# Dragan Todorović Danijela Zdravković

# KALAVEŠNICE IN RADOVNICA\*

#### INTRODUCTORY NOTES

The significance of the conducted field research is seen in the application of micro-sociological approach, an increasingly used level of sociological analysis today, which proves that a social life is mostly realized through "ordinariness and mediocrity". Hence, everyday life is to be taken as an area where "the most important things" happen: it is a place where people live, where traces of history and memories are seen, where future is created, and where people will die regardless of socio-economic circumstances (Spasić 2004, 14). The goal was, using in-depth interview, to make an attempt to bring the moment of everyday life into a scientific observation about identity sustainability of Serbs and national minorities in border municipalities of Eastern and South-eastern Serbia, and to do this not by contemplating on everyday life, but by retelling which comes from the everyday life. In this paper, the social reality is seen "from above", from the perspective of a conversation between a respondent and a researcher, with a goal to reach deeper understanding of customary practices from the perspective of everyday life of a family in the village of Radovnica – the family of Žarko Jovanović, his thoughts, feelings, and behavior related to important questions about his everyday life and the life of his family. Due to heavy snow, the village was without electricity and telephone connections, the road was impassable, so it was impossible to carry out the interview as firstly planed on December 13, 2011 (when it was planned to observe Sirovar in Radovnica). It was conducted on a rescheduled date in the family house of Žarko Jovanović, which is located in the center of the village of Radovnica, not far from an elementary school and a village church; it happened on February 26, 2012, an important date in the Serbian customary calendar – Poklade (carnival). The interview was conducted by Dragan Todorović and Danijela Zdravković in an ambient of worm family atmosphere, filled with unhidden hospitality and optimism. The visit and conversation took almost five hours (from 5:15 p.m. until 9:45 p.m.); the intent of the researchers was to carry out the interview in two parts: filming the ritual of kalaveštica in the open, in the garden of the family house, and then to continue the interview about impressions and

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memories of cultivating the observed customs both in the past and present days. His spouse, Ljubinka Jovanović had a role of a hostess, and she participated in preparations and conduction of the ritual, as well as in the interview from the beginning till the end.

The choice of people for this interview, family members of Žarko Jovanović, was imposed on us as a logical one, since it resulted from the previously made contacts with people in Radovnica and in Niš during the field research (village teacher Tijana Stojney, several locals and two students of the Faculty of sports and sports education in Niš, who come from Radovnica, but study in Niš). Namely, last year (2011), one of the authors of this paper (Danijela Zdravković) went on the field with a task to examine the socio-de-mographic characteristics and life style of the locals in the border village of Radovnica (Tasić & Zdravković 2012). Then she found herself in the mountain village of Radovnica in Trgovište municipality for the first time, and met locals who were open for cooperation and ready to participate in the research, offering wholehearted help, suggesting a visit to some important sights in the village, and at the same time pointing to possible data sources and people who can testify about important events in this area. All mentioned sources agreed in one thing: that Žarko Jovanović falls into a group of locals – respected hosts, with doubtlessly clear visions for the future, but also with deep concern for preserving the tradition, as well as for significance and importance of customary practices for nourishing family relationships, cohesion, and solidarity within neighborhood and the village of Radovnica. Especially because it is possible to observe this example through the prism of a modern sociological principle: that in modern conditions of national aculturalization, border regions become preservers of national treasure and a bulwark of national culture, because they are archaic in comparison to highly urban centers where a strong influence of Anglophone culture is manifested.

#### **About Radovnica**

The village of Radovnica is a rural settlement of a dispersed type; it belongs to the municipality of Trgovište, which is located on the far South-East of the Republic of Serbia, covering the area of 370km,² along the Serbia-Macedonia border, bordering also municipalities of Bosilegrad, Vranje, and Bujanovac. This village belongs to the Pčinja District. It is situated at 950-1400m above sea level, on the valley banks of the Tripušnica River, which is a right tributary to the Pčinja River, 17km Southeast from Trgovište, and 63 km from the town of Vranje. The terrain configuration is typically rural and mountainous; the mountainous area is surrounded by mountains and plateaus, such as: Bele Vode, Dukat, Čupino brdo, Kozjak, etc.

