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Review paper

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Open Air Children's Games and Holiday Gift Giving of Children in Istria

This article was a result of the field research of children's games and annual customs (Christmas and Easter) in Istria. The emphasis was placed on individual open air children's games and gift giving of children during Christmas time.

Key words: children's, games, gift giving, Istria

There were very few data on the culture of childhood in Istria in expert writings or in literature in general. Therefore data for this article were collected through field research¹ and by conducting interviews with informants from the rural regions. When asked about toys and games the informants born in the 1920's and 1930's used to reply that they could not remember any, since they were already as children included in everyday work. "There was no time to play, we had to work, we would be hungry otherwise" (Dukovski 1997:75). The informants born during the 1940's and 1950's claimed that they had time to play. They were making their own toys, adapting to their needs the games they had learned from older children, or inventing the new ones. For children of all generations game is the most "serious" and non-profitable way of spending time together and, hence, is often incomprehensible to adults.

For each person his/her childhood carries a special meaning. Children games are an important basis for the life of an individual and community. They mirror life in a certain community, socio-economic situation and, finally, norms of conduct.

¹ The informants were from: Motovun (Elide Močibob, Matalija Fatorić and Anastazija Ivašić), from Brkač (Pjero Tomac), Beletić Brijeg (Lina Kagliari), Rakotul (Milka Stojinić), Glogorica (Marija Ivić), Karojba (Ana Močibob), Slokovići (Milna Troš), Katun Trviški (Vjekoslava Grubiša), Feštini (Anton and Anđela Božac), Meloni (Renata Sandolj), Barban (Dušan Vale).

According to my informants, the most popular were open air games, in rural and urban settings alike. During those games there were no special divisions on boys and girls or older and younger children. Only exceptionally there were games which were more often played by either girls or boys.² Children were more united and bonds between them were stronger. There were no individual separations, unlike today when children turn to individual games and pastimes. *They only want to watch computer all they long.*³

In rural regions, children used to spend a lot of time outdoors, primarily because of their various duties. When they were six or seven years old, they had to tend sheep or turkeys and when they were only a few years older, they had to tend cows. Therefore the time they spent on the pastures, they would use for games and pastime. They never required some special items, since they used things they had found in nature (stone, wood) or broken earthenware, old cloths, etc.

Games with stones

Children's games which took part in the field or at any other open space opened up the possibility of inclusion of large number of participants and usage of natural materials as toys. Most frequently used, next to wood, were stones. Those could be irregular stone slates or beautifully shaped little stones, depending on the type of the game.

A game with five round stones called *maneti*, *sasèti cristina*, *kamenčiči*, *pika-paka*,⁴ was a game played from spring to fall mostly by girls,⁵ or sometimes even boys. This game, which required from the participants a significant skill, was played in one or more pairs. The necessary items were five small round stones and a flat, raised surface, such as a stone table or some other smooth area.

The game was composed of two parts: in the first part the stones were randomly thrown into the air and caught, for which the points would be calculated, while in the second part the stones were placed in defined positions, thrown into the air and then caught.

The girls loved to play that game and they often carried their stones with them. They would say *idemo igrat na manete* or *gremo dokat na manete*, and if the game lasted for some time, the children would sometimes hurt their nails and their fingers would be sore.

² Later in the text *maneti* and *prahćanje*.

³ P.T., Brkač

⁴ Different dialectal variants for the same game: *maneti*, coming from the Italian word *mano* – hand. A. Mirković also mentioned the name *sasèti* or *cristina* (2005).

⁵ My female informants claimed that the reason was that the girls were more skillful at that game than the boys, so the boys would not play with them, since they could win the game easily.

The game was played by one hand, and it would start when the player shuffled all her/his stones in the hand and threw them on the table. When they fell down, the player would take one of them and would throw it into the air. Before throwing the stone, the co-player would determine which stone should the player pick up from the table. The aim of the game was to pick up the chosen stone from the table when the first stone was still in the air. After that, two stones had to be picked up, then three, then one and at the end *kaval* (all four stones were placed on one heap, *cavàl*, Ital.=horse, which should be picked up by one hand). When the player managed to pick up all four stones, she/he won one point, but if she/he had lost any of the stones during the game, one point had been lost, and the game was continued by the co-player.

