

Black in Serbian Traditional Textile Handiwork

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Abstract

The black colour was very common in Serbian traditional textile handiwork. It was primarily used as a basic colour on garments and textile furniture items. Black yarn was used not only for knitting clothes but also for decoration in weaving and embroidery techniques. This paper focuses on the significance of black colour in Serbian traditional pre-industrial society, primarily in textile handiwork, with an emphasis on dyeing technology. Textile production, as well as dyeing itself, were closely related to nature. Plants, herbs, and vegetables from the natural environment and cultures formed the basis for traditional textile handiwork. A large number of diverse plants were used for naturally dyeing textiles.

Dyeing in black is closely related to the survival of archaic magical elements from folk religious systems and rituals.

The article is mainly based on written sources as well as on textile museum artefacts data.

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Introduction

This article intends to present different aspects of the black colour in Serbian traditional, pre-industrial society, as well as its use and meaning, primarily in textile handiwork, with an emphasis on dyeing technology, raw materials, catalysts and the process allowing obtaining

the colour itself. Dyeing in black is closely related to the survival of archaic magical elements from folk religious systems and rituals.

This article is largely based on sources collected from the exhibition *Reading Colours*, which opened on 20 September 2023, at the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade. Besides written sources, it also relies on textile museum artefacts data from a collection of textile household items, as well as on garments from national costume collections.

The technology of natural dyeing in black is based on data collected from the museum's samples of naturally dyed yarns. Some of the observed artefacts also include traditional recipes. Through the acquisition of objects in 1950, the Ethnographic Museum received 68 samples of wool dyed with plant dyes. The specimens come from different parts of Serbia (Zlatar, Sivac and Vršac in Vojvodina, Šumadija's Jasenica and the Belgrade area - Žarkovo and Mirijevo). Based on local traditional knowledge, the wool was specially dyed for the needs of the museum and the travelling educational exhibition *Natural Dyeing of Wool*. The exhibition was held in many primary schools¹ displaying samples of naturally dyed wool, with dried herbs as raw materials used to obtain them, as well as, certainly, the appropriate catalysts to proceed. The exhibition also presented labelled recipes.

In 1980, the museum received a significant contribution of 25 dyed samples from the vicinities of Kragujevac and Sjenica. Significant data and recipes come from the collection of Hristifor Crnilović, a famous Serbian painter and collector whose collection is showcased as part of a permanent exhibition and stored in Manak's house, Department of Ethnographic Museum, in Belgrade. These samples of dyed wool and recipes were part of the field study he carried out in southeast Serbia (Vlasotince) in 1950 (Cvetković 2023, 23).

Meanings of black

Quite early, the black colour had found a prominent place in beliefs and mythologies, in almost all cultures around the world. In early Christian times, black was associated with death, sin, hell, and the Devil, but also with restraint, modesty, asceticism, monks, and monastic orders.

Also, in early prehistoric times, humans managed to obtain black textile dye, first by burning plants (trees, barks, roots), minerals, and bones (ivory, deer horns); however, this colour turned out to quickly fade and be unstable. Ever since the Neolithic, parts of plants containing tannin have been used to dye in dark colours. The most commonly used roots and barks were those of walnut, chestnut, black alder, and some types of oak. However, textiles dyed using these raw materials lacked lustre and were often uneven, with bluish or brown casts. Over time, dyers perfected this process by adding fixers: first, mud or silt rich in iron salts, and later, iron pellets or acetic acid (Pasturo 2010, 22). Dyeing textile yarns and fabrics black was a difficult task until the middle of the 14th century, when dyers began to use the so-called 'oak apples', which proved to be extraordinary dyes.

¹ In that socialist time some ethnographic exhibitions had an educational role in enlightening people and were travelling across the country.

