

EASTER TRADITIONS AMONG SLOVENES IN ITALY (NATISONE VALLEY)

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Abstract: The paper discusses some Easter traditions of Slovenes living in the Natisone Valley in Italy. The research is based on the authors' field data, ethnographic literature, and archival materials. Easter practices and vocabulary related to the celebration of Easter are analyzed in this paper. The paper covers customs that have not been previously described in the scientific literature or those that have had little attention devoted to them and have remained largely unexplored until now. On the one hand, in the vocabulary of the Slovenian dialect of the Natisone Valley, numerous borrowings from Romance (Italian and Friulian) languages are found, mainly in the field of ritual foods. On the other hand, Slovenian lexemes also penetrate into the Romance languages. The authors use data from neighboring Slovenian dialects in order to demonstrate the broader typological perspective of the study. The paper ends with excerpts from the narratives of informants describing the celebration of Easter, which are published with English translations. The detailing of a questionnaire related to Easter among Slovenes in Italy is a future research perspective.

Keywords: border area, Easter, festive food, Italian language, Natisone Valley, Slovenian language, traditional culture

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, the authors examine some customs related to the celebration of Easter among Slovenes living in the Natisone Valley, a region on the Romance-Slavic border. The description of traditional practices that have not been previously analyzed in scientific literature and the vocabulary related to Easter are the central focus of this paper.

The data for this paper was collected by the authors in 2017 and 2018 by means of field research carried out among Slovenes living in the province of Udine (Italy) (Pilipenko & Iasinskaia 2018). Information from ethnographic literature, archival materials from the index cards of the *Slovenian Linguistic Atlas*¹ (SLA), and from lexicographic sources, both Slovenian and partially Italian, were further added to field data. The characteristic features of the Slovenes living in the Natisone Valley in the province of Udine are their relatively longer habitation in Italy and longer exposure to linguistic and cultural influences from Romance cultures, which are in contrast with the characteristics of Slovenes in the more southern regions of Gorizia and Trieste (the Italian influence on this dialect is discussed in Skubic 1997; Zuljan Kumar 2003).

EASTER EVE

In the system of the traditional Catholic calendar, Easter is not given as much importance as Christmas. However, it is the second most important point of the annual cycle of holidays.

Slovenes in Italy refer to the week before Easter as *velik teden* ('great week', Sl. dial.² *velik tiedan*), the Sunday before Easter as *oljčnica*³ (Sl. dial. *ojčinca* in Mersino; according to SLA, Sl. dial. *cvietna nedeja*), and Easter as *velika noč* ('great night', Sl. dial. *velika nuoč/nuoc*; in the materials of SLA we found *velika noc* (San Pietro al Natisone, Montemaggiore, Pulfero), *velika nuoič* (Mersino)). In the Holy Week, Slovenes went to church for services (Sl. dial. *andohti* 'mass'). In the regions of Gorizia, Kras, and Slavia Friulana, bouquets (Sl. *oljke*, in our field data Sl. dial. *ojke*) consisting of olive twigs were blessed on the Sunday before Easter. Additionally, in the village of Tercimonte, a twig of viburnum was blessed and subsequently used to drive cattle to the pastures. In the village of Cergneu, viburnum twigs were carried to church and then kept at home as talismans against witches. People also carried them to the fields as a protection against poisonous snakes (Kuret 1989 [1965]: 142). These twigs were also kept at home and burned during hail or thunderstorms with an intention of "driving away the thunder" (Sl. dial. *da peržené tuono*).⁴ In the Canal Valley,

people referred to bouquets blessed on the Sunday before Easter as *prajtelj*. Such bouquets consisted of willow twigs decorated with needles, flowers, and potatoes and were placed in the fields on long sticks, where they stood until the end of the harvest as a sign of blessing.

