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# *Džolomar*: Exploring the material culture in a winter masked ritual in Kavadarci, Republic of North Macedonia

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## Abstract

The Balkans are rich in cultural traditions that have pre-Christian origins. Many of these traditions have survived over time and continue to be practiced in the contemporary period. In the Republic of North Macedonia, the Džolomar, a winter masked ritual, is performed during the Orthodox New Year in some communities by an all-male ensemble wearing elaborate costumes. These male performers portray various characters and are mostly notable for the large cowbells attached to their belts. Containing pre-Christian elements, the Džolomar invokes fertility relating to pastoral life, repels evil spirits, and brings good fortune to the community. This article explores the winter masked rituals in Resava and Begnishte, two neighboring villages in Kavadarci. Fieldwork, which consisted of interviews with locals, observations of rituals, and participation in associated practices, was conducted to gather data for the study. By exploring the tradition through the lens of material culture theory, the study confirms that the material elements in Džolomar affect local communities in three ways: the formation of identity, the preservation of cultural traditions, and the reconnection of villagers with their historic past.

***Keywords:*** *Džolomar*; Winter masked ritual; Municipality of Kavadarci; Resava; Begnishte; Republic of North Macedonia

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## 1. Introduction

Masks are usually associated with certain characters, such as the Phantom in the classic movie *The Phantom of the Opera*, or with people attending masquerade parties in Venice. Much of what we know about masks and what we associate them with is primarily influenced by the visuals we consume in mass media. In European and Balkan societies, masks have traditionally functioned as symbols embedded in ritual and social practice. An archaic belief that the dead had power and dominion over the living was embedded in the consciousness of these societies. The dead could wreak havoc, pestilence, and death; however, if the living showered them with reverence, they could enact fertility in the fields and among the people. Masks symbolize the power of the dead, and people wear them to protect themselves, their livestock, and their homes from evil.[1] These two

connotations are further accentuated in the etymologies of the word. In Greek, it is *deikèlon* (a ghost, spirit, phantom, or a mask); in Latin, *larva* or *larvae demonum* (an evil entity or a mask); and in Longobard, *masca* (a spirit that disembowels humans).[1] Moreover, masks remain a powerful symbol alluding to the spirit world and an object, a talisman, protecting people from malice caused by evil spirits.

During winter, masking customs are commonly practiced across much of Europe and the Balkans. In Austria, young and unmarried men personified the devil through an anthropomorphic figure called *Krampus*. These men wear horned wooden masks, complete with fur suits and cowbells. They roam villages to reward good children and punish naughty ones.[2] Mythologically, it is an ancient pagan custom that aims to overthrow winter and restore reproductive capacity in nature and that of humans. In Mamoiada, a shepherding town in Sardinia, 12 masked men called *mamuthones*, representing each month of the year, appear in town on St. Anthony the Great's feast day every January 17.[3] The *mamuthones* wear dark masks (a tragic mask), sheepskins, and large cowbells on their backs, weighing 27 kilograms and evoking a funeral rhythm during the procession.[3,4] The *mamuthones* symbolize ancestral rites and relate to the cycle of death and rebirth.[3] In the Balkans, masked figures also surface during winter, bringing fertility, blessings, and protection to the communities. The winter masked tradition in Bulgaria is generally known as *Surva*,[5] in which young male performers, the *Kukeri*, wear fantastical masks and belts adorned with large metal bells. Together with musicians, they roam the villages between early and midwinter.[6] In the Republic of North Macedonia, particularly in Kavadarci city, the tradition is called *Džolomari,* where male masked performers are notable for their belts with giant cowbells and the addition of other characters, such as the bride and grandmother. Despite the varying terminology, these practices refer to winter masquerades in the Balkans featuring male participants in anthropomorphic costumes.

