

= Badnjak (Serbian) =

The badnjak (Cyrillic : ?????? , Serbian pronunciation : [b?d?a?k]) , also called veseljak (??????? , [???s? ? ?a?k] , literally " jovial one " in Serbian) , is a log brought into the house and placed on the fire on the evening of Christmas Eve , a central tradition in Serbian Christmas celebrations much like a yule log in other European traditions . The tree from which the badnjak is cut , preferably a young and straight oak , is ceremonially felled early on the morning of Christmas Eve . The felling , preparation , bringing in , and laying on the fire , are surrounded by elaborate rituals , with many regional variations . The burning of the log is accompanied by prayers that the coming year brings food , happiness , love , luck , and riches . The log burns on throughout Christmas Day , when the first visitor strikes it with a poker or a branch to make sparks fly , while wishing that the family 's happiness and prosperity be as abundant as the sparks . As most Serbs today live in towns and cities , the badnjak is often symbolically represented by a cluster of oak twigs with brown leaves attached , with which the home is decorated on Christmas Eve .

Since the early 20th century , the Serbian badnjak tradition has also been celebrated more publicly . Before World War I , soldiers of the Kingdom of Serbia developed the custom of laying a badnjak on a fire in their barracks . In the succeeding Kingdom of Yugoslavia , the military badnjak ceremony was further elaborated and standardized in army service regulations , but the tradition ended at the outbreak of World War II . Since the early 1990s , the Serbian Orthodox Church has , together with local communities , organized public celebrations on Christmas Eve in which the badnjak plays a central role . Parishioners festively cut the sapling to be used as the badnjak and take it to their church , where it is consecrated by a priest before it is ceremonially placed on a fire built in the churchyard .

The festive kindling of the badnjak commemorates the fire that ? according to Serbian folk tradition ? the shepherds of Bethlehem built in the cave where Jesus Christ was born , to warm the Baby Jesus and his mother throughout the night . The badnjak may also be seen as a symbol of the cross upon which Christ was crucified , the warmth of its fire symbolizing the salvation which , in the Christian belief , the crucifixion made possible for mankind . Scholars regard the tradition as inherited from the old Slavic religion . They interpret the badnjak as an incarnation of the spirit of vegetation , and as a divinity who dies by burning to be reborn , to whom sacrifices and prayers were offered for the fertility of fields , the health and happiness of the family . The burning symbolized sunshine , securing the vitalizing power of the sun in the coming year . Other South Slavic peoples have similar traditions , and the custom that a family brings a log into the house and burns it on Christmas Eve has also been recorded in other parts of Europe .

= = Family celebration = =

= = = Felling and preparing = = =

Traditionally , the badnjak ceremony begins on Christmas Eve , but there are many regional variations surrounding the details . Early in the morning the head of each family , usually accompanied by several male relatives , selects and fells the tree from which a log will be cut for their household . The group announces its departure by firing guns or small celebratory mortars called prangija . The Turkey oak is the most popular species of tree selected in most regions , but other oaks are also chosen . Beech , pear , quince , hornbeam , and plum trees are used in eastern Serbia , although less frequently than oak trees . In some areas of Montenegrin Littoral where oaks do not grow , olives , bay laurels , elms , or strawberry trees are used instead . Young , straight , and undamaged specimens are preferred . The badnjak may be more valued if it is felled stealthily in someone else 's rather than in one 's own woods .

Generally , each household prepares one badnjak , although more are cut in some regions . Depending on the local custom , Montenegrin Serbs may fell two , three , an arbitrary number greater than two , or the number equal to the male members of household plus one . The latter

means that each of the males has a log associated with him , with the thickest log representing the head of household and the thinnest linked to the family 's prosperity . If there is only one man in the household , three rather than two logs are prepared . The logs may be cut from different species of tree . In parts of the Bay of Kotor , each household prepares four sets of badnjaks , as they are burned there not only on Christmas Eve , but also on the eves of New Years Day , Epiphany , and the Feast of Saint Sava .