From Great Thursday (Sl. dial. *velik četarták*) to Great Saturday (Sl. dial. *velika sabota*), the bells in the churches did not ring (they rang for the last time when the priest sang “Gloria” in front of the altar). Instead, special rattles, which were boards with a wooden bill, were used (*sablívka, klepetawka, klepetec, crlevka, škrtálca, štrgótec, škrtáča, brlínka, drečála, klapotála* (Kuret 1989 [1965]: 152)). Children ran around with rattles and made noises and sounds. Niko Kuret describes the tradition among Slovenes and Italians in Trieste as follows: a “God’s coffin” (*Božij grob*)⁵ is laid down on the roads, and people then walk door-to-door carrying it (or it is put in a closet at home, like a Christmas nativity scene) (ibid.: 154). There is no such custom in Slavia Friulana. Instead, on the Friday of the Holy Week (Sl. dial. *velik petak*), a procession (Sl. dial. *precesija*) called ‘*Križeva pot*’ (‘the way of the Cross’, Via Dolorosa) took place. All agricultural work was stopped, and cattle were confined to the barns (ibid.: 168). The following custom was attested in the Natisone Valley: on Good Friday, children ran and dragged hearth chains along the road to clean them from soot (in older times, there used to be hearths in houses; food was cooked in boilers hanging on a chain over the hearth). This custom of dragging chains (Sl. dial. *katenjáč*) is also known to be prevalent in mainland Slovenia (in Posočje), as mentioned by Niko Kuret (ibid.: 169). This action is referred to as *kietne vlec* ‘to drag chains’ or *očedit kietne* ‘to clean chains’ in the Slovenian dialect of the Natisone Valley (cf. *kietna* (Špehonja 2010: 79)). It should be noted that the word *kietna* is borrowed from the Romance languages (It. *catena* ‘chain’).

BLESSING OF THE FIRE AND WATER

On Holy Saturday in the Natisone Valley, the blessing of the fire was performed on the threshold of the church (Sl. dial. *žéynjen wóyinj* ‘blessed fire’) – a common practice in Italian towns, such as Florence (Krasnovskaia 1977: 24–25). Our informants recalled their childhood experiences of waiting for the blessed fire to be lit and competing for being the first to take it, after which they would carry it home on a lit and smoldering wood tinder fungus that would be broken into pieces and distributed to the owners, who would then fan the fire again and heat their furnaces with it. To infuse it with flavor, juniper was added to the blessed fire on a smoldering mushroom. The fire was also carried to the fields, which were “baptized” with it while asking for God’s blessing (Kuret

1989 [1965]: 183). This custom is widespread throughout Slovenia. A practice of blessing the water on Holy Saturday is also prevalent. In Slavia Friulana (Tercimonte), children washed their feet when the bells started ringing again after three days (ibid.: 190).

EASTER FOOD

A particular importance is given to the preparation of special festive food in Easter traditions. According to the testimonies of our informants, the fire blessed on Holy Saturday was often used for cooking this food. The informants mentioned painted eggs (Sl. *pirhi*) (according to the SLA archive: *pofarbane jajca* (San Pietro al Natisone), *jaica ofarbane* (Mersino), *iaici ofarbane* (Montemaggiore), *jaica kolorane* (Pulfero)); homemade bread, or sweet pastry rolls *gubana* (*gubana*, *gubanca* (Špehonja 2010: 61)) as examples of Easter food. This pastry is called *hubanca* in the SLA archive. In Lusevera (Torre Valley dialect), *pačča* is found instead of this (cf. *pačča*, *pagačča*) (Spinozzi Monai 2009: 570). The term *pugačča* from the Natisone Valley dialect is translated as *pane* 'bread' in Italian and as *focaccia* (Špehonja 2010: 203)). Easter bread is also known as *fujaca*/*fujačča* (ibid.: 52). In the Brda region (Gorizia community), *fulje/fuje*, pieces of dough with sweet seasonings, were cooked in water from boiled ham (*kuhan pršut*). Jelly (*žowca*) and wine were also mentioned to be festive dishes by the informants.

