

## RITUAL ROUND WALK “LADIES” (*PAŇIČKE*) AS A SPECIFIC EXPRESSION OF IDENTITY OF SLOVAKS IN VOJVODINA (SERBIA)

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**Abstract:** The study deals with a specific element of the ritual culture of Slovaks in Vojvodina (Serbia) – “ladies”. Evangelical Slovaks in Stará Pazova perform the “ladies” as an Easter round walk since their arrival in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This custom is a manifestation of pagan-Christian syncretism. The actors are children before confirmation who conduct a round walk on Palm Sunday. The aim of the paper is to describe the circumstances of the origin and historical development of this cultural phenomenon, its current form, as well as the changes and factors that determined its persistence and transformation at present. In the study we will point out the parallels and connections of the “ladies” with other family and annual customs. We will examine the “ladies” mainly as an expression of ethnic and confessional identity as well as family and social affiliation.

**Keywords:** “Ladies” (*paňičke*), Easter, ritual round walk, Stará Pazova, syncretism, Vojvodina.

### 1 Research methods

We have compared the information found in the literature with the field research, which we carried out in Vojvodina localities (Serbia): Stará Pazova, Slankamenské Vinohrady, Selenča, Aradáč, Kovačica and Báčsky Petrovec during the years 2018 and 2019. The research included semi-standardized interviews on the topic of family and annual customs with the inhabitants of the mentioned localities (especially the town of Stará Pazova), with the children who participated in the performance of “ladies”, with representatives of cultural, social and religious life and with representatives of local cultural institutions<sup>1</sup>. Participant and non-participant observations were made in the families of Slovaks, in formal and informal meetings of the Slovak community and during annual festivals. The research is a part of an ongoing several years lasting project that aims to map and evaluate the current cultural potential of the Lowland Slovaks in many countries (Serbia, Romania, Croatia and Hungary)<sup>2</sup>. The annual customs and the “ladies” were considered as an important element of intangible cultural heritage.

### 2 Characteristics of the research locality

In the literature but also in the common colloquial language, the population, which is the subject of our research, is denoted as the Lowland Slovaks. The Lowland<sup>3</sup>, in the broadest sense, refers to the territory around the borders of Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Croatia. Slovaks started immigrating into these localities at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century because of overpopulation, poor economic conditions and religious persecution (Sirácky 1996, 1980). Immigrants to Vojvodina, Serbia (official name Autonomous Province of Vojvodina) came from several regions of Central Slovakia (Hont, Novohrad, Zvolen, Liptov, Turiec, Orava and Gemer), partly from western Slovakia (Nitra, Trenčín and Bratislava) as well as from the regions of Zadunajsko, Novohradsko-piest'anský and Békešsko-čanádský region as a

secondary migration of Lowland Slovaks. In 2002, more than 50,000 Slovaks lived in Vojvodina regions of Bácska, Banát and Srem, accounting for almost 3% of the total population (Bucher 2011).

Located in the south-eastern part of Srem, Stará Pazova is situated approximately 30 kilometres from Belgrade and 40 kilometres from Novi Sad. The oldest preserved record of this town dates back to 1716. The first Slovaks came here from the village of Selenča in Bácska region, where the Catholic authorities forbade them as evangelicals to carry out their own worship services and took their praying room that also served as a school at that time. Military command allowed this population to settle at the military border. Shortly after arriving in a new location in 1771, the Slovaks built a church building and a school here (Čáni 2004 podľa Novotná 2009, Gavrilović 1972, Babiak 2018). Life on the frontier and certain ethnic isolation<sup>4</sup> caused Stará Pazova to become a unique cultural island.

