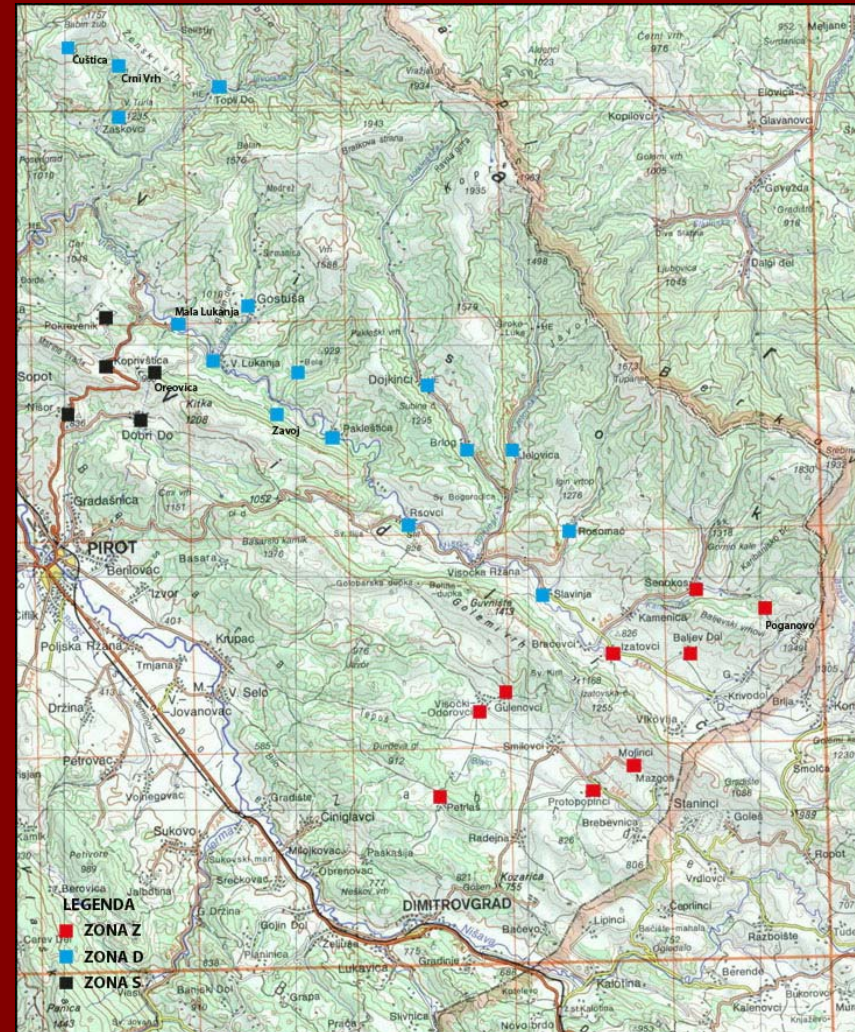


- The researched area can be divided into three zones as regards the presence of magical and ritual practices:

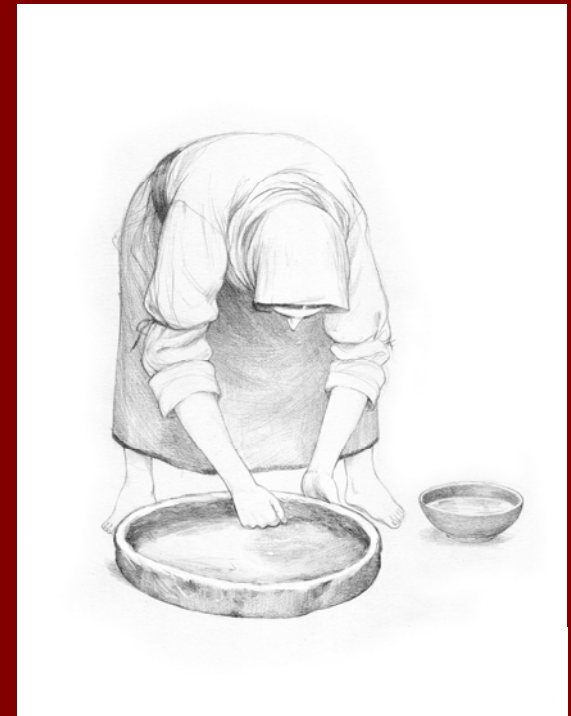
Zone Z: Zabrđje and villages upstream of Slavinja characteristic of their practical approach and the fact that making of bread baking pans lasts several days.