In Grbalj , south @-@ west of Kotor , the number of the logs is equal to the number of people in the household . A terebinth is cut down for the badnjak associated with the woman of the house , called the badnja?ica ([bad??at?itsa]) , meaning she @-@ badnjak . The same term is also used in other areas where only a pair of oak logs is cut , in which case badnja?ica refers to the smaller of the two . In Resava , the badnja?ica is prepared from an Italian oak , and the badnjak from a Turkey oak . In Zagara? , central Montenegro , both of the logs may be cut from the same tree if it is tall enough , the badnja?ica then coming from the upper , thinner part of the trunk . The pair is in some regions joined by a third log called the badnja?i? ? badnjak the child . Although young and thin trees are usually used for the badnjak , in northern Dalmatia 's region of Bukovica two relatively thick logs with diameters of 30 to 50 centimeters (12 to 20 inches) are prepared , plus one thinner log (called trinity) . In other areas dry oak branches are collected from the ground , and used instead of a log .

When the head of household finds a suitable tree , he stands in front of it facing east . After throwing grain at the tree , he greets it with the words " Good morning and happy Christmas Eve to you " , makes the Sign of the Cross , says a prayer , and kisses the tree . He may also explain to the badnjak why it will be cut : " I have come to you to take to my home , to be my faithful helper to every progress and improvement , in the house , in the pen , in the field , and in every place . " He then cuts it slantwise on its eastern side , using an axe . Some men put gloves on before they start to cut the tree , and from then on never touch the badnjak with their bare hands . The tree should fall to the east , unhindered by surrounding trees . It must not be left half @-@ cut , as then it will curse the house of the man . In some regions , if the tree is not cut down after the third blow of the axe , then it must be pulled and twisted until its trunk breaks . The resulting badnjak has a so @-@ called " beard " , the part of the trunk at which it broke off from the base of the tree . In ?umadija , half of a circular loaf of bread is left on the stump , the other half being eaten on the way back home . In Zagara? , the stump is covered with moss or dry leaves , and it will be visited again in spring : the stump sprouting through the cover is an omen of good luck and prosperity .

The first splinter from the tree is taken home and placed where prosperity is especially desired , such as beside the beehives , in the hen roost , or between milk basins in the dairy room , in the hope that the coming year 's kaymak will clot to form thick layers in the basins . It may also be placed beneath some baker 's yeast , so that the prosperity of the household may grow like yeast . In Semberija , a piece of the splinter is put in the dough for the ?esnica , a round loaf of bread prepared specially for Christmas dinner . This is done " because of bees " , as the reason is traditionally termed .

The top of the felled tree is removed , leaving the badnjak of such a length that allows it to be carried on a man 's shoulder , up to about 2 @.@ 5 meters (8 @.@ 2 ft) long . Its branches may be lopped off , or not , depending on the local custom . Once in the home , each badnjak is leaned vertically against the house beside the entrance door . In Montenegrin Littoral , each should be adorned with leaved bay laurel , olive , juniper , and rosemary twigs , which are tied to the trunk 's top , middle , and base with ivy or red silken or woolen threads . In parts of eastern Serbia and Kosovo the badnjak is wrapped in a man 's shirt .

In west Serbia 's region of Ra?evina , centered on the town of Krupanj , the badnjak prepared for each household is cut into three logs , the most important of which is the dozamak ? the log that comes from the part of the trunk that grew nearest to the ground . In Resava , Leva? , Temni? , and Jadar of Serbia , as well as in Ozren and Romanija of Bosnia , the badnjak is cut into three logs associated respectively with the men , the women , and the children .

= = = Bringing in and burning = = =

In the evening , a man of the family brings their badnjak into the house . If there is more than one badnjak , the thickest of them is regarded as the main one , and is brought in first . Stepping across the threshold , right foot first , the man greets his gathered family with the words " Good evening and happy Christmas Eve to you . " The woman of the house greets him back , saying " May God give you well @-@ being , and may you have good luck " , or " Good luck to you , and together with you for many years to come [may we be] " , or similar , before throwing grain from a sieve at the man and the badnjak he carries . In the clan of Ku?i , the woman touches the " beard " of the main badnjak with a whole loaf of bread . In Montenegro , two women holding lighted candles stand one on either side of the house door as the badnjaks are carried in .

Upon entering the house the man approaches the fireplace , called ognji?te ([?????i??t?]) ? the hearth of an ognji?te is similar to a campfire , in that it has no vertical surround . He lays the badnjak down on the fire and moves it a little forward , to summon prosperity for the household . Any other logs are brought in by other males and laid on the fire parallel or perpendicular to the first . In a family with the tradition of burning the badnjak and badnja?ica , they are laid one across the other ; the males then kiss the former , and the females the latter . In Bukovica the two thicker logs are placed side by side , and the thinner one (trinity) is placed in parallel on top . In 19th @-@ century Herzegovina , families with large houses would load their logs onto three or four pairs of oxen , which were then led into the house . The logs were unloaded and laid on the fire , and the oxen driven out through the back door .

