

Čarojice (Masquerade)

The Serbs call the time period from Christmas holidays to the beginning of the “Great” – “Holy” Lent a meat eating period or meatfare period (mesojede, mesnice or mrsovede) and the last week of the meatfare period is the white week, the last day of which is the “white” – “cheese” Shrovetide, the day when the meatfare period ends. Fires are burnt (olalije, oratnice, mašale) on this day in some parts populated with Serbian, figuratively aiming at cleaning the air from evil spirits and thus protecting fields and crops, wishing for these fires to contribute to the progress in fruitfulness and health of people and livestock.

On the Sunday before the white Shrovetide, on the eve of the Great Lent, in some Serbian places a custom called “Čarojice” (masquerade) is organised. This is a custom where a group of masked young men visits households, dancing and singing. Maskers (Čarojičari) represent processions of their ancestors’ souls bringing fruitfulness and basically they are identical to the processions of Christmas carollers.

It is not known when has this custom been started, but it is believed covering up with masks dates as far back as the pre-civilisation and pre-Christian farming/cattle-breeding cultures with characteristic primitive forms of religion as well as magic practised for fruitfulness and protection against evil spirits. The purpose of “Čarojice” was predominantly pushing away the evil and calling for a fruitful year.

No matter how much Čarojice joke around and sing silly rhymes during their visit, participating in Čarojice was a serious matter. Rules for Čarojice were strict and they had to be strictly obeyed in order to avoid fatal consequences. In fact, it

was believed that should by any chance the two groups of Čarojice meet in the same village, one of the participants in Čarojice would most definitely die in the coming year. This is why the young men in a village had to agree on everything, who will participate in Čarojice and if there was going to be more than one group in a village, in which direction would they be moving so they would avoid meeting each others.

Čarojice members must not start visiting the village before 22:00 hours and they must finish their round visits before sunrise. Upon sunset they gather at the house agreed with the group, an odd number of men that chose main roles between themselves: a bride, brother of the groom or “stari svat” (bride’s chief attendant on the way to fetch the bride), a grandmother, a grandfather, a billy goat and a male cat. They are wearing rugs and old clothes and their faces are covered with masks, whether original masks or their faces sooted, that is, drawn on with coal (this is how Čarojice got its name – čarati – a verb: draw with coal), in order to hide their identity the best way possible. They sing common songs along the way, occasionally very rude ones and they carry cattle bells and rattles, chiming and making noise in order to force the daemons away from themselves that night. Brother of the groom, that is, “stari svat” would have the main word, who would call the hosts to come out of their houses. Once the host came out Čarojice members teased him and drew him into Kolo (folk circle dance) which was inevitably danced in front of each house. Čarojice could only be joined by men, mostly of younger age, people who are cheerful and who can sing and entertain.

When they arrive in front of the first house, they stand before a locked door and start singing:

*Čarojice arrived before your house
To drink a hot plum brandy
And incidentally take something away
Whereas their flour sacks are shaking empty*

The host will open the door and let Čarojice inside the house and treat them with: apples, wedding wraps, embroidered handkerchiefs, bacon, salt, grain, hemp... Treating with brandy (rakija) is inevitable, for which they thank the host by singing an appropriate song:

*May this glass, our pride
Wander everywhere and ask for me
No matter was it fifth or tenth
We don't mind at all*

Once they had a good laugh and treat at the host’s and picked up their presents, the host saw Čarojice members out with a song:

*May luck be with you and may you visit next year
again
There will be meat and dried bacon
May you depart with luck on this dark night
Promise that you will visit us*

And they leave to another host singing:

*Let's go brothers
To (the name of the next host) to make it in time
To wish him also a
Good health to serve him well
And with people may he mingle*

Not all of Čarojice members enter the house. At least one member of Čarojice stays out of the house at all times and remains outside, hidden near the house, so that the household members wouldn't know the exact number of Čarojice members, because that night nobody is to count them. If someone would count them and determine the exact number of Čarojice members, it was believed that one of Čarojice members (it was believed that it would be the one with whom the counting ends) would die or fall seriously ill. Even while walking through the village, a part of Čarojice members takes side tracks or bypasses going off the paths in order to prevent people counting them from the inside of their houses.

Čarojice members are equally thankful to everyone, and they sing and rejoice with the ones who give little, the same as they do with the wealthy ones. Very often before poor households they perform the custom without getting anything. However, should there be anyone (which rarely happens) who would confront them, swear at them or wouldn't want to give them anything, Čarojice members curse him using appropriate verses:

*May you get your sons married and crave
for bread*

*May you get your daughters married and
sell your land*

*May your house be called a shanty and
your wife another man marry*

Or

*May God give you daughter-in-law to
clean your "opanci" (strapped soft-soled
footwear)*

*And may she throw your slippers into the
dew and hit you with your knitted socks
across your nose*

*And may she throw your socks in the grass
and "opanci" on your head*

Or yet even worse

*This house made of lime-tree
There is nobody in it
This house made of logs
And in it the host is made of crap*

Once they have paid round visits to the whole village, they go back to the house where they left and before sunrise where they prepare a feast from what they gathered and they get a little drunk. The custom was that all the family members of the ones that participated in Čarojice were invited. Some years, when the gifts were more abundant, the whole village would participate in the evening celebration. If something is left unused they share that in equal parts. On their departure, they bless that home and depart to their houses.



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Čarojice (Masquerade)

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Piskavica
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