To refer to Easter bread, the informants use four lexemes that often function as synonyms – *puyačča*, *fujaca*/*fujačča*, *yubanca* – and descriptive terms in their speech *ta obiejen kruh* ('richly-oiled bread'). The following utterances may indicate synonymy: '*an su kuril tu forne, zok su miel nardit yubanco, su miel narest fujacu*' ("and they heated the furnace, because they had to make *gubanca*, they had to make *fujaca*") (Informant G., San Pietro al Natisone, recorded in 2017); '*allora, tu cajno se j stavila yubanca, puyačča, puyačča smo klical*' ("so, they put *gubanca*, *pogačča*, in the basket, we called it *pogačča*") (Informant C., San Pietro al Natisone, recorded in 2017).⁶ In addition, the synonymy of lexemes is revealed in the SLA materials: in settlements on the territory of the Natisone Valley we find the lexeme *hubanca*, whereas in the dialects of the Torre Valley, its counterpart is *pačča* (Sl. *pogačča*). The term *fujačča* is also attested in the dictionary of the Natisone Valley dialect (Špehonja 2010: 52). In the J. Baudouin de Courtenay dictionary, there is an indication of the Friulian origin of the *fujace* lexeme near the term *pačča* (Spinozzi Monai 2009: 570). In the Slovenian-Friulian dictionary, the counterpart to the Friulian *fuiace* is *pogačča* (Erat 2008: 350). In the Friuli region, the ancient origin of *focaccia*

pastries (Friul. *fuiace*), which are very common during Easter, is mentioned (Perusini 1957: 146); the Friulians make them from yeast dough, and they have a round shape. In Friulian, the lexeme *gubana* is known; it means ‘puff pastry with filling’. *Gubana* is used during Easter as well as on other holidays⁷ and is known to be found among Slovenes in the Natisone Valley (ibid.). In the dictionary of the Friulian language, the meaning of *gubane* is “a kind of puff pastry with grapes and nuts” (Erat 2008: 375), while there are no indications of its ceremonial character. It is obvious that the term *gubana* in Friulian is a loan from the Slovenian language. The lexemes *gibanica* and *gubanica* are common in Slovenian; they are semantically related to the verbs *gibati*, *upogibati* ‘to bend’ and *gubati* ‘to wrinkle’ (Snoj 2015 [1997]), cf. also **gɔbanica* in Trubachev (1980: 187).⁸ It is noteworthy that *pogača* and *fujaca/fujača* have a Romance origin from the Latin *focus* ‘hearth, fire’ (Snoj 2015 [1997]). However, they are not evenly distributed in Slavic languages. If the term *pogača* is known in Russian, Bulgarian, and Serbian dialects, it is likely to be borrowed before the seventh century (Baš 2004: 433), while *fujaca/fujača* is a local term on the Friulian-Slovenian borderland.

The pastries were made in the form of a pigeon (Sl. dial. *γolobica*), which was baked from dough, and an egg (Sl. dial. *icé*) was placed in the head⁹ (occasionally, a nut was added there), a blessed olive twig (Sl. dial. *ójka žéynjena*) was placed in the beak, and the eyes were made of black pepper. A pastry named *menih* (‘monk’) was also mentioned. It is known in the regions of Primorska and Notranjska in Slovenia (SSKJ 2014), and an egg or an eggshell from blessed eggs was also known to be put in it. The number of pastry figures that were made was based on the number of children in the house – one pastry for each child. Easter pigeon (It. *colomba di Pasqua, colombina*) is a widespread type of pastry in northern Italy, in particular, in Friuli.¹⁰ No evidence of it was found in the materials that N. Kuret collected among Slovenes, while the data from Friulian settlements confirms that Easter pigeons made from sweet yeast dough and having a colored egg placed in the center to represent its head are fairly common (Perusini 1957: 144–146; Krasnovskaia 1977: 25). In Carnia, such pastries with Easter eggs are given to children. At the same time, the distribution of such pastries depends on the size and remoteness of the settlement – they are unheard of in small villages, whereas in large settlements they are associated with commercial bakery firms from the regions of Veneto and Lombardy. The Slovenes in the Natisone Valley are familiar with these pastries (Perusini 1957: 145). In our field data, the Slovene lexeme *γolobica* is found to be ubiquitous. It would be logical to expect the influence of the neighboring Romance languages here. In order to clarify this issue, additional research should be conducted by means of field study. It is noteworthy that in the Torre Valley dialect, as well

