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VUČARI – THE BALKAN WOLF-MEN

Katarzyna Satława

In the article below I would like to describe a ritual called Vučarenje that was once popular in Dinaric mountain villages, where Serbian population used to dwell. The wolf has always played an important role in Serbs' folk culture and customs. This widely spread predator was dangerous for both livestock and human. Wolf is present in folk songs as well as in popular sayings which proves that it played an important role in the countryside.

Wolf in Serbian folk culture

Peasants believed that wolf was a demonic creature which possessed supernatural power. It was not common to speak the word *vuk* (wolf) aloud since it could make the wolf come. Instead of saying *vuk*, peasants used words like *pogan* (pagan), *napomenik*, *spomenik* (the one which we mention) or *onaj iz gore* (the one from the mountain) more willingly. It was believed that even a dead wolf may hurt a man. There existed a threat that wolf's soul could take revenge on a hunter. There were different rituals depending on a region, the aim of which was to appease the wolf. Two rituals became fairly popular: the hunter put a weapon on a wolf in order to cheat the dead animal that it was not the man, but the weapon that caused its death. Another ritual was to bring wolf's fur to the village and ask inhabitants to offer gifts which were supposed to "bribe" the wolf.

Villagers considered wolf to have supernatural power that could even prevail death. For example, in families where small children happened to die or were sickly, the name Vuk was often given to a newborn boy to protect him from death. The

name was supposed to make the child possess the same features as the animal - resistance towards diseases and evil of any kind.¹

While studying ethnographic literature one might find various superstitions connected with wolves. At the beginning of winter, especially in regions where Štokavian dialect² was spoken, several home activities were forbidden, since it was believed that they can "open wolf's mouth". It was not allowed to work with sharp or tooth-shaped tools and utensils. Sometimes it was not allowed to comb the wool or weave. Wool could encourage a wolf to come. In Bosnia and Hercegovina the period in which it was prohibited to do any woolwork was called *nesnovanice*.³

¹ BANDIĆ, D. *Narodna religija Srba*, p. 28, <http://pl.scribd.com/doc/50867531/Narodna-religija-kod-Srba>

² Dialect of Serbo-croatian language, spoken in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Hercegovina and the major part of Croatia.

³ PLAS, P. *Nekoliko aspekata simbolike vučjih usta u srpskim običajima i verovanjima*, www.rastko.rs/antropologija/pplas-vucja_usta.htm



Vučarenje - the ritual.

According to Nakićenović, Vučari are those who killed the wolf, flayed its fur, filled the skin with straw and impaled it on a wooden stick. They walked through a village with the wolf, from house to house, and asked a householder to bring gifts. While doing it, they were singing wolf songs (*vučarske pesme*). Householder and his wife were giving Vučari lots of products, “the best what they had”: salt, meat, wine, rakija⁴, cheese, eggs, wool, flour or money.⁵

Vladimir Ardalić provides more detailed description of Vučarenje ritual: a wolf gets wooden legs, artificial teeth made out of fork, tongue made out of red material and an apple that is put into its mouth. After these actions, wolf is impaled on a wooden stick. Once the wolf is ready, Vučari can start visiting households. Vučari group consists of several men (usually no more than ten), who are nicely dressed for that occasion. It is possible that in the meantime (during the march) one man joins the group. He is then called *pridošlica* (the one who came and joined). Men take bags and sacks and one of them takes the wolf on his shoulder. They stop in front of each house and sing. One man sings with a high voice whereas another with a low one. Women bring gifts, such as towels or woolen artifacts, and often thread them on a wolf’s back. What is crucial, the wolf needs “to see” that it is given presents.

Every householder offers something because if the wolf obtains enough gifts, it would not trouble people and livestock anymore. Everyone has

⁴ Rakija – strong alcoholic beverage, popular throughout the Balkans.

⁵ NAKIĆENOVIĆ, P. S. *Kninska Krajina*, p.29 <http://pl.scribd.com/doc/54740031/Kninska-Krajina-Proto-Savo-Nakicenovic>

time to prepare products for the wolf, because the moment of Vučari’s arrival is announced by shouts “Eto vučara! Eto vučara!” (“There are the Vučari!”). Once the wolf receives some gifts, household members cut a bit of wolf’s fur and take it for themselves. Wolf’s fur is supposed to protect people from witchcraft, ghouls and bad spell. Then the group sings a thanksgiving song, praise the householder and leave.

After visiting all the houses, Vučari divide the gifts. No one ought to taste the given meat before it is cut into pieces and distributed among the members of the group. One of the Vučari takes off his cap and covers eyes with it in order not to see anything. Another companion, pointing at a gift asks the one with covered eyes “whose is this?” and the man answers: “it belongs to ...” Such distribution of the goods is called *žmirak* (blinking).⁶

Vučari group could not be observed on a specific day. They were usually crossing the village around Christmas – New Year period. This time of the year was considered to be a moment of transition; uncertain and dangerous one. It was also the time when the most of wolf attacks happened.⁷

Vučari were a common phenomenon on the territory of Kninska Krajina in the 60’s and 70’s. After the war in the 90’s, when a lot of Serbs left Krajina, Vučari groups are no longer observed in the vicinity of Knin.⁸

Vučari songs

Vladimir Bovan classified wolf songs (*vučarske pesme*) as winter ritual songs. They were to assure that the wolf would not come from the mountains and approach the village.⁹ There are two Vučari songs which most often appear in ethnographic sources: Knin¹⁰ version and Lika version. Their content and the aim for what they are sung is similar. The text differs, depending on the territory.

