



Art of Decorating Korovai as Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

The article examines the pressing issue of preserving and transforming the art of decorating the korovai as an element of Ukraine's intangible cultural heritage. The relevance of the topic is driven by the increased focus on local ritual practices in the context of national self-identification and cultural heritage preservation programs. The decoration of the wedding korovai represents a unique combination of symbolism, craftsmanship, and ritual practice that retains deep significance in today's cultural landscape. The aim of the study is to analyze the semantics of the decorative elements, the ritual function of the korovai, the techniques used in its decoration, and the modern forms of adapting the tradition. The article synthesizes ethnographic sources and archival materials, and it examines the practices of contemporary artisans who are reviving traditional forms under new technological conditions. It is concluded that the korovai continues to serve as a sacred mediator between families and generations, and the combination of manual techniques with modern methods contributes to the sustainability of the tradition. The article will be useful for researchers in ethnography and cultural anthropology, representatives of craft schools, and developers of cultural-tourism programs.

Keywords: Korovai, Intangible Heritage, Wedding Ritual, Symbolism, Traditional Decoration, Ritual Bread, Ethnography, Decorative Elements, Craftswomen, Cultural Continuity.

INTRODUCTION

The traditions of preparing and decorating the wedding korovai are among the most expressive elements of Ukrainian ritual culture. The korovai is not merely a festive bread but a sacred symbol that embodies archaic notions of fertility, family well-being, and the continuity of the lineage. As part of the wedding ritual, it reflects the worldview of the people, their values, aesthetic preferences, and system of symbols. Today, the art of decorating the korovai is preserved in several regions and is being revived by individual artisans, ethnocultural centers, and programs for intangible cultural heritage.

Despite the inclusion of certain practices in the National List of Elements of Ukraine's Intangible Cultural Heritage, many aspects of korovai ritual remain insufficiently studied. In particular, the techniques of shaping and composing dough decorations, the meanings of symbols (such as rowan, ears of grain, birds, etc.), and the modern adaptations of traditional forms through technological innovations require scientific description. Moreover, a comprehensive analysis of the synthesis of archaic symbols with contemporary artistic approaches—actively developed by artisans in regions such as Sakhnovshchyna, Polissia, Podolia, and Hutsulshchyna—is lacking. At the same time, the art of decorating the korovai is increasingly becoming not only a ritual element but also

an object of cultural tourism, media communications, and visual art.

The aim of the study is to conduct a systematic analysis of the art of decorating the Ukrainian wedding korovai as an element of Ukraine's intangible cultural heritage, with an emphasis on the semiotic interpretation of symbols, decoration techniques, and modern forms of transforming the tradition. The work is intended to examine the symbolism and structure of the korovai, describe the artistic techniques used in its decoration, identify regional peculiarities, and analyze ways to integrate ancient ritual practices into modern cultural traditions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The article employs methods of comparative-historical analysis, systematization, and semiotic interpretation. Practices of contemporary artisans who are reviving the traditions of wedding baking were studied. Both theoretical and applied aspects of Ukrainian ritual practices related to the art of decorating the korovai, its symbolic content, regional features, and modern adaptations were examined. During the analysis of sources, a growing interest among researchers and cultural institutions in the preservation and popularization of intangible cultural heritage—particularly local gastronomic and ritual practices—was revealed.

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Recent publications addressing elements of Ukraine's intangible cultural heritage consider the traditions of decorating the korovai as part of a broader system of wedding rituals. For instance, the materials of the "Korni" project [5] emphasize the importance of the korovai ritual as a sacred act that involves collective participation, the symbolism of the feminine principle, and protective magic. They note that the ritual is maintained in modern forms, transmitted from generation to generation, and that this knowledge has practical value for local communities. Of particular note is the experience of korovai makers from the Sakhnovshchyna district of the Kharkiv region, whose practice was officially included in Ukraine's National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2022 [2]. In this region, the korovai is decorated exclusively with unleavened dough, and each decorative element—be it rowan, oak leaves, poppies, roses, or "little flowers"—carries a distinct semantic load. An analysis of regional material (ELLE Ukraine supported by MKIP [3], RBC Ukraine [4]) has shown that artisans actively combine traditional techniques with modern aesthetic approaches and innovative technologies.

