

The World of Children

Research conducted in the villages of the Požega basin¹ and the use of sparse written records enabled me to learn more about a neglected segment of traditional life. It encompasses traditional material, spiritual and social culture in the villages around Požega in the late 19th and early 20th century. The world of children was dealt with through a number of themes: pregnancy and customs related to childbirth, confinement, baptism, first children's clothes, furniture and toys, the growing-up process through various games, counting rhymes and participation in the annual customs of their environment. The theme of children's culture was presented at the exhibition "The World of Children" staged by City Museum of Požega from December 10 to 17, 2001. This paper is the adapted text from the exhibition catalogue.

Key words: culture of children, customs, Požega basin

The children's world of traditional culture has been already forgotten to a certain degree in the villages around Požega. It has been captured only in old photographs, in sparse preserved objects and the memories of our grandmothers and grandfathers. There are only few written records of the traditional material and spiritual culture of the children's life in villages.

Pregnancy and childbirth

Pregnancy was subject to certain rules and prohibitions with the intention to influence its outcome. Pregnant women were not exempt from work. It was even

¹ The informants were from Biškupci (Marija Jagečić and Ana Knežević), Bučje (Manda Mikić), Dolac (Jula Plešić), Lukač (Mato Pavić), Pleternica (Brankica Potnar), Velika (Sofija Bošnjaković, born in Toranj, Josip Bošnjaković, Dragica Zvekić, born in Potočani), Vetovo (Marija Petrić, born in Lukač, Ivica Petrić), and Zagrađe (Barica and Jakov Galović).

believed that they would deliver more easily if they worked a lot (north-eastern part of the Požega region).

In the area of Pleternica, pregnancy was kept secret if there were children in the house, since it was considered to be embarrassing. However, if asked directly, the woman could not deny pregnancy because it was believed that she would then give birth to a mute child.

The expectant mother was not allowed to look at a corpse, because of the belief that this would cause the child to be pale. She was also not supposed to approach the altar at weddings, as otherwise the bride would die (Vetovo). It was also inappropriate to look too much at a pregnant woman, since this would expose her to spells (region of Pleternica). If the pregnant woman craved to eat or pick something, she should avoid touching her body at that moment as otherwise the child would get a birthmark (*biljeg*) in the shape of the craved object. The pregnant woman was also to be offered food or given whatever she desired to eat. Whoever refused to give her what she desired, would get a sty.² If meat was hidden from a pregnant woman, it was believed that her child would not eat it.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, when people in the region of Požega lived in extended families (*družine*), women used to deliver in the big room of the common house in wintertime and in the small house reserved for individual families (*kijer*) at summertime. After the breakdown of the extended families, children were born in bedrooms and since the 1960s also in the hospital. In the big house, the woman would give birth on a bed screened off by sheets (*ponjave*³ and *šarenice*⁴) hanging down to the floor to separate her from the rest of the household.

The woman in childbed was assisted by an experienced village woman and possibly also by a woman from the house, who would cut the umbilical cord and then bathe and swaddle the child up.

Women normally delivered lying on the bed. In the case of difficult delivery, the woman would also knee on the floor and hold on to the bed (Dolac) or squat on the floor over a trough filled with warm water (region of Pleternica). If the travail was difficult, the woman was given wine and plum brandy to brace her up (region of Pleternica), she was blowing into a bottle to ease the labour pains or unravelling a woman's hair (Vetovo) to keep her mind off the pain.

As soon as the child was born in an extended family, the women of the house gathered around it and the grandmothers put a tool into its hand: a drill or another handy tool if it was a boy and a spindle or distaff if it was a girl (Čakalić, 1980). This was believed to make the child diligent and willing to work.

The child's umbilical cord was cut off, bound into a cloth and stored away in a box or a chest. Before the child went to school, it was given the umbilical chord to untie

² Inflammation of the eye

³ Bed covers made of cotton or mixed (cotton and flax) weave

⁴ Bed covers made of woollen weave

it. If it succeeded in doing so, it was believed that it proved that the child would be smart: *its mind would untie*.

After childbirth, the mother was not supposed to leave the house for six weeks. This time was called *babinje* (confinement), and the mother would be referred to as *babinjača* (woman in confinement)⁵. In big houses, mother and child were separated from the rest of the room by a curtain of bed sheets (*ponjave*). The woman would stay behind the curtains to avoid being seen by a man whose look could, as it was believed, cast a spell on her (Čakalić, 1980). It was also said that the woman was different (*drukča*) or unclean (*ni čista*) (the region of Pleternica). She could not even think of visiting the neighbours, since she would infest other people's homes by unclean vermin if she stepped in it (Doljanovci). The women of the family - mother-in-law or sister-in-law - were taking special care of the woman in confinement, serving on her, bringing her food, bathing the child, shaking the covers etc.

The six-week special care of the mother and the newborn persisted in some villages⁶ in the region of Požega as long as into the 1950s. After the dissolution of the extended families, this custom was reduced to three weeks, especially in houses where the woman was alone, without the help of the mother-in-law or sister-in-law. After confinement, the woman would go to church for introduction (*na uvod*).

The mother would go to the church to be introduced alone or accompanied by a female or a male (region of Pleternica) relative. The priest would lead her from the vestry to the altar in the church, pray over her and bless her. After that, she was allowed work and visit neighbours.

