

From All the Colours to Black: Introduction of Black Colour into the Serbian 19th-Century National Costume

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Abstract

The 19th century in Serbia witnessed major changes in all spheres and the transition from a feudal to a capitalist society. During this period, clothing also underwent a shift from the Ottoman-Balkan to European dress styles, influencing the construction of the Serbian national costume. Under European influence, the distinctive Ottoman-influenced colourfulness disappeared from certain elements of the national costume; hence, attire worn during the mourning period adopted dark or black hues, while bridal dresses became white. The use of black colour also started to appear in different clothing items and accessories as a fashionable color. Based on preserved sources, this paper aims to examine the introduction of black colour into the national costume for women in Serbia as well as its use within the context of European-influenced dress etiquette.

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Introduction

The 19th century in Serbia witnessed major changes in all spheres and the transition from a feudal to a capitalist society. The uprisings against centuries-long Ottoman rule (1804, 1815) led to two sultan's hatt-i sharifs (1830, 1833), the establishment of the autonomous Principality of Serbia, and the full independence of the state, confirmed at the Congress of Berlin (1878). In this period, clothing also underwent a shift from Ottoman-Balkan to European dress styles, influencing the construction of the Serbian national costume.

The costume was created by selecting characteristic garments from the dress inventory of the urban population living in former Ottoman cities. Its distinctive feature was the Ottoman-influenced colorfulness, characterised by the absence of prominent black or white colours. Until the mid-19th century, the national costume for women started to acquire a fixed form with distinctive elements: the dress (*fistan*), jacket (most often of the *libade* type), sash (*bajader*), and cap (*tepeluk*). Unlike the costume for men, which was quickly abandoned in favor of European dress, the women's costume persisted as a dress style even into the first half of the 20th century (**Fig. 1**).

According to studies on Serbian dress, women's national costume is a fixed dress style symbolizing tradition, contrasting with the dynamic European fashion gradually accepted in 19th-century Serbia. From that point of view, certain changes related to the national costume, such as the introduction of black or white colors, were slightly overlooked.

Mourning Black and Wedding White

The influence of European dress on the formation of the national costume for women was very significant and visible in many aspects. For example, under European influence, black and white colours were occasionally introduced, so the costume worn by the bride at the wedding became white, while the costume worn during the mourning period became dark or black. The preserved visual sources show us different examples of national costumes used as bridal outfits (Prošić-Dvornić 2006: 254, 265; *idem* 2012: 21; Velimirović 2021: 274). The first example shows a bride in a typical, colourful national costume with a veil and wreath, stressing her bridal status. It was used in portraits painted by Uroš Knežević: the privately owned portrait of Voivode Stevan Knićanin's sister (around 1850) and the portrait of Mileva Naumović (1852) from the House of Jevrem Grujić, in Belgrade. The second example shows a bride adorned with the same accessories, dressed in a national costume that, in alignment with European bridal fashion trends, transformed entirely into white. This shift is evident in works of art such as Uroš Knežević's portraits of a girl in white (1850–1852) and Kleopatra Karađorđević (1854), both housed in the National Museum of Serbia. What cannot escape our attention is that the bride's headband (*bares*) retained its red colour, resisting the transformation to white seen in the rest of the costume (**Fig. 2**).

The process of introducing black colour into women's urban dress and national costume is a bit more complex. In Jovan Isajlović the Younger's painting of Prince Milan Obrenović II on the catafalque from 1839, kept in the National Museum of Serbia, female mourners are depicted wearing different dress styles, some influenced by the Ottoman tradition and others by European fashion of the time. The clothing of mourners who are dressed in European style is predominantly black. On the other hand, the mourners' attire following the Ottoman-influenced style is dark and, far from being colourful as usual, it does not entirely adopt the black colour (**Fig. 3**).

The headgear of mourners dressed in Ottoman-influenced style once again attracts attention. The painting shows the practice of covering the head with a dark scarf. That type of head cover can rarely be seen in 19th-century visual representations and appears to have been reserved for elderly women in mourning. In this instance, it is worn by the deceased prince's

mother, Princess Ljubica. A variation of the practice can be seen in Jovan Popović's 1841 portrait of Jelena Petrović, widow of the national leader Karađorđe. The portrait, housed in the National Museum of Serbia, shows Jelena in her old age, having been a widow for quite a long time. Although the colours of Jelena's clothes are not typically vivid, the clothing retained a certain amount of colourfulness, including the striped fabric of the dress as well as the headscarf and headband decorated with small flowers.

In the painting of Prince Milan at the catafalque, we also see fezes worn by the younger members of the family, dressed in urban dress. Fezes, as a typical headgear worn with urban dress and national costume, remained red even in mourning; they did not change colour to match the rest of the dark clothing items.

Fashionable Black

The introduction of dark and black fabrics into Serbian women's urban dress and national costume was not exclusively related to mourning. Towards the mid-19th century, we can also note the introduction of black as a fashionable colour. Both visual representations from that period and clothing items preserved in museum collections occasionally feature black items. In the portrait of a woman in Serbian urban dress, painted by Georgije Bakalović around 1839 and housed at the National Museum of Serbia, the sitter wears a black jacket with gold trimmings and a black chest-covering scarf. In the portrait by Uroš Knežević, painted after 1855 and also held at the National Museum of Serbia, Jelena Herbez Grujić is depicted wearing a black jacket (*libade*) and a black dress (*fistan*) (**Fig. 4**).