According to tradition, the name of the village comes from a male personal name – Radovan, who was the first inhabitant of the village. It is an old settlement, which is confirmed by found remains of pervious settlements (Roman coins, church remains...). In the past, it was mentioned as a village on the well-known Kyustendil caravan route. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was settled by older families from Kriva Palanka, and from around Preševo and Kumanovo. Only Serbs live in the village. The largest hamlet is Trn with 30

houses, and the largest mahalas (T.N. – "mahala" is a residential quarter of a rural or urban settlement) are Magura (12 houses), Kostinci (10 houses), and Bazovica (8 houses). The village has always been in the same place, and it covers  $10 \text{km}^2 - 10 \text{km}$  wide and 10 km long. The average annual temperature in the village is  $10^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

### **Carnival in Tradition**

Every nation has its customs, and these are quite different, but the best seen difference lies in getting acquainted with circumstances in which they have been created, revived, and observed by wider community. No matter how different they may be, folk customs are always connoted by esthetic, scenic, verbal, and nonverbal characteristics, because people have been creating and nurturing it for centuries, filled with emotions and cultural charge. Serbian customs are probably interesting and amusing to other people, both because of differences and similarities that correspond to their own customs.

Serbian customs are insufficiently familiar to modern Serbs. Bearing in mind that since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century culture is seen as a model of material and spiritual adaptation, which a society accepts as a traditional way of solving problems, and that knowing other peoples' customs or exchange of riches of folk traditions is seen as an advantage and is desired in the path of bringing people closer in the time of globalization, an example from the Serbian calendar of customs, known as *Poklade*, which is celebrated on the 10<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> day of February every year.

Since the dawn of time American and European nations have used pagan rituals and customs to celebrate the end of winter and the beginning of spring, glorifying the cult of the Sun. In carnival¹ atmosphere people turn to unrestrained indulgence in food, drinking, and celebrations wearing masks, contrary to everyday living under strict moral norms equally in Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions.²

In France and countries under French influence, Shrove Tuesday is known as Fat Tuesday (Mardi Gras). In Anglo-Saxon countries this day is also called Pancake Day, probably because on that day the remaining eggs were used to make pancakes before fast. In Croatia, the carnival is also called "mesopust" (T.N. – from *meso*, meaning "meat", and *pustiti* meaning "abstain"). The carnival in Russia is celebrated as Maslenica (Marković 2011). Most carnival traditions include ceremonial *straw dolls burning*, which can have different symbolic meanings.

Today, the carnival is usually related to the beginning of Lens fasting before Easter. The last week before Lent is called "bela nedelja" (White Week), and the last day of this week is called "bele" (white) or "sirene" (of cheese) pok-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The word "carnival" comes from the Latin expression carne vale – "farewell to meat", which means that these are last days before the fast, when one can still eat meat. Today some of the most famous carnivals are those in Rio (Brazil) and in Venice (Italia).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The precise date of Bele poklade (White carnial) depends on Easter, which is a moveable feast and it follows the Church calendar, falling on different dates in the Orthodox and Catholic Church. Bele poklade are always on Sunday among Orthodox Christians.

lade (Velike poklade, Završne poklade, Proštene poklade, Proćke, Pročka, Mesopust, Siropust). Usually, these are days full of songs, jokes, and happiness, but they also have a pronounced chthonic character. The day begins with taking food and burning candles in a graveyard, food that is white in color is placed on graves of people who died since the previous carnival, incense is burned and the words are spoken: "everything white today, on this day, let it be seen by all my beloved..." Afterwards, a feast is prepared at homes, with many fatty foods, especially delicatessen made of dairy products. On Clean Monday housewives orderly clean all dishes from any fat and throw away any fatty food; in this way the seven weeks long fast begins.