Ethnographic studies regarding winter masked traditions have been conducted through the years. In Podence, a small village in the municipality of Macedo de Cavaleiros, Portugal, the winter masked performances are known as *Caretos*. Earlier ethnographic interpretations framed the tradition as a disappearing rural past associated with fertility rites, male initiation, and regeneration. Raposo's[7] findings revealed that local elites and cultural groups drove *Caretos*' revitalization in the 1980s. By engaging with tourism, media, and government institutions, the ritual transformed into a marketable cultural commodity, where ritual objects (e.g., masks, cowbells, costumes, statues, and online visibility) are central to its transformations and actively produce meaning. In Gimo, Uppland, Sweden, Hugoson[8] examined the *Knutmasso* and highlighted that its masking practices articulate place-based identity, social relations, and political commentary in a contemporary rural setting. *Knutmasso* becomes a democratic arena where authorities can be publicly criticized without consequence. The ritual objects in the practice (e.g., masks, costumes, carnival floats, and props), which are often handmade, function as mediators of meaning. Among the Moksha and Erzya Mordovians, masks and ritual mummery are considered a core structural component of traditional ritual culture. Masking also serves as a mechanism of transformation, allowing performers to assume identities associated with animals, ancestors, and spirits. Similar to findings from other studies, ritual objects (e.g., masks, costumes, household items, animal skins, and straw) are considered not merely decorative but active ritual agents.[9] Moreover, they reflect totemic beliefs, fertility symbolism, afterlife, renewal, protection, gender negotiation, and cosmological balance among the Moksha and Erzya.

### 1.1. The *Džolomar*

For this study, the author focuses on the *Džolomar* of two neighboring villages, Resava and Begnishte, in Kavadarci. The winter masked customs in Resava and Begnishte offer a vivid tapestry of rich cultural traditions that intertwine ancient rituals with contemporary practices. The *Džolomar* is part of the local tradition during Vasilica, the old New Year, which also coincides with the so-called unbaptized days. In religious terms, this is the 12-day period in the Orthodox tradition between Christmas and Epiphany, during which evil spirits are believed to enter homes and harm people.[10] While the tradition occurs during Christian holidays, the *Džolomar* has no Christian identity and has pagan origins. In both villages, several men wear dark hooded costumes made of sheepskin, goatskin, or even a patchwork of old fabrics sewn together. Their faces are covered in soot taken from an earthen oven, and they have long beards. They also hold a stick or a cane, which they use to whip other male villagers. The focal point of their costumes is the numerous cowbells hanging from their waists, supported by thick leather belts, which erupt loudly when they move. The ritual's male-centric character originated from the Roman Lupercalia, an archaic shepherd tradition of cleansing the flock.[11] Masking is also considered a rite of passage wherein metamorphosis is at its core. The metamorphosis of the moon, human figures, and other objects depicts the transcendence of nature, such as the passing of the calendrical cycle or the transition from one spring to another.

Other characters are present in the annual event, in addition to dark-hooded men. There is a bride, a groom, a grandmother, and an old man, among others. Some men in the village are selected to play these characters. The presence of male transvestites in the *Džolomar* is an archaic practice that is perceived as a form of initiation rites among men. It is interpreted as a transition from boyhood (childhood) to manhood (maturity). The ritual of pretending was also influenced by the cult of Dionysus, the Greek god who was raised as a girl by Inonu, the daughter of Cadmus, to protect him from Hera. The annals of Herodotus also described the act of pretense when the Persians demanded land from Amanita, the Macedonian king. When the Persians were invited to a banquet by the king, they also asked to be accompanied by Macedonian girls. Alexander, the son of Amanita, did not accept the idea; instead, beardless boys dressed as women were ordered to escort the Persians. As the Persians tried to touch their escorts, the disguised boys became agitated and eventually thrashed the party who wanted to defile them.[10] These extracts tell us that the act of pretense influences and plays a massive part in many ritual traditions in North Macedonia.