Immediately after the badnjak has been brought in , or immediately before in some places , an armful of straw is spread over the floor . The straw is usually brought in with the same greetings and throwing of grain as the badnjak . The person spreading it may imitate a hen clucking to call her chicks , " Kvo , kvo , kvo " , with the family 's children imitating chicks , " Piju , piju , piju " , while they pick at the straw . In ?e?ava , northern Bosnia , the children then lie down on the straw , before closing their eyes and picking a stalk with their lips : the child that picked the longest stalk will supposedly be the luckiest in the following year . In the Bay of Kotor , the ceremony is accompanied by the words " Kuda slama , tuda slava " ? " Whither straw , thither celebration . " A common custom is to scatter a handful of walnuts over the straw . It will be collected and taken out of the house on the morning of the second day after Christmas . Some of the straw may be set aside and used in apotropaic practices in the coming year .

The thicker end of the log , the end that was nearest to the tree 's roots , may have a special significance . In Montenegro it is called the head of the badnjak ; the main log is laid on the fire with its head pointing east . In central Serbia the badnjak is laid with its thicker end sticking out from the ognji?te . The household 's shepherds would kiss over it to ensure an abundance of lambs in the coming year . In Gru?a it is coated with honey which is then licked by children . At the side of ognji?te where the thicker end is situated , the family may place a plowshare , a round loaf of bread , a glove filled with wheat , sugar , or a sieve containing grain , honey , cakes , wine , salt , prunes , walnuts , and apples . The cut surface of the thicker end is in ?e?ava kissed by all the family members after the badnjak is laid on the fire .

The head of the household takes a jug of wine and pours some on the badnjak ; in some regions , he may strew wheat grains over the logs . He then proposes a toast : " Grant , O God , that there be health and joy in this home , that our grain and grapevines yield well , that children be born healthy to us , that our property increase in the field , pen , and barn ! " or , " Hail , badnjak , veseljak ! I give you wheat and wine , and you give me every good thing and peace ! " or similar . The name veseljak , literally " jovial one " , is used along with badnjak in some areas . The head drinks a draught of wine from the jug , after which it is passed to other members of household . In the clan of Ku?i , wine is poured on the " beard " of the badnjak , and then a little girl sits for a moment on the log ? for the well @-@ being of the cattle . Christmas Eve dinner follows , which traditionally includes a round loaf of unleavened bread , beans , fish , walnuts , honey , and red wine . The bread is not cut with a knife , but broken with hands .

The badnjak should not be jumped over or trodden upon , and blowing on its fire is avoided . It should not be moved when about to burn through , lest the log break at the place most consumed by the fire , which is usually strongest at the center of the fireplace ; the separation of the log should be

a result of the fire only . None of the family members should fall asleep before the log splits , otherwise some of them may die in the coming year , without warning .

The moment when the badnjak burns through may be marked with festivities , such as the log being kissed by the head of household , and wine being poured over it accompanied by toasts . A reward may be given to the family member who was the first to notice the event , and in the past the men would go outside and fire their guns in celebration . There is a special verb *preveseliti* used instead of the common *pregoreti* to express " to burn through " when referring to the badnjak , which has the same root as the noun *veseljak* . Once the log has burnt through , some families let the fire go out , while in others the men keep watch in shifts during the night to keep the badnjak burning .

Once the badnjak has burnt through , the thicker end is often taken out of the fire and used according to the local custom . It may be carried around the beehives , extinguished , and placed between the branches of a young plum or apple tree . The men may make crosses from it and put them under the eaves , on the fields , meadows , vineyards , and apiaries , so that the coming year may be happy and fruitful . It may also be set aside for next Christmas Eve , to be placed on the fire immediately before the new badnjak , as a symbol of continuity . In Kosovo , a part of the badnjak is preserved and burned again on New Years Day and Epiphany .

