

CULTURE AND IDENTITY: SLAVA, A FAMILY SAINT DAY AMONG THE SERBS

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Abstract: *Slava*, a family saint day, is a holiday belonging the annual calendar of family celebrations; *slava* represents a traditional cultural heritage of the Serbs, and stands out as an example of embedment of traditions into modern life. Over time, the Serbs had placed a special reverence to the *slava* days and thus *slava* became one of the most important annual holiday. *Slava's* great importance is confirmed by the fact that almost everyone, from individual families to various national associations, in the course of a calendar year, dedicate a day to a particular saint, celebrated as the patron of the family or given entity. *Slava* day is dedicated to the patron (guardian) of a home, village, church, and various professionals. In this paper, *slava* will be discussed as a family tradition, with an emphasis on its importance in the present time. *Slava* is enlisted in the Representative List of the Non-material Cultural Heritage by UNESCO, and this has confirmed the fact that the holiday, through the historical duration, acquired certain peculiarities and became thus recognizable as an identity characteristic of the Serbs.

Keywords: Family saint day, culture, identity, non-material cultural heritage, Serbia.

A family saint day, *slava*, is one of the most important and the most significant traditional holiday that deeply permeates the social and spiritual life of the Serbs. At present, *slava* is celebrated by almost everyone - from individual families to various associations, indicates its importance for the Serbian community. In the end of 2014, UNESCO enlisted *slava* in the Representative List of the Non-material Cultural Heritage, as the very first entry of cultural goods from Serbia; thus, *slava*, a family holiday, officially became globally recognized part of the Serbian cultural identity.

Slava, a family saint day, is a holiday belonging the annual calendar of family celebrations, and because of its importance to the community, the holiday became a signifier of the Serbian cultural and ethnic identity. The holiday has always been an important event for individuals as well as for families. The holiday celebration is distinguished by its importance from other types of celebrations used to maintain the Serbian community. The importance is reflected in the fact that in the past two centuries, the celebration of the patron saint day has spread to the rural areas,

church, monastery, professional associations, guilds, organizations and state institutions.

Since the reconstruction of the Serbian statehood in the first half of the 19th century to the present time, several types of *slava* are continuously or intermittently celebrated:

1. City *Slava*. This *slava* holiday celebrates the particular saint, guardian of the city. On the *slava* day, a procession takes place through the city, and the participants, priests and folks, carry icons and read prayers.
2. Village *Slava - zavetina*. The *slava* celebrates the saint patron of the village. On the day of *slava*, a procession of villagers and priest tour the village and visit sacred trees - inscriptions and read prayers, and engrave a cross on a particular tree (SM 2001: 189-190).
3. Church (Temple) *slava*. Almost every church and monastery in Serbia have their own *slava*; church and village *slava* is usually celebrated on the same day.
4. Livestock *slava*. It is well known among the Serbs in Banat. It is celebrated for the health of livestock (Pavkovic, 2009: 523-529).
5. Children's *slava*. It is well known among the Serbs in Banat. It is celebrated for the health of children (Pavkovic, 2009: 529-531).
6. Socialist *slava*. It was celebrated in Vojvodina after World War II until the end of the 20th century, as the day of the liberation of a particular place in the Second World War (Kovacevic 2001: 25-35).
7. School *slava*. This is celebrated on St. Sava Day (Jan. 27), as the holiday dedicated to the first Serbian archbishop and educator. It was established in 1840. After World War II it was abolished by the

decision of the socialist government, but restored in the 1990s.

8. Guild and profession *slava*. It was a characteristic for industrial and craft associations of the 19th and first half of the 20th century. The tradition was abandoned after World War II and rebuilt in the last decade of the 20th century. Today, many sports organizations, professional associations, businesses, government and cultural institutions have a day when they celebrate the saint patron s of the profession or institution (Ивановић Баришић 2015).

Liturgy, cake cutting and lunch are the most important features of all mentioned *slava* holidays, which are, as a rule, attended by all participants of the ceremony.

