

# ANNALES

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*Annali di Studi istriani e mediterranee*  
*Annals for Istrian and Mediterranean Studies*  
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## SUPERSTITION, NATIONALISM, AND THE SLOVENIAN RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE OF THE 19<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper delves into the concept of superstition in the territory of Slovenia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, exploring its formation, evolution, and challenges in historical research on vernacular religiosity. The discussion considers nation-building, editorial process, and the predominant Christian discourse in folklore analysis. The paper explores the coexistence and influence of Christianity and superstition, using examples from the newspaper *Kmetijske in rokodelske novice* to illustrate various types of superstition. It also discusses how intellectuals promoted education and modernisation through critiquing superstitions. The term "superstition" is pejorative in nature and may not accurately describe the people actually experienced them.*

**Keywords:** superstition, vernacular religion, 19<sup>th</sup> century, Slovenian nation-building, folklore

## SUPERSTIZIONE, NAZIONALISMO E PAESAGGIO RELIGIOSO SLOVENO NEL XIX SECOLO

### SINTESI

*Il presente studio analizza il concetto di superstizione sul territorio della Slovenia nel XIX secolo, approfondendo la sua formazione, evoluzione e le sfide connesse alla ricerca storica sulla religiosità popolare. Nel saggio si esaminano la costruzione nazionale, il processo editoriale e il predominante discorso cristiano nell'esame del folklore. Il documento esplora la coesistenza e l'influenza del cristianesimo e della superstizione, utilizzando esempi tratti dal giornale "Kmetijske in rokodelske novice" per illustrare diverse forme di superstizione. Viene inoltre affrontata la questione di come gli intellettuali promuovevano l'istruzione e la modernizzazione attraverso la critica delle superstizioni. È importante sottolineare che il termine "superstizione" ha una connotazione negativa e potrebbe non rappresentare accuratamente l'esperienza delle persone effettivamente coinvolte.*

**Parole chiave:** superstizione, religiosità popolare, XIX secolo, costruzione nazionale slovena, folklore

INTRODUCTION: VERNACULAR RELIGIOSITY  
IN THE TERRITORY OF SLOVENIA  
IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

*There is so much superstition among our Slovenes, oh dear! Much has been written about it in the newspapers Novice, Vedež, and Slovenska Čbela; let me add what I know. That there are indeed sorceresses, wizards, dwarfs, etc., is something that an uneducated Slovene can in no way erase from his memory, because they have heard it from their ancestors and other old people, and therefore it must be true, no matter what anyone says to the contrary!* (Kociančič, 1856, 368)

The relationship between Christianity, vernacular religion, Slovenian nationalism, and enchantment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was complex<sup>1</sup>. While in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the lower social classes were considered exotic, the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought the “discovery of the people.” The intellectuals discovered that they themselves and the peasants (who before 1800 usually had a regional rather than a national consciousness) were actually one and the same people (Burke, 1978, 9, 12), based on the idea that the peasants were bearers of the most authentic, if disappearing, national culture. The urge to document the “remnants” of this disappearing culture in the form of folklore went hand in hand with the blunt valorisation of its elements with some of them being exalted and others seen as intellectually inferior and encouraged to disappear (Mencej, 2017, 56). In line with this interest in

folklore, the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw an increasing interest in the pre-Christian religions of Europe, fueled by nationalist ideologies and an escapist nostalgia for the pre-industrial past (Maier, 2017, 345). The diversity of practices and beliefs at home and around the world fascinated intellectuals (Burke, 1978, 14). Due to the lack of historical sources containing information about Germanic, Celtic, or Slavic pre-Christian religiosity, and because archeological science was still in its infancy, the pagan religions of Europe became an open field for imagination, wishful thinking, and source material for nationalist ideas about nations’ idealised pasts. Scholars adapted the perspective of Christian historiography and incorporated the nationalist goals that constructed paganism as a precursor to the Christian present (Maier, 2017, 345).

The same processes took place in the territory of Slovenia. During the initial efforts to collect Slovenian folklore, Slovenian intellectuals<sup>2</sup>, encouraged by the rise of nationalism in their search for the nation’s roots and belief in “disappearing” folklore, were confronted with a confusing religious landscape among the Slovenian peasantry that did not correspond to a dichotomous assumption of Christianity (the “correct religiosity”) and noble pagan remnants from pre-Christian times. Rather, as it will be demonstrated in the article, they encountered expressions of vernacular religiosity that included Catholic religious orthodoxy, some elements which were accepted as pre-Christian (e.g., legends referring to ancient Slavic deities), and a host of beliefs<sup>3</sup> and practices that they considered non-Christian and erroneous, most often referred to

1 The article was written within projects “Political Functions of Folktales” (ARIS N6-0268), “Facing foreigners in the cities of the Upper Adriatic at the transition from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period” (ARIS J6-4603) and program “The Practices of Conflict Resolution between Customary and Statutory Law in the Area of Today’s Slovenia and Neighboring Countries” (ARIS P6-0435), supported by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

2 An extremely valuable source for researching Slovenian folklore in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including folklore with religious content, would be Štrekelj’s Legacy. Karel Štrekelj (1859–1912) encouraged collections and publications of Slovenian folklore according to academic standards of the time. Numerous folklore collectors (over 300 from all corners of the Slovenian ethnic territory) sent him their folkloric materials forming a rich collection of material, encompassing folk tales, anecdotes, fairy tales, proverbs, riddles, spells, as well as traditional customs, children’s games, and superstitions. His legacy also includes 122 folktales from the following newspapers: *Kres*, *Slovenski glasnik*, *Slovenska bčela*, *Novice*, *Slovenija*, *Torbica jugoslavjanske mladosti*, *Slovenski gospodar* and *Mravljica* (Kropej Telban, 2021, 129–136). Publication and analysis of these materials would undoubtedly be a valuable contribution to Slovenian folklore studies as well as to the discourse analysis of Slovenian vernacular religion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This article offers an insight into the range of materials in need of scholarly attention.

3 As Valk (2022, 5) emphasises, “belief” is a concept that derives from Christianity and the individual relationship with the Christian God. It is not, therefore, universally applicable to religious traditions where practices and rituals are of central importance; such applications would provide misleading results. Despite these shortcomings, the concept of belief has remained a valid scholarly category in the study of religiosity. The concept of belief in itself, however, has been much debated in the field of folklore studies. As Mirjam Mencej (2017, 55–56) summarises, belief (similarly to superstition) went through a paradigmatic shift from being seen as a distinct folklore genre, to a mental and cognitive entity that can only be articulated in stories, acts, arts, and behaviours.

as “superstitions”<sup>4</sup> (from Latin *superstes*, meaning to survive, to witness; O’Neil, 2005, 8864). The collectors of folklore witnessed a clash of two (or more) discourses: the national/Christian discourse and the vernacular one among the peasants (how many religious discourses existed among them is difficult to say, since the written discourses mostly expressed the thoughts of the educated, elite classes as this article will also demonstrate).

Making sense of these differences was a challenge that was never fully resolved. Complicating matters further is the fact that the term superstition referred not only to magic, for example, but also to practices that were not seen as malicious but as arising from ignorance (not unlike in Finnish folklore; cf. Toivo, 2016, 9). In general, the plurality of religious beliefs and practices in 19<sup>th</sup> century Slovenian lands can be compared to religiosity in other countries of the time (cf. Devlin, 1987).

In this paper, I will elaborate on the terms “false faith” and “superstition,” or rather, what superstition denoted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I will also explore why it was characterised as such, and what mentions of superstition actually indicate about the vernacular religiosity in the Slovenian lands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This paper is intended to be a preliminary examination of a broad area of vernacular religiosity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Slovenian newspaper *Kmetijske in rokodelske novice* (= *Novice*) served as a source for the study of this topic. *Novice* was a newspaper with a high circulation and was an influential medium among Slovenes, who at that time were mostly peasants and craftsmen. Under the editorship of Janez Bleiweis (1808–1881), *Novice* advocated for a higher level of education for the peasantry in order to improve agricultural production, the cultural level and also the morale of the Slovenes. Janez Bleiweis was convinced that the basis of the Slovenian and Austrian economy was and should remain agriculture and therefore actively promoted its modernisation, the education of peasants, and the introduction of new agricultural techniques, tools, and crops (Vodopivec, 2021, 31, 34). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Slovenian lands, the

Enlightenment, an intellectual and philosophical movement that characterised the 18<sup>th</sup> century, had the character of a national awakening. Part of this movement was an effort to educate the common people (Kropej Telban, 2021, 97).