The second part of the game was all about displaying skill, i.e. a kind of the best of the best. The stones were placed in different positions called *roge*, *lepeza/palma* and *pika paka*.

Rogi – fingers of one hand were placed vertically on the surface of the table and third and fourth finger were bent. Three stones were placed in front of the fingers (in front of the thumb, index finger and little finger) and two behind them. Then the hand was removed. One stone, as determined by the co-player, was thrown into the air and the remaining four stones had to be collected in one move.

Palma – the hand was placed on the table with all the fingers spread and one stone was placed at the tip of each finger. One stone was thrown into the air and the other four had to be picked up in one move.

The player who lost the game on points initiated the final game *pika paka*, and he/she tried to make the game more difficult for the winner by arranging the stones as complicated as possible. Four stones were positioned in that way that two of them were parallel and placed as far from each other as possible so that they would be more difficult to pick up. The first stone was thrown into the air and two parallel stones, *pika* and *paka* had to be collected, then the stone was thrown again and the player had to pick up the remaining pair of parallel stones.

The most popular open air game with stones in Istria was shoving a round stone or a wooden plate into the hole in the ground using a wooden stick⁶ – *prahćanje*, *praščanje*, *pračići*, *kukali*. It was also known as the game of the shepherds since it was usually played on pastures when the cattle was grazing.

Prahćanje was favorite among the boys, while the girls would join only occasionally. Exceptionally, when there were more of them, the girls would play separately.

At least two players were necessary for this game and the maximum number of players was ten. Each player had a wooden club⁷ which he/she used for shoving the stone. The game was played on the pasture where a central hole was made, called *poje* or *štala*. At the distance of around two meters, several smaller holes, called *pičine*, were

⁶ The informants compared it with today's field hockey.

⁷ Wooden stick with one thickened end.

also dug, the number of them equaled the number of players minus one. Together with the club, the players also needed a wooden or a stone slate called *svinja* or *prasac*.

The game started when the players carrying clubs were positioned next to one of the holes. One of the players did not have his/her hole so he/she presented the threat to the others. Another player was chosen to throw *prasac* as close to the *štala* as possible. While doing that, he would say out loud, just like in a ritual: “Slan pek!” (Ivetac 1984:179). The rest of the players were then trying to shove *prasac* into the *štala*, simultaneously protecting their holes from the player who did not have his/her *pičina*. Those were the basic rules of the game and there was a number of unwritten rules which were, according to my informants, quite complicated and each region had its specificities regarding the rules of the game or accumulating points.

*A big game, we played pračića a lot – it was one hole, we had that pračić, wooden, not round, more oval. We played all, if there were ten of us, there would be nine holes. Each player had to have a stick with one thick end. And he had to preserve his hole, štala, but also had to shove svinja. Everybody tried to shove it to you, and when you were fighting that one, the one who didn't have kućica, that's how we called it, he could take yours. We shoved it on the floor. We did it in the field, but also we could play it in the schoolyard. We also had it done at home and played on Sunday afternoon, sometimes the adults used to play with us.*⁸

Unlike *praščanje*, which has been almost forgotten, the game of *pljočkanje* is still popular today.⁹ It was commonly used throughout Istria by children who were tending cattle to kill time. What was needed for this game were *pljočka* and *balin*. *Pljočka* is a flat stone, ten to twenty centimeters in diameter and two to eight centimeters thick. *Balin* is a round or quadruple stone, large approximately as a fist, and *pljočka* has to be thrown as close as possible to it. The game was played on a flat ground and several pairs (both girls and boys) of players could participate in it. A player from the first pair threw *balin* on the ground which his/her partner then aimed at with *pljočka*. After all the couples took their turn (repeating the same process), it had to be established who threw *pljočka* closest to *balin*.

