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## **KOROVAI AS AN OBJECT OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE**

**Summary.** *The article is devoted to the analysis of the korovai as an object of intangible cultural heritage of Ukraine, its role in preserving national identity, and prospects for inclusion in the UNESCO list. The relevance of the topic is due to the need to protect traditional values in the context of globalization, as well as increasing interest in cultural diplomacy as a tool for promoting the country in the international arena. The novelty of the study lies in a comprehensive consideration of the korovai through the prism of UNESCO criteria, including evidence of its uniqueness, living tradition, and intergenerational transmission, as well as in identifying its role in shaping a positive image of Ukraine through festivals, diasporas, and diplomatic practices.*

*As part of the work, seven sources were studied: newspaper articles, culinary resources, materials of cultural organizations, and UNESCO documents, which made it possible to reveal the symbolism of the korovai, its historical evolution, and modern adaptations. Particular attention is paid to the mechanisms for preserving the tradition — from local initiatives (master classes, Sorochintsy Fair) to digital formats (video lessons, social networks), as well as the analysis of successful cases (Petrykivka painting, Kosiv ceramics) for the development of a nomination strategy for UNESCO.*

*The purpose of the work is to demonstrate how the korovai, combining sacred symbolism and modern practices, strengthens the cultural sustainability of Ukraine and serves as a bridge between the past and the future. The conclusion*

*specifies the key conditions for international recognition: systematic documentation of the tradition, state support, integration into educational programs and active use in cultural diplomacy.*

*The article will be useful for researchers of cultural heritage, ethnographers, curators of international programs (including UNESCO), festival organizers, representatives of the Ukrainian diaspora, and government agencies involved in the promotion of national culture.*

**Key words:** *korovai, intangible cultural heritage, Ukraine, UNESCO criteria, cultural symbols, wedding ceremonies, preservation of traditions, cultural diplomacy.*

**Introduction.** Korovai is an ancient Ukrainian sacred bread made from white wheat flour for solemn events, among which weddings and christenings were the main ones. The round korovai is remarkably decorated on the surface with an ornament of dough, so it is not only tasty but also a real masterpiece of culinary art. The idea of offering korovai bread expresses the qualities inherent in the spirituality of hospitality, unity, and well-being. This bread at the table expresses the significance of the event and indicates the wealth of Ukrainian cultural traditions. The concept of korovai formation is inseparable from the history of the ceremonies and rituals of the Ukrainians, primarily the wedding rite. This bread at the wedding personifies the solidarity of newlyweds and also future prosperity. The newlyweds often cut this korovai, which illustrates their agreement to share the joys and sorrows of life. This complex rite of preparing korovai permeates thousands of generations, standing as an essential element of the national heritage of Ukraine. The procedure of its preparation usually turns into collective participation, which unites a family and even the whole community. At the same time, its preparation and presentation involve rituals that are transmitted from generations. For example, in the wedding tradition, this

particular korovai symbolizes wishes for a long and happy life for the new family, and breaking it together marks the start of a new family.

This paper argues the premise of the interpretation of bread as a phenomenon of Ukrainian culture and its potential release on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List. An analysis is also performed of how the tradition of preparing this bread has survived to the present day and the usage of the event in the course of promoting Ukraine abroad. In the contemporary world, Ukrainian bread does not enter the UNESCO list, but the precedent of Ukrainian borscht qualified in 2022 proves that culinary traditions can be recognized at the global level [4].

**Materials and methodology.** The study was based on an analysis of seven sources, including encyclopedic articles, culinary resources, materials from cultural organizations, and international documents. Basic information on the structure, ritual purpose, and symbolism of the korovai was provided by newspaper publication [1], emphasizing its role in wedding ceremonies and its connection with Ukrainian mythology. Culinary sources [2; 3] revealed the status of bread in culture, focusing on the korovai as a symbol of unity, hospitality, and connection between generations, as well as on modern interpretations of the tradition in the context of gastronomic tourism. Data on cultural events such as the Sorochintsy Fair [6] and the Toronto Ukrainian Festival [7] demonstrated the integration of the korovai into mass celebrations and diaspora practices, which emphasizes its adaptability in the context of globalization. Content analysis of publications [3; 4; 5; 7] and UNESCO criteria [5] revealed narratives related to heritage preservation, as well as the korovai’s compliance with international standards, such as the transfer of knowledge between generations and support for cultural diversity. In addition, critical synthesis methods were used [6; 7], which made it possible to assess the live practices of korovai creation, including master classes and digital learning formats.

