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THE TRADITIONAL CUSTOMS FROM THE ISLAND OF ZLARIN

Summary

The paper discusses traditional folk customs on the island of Zlarin as they were practised early in the twentieth century, surviving partly at least until the Second World War. The customs described here are those connected with life and annual cycles and, to a lesser extent, with coral diving, fishing, shipping, and other activities. The data for this paper was gathered by the present author in interviews with older Zlarinians in 1978. Part of the material has been collected and placed at the author's disposal by Zlarinians who initiated the study of local traditions. Data from literature have also been used, but not much has been found there.

Among the traditional customs connected with the life cycle, birth is discussed first, especially certain beliefs and procedures in connection with pregnancy, conjectures concerning the sex of the unborn baby, and practices at the time of delivery (inducing labour by means of blowing and taking of hot drinks). The placenta was buried near the house or under the doorstep. The care of the mother and the newborn was the job of the village midwife, who also assisted during the delivery. The mother was visited by women relatives who brought her food. The birth of the baby was celebrated on the third day in a ceremony called *povijanica* (swathing ceremony), for which a cake known as *povijanica* was baked. The baby was baptized soon after birth or much later. The godfather and the godmother (or two couples of godparents) gave presents to the baby, to the woman who carried the baby to church for baptism, and to the midwife. If there were fears that the baby might die, it was baptised as soon as possible and was taken to church in secret; the baby would be taken out of the house through the window and the first person that the parents met on the way to church would be taken as a godparent. Some beliefs speak of witches and their danger for the babies, and practices against them are recommended. Customs surrounding the child's first haircut and first tooth are also described.

Krsnica was the birthday party (often also combined with the name-day celebration, as children were commonly given names of the saints on whose fête-days they were born) for male members of the family, even when they were away from home. A special cake was baked for this occasion and was also known as *krsnica*.

The custom surrounding the drafting of young men into the army and their departure into the national service included their stealing flowers from girls and exhibiting them in a conspicuous place, as well as their leave-taking from relatives and friends with all-night drinking and singing.

Numerous traditions connected with marriage began with the first message sent to the girl's parents in which the bridegroom-to-be declared his intention of asking for their daughter's hand. When the parents' consent was obtained he would pay them a visit with his parents. On this occasion the boy and the girl would shake hands and exchange *besida* (promise); the boy would promise to ask for the girl's hand in marriage and she would promise to accept his proposal. The next step after this was the actual proposal. On this occasion the boy had to bring a present for the girl — regularly an ornament made of gold. The period between the engagement and the wedding — whose length depended on various factors — was used by the prospective bride to prepare her dowry and wedding presents. Weddings were normally celebrated between Christmas and Lent. Important figures in the wedding ceremony were *kumpari* (two best men) and *stari svat* (bridegroom's chief attendant). The wedding procession was invariably headed by a standard-bearer carrying a flag. The wedding party would gather at the bridegroom's home, from where it would proceed to the bride's home, and then to church. Weddings usually took place in the early hours of Saturday afternoon, and after the church ceremony the whole party would go to the bride's

ZORICA RAJKOVIĆ

house, where food and drinks were served and there was singing and dancing before everybody went to the groom's home for dinner and further merrymaking. Two events in the course of the wedding ceremony were accompanied by specific customs, namely, the arrival of the wedding party at the bride's home and their departure for the church and the arrival of the wedding party, with the bride, to the groom's home. Arriving at the bride's home, members of the wedding party had to pretend they were looking for a dove which they had lost; those in the bride's house would offer them older women, but they would refuse them one after another until the bride appeared. It is interesting to note that the groom was supposed to walk at the end of the wedding procession on the way to the bride's home, on the way to church, and from the church to the bride's home. It was only when the procession left the bride's home for his home that he was allowed to walk with the bride. Arriving at the groom's home, the wedding party was met by everybody in the house. The mother-in-law would kiss the bride upon arrival and gave her a boy to hold. The bride was supposed to give the boy a pair of socks and a biscuit. Entering the house, the bride was not allowed to step on the threshold but was rather supposed to step over it. In the groom's house, after dinner, gifts were exchanged: the bride would give various clothing items to members of the groom's family and to the more prominent members of the wedding party. Finally, before the wedding party was over and everybody went home, the wedding crown (or a wreath with a veil in more recent time) was ceremonially taken away from the bride's head. In earlier times, the wedding crown was taken off the bride's head with a sword, as described by Alberto Fortis in the second half of the eighteenth century. A week after the wedding the bride's family visited the bride, bringing her presents in gaily decorated baskets (hence the name *koništrice* 'baskets' for this custom).

The second marriage of a widower or a widow was accompanied in Zlarin by a custom which was not pleasant for the new couple: on the wedding day itself, and sometimes for several days after the wedding, groups of people would gather in front of the couple's home and, using various improvised instruments, created a great deal of noise. They would only stop when the new husband gave them the required sum of money, which they would use to buy wine to drink to the new couple's health.