Before World War I, there was a custom to celebrate *male babinje* and *velike babinje* (small and big confinement celebration) (Čakalić, 1980). The small confinement celebration was held eight days after childbirth, when female neighbours and relatives would visit and bring presents to the mother: food, drinks and in the region of Pleternica sometimes also money. The big confinement celebration was held eight days after the small confinement celebration, usually on Sundays, when the family was visited by the mother's and father's relatives. They would bring food and beverages: sweet bread (*pogača*) (Bučje, Zagrade), meat (usually a hen), bacon, sausages, various pastries such as *pereci*⁷, *grana*⁸ and *kugluf*⁹ (Vetovo, Velika, Toranj, Potočani Biškupci) as well as wine and brandy, while the household members would prepare a meal for their guests.

The child's godfather was the most important guest. At such visits, everyone would put money under the child's head as a gift. The godfather gave them a towel or a shirt in return. On these days, every stranger who came to the house on business had to make a present to the child. At the big confinement celebration, the curtains

⁵Term recorded only for the region of Pleternica

⁶Velika

⁷Type of horseshoe-shaped pastry

⁸Type of round hollow bread decorated by various dough motives (usually flowers)

⁹Type of cake

were removed from the mother's bed and she could take part in the feast. In the region of Pleternica, the cork stoppers of the wine and brandy bottles brought as presents to the confinement celebration were thrown over the mother and the child behind the bed to prevent child deafness. In some villages, the guests would bring bottles without stoppers, so that the woman would be able to give birth again¹⁰.

In Biškupci, the child's godmother would visit the mother and the child immediately after childbirth and bring them lunch for a week. The big confinement celebration and the baptism celebration took place fourteen days after childbirth. On this occasion, the guests would bring roast meat, a hen and cakes such as *grana* and *kugluf*.

It was customary in the region of Pleternica to bring sweet bread and live poultry, usually a rooster, so that the child would not lack anything and have all fingers, nails and eyes. The sweet bread was decorated by rooster motives (*na pitlove*) if the child was a boy and by floral motives (*na cvitove*) if it was a girl.

Spells and protection from spells

It was believed that a small child was susceptible to incubi and witch attacks. To protect it from the influence of these evil forces, a garlic clove or a cloth sprinkled with holy water would be put into the cradle. In the surroundings of Pleternica, the child would be sometimes dressed in clothes turned inside out and a *natak*¹¹ or woollen thread would be tied around the baby's wrist.

To protect the child from incubi and witches, a member of the household would draw at one stroke a *wise letter* (a five-pointed star) on the door of the room where the child slept.

Since a little child was not to be admired or regarded too much, its face would be blackened by sooth to protect it from evil looks (*Vetovo*). The clothes and diapers would be removed from the rope before sunset and the water where the child was bathed was not to be thrown to the yard in the evening. Similarly, if someone entered the house in the dark, he should not immediately look at the child because it would *darken* it (*namračiti*).

Spells were removed from the child by holy water, glowing ember and special prayers known by certain people in the village (Bučje, Dolac, Pleternica).

Baptism

In the early 20th century, children were taken to baptism immediately after birth (Čakalić, 1980). Later on, the baptism took place on the second or third day after childbirth and in the mid-twentieth century the child was christened after fourteen

¹⁰ Villages Zgrade, Bučje

¹¹ Cotton thread

days. The child would be taken to the baptism by godparents and someone from the mother's house, usually the child's father. The baby-boy would be held at baptism by the godfather and the baby-girl by the godmother. The child would be dressed in new white diapers and a white shirt decorated with lace or embroidery and put into a white sewn pillow. Having returned from the baptism, the godparents used to put some money under the child's head as a present.

In the first half of the 20th century, people in villages could not afford lavish presents, which is why gifts were usually symbolic. In Biškupci, after they brought the child home from baptism, they would put it on a fruit-tree with the explanation: "Let it climb, so that it becomes fearless". The household members would prepare a meal for the godparents after baptism. In the middle of the 20th century, the big confinement celebration took place on the day of baptism¹².

Childrens clothes

The newborn was swaddled into diapers, usually made of soft and worn clothes. Four white diapers made of purchased textile were used only for the christening and for visits to the doctor. A small cloth or gauze was placed between the children's legs (mid-twentieth century). A second, bigger diaper was used to press and tighten the hands to the body, and the third big diaper was used to wrap up the whole body. Especially the legs would be wrapped tightly, to straighten them out next to each other. The diapers would then be fastened by a swaddling-band as thin as woollen or cotton rope. This band would be wrapped underneath the biggest diaper several times in the shape of the letter S. Once the child was wrapped in diapers, the end of the band would be alternately pulled through loops and tightened. The child would remain in such swaddling clothes until the age of two or three months (Dolac, Zagrade) or six months (Vetovo, Biškupci, Zagrade).

The child's head would be covered by a cap sewn from purchased textile (fastened under the chin with ties) or a small triangular scarf called *naglavačić*, which was tied tightly to ensure that the head takes a round shape (Vetovo, Lukač).

The swaddled child would be placed on an ordinary pillow and bound with a sash (*thanica*). In the 1920s (Vetovo), special pillows were sewn for the child. Since they were very scarce and used only for baptism, they were, just like festive shirts, borrowed among the villagers.

While the child was in swaddling clothes, it would be dressed in a shirt tied at the neck and open on the back. Dressed like this, the child would be usually put in a cradle (*bešika*) equipped with a mattress (domestic textile filled with oat straw, called *strožica* or *blazmica*), featherbed (*perinje*), sheets, covers (*ponjave*), a small pillow and *jorgan*¹³. The bedclothes were usually sewn by the women, mainly from purchased ticking (*inlet*).

¹² Also in Velika

¹³ Bed cover