as in the materials of J. Baudouin de Courtenay, along with *galob* (Spinozzi Monai 2009: 529), the original lexeme for referring to the pigeon, there is also a Romance loan of *kolomba* (ibid.: 543), which could theoretically contribute to the penetration of borrowing in the dialects of Slovenes in Italy. In *Nediško-Italian Dictionary* (Špehonja 2010: 57), only the Slavic root for “pigeon” is attested: *golob, golobičica, golobica* – perhaps the stability of the Slavic name for the Easter pastry is due to the similarity of sounds in the Romance languages (cf. more in Trubachev 1979: 215–217).

BLESSING OF EASTER FOOD

The Easter items were put in a basket and carried to the church to be blessed. The basket of items blessed at Easter was called *žéyanca* (from Sl. *žegnati* ‘to consecrate’, ‘to bless’), and the items blessed at Easter were also called *žeganca* (Špehonja 2010: 319), a term sometimes used to denote bread baked at Easter. The word *cajna* used to refer to the basket in which the items were blessed is also attested (see also Špehonja 2010: 29), cf. It. *zaino* ‘basket’, ‘bag’. Baked goods, bran, flour, and salt were put in the basket. Sometimes the cattle were given the leftovers of the blessed food that was meant for people. For example, a piece of bread blessed at Easter was given to a cow to facilitate the birthing of her calf. The basket was covered with a beautiful tablecloth (Sl. dial. *tavajuč*). In *Vocabolario Nediško-Italiano* (ibid.: 266) we find it as *tovajuč* with a mark that it is borrowed from Friulian. In the dictionary of J. Baudouin de Courtenay, we also find a reference to the Friulian origin (*tavajuz*) for the lexeme *tauajuč* in the Torre Valley dialect (Spinozzi Monai 2009: 603).

These interesting customs related to the Easter basket were recorded during our stay in the Natisone Valley in 2017. According to one of our informants from Mersino, for girls getting married, in the first year of marriage, the mother collects an Easter basket for her daughter, in which, in addition to festive food, a plate, a glass, a spoon, a fork, and a knife are placed. An elegant tablecloth is used to cover this arrangement. The tradition of preparing such a basket for a daughter is called “The Holy Spirit” (Sl. *sveti duh*). A prayer is read along with this, in which it is said, “May the Holy Spirit remain forever with you, in your house.” This was done with the belief that it would ensure no shortage of any commodities in the house. The daughter uses this cutlery received as a gift in the household. At Easter, they eat food from this blessed Easter basket.

Our informants also mentioned games involving colored eggs being practiced at Easter. For example, a coin is thrown into an egg placed vertically such that the coin should get stuck in the egg. The person accomplishing this takes the

egg for him/herself. The shells of the blessed Easter eggs are placed around the house with the belief that they would prevent wild animals from entering.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the Easter customs of the Slovenes of the Natisone Valley and the vocabulary associated with them are examples of Slavic-Romance interaction in the border region of interest. Our fieldwork data significantly complements the ethnographic information and linguistic observations obtained from this part of the Slavic world, which is located on the border of cultures. In the Slovenian language of the Natisone Valley, there is a large number of Romance loanwords (in particular, the ones used to denote pastries as Easter culinary products). However, there might be a linguistic influence in the opposite direction as well. The example of the lexeme *gubana* in the Friulian language confirms this. Some phenomena resulting from the influence of Romance cultures are unheard of in the rest of the Slovenian territory (e.g., Easter pastries referred to using the same word as that for “pigeon”). In the future, the authors plan to use a detailed questionnaire to identify the features of Easter rites in other areas of the Slovenian-Italian border, which will differentiate the vocabulary and ritual practices depending on the region of residence of the Slovenes.

In conclusion, we present some transcribed recordings in the Natisone Valley dialect, which were obtained from informants describing Easter traditions. Slovenian texts are given with an English translation in a simplified orthography that is close to the standard Slovenian language. They facilitate the understanding of the features of the narrative structure, phonetic, lexical, and morphological phenomena, as well as the Romance influence and the impact of the standard Slovenian language. The narratives were recorded from informant I.T. in the village of Tercimonte in June 2018.

