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## **A LITTLE-KNOWN CUSTOM OF FINDING A BODY OF A DROWNED PERSON WITH BREAD AND BAKING TOOLS: A SEMANTIC-STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS**

**Andrii ZIUBROVSKYI**

The Ethnology Institute of National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine

Department of Historical Ethnology

15 Svobody avenue, Lviv, 79000, Ukraine

*e-mail: anzjubr@gmail.com*

*ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2221-3731>*

The article is devoted to the semantic-structural analysis of the little-known and little-studied custom of searching for a drowned body using bread and bakery items. The relevance of the proposed research lies primarily in the fact that at the moment there are no studies on this topic in Ukrainian ethnological science. Based on the analysis of publications somewhat tangential to the researched range of issues, mainly devoted to folk thanatology, the author claims that among other categories of the dead, the attitude towards the drowned was somewhat more loyal, given the mass of such a cause of premature death and the impossibility of unambiguously verifying it as suicide, often due to absence of a corpse. In the case when the drowning took place in an open body of water, and the body was not found, the villagers took certain actions in order to find it. First of all, the reason for the search was the need to verify the cause of death in order to classify or not classify the deceased as a suicide, as well as to reduce the public reaction for the surviving family members of the drowned person. However, the main reason for the search was the need to bury the drowned man, in order to neutralize his supposed negative influence on people as an agent of chthonosis. The main attributes of the ritual of searching for a drowned person were bread, dough trough (her lid) and a candle. The ritual took place in the form of launching these objects on the water: their unnatural behavior – movement against the current, spinning around their axis, circling – indicated the location of the body.

Among the attributes, the main place was occupied by bread. The use of cookies in the ritual of searching for the body of a drowned person is connected with the symbolic and semantic-semiotic statuses of bread in folk cultures. This product was sacralized, being considered the highest value. On a symbolic level, bread was the embodiment of goodness, abundance and fertility, associated with vegetation, warmth, sunlight. That is, he acted as a kind of agent of this, positive, sunny earthly world of the living. From this point of view, bread may have been opposed in such a ritual to the chthonic underwater world, which was associated with the afterlife and the symbolic categories of gloom, cold, phlegm, barrenness – non-life in general. According to folk beliefs, the drowned man became an agent of the underworld. A certain semantic opposition was created, in which the bread and the drowned man were at different ends of the scale of axiological judgments, but, like the rest of the binary oppositions, were in an inextricable connection of alternative concepts. Therefore, the location of the bread in this world mirrored the location of the body drowned under water. Other attributes of the custom, mainly, dough trough, had an identical semantic and semiotic statuses, as bread.

*Keywords:* ethnology, folk customs, drowned, body, to led on water, whirling, whirlpool, bread, dough trough, dough trough lid (“viko”), candle

Any death of a person in modern socio-cultural European realities was unequivocally perceived as a negative phenomenon. However, a bivalent attitude towards the end of biological existence was dominant in the public consciousness before the middle of the 20th century, and sporadically – until today. Thus, in the traditional worldview, death was perceived not so much from the point of view of a tragedy, as certain inevitability, a stage that every person must go through, a life milestone that cannot be redeemed with money or avoided in any other way. Therefore, from an emotional point of view, those who died of natural death were generally treated neutrally and respectfully, albeit with some fear and caution.

The attitude towards persons who died prematurely – those who did not live to their age – was different. They were divided into several categories. The first included those who died prematurely, but a natural death: from an illness, for example. These are, first of all, children, young people, pregnant women, women in childbirth. Ambiguously negative attitude towards were to the killed. In addition, those who were believed to die a “difficult” (prolonged and painful agony) death could also be singled out – criminals, sorcerers, serious sinners<sup>1</sup>.

However, those who died a violent, unnatural death, mainly suicides, those who went missing or were burned, drowned, were clearly negatively perceived. Those, who died in this way, belonged to the category of “unclean” or “untimely” dead. According to folk beliefs, they were considered to be peculiar agents of demonic forces, their place of death was usually the locus of the posthumous stay of such dying dead, and their activities were directed to the detriment of living people<sup>2</sup>.