FAMILY SLAVA

In the hierarchy of holidays devoted to the celebration of a patron-guardian, the most important is the day dedicated to the protection of home and family. Almost every Serbian family celebrates a family *slava* - its "own" Christian saint, celebrated as a patron (guardian) and benefactor. Many consider *slava* as a clear ethnic marker of the Serbs, however the holiday can come in many shapes and colors, making it impossible to provide a simple description (Недељковић 1990: 205). According to a review of the Serbian *slava* (ibid, 317), around 150 days in a calendar year are dedicated to various saints celebrated among the Serbian families. Most of *slava* days are tied to a specific date in the year, and only Lazarus Saturday (Saturday preceding the week

before Easter), Ascension (the fortieth day after Easter) and Pentecost (the fiftieth day after Easter) are moveable *slava* dates. The majority of *slava* are celebrated in autumn and winter, adjusted to fit the former rhythm of the Serbian agricultural-livestock economy. Hence, a saint patron's day is celebrated on a particular calendar day, with many different customs, rituals and inevitable feast as important determinants of celebration. There are some local differences and understandings in celebrations, but these do not diminish *slava*'s importance in the overall hierarchy of the calendar holidays. The holiday *slava* has helped to preserve the Serbian national identity and ethnicity which proved to be of a particular importance in times of foreign occupations since the holiday was "a keeper of ethnic consciousness and other characteristics that aligned Serbian people into the particular ethnic, historical and social community" (Влаховић 1998: 23-32).

Among the Serbs, the family *slava* holiday is celebrated on all occasions: in poverty and in wealth, in sorrow and in joy, in peace and in war. Today, it represents an important feature of the Serbs and it almost goes without saying that the family celebrating *slava* is a Serbian family. Similar customs are known in Romania (Хедесан 1998: 55-60), Bulgaria (Јанева 1998: 49-54), Macedonia (Вражиновски 1998: 79-84), Croatia (Павковић 2014: 124), and Monte Negro (СМ 2001: 496-497).

A family *slava* is a segment of folk culture that permeates the whole national life, with functions that have „a special appropriateness in terms of rural life“ (Бандић 1997: 245). In time, the holiday and surrounding customs, as well as the Serbian community itself, went through various adjustments

in line with the social, economic, cultural and other circumstances.

A family *slava* day is accurately established by the calendar, and each family maintains the celebration according to the available means, and often time, even beyond that. This is so because the holiday represents the major festivity within a calendar year, both for an individual and his/her family as well. *Slava*, in addition to being a family ceremony, also represents a marker of the origin, kinship and membership. Even when *slava* is not discussed anymore, or when family members do not recall the family benefactor, many still remember the name of a particular saint who was once celebrated as the saint patron's day.

A family *slava* is a complex set of ritual and customary practices which, in different forms, keep adapting to the modern times. Longtime survival of *slava* in the folk tradition, despite the social, economic, political and cultural changes that have accompanied the development of the society, indicates the importance attached to it in the national consciousness; in addition, the holiday keeps surviving the shifts of time because it is the family holiday which "is the only family festivity accepted and celebrated accordingly by a rural family as its own" (Бандић 1997: 244).

Researchers across various disciplines discussed *slava* holiday mainly as a product of long and complex historical developments of the distinctive elements of folk and church cultures. For instance, origin of *slava* was connected with the cult of ancestors (Чајкановић 1995: 149-160), agro cult (Влаховић 1985: 136-147); lares familiares (Трухелка 1985: 342-406); it was emphasized as the transitional form from paganism to Christianity (Грујић 1985: 407-485;

Богдановић 1985: 486–511), or, as it was suggested, *slava* is celebrated to honor a prominent family ancestor, celebrated on a day dedicated to a particular Christian saint according to the church calendar (Калезић 1992: 17).