The badnjak burns on through Christmas Day , whether rekindled or kept burning from the Eve . The first visit the family receives that day is considered important , comparable to New Years Day first @-@ footing in the British Isles . The family may choose someone , usually a young male , to be their first visitor , known as a *polaznik* , before the arrival of whom no outsider is allowed to enter the house . Early on the morning of Christmas Day he steps into the house , right foot first , and greets the family with " Christ is Born " , to which they reply " Truly He is Born . " The *polaznik* then approaches the *ognji?te* and repeatedly strikes the burning log with a poker or a branch to make sparks fly . At the same time he utters a wish that the happiness and prosperity of the household be as abundant as the sparks :

The wording of this well @-@ wishing may vary , but its intention is always the same , to invoke happiness and prosperity . The *polaznik* will then throw a coin into the fire before being presented with a round loaf of bread , the traditional gift for the *polaznik* , usually accompanied by some other present . The custom to use a domestic animal as a *polaznik* was kept in some regions until the first half of the 20th century . In Ra?evina , the head of the household would lead a sheep into the house , place it between the *ognji?te* and himself , and utter the wishes while striking the badnjak with a branch cut from it , before saying : " We passed one fire , we are not afraid of another . " His wife would then kiss him over the sheep after saying " may the ewes kiss the lambs as we kiss each other . "

Embers of the badnjak may be used for divination in Jadar . The number of these equal to the sum of grain and livestock sorts grown by the family are taken out from the *ognji?te* and placed on the ?esnica . Each of the sorts is associated with its own ember on that loaf . The sort whose ember retains its glow longer than the others should be the most productive in the coming year . The log sparking by itself presages a rich harvest of honey . Cooled coals of the badnjak may be placed between the branches of fruit trees ; the young trees may be provided also with twigs from the badnjak . Its ash may be spread over the fields and mixed with fodder . Some of the ash may be set aside to be taken with water as a remedy for headache . There are also numerous other regional practices connected with the badnjak .

These ancient traditions have modern , reduced versions . Modern houses usually have no *ognji?te* on which to burn a badnjak , but it may be symbolically represented by several oak twigs , some of which are burnt in a wood @-@ burning kitchen stove and the others placed beside it . Some people chop the badnjak into shorter logs so that they can be put into the hearth and burnt . The most prevalent custom , however , is to place a cluster of oak twigs , with their brown leaves still attached , in whichever location in the home the family feels is appropriate . This cluster is also called the badnjak , and it is usually kept in the home until next Christmas Eve . For the convenience of those living in towns and cities , such little badnjaks can be bought at marketplaces or distributed in churches . In a common arrangement , the cluster of oak twigs is bound together with twigs of European Cornel and several stalks of straw .

The laying of a badnjak on the fire was considered the least a Serbian family could do to show their devotion to Serbian tradition . In Petar II Petrović's poem The Mountain Wreath , the plot of which takes place in 18th century Montenegro , Voivode Batrić urges converts to Islam to return to Christianity and Serbdom : " [...] Lay the Serbian Christmas log [badnjak] on the fire , paint the Easter eggs various colours , observe with care the Lent and Christmas fasts . As for the rest , do what your heart desires ! " Petrović describes the holiday atmosphere that surrounds the burning badnjak on Christmas Eve through the words of Abbot Stefan , one of the main characters of The Mountain Wreath :

= = Public celebration = =

The badnjak ceremony , originally performed only within the family , became a more public celebration . A custom developed before World War I in the Kingdom of Serbia to lay the badnjak on a fire built in military barracks , so that the soldiers stationed there over Christmas could share in the holiday atmosphere . In the succeeding Kingdom of Yugoslavia , the military badnjak ceremony was standardized in army service regulations . On Christmas Eve , under the command of a specially appointed officer , the representatives of military units of a garrison formed a festive procession on horses , accompanied with music . Members of citizens ' associations and other civilians of the garrison town usually joined the procession as it proceeded to the nearest wood to collect the badnjak . They felled a set number of trees , dedicated respectively to the Royal Palace , the military command of the town , the respective commands of units of the garrison , its oldest officer , and its officers ' assembly house . The procession brought the trees to the barracks , in whose yard an open fire was built . The garrison commander then placed the trees ceremonially on the fire , and gave an appropriate address .

More and more state institutions , private firms , organizations , and clubs joined the procession each year , and the event began to take on the character of a public holiday . During the 1930s , the laying of badnjak on the fire became a court ritual . It was performed , in the presence of the royal family , by representatives of the army in the Royal Palace 's room with a fireplace . At the end of the 1930s in some parts of Yugoslavia , especially Vojvodina and Montenegro , the military badnjak ceremony was performed not in the barracks yard but in a square in the garrison town . An open fire was built , on which the badnjak was placed by an Orthodox priest in the presence of soldiers and citizens . This tradition , symbolizing the unity of state , church , and people , was ended by the outbreak of World War II .