However, even in the category of the unclean dead, there were those whose attitude was not unequivocally negative, namely, the drowned. A certain softened perception of this category of the dead is caused by the fact that death in water (a river, reservoir or well) was one of the most common forms of an accident; occasionally, the drowned were even considered righteous<sup>3</sup>. The reason for this was also that, in comparison with, for example, hanging, the fact of suicide by drowning was not clearly visualized and remained controversial.

Regarding the posthumous fate of the drowned in the ethnic territory of Ukraine, there were several main stories. Thus, according to ideas, drowned people became mermaids – mainly young girls who drowned both intentionally and as a result of an accident<sup>4</sup>. According to other beliefs, the drowned person turned into a certain servant of the waterman, for whom he carried water<sup>5</sup>. Or, according to beliefs from

<sup>1</sup> R. Huzii, *From folk thanatology: Carpathian investigations* (Lviv, 2007), 81.

<sup>2</sup> D. K. Zelenin, *Selected works. Essays of Russian mythology: Those who died an unnatural death and mermaids* (moscow : Indrik, 1995), 40–41.

<sup>3</sup> E. A. Berezovich & Yu. A. Kryvoshchapova, “Drowned”. *Slavic Antiquities : Ethnolinguistic Dictionary* : in 5 vols.; pod obsch. red. N. I. Tolstoho (moscow : International Relations, 2012). Vol. V : S (Skazka) – Ja (Jascherica), 383.

<sup>4</sup> A. Kryvenko, *Folk demonology of Volyn: calendar and ritual context* (Lviv, 2020), 93.

<sup>5</sup> Berezovich & Kryvoshchapova, “Drowned”, 384.

Pokuttia, the soul of the drowned person had to do penance by staying on earth for 7 years, near the place of his death<sup>6</sup>. However, in each of these guises, the posthumous activity of the restless drowned man was aimed at harming the living.

The bivalent attitude towards the dead in the water had an impact on ideas about the methods of their burial. On the one hand, they were not buried in the cemetery<sup>7</sup>, but outside it, at crossroads or, in some places in Volyn, near the place of death; occasionally – in the corner of the cemetery<sup>8</sup>. In general, the drowned person was reluctantly buried in the ground, fearing that it would cause a drought; on the other hand, for example, the russians believed that an unburied drowned person causes a whirlwind and frost<sup>9</sup>. However, apparently, they tried to bury the drowned person, considering the supposed harm from this to be less than his subsequent hostile activity to man in one of the guises of the restless dead (in the form of a mermaid or a waterman's servant).

In such a case, there was a need to find the body of a drowned person, especially if he died not in a well, but in a river or a large open body of water. At the same time, the corpse of a drowned person was needed to testify to the fact of an accident or suicide. Relatives of the deceased were primarily interested in such verification, because public opinion was more negative towards relatives of suicides than relatives who died as a result of an accident.

The location of a drowned person could be determined by certain signs. For example, the Poles believed that it was indicated by a whirlpool, foam or green algae, russians – that a pike could lead to the body, etc<sup>10</sup>.

The rituals of dropping certain objects on the water became almost the most widespread: in the place where the drowned person was, they were supposed to stop, spin or circle. So, in the northern part of russia, a birch tree basket or a birch log was used for this purpose<sup>11</sup>. However, this ritual had other clearly defined attributes that could be used both independently and in combination as in the ethnic territory of Ukraine, so in practically all Eastern and Western Slavs.

