

# APOTROPAIC TEXTILE PRACTICES IN POSTPARTUM RITUALS OF THE DINARIC HIGHLANDS: THE RED THREAD AS BOUNDARY OBJECT BETWEEN FOLK MEDICINE AND ORTHODOX CANON

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**Abstract:** A red woollen thread tied around the wrist of a newborn, or worked into the swaddling, belt, or headcloth of a woman in the forty days following birth, is among the most widely reported protective devices in the ethnographic record of the Dinaric highlands and the wider Slavic Orthodox world. It is also absent from the canonical texts of the tradition within whose ritual calendar it operates. The postpartum period is the object of a precise ecclesiastical framework — the prayers of the first day, the eighth-day naming, the fortieth-day churching of mother and child — and the red thread appears at no point in that framework, being neither prescribed nor forbidden. This article treats that absence as its central datum rather than as an incidental gap. Working from the published ethnographic and lived-religion literature on the Western Balkans and the wider Slavic area, and from the comparative literature on amulets, charms, and the materiality of magic, I argue that the standard boundary-object model, which explains an artefact's circulation between communities by its interpretive flexibility, misdescribes what is happening here. The original contribution of the article is the canonical vacancy thesis: the red thread circulates between folk therapeutic practice and ecclesiastical practice not because the two communities read it differently but because one of them has issued no reading at all, and this normative silence is a structural condition rather than an oversight. From the thesis I develop a three-tier typology of ritual objects by institutional status — canonically incorporated, canonically proscribed, canonically vacant — and derive a falsifiable prediction: vacant-tier objects should display higher persistence under secularisation and biomedicalisation than objects in either of the other tiers, since their retention incurs no doctrinal cost and their abandonment yields no doctrinal benefit. The article is conceptual and comparative; it advances no claim resting on new fieldwork, and the concluding section specifies the fieldwork that would be needed to test the prediction properly.

**Keywords:** *apotropaic practice, red thread, postpartum ritual, boundary object, canonical vacancy, Orthodox Christianity, folk medicine, Dinaric highlands.*

## INTRODUCTION

Consider what a priest in a highland parish does not say. A woman brings her child on the fortieth day for the churching; the child wears a red thread on its wrist, tied there by the grandmother in the first hours of life. The rite proceeds. Nothing in the service refers to the thread, nothing in the parish's normative literature addresses it, and the priest, who has seen it a thousand times, does not remark on it either. Now consider the ethnographer's problem. The thread is

manifestly part of the ritual complex surrounding birth; it is present in the same room, on the same body, within the same forty-day interval as the ecclesiastical sequence. Yet the two systems that meet on the infant's wrist have not negotiated a shared understanding of what is happening there. One of them has said nothing at all.

Ethnology has a standard vocabulary for objects that live between systems. Since the concept was introduced to describe how scientific and amateur communities coordinated around specimens in a museum of vertebrate zoology, boundary objects have been understood as artefacts plastic enough to adapt to the local needs of several communities while robust enough to maintain a common identity across them (Star & Griesemer, 2025). The concept has travelled widely, into archaeology and environmental research among other fields, and its portability is part of its appeal (Stansbie, 2022). Applied to our case, it seems to fit: the thread means one thing to a grandmother concerned about the evil eye and another to a priest concerned about the sacramental reintegration of mother and child, and it holds both meanings without breaking. That is the reading I began with, and this article is an argument for why it is wrong, or at least seriously incomplete.

The trouble is the second community's silence. Boundary objects, on the original account, require translation: each community must have a version, and the versions must be reconcilable at the point of exchange (Star & Griesemer, 2025). Orthodox canon has no version of the red thread. It has a version of blessed water, of the cross worn at the neck, of the fortieth-day rite itself; it also has a version of divination and charming, which are proscribed. Of the red thread it has nothing — no blessing, no prohibition, no classification. The object is not shared between two interpretations; it is held by one interpretation and passed over in silence by the other. My claim is that this configuration is common enough in religion-and-folk-medicine contact zones to deserve a name and a model, and that it produces effects the standard boundary-object account does not predict.

The original contribution of this article, then, is the canonical vacancy thesis, together with the typology it supports and the empirical prediction it generates. Stated compactly: where a folk therapeutic object occupies a normative vacancy in the institutional religion within whose ritual calendar it operates, its circulation is governed not by interpretive flexibility but by the absence of institutional adjudication, and vacancy confers a distinctive resilience. Ritual objects can then be sorted into three tiers by their institutional status — canonically incorporated, canonically proscribed, canonically vacant — and the tiers should behave differently under the pressures of secularisation and biomedicalisation. The vacant tier, I predict, is the most durable, because nothing doctrinal is at stake in either keeping it or dropping it.

Three hypotheses structure the investigation. H1 holds that the red thread of the postpartum sequence is canonically vacant rather than syncretically incorporated, and that the published record shows silence rather than negotiated accommodation. H2 holds that the canonical vacancy configuration is analytically distinct from the classic boundary-object configuration, differing in mechanism, in the direction of interpretive labour, and in what happens when the object is challenged. H3 holds that vacancy predicts persistence: among ritual objects in the postpartum complex, those in the vacant tier should show greater retention in urbanised and biomedicalised settings than those in the incorporated or proscribed tiers. I test H1 and H2 against the literature and argue that H3, while consistent with what the literature reports, cannot be settled without the fieldwork the conclusion specifies.

Two disclosures belong in the introduction rather than in a footnote. First, this is not a report of fieldwork. I have conducted no interviews and observed no rites for the purposes of this article; the evidentiary base is the published ethnographic and lived-religion literature, and every claim about practice is a claim about what that literature records. Where the literature is thin —

and for the Dinaric zone specifically it is thinner than the article's title may suggest — I say so rather than filling the gap with plausible-sounding detail. Second, my own position is neither that of the parish nor that of the discipline in a straightforward sense: I write from the Western Balkans, on a religious formation I know from the inside, using analytic categories developed largely elsewhere, and in earlier work on the post-secular public sphere of this region I argued that the translation of religious speech into public reason here proceeds asymmetrically rather than reciprocally (Knežević, 2023). The present article is, in a sense, that argument moved from the level of public discourse to the level of a wrist.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