Black is the only colour that has been unequivocally defined in Serbian traditional culture, with synonyms such as *vrana*, *mor*, *mrka*, etc. It had a negative connotation and was linked to uncertainty, the unknown, darkness, earth, death, or the chthonic world (Petrović 1970, 47). According to many Serbian religious beliefs, black had magical and protective powers. It was an attribute of certain mythical beings, like devils, witches, and demons from the chthonic world, being intensively black. In addition, black animals, objects, and plants were used as magical supplies in ritual practices (Petrović 1970, 47; Radenković 1996, 291).

Review of the dyed textile in Serbian traditional culture

Due to a specific socio-historical background, modernisation of social and economic processes in Serbia started later than in other countries, consequently, the traditional autarkic way of production remained the same until the end of the 19th Century and first half of the 20th Century. Namely, most of the territory south of the Sava and the Danube was part of the Ottoman Empire, from the 14th Century (officially 15th century)² until the 19th century, when its major territory was officially recognized at the Berlin Congress in 1868. During this period of time, the Serbian people were predominantly oriented towards rural life; and the patriarchal social system and autarkic way of production were strengthened. The textile industry was primarily based on domestic, homemade production. Women were responsible for all phases of textile processing, including the preparation of raw materials (wool, hemp, and flax), weaving, knitting, and embroidery. They produced textile elements commonly used in households, such as carpets, pillows, towels, bedcovers, and wall coverings. They also prepared clothing garments for all family members, as well as dowries, wedding gifts, and textile elements for rituals and sacral uses (Bjeladinovic 2011, 11).

Dyeing was an important step in processing textile raw materials. Before the 20th century, spun threads or yarns were mostly dyed within the home sphere. On a smaller scale, wool, clothes, and garments were dyed by professional dyers. For textile dyeing, women mainly used plant-based raw materials from their surroundings. However, some dyes, like chivit (indigo), kermes, and madder, could be obtained commercially. Although synthetic colours started to be produced in 1856, they gradually came into use among Serbian artisan dyers in the 1890s.

Traditional home textile dyeing is based on knowledge, abilities, and skills passed on from generation to generation. Domestic dyeing was exclusively a duty assigned to women, while professional dyers were men.

For natural dyeing, many raw materials were used, primarily plant-based. Women usually collected parts of trees (roots, tree barks, leaves, and fruits) or herbs and vegetables from their immediate environment (Cvetković 2022, 115). They used them rather in raw form or dried. The parts of trees most frequently used were those of walnut, ash, oak, pine, linden, willow, poplar, hazel, quince, peach, cherry, black locust, apple, plum, and alder. Commonly used herbs included common madder, nettle, sorghum, chamomile, bitter dock, spurge,

² The official year when Serbia lost independence was 1451, the fall of the municipality of Smederevo.

common comfrey, and clover. Vegetables such as beans, green pepper, tomatoes, and onion scales were also in use. To make the colour more permanent and ensure its fastness, catalysts were also used in the process: *sijera* (water left after scouring fleece), urine (often children's), alum, kraut juice, green vitriol (ferrous sulfate FeSO₄), blue vitriol (copper sulfate CuSO₄), wine vinegar, salt, iron sulfate, and limewater. Most of them were homemade.

The dyeing process required heating and boiling a mixture of dyes and catalysts dissolved in water, along with yarns, in domestic dishes such as pots or cauldrons. Dyeing procedures were regulated according to multigenerational practices and followed local rules, setting the amount of ingredients and the duration of the process needed to determine the shade and persistence of the colour.

Dyeing in black

The black colour was widely used in Serbian textile handiwork, particularly in the weaving of garments and textile furnishing elements. Black-dyed yarns were also used in knitting, but to a lesser extent. During the Ottoman period, relevant law regulations for clothing forced the Christian population to wear black garments to be more visually distinguished from the Muslim population in the public space (Filipović 1963, 64). There were several factors influencing the intensive use of black garments, including practical ones such as the easy availability of raw materials for black dyeing.