### 1.2. Material culture theory

In exploring the *Džolomar* rituals in Resava and Begnishte, this study focuses on the ritual's material culture, particularly the ritual objects: What artefacts are used by the *Džolomari*? What do these artefacts symbolize? How do these artefacts reconnect people to their past? How do these artefacts reflect the identity of each village? These questions are derived from the tenets of material culture theory (MCT). MCT theorists hold that objects play a role in social relations,[12] express specific values, beliefs, and attitudes of people,[13] and shape individual and collective identity via bodily experience and memory.[14] A material culture study stressed that, "objects have the ability to signify things—or establish social meanings—on behalf of people, or do 'social work.'"[15(p4)] Instead of things or objects, the term *artefacts* is utilized in that study to determine the materials used by the *Džolomari* because MCT regards them as "symbolic of some prior aspect of cultural or social activity."[15(p15)] Arguably, these artefacts connote values that the villagers continue to uphold. Many artefacts used by the *Džolomari* are utilitarian, but they also magnified spiritual value and reflected people's attitudes toward others. As Prown reiterates, they may "constitute distinctive cultural expressions."[13(p3)] These artefacts also allow villagers to experience their past firsthand, as they serve as evidence of rituals conducted in earlier times. They act as agents for the survival of historical events.[13] Through these frameworks, the current study's narrative is created by discussing the following points: a description of the *Džolomar* rituals in Resava and Begnishte; a discussion pointing out the most important artefacts, their symbolic meanings, and how these artefacts bridge the past and present; and an exploration of how these artefacts relate to MCT.

## 2. Methodology

A qualitative research design was utilized to collect data for this study. The data gathering process included interviewing the performers and villagers, observing the rituals closely, participating in some aspects of the rituals (e.g., being beaten by a stick several times and applying soot on the face), merrymaking (e.g., eating with the locals and chatting in front of the bonfire), and documenting the rituals by capturing videos and photos. Transportation to all field sites was provided by Arts 5.0 Ltd. In addition, the Museum Kavadarci and the Association of Džolomari in Resava and Begnishte facilitated access by introducing resource persons to the fieldwork group. Given that each researcher has their own research agenda, everyone was allowed to record their own video and audio. A folder on Google Drive was created where all researchers could share their documentation (e.g., videos and photos) and recorded interviews. Researchers may use these materials as long as appropriate credit is given. Through a smartphone application, writing field notes, such as the essential details in the activities we participated in or observed, daily reflections, and significant remarks of individuals we interviewed or encountered from time to time, became time-efficient.

During fieldwork, Prof. Anna Mária Bólya and Prof. Rodna Velickovska served as interpreters for researchers who were not fluent in Macedonian. One of the researchers, Milena Medojevic, who is fluent in both the local language and English, was also instrumental in verifying the statements of key respondents, especially during the panel interview with Tome Krstevski, the museum curator of Museum Kavadarci, and Ordancho Lazarov, village president of Begnishte. Informal interviews were also conducted without interpreters, as some villagers, notably the teenage respondents, are fluent in English. Insights from the teenage respondents are significant as they were able to contextualize the villages' traditions and verify some information.

This study was guided by ethnographic analysis. The data collection provided a thick description of how artefacts were used in the *Džolomar*. These artefacts were positioned in their social and cultural contexts using contextual interpretation. To identify recurring ideas and the meanings attached to these artefacts, and to explore their relationships with people in the communities, two connected processes were conducted: thematic coding

(meanings associated with artefacts) and relational analysis (how these artefacts mediate). Using the lens of MCT, the study explained in Section 5 how the extant themes and relationships depicted the artefacts as cultural texts that regulated proximity, status, and intimacy; how they personified the gendering of time; and how they became valuable resources that connect the communities to their past.