### *Literature Review*

Four bodies of scholarship converge on this problem, and it is worth setting out what each contributes and where each stops. The first is the study of lived and vernacular religion, which has transformed how the coexistence of official and unofficial practice is described. Radulović and Stojanović (2025) review the study of folk Orthodoxy in Serbia from the legacy of Dušan Bandić to contemporary lived-religion approaches, tracing the shift from a model in which folk practice is a degraded residue of doctrine to one in which it is a mode of religiosity in its own right. Pavićević (2025) distinguishes church-goers from bearers of a broader Christian Orthodox culture in contemporary Serbia, a distinction that matters here because the two groups may relate quite differently to an object the church has not ruled on. Bowman (2022), writing in tribute to Leonard Primiano, restates the vernacular-religion programme's core insistence that all religion as lived is vernacular. Anđelković, Stojić-Mitrović, and Tomašević (2025) examine the role of spiritual fathers through believers' narratives, which is where one would expect canonical questions about domestic practice to surface if they surfaced anywhere; Todorović (2023) analyses new meanings of the Orthodox lity, a rite that does incorporate material and spatial elements canonically. Comparative cases from other traditions show similar dynamics: Brown (2020) documents vernacular religion in Tibetan songs of Nubri, and Maño and Xygalatas (2022) analyse how Mauritian Hindus choose among ritual forms.

The second body concerns the materiality of magic and protection. Hukantaival and Jonuks (2023) survey the materiality of magic through Estonian and Finnish museum collections, showing how protective objects enter and resist institutional classification. Agapkina and Toporkov (2020) reconstruct the structure and genesis of a Slavic spell type directed against children's insomnia, which is the closest the recent Scopus-indexed literature comes to the specific protective repertoire surrounding infants in the Slavic area. Aracil (2024) analyses the fig-hand amulet and the protective power of display, a study of apotropaic mechanism that transfers usefully to thread. Hagen (2019) examines devotion to the apotropaic cross, a case of an object squarely inside the incorporated tier and therefore an instructive contrast. Kohonen (2023) reassesses traditional healing expectations through placebo and performance studies, and Hiimäe (2019; 2022) analyses belief narratives about spirit-animals and about magically induced love, both of which illuminate how protective concerns are narrated. Urbonienė (2025) documents rituals of protection against natural and social disasters in Lithuania, a recent case of protective practice under conditions of institutional presence. Karlsson (2022) examines Karelian ritual specialists' incantations, and Gošić (2025) traces the social practices behind prehistoric symbol-bearing objects from inalienable possessions to magic.

The third body concerns birth, the body, and the ethnography of textile and dress. Pantović (2021) analyses social positioning and informal relations during childbirth in a Serbian setting, showing how women navigate an institutional medical system through non-institutional means.

Marander-Eklund (2020) examines how the birth of a child was experienced and narrated in 1990s Finland, and Iuga (2020) reports on Romania's first childhood museum and its framing of coming into the world, a rare treatment of the materiality of birth in an Orthodox context. On textiles, Anđelković (2022) analyses dressing at the liturgy in the Serbian Orthodox Church, which is precisely the domain where cloth is canonically regulated; Ivanović-Barišić (2023), Aksić and Žiljkić (2022), Mikulić (2022), and Matić (2026) document clothing practices and narratives across twentieth- and twenty-first-century Serbian contexts. Balaban (2021) analyses colour symbolism in the Neolithic of Serbia, a reminder that chromatic meaning has a long regional archaeology. Stevanović (2019) frames gender regimes in culture and history, and Radulović (2019) analyses women's narratives in a very different institutional setting, both of which bear on how women's ritual agency is constituted.

Between the second and third bodies sits a set of studies on ritual materials that are institutionally regulated, and they are indispensable as controls. Blagaić and Niemčić (2024) analyse island processions as ritual reproductions of shared temporalities, a case in which the church supplies the calendar, the route, and the objects carried, so that nothing in the assemblage is unadjudicated. Kuncj (2019) examines ritual, devotional, and funeral songs interwoven with folk tradition in the Slovenian material, a domain where the institution has views about repertoire even when the singing happens outside the temple. Vince Pallua (2019) reconstructs the ritual-mythological interpretation of water-giving through Slovenian-Croatian scholarly cooperation, addressing a substance that is simultaneously an everyday material and a fully sacramentalised one — perhaps the clearest instance in the regional literature of an object saturated by ecclesiastical meaning. Maldonado-Estrada (2020) analyses tattoos and Catholic devotion in Brooklyn, a case in which a bodily practice long regarded with suspicion has been absorbed into devotional life. Jovanović and Stojanović (2025) examine Serbian Orthodox believers' perspectives on organ donation, which shows the institution taking a position on a bodily question where it might have remained silent and did not. Read together, these five establish the baseline against which vacancy stands out: when the institution has an interest, it speaks, and it speaks in detail.

The fourth body is conceptual and methodological. The boundary-object concept, now available in a recent scholarly re-edition (Star & Griesemer, 2025), has been applied to archaeological and environmental classification by Stansbie (2022) with attention to exactly the problem that concerns me — what happens when the communities coordinating around an object have unequal interpretive investment. Kuzmanović (2020) asks how an archaeology of religion is possible, a question about the inference from material remains to normative systems that has an analogue in inferring institutional stance from institutional silence. Njaradi (2025) revisits Ernesto De Martino and Dragoslav Antonijević on the last ritual trance in Europe, a study of how scholarship constructs the disappearance of practices. Petković (2026) examines Orthodox memes as digital folklore and lived religion, showing the tradition's newest contact zone. On the regional theoretical side, Knežević (2023) analyses the asymmetric translation of religious speech in the post-secular public sphere of the Western Balkans; Cvjetić (2025) develops a triadic model of the somatic inscription of ideology; Gomez (2024) analyses biopolitics and the body through a Foucauldian framework; McDougall (2023) examines governmentality and technologies of the self in post-pandemic biopolitics; Mićunović (2023) analyses Esposito's immunisation paradigm in the Western Balkans; and Risojević (2024) treats identity, memory, and collective trauma in post-conflict Western Balkan societies. These last six matter because the body in the postpartum period is not only a ritual body but a governed one.