**Results and discussion.** The history of the korovai in Ukrainian culture goes back to ancient times, when bread was not just food, but a sacred symbol. It is believed that the tradition of baking a korovai arose in pre-Christian times, when the Slavs revered bread as a gift from the gods, the embodiment of fertility and prosperity [2]. An example of a wedding korovai is shown in Figure 1.



**Fig. 1. A three-tier korovai at a wedding [3]**

The korovai has become an integral part of the ceremonies and rituals that accompany key events in a person's life. In Ukrainian culture, it has become firmly established as an element of tradition, reflecting a deep connection with nature and the spirituality of ancestors, which makes it an important link in the historical heritage of the people. The korovai plays a role in key events in the lives of Ukrainians, such as weddings, christenings, and religious holidays. At weddings, it takes center stage: it is baked with special care, often by the joint

efforts of the family. Newlyweds are greeted with a korovai and salt - this is an ancient sign of hospitality and blessing of the new family. The ritual of breaking the korovai symbolizes the beginning of a life together and even predicts who will be the head of the house, depending on who breaks off the larger piece. In baptismal rites, the korovai represents the acceptance of a new member into the community, and at holidays such as Christmas or Easter, it becomes a symbol of abundance and gratitude, accompanying the celebrations and enhancing their significance. The symbolic meaning of the korovai goes far beyond simple bread. Its round shape is associated with the sun, which symbolizes warmth, light, and the continuation of life. The decorations on the korovai — dough figures in the form of flowers, ears of corn, or birds — carry additional meanings: flowers and ears of corn reflect fertility and a rich harvest, and birds symbolize family happiness and fidelity [1]. It becomes not just a treat but a powerful cultural symbol that passes on the values and traditions of the Ukrainian people through generations, strengthening the connection between the past and the present. An example of ka orovai decoration is shown in Figure 2.





**Fig. 2. Birds, grapes, and vines adorn korovai [3]**

Whether or not the korovai will be entered in the list of elements for the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage depends on compliance with these criteria and its significance for Ukrainian culture. A criterion that has to be met for any element to be included in the UNESCO list should be based on the beauty of the element; the criterion normally includes three requirements: uniqueness, living tradition, and intergenerational transmission. Uniqueness represents the outstanding feature of the practice as compared to any different cultural phenomenon. The korovai can be presented as a circular korovai with a very

complicated decoration of the dough and deep symbolism expressed in fertility, hospitality, and happiness, distinguishing itself from any breed of bread that exists. On the other hand, living tradition signifies the ability of the practice to continue and be supported by the community. The statement is thus painted that the korovai baking practice continues to be actively observed in Ukraine, particularly during weddings, baptisms, and religious festivities, which serves as evidence of its place in contemporary life. Transmission involves learning and mastering specific knowledge and skills related, in our case, to the element of intangible heritage of korovai-making practices from older to younger members of Ukrainian families and communities. In this way, the korovai would fully satisfy the criteria for consideration by UNESCO as a candidate for recognition at the international level. The effective recognition of Ukrainian traditions by UNESCO is proof of the importance of Ukrainian cultural heritage on the world cultural map. A very good example is the Petrykivka painting, which was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2013 [4]. It is a typical artistic folk painting typical of the Petrykivka village, Dnipropetrovsk region, in which bright floral motifs and symbolic signs express all the wealth of Ukrainian nature and traditions. Its nomination process was carefully organized: historical research was carried out for the preparation of the dossier, techniques and symbolism were described, and the living tradition was demonstrated through festivals and exhibitions. Another example is Kosiv ceramics, as nominated to UNESCO in 2019 [4]. This is a traditional pottery art from the town of Kosiv in the region of Ivano-Frankivsk, known for its unique painting techniques and use of natural materials. What was required for a nomination like that of Kosiv ceramics was collecting archival material, conducting master classes, and installing exhibitions to show relevance and continuity. Both cases show that success at the international level was only possible because local communities and the state provided their full support to preserve and promote their traditions.