The Slovak population is now the largest ethnic minority in the city. In 2002, there were 10,477 Serbs and 5,848 Slovaks, representing 31.4% of the total of 18,645 inhabitants. Yugoslavs, Croats, Romani, Montenegrins, Macedonians, Hungarians, Ukrainians and others are also a part of the ethnic structure of the town. Slovak language is the second most represented language and, due to the high representation of Slovaks, it is, together with Serbian language, the official language. Bilingualism and the common presence of the Slovak language in the communication of Slovaks and Serbs are omnipresent. There are several ethnic-based institutions in the city: kindergarten, two primary schools - Serbian and Slovak school. Secondary schools (grammar school, economic school and secondary technical school are not Slovak schools, Slovak language is taught as an optional subject there). In the town there is a radio Stará Pazova, which has two separate editorial offices for broadcasting in both Serbian and Slovak languages. There is a theatre with a Slovak and Serbian program composition (Novotná 2009). Dialect of Stará Pazova has the character of Central Slovak dialects, reflecting the contact of the Slovak population with Serbian but also Hungarian ethnic groups (Štolc 1968, Hurban 1933).

The uniqueness of the lowland Slovaks, which manifests itself in the studied phenomenon of “ladies”, is connected with the syncretic character of their culture. Syncretism is based on the interaction of the culture of the mother nation, the culture of the surrounding nation, and other ethnic groups as well as the culture created by the Slovak minority community in the new homeland. In their culture, two opposing processes began immediately after the settlement: following the original cultural values acquired in their homeland and, on the other hand, ethno-cultural changes caused by the processes of interaction with the different ethnic community. The interaction of these factors enriches and expands the area of material and spiritual culture, and brings forth modifications, wide variability and specificity of culture (Botík 2011).

### 3 Historical development and changes in the ritual round walk “ladies”

“Ladies” (*paňičke*) are an exceptional cultural phenomenon in the region of Vojvodina and all other regions inhabited by Lowland Slovaks. They are a multi-layered formation that combines ancient pagan rites of passage - the departure of winter and the welcome of the new vegetation period and new life and the Christian Easter holiday dedicated to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. “Ladies” were originally known in other Vojvodina settlements as well, such as Aradáč, Pazova or Kovačica. Several decades ago, they were alive in Selenča, where they were practiced among Slovak evangelicals. Slovaks

<sup>1</sup> We conducted the interviews with local evangelical priests, representatives of the local branch of Matica slovenská, the Museum of Vojvodina Slovaks, the Association of Pazova Women (a part of Slovak Cultural and Artistic Association of a hero Janko Čmelík) and others. Respondents' direct statements are in italics in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Based on these studies, several separate publications or scientific studies have been created (for example, Čukan, Korina and Lenovský 2014, Čukan, Michalik, Zima and Žabenský 2015, 2017, Čukan, Kurpaš, Michalik et al. 2018.)

<sup>3</sup> The Lowland, also called southern regions or lowland Hungary, represent southern regions of former Hungary, unlike the area called Upper Land (Hornia), which represented the northern mountainous regions of Hungary, inhabited predominantly by Slovaks.

<sup>4</sup> The nearest Slovak village of Kovačica is about 20 kilometres away.

in Stará Pazova came to this territory from Selenča and therefore they are likely to have transferred these customs to the new homeland from there. According to the local priest, recollections of this custom are still preserved in the memory of the oldest inhabitants of Selenča, but its active practice ceased to exist in the 1920s. Sporadic performance of “ladies” can also be found in Sklankamenské Vinohrady, which is a part of the local evangelical church in Stará Pazova.

Picture 1: “Paňičke”. The second half of the 20th century. (Archive of TO, Stará Pazova)



It is likely that “ladies” in Stará Pazova have existed continuously since the arrival of Slovaks to this locality, with the exception of several years of war. They are held annually on Palm Sunday. Its original actors are girls of pre-school or school age before confirmation (up to 12 years old) who visit their relatives in groups (of 3 or more) with their round walk. By singing songs they declare the departure of winter, prosperity and health, for which they are rewarded with eggs and other treats from the hosts (Sklabinská, Mosnáková 2012).