The winning couple was the one who threw *pljočka* closest to the *balin* (or who hit it), and for that obtained one point, *punat*. The overall winner of the game was the first couple to collect 11 points. In the game there were also expressions like “zajahati” which meant to hit the *balin* with *pljočka*, while “tura igre” referred to throwing *pljočki* in one direction. “Šeko” was when *pljočka* or *balin* were hit “straight to the head”.¹⁰

Today the game is played on a 16 meters long and 3.5 meters wide terrain fenced off by a rope. The winners have to collect 13 points. “The game includes good manners – *pljočki* should not be taken from drywalls, players are not allowed to drink, smoke

⁸ E.M. Kaldir, field notes by M. Margetić 2006.

⁹ Primarily thanks to tradition enthusiasts who have revitalized this game through various tournaments in *pljočkanje*, organized throughout Istria, for example, in Tinjan, Pula, Žminj, etc. Several *pljočkanje* teams have also been founded.

¹⁰ Straight to the head, i.e. to the centre.

or curse during the game. Players should respect and help each other and the game should be accompanied by a lovely song and good old customs".¹¹

Breaking of pots was a game which was played in Barban during a village feast, on the main square or in the centre of the village where the local inhabitants and their guests would gather or, less frequently, it could be played somewhere out in the fields. The number of players was not strictly determined and the necessary items were: an earthen pot (it could be old or new, it just had to be whole), a wooden pole from 2,5 to 3,5 meters long, money and dark ribbon.

The pot was placed on the ground with the opening facing down, and money was placed under it (the money was collected by the players facing themselves or it could be given as a gift). One player who was standing approximately 20 meters from the pot was blindfolded with a dark ribbon through which he/she could not see anything, a pole was handed on to him and somebody turned him around for three times. The turning had to be done in both directions (left, then right), so that the player would become disoriented. Then the person who was turning him shoved him/her in the direction of the pot. The player had to walk in the direction of the pot carrying the pole. The others would cheer and yell directions (left, right, straight ahead, etc.) When the player came close to the pot, everybody would yell *hit it!*, and he/she would do it. The player tried to hit the pot as hard as he/she could in order to break it, given that he/she hit the right place. The player who managed to break the pot would receive the money hidden under it as a reward.

Even though by the material used and the way the game was played, the game called *hitat u jaje*¹² did not belong to open air games with stones, it nevertheless deserved to be mentioned here since it was frequently played in the regions from which my informants came from.

It was played by children and the youngsters after mass by hitting eggs with coins. There were more variants of the same game called – *šćukat jaja*, *pičit* or *boćanje jajima*. The game is not played by children anymore, but there are places where the adults have revitalized this custom and have made it part of entertainment during Easter celebration.

Hitat u jaje was played in Trviž after lunch or after mass on Easter Day or Easter Monday. Children used to play with an adult who would bring coins. Young men who were already receiving salary would bring ten cent coins, *centeže*. A child would put his/her egg in the corner and an adult would try to hit it. If the person hit the egg, he/she would take it, but if the person missed the egg, the coin which was tossed belonged to the child.

¹¹ <http://www.glasistre.hr/?7dfc8ffd0b1819a2402936a061449b9f,TS,2669,,14796,,187333>

¹² Traditional children's game of hitting the eggs was played on Easter after lunch. This game, as well as *pljočkanje*, has been revitalized. In the last few years a tournament in *Šćukanje jaja* has been organized on Easter Day in the small town of Savičenta.

Children from the village of Kaldir used to mark their eggs, so that they could recognize them, binding them with a small ribbon or a band. They used to say *gremo boćat jaja*. The players (*boćari*) had to be announced. At the beginning of the game, the players determined which coin was to be used for hitting eggs (today the coins are, for example, 1, 2 or 5 kuna coins). The egg was placed at a certain distance and hit. The player hitting the egg had to throw the coin so that it would get stuck in the egg. If he/she managed it, he/she would take both the egg and the coin. If he/she missed the egg, the money went to the egg owner.