### 2.1. The fieldwork process

This research entailed immersive fieldwork conducted from January 9 to January 15, 2025. The fieldwork was organized by Arts 5.0 Ltd. and headed by Prof. Bartha Elek and Prof. Anna Mária Bólya from the University of Debrecen in Hungary. Aside from the author, six doctoral students from the same university participated in the fieldwork, each with their own research agenda. On January 9, the team left Budapest, Hungary, early in the morning and arrived in Kavadarci city, the Republic of North Macedonia, in the early evening. The following day was allocated for a lecture on Macedonian cultural traditions by Prof. Rodna Velickovska, an ethnomusicologist from the University of Skopje. Due to heavy snow on January 11 that made the roads impassable, we opted to stay in the accommodation. We devoted the day to discussing our research plans and deriving questions for the *Džolomar* performers and villagers. By the following day, the team visited the Museum Kavadarci in the city center. Museum curator Tome Krstevski gave a tour and explained the significance of the vast collections to Kavadarci's cultural heritage. After this, the museum invited Ordancho Lazarov, the village president of Begnishte and a longtime *Džolomar* performer, and we were allowed to conduct a panel interview with him, which lasted 45 minutes.

In the early evening of January 13, we proceeded to the two villages in the city's outskirts. First, we made a quick stop in Resava, where villagers had set up a bonfire and barbecue in the plaza in preparation for the Orthodox New Year celebration (Figure 1). It is tradition for this merrymaking to continue till the next day. As we mingled and conversed with the villagers, barbequed meats and sausages were served unendingly, and hot *rakia* (local fruit brandy) was poured generously. After an hour, we headed for Begnishte, the ancestral residence of village president Ordancho Lazarov. Our host family invited some *Džolomari* for us to meet. With enough *rakia* from our host family, we engaged in brief conversations with the performers to get to know them personally (Figure 2). They also showed us the storage area where the *Džolomar* costumes were kept. This lasted at least two hours before we headed back to the city.

Around three in the morning on January 14, we proceeded to Begnishte to witness the masking process and the preliminary ritual outside our host family's residence. By five o'clock, the ritual started, and the procession commenced, going to the main square where a huge bonfire was ongoing. After observing the rituals for several hours, we visited the village of Resava to witness their version of the *Džolomar*. We were also invited to the home of the *Džolomar* leader, where his mother showed us how to bake a traditional bread, *λαλαγκίταις* (*lalangites*), which they serve in the community gathering every New Year. The last phase of the fieldwork was returning to Begnishte at midday to observe the final part of the ritual, when the *Džolomari* went house to house, where residents gave them foodstuffs, which they would feast on later. Finally, we returned to Resava, conversed with the locals, and observed the *Džolomari* in the village for another hour.

On January 15, the team concluded fieldwork by summarizing the gathered data and finalizing the timetable for the outputs to be submitted individually and collectively before heading back to Budapest.

## 3. The *Džolomari* of Resava and Begnishte

The *Džolomar* rituals of Resava and Begnishte share the same purpose: to ward off evil spirits and instill fertility in their agricultural lands and the villagers. Both also share the same characters and costumes. However, based on the author's observation, there is a slight difference in focus and certain ritual elements. In Resava, the number of male performers was fewer; the celebration's highlight was mainly geared toward reuniting with family and friends, and partaking in the community barbecue was deemed necessary. In contrast, while the festivity in Begnishte also contained elements of community solidarity, the focus is on the ritual aspect of the *Džolomar*: the number of male performers exceeded 15; there was a pre-ritual conducted early in the morning before the procession; a circular dancing near the bonfire was held; rioting between the performers and male villagers and copulation rites between the bride and male villagers are common occurrences; and the presence of a decorated donkey roaming the village with the performers to carry gifts from residents was an added novelty.