Similarly to beliefs in other places, certain phenomena were regarded as portents of death in Zlarin. They included unexplainable noises, hooting of owls, and hens producing the sound of roosters. When a person died, his body was washed and dressed and then placed in a coffin, with a straw-filled cushion under his head. The cushion could not be filled with feathers as it was believed that in this case the dead person might return among the living. For the same reason, the dead person's socks were sewn together (no shoes were put on his feet), and when the coffin was being carried out of the house a little water was spilt after it; as soon as the coffin was out of the house, the house was swept clean and the dust was scattered far from it. When a young girl or a young man who was still a bachelor died, they were dressed for burial as they would be for a wedding.

When somebody died in the family, relatives, friends and acquaintances would gather in that house for three evenings in succession. On the third evening, following the funeral, dinner would be prepared (known as *sedmina*) for relatives and coffin-bearers. If the deceased person was fairly advanced in age, the third evening was not wholly serious and was often marked by a certain amount of joking and conviviality. While the body was still in the house, as well as during the funeral procession and at the cemetery, women wailed loudly, relying on certain wailing formulas but also improvising texts about events from the deceased person's life.

The account of the customs connected with the annual cycle begins with the description of the carnival season. The main carnival custom was that of masquerading by individuals or groups. Such carnival processions went through the village for several days before Shrove Tuesday, which was the last day of the carnival. Carnival processions commonly included men masked as women, then men wearing old-style cloaks (*gabani*), then those dressed in sheepskins or in coats turned inside out, as well as hunchbacks, lame invalids and blind men in fancy clothing. Their faces were often smeared with soot or covered by masks (bought or home-

 Običaji otoka Zlarina

-made, made of cloth, cardboard or fur). Masked people carried sticks, umbrellas and other accessories; they often produced a lot of noise with bells, horns and rattles and sprinkled one another with ashes and soot.

Larger organized groups of men enacted scenes which provided comments on contemporary social and political situations and problems. Such scenes usually had one central carnival character — a puppet called Jure. The puppet was carried in a procession, accompanied by a variety of masked characters, all the way to the harbour, where it would be put on trial, sentenced to death and burned at the stake. The carnival puppet was the embodiment of all the miseries suffered by the Zlarinians throughout the year, and by sentencing it to death they gave vent to their dissatisfaction with the social system, political and economic situation, and their resistance to the secular and church authorities. A very frequent part of the carnival event was a wedding procession in which all roles, including the bride, were played by men.

Among the customs of the spring season mention should be made of the bringing of consecrated olive branches into the fields and vineyards to protect them against hail, then the customs in connection with Easter (especially the Easter cake, blessing of food, and Easter Monday dance), the celebrations and country fair for St. George's day, the maypole decoration, and the bonfires from Midsummer Day to St. Peter's fête. An interesting custom was recorded in Zlarin on the eve of St. Antony's Day: men would gather and call one another to go into the mountain, after which they would end up in the local tavern. Some details in this custom seem to indicate that it may have survived from the time when shepherds in the Dalmatian hinterland, ancestors of present-day Zlarinians, left their villages for summer pasturelands in the mountains.

No major folk events took place in summer and autumn. The Christian festivals were those of Our Lady of the Roses, then the Assumption and the Nativity of the Virgin Mary. For All Saints' and All Souls' Days, Zlarinian families decorated the graves of their dead and the women wailed at the graves.

Being fishermen, seamen and coral divers, Zlarinians understandably celebrated the day of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of seamen. On the eve of St. Lucy's fête, children left their stockings under their pillows, expecting to find them filled with sweets and fruit the following morning.

Customs in connection with Christmas spanned the period of two weeks between Christmas Eve and Epiphany. On Christmas Eve, the head of the family, usually the oldest man, brought an olive log (known as *b a n j a k*) into the house and placed it on the fireplace. During the family dinner, a little of everything that was eaten at the table was put on the *b a n j a k*, and it was also splashed with wine. A special Christmas cake, called *b o ž i ć n j a k*, was baked for Christmas. Several pieces of the cake, usually three, remained on the table, together with the obligatory Christmas candle, until Epiphany.

For Christmas and New Year's Day, well-wishers (*k o l o j a n i* 'carolers') went from house to house in small groups of boys and men singing a special song for Christmas and New Year and wishing all the best to friends, relatives and prominent Zlarinians. At each house they visited, the carolers were given presents in money, fruit and sweets, while adults were also offered wine and brandy.

Among the customs connected with coral diving, fishing and sailing, only those have been recorded which concerned the departure and return of coral divers and fishermen and the oaths taken by seamen. The main purpose of these customs was to ensure a good catch for fishermen and coral divers. The last part of the paper gives a very brief description of the customs and beliefs surrounding grape picking and house building.

(Translated by V. Ivir)