A fifth strand, smaller but directly relevant, concerns how the discipline itself handles the objects it studies, and it matters because my argument is about classification. Stojanović (2025) sets museum ethnographic folklore against the folklore of museum professionals, a reflexive

move that exposes how institutional framing constitutes what counts as an item of tradition. Mladenović-Ribić (2024) analyses safeguarding programmes for living heritage, and Banović, Pisev, and Milenković (2024) together with Dražeta, Ćuković, and Milenković (2024) examine what enters and what fails to enter the register of cultural heritage in multiethnic contexts. These studies describe a second classificatory system operating on the same material: an object may be canonically vacant while being heritage-classified, or vice versa, and the two systems need not agree. Nešković (2024), analysing ritual resilience at the Shaolin Monastery, shows how change and continuity interleave when an institution and a practice are entangled over long periods, which is the closest thing in the recent literature to a longitudinal treatment of the dynamics I am proposing. Pinal Villanueva (2024) documents healing practices and body conceptions in a contemporary New Age setting, and Guliyev and Garayev (2024) examine folklore concerning what men keep secret from women, both of which show how domains of knowledge get partitioned by gender and access.

What the four bodies do not supply, jointly or severally, is an account of institutional silence as a positive analytical object. Vernacular religion studies describe what people do; canon studies describe what the institution prescribes; the boundary-object literature describes negotiated coordination. Nobody, so far as my searching found, has asked what follows when an institution declines — structurally, durably, and perhaps deliberately — to rule on a practice occurring inside its own ritual calendar. That is the space this article occupies.

### *Research Methodology*

The study is conceptual and comparative, and its method has three steps, each with limitations I state as I go. The first step is the construction of a documentary base. I assembled the peer-reviewed literature published from 2019 onward that bears on any of four topics: protective and apotropaic practice in Slavic and Baltic contexts, the postpartum period as an ethnographic and medical-anthropological object, textile and dress practice in Southeast European contexts, and lived or vernacular religion in Orthodox settings. Searching proceeded through Crossref queries restricted to the relevant journals by ISSN, supplemented by keyword searches, with inclusion requiring peer review, a resolvable identifier, and direct topical relevance. Fifty-five items met the criteria. I record honestly that the yield for the Dinaric zone specifically was low: the recent Scopus-indexed literature contains far more on Estonian, Finnish, and Lithuanian protective practice than on Bosnian, Montenegrin, or Herzegovinian, and the reader should read my Dinaric claims as claims about a regional case that the recent literature underdescribes rather than as claims resting on a thick recent record.

The second step is what I will call reading for the normative gap. Instead of asking what a tradition says about a practice, one asks whether it says anything, and then whether the silence is systematic. Operationally this means three checks. First, is the object absent from the tradition's prescriptive materials for the relevant ritual sequence — in this case the liturgical framework of the postpartum period? Second, is it absent from the tradition's proscriptive materials, the lists of practices identified as improper? Third, does the ethnographic and lived-religion literature report clerical engagement with the object, whether approving, disapproving, or negotiating? An object absent from all three is canonically vacant in my sense. The method's obvious weakness is that arguments from silence are weak arguments, and I have tried to compensate by treating the finding as defeasible: a single documented instance of sustained clerical adjudication of the red thread in the region would move the object out of the vacant tier and would falsify H1 for that setting.

A word about terminology is needed before the analysis, because two of my terms are doing non-standard work. By canon I do not mean canon law in the narrow sense of conciliar

legislation, but the whole body of prescriptive and proscriptive material that constitutes a tradition's normative position: service books, pastoral literature, and the instructional practice through which clergy convey what is and is not proper. By vacancy I mean the absence of a position within that body, not indifference on the part of individuals. A priest may privately regard the thread as harmless or as superstition without the tradition having a position, and it is the second-order fact — the absence of a tradition-level ruling — that I am claiming. The distinction is easy to lose and I shall try not to lose it, because most of what makes the thesis interesting depends on it. Radulović and Stojanović (2025) note that the scholarly framing of folk Orthodoxy has itself moved from treating unofficial practice as deviation to treating it as a mode of religiosity, and my terminology follows that movement: vacancy is not a deficit in the practice but a feature of the institution's relation to it.

The third step is comparative typology construction. Having isolated vacancy as a status, I ask what other statuses an object may hold with respect to an institutional religion and how many are needed to classify the postpartum repertoire. Three proved sufficient: incorporated, proscribed, vacant. I then ask what each status implies for the object's dependence on institutional infrastructure, for the cost of its abandonment, and for its expected trajectory under secularisation and biomedicalisation. That last move generates the article's testable prediction, and I want to be exact about its status: it is a prediction I derive, not a finding I report, and nothing in the present study establishes it. No quantitative claims of any kind are made about frequencies of practice, because the sources do not support any.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

The findings fall into four blocks. The first concerns the status of the red thread in the documentary record and bears directly on the first hypothesis. Applying the three checks described in the methodology returns a consistent result. On the first check, the thread is absent from the prescriptive framework of the postpartum sequence: that framework has a determinate shape, running from the prayers said on the day of birth through the naming to the fortieth-day churching of mother and child, and the object does not appear within it. On the second check, the thread is absent from the proscriptive materials as well; the practices that Orthodox pastoral literature has historically identified as improper cluster around divination, charming, and recourse to specialists claiming occult power, and a grandmother's tying of wool is not among them. On the third check, the recent literature on lived Orthodoxy in the region records no clerical adjudication of the practice in either direction. Radulović and Stojanović (2025), whose review covers the full arc of folk-Orthodoxy scholarship in Serbia, describe a field in which the relation between official and unofficial practice has been reconceived, but not one in which objects of this kind have been ruled on. Anđelković, Stojić-Mitrović, and Tomašević (2025), working through believers' narratives about spiritual fathers, document extensive lay-clerical negotiation over conduct without reporting engagement of this sort. The thread, on the available record, occupies a normative vacancy.

The second block distinguishes vacancy from adjacent statuses and bears on the second hypothesis. Two contrast cases make the distinction visible. The apotropaic cross, as analysed by Hagen (2019), is protective in function and canonically incorporated in status: it has an authorised place, a blessing, a theology, and a clerical constituency invested in its correct use. Liturgical dress, as analysed by Anđelković (2022) for the Serbian Orthodox Church, is textile and canonically regulated down to detail: what is worn, by whom, when, and with what meaning are all matters on which the institution has spoken. These two cases share the thread's material and protective character while differing in status, which is what makes them useful. Where the cross and the vestment depend on institutional infrastructure for their meaning and their reproduction, the

thread depends on neither. Its transmission runs through the household rather than the parish, its knowledge-holders are grandmothers and midwives rather than clergy, and its correctness conditions are set by practice rather than by rubric.

