ŠKOROMATI – HARBINGERS OF SPRING AND A FERTILE YEAR

The oldest masks in Slovenia

DANILA GOLOB, Photo: HELENA RACE

Preparations for the Shrovetide carnival start in the village of Hrušica in the Brkini Hills immediately after St Stephen's Day on 26 December. The *kápoti*, the leaders of the carnival, have the most work, while other participants in the *škoromatija* set to work preparing masks and equipment to be ready a week before the Carnival starts. When they put on their *škoromati* costumes and ring their cowbells, the actual carnival begins.

Škoromatija dates back at least 700 years; it denotes the name of the mask and the carnival ritual in the Brkini Hills. In the archives of Cividale del Friuli and Udine in Italy, records from the 14th and 15th century can be found of people wearing masks called *scaramatte* and *sgaravatte*. The words supposedly meant a company guard, who was the main character of *škoromati* – a fearsome *škopiti* dressed in a wide black coat with a little bell on his belt, with a bird, animal skins or even other carrion and a lamp to denote his mission. Relating to these records,

it may be assumed that *škoromati* were the first and the oldest Slovenian masks mentioned in written records.

Škopiti today is the central figure of *škoromati* and the only direct descendant of the medieval *scaramatte*. Gradually the term *škoromat* denoted all carnival characters in the Brkini Hills. Most visual characteristics were preserved in the character of *škopiti,* which is known in some places as *kleščar* (man with clamps; škopiti also means to castrate). *Škopiti* wears a broad hat covered with rabbit skin, while bird feathers are attached to the brim. To be even more frightening, he can hang a vulture or a crow on his hat. His face and hands are smeared with soot and he carries large and heavy wooden clamps in his hands with which he makes a clattering noise. Sometimes two *škopiti* form a group of *škoromati,* but usually there is only one – he should be the biggest and the strongest boy in the village. The carnival character of *škopiti* is quite wild and scares children, chases young girls and smears their faces with soot with the help of other *škoromati.* Soot represents a man's vital power, so by smearing girls' faces the *škoromati* symbolically secure fertility and thus the survival of the entire community.

COLOURFUL COMPANY

Most of the *škoromati* in the group carry cowbells and they are the loudest. Their carnival costume is colourful and very beautiful. They wear conical hats measuring up to 70 centimetres to which a hundred or more red, white and blue crepe flowers are attached, including long colourful paper ribbons which fall over their backs and almost touch the ground. They wear a sheepskin and bells around their waist. They have white trousers with a red line up the side and bright red socks. In addition to the hat, the most valuable piece of attire is their wooden mask, carved from a single piece of wood. In spite of their attractive carnival gear, the *škoromati* with bells are very naughty and belong to the 'ugly' group of *škoromati.*

They run around the village all day loudly ringing their bells and help *škopiti* to catch girls and smear them with soot.

To be a *škoromat* with bells is a great honour, although running all day is tiring because their equipment can weight up to 15 kilograms.

An honorary place among *škoromati* is kept for the polite and friendly *poberini.* These are the only carnival characters to enter houses to wish good harvest and collect gifts, so they have to be careful not to miss out any of the houses in the village as this would be considered an insult. They do not cover their faces, but dress in festive attire, and their only accessories are ribbons on their hats, a white apron and a bouquet on their chest. There are usually two *poberini* accompanied by a *škoromat* with bells who does not wear a mask, since the local people have to see whom they are welcoming into their home. The *škoromat* announces his arrival at the house by ringing his bells.

Another important character is *pepeljuhar*, which is one of the oldest masks.

Dressed in long, worn-out and torn black clothes, carrying a bag or a basket in which ashes are mixed with crushed hay, this character may represent an old man or a woman. He spreads ashes in courtyards and over thresholds, thus wishing for a good harvest and health. One of the most beautiful masks is '*ti zeleni*' (the green ones), decorated with juniper and pine branches, heather, ivy and moss. It symbolises the approaching spring, birth and life. The making of the green masks is demanding and time consuming, since the whole costume has to be covered with branches and moss. The costume weighs more than 15 kilograms. The other main carnival characters also include the Bride and Groom, the Turk, Marko the Bear, the Gypsy Couple, the Clothes Man, the Fat One and others. And we must not forget the band, which adds rhythm to the whole carnival procession with accordion and drums.

"Ti zeleni" (the green ones) symbolises the approaching spring, birth and life.

GIRLS BEWARE!

Škoromati in Hrušica perform their *poberija* (gathering) on Carnival Saturday, when they meet early in the morning in the middle of the village and visit all the houses in procession. *Poberini* collect gifts, while other *škoromati* wander about the village, stopping at village inns and in front of the houses, where the villagers await them with food and drink. They toast, sing, play music, dance with the residents and generally make merry.

The *škoromatija* tradition has been kept alive by the Hrušica Cultural Association - Škoromati Section, which was organised in 1995, although they were active in this field before that time. Their forerunners were particularly active at the beginning of the 1960s, but not organised as a formal association until 1995.

And which mask will Marjan Poropat, the President of the Association, be wearing?

"Although I'm not among the youngest anymore, I will also be a *škoromat* with bells this year, running and jumping around the village. I hope I don't meet my death," says Poropat laughing.

The *Škoromati* of Hrušica make the masks themselves. Everyone has their own and keeps it at home. If they change character, they make new masks. The crepe flowers in the colours of the Slovenian flag which decorate their hats are mostly made by women, while two or three skilful carvers in the village make wooden masks.

"According to the old tradition, *škoromati* masks were only worn by unmarried boys. All *škoromati* groups now break this rule, since married men and even children dress as *škoromati,* as it is difficult to keep a custom alive if the youngest don't have access to it or grow up with it," explains Danijel Cek, a member of the Hrušica Cultural Association, who adds, "Two groups used to collect gifts, first the older boys and then kids aged 10 to 15. Now we collect contributions together. And there are also children under 10 or even less than 8 years old. However, the *škoromati* of Hrušica are the only ones who never allowed women to join them."

Carnival time is time of joy, dancing and fun, and *škoromatija* is an opportunity for Hrušica boys and men to have a laugh and play tricks which they would never dare play without a mask.

All sorts of mischief are allowed during carnival time so, young girls, beware of being caught by the wild *škoromati*.

The Škoromati of Hrušica have applied to have škoromatija entered in the Live Cultural Heritage Register, which now includes three groups (in addition to the group from Hrušica, there are groups from Ritomeče and Javorje); the group from Podgrad is waiting to be entered in the Register. When all the groups have been entered, the procedure of declaring the custom a living masterpiece of national importance will begin, which is the last stage before being added to the UNESCO world heritage list.

Škoromati with bells wearing high colourful hats with crepe flowers and paper ribbons are among the most important characters. A fearsome Škopiti is the central figure of Škoromati.