Plant-based materials the most commonly used for dyeing in black were walnut trees - including their leaves, bark, roots - dry and green shells, green nuts (**Fig. 1**), as well as ash trees (*Fraxinus* sp.), (**Fig. 2**) leaves of sourwood (*Ailanthus altissima* (Mill.)), twigs with leaves of alder (*Alnus glutinosa* (L.)), plum bark, rest harrow (*Ononis spinosa* L.), twigs with leaves and flowers of tatarium maple (*Acer tataricum*), red flowers of the wild origano (*Origanum vulgare* L.), bark and pine cones of the pine tree (Jurišić 1929: 37; Ivanović 1953: 210). Walnut and ash trees were the most common natural resources used for dyeing black because of their geographical accessibility.

Brown is closely related to black and is even interpreted in the same way. A wide range of raw plant materials were used by women to get different shades of brown, such as walnut, sorghum seeds, cherry bark, brown beans, horseradish root, elm bark, comfrey leaf, elderflower fruit, plum, white grape pomace, and quince bark (Jurišić 1929, 37; Ivanović 1953, 210). Homemade catalysts were usually added to fix the color.

The black color was commonly used for dyeing wool-felted cloth called *sukno*, which helped to make various garments. Regions where stock breeding, mainly sheep husbandry, was highly developed, established trade in *sukno* (Cvetković 2010, 252). *Sukno* was used both for women's and men's garments, notably upper-body sleeved garments such as jacket (*gunj*) or sleeveless chemises (**Figs. 3 & 4**) (*jelek, zubun*) as well as different types of male pants and breeches.

Regular non-felted black wool cloth was usually used to make skirts like *zaprega*, *bojče*, *futa*, and *vutara*, as well as aprons. It was also used for knitting, especially socks and gloves (Fig. 5).

The collection of the Ethnographic Museum displays coverings and textile furnishing elements that have been naturally dyed black and brown (Figs. 6 & 7).

Dyed yarns were usually a base color, but also for decoration in some weaving techniques and in embroidery.

The Zmijanje Embroidery is notably very famous and figured on the UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity since 2014 (Đukanović 215, 45). It is famous for its indigo embroidery patterns made of white cloth. Older samples were embroidered with black wool thread that was dyed in ash trees (Владић-Крстић 1979: 26) (Fig. 8).

Dyeing black and the systems of beliefs and rituals

Interestingly, archaic forms of ritual behaviour have been preserved for a long time, just like the black dyeing process. On the one hand, plants used for dyeing black were full of symbolic meanings and part of a system of beliefs; on the other hand, the black colour itself carried specific dangers and negative meanings.

Characteristics of the walnut tree used to produce black, such as the lushness of its crown or its strong shadow, have been attributed to many symbolic properties that had contributed to confer it a prominent place in the local system of beliefs (Agapkina 2001, 408, 409). The walnut was believed to be a 'halo' tree inhabited by fairies and witches who supposedly lived on its crown (Čajkanović 1985, 186). Magical activities were performed in its shade. Sick people used to pass on its roots to heal, so did healthy children in some places, for preventive purposes (Petrović 1970, . 257, 258).

The connection between walnuts and the cult of ancestors can be seen in many customs. The tree is planted on the graves, and its fruits are left on them. Walnuts are also part of Christmas customs, partly dedicated to the ancestors, as well as wedding customs.

Ash bark and leaves were also used to obtain black paint (Ivanović 1953, 209; Grđić-Bjelokosić 1895, 477). In Slavic mythology ash was considered to have apotropaic properties.

Oak bark was also used to dye wool black. Oak is a symbol of durability and stability and was considered a sacred tree. It is often chosen to represent the holy tree *zapis*, the sacred village tree. Oak had a prominent place in Slavic mythology, and it is believed that it was dedicated to the supreme god Perun (Agapkina 2001, 567). Oak was considered a shady tree. *Badnjak*, the holy oak branch, has a prominent role in Christmas customs.