Bread was the main item. For example, on the territory of Halytska Volyn, bread was lowered into a reservoir – at the place where the body was, it was supposed to circle (the village Pidmonastyrok, Radekhiv district, Lviv region; village Sokolya, Busk district, Lviv region)<sup>12</sup>. Poles from the outskirts of Warsaw at the end of

<sup>6</sup> Huzii, *From folk thanatology : Carpathian investigations*, 104.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>8</sup> Berezovich & Kryvoshchapova, “Drowned”, 384.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 385.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 384.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Archive of the Institute of Ethnology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (hereinafter – the Archive IENASU), f. 1, op. 2, ref. 688 (Ethnographic field materials on the topic “Bread in the traditional culture of Ukrainians” were recorded by A. V. Ziubrovskyi in the Brody and Radekhiv districts of the Lviv region.

the 19th century had an analogy of the described ritual. However, it was believed that not even the whole loaf of bread, but only “a piece of bread thrown on the water, stops on the surface where there is a human corpse in the depths” (village Maceiovychi Masovian Voivodeship)<sup>13</sup>.

Bread, however, more often was combined with a consecrated candle (occasionally a consecrated on the “Stritennia” (Praesentatio Domini) candle was used). It was stuck in a bread loaf and set on fire. The rest of the ritual remained identical to those previously described (village Staryky, Horokhiv district, Volyn region; village Kolmiv, Horokhiv district, Volyn region; village of Merva, Horokhiv district, Volyn region)<sup>14</sup>. In some places, the respondents claimed that the candle was not stuck in the bread, considering its uselessness – in the conditions of an open environment, it would most likely go out, thus not fulfilling its ritual functions (village Kutriv Horokhiv district, Volyn region)<sup>15</sup>.

Often an attribute of the search for the dead was a dough trough (“pikna (chlibna) dizha”). It was floated empty, or with bread and a candle inside: the result had to be identical to the previous one – the tub had to stop and spin around its axis, or circled in the water at the location of the body of the drowned person. For a similar purpose, they could use not the entire dough trough, but only its cover – “viko”, “viczko”. Moreover, in this invariant of the ritual, this attribute, like the bowl, could be used alone (although rarely) or in combination with bread and a candle.

In order to search for the body of a drowned person, other objects were also used. So, in the Chyhyryn region (Middle Dnieper region) it was necessary to “insert a lighted wax candle into a wooden bowl and let it float: the drowned man will float away”<sup>16</sup>. I will also note that the custom of looking for a drowned person with bread was quite widespread among the peoples of Western Europe. From there, it was obviously introduced into the spiritual culture of the non-indigenous population of North America. In particular, Mark Twain in “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” describes a ritual, according to which, in order to find the body of a drowned person, loaves of bread with “quicksilver” (mercury) embedded inside were dropped into the water – the cookies stopped at the location of the corpse<sup>17</sup>. The mentioned metal was used

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7–13.07.2011), sh. 72.; Archive IENASU, f. 1, op. 2, ref. 689 (Ethnographic field materials on the topic “Bread in the traditional culture of Ukrainians” were recorded by A. V. Ziubrovskyi in the Kamianka-Buzka district, Lviv region. 4–8.07.2012), sh. 162.

<sup>13</sup> A. Pleszczyński, “Cokolwiek ze starych szpargałów”. *Wisła. Miesięcznik geograficzno-etnograficzny*, t. 11(2) (1897), 262.

<sup>14</sup> Archive IENASU, f. 1, op. 2, ref. 685 (Ethnographic field materials on the topic “Bread in the traditional culture of Ukrainians” were recorded by A. V. Ziubrovskyi in the Horokhiv district of the Volyn region. 7–19.07.2010), sh. 113–114, 260–261, 279.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>16</sup> A. Podbereski, “Materyjały do Demonologii Ludu ukraińskiego. Z opowiadań ludowych w powiecie Czehryńskim”. *Zbiór wiadomości do antropologii krajowej*, t. 4 (1880), 67.

<sup>17</sup> M. Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Kyiv : Rainbow, 1970), 101.

for protective purposes, as it was considered an apotropaic in traditional culture. For example, among Ukrainians, it was used as an attribute of the ritual of laying the foundations of a house to ward off “evil” from the future residents of the house<sup>18</sup>.