Here is a description of carnival (poklade) in the encyclopedic dictionary "Slavic Mythology":

"POKLADE – among South Slavs, the last day or the whole week before a —» fasting season of several days or several weeks; it is celebrated in a cheerful and loud way, with abundance of fat food (Serbian poklade, Croatian: and Slovenian: fašnik, Slovenian: pust, Bulgarian: заговезни, Macedonian: сирийца). In folk tradition the most celebrated day is the one before Great or Easter Fast. Bele poklade, Velike poklade, Sirne poklade, Macedonian Велики поклади, Проштени поклади, Прачка, see also Serbian: Mete poklade, Bulgrarian: Мети заговезни 'the last day when fatty foods can be eaten (the week before Lent)'. Among Balkan Slavs, characteristic customs for the last day before Lent are those related to visiting relatives (forgiving sins and offences), to buring -> fires (torches, arrows), masquerade and other games, -> divination (about life and death, yields), to exorcism against —»diseases, —> unclean

forces, etc., also to Serbian lamkapa, Macedonian амкање, Bulgarian ламкане, хамкане – a custom with —» an egg (piece of cake, halva, coal) that hangs on a thread, which participants have to

catch with their teeth (Tolstoj and Radenković 2001).

In the afternoon, so called *oproštajno večernje* ("forgiving evening service") is served in Orthodox churches, when believers, first in churches, then in their houses, ask for and give forgiveness for previously made insults, negligence, defamation, and feuds, so that they could start Great Lent with a "pure soul".

"Sons and daughters with their families visit their parents, bringing them a bottle of liquor and other gifts. A son-in-law necessarily visits his parents-in-law, best man, and a bridesman, and asks for procka (T.N. – he asks if he has a pass) so that he could decently start fasting. When he enters a house, he kisses a hand of his father-in-law and says: 'Forgive me, grandpa', and his father-in-law replies: 'You are forgiven, son'."

(http://www.pravoslavlje.net/index.php)

During this period, a special attention is given to protection from negative influences of witches, so there was a practice of smearing oneself with

garlic and lighting protective fires ("olalije", "oratnice", "priveg") (Đorđević 1985).

Lighting and jumping over fire is kept in local traditions under several similar names: karaveštica, karavesnica, kalavešnica, krljaveštica, krlaštica.<sup>3</sup> Momčilo Zlatanović (1998) in his Dictionary of South Serbia Speech defines these as follows:

"**καραβέштица** *f* jumping over fire on Bele poklade; a carnival game (Vranje)."

Bonfires were made of straw, hay or old rags, often straw dolls in a shape of a witch were also made.<sup>4</sup> Almost every house had its own bonfire or it was made at the end of a village, on a crossroad, on a hill, but it was necessarily followed by dancing and jumping over the fire.<sup>5</sup>

The celebrations were made more festive by noisy groups of children dressed in unusual costumes and masks; playing music and dancing, shouting and yelling along with music of the tamburas, accordions, frulas, and bagpipes, they entered gardens of locals and expected gifts (fruits, confectioneries, dried prunes, roasted squash, bacon, dried meat, coins, eggs, etc.). The masked procession used to be accompanied by "mečkari" ("bear ta-mers"), men painted with soot and dressed in torn clothing or covered with hide (Marjanović 2003-2004, 2005).

Ceremonial procession used to be a part of widely accepted religious behavior of Serbs. Facing unpredictable natural forces and mythological creatures, peasants used different magical practices, dresses, songs, and dances in attempt to tame them and bring them on their side or, on the other hand, to drive them away from their arable land, orchards, and meadows in order to secure harvesting crops in the summer (Vlahović 1999).

## KALAVEŠNICE IN RADOVNICA

#### How were the customs observed?

Building fire on "Bele poklade" (or Kalavešnice, as it is called here) is a long tradition. While jumping over burning piles of straw and hay in a field, a garden or anywhere else on a property, household members would shout as loud as possible: "The bigger the voice, the bigger the crop"! An unwritten rule was to form three consecutive burning piles, which were jumped over in both directions (upwards and downwards) without stopping.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Actions which are used to drive away ("otkarati") witches.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Today, in the region around Niš, children come with their parents to jump over fire, they are masked and they have hand-made dressed dolls that resample witches. When the fire burns out, they may smear soot on their faces, believing that everything evil was expelled by this burning (http://www.juznevesti.com/Drushtvo/Karavestice-u-Gornjem-Medjurovu-video\_.sr.html).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> There used to be a belief that places from which these fires can be seen won't be struck by hail during the summer.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Magical words were used to ensure a good harvest in the coming season.