A young bride, who is different from the others by wearing a *parta* (bridal head outfit) or a wreath on her head, is the central character of a group of “ladies”. All girls are dressed in traditional folk costumes of Stará Pazova. One of the girls carries a basket (*céger*) or a felt egg bag; the others are dancing. In every house “ladies” dance and sing a song that is used up to now with minimal variations:

*Palm Sunday, where have you left the keys?  
I gave them, I gave them to Saint George.  
Saint George, get up and unlock the doors.  
We will brew, we will brew red beer,  
We will make, we will make reeve's son drunk,  
If he doesn't drink, we will beat him with the whip on his buttocks.  
The girl is pretty, her hair is down to her waist,  
Reward, reward our beautiful bride,  
we will take her to a fair,  
we will buy her a lace- a red or a green one,  
on a Palm Sunday.  
A big grove or a small grove,  
You our goodwife,  
give us some eggs, not only one but two,  
you will not miss that much.*

The origin of the name “ladies” (*paňičke*) can be explained in several ways. One of them is the presence of a young bride - a virgin (in Slovak language *panna*) who is traditionally associated with the motives of youth, innocence and purity, as well as the rebirth of spring, nature and life. The second parallel can be found in the statements of Stará Pazova inhabitants. According to them, the name „lady“ (*paňičke*) is connected with the motives of beauty or the specific status and prestige of girls. When the girl, who was supposed to take part in the round walk, was dressed nicely, they said to her, *You are as pretty as a lady*.

Today, when using this term, we mean the proud, nicely dressed girls or brides, but also the complex syncretic formation that consists of a girl, a boy, a round walk, a text, a melody, rhythmic steps, props and a reward.

Ritual round walk of “ladies” has undergone several changes of its form, content and meaning. However, the presence of at least three girls in the group, the presence of a young bride with a wreath and a basket to receive a reward are the elements that remained. Several transformations are observed with the actors of the tradition. Originally, the “ladies” were performed by poor girls, who gained eggs in this way. The eggs were then decorated and given to the boys called *oblievari* (those who came to splash them with water as a part of Easter tradition) on Easter Monday. Sometimes, the “ladies” were performed by gypsy children, also dressed as young brides. However, they were not dressed in Slovak folk costumes but in clothes typical for “ladies”. Gypsy children sang the same song (Maričová 2009). In this context, the tradition also had a certain social significance; it was a manifestation of the social stratification of the population. Approximately in the 60s and 70s of the last century, little boys joined the groups of girls. Their role was to help the girls to carry the basket. Later, the number of boys in the group grew, they started to form pairs with the girls. Today, boys are an integral part of the tradition of a ritual round walk. They do not have their own name, the concept of “ladies” today includes both girls and boys. At present mostly boys and girls of pre-school age participate actively in these walks. Mothers with their toddlers in folk costumes, who participate in the parade of children in the church and their singing in front of the church, are an important element of the custom. Initially, children were mainly rewarded with gingerbread, apples and raw eggs. Later, they were given dyed eggs, chocolate eggs, dinars or sweets of various kinds.

Picture 2: “Paňičke” in front of the Evangelical Church. Stará Pazova. April 2019. (Author: S. Letavajová)



The clothes of the “ladies” have also undergone significant changes. At first it was simple and ordinary. *Children wore ordinary clothes in pale colours. Apron and female shirt (called kepeňka) were of the same colour.* It was the wreath or *parta* (bridal head outfit) that distinguished the bride from other girls. Approximately in the 1960s, clothing is changing and takes on its current form. The different garments, material and the way of making the clothes of the “ladies” are replications of the rich and ornate women's wedding clothes of Slovaks in Stará Pazova. While the garments of Slovak brides in Vojvodina was mostly black, the brides in Stará Pazova as well as the border workers<sup>5</sup> were allowed to wear coloured clothing and short skirts. The typical colours of everyday clothing as well as the ceremonial wedding costume were white and light blue. The use of these colours has become one of the most significant elements of ethnic but also local distinction of Slovaks in Stará Pazova. *They*