### 3.1. Begnishte

Begnishte's *Džolomari* started arriving before five in the morning, and they all gathered at the leader's residence uphill. Some performers were already dressed, and one could hear them passing along the narrow streets, their cowbells jangling loudly. Others were just masked with the help of some male attendants. An oven adjacent to the storage room where the costumes are kept is equally

**Figure 1.** The bonfire and community gathering in Resava. Photograph by Emese Lengyel (2025).

**Figure 2.** An intimate gathering was held with the *Džolomari* of Begnishte. Photography by Jose Antonio Lorenzo Tamayo (2025).

essential. The *Džolomari* retrieved ash from this oven and applied it to their faces. Male teenagers also approached us and naughtily applied soot on our faces. At least three *Džolomari* approached me during this time as well and, as traditions dictate, they struck the author's backside. By exactly five, an old man who served as the group leader assembled the performers and, after saying his initiations, the *Džolomari* either jumped or gyrated, which propelled the cowbells into producing immense noise. A group picture was taken afterwards for posterity. Immediately after the group photo, the leader led the *Džolomari* to the main square in a sprint, as if they were rallying.

The performers then gathered in a circular formation in front of the huge bonfire, held their arms together around it, and conducted an *oro*, a traditional chain dance usually performed at almost all life occasions and seasonal rituals in the Balkans.[16] The performers conducted another *oro* in an open space adjacent to the bonfire. While jumping in a circular motion, they did not break the *oro* for a short period until two or three of them decided to detach and quickly snatch a random male villager to punish. Punishment included hitting the buttocks or gripping the captive tightly to prevent escaping. At times, the *Džolomari* brought the male villager into the circle, where he tried his best to free himself from captivity (Figure 3).

Another event was the symbolic copulation between a bride and a *Džolomar* or any male villager. The group's leader was the first to do this. He performed the sexual act on the bride, who was spread-eagled to the snow-laden ground beside a wall. As the leader enacted a symbolic copulation in a rear-entry posture, the other performers and onlookers intently observed the act. Some onlookers were taking pictures or video recording from a distance. While the act could be perceived as provocative, it was carried out within a framework of ritual solemnity, eliciting respectful attention rather than overt surprise. Ordancho Lazarov, a *Džolomar,* explains that this act is related to agriculture and symbolizes fertility for successful vegetation. Aside from being a fruitful year, this is the only time when people can be impudent, since the ritual falls during the unbaptized days.[17] The *oro*, snatching male villagers, and the symbolic copulation are performed throughout the day in varying intervals.

Around midday, the leader emerged with a baby doll riding a donkey near the bonfire. The performers, with the bride carrying the baby doll taken from the donkey, went from house to house (Figure 4). As the *Džolomari* visited each residence, the host danced with them on the lawn while his wife handed them food (e.g., cheese, flour, meat, and brandy), which the donkey carried. Food collected during the day will be used for the dinner reception for the *Džolomari*, which will take place a few days after the New Year and will be prepared by women close to the performers.[17]

### 3.2. Resava

Meanwhile, the *Džolomar* ritual in Resava is less complex than in Begnishte. Elements such as symbolic copulation, dancing the *oro* (although they only perform a half *oro* given the lesser number of *Džolomari*), and hitting the buttocks of male villagers were common occurrences throughout the day. Here, the author was caned twice by different *Džolomari*. Conversely, no random male villagers were snatched, nor was a donkey carrying food gifts observed in this village. One element that they took seriously was rioting. Resava's *Džolomari* usually wait along the main road for passing cars. They would stop the car on its tracks and press the passengers to reward them (usually with money). If the passengers do not give in, another option for them is to tackle the *Džolomari* instead (Figure 5). The festivity in Resava was firmly focused on strengthening and reuniting ties with fellow villagers. Those interviewed, especially the teenagers, live in the city and return to the village only with their parents during holidays and special occasions. Two teenage informants noted that they look forward to this event every year.

