

BREADS OF THE IMMORTAL

Serbia's particular wealth presents the bread preserved in the traditional culture of the Vlachs, the specific Romanophonic community that lives in the northeastern part of this Republic.

In its everyday use, the bread with the Vlachs is modest like everywhere else, but in sacral rituals it becomes the luxury that is rare to be seen somewhere else. The role of the bread is particularly emphasized in the cult of the dead, where, on certain occasions, several thousands of baked bread products can be found on the dining table at the same time! Such a ritual is called the *pomana* and is organized for the first time in the evening after burial (this *pomana* is called "cara") and then it is organized seven days after death ("stamina"). The *pomana* on the fortieth day ("patrudzășilji") is important, because it is believed that a deceased person then finally goes over to the next world. With the *pomana* are commemorated semi anniversary and first anniversary of death. Afterwards, the *pomana* is repeated every year, until the end of the seven-year cycle when direct obligations of the living persons towards their dead cousin come to an end.

While they last, these obligations are numerous and complex. The Vlachs have preserved an ancient belief that man after his death does not change his nature but his dwelling place, since God has created him as an immortal being! The other world is basically dark, cold and waterless, and one can go over to its heavenly part only with unselfish help of the living community. Since the deceased person still has the real life needs, the *pomanas* are organised for him as luxurious feasts on which the living persons offer him various food, selected drinks and other requisites. Among abundant and delicious meals, the cult place has the *ljegume* ("soups"), of which there always must be three kinds. Most often there are cabbage, potato and bean soups.

The breads made of the finest wheat flour make the basis of the *pomana*. The number of breads increases during the seven-year cycle with the *numarature* ("numbers"), the strict ritual rules, which have a religious-magical and ritual character. The main breads are called the *trăbujelje* ("laws") and represent various divine, mythological or demon beings that govern the life after death and guard crossings between the two worlds.

The shape, number and name of the "laws" differ from village to village. There are differences even within the same place, because the culture of the ritual breads is strongly influenced by the local and even family tradition. This provides originality and great variety of the ritual breads.

Even today most "laws" have preserved in their names the names of the pagan deities to whom they are offered as a bloodless sacrifice. The main gods are from the Uranus pantheon: *Suarilji* (the Sun), *Luna* (the Moon), *Marc* (Tuesday, the day of Mars), *Žuoj* (Thursday, the day of Jupiter) and four celestial positions of the *Ursa minor* constellation are personified in the most important bread of the Vlach *pomanas*: *svastika* (in Serbian *svastika* means wife's sister)! This motif appears in many variants and under many different names, and the most common is the euphemism *frumoșăl* ("a beauty").

Then come the breads bestowed to God, to the Mother of God, to the Archangel ("the soul taker") and to Saint Peter ("the holder of the keys to Heaven"); then the bread for the keeper of the plank bridge, which the deceased person crosses on his way to the afterlife world; the bread for the guardian of Heaven's doors; the bread *pndar* for the being watching the *pomana* and making sure that no uninvited guests show up...

There are hundreds of such motifs preserved in the culture of the Vlachs of the northeastern Serbia and each of them represents one capital letter from the book of Childhood of the human civilisation. It faded into oblivion a long time ago in other parts of the world, but with the Vlachs this book is still being written and read.

Written by **Paun Es Durić**, ethnologist
Museum of Majdanpek, Serbia