The third block records the typology that the contrast cases generate, together with the placement of the postpartum repertoire within it. Tier one, canonically incorporated, contains objects and acts with an authorised place in the tradition's own framework, among them the churching rite itself, the naming, the blessing of water, the cross worn at the neck, and the vestment (Hagen, 2019; Anđelković, 2022; Todorović, 2023). Tier two, canonically proscribed, contains practices the tradition has identified and rejected: recourse to charmers and diviners for the protection of the newborn falls here, and the recent Slavic material on protective spells shows how elaborate such repertoires can be even when institutionally disfavoured (Agapkina & Toporkov, 2020; Karlsson, 2022). Tier three, canonically vacant, contains objects the tradition has not classified: the red thread, and alongside it a range of domestic protective measures whose status the literature likewise leaves adjudicated (Hukantaival & Jonuks, 2023; Urbonienė, 2025). The typology is exhaustive by construction — an object is classified, or it is not, and if classified it is either approved or rejected — but its interest lies in what the third cell turns out to contain, which is a great deal.

The fourth block reports the mechanism difference that the typology exposes, and this is the finding on which the article's argument turns. In the classic boundary-object configuration, both communities perform interpretive labour: each constructs its own version of the object, and the versions are held together at the point of exchange by a shared material form and by the work of translation (Star & Griesemer, 2025; Stansbie, 2022). In the vacancy configuration, interpretive labour is one-sided. The household community elaborates the object extensively — when it is tied, by whom, with what wool, for how long, what is said over it, and what happens to it when it is removed. The institutional community elaborates nothing, and its non-elaboration is not a failure to notice but a stable condition that persists across generations of clergy who cannot plausibly all have failed to see the thread. The object is therefore not shared but tolerated, and toleration is a different relation with different properties. A shared object can be renegotiated; a tolerated object can only be left alone or ruled upon, and ruling upon it would convert it into a tier-one or tier-two object and destroy the arrangement.

A supplementary observation belongs with these results because it qualifies how far they generalise. The documentary base is unevenly distributed. Of the fifty-five items in the reference list, the largest single block comes from one journal of the Serbian ethnological establishment and a second from one journal of Serbian ethnology and anthropology, with a substantial Estonian-Finnish-Lithuanian cluster and a smaller Croatian and Slovenian one. The Bosnian, Herzegovinian, and Montenegrin highlands — the Dinaric zone proper — are represented in the recent Scopus-indexed literature mainly through work on heritage regimes, minorities, and post-conflict identity rather than through ritual ethnography (Banović, Pisev, & Milenković, 2024; Dražeta, Ćuković, & Milenković, 2024; Galić, 2024; Risojević, 2024). This is a real limitation on the article's regional claims and I return to it in the conclusion. The concept of canonical vacancy does not depend on the Dinaric case; the Dinaric case is where I noticed it.

A sixth observation concerns the second classificatory system mentioned in the review, and it complicates the picture in a way worth recording. Heritage regimes classify what religion does not. Objects and practices excluded from or ignored by ecclesiastical normativity can be, and increasingly are, inscribed in registers of intangible cultural heritage, where they acquire a different kind of official status: not permitted or forbidden but safeguarded, documented, and represented (Mladenović-Ribić, 2024). The politics of that inscription are themselves contested, with Banović, Pisev, and Milenković (2024) documenting systematic underrepresentation of Ottoman

intangible heritage in one register and Dražeta, Ćuković, and Milenković (2024) analysing the difficulties of safeguarding systems in multiethnic states. What this means for the present argument is that canonical vacancy does not entail invisibility to all institutions. It entails invisibility to one, and the object may be highly visible to another whose classificatory interests run differently. Stojanović (2025) puts the reflexive point sharply by asking whose folklore the museum's folklore is; the answer, for a vacant-tier object entering the heritage register, is that it acquires a new custodian without losing its old vacancy.

## THE THREAD IN THE FORTY-DAY SEQUENCE

The postpartum period in the Orthodox tradition is not an undifferentiated stretch of time but a structured interval with a beginning, an internal articulation, and a terminus. The interval runs forty days; it opens with prayers said over the mother on the day of the birth, is marked at the eighth day by the naming, and closes with the churching, at which mother and child are brought to the temple and reintegrated into the assembly. What matters for the present argument is that this is an institutionally administered temporality: the church sets the intervals, supplies the words, and controls the terminus. A woman in the forty days is in a state the institution has defined, and the definition is not vague.

Into this defined interval the household inserts a second temporality with its own markers, and the two are not coextensive. The thread is tied in the first hours, before any priest is involved, and its removal is governed by household reckoning rather than by the fortieth day. The two schedules run in parallel across the same body without either adjusting to the other. This is worth dwelling on, because parallel non-adjustment is precisely what one would not expect if the arrangement were a syncretic accommodation. Syncretism, as ordinarily described, involves mutual adjustment: elements are trimmed, reinterpreted, or re-dated to fit. Here nothing is trimmed. The ecclesiastical sequence proceeds exactly as if the thread were not present, and the household sequence proceeds exactly as if the churching were a separate matter, which in an important sense it is.

The protective logic of the object is best understood through the comparative literature on apotropaic mechanism rather than through speculation about its origins. Aracil (2024) shows, in her analysis of the fig-hand amulet, that the protective power of such devices operates through display: the amulet works by being seen, by presenting to the hostile gaze something that captures, deflects, or absorbs it. That mechanism illuminates why the thread is tied where it is. A wrist is visible; a wrist is what a visitor's eye falls on when a newborn is presented. The red is not decorative but functional in the same sense — it is the first thing seen, and its being first is the point. Hukantaival and Jonuks (2023) make a complementary observation from museum collections: the materiality of magic is frequently ordinary, the protective object being a common substance in an uncommon configuration, which is exactly the description of a length of household wool tied in a particular place at a particular moment.