A family *slava* is a segment of folk culture that permeates the whole national life, with functions that have „a special appropriateness in terms of rural life“ (Бандић 1997: 245). Long-term duration of *slava* holidays in the festive life assumed certain adjustments within its content, so that at the present time, it is becoming increasingly apparent that it functions as a specific “way of hospitality” (ibid: 246), since the festive luncheon or dinners are attended not only by the members of the family, but also by close relatives, neighbors, acquaintances, and friends.

Mutual visitation is an essential determinant of *slava* celebrations; however, today, a structure of festive wishers appears somewhat altered. *Slava* visitation has an important function during the holiday, since it provides an opportunity to encourage kinship relationships or inter-kinship integration; these, in turn, can contribute to the preservation of cohesiveness within families, as well as on the broader social level - within villages or urban areas. To the hosts, the arrival of guests to *slava* feast is a reliable sign that reciprocal relationships with relatives and friends still linger.

Almost every family in Serbia claim their own family saint patron, and it is a family tradition to celebrate that day worthily because *slava* day, for each family as well as for individuals, is the greatest holiday of the year. In addition to being a family ceremony, *slava* holiday is a marker of the membership, kinship and origin; as such, *slava* is not a personal feast, but a

family one – of a home, it is being transmitted from a father to sons, and from sons to grandsons. “A particular saint, celebrated by a particular family, is considered as the closest family guardian. A family sends prayers, swears an wishful thinking to the saint, who is regarded as a mediator between God and family members (...) *slava* is very rarely changed; but it can happen that someone very ill, or in a big trouble, addresses another saint for help. In such a case, the man can take another *slava* day to celebrate as well, in addition to his family *slava* day. Still, as long as he lives, he will celebrate his family *slava* first and foremost” (Милићевић 1985: 78-79). Although there are many canonized as well as unwritten rules of *slava* celebration, in time, an assumed rule was set aside that “perhaps should not be emphasized at all, and that is (...) *to celebrate!*” In the folk tradition, a principle of maintaining the ritual and customary practices is expressed through belief that “the greatest sin is to stop celebrating. A *slava* can be replaced, but the celebration should not cease” (Недељковић 1991: 27). Abandoning *slava* celebrations was met with disapproval among the Serbs, although in the decades after World War II, it was a fairly widespread practice, mainly due to the influence of socialist authorities towards the traditional heritage. The fact is that people “consider their *slava*, that is, the celebrated saint as their home guardian, and believed the saint would avenge the house that abandoned the celebration” (Петровић 1948: 213), is certainly an important precondition for *slava* survival in a festive tradition of the Serbs. The relationship of the people towards the celebrated saint patron is confirmed primarily through ritual and customary practices as components of the celebration. Empirical data from

previous as well as from more contemporary research point out to the fact that no saint among the Serbs is celebrated so solemnly and reverently as *slava* day.

Since *slava*, as a rule, is transmitted within a family through generations, all people who celebrate the same saint were, until recent past, deemed to be relatives. During the second half of the 20th century, there have been significant changes in many spheres of life, including the notion of kinship relations, nevertheless, even today, the older people try to prevent the establishment of marriage among young people who celebrate the same saint because of entrenched beliefs that they are related.

Variability concerning the term is one of the concerns associated with the studies of family *slava*. Indeed, it seems incredible that for the festivity of such great importance in the Serbian tradition, there is still no commonly accepted term, known to everyone.

Already back in the 19th century, it was noted that "even in smaller places *slava* comes under different terms, and the celebration is called at the same time, by many names: *slava*, service, holy, feast day, saint, baptized name etc." (Милићевић 1894 : 149). *Slava* celebration today lasts just one or two days, while in the period of domination of the traditional forms of folk culture, it was the custom to celebrate for several days: "apparently, the greatest holiday of Serbian lineages was celebrated as a multi-day feast, probably a seven-day event" (Недељковић 1990: 206).

