

THE SLAVA LOAF (CAKE) AND DINING TABLE IN THE SERBIAN TRADITION

Bread is no doubt one of the greatest human discoveries! In fact, being so important as fundamental food component, bread has become a symbol of wealth, a part of a spiritual ritual and reflection of culture. Ritual bread follows man throughout his entire life.

Bread is one of the most important symbols of the Christian culture (Bread is my body, said Jesus). The story of bread in Christianity is the story of ever-current ethical and symbolical life of human beings!

Bread has its special place in the Orthodox tradition, namely in Svetosavlje (the Serbian variant of the Orthodox religion), which accepted, christianized and preserved some old-Slavic pagan customs and beliefs.

Every Serbian Orthodox ritual begins and/or ends with a ritual in which bread plays a magical, sacrificial or apotropaic role. The size, shape and decoration of bread and cake made of bread dough depend on their purpose. The ingredients of dough, namely whether plain or finer flour, the first unused water (Christmas loaves) or plain tepid water will be used, or fat, eggs, milk, raisins, walnuts, honey or coins will be added, depend on that what bread symbolizes.

The Slava (Celebration of Family Patron Saint's Day)

The Orthodox Serbs in the course of accepting Christianity distinguished themselves from other Orthodox believers (as well as from all other Christians) by developing and preserving their particular national domestic cult in a primary form throughout the centuries up to nowadays and by creating a special ritual called – the Krsna Slava, in which bread has one of the central places.

The Krsna Slava is basically a combination of the pre-Slavic pagan custom of paying tribute to a patron saint and the common Christian cult of a special oath to saints (St. Nicholas, St. John, St. George or some other).

The Slava phenomenon is much deeper and wider than cultural archeology and today it does not exist out of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which shaped this ritual.

There is not a single Serb without family feast (the Slava), because the Slava is transmitted from generation to generation (mostly via male children) and is never discontinued. The continuity of the Slava is the evidence of longevity and the sign of family preservation and unity of family members, both the living and the dead ones. As such it represents one of the most important and certainly the oldest religious ritual.

All religious rituals symbolize fullness of life and so to speak they are simultaneously dedicated to the beginning and the end of each biological cycle - the cult of the dead (*so that their dead souls can maintain friendship with the living descendants*) and the cult of fertility (*May the year be exceptional and bountiful, May God grant health to people and their cattle, May God grant bounty to people's homes and fields and all the best!* – the Slava toast).

The Slava Loaf

The Slava loaf has the central role in the ritual. It is made of plain (wheat) flour with yeast and is mixed with the holy water, which had been blessed by a priest a few days earlier in a special religious ritual. Also, it can be mixed with the epiphany water. Up to the second half of the 19th

century dough was made as for a plain white bread. With the development of the middle-class in Serbia there were changes in the ingredients of dough. Today more sugar, milk, eggs and raisins are added to dough to give it a sweet taste. Loaf has a circular shape; its width and size are not predetermined and depend on the number of expected guests (so that each guest could have at least a mouthful). A lady of the house makes loaf and she endeavors to make it look appealing by covering it with decorations.

Loaf presents typical family bread sacrifice whose origin can be traced in the pre-Christian period. By it in fact a bloodless sacrifice is offered as a token of gratitude and a prayer to patron saint. For this purpose loaf is decorated and each decoration has its symbolic meaning.

The most important decoration on loaf is a seal – with four imprinted symbols: Ис.Хс.Ни.Ка. – meaning *Jesus Christ the Victor*. It is sufficient to put one seal on loaf, but usually five seals are put in order to decorate the whole upper crust of loaf in the shape of an imagined cross. Each family has its own family seal shaped like a square in the negative and usually made of wood, but also of terracotta or metal.

Seal is imprinted in a yeastless hard kneaded dough which is made by mixing white flour, water and salt and which is pasted for example with a bit of honey to loaf. Other decorations are made of the same dough.

Another obligatory decoration is a small bunch of basil, which has a special place in the Serbian tradition. All other decorations of the Slava loaf depend on the nature of family's business and on that what they wish to achieve. The most frequent symbols are: ear of grain – symbolizing a bountiful harvest; fish – symbolizing a bountiful catch; a small barrel – plenty of wine and brandy; fruit of a fruit-tree, usually grape – symbol of the fruit-tree's fertility; pigeons – love and peace; young pigeons – children. Decorations are equally arranged on the upper crust of loaf. Loaf is decorated on its upper brim with a triple braid, which symbolizes the eternal life circle.

The Slava Table and Ritual

The Krsna Slava ritual itself is at the same time church and folk ritual. In the main living room on the table laid festively are: the Slava loaf, boiled wheat (koljivo) - the symbol of togetherness of life and death, a glass of red wine (as a liturgical element), a candle in a candlestick and a small bunch of dry basil.

Guests who come to the Slava upon entering the house first cross themselves, then by a teaspoon take boiled wheat shaped on the plate as a cone and then they take several sips of red wine from a glass that stands next to the wheat. The plate with wheat and glass of wine, together with a burning candle, stands on a special tray. Taking wheat and wine symbolizes that a guest leaves in front of the threshold of a host's house all (possible) evil thoughts or intentions.

A lady of the house prepares wheat of the finest grain one day before the very day of the Slava. Wheat is boiled and put in a warm place so that each grain could become swollen. After several hours wheat is drained and ground, sugar is added as well as ground walnuts and other seasons (muscat nutmegs and vanilla). This recipe for the preparation of wheat is of a newer date, namely it has been used since the 19th century mostly in cities. In rural region guests are more often served with boiled wheat that is only drained and sweetened with sugar.

Cutting of the Slava loaf is the culmination of the Slava ritual. The ritual is performed on the very day of the Slava, usually in the late afternoon hours in the presence of all family members and the event is complete if the guests are present as well.

A priest lights a candle while reading certain hymns, then he reads a prayer to patron saint (in which he mentions all living members of the family), and then blesses wheat with wine drops. Then together with hosts and guests, along with singing hymns, he turns loaf in a circle in the direction of the sun's rotation as a symbolic act of eternity. After that the priest turns loaf from the bottom side and cuts it in the shape of a cross, and then in the middle of the cross pours several drops of red wine. The Slava loaf, which is already cut in the shape of a cross, is broken into tiny pieces and each guest has at least one piece. Thus ends the church part of the ritual.

Table manners, in particular proposing toasts as well as the meals that are served to the guests, have the meaning of unity, i.e. collective ritual eating and drinking. Particularly important custom is the exchange of toasts between guests and a host. Through the toasts the best wishes are expressed for the host's family and the host proposes a toast in return.

May you be healthy, my brother! To health of this honest table and honorable people! May the one who laid this table be honorable! May God grant the one who laid the table this year to lay it next year bountifully and honorably, happy and plentifully for many years and all his life long, he and his children after him, may it grant God!

Food is here the contents which also has a mysterious meaning, especially the Slava loaf. If the Slava falls in the days of Lent (such as St. Nicholas' Slava – December 19) all prepared meals are lenten.

The host's house is not just a hospitable home, but at the same time it is shown as a miniature picture of the community full of real viability, and the material presence of the Slava loaf, wheat and wine symbolize non-material spirituality, which gives a deeper sense to life.

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