In order to understand the essence of the ritual of searching for the body of a drowned person, let's consider its main components – attributes, loci and action components. Undoubtedly, among the attributes, the main place was occupied by bread. It is obvious that the use of cookies in the ritual of searching for the body of a drowned person is connected with the symbolic and semantic-semiotic statuses of bread in folk cultures. This product was sacralized, being considered the highest value. On a symbolic level, bread was the embodiment of goodness, abundance and fertility, associated with vegetation, warmth, sunlight. That is, he acted as a kind of agent of this, positive, sunny earthly world of the living. From this point of view, bread may have been opposed in such a ritual to the chthonic underwater world, which was associated with the afterlife and the symbolic categories of gloom, cold, phlegm, barrenness – non-life in general. According to folk beliefs, the drowned man became an agent of the underworld. That is, a certain semantic opposition was created, in which the bread and the drowned man were at different ends of the scale of axiological judgments, but, like the rest of the binary oppositions, were in an inextricable connection of alternative concepts<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, the location of the bread in this world mirrored the location of the body drowned under water.

According to other ideas, bread was identified with the fate of a person, which was clearly manifested in a complex of beliefs about bread forgotten in the oven<sup>20</sup>, a complex of prognostic beliefs about the consequences of baking defective or non-standard cookies<sup>21</sup>, guesses about the future fate of family members when baking ritual bread<sup>22</sup>, etc. I will also add that bread, according to ideas, possessed its own Destiny, which is presented in a complex of beliefs about personified bread, which, most importantly, is reflected in the legends about its “life and suffering”. According to them, well-cooked bread had a destiny that was correct even from a human point of view: it was born, lived life and died correctly (was eaten)<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> R. Siletskyi, *Traditional building rituals of Ukrainians* (Lviv : LNU named after Ivan Franko, 2011), 206.

<sup>19</sup> S. M. Tolstaia, “Semantic oppositions”. *Slavic antiquities : Ethnolinguistic dictionary* : in 5 volumes; pod obsch. red. N. I. Tolstoho (moscow : International relations, 2004). Volume III : K (Krug) – P (Perepiolka), 557.

<sup>20</sup> A. Ziubrovskyi, “Folk perceptions of the bread left in the oven of the Ukrainian population of historical-ethnographic Volyn at the end of the 19th – beginning of the 21st century”. *Ethnic history of the peoples of Europe* 43 (2014): 5–14.

<sup>21</sup> Ejusdem, *Folk traditions of baking bread of Ukrainians at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 21st century (Based on the materials of the South-Western historical and ethnographic region)* (Kyiv : Naukova Dumka, 2018), 105–110.

<sup>22</sup> A. B. Strakhov, *Cult of bread in Eastern Slavs. Experience of ethnolinguistic research* (Munich : Otto Sagner Publishing House, 1991), 54–56.

<sup>23</sup> Volodymyr Konopka & Andrii Ziubrovskyi, “From grain to bread”: a semantic and structural analysis of agricultural life of Ukrainians (based on the materials of the South-Western historical and ethnographic region) (Lviv : Institute of Ethnology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, 2018), 117–119.

As already mentioned, the drowned man belonged to the category of “unclean” dead, whose life path and fate was incomplete, broken, ritually incorrect. Obviously, in this case, and the basis of homeopathic magic, it was believed that bread should in a certain way “fix” a person's fate, make it complete. The correct completion of the life path provided for the possibility of burying the human body, which was indicated by the bread floating on the water. A simpler explanation is possible: the bread was inextricably linked with the person (including the body of the wanted drowned man), whose fate it personified. However, according to this version, the cookies used to search for the dead should have been baked in the house where the deceased lived. However, I would like to note that it was not possible to record direct evidence of a similar content regarding the existence of such a requirement. It is also necessary to take into account the extremity of the ritual: the house of the drowned person might not have the necessary bread.