Za veliko nuoc je blo puno reči, recimo. Allora, na velik pétak, kar za nas otroké velik petak, tist petak pred veliko nocjó, ne. Allora, tist teenčas ne zvonije, ja. Je blo vse povezano no malo z viero, zak judjé so bli zaries, so verval... Na velik petak se nije smielo zvonit, mi smo miel sablúke, an klepetauke, no. Klepetauke so ble pa, je bla na daská, an je miela no ročico ta zdola, yo na vrh je blo no kladvo, an s tisten kladvan se je tuklo. Tole je blo na posebno zvičer, kar je bla Ave Marija.

There were a lot of things at Easter, let's say. On Good Friday, for us children, Good Friday, this is the Friday before Great Saturday. Then

they didn't ring the bells. Everything was connected with faith because people really had faith... On Good Friday, as it was not permitted to ring the bells, we had rattles. A rattle was a board with a handle at the bottom and a hammer at the top, and they knocked with this hammer, especially in the evening when Ave Maria was sung.

Potle je bla navada tud za kietne ulec, no, ylih tako na velik petak smo kietne wlekl, kietne, ma, verige po slovensko. Tiste ma kere kietne? Ankrat so ble oynišča, an tu oynišče je bla na kietna, ki je miela rinke buj debele, an na tu se je obieslo lonác al pa rinkón smo pravli. An seveda tale kietna je bla vsa ukajená, no, an za očediet jo je bla navada parpet tole kietno cje za konác varcé al pa cje štrink smo yworil mi, no, an wlačét. Tekrat ni blo cieste, ašfalta. So ble stazé s kokulát, so s kámanjan narette. An ta po telin kukulat, de se jo očedla tale kietna, an de se jo parnesló damú, da se je laščéla, no. Za velik petak. Zak za veliko nuoc so očedli vso hišo, an tisto je moralo bit čedno. Pero jas kar sam se rodiu jest, je blo malo oynišč, so ble ostale smo dvie oynišča. Pa ylih takuo, smo letál s telmi kietmi, je bla taka navada, da ylih takuo smo šli napriej s telmi kietmi, smo wlačél otroci.

Then there was the custom of dragging chains, and it was on Good Friday that we dragged chains, *veriga* in Slovenian. What kind of chains? Then there were hearths, and there was a chain in the hearth, it was thicker, and a boiler was hung on the chain, we said *rinkón*. And of course, this chain was completely blackened, and to clean it, the custom was to tie this chain by the end of the rope, we said *štrink*, and drag. Then there was no good asphalt road. There were paved roads made of stone. And they dragged along this paved road to clean this chain. And they brought it home and it was all shiny. As it was Good Friday, the whole house was cleaned at Easter, and everything had to be clean. But when I was born, there were few hearths, there were only two hearths left. And we ran with these chains, there was such a custom that we walked with these chains, we dragged them as children.

Na veliko sabotu, tu sabotu smo nešli žeynjavat, žeynanco smo yworil, se je klicalo. Je blo vse, kar se je nesló požeynjavat. Ponavad je bluo ta obiejen kruh, je biu sladki kruh, an yolobíce, so nardíl otrokán, an vse pečenó. Potle salam se je dielo, no malo solí, an nič druzya se mi zdi.

On Holy Saturday, we carried a basket with products to be blessed, we said *žeynanca*. There was everything that was carried to be blessed. Usually there was bread, richly oiled, there was sweet bread, and the pigeons were made with everything baked for the children. Then they added a sausage, a little salt, and nothing else, it seems to me.

Jajca so ble kuhane, s kajšnem listjem, o š čebulo. An tiste smo potle na veliko nuoc to nediejo zjutra ta parva rieč se j moralo pokust tiste. Pero je korlo čakati tekrat, je korlo počakati štier ure, korlo wstat pried, zak je moralo bit štier ure pried ku obhajilo. Maša je bla ob deset, zak smo morali wstat ob šest za an kwart, zak od šest an naprej se ne smielo nič take miet.