This work represents a first systematic scholarly attempt to address the image of superstition in 19<sup>th</sup> century Slovenian folklore, thus opening a new field of historical research on 19<sup>th</sup> century Slovenian vernacular religiosity.

#### THE SHIFTING SANDS OF SUPERSTITION

Religion and superstition are among those terms that we all assume we understand, but as soon as we try to define them, they become much less clear. Similar difficulties, plurality, and fluidity of meaning occur with terms such as magic, witchcraft, or heresy<sup>5</sup> (cf. Kallestrup & Toivo, 2017; Toivo, 2016, 9–10). In different historical and cultural contexts, they had different meanings and are therefore difficult to define universally. Superstition does not form a separate (theological) sphere but is part of many levels of culture and society (Kallestrup & Toivo, 2017, 2). Consequently, as will be shown, even in the same historical and social context it is difficult to find a unified definition. In addition, terms such as superstition and paganism are interrelated in meaning and are inevitably used alongside the processes of scholarly interpretation.

I must first define what I mean by the term “superstition.” Over time, the concept of superstition has evolved and been used to criticise other religious beliefs and practices. It has meant various things to different people over time. The term “superstition” has been used by dominant religions throughout history to describe religious beliefs and practices that were subject to disapproval. It has a pejorative connotation and is defined based on (or rather in opposition to) the culture’s concept of “true religion” (O’Neil, 2005, 8864). Although the meaning of superstition has never been clearly defined, it has always meant the opposite of “true religion” (Cameron, 2010, 4). This is similar to the concept of “paganism,” which has only ever

4 In this article, the term “superstition” is used, even though from a scholarly perspective it is an outdated term as it contains pejorative connotations. I have, non the less, decided to keep it in the article as a descriptive term for various non desirable elements of beliefs and practices as described and valorised by Slovenian intellectuals from the 19<sup>th</sup> century as it, in my opinion, best represents the sense of religious, moral, and political inferiority of some aspect of Slovenian folklore that were marked by this term. The term “superstition” (and related terms mentioned in the continuation) is also used by the authors from *Novice* themselves, therefore, I am inclined to use the emic terminology (from the point of view of the authors in *Novice*, not from the point of view of the peasants from whom they got their materials), although I do attempt to explain and interpret it. I am, however, fully aware of the complexity of a topic such as “superstition” and that more appropriate scholarly terminology exists for it (as I also discuss in this article). This complexity is exactly what I want to address with this contribution. By using this term, I do not, therefore, wish to pass any sort of judgement or valorisation of the folklore I am analysing here.

5 One of the delimitations between these terms could be: idolatry as the worship of a wrong god or not-a-God; heresy as the worship of a true God, but according to beliefs that contradicted authority; superstition as a means of worship of a true God by inappropriate means (Cameron, 2010, 4).



existed as an entity in the eyes of its opponents (Jones, 2014, 145). In Christianity, non-Christian, “pagan” religions were associated with terms such as “idolatry” or “magic.” This was despite evidence suggesting that things were more complex (Maier, 2017, 343).

The term superstition has from a scholarly sense been closely interlinked with the term “belief” as Mirjam Mencej (2017) demonstrated in her review article about the scholarly field of international and Slovenian folklore studies throughout time. Similarly to the concept of superstition, the concept of belief has gone through various transformations in terms of meaning and definitions and still remains open for various interpretations and meanings (Mencej, 2017). What superstition is thus depends on the perspective of the adherents of that dominant religion who attach meaning to the religious expressions of the Others<sup>6</sup>. Having the authority to define (and thus control) what kind of religiosity is “correct,” what is sacred (and consequently, what is “incorrect,”<sup>7</sup> superstitious, heretical) has been subject to control throughout history. The Church seeks to monopolise the sacred (and “true religion” in general), to universalise it, to give it a name, and to create distance between it and people. Individuals can be sanctioned if they do not follow this version of religiosity (Stark, 2002, 31).

Despite the multitude of meanings, there have been attempts in academia to find a unified definition.<sup>8</sup> The complexity of various ideas about and definitions of superstition was addressed by Alan Dundes (1978, 90) who provided a tentative definition of superstitions as “traditional expressions of one or more conditions and or more results with some of the conditions signs and other causes.” He also determined three basic categories of superstition. The first are “Signs” that consists of portents and omens that one can read (for example, a ring around the moon predicts rain). The second category is “Magic.” Such magic superstitions serve as a means of production and not just of prediction – in contrast to sign superstitions, human agency in this type of superstition is intentional rather than accidental. It also involves belief and practice. This category also includes divination. The third category, “Conversion” is hybrid as it consists of sign superstitions being converted into magic superstitions. It includes planting signs, wishes, and counteractants (i.e. forms of counter-magic) (Dundes, 1978, 91–93).

Cameron also (2010, 5) attempted to provide a general summary of superstition, describing it as “a fairly disorganized bundle of beliefs and practices rooted in

tradition: attempts to discern the unknown through divination, and to control it, or at least protect against it, through simple use of “charms.” Conceptually, as Valk (2022, 2) summarised, superstitions ranged from being strange “leftovers” from the past and expressions of a lack of education (or intelligence) to being considered an integral part of human life. And a similar conceptualisation happened with folklore itself, which was first seen as a “remnant” of the past, alive only among the peasants, and then began to represent a vital and important aspect of social and individual expression and creativity.

The complexity of studying superstition and religiosity is further complicated by the fact that there are many societies in which the modern separation of religion from other aspects of society has not occurred – in most societies throughout history and the world, religion and culture are one and the same, and religion does not represent a separate entity (Stringer, 2005, 9). This leads to difficulties in exploring religion and superstition with modern understandings of these concepts. Even within the framework of a particular religious orthodoxy, the term superstition took on various meanings at different points in time.

By analysing examples of superstition in *Novice*, I will try to provide an understanding of what the term meant in the context of Slovenian lands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

#### RELIGION, SUPERSTITION, AND CHANGING MEANINGS

However, before we embark upon an analysis of superstition in *Novice*, it is important to understand how the concept of superstition became the image we know from the newspaper. This image is the result of a long historical process.

In ancient times, certain behaviours were seen as expressing a false understanding of the world and the divine. Such behaviours were called “superstition.” This ignorance of the laws of nature (as they were understood at the time) was usually associated with common people and rural life, that is, with the lower strata of Roman society. As the Roman Empire expanded, superstition became associated with exotic foreign religions, including Christianity (O’Neil, 2005, 8864).

Early Christians used the term when referring to pagan<sup>9</sup> beliefs and practices, including the Roman religion. In keeping with the militant nature of Christian monotheism, the negative meaning of superstition

6 The level of this arbitrariness was pointed out by Dundes (1978, 89) in the possibility of the practice of a Christian sect endorsing the practice of making the sign of the cross to ward off bad luck being considered superstition by another Christian denomination. Similar relativity is seen in defining the difference between mythology and religion: mythology that is believed in or endorsed by authority is called “religion,” while religion without belief is considered mythology.

7 Superstition was also often associated with fear and irrationality (Dundes, 1978, 89).

8 Some scholars who have attempted to provide a definition include Puckett (1926), Frazer (1927), Taylor & Whiting (1958), Hand (1961), Yoder (1974), Dundes (1978), Motz (1998). Many scholars, however, have avoided providing a definition of superstition.

9 The Latin speaking Christians initially applied the term “pagani” (Latin for “villagers”) to peasants who continued to engage in old non-Christian practices and beliefs and the term was eventually extended to all “pagans” (Jones, 2014, 5).

intensified – Roman statues, for example, were seen as idols, and Roman religious sacrifices were seen as offerings to the devil (O’Neil, 2005, 8864–8865).

By the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity slowly began to replace Paganism as the dominant discourse in Europe (Stringer, 2005, 18). During the Middle Ages, Christian efforts to Christianise intensified and pagan practices were condemned. Superstitious acts were seen as neither harmless nor ineffective. Even if they did not directly invoke the devil, they were based on forces outside those controlled by the church and were therefore considered diabolical. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, inquisitorial jurisdiction was extended to the magical activities of the lower classes, resulting in the new crime of witchcraft (O’Neil, 2005, 8865; Kallstrup & Toivo, 2017, 5). Superstitious acts were thus no longer just an issue of pastoral disapproval but were criminalised and prosecuted by both the Church and secular courts in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (O’Neil, 2005, 8865).