The agents matter as much as the mechanism. The thread is tied by women, typically by the senior woman of the household or by whoever attended the birth, and the knowledge involved is transmitted along female lines outside any institutional certification. Stevanović (2019) situates such arrangements within the broader question of gender regimes in culture and history, and the point for us is jurisdictional rather than symbolic: the postpartum room is a space of female authority, and the thread is an exercise of that authority. Pantović (2021) documents, for contemporary Serbian childbirth, how women mobilise informal relations and social positioning to navigate an institutional medical setting, which shows that the pattern of extra-institutional agency around birth is not a historical residue but a live competence. I want to be careful here not to



romanticise: female jurisdiction in the birth room has historically coexisted with severe constraint elsewhere, and the two facts are not in tension.

The colour deserves separate treatment, since the article's title rests on it and a reader is entitled to know how much weight it can bear. Comparative work on chromatic meaning in the region has a long reach: Balaban (2021) analyses the symbolism of green in the Neolithic of Serbia, demonstrating that colour-symbolic systems can be reconstructed with care from material remains, but also that reconstruction is inferential at every step. For red in the protective register, I would resist any single explanation. The association with blood is available and frequently offered; so is the association with fire, with vitality, and with visibility itself, since red is simply the most conspicuous colour against most skin and most cloth. The visibility explanation has the advantage of connecting to the display mechanism Aracil (2024) analyses, and it has the further advantage of requiring no assumption about what practitioners believe. Whether the practitioners themselves would offer any of these explanations is an empirical question I cannot answer from the published record, and the temptation to answer it anyway — to supply a symbolic exegesis the sources do not contain — is precisely the temptation this article's method is designed to resist.

The material substrate also matters, and here the recent ethnography of textile in the region is useful even though none of it concerns protective thread directly. Ivanović-Barišić (2023) traces clothing narratives in Belgrade, Aksić and Žiljkić (2022) document women's clothing practice through the twentieth century in Novi Pazar and its surroundings, Mikulić (2022) reads women's costume narratives out of caricature, and Matić (2026) analyses how entrepreneurs shape contemporary clothing culture. What emerges from these studies collectively is a picture of textile as a dense medium of social signalling that has undergone rapid transformation without losing its communicative load. Wool in particular has moved from being a household product of the domestic economy to being a purchased commodity, and that shift, small as it seems, changes what tying a thread involves: the grandmother of 1960 unravelled a piece of her own weaving, the grandmother of 2020 buys a skein. Whether the practice survives that substitution intact is exactly the kind of question a persistence study would need to ask, and I flag it here because it is the sort of detail that distinguishes a live practice from a remembered one.

One more feature of the sequence deserves comment because it will matter for the vacancy argument. The thread is protective, and what it protects against is most often glossed as the evil eye, the ambient danger posed by admiration and by the gaze of others. The relevant theological point is that Orthodox tradition does have resources for addressing envy and the harm of the gaze; the tradition is not silent about the phenomenon. What it is silent about is this device for handling it. That distinction is important because it blocks the easy explanation that the institution says nothing because it has nothing to say. It has something to say about the danger. It says nothing about the wool. The asymmetry between the two silences is what makes vacancy a structural fact rather than a lacuna, and I take it to be the strongest single piece of evidence for the first hypothesis.

## **CANONICAL VACANCY AND THE LIMITS OF THE BOUNDARY-OBJECT MODEL**

Why would an institution decline to rule? Three explanations present themselves, and they are not mutually exclusive. The first is prudential: ruling has costs. To bless the thread would be to assume responsibility for a practice the institution does not control and whose therapeutic claims it cannot underwrite. To forbid it would be to set clergy against grandmothers in a domain where grandmothers hold effective authority, and to risk a confrontation the institution would probably lose while gaining nothing. Silence is the dominant strategy in a game whose payoffs

are structured this way, and one need not attribute to any individual cleric a strategic calculation to observe that the structure selects for reticence.

The second explanation is jurisdictional. The institution's authority over the postpartum period is real but bounded: it covers the temple, the rite, the words, and the terminus, and it does not cover the household interior in the first hours after a birth, when no cleric is present and none is expected. Anđelković (2022) shows how finely the institution regulates textile within its own jurisdiction, specifying dress at the liturgy in detail; the contrast with the total absence of regulation of textile on the newborn's wrist is instructive precisely because it shows that the institution is perfectly capable of ruling on cloth when cloth falls within its space. The silence is not a general indifference to material culture. It tracks a boundary.

The third explanation is categorial, and it is the most interesting. To rule on an object, an institution must first construe it under a category its normative system recognises. Is the thread a sacramental, an amulet, a medicine, an ornament, a custom? Each construal triggers a different normative machinery, and none fits comfortably. Kuzmanović (2020), asking how an archaeology of religion is possible, raises the parallel methodological difficulty of inferring normative status from material remains, and her point transfers: categorisation is not a neutral preliminary but the substantive act. An object that resists categorisation is thereby insulated from adjudication, and thread is unusually resistant — too humble to be sacramental, too commonplace to be occult, too purposive to be ornament, and too physical to be mere custom. Its vacancy may be a consequence of its categorial awkwardness rather than of any decision at all.

Now the comparison with the boundary-object model can be made precise. Star and Griesemer's original cases involved communities with distinct but active interests in the same material: collectors, trappers, university administrators, and professional zoologists all had something to say about a specimen, and the specimen's boundary character consisted in its capacity to satisfy several such sayings at once (Star & Griesemer, 2025). Stansbie (2022) shows the same dynamic in archaeological and environmental data, where finds serve simultaneously as evidence for incompatible research programmes. The essential feature in both is bilateral interpretive investment. Remove that feature and the model's explanatory work disappears: an object cannot be plastic across interpretations if there is only one interpretation. What the thread demonstrates is that objects can occupy the interstitial position the model was built to explain while satisfying none of the model's conditions, which suggests the interstitial position is over-determined by the standard account.

The organ-donation case makes the contrast unusually clean, and it is worth setting alongside the thread for a moment. Here is a bodily question on which an institution could plausibly have stayed silent: the matter is modern, technical, and outside any traditional ritual framework, and a tradition wishing to avoid controversy had every reason to say nothing. Yet Jovanović and Stojanović (2025) document believers navigating an articulated set of positions, which means the institution spoke. Why there and not on the thread? The answer, I suggest, is that organ donation is legible under existing theological categories — the body, its integrity, its resurrection, the ethics of gift — while a length of wool on a wrist is not legible under any of them. Legibility, not importance, is what triggers institutional speech. That is a claim with teeth, because it predicts that vacancy will cluster around practices whose theological description is awkward rather than around practices the institution considers trivial, and those two classes come apart. Vince Pallua (2019) shows how thoroughly water is theologised in this tradition; water is far more ordinary than wool, and vastly more spoken about.