Two distinct elements made the *Džolomar* ritual in Resava meaningful: the bonfire and the constant grilling of meat. According to the bonfire's custodian, villagers collected wood several days before the New Year. His duty was to maintain the fire until the festivity ended that day. Here, people usually engaged in conversations with friends, and the fire provided enough heat to combat the cold. Beyond its social and utilitarian meanings, fire symbolizes the sun; in the Macedonian tradition, people believe that evil spirits can be repelled by fire.[18] This is also reinforced in the grilling of meats, as fire is also an element in the cooking process (Figure 6). As endless food was shared among the villagers and their guests, food also became an impetus for strengthening relationships and group solidarity, which were further harnessed by emotions, experiences, and space.[19]

## 4. Artefacts and symbolism in the *Džolomar*

The exact origins of the *Džolomar* are difficult to trace due to the lack of documentation. However, through oral tradition, villagers believe that this winter masked custom has been practiced for centuries and was already in place before the introduction of Christianity. During fieldwork, observing the *Džolomari*, the costumes worn by the performers provide hints at the ritual's antiquity and symbolic nature. There are several characters in this Macedonian winter masked tradition. The most apparent

**Figure 3.** Some *Džolomari* snatch and tackle a male villager. Photography by Emese Lengyel (2025).

**Figure 4.** The donkey with a doll atop it emerges with the *Džolomar* leader. Photography by Jose Antonio Lorenzo Tamayo (2025).

**Figure 5.** The *Džolomari* of Resava halts the passing car to ask for money. Photography by Emese Lengyel (2025).

**Figure 6.** Food is a big part of the celebration in Resava. Photography by Jose Antonio Lorenzo Tamayo (2025).

are the hooded black figures with ashen faces and long beards, and they hold a wooden stick or a cane. Their hoods are made of goat's wool, and their long moustaches and beards are fabricated using similar material. Ordancho Lazarov adds that the outfit alone may cost around €100, and the performers order it in Bulgaria if it is unavailable in North Macedonia. Inspired by forest ghosts, the terrifying appearance of the *Džolomari* aims to chase evil spirits, including *Karakondzul*, a nocturnal creature in Macedonian folklore that comes to the ground during the 12 days of Christmas, vampires, and plagues.[20,21]

The cowbells, called *klapetusha,* are another essential element in the costumes of the *Džolomari* (Figure 7). Each *Džolomar* typically carries at least 10 bells of varying sizes, weighing a total of 15 kilograms. It is estimated that each bell-equipped costume could weigh around 20 kilograms. Given the physical component of the costume, those men who want to be a *Džolomar* should be able to carry the weight of the bells. These bells are also expensive, costing €30 apiece. Observing the costumes, there are two bell variations among the performers: a more traditional gunmetal cowbell, which is bigger and bulkier, and a slimmer version that resembles a triangle. The loud sounds these bells produce serve as a means of banishing evil entities in the villages. The wooden stick or cane held by the *Džolomari* also has a symbolic function. As mentioned earlier, the author was caned five times in both villages. The performers do it out of goodwill, since being beaten by a *Džolomar* is seen as having a positive effect. In 1903, Abbott[22] observed in some parts of Macedonia, particularly in Shatista, that young boys knock people with sticks and clubs as they wish them health and joy. He also noted that the sticks are replaced by green boughs of the cornel or the olive tree, which symbolize summer fruitfulness and life.[21,22] In the contemporary period, the villagers in Begnishte and Resava believe that caning corresponds to wishing people good health and abundance. The same symbolic function applies if a *Džolomar* suddenly applies soot to the face of any unsuspecting villager.[15,17] This act is typically performed by teenage members of the *Džolomari*.

Female characters, such as the grandmother and the young bride, are also emphasized in the *Džolomar* rituals. The grandmother wears a dark outfit, and a black veil surrounds her face. Meanwhile, among all the characters, the bride is noticeable for her all-white costume. In contrast to the grandmother, the bride wears a white veil. The costumes of the female characters are easy to procure, as no special materials are required; they are simply normal garments worn by women. These characters also wear cloth masks with holes for the eyes, nose, and mouth, which are decorated with exaggerated makeup. In Begnishte, the same individuals have been playing these female roles for

**Figure 7.** Bells of various shapes and sizes hang on the waists of the *Džolomari*. Photography by Emese Lengyel (2025).

many years. Symbolically, the grandmother represents the old year about to end, while the young bride denotes the new year filled with abundance.[17] Both characters join the symbolic copulation that signifies fertility in an agrarian context.