<sup>5</sup> Respondents expressed their need to wear practical clothing (short skirts), which would not hinder the activities conducted on the border and their potential contact with enemies (transport on carriages, physical work, providing supply to soldiers).

had to wear these colours to make obvious that they were Slovaks from Stará Pazova. This colours are also used in the clothing of "ladies". Up to this day, the following are the compulsory parts of the garment: knitted woollen pantyhose (*pantúške*), a white pleated apron called *šata* and specific hair style. The girls have their hair tied in one braid plaited high in the back of the head. Regardless of the season, the "ladies" usually wear a black scarf (*túrák*) over their shoulders. From the beginning the boys' clothes copied the clothing of adult men and the groom. Boys are dressed in a Slovak folk costume, consisting of a white shirt embroidered on the side and a hat (*kalapčok*). The use of rosemary twig on the hat or a peacock feather was also a specific element. People in Stará Pazova kept peacocks. People who kept peacocks were said to be proud.

Picture 3: "Paničke in church". Stará Pazova. April 2019. (Author: J. Čukan)



Some changes also occurred in performance of the round walk. Originally children visited their relatives in the morning. From the 1940s, a visit of the church was incorporated into the program. At the end of the evangelical worship, the "ladies" come in pairs to the church, walk around the altar, receive the blessing and take their picture in front of the altar. After the Sunday service, they dance and sing in front of the church, for which they are rewarded. This tradition is still alive today. This year (on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019) 28 pairs of children attended the ceremonial worship in the evangelical church. Later, a priest joined the program, telling the children about the content and meaning of the Palm Sunday. The role of the church, a local church community and local priest in shaping the present form of this custom is very significant. An interesting component of the tradition of "ladies" is the sale, which has been organized on Palm Sunday for two years. It includes the sale and exhibition of Easter eggs, home-cooked meals and handmade souvenirs from the entire area of Stará Pazova.

"Ladies" are a constant expression of ethnic, confessional, regional, family and social affiliation. Several generations are currently participating in the performance of "ladies", the preparation of clothes, the rehearsal and the realization of the round walk. Often they are the grandmothers who prepare clothes for their grandchildren, dress them up and teach them the lyrics of the traditional song. This phenomenon is an expression

of family identity and belonging and a condition for the intergenerational transmission of tradition.

The clothing of "ladies" also reflects the social status of the family. Making clothing is quite difficult and expensive. Dressing up the "lady" is a complex technological process that has from 12 to 15 successive stages in completing a girl's garment. The number of garments and stages depends on whether the girl has an opulent *parta* (bridal head outfit) or just a little wreath on her head. Every family cannot afford to own such a costume. *Today people are in better financial situation. They spend a lot on their children. They give a great wealth to children. So the children are now dressed like a real bride.* Other families borrow this garment.

"Ladies" in Vojvodina reflect ethnic and confessional affiliation. Most often they were held among Slovak Evangelicals, although the intergroup overlaps of ethnic and religious diversity were also evident in this environment. *Many times when a girl did not have a Slovak girlfriend, they took their Serbian neighbour and went with her. They dressed her in our folk costume and went with her from house to house.*

Ritual round walks of "ladies" in the past were mainly connected with the ceremonial prosperity function. The function of entertainment was added to it later. At present, these functions are interconnected. Pairs of girls and boys are now being prepared by their parents, grandparents, godparents, school teachers, folklore leaders and local church within the children's Sunday schools in order for them to come responsibly and seriously to the family, to stand in front of adult relatives and show them what was always performed on Palm Sunday in Stará Pazova in the past. The inhabitants of Stará Pazova consider the tradition of "ladies" to be a binding, necessary, natural and essential part of this festive day as well as the entire Easter custom cycle. Moreover, the visit of "ladies" in the homes of the Stará Pazova families is considered a God's blessing and a promise of prosperity, health, and good harvest. Families who are not visited by the "ladies" feel offended and believe that it will bring them bad harvest. Thus, tradition is regaining high normativity and obligation, which is typical of ritual practices.