The whole week before Lent – "Pročke" – people would visit their relatives and close family members (godparents, parents-in-law) and ask for forgiveness for any possible negligence during the previous year. A younger person would humbly address an older one, because the young could, intentionally or accidentally, due to their inexperience, make mistake in their behavior toward the elderly.

The beginning of Lent marked the beginning of planting season in fields, plowing and sowing agricultural crops; winter was sent off, and the arrival of spring was celebrated. It was in consciousness of peasants that proper magical rituals were to protect crop yield from lightning, hail, drought or flood; and this was done by offering sacrifice to higher forces, which was represented by making ritual bonfires. Omitting any of the prescribed actions was out of the question, because that could challenge the success of harvesting plenty of fruits, vegetables and other products.

Straw is not burnt as it used to be (there is not much of it in households, because there is less livestock for which it is used as a floor covering), hay is used instead. Straw used to burn well and the flame was bigger, while the fire of burning hay produces thick smoke. Nevertheless, peasants do not give up the old tradition and they keep them alive in somewhat changed settings. It may happen that children and youngsters scorch their hair and eyebrows, and they would additionally change their appearance by smearing soot on their faces. Still strong elderly people used to leave unbridled joy to youngsters, and when the fire died away they used to cross it at least three times in both directions while saying appropriate words and sentences. In a case of death of a family member during the previous year, mourners did not observe these customs, nor did they organize it in front of their houses.

Masquerade and carnival in Radovnica have never been organized on Bele poklade, but on another day — *Sirovare*, a holiday that is also traditionally organized in this region, but at different time, at the end of January. From an early twilight until late evening hours, a group of ten younger people visits households in the village and collects gifts, such as wool, meat, bacon, apples, brandy or money. They used to wear traditional clothes (worn clothing, "šajkača", and "brič"-trousers) and whirl "treskataljke" (T.N. — a type of ratchet), a handmade wooden instrument that produces unbearable noise, which purpose was, among other things, to drive away evil forces and to reduce their actions. No masks were worn on this occasion.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Those who do not have hay take *dried fern* and burn it in their yards.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Modern generations do not attach importance to traditional beliefs when observing the customs, but they do it mostly in order to preserve tradition. However, Ljubinka, Žarko's wife, recalls words of her parents: "If a child had an allergy on his or her face, ash from the ritual bonfire would be smeared on it, which was kept in a special jar, as a medicine."

 $<sup>^{\</sup>rm 9}$  They also would not decorate eggs for Easter.

## What is done today?

In the late afternoon on February 26, hosts from Radovnica have been patiently standing in front of piles of hay in their gardens, formed over unmelted snow. Through fog, filled with light rain, the first fires have begun to spark from different locations, followed by din of excited people.

There was Žarko Jovanović, a respected host from Radovnica, waiting for us in front of the house, together with his wife Ljubinka (1959) and the youngest child from a neighbor's house.

Žarko Jovanović, an Orthodox Serb, was born on May 1, 1960 to father Uroš (1933-2009) and mother Rajna (1931) in Radovnica, in the mahala of Kočinci. He finished elementary school also in Radovnica, as a pupil who had to walk a long way to go to school, and then a secondary school of mechanical engineering "V.V. Vujo" in Vranje. He married Ljubinka (1959) from Trgovište on August 3, 1982, and he has three sons, Saša (1984), Dragan (1985), and Marko (1992). Žarko has a harmonious relationship with his family, which, beside his wife and children, is consisted of his mother Rajna and daughter-inlaw Suzana (1987), wife of his eldest son Saša. In 1986, the Jovanovićs moved from their old house in the mahala of Kočinci (6km from the center of Radovnica) into their new family house, made of solid materials, with backyard and additional buildings for keeping poultry and livestock, drying and storing forest fruits and fuel, and agricultural land. They keep only pigs, poultry, a dog, and a cat. They cultivate the land as they did before, and beside orchard (apples and plums), they grow vegetable crops (potato, pea, onion, beans...). In 2000, Žarko bought a house in Vranje, where two of his sons and his daughterin-law live now. The voungest son studies in Niš.