In *slava* customs and practices many elements have a function of providing family welfare, prosperity of fields, livestock fertility, etc., in a word, the progress of the entire household. A family usually celebrates one *slava* but sometimes it can be two or even more. More than one *slava* is celebrated in a household in cases when a

bride brings a substantial dowry, or when a groom comes to live in his bride's house, or in cases of property inheritance, or when a family adopts a male child in order to keep the boy's tradition alive. In the event of illness or physical affliction, additional *slava* were taken also. In such cases, the family vows that, if it comes to a healing, it will celebrate the chosen saint.

Slava is a family holiday and it is understood that during the celebration all members of the household gather together. In cases where male children have separate households, the father usually celebrates *slava* during his lifetime or until he gives it up to his children. When the sons take over, they, as a rule, continue the family tradition - celebrating the way it was done in the native family household.

Slava celebration is not skipped even in cases where the host for different reasons, is absent from home. In such circumstances, the guests are received by the remaining members of the family, who perform *slava* rituals. But "the absent host` mentions *slava`* and possibly treats friends and acquaintances wherever he is on the day of *slava`*" (Недељковић 1990: 210), which points out to the fact that the absence from one's home and separation from the family does not mean that the host will fail to mention his saint patron.

Slava was celebrated in times of war, and today, even among members of Serbian emigration in Europe, America and elsewhere. In times of family mourning celebration is not skipped but celebrated moderately - without jokes and singing. If a woman is left alone with small children, she continues to celebrate until the children are grown enough to take on the celebration. Sharing and takeover of the *slava* cake between father and son/sons means that a family separates, heirs

become independent and start their new family cult of new *slava* hosts.

On one hand, 1990s were marked by the events in the sphere of politics, economy, and culture which substantially impoverished the nation in the material sphere, but, on the other hand, they have encouraged the renewal of traditions after decades of denial of the people's own past during the socialism. Many people who had, for several decades after World War II, abandoned the tradition, began to return to forgotten customs, and among other things, they started to celebrate *slava* again. The celebration usually included a priest to bless the holly water, and relatives and friends over lunch or dinner. Depending on the region, invitations were sent out for *slava* lunch usually only the first time; afterwards, it was expected that guests would arrive without an invitation every next time. In the past the *slava* invitation custom was very solemn - invoked with an apple given to the oldest member of the invited family.

Even in the present times, *slava* remains a holiday with a marked social and integrative functions. In this sense, *slava* became an important family gathering and social event to maintain the tradition - it combines the past and present, and, it presents with an opportunity to treat relatives, friends, and random passerby. Families celebrating *slava* holiday always try to make the festivity as worthily as they can. In addition to the preparation of certain types of food, household activities are focused also on cleaning the house and yard, since the family tends to keep things clean and tidy for the holiday.

The structure of ritual and customary complex of family *slava*, has certain more or less established components: firstly, **the participants** - hosts and guests; then, secondly, ***slava* activities** - consecration of holly

water, consecration of *slava* grain and bread (cake), food preparation, welcoming and farewell of guests, ***slava* "props"** - candles, censer, incense, basil, icons, obituaries, lamp, oil, boiled wheat, wine and cake ; and thirdly, beliefs - associated with the celebration of the saint patron. Considering the fact that the form of celebration is not consistent and binding, an omission of a segment of the holiday content is acceptable, especially for the *slava* "props" (Ивановић Баришић 2007: 233-242). Disparity in the *slava* celebration, especially in the distant past, was so great that the differences and discrepancies existed "even among households of close kinsmen At the same time, given that *slava* is an ancient holiday, preserved, adapted and enriched among the Serbs for many centuries, it is no surprise that *slava* carries multifaceted layering -in terms of culture, civilization, religion, innovation and technology. It is understandable, then, why people aspired to preserve the immense wealth of customs and ritual procedures connected with the *slava* holiday, and tried to make the holiday more beautiful and lifelike, impressing upon it all the contents of heritage, local environmental resources and aspiration for the future progres"(Недељковић 1991: 61).