The Catholic Church sought to define what superstition was and to eliminate it. This was also one of the issues at the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and the Council of Malines (1607). While “popular magic” of the lower classes was condemned, ecclesiastical practices such as selling indulgences and exorcism were not. Access to the supernatural was monopolised by the Catholic Church (O’Neil, 2005, 8866).

Attempts to understand the difference between the concepts of magic and superstition and faith and prayer continued in the following centuries. While faith and prayer were considered humble requests to the divine, magic was something compulsive that had the power to cause action on the part of a supernatural force (Toivo, 2016, 9, 14).<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, while superstition was considered both a secular and a religious crime, there was also the possibility that actions associated with superstition were considered acts of fraud (at least when money was involved) (Toivo, 2016, 15). Furthermore, by the end of the Middle Ages, all magic, regardless of its purposes (evil or seemingly good, such as curing disease), was considered to be associated with the devil (Toivo, 2016, 9).

During the Protestant Reformation, superstition took on new meanings. Many Catholic practices and beliefs (e.g., popular veneration of relics or saints)<sup>11</sup> were viewed by Protestants as superstitious because they represented an “inappropriate way” of worshipping God (O’Neil, 2005, 8865–8866; Cameron, 2010, 5). In a sense, Christians viewed other Christians who practiced differently as impure and essentially pagan (Jones, 2014, 147). Despite the attitude that Protestantism eliminated superstitious elements in Christianity, the Reformation did not actually abolish the threat of witchcraft or belief in demonic or other spiritual entities (Cameron, 2010, 12). Only perceptions changed. And while Protestants accused Catholics of practicing a magical religion, Catholic reformers also sought to eradicate spells from the culture of their followers (Burke, 1978, 210).

Thus, in both Catholic and Protestant countries, there were systematic attempts by clerical and political elites to raise the religious and moral level of the general population. These attempts were not entirely successful, and superstitious elements continued to be documented in subsequent centuries (including in *Novice*) (O’Neil, 2005, 8866).

The significance of superstition also changed over subsequent centuries. As Burke (1978, 241) puts it, the changes in terminology may express a change in attitude. This can be seen in the word “superstition.” In English and Romance languages before 1650, the predominant meaning of the word seemed to be “false religion,” and the term was often used to refer to magic and witchcraft. From that context, it can be inferred that these acts were effective but evil. A change occurred in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century when dissenting beliefs, previously feared because they were based on demonic acts, were now treated with indifference or even ridicule (Cameron, 2010, 24). The meaning of superstition changed to “irrational fears” and the beliefs and practices associated with superstition were understood as foolish but harmless and ineffective (Burke, 1978, 241).

10 There were, however, quite a few scholarly attempts to define the difference between magic and religion. As summarised by Granholm (2014, 9–12) according to James Frazer’s understanding magic is an attempt to control supernatural forces in the environment (therefore, magic is a form of a primitive, but erroneous science), while religion signifies submission to these forces. Emile Durkheim saw religion and magic as operating with the same general premises (belief systems, rites ...), however, while religion unites its practitioners in churches, magic does not. Mircea Eliade defined the terms *kratophanies* (manifestations of power), *hierophanies* (manifestations of the sacred), and *theophanies* (manifestations of the divine). While there is no clear distinction between religion and magic, the latter is more closely related to kratophanies because of its relation to power. While the delimitation between religion and magic is hard to make and they are essentially artificial scholarly categories, the continuous attempts to define them are probably a result of Christian perception of “proper religion” being devoid of “magical” elements. Additionally, magic has often been viewed as a static and transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon even though that is not the case. Magic has not been the same in all cultures and all eras. There is also the problem of applying the European understanding of magic to non-European cultures which hinders a thorough understanding.

11 Even some official practices of the Catholics were described by Protestants as pre-Christian remnants, for example, comparing the cult of the Virgin Mary with the cult of Venus or seeing the saints as successors to the pagan gods and heroes (Burke, 1978, 209; Jones, 2014, 148).

The Enlightenment brought a new understanding of superstition as the scientific study of nature was proposed as a new cultural orthodoxy. In this sense, magical practices (and all “irrational” aspects of religious practices) and beliefs continued to be considered superstition, but their diabolical efficacy was replaced by the scientific understanding of their impossibility—magic again took on a different meaning (O’Neil, 2005, 8866; Cameron, 2010, 25; Kallestrup & Toivo, 2017, 8). Echoes of Enlightenment thinking can still be felt in *Novice* and their understanding of superstition.

However, after decades of propaganda for rationalism, 19<sup>th</sup> century European intellectuals rediscovered traditions, folk legends, and other folklore in the spirit of nationalism. They saw superstition not as demonic goings-on but as a valuable remnant of the nation’s pre-modern noble past. In a sense, this was a time when the magical and demonic definitively lost their power to instill fear (Cameron, 2010, 26–27).

Even in the world after urbanisation and industrialisation, a culture of “superstition” persisted well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond (Cameron, 2010, 14). The term superstition continues to be used in today’s society and still has a pejorative meaning used to describe any belief system that does not conform to one’s concept of rationality or even to religion as a whole (Cameron, 2010, 4).

#### CHALLENGES IN STUDYING VERNACULAR RELIGIOSITY FROM HISTORICAL SOURCES

As mentioned above, the purpose of this paper is to address the very under-researched topic of the historical aspects of vernacular Slovenian religiosity. This is not an easy task as the sources are often very one-sided (i.e. written from the point of view of intellectuals and bearers of orthodox religious discourse) and lack the ethnographic data useful for a contemporary researcher (the process of gathering information, information about the interlocutors and the context in general, etc.) and there is also a different paradigmatic orientation in the research than there was at that time. In the historical sources, the (theologically literate) authors often knowingly or unknowingly described beliefs and practices that diverged from doctrinal religious beliefs in terms of the polarised cosmos of Christian philosophy (Cameron, 2010, 9). Thus, the texts used for this paper do not directly reflect cultural and religious categories. The voices of peasant interlocutors were decontextualised and filtered first by folklore collectors and later by *Novice*’s editorial policy. Moreover, a very distinct agenda in collecting this folklore (i.e., building an image of a “true Slovene”) presents an additional challenge in trying to understand the

reality of vernacular religion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The nature of such historical sources thus has a dual character: on the one hand, they provide information about the religious beliefs and practices of 19<sup>th</sup> century Slovenian peasants, and on the other hand, they reflect the prevailing cultural, political, and religious discourses of the time. This paper will deal with both of these aspects, but will focus on the latter, focusing on “false” and “erroneous” religious beliefs and practices, i.e., superstitions.

Moreover, it is important to realise that 19<sup>th</sup> century Slovenian folklore offers examples of 19<sup>th</sup> century Slovenian vernacular religion, rather than medieval folklore (cf. Young, 2022, 9). The reason for emphasising this is that in past (international) scholarship there was too little criticism when it came to comparing different religious elements: for example, ancient and medieval religiosity, rural and urban religious expression, peasant religiosity, and the religion of the nation as a whole were equated with one another (Burke, 1978, 20). As we know today, the context of religious ideas is crucial to their understanding.