Ukrainian korovai must be nominated for the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List, following similar consistent steps that are taken for the nominations of Petrykivka paintings and Kosovo ceramics. At the first stage, comprehensive documentation has to be prepared on historical backgrounds outlining the place and period of emergence of the tradition and its elevated symbolic function in Ukrainian culture, followed by contemporary methodologies and channels to pass this wisdom onto forthcoming generations. An important element of this process is the presentation of living activities that support and aid the continuity of the tradition, which can be proved by offering master classes, festivals, and educational programs. This process involves the necessary support of the community since UNESCO insists on real involvement from the bearers of the tradition in the initiative supporting it. Another direction is the national and regional level support: the official recognition of the tradition as a part of the cultural heritage of Ukraine and the commitment of the authorities to promote its protection and popularization. The prepared dossier — including summed up moments — should be brought on the agenda of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO.

The inclusion of the korovai in the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage will be an important step in preserving the rich cultural traditions of Ukraine. The korovai is a togetherness symbol with the most profound significance tied to Ukrainian wedding rituals since the very beginning. Sound and set recognition from across the globe will add proven cultural values to the ongoing efforts of preservation through the passage of this tradition to the bright future of our generations. Leading quite dynamic initiatives already in place in Ukraine, starting from festivals to master classes and digital platforms created to help the korovai-making tradition survive, this listing will draw more dust into these efforts and make the korovai an ever-brighter part of the country's cultural essence.



Such an inclusion of korovai in the UNESCO list will bring immense international and diplomatic benefits to Ukraine. It shall largely contribute, first of all, to the promotion of the culture of Ukraine in the world, something that may inspire cultural tourism and easy international exchange. More than that, in the personified form of hospitality, korovai shall turn into a tool of cultural diplomacy that will not only improve the image of Ukraine abroad but also multiply bonds with various other countries. As an illustration of Petrykivka painting and Kosiv ceramics, which have already gained recognition from UNESCO, cultural elements can at times become nations’ ambassadors, representing the wealth of Ukrainian heritage and openness toward the world, taking korovai to be a plausible bridgehead reflecting Ukrainian tradition to the whole international community.

In modern Ukrainian society, a variety of initiatives are increasingly popularizing the baking of korovai, which at their best can sometimes play no less a consumer role in the safeguarding of cultural heritage and the conveyance of knowledge to coming generations. The primary form of preservation is the arrangement of master classes and festivals where representatives of folk arts demonstrate korovai baking—for example, at the annual Sorochinsky Fair [6]. Such events raise the profile of the tradition while providing ample opportunities for applying the technique in practice and developing mastery in the preparation and decoration of korovai. The explanation behind such festivals is to appeal to the masses with korovai and, in the long run, support its acknowledgment as evidence of Ukrainian culture. Also, the activities of museums and cultural centers show considerable input to the lore of the traditions of korovai. Some museums organize exhibitions and additional educational programs related to the process of making a korovai. Visitors may learn about the history of this korovai, its meaning, and regional peculiarities, as well as accompany their knowledge with master classes. Such programs do not only help keep some knowledge of korovai issues alive, but they help stimulate young people towards it as well. It is

possible to extend information about recipes and cooking methods massively through social media, culinary blogs, and video tutorials via YouTube. Ukrainian culinary bloggers and bakers, for example, have provided many videos with instructions on how to bake a korovai and have thereby made this tradition of theirs accessible to a much larger audience. This is very significant in the age of globalization since people can tend to lose traditions such as korovai if they are just not of interest and not known. The Internet makes it possible not only to find out what a korovai is but also to master its recipe, even if one does not have personal contact with any masters or cultural events.

The knowledge transfer from generation to generation forms a framework that has an inherent connection with this tradition of baking korovai. Older people take the lead and teach the younger ones in Ukrainian families and communities, ensuring the practice of carrying cultural continuity through time. For instance, in some areas of Ukraine, there is a program under which schoolchildren and students are taught by experienced bakers the art of baking and imparted the symbolism behind making korovai.