One of my informants from the village of Kale explained it in the following way: *For Easter we would play šćukanje jaja, one could earn a coin or two, who hit it first, he got the coin, monida, lira. Yes, that was our fun for Easter.*

Gift giving of children during Christmas time

Religion and Church left significant trace in the lives of many communities. Even though Istrian society as a whole built its foundations on Christianity and Christian system of values, it did not mean that a large number of believers practiced their faith by attending mass regularly. However, all Catholic holidays and customs were always celebrated inside family circles, almost without exception. Going to the church on Sundays, especially in rural regions, did not have only spiritual but also social significance. It provided a sense of belonging to the community because it was a place where one could meet his friends and relatives, but also an occasion where one could wear nice clothes, unlike modest clothes which were worn everyday.

General and generally known rules of behavior in certain life situations influence the sequence of events, type of behavior or repetition of certain behaviors. Some of them were prescribed by custom or tradition and they composed a ritual belonging to a certain region, family, group of people. Holiday rituals have a deeper meaning and emotional validity. The majority of the members of one community participate in them, accept them and/or revitalize them. The rules which are part of those rituals are never considered, they are simply followed and abided. Possible changes result in confusion, especially with children. When children are familiar with parts of a ritual, with the prescribed behavior of adults and their own role in it, they can comprehend the ritual's predictability. This possibility of prediction and familiarity with events give them the sense of security. Additional sense of security is provided by the knowledge that in certain parts of the ritual they can themselves be creative and express their feelings through the effort they have invested. This is frequently emphasized on the occasions of gift giving and ritual well-wishing. Creative contents in greeting cards as well as children's personal touch while extending seasonal greetings frequently got awarded by those to whom they were intended.

On the other hand, the gifts children received during holidays did not always depend on their effort, but on their family's financial situation.

Christmas time begun on December 6 with St. Nicholas Day and ended on January 6 with Befana, as confirmed in the folk saying from the town of Motovun: *Giorno della Befania tutte le feste porta via!*¹³ Because of the holidays which announced the onset of Christmas, people were going to church more frequently and children were especially happy because that was the time of gift giving and spending more time with one's family. Moreover, it was the period of winter school holidays and due to the winter season they had less work to do outside.

My field research included informants who were born and raised in Croatian speaking and Italian speaking parts of central Istria.¹⁴ Therefore the descriptions of certain customs and identical and/or similar games were different. The procedures during processions were the same, but the texts children would chant were different. Local differences, not only in language, but in the ritual itself which was frequently different in different villages, should also be emphasized. The function was, however, the same – to extent good wishes and receive presents.

St. Nicholas

St. Nicholas was known as the saint and gift giver of children and poor people and was celebrated on December 6. He was also the patron saint of children, seamen, girls, poor people, students, pharmacists, bakers, fishermen, prisoners, tradesmen, travelers and several cities throughout the world.

The custom of giving gifts to children on St. Nicholas Day was, according to my informants, imported to Istria from the neighboring countries. They claimed that it was more practiced in cities than in rural areas and that it gained in popularity after the war. Since it was focused on gift giving, it was considered as a kind of announcement of Christmas and other major holidays.

Older informants from rural areas considered gift giving on St. Nicholas's Day as something completely new,¹⁵ while in Motovun the informants claimed that it was practiced already during Italian government. That holiday was celebrated also in the school, since on that day, children would find a piece of fruit or a candy under their school benches. Those gifts were provided by the school in cooperation with local government and the custom was practiced until communism. After that, the tradition of gift giving was mostly reduced to the family circle.

¹³ "Befana day takes all holidays away".

¹⁴ The town of Motovun and the surrounding area were under Italian government, and people there spoke Italian.

¹⁵ Mostly from the Second World War onwards and mostly in the cities since people in the rural areas were poor and parents could not provide gifts for all the children.