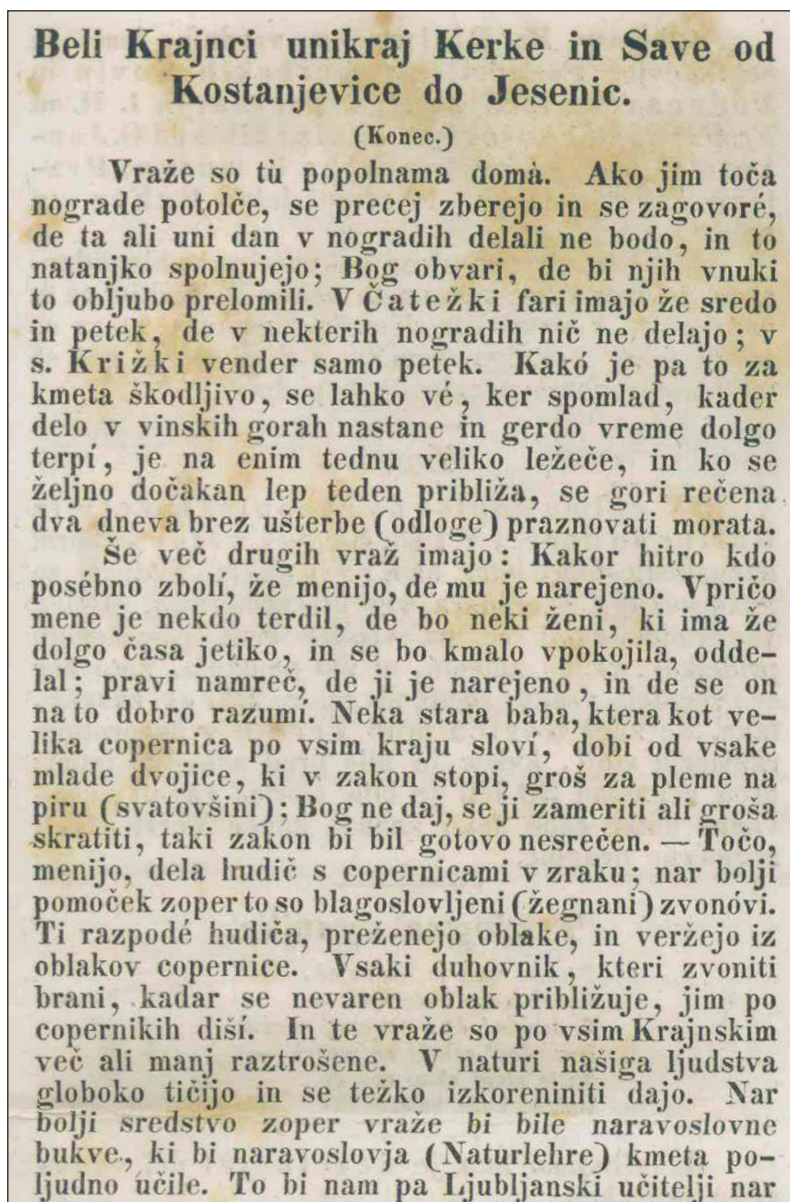
Moreover, not all religions adhere to the Christian concept of “faith.” According to Downen (2000, 2), ancient paganism was not faith-based, but rather concerned with the observance of ritual systems. Perceiving other religious expressions with the concepts of one’s own religion (for example, vernacular religion does not have a coherent and ordered structure like Christianity; cf. Toivo, 2016, 11) can lead to fundamental misunderstandings. And not only was paganism not a coherent set of religious beliefs and practices, but, as is characteristic of other religions, it was constantly changing and reinventing itself (cf. Young, 2022, 9). Thus, when *Novice* articles mention “beliefs,” e.g., about witchcraft, we cannot assume that the bearers of these beliefs perceived them in the same way as they perceived their beliefs in, e.g., Christian saints.

#### EXAMPLES OF SUPERSTITION IN *NOVICE*

Having understood the complex nature of superstition, I will now try to analyse what superstition meant in Slovenian lands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, based on publications in *Novice*.

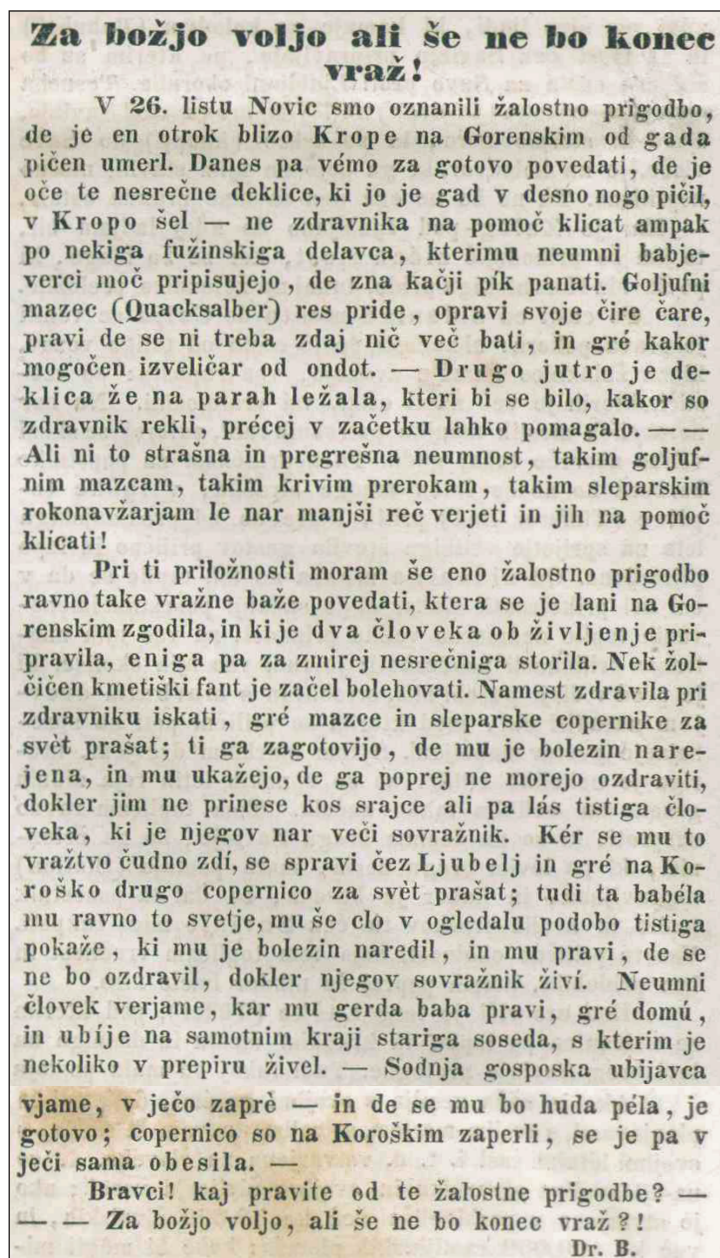
In *Novice*, various expressions were used to describe false beliefs and practices: in Slovenian, these are “vražjeverje”, “vraže”, “babjeverje”, “prazno-verje”, “prazna vera”, “malikovanje”, “krivoverstvo”, “kriva vera”. The term superstition was also very often mentioned in connection with the belief in witches. It is difficult to translate these terms directly into English, but roughly these expressions mean “superstition”, “old wives’ faith”, “empty faith”, “idolatry”, “false religion”, “witchcraft.”





*Figure 1: Beli Krajnci unikraj Kerke in Save od Kostanjevice do Jesenic (Konec.) (Delimarič, 1845, 31).<sup>12</sup>*

12 Translation: "Superstitions are completely at home here. If hail ruins their vineyards, they gather and promise not to work in the vineyards on this or that day and they are very strict in keeping that promise. God forbid their grandchildren would break that promise. In the Čatež county they already have Wednesdays and Fridays when work in the vineyards is forbidden. In Sveti Križ they only have Fridays. It is easy to see how harmful such beliefs are: in the spring when there is much work to be done in the vineyards and bad weather is frequent a week can be a long time without working there. When good weather finally arrives, they are forbidden from working on these two days. They also hold many other superstitions: as soon as someone gets seriously ill, they immediately assume that a spell has been cast on them. Someone claimed in front of me that a certain woman, who has had tuberculosis for a long time and is about to retire, has been cursed and that a spell has been cast on her and he claimed to understand these things well. An old woman, renowned throughout the region as a great witch, receives a coin from every young couple entering marriage during the wedding feast. God forbid anyone offend her or cut short her money; such a marriage would surely be unhappy. They also believe that the devil together with witches create hail and that the best countermeasure against hail are the blessed church bells. They drive the devil and the clouds away and hurl the witches down from the clouds. A priest who prevents the bells from being rung when a dangerous cloud approach is suspected of being a witch himself. Such superstitions are scattered throughout Carniola to a greater or lesser extent. They are deeply rooted in the nature of our people and are difficult to eradicate. The best remedy against superstitions would be simple science books for peasants. [...]"



*Figure 2 and Figure 3: Za božjo voljo ali še ne bo konec vraž!*  
(Bleiweis, 1847, 120).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Translation: “On this occasion, I must relate another sad story of just such a superstitious event that happened last year in the Upper Carniola region, which took the lives of two persons while causing perpetual misfortune to another. A certain little peasant boy began to fall ill. Instead of seeking remedies from the doctor, he went to charlatans and deceptive witches to ask for advice. They assured him that his illness had been caused by sorcery and instructed him that they couldn’t cure him until he brought them a piece of a shirt or a strand of hair from the person who was his greatest enemy. Finding this superstition peculiar, he travelled to Carinthia over Ljubelj to consult another charlatan. This one even conjured up the image of the person who had inflicted the illness upon him in a mirror and informed him that he wouldn’t be cured as long as his enemy is alive. The naïve man believed the words of the wicked woman, returned home, and in a secluded place killed an old neighbour with whom he had been in a minor dispute. The judicial gentry ordered the murderer to be captured and locked him up in prison – and that he will have a tough time is certain; the sorcerer too was locked up in Carinthia, but she hanged herself in prison. Readers! What do you say about this sad story? For God’s sake, will there ever be an end to superstition?!”