The semiotic aspect of studying the symbolism in the korovai's decoration allows it to be seen not merely as decorated bread but as a complex system of cultural signs. In works dedicated to ritual cuisine and ethnographic visualization, the significance of elements as amulets, well-wishes, and identification markers of a specific region is emphasized. In particular, clusters of rowan or kalyna are interpreted as symbols of lineage, birds as harbingers of harmony and fertility, and braids and wreaths as symbols of life's cyclicity and protection from malevolent forces [1].

Thus, the study is based on a combination of empirical and theoretical approaches that encompass both the deep cultural meanings of the korovai and modern forms of its preservation and transmission. This multi-level analysis ensures a comprehensive examination of the object within the context of Ukraine's intangible heritage, allowing for well-founded conclusions to be drawn in the subsequent sections.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The symbolism used in decorating the wedding korovai constitutes a stable semiotic system that traces its roots back to pre-Christian times. Every decorative element carries both an aesthetic and a sacred charge, aimed at protecting the newlyweds, attracting prosperity, ensuring the continuation of the lineage, and fostering harmony in married life. In the tradition of a Ukrainian wedding, decorating the korovai is not merely an artistic act but a unique code of cultural memory that encapsulates wishes, beliefs, and hopes. One of the most common symbols is rowan, depicted either as clusters of berries or as rounded droplets made of dough. Its meaning is multilayered: in popular worldview, rowan is associated with feminine fertility, protection from the evil eye, and defense against malevolent forces. It is often placed around the perimeter of the korovai as a kind of energetic amulet.

Birds, most often doves, are placed on the top of the korovai and symbolize peace, harmony, and pairing. According to ritual logic, the presence of a pair of doves represents a strong union founded on love and spiritual kinship. In some regions, not just a pair but an entire "bird's nest" is depicted on the korovai, serving as a harbinger of future offspring and the continuation of the lineage. Floral motifs, especially roses, poppies, and periwinkles, are frequently combined with wheat ears to create a symbolic ensemble of abundance, vitality, and harvest. The wheat ear, a central element of the agrarian calendar and ancient fertility symbolism, is included in the composition to "invite" wealth and prosperity into the new family. Flowers, in turn, signify beauty, purity, feminine strength, and the emotional blossoming of a new life. Special attention is given to dough braids—they encircle the korovai or intersect at its center. The braid symbolizes femininity, the continuity of the family, and the cyclic nature of life. Compositionally, the korovai is almost always arranged in a circle—a form symbolizing eternity, the closed nature of the lineage, and the infinite cycle of love and protection.

Table 1. Symbolism of decorative elements in the Ukrainian wedding korovai (compiled by the author based on sources [1-5])

Element	Symbolic meaning	Ritual function
Rowan	Fertility, protection, feminine energy	Amulet, attraction of prosperity
Doves	Peace, harmony, union	Symbol of pairing and balance
Wheat ears	Harvest, abundance, continuity of the lineage	Wish for material prosperity
Flowers (e.g., roses)	Beauty, love, spiritual fulfillment	Symbol of femininity and renewal
Dough braids/wreaths	Continuity of the lineage, cycle of life	Symbol of cyclicity and strong family bonds
Circular form	Wholeness, eternity, protective power	Closed protection for the new family

The Ukrainian wedding korovai has, since time immemorial, held a central place in the structure of ritual practices, serving as both a festive delicacy and a key symbol around which the entire ritual framework of the wedding is formed. Its significance extends far beyond the gastronomic: the korovai is regarded as a sacred object, a mediator between families

and lineages, between the human world and higher forces. The korovai is the culminating element of the wedding. It is the first item brought into the groom's home and placed on the table, marking both the beginning and the end of the ritual cycle associated with the marriage [1], [5]. It is placed on a rushnyk—an embroidered cloth symbolizing the

new family's path. In several regions of Ukraine (notably in Poltava and Slobozhanshchyna), the korovai is lifted above the heads of the newlyweds as a sign of blessing.