An important factor in the use of bread in the ritual of searching for a drowned person is its symbolic role as a sacrifice and the main attribute of the ritual feeding of the souls of deceased relatives. Biscuits in one guise or another appear in the entire complex of funeral and memorial rituals of Ukrainians<sup>24</sup>. Likewise, traditional bread baking is closely related to honoring the souls of relatives. It is possible that in the ritual of searching for the body of a drowned person, bread could perform the role of an exchange victim or a ransom victim (for example, certain analogies can be found in the customs of “purchasing a place” for the construction of a new dwelling<sup>25</sup>). That is, the chthonic world was given a “cookie sacrifice”; in return the latter returned the body (soul) of the drowned. The validity of such considerations can be evidenced by the fact that the further function of the bread, which was used to search for the drowned, remained unknown from the descriptions of the ritual. It is clear that it was not used as food, because contact with the chthonic world gave it dangerous properties (even if it was not corrupted by water from a rational point of view). Indirect references indicate that it was left “in places where no one walks”, like other ritually dangerous objects that came into contact with the dead, for example. However, these narratives do not contradict the assumption that such bread was left in the water.

It is also likely that when the bread was thrown on the water, the drowned person was commemorated. Since the act of commemoration in folk culture was quite closely tied to the grave (real or imaginary), in this way the cookies had to show not so much the body of the drowned person as his *grave*. Regarding the analogy of the ritual of searching for the dead with bread and the act of commemoration, the use of other attributes and circumstances of execution, is evidenced.

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<sup>24</sup> Konopka & Ziubrovskiy, “*From grain to bread*”..., 117–119.

<sup>25</sup> Siletskyi, *Traditional building rituals of Ukrainians*, 203–210.

Similar axiological and symbolic characteristics to bread were found in another attribute of the ritual of searching for a drowned person – dough trough. It was considered a symbol of abundance, wealth, fullness, fate<sup>26</sup>. As a result of the specific property of dough trough to multiply “spir” (a universal category, meaning both abundance and its multiplication), which manifested itself in a several-fold increase in the volume of dough during fermentation, it was symbolically identified with a woman's womb<sup>27</sup>. A dough trough was an indispensable attribute of a woman, inextricably semantically connected with her: for example, the destruction of a dish, the cracking of a hoop on it predicted a quick death for the hostess<sup>28</sup>. However, it is true that the gender of this attribute was not revealed in the ritual: both women and men were searched for with the “dizha”. Most likely, the dough trough was symbolically opposed to the negative properties of the drowned person, like other objects in the researched custom.

Descriptions of the ritual of searching for a drowned person at the moment do not provide an answer regarding the verbal accompaniment of the action. Thus, certain doubts regarding the necessity of verbal forms were expressed by already mentioned Mark Twain in the second half of the 19th century. The heroes of his work note that, usually, when putting bread on the water in order to find the body, the participants of the ceremony are silent<sup>29</sup>. After all, the fact of silence is logical, considering the close connection of this ritual with the memorial sphere. Most commemorative practices require ritualized silence<sup>30</sup>. It is also likely that the participants in the ritual of searching for a drowned person were silent for a protective purpose, since any contact with the other world was perceived as potentially dangerous.

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The given material makes it possible to draw certain conclusions.

1. In Ukrainian folk culture, death was not perceived as a tragedy, but rather as an inevitable necessity, without excessive emotionality. It is about a “correct” death from old age and natural circumstances.

2. Premature death of children, young people, pregnant women, women in childbirth, etc. was perceived negatively. But, rather various categories of those who died a violent death, the missing, etc., were considered ritually impure. Among them suicides were considered the most dangerous.

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<sup>26</sup> A. L. Toporkov, “Diezha”. *Slavic antiquities : Ethnolinguistic dictionary* : in 5 volumes; pod obsch. red. N. I. Tolstoho (Moscow : International Relations, 1999). Volume II : D–K (Kroshki), 45.

<sup>27</sup> Ziubrovskiy, *Folk traditions of baking bread of Ukrainians...*, 34–36.