#### 4 "Ladies" in the context of Easter customs and children's games

From the point of view of form, content, symbolism and meaning, it is possible to connect the "ladies" with several traditions. As ritual round walks, we classify "ladies" as the annual custom of the Easter and pre-Easter cycle. The "ladies" are an obvious remnant and distinctive transformation of the ancient Slavic custom of carrying out the winter, which is known in several regions of Slovakia, among the Lowland Slovaks, but also in many other European cultures (described for example by Čaplovič 1997, Niederle 1924). According to the ancient ideas of the Slavs, the spring equinox period was symbolically as well as realistically connected with the departure of winter and the arrival of spring, it meant awakening of nature and starting of agricultural activities. This period was seen as a transition, a new beginning, a new year, the departure of the old and the arrival of a new one. For this reason, there were a number of rituals connected with it, that were supposed to bring health, prosperity and fertility for people, but also for animals, land and nature in general. As winter was traditionally perceived and personified as a dangerous and negative being, the cleansing, protective or prosperous magical acts were supposed to eliminate its influence. The departure or death of winter was accompanied by its ritual destruction. Winter, also called *Death*, *Morena*, *Marmuriena*, *Baba*, *Kisel* or *Kiselica*, was most often presented as a female being. She had the form of a straw-stuffed dummy on a wooden stick, dressed in women's clothes. Young girls carried this dummy through the village on Passion Sunday or Palm Sunday while singing (Elscheková, Klepáčová 1995). *Morena* was destroyed by burning, throwing in water or stoning.

The tradition of carrying out *Morena* was known among Slovaks in Vojvodina as well. We observe it in Selenča, Kysáč, Kovačica



and Stará Pazova. In Selenča, they took out *Kisel'ka* on Palm Sunday and they received eggs for her (Vereš 1973). In Kovačica, girls went round on Palm Sunday from morning with a sprig and they were singing songs. One of them was dressed as a bride (Pavlov 2019). Destruction of *Kiselica* or *Morena* in Stará Pazova was known since the arrival of Slovaks to this village. *Kiselica* was made by the girls, it was a dummy on a wooden stick, and they dressed her up and carried her singing around the village. They set her on fire and threw her into a stream behind the village. The first record of active practice of this custom comes from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is found in a monograph from 1932 (Lilge 1932). They were mainly girls from poorer families who went round with *Kisel'ica* before World War II and collected eggs. Some residents of the village remembered that on this occasion they also went to Nová Pazova, where the German Evangelicals lived, who welcomed them and rewarded them. According to the research of ethnologist Pavlov (2019), the tradition has gradually lost its obligatory character, its magic significance has disappeared and it has been replaced by its entertainment function. Young girls, who originally carried out Winter, are replaced in today's form of "ladies" by groups of children lead by a young bride of their age. Boys and girls – "ladies" in ceremonial ritual clothes generally represent the youth and the beginning of a new era. If some girls are dressed as brides, the function of youth, fertility and new life is even more expressive and obvious. The motives of the departure of winter and its ending are still present in the song sung by "ladies" in Stará Pazova during their round walks. One of its central motives is bringing or passing the keys that unlock the new season and bring spring. The same song was sung in Stará Pazova when taking out *Kisel'ica*. Another element that clearly interconnects the contemporary "ladies" with the original spring customs is the moment of rewarding the "ladies" with Easter eggs. Presenting the girls with eggs as a symbol of spring and life is present and obligatory in all forms of this tradition.