Special emphasis in the tradition is placed on the ritual of dividing the korovai. This is carried out with the blessing of the parents or godparents and is accompanied by specific actions and words. The korovai is cut or broken by the godparents or the eldest person in the family, after which the pieces are distributed among the newlyweds and guests. This is not merely a treat—each piece carries a share of happiness, prosperity, and protection. In some regions of Ukraine (for example, in Volyn and Podolia), there is a custom in which the best part of the korovai—the top adorned with doves—is eaten only by the bride and groom as a symbol of the unity and indivisibility of their future union [4].

The semantics of the korovai are closely linked to the concept of sacred bread as an intermediary between worlds. In popular belief, bread is not merely food but the result of labor blessed by nature and God. That is why the wedding korovai has always been considered a “ritual gathering point,” in which the forces of the lineage, the blessings of the elders, the wishes of the guests, prayers, and magical elements are united. The korovai is the bread that “brings” families together; at the moment of its division, two lineages are finally united.

Regional differences lend additional nuances to the ritual. For example, in Polissia Zakarpattia, particular attention is paid to the appearance of the korovai—it must be beautiful and “mighty,” tall, with a richly decorated top, symbolizing the strength of the lineage and the status of the family [3]. In Polissi, collective preparation of the korovai accompanied by songs and playful banter is popular, with each participant contributing—whether dough, decoration, or the fire for baking. In the Poltava region, there is a tradition of ceremoniously carrying the korovai out of the groom's home to the sound of folk instruments, along with a ritual “farewell to the bride's maiden name” [1].

The techniques for decorating the Ukrainian wedding korovai have evolved over the centuries and have been established as a form of ritual art that combines craft skills with sacred symbolism. All decorative elements are handmade from dough, which emphasizes the individuality of each piece and the symbolic “liveliness” of the created image. The design is based on figures of plants, animals, and ornamental compositions crafted in dough while adhering to certain aesthetic canons. One of the most common techniques is dough modeling. Artisans create miniature flowers (such as roses, periwinkles, poppies), birds (most often doves), and wheat ears, placing them along the perimeter and at the center of the korovai. Specially prepared unleavened dough is used for modeling, which must retain its shape and not deform during baking. Each element is molded by hand without the use of molds, thereby conveying the artisan's personal style and regional characteristics [2].

Another important technique is dough weaving. Here,

methods analogous to weaving and traditional women's ritual practices are applied. Braids, wreaths, and borders are formed along the circumference of the korovai. A three-strand weave is particularly symbolic, representing the inseparable unity of the family, lineage, and community. In some regions (for example, Sakhnovshchyna, Podolia), these braids visually “hold” the structure together and unite the other elements into a single composition [2]. Some artisans use natural dyes (for example, beet, carrot, or boiled onion peel extracts) to impart a color accent to the decorative elements. Grain and seed inclusions—such as poppy, wheat, and millet—are also used to complement the ornaments, thereby intensifying their symbolic meaning. Poppy is believed to protect against evil spirits, while wheat symbolizes wealth and the continuation of the lineage.

Regardless of the technique used, the korovai adheres to certain aesthetic principles:

- Symmetry is considered essential, as it expresses harmony in relationships and balance within the new family.
- Centered Composition emphasizes the axis of the bride and groom's union, with the top of the korovai often serving as the dominant symbol—frequently, this is where a pair of doves is placed.
- The circular form of the korovai serves as its fundamental structure, symbolizing wholeness, eternity, the closed nature of the lineage, and protection from external influences.