Zone D: All villages to the right of the river Visočica, from Rosomač on as well as Topli Do, Zaskovci, Čuštica and Crni Vrh characteristic of using dolls.

Zone S: Villages of Srednje Visoko to the left of the river Visočica, zone characterised by innovations.



- **The technological process is conducted in three stages and all the three imply observing of certain rituals and practices:**
 1. **Digging, transferring of clay and preparation of clay for treading.**
 2. **Treading of clay until it became plastic body.**
 3. **Shaping of the clay body, initial drying of clay body is continued until completely dry and baking of bread baking pans.**
- **The second phase is characterised by most of the magical practices, the first stage less so and the third stage is marked by very few examples of magical practice. Quite a number of magical practices is related to the bread baking pan and its use.**
- **There are differences in customs between villages.**



Choice of Days for Treading Bread Baking Pans

- In many of the villages, mainly in the D zone, the day when treading is to be done, even if it is not a feast day, is considered an important social event carried out in public and is marked by joy and gaiety.
 - Most often it is a feast day dedicated to a powerful saint protector celebrated in the beginning of summer.
 - There are over 65% registered examples when pans are made on feast days, usually on St. Elisha's Day (27th June) or St. Vid's Day (28th June), or on Tuesdays and Thursdays after the Whit Sunday, but also on St. Nicholas (22nd May), St. Peter's Day (12th July) and St. Elijah (2nd August). The treading days may extend until Nativity of the Mother of God Day (21st September).
 - Some women intentionally do the treading on St. Elisha's Day and on Thursdays after the Whit Sunday when no other work is allowed for fear of being thunderstricken.
 - There are also women who do not work on these days also for fear of being thunderstricken.
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Group Work and Beginning of the Job



- The work is done in a group.
- Number of participants varies in accordance with observing the magic of numbers (three or any other odd number) and the execution of all usual magical practices and technical procedures.
- This is easier when the group is large since women have daily duties including help needed by relatives or neighbours.
- Only six villages observe the magical number of three, and the rule of odd numbers is observed, or at least known, in dozen others.
- It is important that the work is begun at sunset or at dawn and by a woman whose both parents are alive.

The Magic of Numbers

- Everything should be threesome or at least in odd numbers:
 - Three or any odd number of women.
 - Three places where the clay is dug.
 - Three places from where the clay is brought.
 - Three days of work.
 - Three phases of treading.
 - Three treading cycles in each phase.
 - Three times the charms should be said during treading.
- Treading consists of three-nine combination (three times in three phases) as is the case with saying charms (*It is tread three-nine times as are the charms said*).
- Women who abide by rituals take care that there is no even number of women in a group, that the clay is not fetched even one time more. They throw away the excess clay body to avoid making even number of pans.



Principle of the Wholeness

- **Unbroken whole is desirable: women who make pans should have both parents alive, they should not be widowed, having dead children, or there should not have been imminent death case in their home or among relatives.**
- **Leader of the group, the woman who leads the row of women treading around the cone should have both parents alive.**
- **It is mandatory that processing of clay, or at least the treading should begin and end in one and same day.**



Male-Female Principle, Ritual Purity of Women and Obscene Behaviour

- Division between men and women is present and emphasised in series of procedures, without any practical meaning, from the moment when women fetch clay to the moment when new pans are baked.
- Ban on men to participate.
- Women tie men's shirts around their waists as skirts.
- Exchange of obscene jokes with men passing by.
- Women strip one another bare and throw each other into the mud during treading.
- «*We made it nice, now I wish a man would come by!*» Between two treadings when a pointed cone is made women make mention of men.
- «*Do you need it this big?*» They make so called *sukar trying* – cylindrical strip of treaded clay.
- Bread baking pan contains female fertility and is the symbol of femininity. Bread rises in it. Therefore *sukar* is the sign that the dough has become tough and it was time to shape it.