These expressions were not used exclusively in the context of religiosity, but also to denote outdated or harmful agricultural, medical, alimentary, and other beliefs and practices that were out of step with more recent scientific developments. In this article, however, the focus will be on the context of religiosity. The religious beliefs and practices mentioned and described with the aforementioned words come from the Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian tradition (Maier, 2017, 350) and we can assume that (apart from the pejorative connotations they contained) they did not accurately describe them from an emic perspective. Therefore, not only do the mentions of superstition not provide an opportunity for a comprehensive understanding of the religious practices of the lower classes, but the mention of superstition, which was seen as a remnant of paganism, does not provide an opportunity for a reliable reconstruction of the pre-Christian religion.

However, the number and variety of such non-Christian items published in *Novice* (which probably represent only a fraction of the whole) testify to the fact that religiosity in the Slovenian lands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was diverse, but also to the fact that this diversity was not seen as problematic for the majority of the population.

The article in Figure 1 from *Novice* contains a brief summary of various superstitions that were common among Slovenes living in Bela Krajina. They are condemned by the author.

It is perhaps not surprising that most of the superstitions mentioned in *Novice* relate to folk medicine and agricultural beliefs and practices (example: Figure 2 and Figure 3).

The health of people and livestock and the ability to accurately judge the timing of agricultural activities were vital to farmers. Christianity obviously did not provide them with enough support in times of uncertainty. Therefore, peasants did not hesitate to resort to magic and divination, for example, to try to control their uncertain reality, which was accompanied by a lack of education and medical care. In everyday life, people needed divine helpers who could quickly influence and improve their situation, as opposed to the more abstract ways of contacting the deity that Christianity offered them (Stark, 2002, 31).

Another example of such “foolish superstition” is the belief that a person who dies from a viper bite cannot go to heaven (Cvotrev, 1845, 67–68).

The other superstition that was very often criticised in *Novice* was the belief in witchcraft, often related to the material loss suffered by the peasants. One of the other recurring beliefs mentioned in the paper was the belief that milk is tainted by the malignant powers of witches. “Believe me, if someone knew how to do witchcraft in this day and age, they would use their magic powers for something else – I mean, I think they would make money appear rather than spoil milk.

That’s just an empty superstition. Bad milk usually has obvious causes that you do not notice; I want to explain them to you one by one here, so listen to me.” (Unknown author, 1844, 78) Then, in a simple, almost patronising tone, the author explains the real reasons for spoiled milk, which are due to factors such as the poor health of the cow, its inadequate nutrition and lack of hygiene during milking. Janez Bleiweis was very keen on translating scientific knowledge into the everyday life of the lower classes (cf. Kolar, 2021, 73–74), which would explain a considerable number of reports of such superstitions in *Novice*. Another type of superstition frequently mentioned in *Novice* is divination, especially in predicting the weather:

*It is especially sad that there are many superstitions and misconceptions about bad weather among the people. Some believe that enemy sorcerers cause hail, while others believe that lightning, thunder, hail, and rain are always just divine punishments or retribution!* (Šmidt, 1850, 126)

These types of superstitions were received very negatively by the authors in *Novice*, and there was a strong tendency to eradicate such ideas about the weather.

Other examples of superstitions mentioned in *Novice* include superstitions about solar eclipses (a poison falls on the earth and poisons plants and waters (Unknown author, 1851b, 149–150)) or earthquakes during solar eclipses (Unknown author, 1851c, 158) or that drinking the blood of an unborn fetus can make one invisible (Plemelj, 1851, 222) or various mentions of false accounts of people falling into a trance (e.g., Unknown author, 1851d, 255).

There are also various mentions of fraudulent people with supposed supernatural abilities, such as the ability to see the future or have visions. *Novice* was very suspicious of such claims and portrayed such people as exploiting the gullibility of the superstitious. One such example is a young girl who had visions of Jesus and the Virgin Mary (Unknown author, 1851e, 196; Unknown author, 1851f, 203). The author of the article wondered why the people who visited her did not show such piety in the context of Orthodox Christianity. “One should pray to God and worship the miracles of His omnipotence. We do not need sick little girls to make such circus comedies.” (Unknown author, 1851f, 203)

We see, then, that belief in superstitious miracles was not considered false and superstitious when they occurred in the context of doctrinal Christianity – in this form, these superstitious acts were considered “miracles”. All other types of (seemingly) superstitious events were called “false,” “shameful” superstitions. Supernatural realms existed both in the context of Christianity and



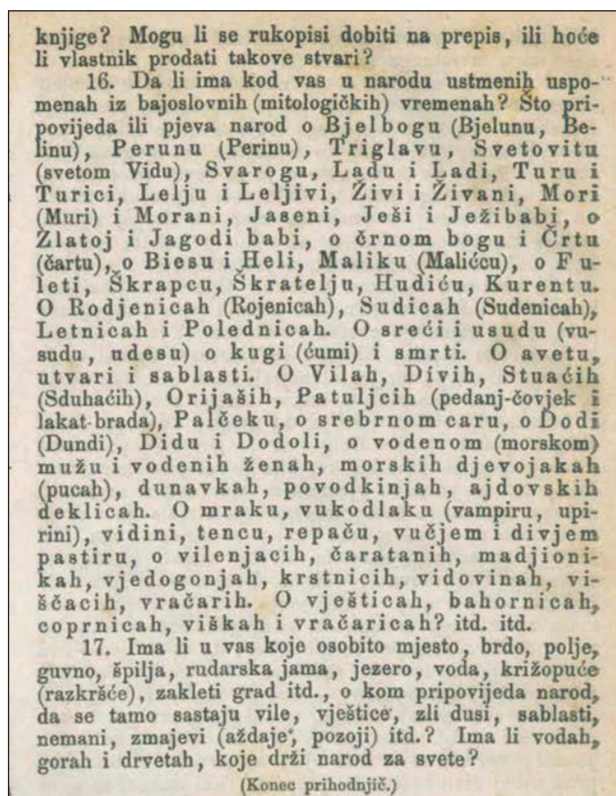
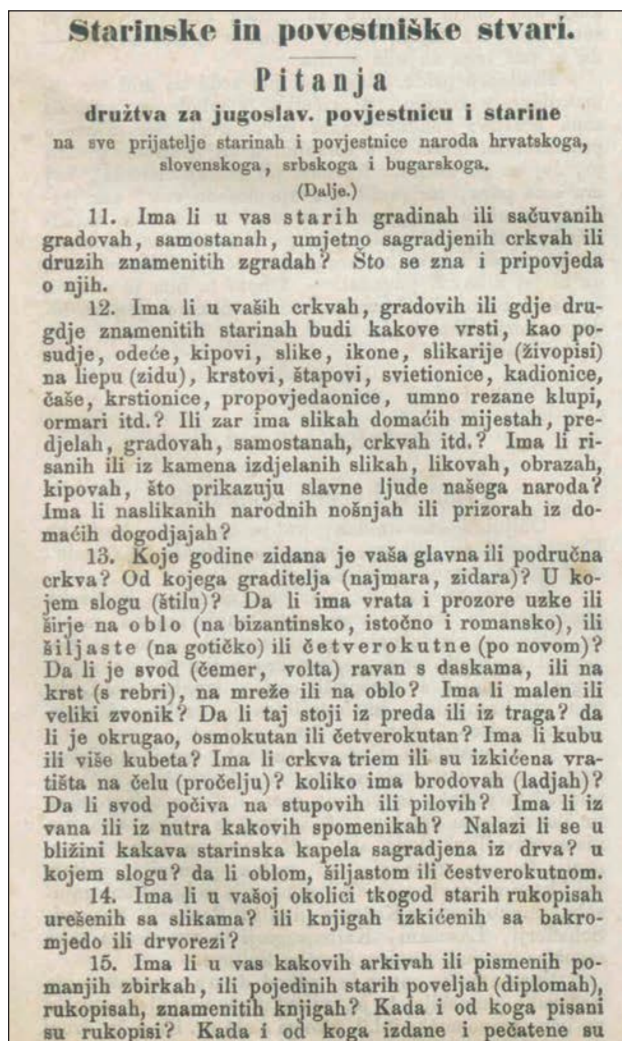


Figure 4 and Figure 5: *Starinske in povestniške stvari* (Kukuljevič, 1871, 85).<sup>14</sup>

in “superstitious” realms (i.e., non-Christian religious expressions). The difference between the two is that the supernatural in Christianity is part of an ideology that controls religious ideas (cf. Koski, 2016, 27).