After he had finished high school (1980) and married (1982), Žarko found a job in a textile factory – JUMKO from Vranje – in a branch in Radovnica, where he still works as a precision machinist who maintains machines. His wife Ljubinka also used to work there until 2009 as a textile worker, but she receives welfare money now and is waiting for a process for obtaining a pensioner status to begin.

The Jovanovićs family is very mobile during the whole year, splitting their time between Radovnica, Vranje, and Niš. This mobility of the Jovanovićs indicates family solidarity, help, support, understanding, and cooperation when it comes to the questions of education, employment, working at factory and around the house, working the land, maintaining livestock, collecting forest fruits (mushrooms, blueberries, rose hips, wild thyme...), collecting wood for heating, and selling mushrooms, blueberries, and wood. This has provided solid financial income to the Jovanovićs as well as the possibility to intensify and spread their work and family activities, in accordance with visions of this respected and persistent host from the mountain village of Radovnica, who used benefits of symbiosis between locals of this border region and the nature.

We are acquainted with their family life by his wife Ljubinka, whose story has a recognizable character of idealization of the past in traditional life practice which is still cultivated today; she points out that her children have been included both in work and in everyday activities since they were very young, and that they have actively participated in traditional practices of this region. All members of the family are involved in work that is neither easy nor simple, but they still have time to rest, have fun, and socialize with neighbors and relatives; this is more common during winters, when there are no activities related to nature, except for selling fruits, vegetables, and wood. General conclusion of both Ljubinka and Žarko is that existence in Radovnica depends largely on one's own work and family solidarity in the house, in the field, in the factory, and in the village.

After cordial greetings, pointing his hand to the houses of his closer and farther neighbors (ph. 1, 2, 3, and 4), he advised us not to prolong the realization of activities for which we had come to this region, almost at the tripoint of Serbia, Bulgaria and Macedonia. The seven year old boy was the most impatient: he was spinning a sack made from a military tent sheet filled with hay. He went hastily into the orchard behind the house and spread dried grass in three equal piles on the snow that had been dug away. Knowingly, Zarko poured some gasoline in order to light fire more easily. Three bonfires kindled suddenly, and the Jovanovićs together with Nenad (ph. 5) started to jump skillfully over them; one of the authors of the paper joined them (ph. 6), as well as neighbors from the next door (ph. 7). There was shouting all the time: "The bigger the voice, the bigger the crop"!

As soon as the last ember from the three hay piles died out Žarko painted Nenad's face with soot and took him to a facility next to the main house. There was a peeled boiled egg hanging on a long thread (in the past, there used to be a chain hanging from the ceiling above a hearth). The boy's task was to "bark" at the egg ("woof, woof, woof"), which swung to left and right, and to try to bite it without using hands (ph. 8). Žarko remembered his childhood when seven or eight children had been clumsily pushing around the chain wanting to catch the swinging egg in their teeth, and to eat it as a reward. Proving that this was not his first time, Nenad ably fulfilled his task in a short time, which was followed by loud approval and laughter of everyone present.

We moved to the living room of the Jovanovićs, where we were joined by Žarko's cousin, Slave Dodić (1958) and his wife Stojka Dodić (1956) (ph. 9). We continued the conversation about the meaning that these rituals had had for the previous generations in Radovnica. A dish that was necessarily prepared used to be "banica", a special egg pie; 10 cheese, bacon and sliced dried meat were also served (poultry and livestock were not slaughtered for this occasion).