The main and perhaps the most important element of *slava* at present, is the *slava* lunch, which the host family prepare for its guests. Among the Serbs, *slava* meals can be with or without animal contents, depending on the church calendar: meat and animal contents are not allowed during the time of fasting, including Wednesdays and Fridays. *Slava* menu depends on a hostess knowledge and skills, and on financial availability, however, diversity and abundance are sought for in menu preparation. A *slava* feast without animal meat and contents offers fish, and in non-fasting time, *slava* can offer a variety of meat, roasted, cooked or fried.

In the course of celebrating *slava*, the most important ritual takes the central part of the day - at lunch, because then the hosts perform a ritual called "raising glass in the honor" and cuts the *slava* cake, if this wasn't already done during the morning liturgy in a church. Given that in the modern times, the *slava* lunch has shifted more towards the evening, the rite of burning candles and "raising glass" increasingly shifted towards the afternoon. The ritual is performed by the host and close relatives, godfather or a priest who gives a blessing to the family. *Slava* cake is the most important *slava* bread, made in a round shape, prepared from wheat flour, yeast and consecrated water. As a rule, the upper surface of the cake is decorated with a small round piece of bread and pieces of dough. In folk beliefs, ritual cakes, especially those kneaded from wheat flour are very important for the welfare of the entire family (Ивановић Баришић 2010: 189-202).

Family *slava* is just another example of holidays whereas religious (recommendations and canons of the Serbian Orthodox Church) and the profane construct customs (traditional "pattern" of celebration) are intertwined. Previous but also recent surveys show the diversity of content in *slava* celebrations despite the Church increased influence and demands to form a pattern of celebration that would be identical throughout the territory of the present-day Serbia. The ideal sacred form of *slava* ritual that would include a priest, church attendance in the morning, possession of an icon, candles, *slava* cake, wheat, red wine, incense, basil, oil lamp, and prayer has not been achieved yet, because *slava* is still differently interpreted and applied in practice.

The content of *slava* ritual is a subject to change and adjustments depending on circumstances and occasions,

nevertheless, the *slava* feast can be considered as the only indispensable element of the celebration. "On the whole, the Orthodox Serbs had marked off in the manner of *slava* celebration from the other Orthodox nations especially regarding the chosen saints; they had developed their own, nationwide domestic cult with a special ritual. Therefore, customs surrounding the celebration of a saint patron had developed as a distinct characteristic of the Serbian culture and hence became a legitimate marker in determining the Serbian entity in relation to other entities in the Balkans. Acceptance and transmission of a saint patron's day within the traditional model of both forms, tentatively named secular and church models, is not an automatic, but assumes a selective process" (Бандић 1997: 240).

Social processes in the former Yugoslav community during the second half of the 20th century significantly influenced the reshaping of traditional folk culture, especially in the folk calendar holidays. Certainly, the most influential and with the most visible consequences were migration from villages to cities, migration for economic reasons to other countries, the daily migration of population from the city and its surroundings, changes in family life, education, and changes in the status of women within a family and in society.

1990s were important decades during which the conditions were met to begin the process of revitalization of traditions and spiritual renewal of the Serbs. Family *slava* is just one segment of the renewed tradition and its importance is further enhanced by its inclusion in the list of national holidays; this in turn assumes a realistic supposition to preserve the national identity and perpetuate the family tradition.

Additional incentive in this regard, as already mentioned, is enlisting of a family *slava* into the

Representative List of the Non-material Cultural Heritage by UNESCO; as such, it has become a recognizable feature of the Serbian people while, for the Serbs living abroad, it remains one of the few elements that “protects” from the complete assimilation.

ENDNOTES

- [1] The paper was created as a part of the research project 177028: “Strategies of identity: contemporary culture and religiosity”, fully funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.
- [2] Ritual and customary system is more or less identical for the entire area of Serbia. Certain discrepancies concerning touring villages and customs around the inscriptions were recorded in Eastern Serbia, see: Todorović 2005 (www.etno-institut.co.rs).

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