The informants¹⁶ whose families practiced giving gifts, remembered how eagerly they would wait for St. Nicholas's Day. *And we were happy when St. Nicholas came. We waited for it, "go to sleep, if you don't go he won't come" – so they told children. He came, but nobody could see him – we would get apples, oranges, hazelnuts. Onion – because it made you cry – children who were crying a lot would get onion from Nicholas. A willow rod tied with a red ribbon – my mum said – you were naughty and you got a whipping rod. An empty plate was placed on the table on which St. Nicholas would leave the gifts. They said he would come through a fire-place.*¹⁷

I have singled out this account, since the informant has emphasized the empty plate for collecting gifts which was placed on the table. Some other older informants have confirmed the same. They all agreed that placing boots inside the windows was a new phenomenon (after the 1940's and 1950's), and they explained that the plate was probably used simply because they did not have boots.¹⁸

Majority of my informants of different generations confirmed that before the World War II children received gifts very rarely, due to poverty. After the war, children learned in school about St. Nicholas and since then it was introduced to their families as the day when children received gifts. At that time, St. Nicholas became simply Nicholas.

Two variants of gift giving linked to Nicholas were mentioned: Nicholas himself brought gifts to children or they would find their gifts in a boot next morning. In the first variant,¹⁹ somebody from the household (a father or a younger man) would dress up in red, put on a fake beard and carried gifts in a big bag to the houses of children, usually relatives, or children would gather at one place and he would present them with gifts there. Krampus accompanied him; he was an evil chaperon who would give children whipping rods and coal.

In the village of Katun Trviški, Nicholas was not accompanied by Krampus, but by Štriga,²⁰ who was scaring off children so that they would behave.

In the second variant, the children would not meet Nicholas at all, but were obliged to clean their *škornja*²¹ the night before and place it at the window, expecting to find gifts in it the next morning. Good children would find apples, hazelnuts, walnuts or an orange and bad ones would find a *baketinica*²² in their boot or those who were crying a lot would sometimes find an onion. Nicholas and Krampus were also a kind of disciplinary method. If the children behaved well, they would receive gifts and if they misbehaved, they would get a rod as a warning. Therefore the children were very obe-

¹⁶ From Motovun and Karojba.

¹⁷ N.F., Motovun, born in 1923.

¹⁸ The same data was obtained in the region around Pazin and Beletić Brijeg.

¹⁹ Data from Kaldir and Karojba.

²⁰ From Ital. Strega = witch

²¹ Dialectal term for "boot".

²² A whipping rod decorated with red ribbon.

dient a few days before St. Nicholas's Day and they took special care when preparing boots to be put in the window. They would make them shine.

Informants from Cer, Barban and Glogorica claimed that giving gifts at St. Nicholas's Day was a new phenomenon and that they did not remember if from the past.

Contemporary gift giving of children at St. Nicholas's Day has significantly changed in the last twenty years. Children expect a lot from their parents since today's way of life, i.e. consumerism, has greatly increased their expectations. During holidays, we are constantly surrounded by appealing commercials from media. Nowadays, boots are rarely placed at the windows. If they are placed, those are usually decorative bags shaped like a boot.

Good hand/Buona man

January 1 is not a religious holiday, but the celebration of the beginning of the New Year. The passage from the old year to the new one was always an opportunity for wishing that the new one would be better than the old one. In order for this to come true, it was desirable that someone should extend good wishes. In Istria that day was not especially celebrated, only lunch used to be more elaborate and in some cities a dance or a party was organized. However, it was important who would be the first person to wish a happy New Year. It was considered lucky if the first well-wisher was a man, especially a male child. It was considered bad luck and a shame for the house if no children would come to wish a happy New Year.

Children were always looking forward to that day, since after St. Nicholas's Day that was another opportunity for receiving gifts. On the basis of my field research, I could differentiate between two ways of gift giving of children at New Year's Day. The first one was that children, unlike gift giving linked to St. Nicholas, when they did not have to put special effort in order to obtain gifts, had to organize themselves and jointly visit each house. The second, simpler way, was when mothers and/or grandmothers would give gifts to the children.