Less frequently, superstition is mentioned in connection with narrative folklore, e.g., in legends. Matevž Ravnikar-Poženan (1846, 112) describes legends about a folk figure (a midwinter deity; Kropelj, 2012, 50) called “Torka” as a superstition:

*Torka was an apparition that frightened the people who spun on Tuesdays and Thursdays, or the spinners who left the distaff next to the wheel when it stopped spinning. A dog's paw appeared and began to spin the spinning wheel. There are more such curious and amusing superstitions that the Krains tell each other to this day for amusement.*

14 Translation (of part of the text; some names of folk beings mentioned here are hard to translate into English as they don't have an adequate substitute in that language): “Are there oral memories among your people from legendary (mythological) times? What do the people confess or sing about Veles, Perun, Triglav, the White God, Bjelun, Belbog, Saint Vitus, Svarog, Lada and Lado, Tur and Turica, Lel and Lela, Živa and Živan, Mor and Mora, Jasen, Ješo and Ježibaba, the Black God, and Črt (Čart), about Bies and Hela, Malik (Maličko), about Fulet, Škrapec, Dwarf, the Devil, Kurent. About Faits, Letnice, Polednice. About happiness and destiny (fate), the plague, and death. About the world, the creation, and power. About Vila, giants, spirits, Orjaši, dwarves (small people and elbow beard), Palček, about the silver king, about Dod, Dida, and Dodola, about the water (sea) man and water women, mermaids, water spirits (povodnice). About twilight (Mrak), werewolves (vampires, upirs), ghosts, tenco, repač, wolf shepherd, ovcoder (wolf charmer), forest women, witches, magicians, mad women, fortune tellers, witches, etc., etc.”

The non-Christian figures in folklore, which may have served various social<sup>15</sup> or psychological needs (in the past or present), are downplayed as serving only for “amusement.” It is also often claimed that superstitious ideas (e.g., about werewolves) are remnants of pre-Christian ideas and exist today primarily as folktales (Gomišak, 1865, 34), ergo not in the form of active ideas.

As knowledge of folklore (its content and research methodology) matured over the years, *Novice* from time-to-time published instructions for folklore collectors on what folklore they should collect (because not all folklore was good folklore). This had a direct impact on what folklore was published in the newspaper.<sup>16</sup> Among the instructions for collectors were guidelines on how to collect superstitions. From these guidelines, we can surmise what was considered superstition (Figure 4 and 5).

In this case, witches (very often associated with superstitions) are mentioned along with faits, werewolves, ghosts, dwarfs, mermaids, and other folk figures that could not be part of the Christian worldview.

#### SUPERSTITION AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY: A COMPLEX INTERPLAY

In 1847, *Novice* reported a cruel incident in which a mare’s tongue was cut off, presumably by a:

*follower of superstition, who foolishly believed that the tongue of such a mare, which is all black, without a single white spot on her whole body, and which has had one or even several foals, has in it a strange power which helps man to accomplish anything he desires. [...] Since this superstition that the tongue of the black mare possesses a miraculous power is prevalent among some foolish people, it is believable that the unfortunate mare may have lost her tongue and her life due to this foolish superstition. We wonder if those who believe in such things – are not even more foolish than cattle? Is it proper for them to have a human form? Is it true that they have reason and intelligence? They lack not only a spark of intelligence, but also faith, otherwise they would not attribute divine power to the horseflesh (the tongue)! That the tongue of a wicked old woman has a poison-*

*ous power in it, and that through such tongues many bad things have happened in the world, is an old belief – but to assert that the tongue of a black mare possesses any power other than that of eating and drinking is a superstition so foolish that one should be ashamed even to mention it.* (J. U., 1847, 146–147)

Such a belief, then, is not only a sign of lack of education or even stupidity, but also violates Christian norms since supernatural powers can only be attributed to God. The question arises, however, as to how much the average uneducated person in the 19<sup>th</sup> century actually knew about Christian teachings. Research on French peasants from the same period shows that they did not know them very well (Devlin, 1987, 6).

In the article about the Slovenes in Istria, the author praises the people for their piety. However, there is also mention of an “empty faith” in relation to the rosary, the prayer beads used by Catholics:

*I would also like to tell you about an empty faith they have. They believe that prayer is only for the one who has the rosary and not for the one who uses it to pray. Therefore, they will never use someone else’s rosary. And if you find a rosary, you put it back because you believe it is of no use to you.* (Bleiweis, 1848, 11)

As Karelian folklore also shows, abstract Christian concepts inherent in objects, times, or places can be reinterpreted to provide a concrete benefit (Stark, 2002, 31).

Vernacular religion, therefore, is often a mixture of beliefs from different belief systems that coexist without conflict despite their apparent incompatibility. As Stringer (2005, 18, 23) notes, many of the discourses in societies consist of combinations of pagan and Christian elements, making it nearly impossible to identify “pure” Christian or pagan discourses. The gap between dogmatic, official religion and the way people practice it in everyday life (i.e., vernacular religion) can occur in many aspects of religiosity: in defining the “right” behaviour in a religious context, in understanding the role of church symbols and personalities such as saints, in the goal of religious activity itself, or even in understanding more basic religious concepts, such as the soul or life after death (Stark, 1994, 36).

15 One way of explaining the persistence of such a character in a predominantly Christian society could be the importance of exchange and reciprocity in social relations of traditional agrarian societies (Stark, 2002, 32). George Foster’s (1965) concept of “limited good” encompasses the idea that in traditional societies, members of the community saw desirable things as existing in limited quantities. Consequently, one can improve their position only at the expense of others. Folk characters such as Torka might express the prohibition of trying to gain something by crossing society’s prohibitions and thus unjustly get ahead of others in the community.

16 According to the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder and Hegel, culture should be understood in the context of the ethnic, existential, and traditional connections of a people. The collection of folktales and other folklore materials that gained momentum during this period can be seen as contributing to ethnic consolidation and nation-building. It also serves the dual role of homogenising culture within a specific territory and differentiating one culture, like German culture, from others. Collectors of national treasures also emerged in Slovenia during this time, with Karel Štrekelj (1859–1912) creating the most extensive collection (Tratnik, 2022, 1043). Folklore was used to express nationalistic (Slovenian) ideas (cf. Crowther, 2022). Additionally, Slovenian writers used Slovenian folklore in their literary work (cf. Darovec, 2021).



It has also been noted (cf. Stark, 1994, also Devlin, 1987, 7) that vernacular religion focuses more on more “down-to-earth” issues, such as the delineation of important social categories and relationships within the community, and that numinous and awe-inspiring experiences (as described by scholars such as Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade) cannot adequately explain the cultural functions of vernacular religion (Stark, 2005, 30).

Young (2022, 16), on the other hand, compares the multitude of different beliefs and practices in vernacular religiosity to the layers of an onion, with the outermost layers representing the abstract assertions about the divine and the inner layers representing the supernatural beliefs associated with the everyday experiences of rural existence.

These beliefs and practices were often a mixture of Christian and non-Christian elements. Dular (1865, 19–20) was very critical of such superstitious beliefs and practices, believing that they contaminated the sanctity of Christian holidays. He also added that among younger and educated people these beliefs are being forgotten, and he wished they would be forgotten altogether.

There are also various customs, including deviations and magic that took place on certain days of the year, such as Christmas Eve. Ozvald Dular (1865, 19–20), for example, wrote about a pot called “žehtar” used for milking cows, which was placed under the table on Christmas Eve to ensure high milk production for the whole new year. On Midsummer’s Eve, lovers washed themselves in the evening, but did not dry themselves and lay down to sleep like this, placing a freshly washed cloth under their pillow. During the night, the one who was meant for them would come and dry them. Women also carried a wreath of various flowers and threw it onto a tree. If it stayed on the tree, the woman would get married, if it fell off, she would not get married and so on. And if there was a funeral during the Christmas celebrations, it meant that many people will die the next year. He also added that there are many such “beliefs and superstitions”<sup>17</sup> in existence and that people did not even think about them as harmful (Dular, 1865, 19).