The practical difference between the two configurations shows up under stress. A boundary object challenged — by a change in one community's classification system, say — is renegotiated, and the literature on classification and infrastructure is largely a literature about such

renegotiations (Stansbie, 2022). A vacant object challenged cannot be renegotiated, because there is no second position to negotiate with. It can only be ruled upon, and ruling destroys vacancy irreversibly: once an institution has said the thread is permitted, it has entered tier one and acquired institutional dependencies; once it has said the thread is forbidden, it has entered tier two and acquired the peculiar durability of the disapproved. Either way the object's mode of existence changes. This irreversibility is, I think, the sharpest formal difference between the two models, and it is what makes vacancy worth naming rather than treating as a degenerate boundary case.

Vacancy is not confined to this case, and the typology gains credibility from its portability. Consider the proscribed tier for a moment, since the contrast illuminates the vacant one. Charming and incantation have been institutionally identified and rejected across the Christian traditions for centuries, and one consequence is that they became specialised: proscription concentrates a practice in the hands of those willing to bear the cost of it, producing recognisable specialists with recognisable repertoires. Agapkina and Toporkov (2020) reconstruct the internal structure of one such Slavic repertoire in detail, and Karlsson (2022) analyses how Karelian ritual specialists related to their incantations, in both cases dealing with material that is elaborate precisely because it belongs to specialists. Vacant-tier practice looks entirely different: it is diffuse, unspecialised, minimally verbal, and held by ordinary members of the household rather than by anyone with a role. That structural difference between the tiers — specialisation under proscription, diffusion under vacancy — is not something I anticipated when constructing the typology, and I regard it as the most suggestive of the incidental findings.

The Estonian and Finnish material offers a further test of portability, since it comes from Lutheran rather than Orthodox settings. Hukantaival and Jonuks (2023) describe museum holdings of protective objects whose relationship to the established church was, for most of their working lives, one of neither approval nor prohibition; Hiimäe (2019; 2022) analyses belief narratives about spirit-animals and about magically induced love that circulate without institutional adjudication of any kind. Urbonienė (2025) documents Lithuanian protective ritual in a strongly Catholic setting where some elements are ecclesiastically incorporated and others are not, which would make Lithuania a promising site for a comparative test of the tier hypothesis. Kohonen (2023) approaches the question from yet another direction, asking what performance and placebo research can tell us about why healing expectations persist. None of this establishes that vacancy operates identically across confessional settings; it establishes that the configuration is not an artefact of Orthodoxy, which is the weaker claim I need.

An objection deserves a hearing at this point, because it has occurred to me repeatedly while writing. Perhaps I am mistaking the absence of documentation for the absence of adjudication. Parish life generates enormous quantities of informal normative talk that never reaches print, and it is entirely possible that priests do comment on the thread, in confession or in conversation, in ways no ethnographer has recorded. I concede this straightforwardly: my third check is a check on the published record, not on parish reality, and the published record for this region is thin (Radulović & Stojanović, 2025; Pavićević, 2025). What I would say in defence of the thesis is that the same objection would apply to any claim about institutional stance derived from documentary sources, and that the appropriate response is not to abandon such claims but to specify what evidence would overturn them. In this case: recorded clerical instruction on the thread, in either direction, from more than isolated individuals. Anđelković, Stojić-Mitrović, and Tomašević (2025) show that believers' narratives about clerical guidance are recoverable; that such narratives do not, in the recorded corpus, concern this object is at least suggestive.

## PERSISTENCE UNDER SECULARISATION AND BIOMEDICALISATION

Before the prediction, a preliminary about what secularisation means in this setting, since the term carries assumptions that do not transfer well. The Western Balkan case is not one of religious decline followed by institutional retreat. Institutional religion here has been, since the early 1990s, more publicly present rather than less, and the relevant transformation is a change in the mode of religiosity rather than its quantity: Pavićević (2025) distinguishes those who attend from those who identify with Orthodox culture without attending, and finds the second category large. Todorović (2023) documents new manifestations and meanings attaching to public rites, and Petković (2026) traces the tradition's migration into digital folklore. In earlier work on the post-secular public sphere of this region I argued that religious speech and secular reason translate asymmetrically here, with the traffic running mostly one way (Knežević, 2023). What all this implies for the present argument is that the pressure on ritual objects is not a simple withdrawal of religion but a reshuffling of which institutions claim which parts of life — and reshuffling is exactly the condition under which the tier of an object matters most.

The typology earns its keep if it predicts something. Here is the prediction. Tier-one objects depend on institutional infrastructure: a churching requires a priest, a temple, and a household willing to attend, so its retention tracks the rate of institutional participation. Tier-two objects depend on counter-institutional commitment: recourse to a charmer requires both a specialist and a client prepared to act against clerical disapproval, so its retention tracks the survival of specialist networks and of the disposition to defy. Tier-three objects depend on neither. A grandmother needs no priest, no temple, no specialist, and no defiance to tie a thread; she needs wool and a free minute. It follows that under conditions which erode institutional participation and specialist networks alike, tier-three objects should persist longest, and should do so without any of the identity-work that retaining a contested practice normally requires.

The second half of the prediction concerns biomedicalisation specifically, and it runs against an intuition. One might expect that as birth moves fully into hospitals, domestic protective practice would disappear along with the domestic birth it accompanied. I predict the opposite for the vacant tier, and the reason is that vacancy makes the practice compatible with anything. A thread on a wrist contradicts no clinical protocol, competes with no medical claim, and requires no explanation to staff; it can travel into a maternity ward without friction because it asks nothing of the setting. Pantović (2021) shows that Serbian women in institutional maternity settings already deploy an extensive informal repertoire alongside the clinical one, navigating through social positioning and personal relations rather than through opposition. A protective thread fits that pattern exactly: it is not a rival to obstetric care but an addition running on a different register. What biomedicalisation eliminates are practices that make competing therapeutic claims — and the thread, as a vacant-tier object, has never had to make one, because nobody has ever required it to justify itself.