This first type of gift giving linked to wishing a happy New Year would start in the early morning. The children who came first would receive more gifts. *On New Year, early in the morning, if you came earlier, you got more, if not, you got less.*²³ Five to ten children would gather in front of somebody's house and arrange the route. They said they were going to find a Good Hand or Buona Man.²⁴ Each child carried with him/her a small linen bag or a sock which were used for collecting gifts. *Oh, of course, we went through the village with that sock. We had a sock or koneštra made from cloth – it had to be long so that we could put a lot in it, and the sock was mother's or father's, not our small one. That we did for the New Year – Buon principio del Anno.*²⁵ Instead of a linen bag, some

²³ A.I., Motovun

²⁴ In Italian speaking regions.

²⁵ R.S., Meloni.

children would carry a small basket. When they would arrive in front of the house, the children would firstly greet the hosts with *Buon giorno, un principio del Anno.*²⁶ Or *Danas je Novo lito, da nam date dobru ruku.* Then they would say:

Santolo mio diletto
Metti la man sul petto
Metti la man in casella
*Paghi me la buona man.*²⁷

Another version of the greeting:

Santolo mio diletto,
Metti la man sul petto,
Ricordi ti da me
*E della mia sorella.*²⁸

Next to the text, the well-wishers would also express individual wishes for good health and fortune of the members of the household in the year to come, which frequently depended on the skill of the well-wisher himself/herself. After that, the hosts would thank the children and answer with: *for a good hand, for a good hand.* While doing that, they would also present them with hazelnuts, walnuts, apples, candies and, less frequently, money. Children would put the presents into the bags, socks or baskets and move on. *That what we got we would eat, give away, and what was left we would take home.*

In Katun Trviški this custom was identical to the custom as performed in the area around Motovun. The difference was in the name of the custom and in the spoken text. Instead of asking for a *Good hand*, children would say *idemo pobirati rišilo.*²⁹ Each would bring his/her *boršica*³⁰ and, gathered in the groups of four to six, they would walk around the village wishing a happy New Year.

When they arrived in front of the house, they would say:

Dobro jutro, srično Novo lito,
smo došli po rišilo,
*da bite i k litu.*³¹

²⁶ Italian speaking region, Motovun and the surrounding area.

²⁷ *My dear godfather, put your hand on your chest, put your hand in your wallet, (pay me) give me for a good hand.* This text was spoken especially to godfathers and grandparents, since children expected to get some money from them.

²⁸ *My dear godfather, put your hand on your chest, remember me and my sister.* The hosts were expected to be generous.

²⁹ To collect gifts – rišilo.

³⁰ Dialectal term for a small bag.

³¹ V.G., Katun Trviški

The hosts would reply: *God bless, so you are good children!* With this greeting, besides wishing a happy New Year, the children wanted to urge the hosts to be more generous next year. Arrival of the children into the house was considered fortunate and desirable. However, there were houses without children. My informants mentioned one such family which, instead of hazelnuts, apples, etc., gave children some potatoes. As a revenge, the children threw potatoes at the house and avoided it in the following years.

This type of gift giving of children for the New Year was present in rural and urban regions alike. The children would first visit their relatives and godfathers and godmothers, and then other houses. However, not all the children liked collecting gifts in this way. As the main reason my informants outlined the embarrassment and shame some of them would feel since they felt like beggars. Especially the children from wealthier families while, on the contrary, children from poorer families could hardly wait for that day, since that was an opportunity for them to get a coin or a candy.

The second type of gift giving of children for New Year was done by mothers and grandmothers who would bake sweet bagels/cakes and give them to the children from their household, but also to the children who would visit the house that day. This was confirmed by the informants from Cer, Barban and Gračišće. They also claimed that there were no special ways of extending New Year's greetings or well-wishers who would go around the houses. Families would only extend their good wishes with their relatives.