Yugoslavia 's socialist government suppressed or discouraged public religious celebrations until the early 1990s . Since then , the Serbian Orthodox Church has , together with local communities , organized public celebrations on Christmas Eve . There are typically three elements to such celebrations : the preparation , the ritual , and the festivity . The preparation consists of cutting down the oak sapling to be used as the badnjak , taking it to the church yard , and preparing drink and food for the assembled parishioners . The ritual includes Vespers , placing the badnjak on the open fire built in the church yard , blessing or consecrating the badnjak , and an appropriate program with songs and recitals . In some parishes they build the fire on which to burn the badnjak not in the church yard but at some other suitable location in their town or village . The festivity consists of gathering around the fire and socializing . Each particular celebration has its own specific traits however , reflecting the traditions of the local community .

The expedition to cut down the badnjak is the basic activity in the preparation part of the celebration . It can be performed by an individual , but it is usually a collective act accompanied by a festive procession that may include carriages and horsemen . After the tree to be used as the badnjak is cut down , it is adorned with straw , ribbons , oranges , apples , and sometimes with the Serbian flag . In some parishes more than one badnjak is used in the celebration , and a different tree is felled for each . Often bunches of leaved oak twigs are prepared to be distributed to the congregation gathered at the church . Each badnjak is festively taken to the church gate , often transported on carriages . The badnjak may be taken into the churchyard without any ceremony , or it may be followed by a procession , as is the case in parts of Republika Srpska and the Bay of Kotor .

The ritual is the central part of the celebration . Vespers vary from place to place with respect to the time of the beginning of the service , its length and structure . The laying of badnjak on the fire usually comes after the service , and is done by a priest or by a respected parishioner . Before the burning , the tree may be processionally carried around the church . In the case of more than one badnjak , the trees are placed in the shape of a cross . The assembled devotees throw then into the fire their twig bunches , each representing a small badnjak . The consecration or blessing is performed by a priest : he strews wheat grains over the badnjak , censes it while singing the Troparion of the Nativity , and as he intones prayers , he pours wine and spreads honey on it . Instead of applying wine and honey , holy water may be sprinkled on the tree by dipping a bunch of basil into a bowl with the water . This rite is generally performed after the placing on the fire , although it may happen before , in which case the consecration may be performed in the church itself or in its yard .

After the ritual the priest delivers a short sermon , followed by the church choir singing Christmas songs ; poems that praise the Nativity of Jesus Christ may be recited . In Montenegro , decasyllable Serbian epics are sung to an accompaniment played on the gusle , a traditional Serbian bowed string instrument . The celebration ends with parishioners gathered around the fire , served with cooked rakia , wine , or tea , and the food allowed during the Nativity Fast . Parishioners may pick a twig from the badnjak and take it home to place in front of their icon , or at another appropriate location .

Although Serbian public religious celebrations , as those of other peoples , were discouraged in Socialist Yugoslavia until the early 1990s , they continued among Serbian Americans . The public badnjak ceremony was held in Serbian Orthodox parishes in the United States during that period , as it is today .

= = Interpretation = =

The origin of the badnjak is explained by the events surrounding the Nativity of Jesus Christ . According to the Gospel of Luke 2 : 1 ? 20 , Mary Theotokos gave birth to Christ at Bethlehem , wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger . By Holy Tradition , the manger was located in a cave near that town . An angel of the Lord appeared to a group of shepherds who were keeping watch over their flock by night in that region , and told them that the Savior was born at Bethlehem . They went there and found the baby lying in the manger , as the angel described to them . By folk tradition , the shepherds brought firewood to the cave and built a fire to warm the newborn Christ and his mother throughout the night . The burning of the badnjak commemorates this event .

While blessing the badnjak , some priests chant the following prayer : " O Lord Jesus Christ , our God , who did plant the Tree of Life in paradise so that it might bestow upon us eternal blessedness , bless also now this tree which is a symbol of Thy cross and the Tree of Life in paradise , and which reminds us of Thy holy birth and of the logs which the shepherds of Bethlehem kindled to warm themselves when they came to worship Thee , the divine infant , and thereby prefigured Thy salvation @-@ bearing cross . "

Scholars regard the badnjak customs as practises inherited from the old Slavic religion . In the pre @-@ Christian religion of the Serbs , as shown by Serbian scholar Veselin ?ajkanovi? , there were trees seen as dwelling places of spirits or divinities . ?ajkanovi? argues that there were also trees seen as divinities per se . He considers the badnjak as a convincing example of the latter . Salutations , prayers , and sacrifices such as grain , wine , and honey are offered to him (the name badnjak is of masculine gender in Serbian) ; he is consistently treated not as a tree but as a person .