The rather profane, practical, and pragmatic character of vernacular beliefs and its (moral) evaluation is also evident in folk stories that contained non-Christian elements. If they had social and moral value in the eyes of 19<sup>th</sup> century Slovenians, they were not judged negatively. This

is evident in an article by Matija Majer (1844a, 136), who presented a folk tale about breaking the social taboo of beating one’s parents. In the story, a child beat his mother while she beat him. A short time later, the child died and the heartbroken mother, while visiting the grave, saw an arm sticking out of the grave. A priest explained to her that this is because the earth does not accept the hand that has struck a parent. After consulting with the priest, he advised her to beat the arm until it returned to the grave. After she did so, the child’s arm slid back into the grave.

Although the story clearly violated Christian doctrine<sup>18</sup> which states that the deceased cannot influence the world of the living, the moral element of the story, namely the prohibition against hitting a parent, made it socially acceptable. The Christian element (the priest) probably also helped make this story acceptable. Although the search for the origins of such stories is not the focus of this paper, we might question the motivation for such a postmortem activity that violated Christian teaching. One such explanation, as mentioned earlier, would be that the moral aspect outweighs the contradiction in doctrine. The other might be that such stories echoed pre-Christian notions of the afterlife (transposed into a Christian context), in which the dead were not necessarily as separate from the world of the living as they are in the Christian world. Like centuries earlier, in the Middle Ages, stories about the dead entering the world of the living were still part of nineteenth-century folklore. An additional reason for this could also be that (private) religious beliefs about the ancestors are very resistant to change, as they are related to deep questions of identity, connection to the past, and place (Mandeville Caciola, 2017, 30). Vernacular Christian discourses are also flexible, allowing for the interpretation of various non-Christian elements within the framework of Christianity (cf. Koski, 2016, 27). And as a seemingly unproblematic use of Christian and non-Christian elements in the same narrative shows, the Christian binary opposition between good and evil was not so strict in the vernacular religion of the laity—people seem to have lived their religiosity more on a continuum<sup>19</sup> and it was not always clear to which of these categories their rituals, actions, or words were closer (Toivo, 2016, 24). This ambiguity also carried over into the realm of identity: a person could practice magic without doubting their identity as a devout Christian. This is confirmed by the fact that in the descriptions of superstition in *Novice*, the

17 In the original »ver in vraž« (Dular, 1865, 19).

18 Mirjam Mencej (2008, 189; 2017, 61) agreed with von Sydow’s (1948) idea that a »fict« as a folklore genre cannot be used to research beliefs as it portrays a story that is not believed, as it primarily serves as a pedagogical means to protect children from danger or prevent them from damaging crops etc. The story described here could be categorised as a fict. However, I chose not to exclude it from other examples of folklore in this article as even if there was no underlying belief in the credulity of such stories, it still borrowed its content from a non-Christian “depository” of images, even though the same effect could be obtained by using a story that did not transgress the Christian world view. If nothing more, such stories demonstrate that non-Christian imagery was alive and well in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Additionally, Alan Dundes (1978, 89) also held the conviction that belief is not a reliable criterion for defining superstition.

19 Toivo (2016, 42) presented a case of a widow from Ulvila who in 1676 was accused of using magic and witchcraft while fishing. She tried to defend herself at her trial by explaining that during the very act which brought her to trial she also mentioned God. From her point of view, her act was a godly prayer, while the court interpreted it as a charm. Most of the population thought that using Christian formulas meant that they were in the realm of orthodoxy (Toivo, 2016, 44).



question of the Christian self-identity of those to whom the superstitious actions and beliefs were attributed was never questioned. Religion is not only belief in a deity or observance of religious rituals, but also belonging to a community, i.e., an identity. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, “being a Christian” did not necessarily mean the same thing to a clergyman or a peasant.

In any case, stories like the one described show the complexity of vernacular religion. Although in a different geographical and cultural context, in Finnish folklore, concern for the morality of community members and control of transgressions in the form of supernatural punishments was characteristic of Christian village culture (Koski, 2020, 178). It is also noteworthy that what was considered religious orthodoxy was not only institutionally defined, but also contested and determined by other social aspects, such as the popular, social, or performative (Kallestrup & Toivo, 2017, 3, 8). Therefore, although Christianity permeated every pore of Slovenian society, it could not (at least on a practical level) eradicate all segments of non/pre-Christian beliefs and practices. Psychological factors probably also played a role, as there were needs not adequately met by Christianity (Caldwell Ames, 2012, 337). Vernacular religion thus represents a functional system that adapts useful elements from different belief systems (cf. Stark, 2002, 30), and both orthodoxy and the vernacular draw from each other<sup>20</sup> (cf. Devlin, 1987).

There are also examples of superstitions that could be overcome by Christian intervention. For example, fire seen at night suggested buried treasure guarded by a dwarf. If one threw a rosary into this fire and said a prayer, this would drive away the dwarf and one could claim the treasure (Kociančič, 1856, 369). Even more, if a priest refused a request to ring the bells during thunderstorms, he himself could be accused of being a witch (Delimarič, 1845, 31). Associating the representative of the church with superstition may seem strange and contradictory, but it was not an uncommon belief (cf. Porter, 1999, 261; Devlin, 1987, 20–21).

#### BETWEEN PROGRESS AND TRADITION: EDUCATION, POLITICS AND POWER IN RELATION TO SUPERSTITION

The pedagogical component of the critique of superstition is an essential component of the articles in *Novice* (Figure 6):

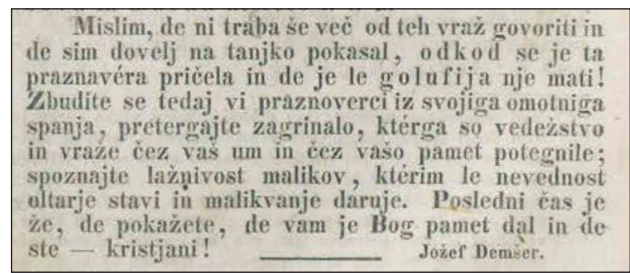


Figure 6: *Šembilja (Konec)* (Demšer, 1844, 111).<sup>21</sup>

*One must be proud of one's nationality and honour it. However, not all customs, whether Slovenian or of other nations, are praiseworthy; some of them are wrong or even sinful [...] There are some folk customs, superstitions, which must be eradicated if the people are to advance culturally. What is sinful is explained to us by Christianity and common sense.* (Unknown author, 1851a, 26)

In *Novice*, there was an active attempt to educate readers so that they would no longer hold superstitious beliefs not in harmony with scientific knowledge (cf. Iskrač-Frankolski, 1863, 313; Likar, 1863, 155). This was not only a question of intellectual progress, but also a question of religion and morality – those who held on to erroneous ideas from the pre-Christian past were not only ignorant, but also against Christianity. Even though, from a Romantic and nationalist perspective, folklore, especially traditional beliefs and mythology, reflected the collective consciousness of the nation, untouched by modernity and reason (Koski, 2020, 172), at the same time, the “wrong” kind of non/Pre-Christian folklore stood in opposition to the notion of a “true Slovene,” who was proud of his noble pagan past and whose remnants (i.e., folklore referring to pre-Christian entities, such as Slavic gods, fairies, buried treasures ...), but did not actively believe in them. Both Christianity and scientific discoveries<sup>22</sup> represented progress that a “true Slovene” had to embrace wholeheartedly.

20 Some of the vernacular practices (for example, popular pilgrimages for health, animals, or wealth) were accommodated by the Church – although not always with great enthusiasm (Devlin, 1987, 11).

21 Translation: “I believe that there is no additional need to talk about these superstitions and that I have shown in detail how these empty beliefs came about, and that deceit is their mother! Wake up from your hazy sleep all who believe in these empty beliefs, break the curtain of superstition that covers your mind and intelligence; know the falseness of the idols to which you make altars and give offerings out of your ignorance. It is the final time to show that God gave you a mind and that you are, in fact, Christians!”

22 Although, as rightfully pointed out by Dundes (1978, 89) the criterion of validity in the sense of objective scientific truth as a postulate for defining superstition is also wrong as the stance of what is considered the right kind of knowledge is also relative in societies and prone to change. Perhaps the most common definition of superstition is that which employs the criterion of validity in the sense of objective scientific truth.