One of the leading ways in which the korovai is presented on an international level is through cultural festivals and exhibitions. For example, at the annual Ukrainian Festival in Toronto, which attracts thousands of visitors. Among the most prominent features at the festival are traditional Ukrainian dishes, among which is the korovai [7]. Through such events, apart from introducing Ukrainian traditions to the international world, they also manage to create pride among the Diaspora Ukrainians, who are reminded of the importance of the korovai as a symbol of their culture.

The Ukrainian diaspora all around the world has a significant role in the growth and preservation of the tradition of sharing korovai. In the United States, Canada, and Australia, Ukrainian communities prefer to settle cultural events, such as weddings and religious festivities, where korovai is meticulously baked and shared according to the rules and rituals passed down for generations,

connecting them with their roots and educating the youngest members of the diasporas. In diplomatic settings, the offer of a korovai with salt, an old Slavic custom, is taken as a warm welcome and a gesture of respect. State visits or international conferences held in Ukraine receive a warm welcome with korovai for the foreign representatives, converting such dignified greetings into practical first-hand Ukrainian culture. This practice pays homage to the guest and, at the same time, in a rather implicit manner, helps to achieve the goals of cultural diplomacy by proving the Ukrainian people to be very open and hospitable. An example of the practice of a korovai in diplomatic protocol is shown in Figure 3.



**Fig. 3. Bread and salt on the occasion of Joe Biden's arrival in Ukraine [1]**

The very warmth, tradition, and hospitality imbibed in the values of a korovai substantially cultivate the positive perception of Ukraine in other countries. Exposure to a korovai at festivals, made by the diaspora, or presented diplomatically forever links foreigners with the generous and open Ukrainian public; this diminishes negative stereotypes and leads to a more profound understanding of Ukraine, more emphasis on its cultural richness and resilience in modern challenges. Therefore, the korovai is a polyvalent instrument of Ukraine’s cultural diplomacy. It promotes Ukrainian culture and enhances ties among nations through presentations within the mainstream international scene,

upholding it by the diaspora as a beacon of hospitality, symbolizing Ukraine as positive, and therefore further ties with the rest of the world.

**Conclusion.** Korovai is not just bread; it’s a symbol of unity, blessing, and the history of deep traditions in Ukrainian culture. The practice is still alive and therefore fits UNESCO’s criteria for inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Given the examples of successful recognition at the international level of other Ukrainian traditions — Petrykivka painting and Kosiv ceramics — korovai also has significant potential to win recognition on a world scale. To do so, though, requires systematic work, in particular, governmental and non-governmental support for culture.

The tradition of making korovai bread becomes important to keep alive in generations to follow not only to strengthen the identity of Ukrainians in cultural terms but also as a form of knowledge transfer and value practice across the generations. This tradition can become modernized to fit into the more general global context and fast-moving world life. The example formed by master classes, festivals, and museum programs works well with both the promotion of korovai and the tested ways to educate youth. Modern technology, including online courses and videos, will also help to maintain knowledge of baking. This should be supported nationally with the most generous means, giving birth to connections between the past and present that will preserve the korovai as a Ukrainian cultural symbol for future generations. The initiation of support for the projects of korovai promotion at the national and international levels is targeted at the preservation of this tradition and its attaining the level of the element of the world cultural heritage. The nomination of the korovai for the UNESCO list may become an important step, but it needs the active participation of communities, authorities, and cultural organizations.

It, in turn, will serve as a means of cultural diplomacy, binding international relations and the propaganda of Ukraine abroad. However, the challenging task in these directions is to work more productively and closely with the Ukrainian

diaspora and apply modern media, such as social networks or documentaries, to significantly increase the recognition of the korovai. Financial support from the government concerning cultural undertakings and educational projects will determine this process. That is why all stakeholders should make every effort possible to ensure that the Ukrainian korovai is preserved as part of the Ukrainian heritage and assigned its rightful place as one of the world's cultural treasures.

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