German scholar and folklorist Wilhelm Mannhardt holds that the log represented an incarnation of the spirit of vegetation . The sacrifices offered to the badnjak were meant to guarantee the fertility of fields , the health and happiness of the family . Its burning symbolized sunshine , and was intended to secure the vitalizing power of the sun in the ensuing year . The lighting of the log could be regarded as a fusion of tree worship and fire worship , attested in Slavic customs ; e.g. , Istrians fed the logs lighted on St. John 's Day by sprinkling wheat upon them . ?ajkanovi? characterizes the pre

@-@ Christian badnjak as a divinity who dies by burning to be reborn , comparing it in this respect with Attis , Osiris , Adonis , and Sandan . He also proposes that the crosses made from the thicker end of the log may have originated from idols representing deities comparable with the Roman Lares , the cruciform having developed from an anthropomorphic shape of the idols . The badnjak is preferably cut from an oak , which was the most respected tree in the old Slavic religion , associated with the supreme god Perun .

Archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans was a guest in a Serbian highlander family in the region of Krivošije , Montenegrin Littoral . Analyzing the practices , he concluded that the badnjak customs were connected with ancestor worship . The lighting of the log on the ognjište could be seen as a solemn annual rekindling of the sacred hearth fire , regarded as the center of the family life and the seat of the ancestors . The belief that ancestral spirits dwell in the domestic hearth was attested among Slavic and other peoples . Fire worship in the old Slavic religion was mostly transformed into the cult of domestic fire , and thus joined with ancestor worship . A trace of sacrifice to the fire is the coin thrown into it by the polaznik after the ritual of making sparks fly from the badnjak .

Fire from the domestic hearth was under no circumstances given out of the house on Christmas Eve , not even to a neighbor whose fire had gone out . The reason for this prohibition , according to ?ajkanovi? , was the belief that the Eve is a time when the ancestral spirits , guardians of the family 's happiness and prosperity , are especially active in this world . Christmas Eve dinner is a feast prepared in their honor , and they join the family at it . They gather on the straw spread over the floor , and on the hearth . These spirits could be removed from the family if any piece of their fire were taken away by an outsider . In people 's words , fire should not be given lest the luck be taken away from the house , or for better crops , or because of bees . Referring to the latter explanation , ?ajkanovi? argues that , in the old religion of the Serbs , the bees were regarded as pure and sacred insects , in whom ancestral spirits could dwell . The same explanation , " because of bees " , is also given for the aforementioned custom of putting a piece of the badnjak 's first splinter in the dough for the ?esnica .

Russian philologist Vladimir Toporov has proposed that the felling of the badnjak was originally a reenactment of the mythical fight in which Mladi Božić (" young god ") slew his father Stari Badnjak (" old Badnjak ") . Božić , the diminutive form of the noun bog , meaning god , is also the Serbian for " Christmas " . The characters of Stari Badnjak and Mladi Božić are found in old Serbian Christmas songs , where they are not explicitly referred to as father and son , and no fight between them is mentioned . By Toporov , the former personified the last day of the Old Year , the climax of the power of Chaos , and the latter personified the first day of the New Year , the beginning of reestablishment of Cosmic Order . He regards Stari Badnjak and Mladi Božić as originating from respectively the dragon and the dragon slayer of the Proto @-@ Indo @-@ European mythology . Stari Badnjak would be related to both the Vedic serpent Ahi Budhnya (" the Dragon of the Deep ") killed by Indra , and the Greek dragon Python killed by Apollo . The words badnjak , budhnya , and python stem from the Proto @-@ Indo @-@ European root * bhudh- , denoting bottom , foundation , depths , and related notions .

According to Russian philologist and mythographer Boris Uspensky , Stari Badnjak and Mladi Božić have analogues in East Slavic tradition ? Nikola 's Dad and Nikola . The name Nikola is a popular reference to Saint Nicholas of Myra , whose feast falls nineteen days before Christmas , on 6 December , his " dad " being celebrated the day before . Nikola is portrayed in East Slavic folklore as merciful and protective towards the common people , patron of animals and agriculture , connected with riches , abundance , and fertility . Uspensky argues that this saint took on attributes of the serpentine god Volos , whose cult was very strong among East Slavs before Christianization . He was the adversary of the dreadful thunder @-@ god Perun , who is in this case reflected in Nikola 's Dad .