Picture 4: Grand mother with grandson. Preparing for round walk "paňičke". Stará Pazova. April 2019. (Author: S. Letavajová)



As we have mentioned earlier, the role of a young bride is very important in the group of girls that represent "ladies". In this context, we could also look for parallels with children's games,

especially those that come from or imitate family customs – a wedding or a funeral. Children's folklore includes games and rhymes, some of the customs and festivals that come from the adult repertoire, or the ones by which children imitate the adult life. An example of this element is a children's wedding or a funeral – burying a sparrow, a mouse, or other animal. The children perform the roles of wedding or mourning officials, in the case of a funeral they present the role of a priest, cantor or a funeral parade, in the case of a wedding they represent the bridegroom, the bride, the elder, wedding parents, cooks, musicians, groomsmen and bridesmaids.

The tradition of children's weddings is still alive in the Serbian village of Kovačica. In the past, children were performing the wedding in the natural environment; almost every street had their wedding parade. In addition to being entertained by these activities, the children learned the common traditions of adults. In the last decade, the children's wedding in Kovačica has been institutionalized, it has a script and a director, and most often it takes the form of a folk wedding parade through the streets of the village. It is a program performed by adults, a cultural event that has repeated performances (in Kovačica as well as at folklore festivals at home and abroad); the number of performances depends on demand and the amount of finance. Its primary function is to select the appropriate types of children, prepare a quality cultural program and to institutionalize the original Kovačica / Slovak custom. The event is held under the auspices of the Memorial Centre of Dr. Janko Bulík, who is, in cooperation with Matica Slovenská in Kovačica, its main organizer. It is held in August or September and in 2019 it will be its 13<sup>th</sup> year (Children's Wedding in Kovačica 2016, 2019). However, we believe that the connection of the "ladies" with children's games is not unequivocal. When performing children's wedding, children imitate adults or some of their activities and the game plays a primary role, regardless of whether their parents help them prepare the space, costume or food.

## 5 Conclusion and discussion

The performance of "ladies" is an ancient custom of the Vojvodina Slovaks. If we do not take into account its unique manifestations in the nearby Sklankamenské Vinohrady, Stará Pazova is the only locality where the "ladies" are still alive and continually realized since the arrival of Slovaks to this locality. The "ladies" have evolved and naturally transformed into today's form from the pagan Slavic ritual of *Morena* (Winter). From the original forms of this cultural element, they retained most of the formal, content, and semantic components. The presence of the "ladies" and their walks during the Palm Sunday is considered a norm and an obligation by the local community, without which the Palm Sunday would not be what they are supposed to be. Some changes took place mainly in the outside – the formal aspect of the custom. The ladies' garments were enriched (colourful, rich, complex garments and garments imitating the bride's clothing), and the group of actors of the tradition expanded (a number of groups and a number of young brides, the presence of boys, babies dressed in folk costume during church services), new features appeared in the round walks such as the participation of the "ladies" in the Palm Sunday evangelical worship (presentation of the children in folk costumes before the altar, blessing by the priest, taking a picture, singing and dancing in front of the church). All of these factors determine the continuation and strengthening of the obligatory character and normativeness of the tradition. From the viewpoint of a form the tradition is increasingly more colourful, varied, pomp, theatrical and representative. They are particularly better living standards of the population that determine these changes. However, the contemporary form of the "ladies" is primarily a reflection of a strong ethnic, confessional and local identity. In addition to the family background and the natural intergenerational transfer of the tradition from the generation of grandparents to their children and grandchildren, the activities of local institutions also participate in its formation. The local priest, evangelical church, kindergarten and primary school as well as folklore ensembles contribute to the preservation and revitalization of the "ladies". The formal and informal support of

local associations and societies and local authorities is also significant. Their effort to register the "ladies" in the list of Serbian intangible cultural heritage<sup>6</sup> is the manifestation of these tendencies.

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#### Primary Paper Section: A

#### Secondary Paper Section: AC

<sup>6</sup> The following organizations are trying to register the "ladies" in the list: Slovak Evangelical church in Stará Pazova, Local branch of Matica slovenská in Stará Pazova, Slovak Cultural and Artistic Association of a hero Janko Čmelík.