- **Women when making pans must not have their menstrual periods, should not have spent the night with their husbands, be pregnant, and should have had bath and wear at least clean if not new dress.**
- **In some of the villages treading is done by young women or girls, whilst in other places the entire work is done by experienced middle-aged women.**



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- The most complete way to conduct the custom is to do it in a street or crossroads in a village, where people pass. This provides opportunity to have the work blessed by many. Women also bless their work with obscene words and they exchange with passers-by blessings with less or more emphasised obscene content. The bashful or the young remain silent at these obscene greetings and answer by nodding only. Those who are not so bashful answer more boldly and engage in exchange of cheerful obscene jokes with passers-by.
 - If the passing woman is of their age and not bashful, she also uses ambiguous blessings.
 - In the village of Gulenovci magic names are given to the pans during thermic treatment to provide their durability and unbreakability.
 - Some passers-by undermine them or utter curses more as a prank than as joke: may their pans would not harden, may they fall apart, lose their shape and not be good for baking. Women answer by anti-curses and their own blessings to annul the curses, uttering curses, obscene insults and throwing mud as they are convinced that curses have negative effect and that they will not be able to make the clay body and to shape their pans (*If they curse the work, the clay can not be kneaded*).
 - If the treading is done by young women and girls and a man whom they like is passing by and he does not bless their work or makes some brash and obscene remark, they answer by witty blessings. If they do not like the man, the answer is a curse.
 - Women who make bread baking pans think that their pans will last longer if they make obscene jokes and make obscene gestures convinced their bread will rise and bake better in the pans they make.
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Doll



- The entire work on bread baking pans, starting with digging and carrying the clay to the treading (and shaping) is protected from spells by a doll the evil eye should look at first thus annulling the effect of the spell.
- The pans should be protected from bad spells until they are baked.
- There are 25 cases in 11 villages when a doll was placed on treading floors. These villages were next to one another representing a geographic micro unit.
- A doll is made before the treading starts and is destroyed after the prepared clay is divided, or after the pans are shaped or two weeks after the pans have been partly dry.
- The base of the doll of average human height and breadth is formed by two hazelwood or hornbeam sticks, one for the stature and the other for stretched arms.



- Participating women bring pieces of their new dresses. Face of the doll is made of a piece of cloth and eyes, nose and mouth are drawn by charcoal. Doll's headscarf is decorated with flowers and doll is placed facing the road as if expecting someone to come, or facing the treading floor.
- In Zavoj the doll is placed facing the sun and women, but it can also be nailed to the gate for the people to know where the pans are made. In some villages small dolls are made of clay in shape of humans and are dressed in rags, have headscarf and are placed on top of a pole.
- The use of dolls is explained by the need to protect pans from spells cast and from any other harm.

Axis of the World

- **The vertical connecting the Earth to the skies occurs when the treading is done at hearths.**
- **When treading is done in *iža*, a big room with hearth which includes chains, chimneys and smoke, it is done along the very axis of the world connecting the Earth and the skies.**
- **The same applies when treading is done around a pointed clay pile which is slowly wetted by pouring water in a hole on its top. Women holding each other by shoulders are led by a woman with both parents alive and form a magical round from left to the right and hop only on their right foot.**



Hearth

- Very important spot in the mythic-religious sense is probably the oldest place where *treading of bread baking pans* was done. It is big and sometimes the only room where the hearth is.
- Due to the impracticability this custom is now very rare but examples still exist in a broad area of the explored region.



- **The impact of the magic on bread baking pans, besides the chosen day, numbers, words, attitudes, emphasis on the gender, use of dolls for protection against spells, is also recorded in ritual purity of women making pans, undisturbed wholes (living parents), circles during treading (spiral, rounds), walking from left to right, axis of the world (walking around high clay cone, hearth), space (crossroads, roads, gates, thrashing floors, empty stables, cones of clay, rooms with hearth), or time for the beginning of work.**



- **Connection between the bread baking pan and the clay as Earth is noted in the fact that pans are rarely lent or borrowed and that women besmear each other with clay.**

- Bread baking pans receive the power of the place and time of their making; might, fertility, gaiety and merry singing of embellished women treading the clay and shaping it; magic of numbers, words and obscene gestures as well as series of other magical practices which are embedded in the pan.
- In the end, a new pan is baked, removed from the fire and dough must be instantly put in, let to rise and become bread. This will make a bread baking pan a constantly needed *magical* household object which participates in diet and daily revival of a home and is not to be taken away from home or lent to anybody.
- If lent, it is not to be returned in case it was damaged or someone died in the family that borrowed it unless 40 days or a year had passed.