## 5. Analyzing material culture in the *Džolomar*

Material culture theory recognizes that objects are not passive; they play a crucial role in relational structures, expressing communal attitudes, beliefs, and values, and in the formation of collective identity through embodied practice and memory. In the *Džolomar* ritual in Resava and Begnishte, artefacts, including the outfits of the performers, bells, canes, and masks, serve as cultural texts that encode historic, symbolic, and emotional meanings.[13] These artefacts also contain intangible values (i.e., fertility, protection, abundance, and purification) that are made visible in the community. The *Džolomar* is both bodily and performative. Recalling Catherine Bell's "ritualization," the body becomes ritualized, given the strategic differentiation of ritual acts, which differ from ordinary behavior.[23] The bodily and performative aspect reflects this differentiation in various ways: the need for strong men to carry heavy bells throughout the ritual, which requires strength and stamina; the movement of the bodies for the bells to produce the ritual sounds; the *Džolomari*'s terrifying appearance that is supposed to scare evil spirits; and the rioting acts with passersby.

Miller[12] emphasized how artefacts do "social work." In this case, artefacts regulate proximity, status, and intimacy. The repeated caning and soot application to the faces of villagers by the *Džolomari* exemplify ritual encounters that blur the line between aggression and blessing. They become vehicles for sanctioned aggression, permitted only during the unbaptized days in the Orthodox calendar. Furthermore, Tilley[24] noted that ritual objects serve as a bridge that connects multiple layers of temporality. Artefacts in the *Džolomar* denote layers of time: cosmic time (i.e., performed during unbaptized days), agricultural time (i.e., fertility rituals relating to agrarian context), and biographical time (i.e., men becoming *Džolomari*, women preparing food). They also become part of cultural expressions, a gateway for villagers to reconnect with their past. Through these artefacts, local folklore and customs are preserved and passed on to the next generation. Villagers do this in two meaningful ways: they recount the tradition's significance orally and engage their children in it early on. The latter is more apparent and can be exemplified through the young *Džolomari,* who dressed like miniature versions of their fathers and reenacted the ritual in the evening.

As early as five years of age, male children are already immersed in the *Džolomar* ritual, and from here, they learn the symbolic nature of the artefacts. This process reflects the perspective of the French anthropologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu,[25] who emphasizes that identities can be influenced by material objects and social interaction. From a Bourdieuian perspective, the *habitus*, which refers to internalized dispositions, practices, and perceptions, plays a crucial role in explaining how material objects affect identity formation in the community. The formation of the *habitus* is developed through children's repeated engagement with masks, canes, soot, and costumes. These materials instill embodied dispositions that eventually regulate social behavior and perception. This process also conveys the transmission of cultural capital (e.g., skills and knowledge).[26] As children gradually participate in the *Džolomar* and become performers during adulthood, they attain mastery of ritual knowledge, and material culture becomes a marker of communal identity and continuity of tradition.

Gendered personifications of time are also evident in the *Džolomar*, which further illustrates the symbolic meaning embedded in material culture. This is characterized by the grandmother (old year) and the bride (new year). While the female garments worn by the performers are not elaborate, these are re-signified for ritual use. In Begnishte, a baby doll is seen riding on the donkey, which conveys biological reproduction and enables the community to participate in symbolic renewal. The donkey serves as a moving artefact of exchange and reciprocity, embodying social cohesion. It reinforces the villagers' kin and communal obligations to provide food to the *Džolomari*. Villagers contribute to the performers' shared meal without being physically present. Conversely, the rituals observed in Resava and Begnishte shaped localized ritual priorities. As observed and experienced, the ritual in Resava demonstrates themes of warmth and belonging, as the constant grilling of meats draws villagers into a shared meal and endless conversations. In contrast, the ritual in Begnishte felt formal and centered on drama and spectacle, as evidenced by the number of participants, the use of masks and ceremonial gestures, and the inclusion of additional artefacts (e.g., a doll and a donkey). The tradition's flexibility and local interpretations of shared symbols allow each village to express its identity.