Jackets of *libade* type are among the most well-preserved national costume elements in Serbian museum collections, and also the ones that lasted the longest in Serbian women's wardrobes, up to the mid-20th century. The *libade* is a short jacket with long sleeves that flare at the bottom. It is usually made of dark red or dark blue silk velvet or silk satin with more pastel nuances, with embroidered and passementerie trimmings. Among the preserved *libades* are a significant number of black ones, made of silk satin with distinctive gold-coloured trimmings (**Fig. 5**).

Among popular black items was also the *bajader*, a long and wide silk sash with fringes tied below the waist. Due to their European-style floral decoration, it has been considered that *bajaders* were imported from Europe (Stojanović 1980: 30-31; Prošić-Dvornić 2006: 248, 255-256). However, this assumption still leaves some questions open. Among the *bajaders* depicted in paintings and those kept in museum collections, there are items with a black ground. In two portraits from the National Museum of Serbia—the portraits of Pavle Stanišić's children, painted in 1846-1847 by Katarina Ivanović, and the portrait of Miljko Bajković's wife, painted by Arsenije Petrović in 1844-1850—the sitters wear black *bajaders* with floral and striped decoration (**Fig. 6**).

During the last decades of the 19th century, the black colour finally gained a more defined place in Serbian women's national costumes. It became a common choice for widows and elderly women who continued to wear this style of dress. In painted and photographed portraits from this period, the completely black national costume is no longer unusual, as it

was few decades earlier. This is shown on the photo of Sofija Uskoković, the widow of merchant Mijajlo Uskoković and mother of writer Milutin Uskoković. This photograph, now kept in the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade, was taken in the town of Užice in 1906, a year after she became a widow. The sumptuous black national costume can also be seen in the same museum, in the photo of Stojna Žarković taken in 1899 (**Fig. 7**).

Black *Tepeluk*

An interesting question related to the introduction of black colour into the Serbian national costume is: what happened to the persistently colourful headgear? In the above sections, we discussed two types of shallow red cloth caps, parts of Serbian women's urban dress and national costume: the fez and the *tepeluk*. While the fez included a tassel, its later variation, the *tepeluk*, was decorated with pearl embroidery arranged in a series of cones.

A particular challenge with the *tepeluk* is that it was worn at the back of the head, so in most cases, on the painted and photographed portraits, it remained invisible or not visible enough. What remained visible is that both fez and *tepeluk* were generally red, which is confirmed by the items preserved in museum collections. In some cases, during mourning periods, the *tepeluk* was covered with black fabric while the accompanying headband (*bares*) was replaced with a black ribbon (*idem* 2006: 265, 2012: 21).

Yet, there came a point when even the *tepeluk* adopted a black color in order to match the etiquette and the rest of the black costume. The Museum of Applied Art in Belgrade holds a rare example of a black *tepeluk*, dated back to the second half of the 19th century (Maskareli 2019: 38, 88). The conical embroidered decoration of this *tepeluk* features black beads instead of the usual white pearls. Unfortunately, the museum documentation lacks any information that would be helpful regarding more precise dates or context. The picture is a little bit clearer regarding another known example of a black *tepeluk*, kept in the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade. The museum documentation states that the cap was worn about 1890 in Zvornik, which was then a part of Austria-Hungary, now Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a component of the Serbian national costume (**Fig. 8**).

With the examples of black *tepeluks*, we conclude our paper, in which we aimed to map different points related to the introduction of the black colour into the Serbian national costume. Throughout the 19th century, the colourful national costume, under the influence of European etiquette and fashion, eventually embraced its black version. We believe that certain questions related to the Serbian national costume are still unanswered and we hope that our small search for the black colour will draw attention to them and contribute to further studies of Serbian 19th-century dress.

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Fig. 1

Uroš Knežević, *Wife of Atanasije Đorđević*, 1847-1848.

Ethnographic Museum, Belgrade, accession no. 9910.



Fig. 2

Uroš Knežević, *Kleopatra Karadorđević*, 1854.

National Museum of Serbia, accession no. 31_1381.



Fig. 3

Jovan Isajlovic the Younger,
Prince Milan Obrenovic on the Catafalque, 1839.
National Museum of Serbia, accession no. 31_104.



Fig. 4

Uroš Knežević, *Jelena Herbez Grujić*, after 1855.
National Museum of Serbia, accession no. 31_1446.

Fig. 5

Jacket – *libade*, Serbia, Petrovac na Mlavi,
early 20th century.

Ethnographic Museum, Belgrade, accession no. 47522.



Fig. 6

Sash – *bajader*, second half of the 19th century.

Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade, accession no. 1886.



Fig. 7

Stojna Žarković, 1899.

Ethnographic Museum, Belgrade, accession no. 16019.



Fig. 8

Cap – *tepeluk*, Serbia,
second half of the 19th century.
Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade, accession no. 1951.