There is comparative support for the general shape of the argument, though not for the specific prediction. Hukantaival and Jonuks (2023) show that protective objects persist in museum and popular contexts long after the belief systems that generated them have been officially superseded, and their materiality is part of why. Urbonienė (2025) documents protective ritual mobilised in Lithuania in response to contemporary natural and social disasters, in a society with a strong institutional church, indicating that protective practice is not a residue awaiting extinction but a resource activated under uncertainty. Kohonen (2023) reassesses traditional healing through placebo and performance research, which supplies a mechanism by which such practices could produce effects their practitioners experience as real without making claims that clinical medicine must adjudicate. Iuga (2020), describing the framing of birth in Romania's first childhood

museum, shows the same repertoire entering the heritage register, which is another route to persistence — and a route with its own distortions, since heritage-making converts practice into representation (Mladenović-Ribić, 2024; Stojanović, 2025).

Now the honest qualification. I have derived a prediction; I have not tested it. Testing it would require the comparative frequency data that this study does not have and that, so far as I could establish, nobody has collected for this repertoire in this region. The recent regional literature on the Dinaric zone concentrates on heritage regimes, minority religiosity, and post-conflict identity (Banović, Pisev, & Milenković, 2024; Dražeta, Ćuković, & Milenković, 2024; Galić, 2024; Risojević, 2024), not on the ritual micro-practices of birth. Trbojević (2025) documents transgenerational transformation in village community life and Njaradi (2025) reflects on how disciplines narrate the disappearance of ritual, and both are cautionary: what looks like persistence or extinction from the outside often turns out, on close inspection, to be transformation into an unfamiliar register. My prediction could fail in exactly that way, with vacant-tier objects surviving in form while their protective rationale evaporates, leaving something better described as sentiment than as practice.

A second qualification concerns what persistence would even mean here, and it is not a quibble. A practice can persist as a practice, with its protective rationale intact and its performance deliberate; it can persist as a habit, performed without rationale by people who would be embarrassed to defend it; or it can persist as a citation, performed knowingly as an act of cultural belonging, which is what happens when heritage regimes get hold of something (Mladenović-Ribić, 2024; Stojanović, 2025). These three are not degrees on a single scale but different phenomena, and a survey instrument that counts threads on wrists would not distinguish them. Pavićević (2025), separating church-goers from bearers of a broader Orthodox culture, has already established that the region contains populations relating to religious material in these different modes, and a persistence study of the thread would need to make the same separation. My prediction, stated carefully, concerns the first two modes and not the third: I expect vacant-tier objects to survive as practice and as habit longer than incorporated or proscribed objects, and I have no view about the citational mode, which follows the logic of heritage rather than of ritual.

It is worth adding a layer that the ritual literature alone does not supply. The postpartum body is not only a ritual body but a governed one, and the last several years have produced regional work making that governance visible. Gomez (2024) analyses biopolitics and the body through a Foucauldian framework applied to contemporary surveillance; McDougall (2023) examines governmentality and technologies of the self in the post-pandemic period, arguing for a biopolitical residue that outlasts the emergency; Mićunović (2023) applies Esposito's immunisation paradigm to Western Balkan vaccination politics and identifies an inverted immunitary paradox; Cvjetić (2025) develops a triadic model of the somatic inscription of ideology distinguishing disciplinary, affective, and performative modalities. Set beside these, the thread looks different. In the disciplinary register it is nothing — it disciplines no one, produces no docility, generates no data. That nullity is precisely what my typology predicts of a vacant-tier object, and it suggests a broader hypothesis I can only gesture at: objects that escape institutional religious classification may also escape the classificatory machinery of health governance, and for structurally similar reasons.

The comparison with institutionally saturated ritual makes the persistence argument concrete. A procession requires a route, a date, a clergy, and a community assembled at a particular hour; Blagaić and Niemčić (2024) show how such events reproduce shared temporalities, and the reproduction is expensive in exactly the resources that depopulation and outmigration remove first. Ritual song requires transmission chains and occasions for performance, and Kunej (2019) documents how the interweaving of devotional and folk repertoires depends on both. A thread requires neither route, nor date, nor assembly, nor chain of specialists. This asymmetry in

infrastructural demand is the mechanism behind my prediction, and it is worth naming as such rather than leaving it implicit: vacant-tier objects are cheap. Their cheapness is not incidental to their vacancy but connected to it, since the institution's reasons for not ruling — the practice's smallness, its domesticity, its categorial awkwardness — are the same features that make it inexpensive to reproduce.

One further comparison sharpens the point about tiers. Consider what happened to protective practice in the pandemic, when a new institutional order asserted jurisdiction over bodies with unusual force. Trubarac Matić and Krel (2022) document children's folklore generated around the pandemic; Jovanović (2024) analyses traditional songs and their messages in Serbia during the corona period; Petković (2026) traces Orthodox memes as a contemporary contact zone between digital folklore and propaganda. What these studies show is folklore proliferating precisely in the interstices that no institution had claimed. The parallel to the thread is not perfect, since pandemic folklore is expressive where the thread is instrumental, but the structural similarity is real: unclaimed normative space is generative. Vacancy is not merely a condition of survival but, on this evidence, a condition of production.

## CONCLUSION

What did the silence turn out to be? Not an oversight, on the evidence assembled here, and not a tacit permission either. The first hypothesis is supported: applying the three checks to the published record returns absence at every point — absence from the prescriptive framework of the forty-day sequence, absence from the proscriptive lists, and absence from the recorded lay-clerical negotiations that the recent lived-religion literature documents in other domains (Radulović & Stojanović, 2025; Anđelković, Stojić-Mitrović, & Tomašević, 2025). The decisive consideration is the asymmetry noted in the fourth analytical section: the tradition addresses the danger the thread is deployed against while saying nothing about the thread, which rules out the explanation that it has nothing to say. Support is not proof, and the argument remains an argument from documentary silence, defeasible by the evidence I specified.

The second hypothesis is supported more strongly, because it is conceptual rather than evidentiary. Canonical vacancy differs from the classic boundary-object configuration in mechanism, since it involves unilateral rather than bilateral interpretive investment; in the direction of interpretive labour, which flows entirely from the household side; and in behaviour under challenge, since a vacant object cannot be renegotiated but only ruled upon, and ruling destroys vacancy irreversibly by converting the object into another tier. That irreversibility is the formal signature of the configuration. The third hypothesis remains a prediction: vacant-tier objects should persist longest under secularisation and biomedicalisation because their retention requires no institutional infrastructure and no counter-institutional commitment, but nothing in this study establishes that they do.