The eggs were boiled with some leaves or with onions. And then on Easter Sunday morning, the first thing you had to do was to eat them. But you had to wait for four hours, you had to get up in advance, because it was supposed to be done four hours before Communion. Mass was at ten, we had to get up at fifteen to six, because from six onwards we couldn't eat anything like that.

Ojčinca pravimo mi. Smo nosil ojko požeynjavat, an potle je bla cieló lieto dol domá suha, an potle se je nije smielo mai vrieč, ma nimar zažyat, ne. Se je zažyalo tu šporyetu. An tekrat je biw tu vsaki hiši an križ, an cje za križ dvie perá od ojke zmieran se j dielo, ne. Seveda so skuhal na veliko nuoc kiek bujšeya, nič posebneya... Za veliko nuoc je bla navada za tole, ta obiejen kruh, ki je bil sladki kruh, pečén domá, tele yolóbice. Pero za veliko nuoc ... ma ne yubanca, yubanco pa je blo za svet Ivan, zak par nas na Tarčmune je bil praznik, je biw yod. Zak svet Ivan je sveceník od cierkve tarčmunske.

We say *ojčinca*. We took a bouquet with olive twigs to bless, and then it was kept dry at home all year, and it could not be thrown out, but always only burned. It was burned in a furnace. And there was a crucifix in every house, and two twigs from that bouquet were always placed behind it. Of course, something better for Easter was cooked, but nothing special... At Easter there was a custom, it was richly oiled bread, it was sweet bread baked at home, these pigeons. But, on Easter ... not *yubanca*, *yubanca* was on St. Ivan, because we had a holiday in Tercimonte, a temple holiday. Because St. Ivan is the patron saint of the church in Tercimonte.

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NOTES

- ¹ The authors express their gratitude to Dr K. Kenda-Jež for the opportunity to get acquainted with the archive materials of the Fran Ramovš Institute of the Slovenian Language (Ljubljana, Slovenia).
- ² The following abbreviations are used to denote the languages: It. – Italian; Sl. – standard Slovenian language; Sl. dial. – Slovenian dialect of the Natisone Valley.
- ³ *Oljka* (Sl.) – an olive twig, blessed on this day. In Italy it is called the *day of olives* (It. *giorno delle ulive*) (Krasnovskaia 1977: 22).
- ⁴ The same custom is also attested in Italy (Krasnovskaia 1977: 24).
- ⁵ This refers to an object resembling a Christmas Nativity scene (cradle), only with an Easter theme: a scene with figures, in the center of which is the figure of the dead Christ.
- ⁶ Cf. a quote from the article in the Natisone Valley dialect about Easter customs by the local press: ‘*Blizu tega je bla fujača al’ obiejen kruh, ki so ga jedli na tešče*’ (“Nearby was *fujača* or richly oiled bread that was eaten on an empty stomach”) (see http://dom.it/na-solarjeh-delavnica-pirhu_laboratorio-per-imparare-a-fare-i-pirhi/ last accessed on 7 September 2022).
- ⁷ Although in Baš (2004: 141) we find that *gibanica* is a festive dish.
- ⁸ According to the data of the Etymological Dictionary of Slavic Languages (Trubachev 1980: 187), words derived from the verb **gobati* designating various types of pastries exist in Bulgarian, Macedonian, Slovenian, and Ukrainian languages.
- ⁹ Cf. the custom of baking whole eggs in Easter bread that is common among the Southern Slavs (Agapkina 2002: 149; Agapkina 2012: 421).
- ¹⁰ The custom of decorating the Easter bread with figurines, flowers, and birds is known mainly among the Eastern Slavs (Ukrainians, Belarusians, and in the southern provinces of Russia) and Southern Slavs (Bulgarians, Serbs) (Agapkina 2012: 421). The festive pastry in the form of a pigeon is also found in other Slavonic regions, in particular in Ukraine, where on the day of the Forty Martyrs, birds are baked (Gura 1997: 615).

PRIMARY SOURCES

Interviews recorded by Gleb Pilipenko and Maria Yasinskaya in Udine province, Italy, in 2017 and 2018.

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