In practice, each region of Ukraine introduces its own stylistic features into the decoration of the korovai. For example, in Zakarpattia, a richly adorned upper tier with numerous small flowers predominates, whereas in Slobozhanshchyna, the emphasis is on large birds and wreaths [3]. Modern artisans working in ethnocultural centers and craft schools often create sketches for future korovais, adapting traditional schemes to the specifics of each order, which reflects the living nature of the tradition (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Traditional Decorative Layout of a Ukrainian Wedding korovai (author's reconstruction based on sources [2], [3], [4])

The current stage in the development of the art of decorating the korovai is characterized by an active return to the once-forgotten ritual practice, alongside its adaptation to the conditions of the 21st century.

The main feature of today's stage is the synthesis of traditional craftsmanship with new technologies, visual solutions, and educational projects. The principal forms of this synthesis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Traditional techniques and modern adaptations in korovai decoration (compiled by the author based on sources [2-4])

Element/technique	Traditional approach	Modern adaptation
Modeling of elements	Handcrafting, molding with unleavened dough	Silicone molds, 3D printing, stabilized mixtures
Coloring	Natural color of the dough through baking	Natural dyes, edible pigments
Composition	Wreaths, braids, central figures	Asymmetrical solutions, art-deco stylization
Raw materials	Wheat flour, water, salt	Flour with additives (amaranth, corn), vegan recipes
Source of inspiration	Oral traditions, living heritage	Archival photos, museum collections, ethnographic catalogs

Traditions are most actively preserved in regions where elements of korovai art have already been included in the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Ukraine. For example, in the Sakhnovshchyna district of the Kharkiv region, where the "Sakhnovskiy korovai" has been officially recognized, local artisans continue to use classical molding techniques, dough weaving, and symbolic motifs [2]. They rely on the living tradition as well as on archival photographs, sketches preserved in local museums, and oral recollections of previous generations.

During folk art festivals and under programs of the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, artisans from various regions present diverse interpretations of korovai decoration. There are examples of the incorporation of modern technological solutions, including the use of silicone molds for faster molding of repeating decorative elements; the application of natural pigments (from beets, carrots, or kalyna) for coloring the dough; and working with new types of flour—such as amaranth, corn, or gluten-free varieties—to adapt the recipe to modern gastronomic demands [3].

Part of the modern practice is the digitization of the process – the creation of digital sketches of the korovai prior to its production, especially within craft schools and ethnocultural centers. Visual mock-ups help the customer choose the composition and symbols, while enabling the artisan to prearrange the compositional and semantic structure.

Among the significant trends is the active reinterpretation of lost motifs, such as multi-tiered wreaths, figures in the shapes of "stars" and "ears in a cross," previously recorded in ethnographic expeditions of the 19th–20th centuries. Through work with museum collections, visual catalogs, and local archives, there is not merely a copying but a meaningful return of artistic-ritual memory into contemporary practice.

CONCLUSIONS

The art of decorating the korovai, as part of Ukraine's intangible cultural heritage, demonstrates a high degree of resilience and symbolic richness. The korovai remains an integral element of the wedding ritual, uniting sacred concepts, visual codes, and collective memory. Its

symbolism—from rowan and doves to braids and wreaths—retains a deep archetypal meaning that is still relevant in the 21st century. Korovai decoration continues to be both a craft practice and an artistic gesture in which the family and community participate in the sacred act of creating a new social unit.

At the same time, the modern state of the korovai tradition faces several challenges. Urbanization, the outflow of youth from rural areas, and the declining number of tradition bearers are among these issues. However, the example of regions included in Ukraine's National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, such as Sakhnovshchyna, demonstrates that it is possible to preserve the tradition and revive it through cultural, educational, and ethnocreative projects. Modern artisans combine traditional techniques of molding and weaving with technological means—such as molds, edible pigments, and digital sketches—preserving the visual canon while adapting it to the audience's demands.

The future of the art of korovai decoration depends on the ability to combine scientific documentation with a living cultural practice. It is essential that the process of skill transmission be incorporated into both formal and informal education systems, as well as into festival and museum programs. The development of this field is possible only through a comprehensive approach—an intersectoral collaboration among cultural policy, tourism, education, and the craft business.

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