- It is also used in folk medicine; pan with embers is brought into the room where newlyweds will spend their first night, woman in labour would speed up the process by crossing over a hot bread baking pan; if a tooth aches a heated piece of pan should be held on the aching place; long lasting and unpleasant itching of foot is cured by holding a bare foot in warm pan or on a heated piece of a pan.
- The pan is also used in fortune-telling treated more as a game and entertainment than something believed in.



- **On Christmas Eve after the ritual bread is baked the bread baking pan is filled with twelve identical, arranged and named quarters of onions containing each the same amount of salt. Next day the onion pieces are inspected as to where and how humid the salt is which would tell which months will be dry or rainy.**

- **On the eve of St. Basil the Great (14th of January) oat seeds are heated in bread baking pans until they burst: two grains are put into a pan and they are named after the couple who are thought to be in love and if the grains pop to each other, it means the couple is in love.**



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- **After being used the bread baking pan is cleaned of crumbs and placed where there is no humidity, danger of being damaged or contamination; if the pan has been in long use its lifetime is prolonged by careful mending.**
 - **«*I feel sorry for a good pan when it breaks; I still remember how good bread from it was!*» one of the women said.**
 - **A pan, even its remains, must not be tread on and thereby undermined. Pan shards are used as supports in hearths or for edging seedlings beds.**
 - **People also build into bread-furnaces pieces of bread baking pans and use their bottoms as floor while other people plaster parts to walls exposed to the fire. Or the shards are removed to a clean place (next to the fence, bush or heap of rocks) although there are villages where the pans are simply discarded.**
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- **Most of the women observe the customs and make pans every year even when the supply is abundant. Despite great toil and dirty work, they experience it as time for socializing, joy, freedom and play, as something for which there is no room in their everyday life.**
- **In remote bigger villages with many women who make pans, rituals of magic character are better observed and less changeable, but in smaller villages at fringes of two cultural micro-areas customs bear characteristics of both regions and are volatile and inconsistent in performance.**





- Since the pan making is accompanied by set of magical practices intertwining with technological procedure it is very difficult to separate them from the procedure and make the difference.
- Where the magical prevails the rituals are better observed and resist changes.
- Changes are rejected when the magic rituals have positive impact on the course and result of technological procedures: taking clay from three places, treading shaped as spiral which opens or closes, dancing towards the centre and away from it.

- **The magic rituals connected with bread baking pans lose their strength faced by: strict attitude towards use of obscene talk and actions, new experience gained after being married to a person from different environment; self-confident woman imposing her smartness, knowledge, skill and personal attitude on other participants; paying greater attention to the practical side and better use of time.**



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- **Group of girls or younger women will always value more the practical side and older women will persist on sticking to what they already know.**
 - **Many of the gifted and practical women ease the very strong pressure of the tradition and introduce novelties which yield better results only by being cautious and resilient, year after year, persisting on those features which prove to be better than the traditional ones.**
 - **These innovations may include working on any day suitable for observing the ritual, bringing of clay, participation of men, wetting the spread clay, big water hole in a small heap of clay, covering the warmed up earth, treading under a shed or on a movable ground which enables transfer, treading forward and backward, dancing from the ends to the centre and back, beating of clay body in the third phase, use of builder's tools (planes, meters, measuring the circumference before making the wreath).**
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Conclusion

- The custom of *treading bread baking pans*, in all its details a pagan and magic one, shows definite vertical line from the deepest layers of oral Balkan and Slavic cultures. As to the technological aspect its roots are buried even deeper in the past. In the western part of the Stara Planina Mountain the custom completely died out half a century ago. Although there still exist living witnesses and performers of *treading the bread baking pans* their number is decreasing fast as is the number of women who have experienced answers to many questions related to the methods of work and accompanying magical practices and rituals which should be explored and more comprehensively understood. By recording all details of the bread baking pans treading process I tried to save from oblivion this ancient custom and preserve it for the future.