Children were not making rounds, but were given *Good hand* when they would wake up in the morning. The expression "to give good hand" in this case referred to presenting gifts, which always included a *tičo*,³² then walnuts, hazelnuts, apples, etc, or whatever was around the house. "*For the New Year we brought to each other hazelnuts, apples, walnuts... what we had. In poverty, you would give, a gift for good hand, whatever you had*" (Bijažić 1999:120).

La Befana, January 6

La Befana is an Italian legend on a good witch.³³ It was celebrated on the Catholic holiday of Epiphany, on January 6. In Istria it was common in regions which were under Italian government and became a tradition.

The legend which is still told to the children today goes: Thee Magi in their search for the little baby knocked on the door of a cabin to ask for directions. An old lady with a broom opened the door. She did not know who were those colorfully dressed

³² Sweet bagel shaped like a bird made out of sweetened dough for making bread.

³³ The name of the witch Befana came from the Greek name for the Day of the Birth of Jesus: epifaneia, in direct translation the Appearance (of God). Today the same word is used in the West as the word for, what is in Croatian known as the Day of Magi.

men and neither she knew how to give them directions to baby Jesus. They thanked her and kindly asked if she wanted to join them in their search. She refused since she had too many chores. When they left her, she suddenly realized that she had made a mistake and decided to catch up with them. She was looking for them, but could not find them. Since she missed her opportunity, now she would stop every child she met on the way and gave them candies, hoping that that was baby Jesus. Each year on the night before Epiphany, she starts her search for the Child of God. She stops at the house of every child and leaves candies for good children, or a small lump of coal for the bad ones.³⁴

In Motovun and the surrounding area Befana was quite popular among children. She was interesting because of her appearance (old witch with a good heart), the way of arrival (flying a broomstick) and gift giving of, usually, candies (with poorer children more often hazelnuts, walnuts, apples, etc). Befana was expected to bring gifts, so children would hang on their socks over the fireplace, at the fireplace hood or at the window on the evening before (on January 5).

On the afternoon of Epiphany children would gather in the yards or on the street playing games and singing songs on Befana. Everybody brought with them three hazelnuts, walnuts or candies which he/she got from Befana.

La Befana vien da notte

Con le scarpe tutte rotte

Con vestitio alla Bebè

*Viva i tre Re.*³⁵

Children were standing in a circle, turning around and when they would sing the last line *viva i tre re*, they would throw into the air the gifts they were holding in their hand. More skillful children would collect more hazelnuts or candies. The game would continue until they had something to throw.

Besides for giving gifts, Befana was used for scaring children. If children would not behave they were threatened that Befana would take them far away. *Befana was the one who was scaring children, she was old and ugly, went around school. The day before she went through the streets...through houses.*³⁶

In some villages in the central Istria where Befana was not known as the gift giver, she was known as an old lady who could severely harm children and in that sense was used for frightening them. The same role was ascribed to Štriga who was malicious and could also harm children, especially if they stayed out late in the dark.

³⁴ Obtained from <http://www.shieldmaidens.org/Vhr/udruga/letak/befana.html>

³⁵ E.M., Kaldir, *Befana come by night, with red socks, in a vest like Bebè, long live the Magi.*

³⁶ A.I., Motovun

Instead of a conclusion

The culture of childhood in Istria demands additional research and analysis. Since there are very few written sources, the main source of information are the informants who can transfer the knowledge they have. Many games have today disappeared or have been preserved only in segments. One of the reasons is the changed way of life, in urban and rural settings alike. Rural settings have almost stopped being rural in the strict sense of the term, since children today do not have to work in the fields or tend cattle. They are more oriented towards individual games, toys and computers. However, thanks to the individual efforts of tradition lovers, some traditional games such as *pljočkanje* or *hitat u jaje* have been revitalized. Even though they are today played by adults, children are displaying increasing interest. On the other hand, gift giving of children during holidays has turned into a tradition of buying big and expensive gifts imposed by current trends. Hence apples, hazelnuts and walnuts have been replaced by Barbie dolls or Ninja Turtles. Extending seasonal greetings and good wishes has slowly lost the personal touch because of sending popular text messages.

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