<sup>28</sup> A. Ziubrovskiy, “A dough trough in the folk culture of everyday Ukrainians of the South-Western historical and ethnographic region: peculiarities of production and handling”. *Actual problems of national and world history: Scientific notes of the Rivne State Humanities University* 26 (2015), 255.

<sup>29</sup> Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, 101.

<sup>30</sup> T.A. Agapkina, “Silence”. *Slavic Antiquities : Ethnolinguistic Dictionary* : in 5 volumes; pod obsch. red. N. I. Tolstoho (moscow : International Relations, 2004). Volume III : K (Krug) – P (Perepelka), 292.

3. Among other categories of “impure” dead, the attitude towards the drowned was somewhat more loyal, given the mass of such a cause of premature death and the impossibility of unambiguously verifying it as suicide, often due to the absence of a corpse.

4. In the event that the drowning occurred in an open body of water, and the body was not found, the villagers took certain actions in order to find it. First of all, the reason for the search was the need to verify the cause of death in order to classify or not classify the deceased as a suicide, as well as to reduce the public reaction for the surviving family members of the drowned person. However, the main reason for the search was the need to bury the drowned man, in order to neutralize his supposed negative influence on people as an agent of chthonosis.

5. The main attributes of the ritual of searching for a drowned person were bread, dough trough (her lid) and a candle. The ritual took place in the form of launching these objects on the water: their unnatural behavior – movement against the current, spinning around their axis, circling – indicated the location of the body.

6. At the symbolic level, the indicated attributes personified goodness, abundance, wealth, fullness of life, etc. and acted as antagonists to the negative properties of the afterlife (gloom, cold, death), which were transmitted to the drowned person.

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## МАЛОВІДОМИЙ ЗВИЧАЙ ЗНАЙДЕННЯ ТІЛА ПОТОПЕЛЬНИКА З ХЛБОМ І ЗНАРЯДДЯМ ДЛЯ ХЛБОПЕЧЕННЯ: СЕМАНТИКО-СТРУКТУРНИЙ АНАЛІЗ

Андрій ЗЮБРОВСЬКИЙ

Інститут народознавства НАН України

відділ історичної етнології

просп. Свободи, 15, Львів, 79000, Україна

e-mail: anzjubr@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2221-3731>

Стаття присвячена семантико-структурному аналізу маловідомого та малодослідженого звичаю пошуку тіла утопленого за допомогою хліба та хлібопекарських предметів. Актуальність пропонованої розвідки полягає передовсім у тому, що на даний момент в українській етнологічній науці немає жодних досліджень із даної теми. На основі аналізу публікацій, дещо дотичних до досліджуваного кола питань, головню присвячених народній танатології, автор стверджує, що серед інших категорій довірних мерців ставлення до утоплених було дещо лояльнішим, з огляду на масовість такої причини дочасної смерті та неможливість однозначної верифікації її як самогубства, часто через відсутність трупа. У випадку, коли утоплення відбувалося у відкритій водоймі, а тіло не було знайдено, селяни

вчиняли певні дії для його пошуку. Причиною розшуку передовсім була необхідність верифікації причини смерті з метою віднесення чи невіднесення загиблого до категорії самогубців, а також зменшення суспільної реакції для живих членів родини утопленого. Проте головною причиною пошуку була необхідність поховання потопельника задля знешкодження його гаданого негативного впливу на людей як агента хтоносу. Основними атрибутами ритуалу пошуку утопленика були хліб, віко пікної діжі та свічка. Ритуал відбувався у формі пускання цих предметів по воді: їх неприродна поведінка – рух проти течії, крутіння навколо своєї осі, кружляння – вказували місце перебування тіла. На символічному рівні вказані атрибути уособлювали добро, достаток, багатство, повноту життя тощо та виступали антагоністами негативним властивостям потойбіччя (морок, холод, смерть), які трансливалися на утопленика.

*Ключові слова:* етнологія, народні звичаї, утоплений, тіло, пускати по воді, чорторий, хліб, хлібна діжа, віко хлібної діжі, свічка

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