Nevertheless, which folklore was acceptable and good, and which was better forgotten was not perfectly clear. This uncertainty about pre-Christian/non-Christian beliefs reflected in Slovenian folklore was addressed by Matija Majer (1844b, 172):

*Is it permissible to speak of the old times, of how it used to be? Could it perhaps be a sin if we talk about Slovenian sybils, about žalik žene? I think this is not so wrong. After all, educated people study stories (history), and I have never heard that this is wrong; they even praise them for being educated, because they can tell how things used to be in the world. What others find beautiful, you should not make a shame for Slovenians! Excuse me? Don't people learn whole books about the false gods (idols) of the Romans and Greeks? They don't do it to believe in them, but only to know what the faith of the ancient Romans and Greeks was. They themselves remain devout Christians. Isn't that so? I have traveled among the Slovenes in Carniola, Styria, Carinthia, and Gorizia – as far as I know them, I do not think there is anyone among us who is foolish enough to pray to Sybil or the White Lady as to a goddess, or to kneel as to a saint and sigh: 'Saint Sybil, pray to God for us.' A Slovene sometimes says, 'Sybil said this and that,' in the sense of 'Plant corn or tuber crops during the old moon or the new moon,' meaning, 'That's what people used to do.'*

The true value of such superstitious beliefs lies in the fact that they offer a window into the noble Slovenian past:

*Those who do not see at first glance that these superstitions originate from pagan times and resemble the superstitions of other peoples need not be surprised that even today stories full of such absurdities are told. They are a living testimony to the mythology of the time and remain interesting to us because they reveal the history of development and civilisation of the Slovenians. (Mulec, 1856, 225–226)*

“Vernacular knowledge”<sup>23</sup> as Valk (2022, 12) put it, contains elements of institutional knowledge and at the same time contradicts and competes with it. The terms “vernacular” and “institutional” are closely related to social institutions that deal with power (Valk,

2022, 8). In the case of *Novice*, we can see that while the bearers of vernacular knowledge (as the educated collectors saw them) accepted parts of the authoritative discourse (Christian teachings, certain scientific knowledge), they also maintained certain beliefs and practices that were outside of these discourses. And from the outside perspective (i.e., from the bearers of the authoritative discourse), these were seen as inferior (unless they were seen as non-threatening “remnants” of past times). Non-doctrinal (i.e., non-Christian) traditions and beliefs were considered part of otherness, and cultural and scientific interest in them was legitimised solely by their perception as “remnants” from the past (Koski, 2020, 172). If not, they were not considered a valid research topic in themselves and an equally valid part of Slovenian culture, but “superstition” and “foolishness.”

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS AND POSSIBILITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This paper has attempted to shed light on the complex religious landscape of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the territory of Slovenia, in which doctrinaire Christianity and lived, vernacular religion coexisted and interacted in various ways. Through an analysis of historical sources in *Novice*, we have seen how the dominant religious discourse of the time often marginalised and stigmatised vernacular religious practices as “superstitious,” while at the same time accepting some of them for political and social reasons. It was also mentioned how the rise of nationalist ideologies on Slovenian territory and in other European nations as a whole fueled interest in pre-Christian religions and folklore, which were seen as expressions of national identity.

While *Novice* provides us with information about the nature of the content of religious beliefs and practices in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is difficult to assess how those described as adherents of superstition (i.e., peasants) actually viewed it. As noted earlier, superstition is a concept imposed by the dominant religion and is as such part of a discourse that denies the validity and equality of religious expressions that do not conform to them. It, in fact, silences them.

It is questionable, however, whether the educated collectors and researchers of Slovenian folklore attached the same meaning of Christian “faith” to the stories and practices they encountered among the Slovenian peasants, which they called “superstition.” Perhaps the vernacular religiosity they encountered could be better characterised by

23 »Vernacular knowledge is not a systematic and consistent doctrine but rather an expressive strategy and its never-finalized product, which appears in manifold forms, both verbal and non-verbal. It can be expressed in oral, written and printed genres but also acted out in visual art, symbols, music, rituals and behaviour. It can be finalized in writing or works of art but more often it occurs in private and public interaction« (Valk, 2022, 9).

attitudinal factors and ritual practices than by beliefs (cf. Despland, 2005, 8863; also, Valk, 2022). However, Maria Toivo (2016, 11) disagreed with the assumption that “lived religion” should be reduced to rituals and believes that it also includes experiences and emotional performances, an “acting out” of a person’s conception of the world and their relations to the sacred and supernatural. Even magic, as she rightly pointed out, requires a belief in its efficacy and a conviction that there is a higher power that can be compelled to interact (Toivo, 2016, 11). Regardless of what kind of beliefs (or lack thereof) is mentioned, what we can witness instead through the descriptions of superstition in *Novice* is the existence of various ways of coping with life that do not necessarily require a firm commitment to faith in the Christian sense (cf. Despland, 2005, 8863), but do not necessarily exclude it either.

In analysing the representation of superstition in *Novice*, several things must be considered. These include the nationalistic motivations in collecting and interpreting folklore at the time. The other is the editorial process and the pedagogical goals that Bleiweis pursued as the editor. Additionally, one must consider the prevailing Christian discourse that was found in all sectors of society. The rather fragile balance between admiration of pagan remnants and abhorrence of non-Christian beliefs and practices was accompanied by the (unconscious)

search for enchantment (contradicting Weber’s notions of disenchantment), the construction of Slovenian identity, and attempts at the intellectual justification of the superiority of Christianity and the subsequent need to eradicate harmful and backward superstitions that hindered the quality of life and corrupted the religious and moral character of a “true Slovenian.”

The criterion for distinguishing non-Christian elements in folklore as “harmless” or even “valuable” from “superstitious” and “stupid” seems to be active belief in their efficacy or credulity. But even this is not black and white. If the overall message of a particular folklore confirmed and reinforced current moral, political, or religious discourses, the non-Christian elements in the folklore were accepted.

The examples of superstition presented are undoubtedly only a fragment of what was considered superstition in Slovenian lands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and of vernacular religiosity in general. A more comprehensive study would be needed<sup>24</sup> in order to build on or correct the conclusions of this paper. However, this paper could be the starting point, and this study allows us to draw some reasonable conclusions. Attempting to understand or even reconstruct the folk religiosity of the past is difficult (cf. Valk, 1996), and as always with attempts to understand the mentality of the past, consideration of the context of the time is crucial.

<sup>24</sup> Other newspapers where 19<sup>th</sup> century Slovenian folklore was published include Slovenski glasnik, Slovenska bčela, Zora, Vestnik, Vedež, Kras, Ljubljanski zvon, Dom in svet. The first collections of folklore in monographs also started to be published. Additionally, a great deal of folklore has never been published (Kropej Telban, 2021, 104).



## VRAŽEVERJE, NACIONALIZEM IN SLOVENSKA RELIGIJSKA KRAJINA 19. STOLETJA

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## POVZETEK

V prispevku je raziskan koncept vraževerja oz. odnos do vraževerja na območju Slovenije v 19. stoletju. Članek povzema različne pomene, ki jih je vraževerje imelo skozi čas ter obravnava težave pri raziskovanju vernakularne religioznosti na podlagi zgodovinskih virov. Članek se začne z razpravo o prepletanju krščanstva in vraževerja, poudarja načine, na katere sta se prepletala in vplivala drug na drugega. Nato se pogloblja v različne vrste vraževerja, ki so bile razširjene v tem obdobju, pri čemer se opira na primere iz časopisa *Kmetijske in rokodelske novice*, v katerem se omenjajo različne vrste vraževerja, vključno s čarovništvom in prerokovanjem. V članku je prav tako govora o kritikah vraževerja v *Novicah*, katerih namen je bil dvigniti izobrazbeno raven nižjih slojev. Preučuje tudi načine, na katere so nacionalne ideologije spodbujale zanimanje za predkrščanske religije in odnos intelektualcev do vraževerja. Razprava obravnava tudi proces oblikovanja naroda, uredniški proces ter krščanski diskurz v analizi folklorne. Elementi folklorne so bili sprejeti, če so se ujemali s prevladujočimi moralnimi, političnimi ali verskimi stališči. Članek se zaključi z razpravo o najpomembnejših zaključkih raziskave, poudarjena je tudi nujnost celovitejšega raziskovanja vernakularne religioznosti v 19. stoletju ter pomembnost upoštevanja konteksta preučevanega obdobja pri poskusu razumevanja religijske preteklosti. Članek podaja podroben in niansiran vpogled v vlogo vraževerja v verskem in kulturnem okolju 19. stoletja na območju današnje Slovenije.

**Ključne besede:** vraževerje, vernakularna religija, 19. stoletje, slovenski nacionalizem, slovstvena folklor

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