The principal original contribution of this article is the canonical vacancy thesis and the three-tier typology built on it: a demonstration that institutional silence can be a structural condition with its own dynamics rather than a documentary gap, that objects occupying such silence circulate by a mechanism different from the one the boundary-object literature describes, and that the difference generates a falsifiable prediction about persistence. Secondary to that, but worth stating separately, is the methodological proposal of reading for the normative gap — asking of a practice not what a tradition says but whether it says anything, and treating a systematic nothing as data rather than as an absence of data.

Three implications follow, addressed to different readerships. For the ethnography of religion in the region, the practical proposal is that fieldwork schedules should include adjudication questions alongside meaning questions. Ethnographers reliably ask what a practice means to those

who perform it; they less reliably ask what the institution has ever said about it, and the second question is answerable by informants in a way the first often is not. Radulović and Stojanović (2025) show how far the framing of folk Orthodoxy has moved in recent decades, and a systematic mapping of the vacant tier would be a natural extension of that movement. For the boundary-object literature, the implication is that the model's scope conditions deserve statement: it explains coordination between communities with active interpretive investment, and cases lacking that feature need a different treatment (Star & Griesemer, 2025; Stansbie, 2022). For heritage practitioners, the implication is more uncomfortable. Inscribing a vacant-tier practice in a register does not preserve it neutrally; it supplies the classification the practice had escaped, and the resilience I have attributed to vacancy is resilience that inscription may remove (Mladenović-Ribić, 2024; Stojanović, 2025). Safeguarding can be a mode of ending.

Five limitations bound these claims, and the first is the one that troubles me most. This article carries a Dinaric title on a documentary base that is not Dinaric enough. The recent peer-reviewed literature on ritual micro-practice in the Bosnian, Herzegovinian, and Montenegrin highlands is sparse, and I have leaned on Serbian, Estonian, Finnish, and Lithuanian material to build an argument whose illustrative case sits elsewhere. A reader entitled to Dinaric evidence will not find enough of it here, and I would rather say so than let the title do work the sources cannot support. The second limitation follows: arguments from silence are structurally weak, and although I have tried to specify what would defeat mine, the specification does not convert weak evidence into strong. The third is that the three checks operate on published sources, not on parish practice, and parish practice generates normative talk that never reaches publication. The fourth is that the typology, being exhaustive by construction, cannot be falsified as a classification, only judged useful or useless; only the prediction derived from it is falsifiable, and that prediction is untested. The fifth is that I have written about a female ritual domain without having spoken to any of the women who maintain it, which is a limitation of a different kind, and not one that better sources would remedy.

The remedy for most of this is fieldwork of a specific and quite feasible design, which I would rather describe than merely invoke. It would require, first, interviews in highland parishes with both clergy and senior women about the same object, conducted separately, with the interview schedule built to detect adjudication rather than to elicit belief — the questions being what the priest has ever said about it, not what the thread means. Second, it would require comparative sampling across settlement types, since the persistence prediction is comparative and cannot be tested in one place. Third, it would require attention to the maternity ward as a site, because the biomedicalisation half of the prediction concerns exactly that transition and the ethnography of Southeast European obstetric settings has begun to develop the tools for it (Pantović, 2021). Whether anyone will do this work I cannot say; the region's ethnological capacity is currently absorbed by heritage regimes and identity questions, for reasons that are themselves worth studying (Mladenović-Ribić, 2024; Banović, Pisev, & Milenković, 2024). But the design is not exotic, and the object is still on the wrists.

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# APOTROPEJSKE TEKSTILNE PRAKSE U POSTPOROĐAJNIM RITUALIMA DINARSKOG GORJA: CRVENI KONAC KAO GRANIČNI OBJEKT IZMEĐU NARODNE MEDICINE I PRAVOSLAVNOG KANONA

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## Originalni naučni članak

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**Sažetak:** Crveni vuneni konac vezan oko ručice novorođenčeta, ili uvezan u povoj, pojas ili povoznik žene u četrdeset dana nakon porođaja, spada među najšire zabilježena zaštitna sredstva u etnografskoj građi dinarskog gorja i šireg slovenskog pravoslavnog prostora. Istovremeno, taj konac izostaje iz kanonskih tekstova tradicije unutar čijeg obrednog kalendara djeluje. Postporođajni period predmet je precizno određenog crkvenog okvira — molitve prvoga dana, imenovanje osmoga dana, vocrkvljenje majke i djeteta četrdesetoga dana — a crveni konac se ni na jednom mjestu u tom okviru ne pojavljuje: niti je propisan niti zabranjen. Ovaj članak tu odsutnost tretira kao središnji podatak, a ne kao usputnu prazninu. Na osnovu objavljene etnografske literature i literature o proživljenoj religiji na Zapadnom Balkanu i širem slovenskom prostoru, te komparativne literature o amuletima, bajanjima i materijalnosti magije, tvrdim da standardni model graničnog objekta — koji kruženje predmeta među zajednicama objašnjava njegovom interpretativnom fleksibilnošću — pogrešno opisuje ono što se ovdje događa. Originalni doprinos članka jeste teza o kanonskoj ispražnjenosti: crveni konac kruži između narodne terapijske i crkvene prakse ne zato što ga dvije zajednice čitaju različito, nego zato što jedna od njih nije ponudila nikakvo čitanje, a ta normativna tišina jeste strukturno stanje, a ne previd. Iz teze razvijam trostepenu tipologiju obrednih predmeta prema institucionalnom statusu — kanonski inkorporirani, kanonski zabranjeni, kanonski ispražnjeni — i izvodim provjerljivu predikciju: predmeti ispražnjenog stepena trebalo bi da pokažu veću postojanost pod sekularizacijom i biomedikalizacijom nego predmeti iz druga dva stepena, jer njihovo zadržavanje ne nosi doktrinarni trošak, a njihovo napuštanje ne donosi doktrinarnu dobit. Članak je konceptualan i komparativan; ne iznosi nijednu tvrdnju zasnovanu na novom terenskom istraživanju, a zaključni dio precizira terensko istraživanje koje bi bilo potrebno da se predikcija valjano provjeri.

**Ključne riječi:** *apotropejska praksa, crveni konac, postporođajni ritual, granični objekt, kanonska ispražnjenost, pravoslavlje, narodna medicina, dinarsko gorje.*