A gest whose presence was required was a son-in-law, who expected "forgiveness" from his parents-in-law for any possible feuds since the previous holiday. He used to bring a box of sugar cubes as a gift, and if he behaved well

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Laughing a bit, Stojka told us that, when she was a child, her parents had used to wake her up during the night, giving her the last chance to "oblažiti" (eat fatty food, remaining from the daily feast). Already in the morning, they threw the remaining food to animals, and dishes were washed in warm water. They fasted until Easter.

during the year, his mother-in-law would give him "ribica"<sup>11</sup>, the best part of pork shoulder. Generally, during the whole week, youn-ger people visited older ones, but never vice versa: even if there were no reasons for asking for "forgiveness", these meetings would strengthen family and marital moral and would remind them to act properly.<sup>12</sup>

On that day they would not miss to visit graves in the village cemetery, just after the noon ("lunch is brought to the deceased", older people used to say). Everything that had been on the dinner table the previous evening was offered to ascendants along with a lit candle. Attendance of a priest is not obligatory. Generally, people do not bind these customs to the official Church, they do not go to church on *Poklade*, but neither is the Church interested in what its parishioners do before Lent.<sup>13</sup> The day after, and only on that day – Clean Monday, the first day of seven-day refraining from eating fatty foods, no matter how far they went in overeating the day before, the largest number of locals would observe a strict "water only" fast: they would not take any calories in their organism, except for water. This custom is still preserved today, although there are far fewer people who would undertake a precept of a seven days refraining than there used to be.<sup>14</sup> Our interlocutors confirm that there is no music, and that incantation and divination are also not practiced by young girls or elderly women.

Žarko and Ljubinka asked us to move to another room, where a set table awaited us with homemade foods which people from Radovnica usually offer to their guests on this day (ph. 10). Beside unavoidable "banica" and boiled eggs, we were offered peppers stuffed with cow's-milk cheese, peppers boiled in oil, potato salad, pressed sheep's-milk cheese, and soured cow's milk. There is a separate plate with sliced dried bacon, dries meat and čvarci (T.N. – a type of pork rinds), and there was a roasted lamb in a metal sheet pan. Žarko, as an experienced hunter, was proud of a marinated rabbit caught in the local mountains, and he insisted that we tried it. We were offered homemade brandy at the beginning and homemade wine at the end of the dinner.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> When a son-in-law used to return home from the visit to his parents-in-law, he would certainly be asked: "Son, did grandma give you 'ribica'?"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Ljubinka tells us: "There, my sister called me a few days ago and asked me why I hadn't gone, with Žarko, to our parents; Father had expected us to come for 'forgiveness'. I told her that I hadn't sinned, and that their son-in-law could go if he had: as far as I knew, he hadn't sinned also. 'And how would you know?' – she asked in return".

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> There is an Orthodox church with a priest in Radovnica. However, the local do not visit it when they go to the cemetery, when they take foods and drinks as gifts to the dead. Many of them are more rely more on experience of their elder relatives and neighbors, who bestow their knowledge on them, which they had inherited from their old ones.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Žarko explains his point of view: "Look, people used to prepare some lens, beans, soups in the past, they didn't have so much food as we have today. Meat from a pig that was slaughter during the year used to be kept in storage for important days of the year: Christmas, Easter, Slava. So they used to eat nonfat meals on any other day. It is not like that today: every household slaughters a pig or two, weighing up to ten kilos, and they eat meat every day. So it is normal that they cannot keep fasting for forty days!"

### RELIGION, RELIGIOUS AND FOLK CUSTOMS ON THE BORDER

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# **PHOTOGRAPHS**

Ph. 1: Burning fires in Radovnica households



Ph. 2: Burning fires in Radovnica households



Ph. 3: Burning fires in Radovnica households



Ph. 4: Burning fires in Radovnica households



Ph. 5: Members of the Jovanović family jump over the fire



Ph. 6: The author joins in the jumping over the fire



Ph. 7: People jump over the fire in the neighboring backyard



Ph. 8: Nenad Tončić "barks" at an egg



Ph. 9: Interviewees: Slave and Stojka Dodić, Ljubinka and Žarko Jovanović



Ph. 10: Holiday meal