Although literature is full of descriptions regarding the dyeing method and process, data on the ritual behaviour adopted during this process can also be found sporadically. The majority of such data precisely concerned the dyeing of yarn in black; for instance, it has been recorded that dyeing in these colours was a procedure made in silence and exclusively at night (Radenković 1996b, 275, 320). In some cases, lies were also told. In western Serbia, it has been recorded that before dropping the yarn into the mixture for dyeing black, a woman would have said, 'A black night passed through the black village and descended into my chancel' (Jovašević 1965, 78). Performing dyeing at night, in a dark colour, using most of the time pieces of walnut wood, was dangerous in several aspects. Night, the black colour and the walnut tree present indeed a distinctly chthonic character. Silence, or telling lies while dyeing, as traditional forms of anti-behaviour, were applied in order not to invoke dangerous chthonic forces, i.e., to prevent unwanted consequences and bad influences (Radenković 1996a, 88, 89; Agapkina 2001, 548, 549; Ivanović Barišić 2016, 34).

Conclusion

As shown in this article, Serbian traditional culture was in close interaction with nature. Plants, herbs, and vegetables from the natural environment and culture formed the basis of traditional textile handiwork. A large number of diverse plants from immediate environments were used for naturally dyeing textiles. The black colour was very common in textiles, primarily as a basic colour for garments and textile furniture items. Black yarn was not only used for knitting clothes, but also for decoration in weaving and embroidery techniques. Various plants from the environment were used for dyeing yarn in black or related brown, but usually, women used parts of walnut and ash. Interestingly, archaic forms of beliefs and ritual praxis have been preserved to dye in black or similar colours.

All recipes we preserve at the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade should be represented as part of our tangible cultural heritage. On the other side, we can regard such material as a part of ecological cultural heritage and probably as ecological potential for workshops, experiments, and use in the textile industry in the future.

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Fig. 1

EM inv.nu. 24923.

Sample of wool dyed with walnut shell,
1950, Kragujevac.

Fig. 2

EM inv.nu. 24924.

Sample of wool dyed with ash bark,
1950, Kragujevac.





Fig. 3

EM inv.nu 26406.

Curdiya Novo Pazar, beginning of 20th century.



Fig. 4

EM inv.nu. 17608 zubun.
Bajina bašta-yarn for embroidery dyed in indigo and ash,
second half of 19th century.



Fig. 5

EM Inv.nu. 21812.
Socks, Zmijanje, yarn dyed in ash, 1920.

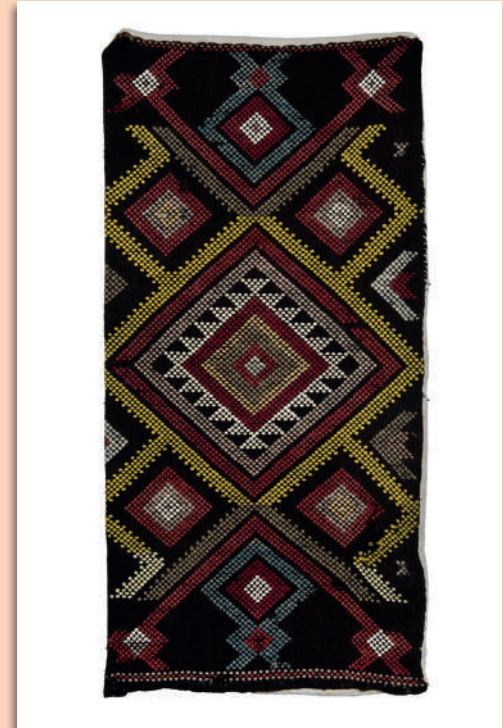


Fig. 6

EM Inv. nu. 42822.
Pillowcase, Knjaževac, black yarn dyed in walnut,
second half of 19th century.



Fig. 7

EM Inv.nu. 22488.
Carpet, Boljevac, wool dyed I walnut, quince and plum, 1948.



Fig. 8

EM Inv.nu. 39938.
Embroidary sample, Zmijanje,
second half of 19th century.