The notion of a quarrel between Nikola and his " dad " is present in a number of legends . The connection between the father ? son pairs of Stari Badnjak ? Mladi Božić and Nikola 's Dad ? Nikola is corroborated by the fact that , in many East Slavic regions , practices characteristic for Christmas have been transferred to the Feast of Saint Nicholas . There is , however , an inversion in the comparison between these two pairs . In the former pair , the first stems from the mythical dragon ,

and the second from the dragon fighter , while in the latter pair it is vice versa . This inversion explains , by Uspensky , the fact that in some areas Nikola 's Dad is celebrated on the day after his son 's feast , rather than on the eve of it . In that way , the " dragon " (Nikola) comes before the " dragon fighter " (Nikola 's Dad) , as is the case with Stari Badnjak and Mladi Božić .

Serbian ethnologist Petar Vlahović has proposed that the noun badnjak and the related adjective badnji (attributive " Christmas Eve ") are derived from the root of the verb bdeti (" to be awake ") , referring to a custom of staying awake through the night before Christmas Day . The same etymology of the adjective badnji has also been proposed by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić , 19th @-@ century Serbian philologist , systematizer of oral literature , and ethnographer .

= = Similar European traditions = =

The custom that a family solemnly brings a log into the house and lights it on the hearth on Christmas Eve has been recorded in various parts of Europe . In England , a Yule log used to be festively kindled on the domestic hearth so " that sweet luck may come while the log is a @-@ teending " , as described by 17th @-@ century poet Robert Herrick . In France , the log had different regional names : chalendal , calignaou , tréfoir , and tréfouet . In Provence , it had to be cut from a fruit tree ; it was brought in by the whole family while they sang a carol praying for blessing on the house , that the women might bear children , the nanny @-@ goats kids , and the ewes lambs , and that their grain and wine might abound . Before the log was placed on the fire , the youngest child in the family poured wine on it . Logs were devotionally laid on the domestic fire on Christmas Eve in various parts of Italy ; in Tuscany , Christmas is called Festa di Ceppo , literally " feast of log " . In the Val di Chiana , the children of the family were blindfolded and commanded to beat the burning log with tongs . Traces of Christmas @-@ log customs can also be found in Germany and Scandinavia . In Thuringia the family placed a Christklotz (Christ log) on the fire before going to bed , so that it might burn all through the night .

In Croatian tradition , objects of two different types are referred to as badnjak . The first type includes leaved branches cut from Turkey oaks or hazel trees , up to 2 meters (6 @.@ 6 ft) long with as many catkins as possible . Such a branch used to be placed on Christmas Eve morning above the house door , under the eaves , or on the roof , and had an aesthetic role . The other type includes logs cut usually from oak trunks . In the evening the family used to ritually bring three such logs into the house and burn them on the hearth . These practices are no longer performed , but in some places a modified form of badnjak is used : a cross is carved into the bark of pieces of firewood which are burned in kitchen stoves on Christmas Eve . In Bulgaria , the youngest man of the family goes on the Eve into a forest to cut down an oak , elm , or pear tree , which will be used as the badnik (??????) . After the man brings it into the house , a hole is bored in one end of the badnik and filled with wine , cooking oil , and incense . The hole is plugged , and that end of the log is wrapped with a white linen cloth before the badnik is festively burned on the hearth .

In Greece , a large log was lit on the hearth on Christmas Eve and kept burning or smoldering through the Twelve Days of Christmas . This was done as a protection against the demons called Kallikantzaroi , believed to be emerging from their dens at night during that period to attack people and damage their property . The fire and smoke from the log was thought to prevent the Kallikantzaroi from entering the house down the chimney . The ritual burning of logs on the Eve was also carried out in Albania . When the buzmi , as the log was called there , was about to be brought into the house , a member of the family would go out into the yard , shout the name of the household 's head , and proclaim that the buzmi was coming and bringing all kinds of delicious things . The head of the household would respond by saying " You are welcome ! " and the buzmi would be ceremonially brought in , greeted by the family and treated with great respect . The log would be placed on the hearth , and often a significant part of all food and drink in the house would be put on the log and burned together with it .