⁶ ARDALIĆ, V. Bukovica – Narodni život i običaji, *Benkovački magazin*, No.2, December 1994 http://www.rastko.rs/antropologija/ardalic_bukovica/ardalic_bukovica_1.html

⁷ PLAS, P. *Nekoliko aspekata simbolike vučjih usta u srpskim običajima i verovanjima*. www.rastko.rs/antropologija/pplas-vucja_usta.html

⁸ Informer: Vjera Mesic, Etnografski Muzej, Beograd

⁹ BOVAN, V. *Yugoslav Oral Lyric*, p.152 http://journal.oraltradition.org/files/articles/6ii-iii/5_bovan.pdf

¹⁰ <http://pl.scribd.com/doc/54740031/Kninska-Krajina-Proto-Savo-Nakicenovic>

Licka (Lika version)¹

Domaćine, dobar dan,
evo vuje pred tvoj stan.

Domaćine, rode moj,
evo vuka pred tvoj dvor.
Domaćine, od kuće,
evo vuka kod kuće.

Ćeraj vuka od kuće,
nije dobar kod kuće.
Dok je vujo mladi bio,
nije vujo tad prosio,
već na silu odnosio.

Vujo nam je salazio,
dobre gazde nalazio.
Vujo nam je ostario,
u polje je sa ,odio,
ne bi li se zaodio.

On se nije zaodio,
već je ranu zadobio.
Pa nemere da je nosi,
vujo mora sad da prosi.

Podaj vuku slanine,
da ne slazi s planine.
Podaj vuku sočice,
da ne kolje ovčice.

Podajte mu koje jajce,
da ne kolje janjce.
Podaj vuku varke,
da ne kolje jarice.

Podaj vuku vunice,
da ne kolje junice.
Domaćine, pladanj sira,
domaćine, kvartu pira.

Kiti, snašo, mrka vuka,
biće ćerka ljepšeg struka.
Još nek snaša darak meće,
biće ćerka bolje sreće.

Podaj gazda i novaca,
biće veći broj ovaca.

Householder, good morning
There's vujo in front of your flat

Householder, my kindred
There's a wolf in front of your courtyard
Householder, from home
There's a wolf at your home

Keep the wolf away from home,
It is not good at home
When vujo was young
No one invited him then
He was driven out instead

Vujo came to us
he found a good host
Vujo got old
He went to the field
But did not reach it

He did not reach it
But he got wounded
He does not measure what he takes
vujo must beg now

Give bacon to the wolf
So he won't come from the mountains
Give socks to the wolf
So he won't kill the sheep

Give it eggs
So he won't kill the lambs
Cheat the wolf
So he won't kill the goat kids

Give wool to the wolf
So he won't kill the cows
Householder, (bring) a cheese platter
Householder, (bring) a small feast

Kitty, goody, brown wolf,
(your) daughter's waist will be more beautiful
Put another gift
So the daughter would be more lucky

Give money, householder
You would have more fruit then

Mgr. Katarzyna Satława (1983)

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Where to search for Vučari nowadays?

I wondered whether it is possible to meet a Vučari group crossing mountain villages in contemporary times. In order to check it, I asked people from villages of Bosanska Krajina, located on the territory of Republika Srpska, where Serbs from Croatia might have settled. Inhabitants of Svodna, Donji Agići, Podrasnica and Gornji Podgradci were interviewed but unfortunately none of them has heard about Vučari.

Nevertheless, it is possible to see their equivalent at a stage. Several folk ensembles present Vučarenje and vučarske pesme among other of their performances. Ansambl Kolo¹¹, KUD¹² Krajina¹³ and KUD Bačko Dobro Polje¹⁴ have vučarenje in their repertoire. The main song, that is sung by all three groups, is based on the variant stemming from Lika but each group presents different accompanying songs or formulas used by Vučari. Although the interpretation of the ritual and the way of presenting it at the stage might differ, the core, which is based on bringing the wolf - singing Vučari song – the act of bestowal – *kolo* dance - praising a householder, stays unchanged.

For those who do not have an occasion to watch the ritual presented by a folk ensemble, there are two film sources available on the internet which focus on vučarenje.¹⁵

¹¹ Ansambl Kolo, *Vucari iz Bosne*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSEsqnOY-p8o>

¹² KUD = shortening of *Kulturno Umjetničko Društvo* (Cultural-artistic assembly)

¹³ Kud Krajina, <http://www.kudkrajina.org.rs/>

¹⁴ Kud Bačko Dobro Polje, <http://www.kudbdpolje.net/>

¹⁵ A short documentary *Srpski narodni običaji iz Srpske Krajine*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDvsunKoF-c> and Yugoslav drama movie *Vučari iz Donje i Gornje Polace*, 1978. Pisac scenarija: Jovan Radulović, Režija: Zdravko Šotra

SUMMARY & KEYWORDS

In the article I would like to describe a ritual called Vučarenje that was once popular in Dinara mountain villages, where Serbian population used to dwell. The wolf has always played an important role in Serbs' folk culture and customs. This widely spread predator was dangerous for both livestock and human. Wolf is present in folk songs as well as in popular sayings which proves that it played an important role in the countryside.

- ▶ wolf, folk culture, folk songs, Serbs, ritual
- ▶ vlk, lidová kultura, lidové písně, Srbové, rituál