Another way villagers connect to their past is by retaining the original elements of the *Džolomar*. In other places in North Macedonia and the Balkans, there is a tendency to add other characters (e.g., politicians and celebrities) depending on the social and political climate. The village of Vevčani in North Macedonia, for example, incorporates political satire into its tradition. Instead of

traditional anthropomorphic characters, male participants prefer to wear a mask of Vladimir Putin, dress in the style of Josip Broz Tito, the late Yugoslav leader, or portray any authoritarian figures.[27] The *Džolomar* in Resava and Begnishte have preserved their original forms—the way their ancestors conducted the rituals in yesteryears, as the villagers emphasized. Moreover, the survival of the material elements in the *Džolomar* is also shaped by its material composition and societal values. The bells, for example, endure the tests of time. Many of the bells used by the *Džolomari* are old, and some have been handed down for generations. While the outfits may decay over time, the performers purchase new ones as needed. British historians Leonie Hannan and Sarah Longair[28] affirmed that material elements survive when people value them. In the *Džolomar*, the material elements may not have monetary value, but the villagers regard them as valuable because they have symbolic functions.

## 6. Conclusion

The *Džolomar* is a ritual conducted during the Vasilica, which coincides with the unbaptized days in the Orthodox calendar and denotes themes of fertility, protection, abundance, and purification. In the Republic of North Macedonia, Resava and Begnishte, in the municipality of Kavadarci, are noted for preserving their winter traditions. This study examined the *Džolomar* through the lens of MCT. Artefacts utilized by the *Džolomari* have an active role in shaping ritual practice, social relations, and intergenerational continuity. As cultural texts, objects such as masks, bells, canes, soot, and costumes carry symbolic meaning that regulates bodily movement, proximity, and interaction. The repeated use of these artefacts also makes abstract values (e.g., fertility, protection, renewal, and purification) materially and socially tangible. Reading the *Džolomar* within the framework of MCT reveals how ritual knowledge is transmitted through performers' embodied participation, rather than solely through oral explanation. This is observed among children who imitate adult performers and handle ritual objects early on, demonstrating how material objects contribute to the formation of dispositions, skills, and perceptions that are sustained into adulthood. In such a context, ritual continuity relies on repeated bodily practice, mediated by artefacts, rather than on explicit instruction.

Despite differing ritual emphases in Resava and Begnishte, both communities employ shared symbols in ways that reflect their unique cultural identities and distinct local expressions. While Resava highlights conviviality and warmth, Begnishte focuses on spectacle and structure. This illustrates how material culture allows for flexibility without disrupting ritual continuity, thereby helping explain the practice's resilience in the face of social change. Given the scarcity of studies on the *Džolomar* in Macedonia, this study contributes to the anthropological understanding of the ritual by demonstrating that ritual objects are not merely passive cultural remnants, but active agents in the production and transformation of tradition. By foregrounding materiality, embodiment, and local variation, the study also contributes to broader discussions regarding ritual persistence and transformation. More than a belief or cultural narrative, it demonstrates how winter masked rituals such as the *Džolomar* endure over time through the sustained social life of ritual objects, which continue to structure communal experience across generations.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Author contributions

This is a single-authored article.

## Ethics approval and consent to participate

The communities involved in the study were aware of the fieldwork. The Pannónia Scholarship Programme requires written permission from an international partner. For this study, a signed agreement was provided by Resava's community president. The same person serves as the president of the Association "Jolomari" in Resava and Begnishte. No further approval was needed.

## Consent for publication

Interviewees gave verbal consent for the publication of their interview material and any identifiable photographs.

## Availability of data

The data used in this study are exclusively available to the group that conducted fieldwork in the Municipality

of Kavadarci. A written request must be submitted to the author.

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