

Trikraljski Zvezdari: The Continuity of a “Silent Tradition” in the Sutla Valley

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Abstract

This article examines *Trikraljski zvezdari* (Epiphany carolers), a “silent tradition” practiced in the Sutla Valley along the Croatian-Slovenian border. On Epiphany Eve, small groups of *zvezdari* visit homes carrying a star, singing *trikraljska popevka* (the Epiphany carol), and offering blessings. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork across several villages, the research examines the persistence of this practice by tracing its historical origins and continuity alongside contemporary performance practices, with particular attention to localized musical adaptations. The findings suggest that the endurance of silent traditions is primarily sustained through ongoing local adaptation, personal dedication and communal participation, rather than the conservation of traditional patterns. Ultimately, the custom of *Trikraljski zvezdari* exemplifies how a living tradition endures through localized, continuous, and largely unnoticed practices that reinforce identity, memory, and a sense of belonging.

Key words

trikraljski zvezdari, Epiphany carolers, star, ritual rounds, revitalization, trikraljska popevka

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Until recently, I was unaware that the tradition of *Trikraljski zvezdari*,¹ or Epiphany carolers, had been taking place for decades in the vicinity of my home. Each year on Epiphany Eve (5 January), a group of at least three men gathers at dusk and proceeds to visit households throughout the night, singing and offering blessings for the coming year, while carrying a star. This custom not only provided the impetus for this research but prompted me to reflect on the quiet cultural practices that remain largely unnoticed by the broader public or institutional frameworks. From this realization emerged the concept of “silent traditions”—a term I propose to describe locally sustained practices that endure through repetition, adaptation, and the personal commitment of individuals acting as custodians of living tradition, often accompanied by a latent aspiration for recognition and visibility. In this sense, the word “silent” does not imply an absence of sound or expression but points to the often unacknowledged presence of such traditions within social and cultural life. Silent traditions thus draw attention to small-scale practices that remain largely unnoticed within the everyday texture of communal life, while simultaneously sustaining its memory, belonging, and cultural meaning. Their endurance, however, often results in vague or unfounded historical narratives, which makes them all the more difficult to contextualize and investigate.

The notion of silent traditions extends ongoing discussions on the closely intertwined concepts of living tradition and cultural memory. While the concept of living tradition has been used to describe practices that remain embedded in social life rather than preserved as static heritage (see Bendix 2018), cultural memory explores how such embeddedness is realized through processes grounded in a community’s collective memory (see Gülüm 2023). Silent traditions, such as *Trikraljski zvezdari*, are deeply woven into the social life of a community, yet they lack the visibility often assumed by these frameworks: they continue to be performed and remembered through affective investment and intergenerational transmission, outside structures of formal recognition and institutional mediation. Examining the processes by which meaning and continuity are enacted, this study explores how *zvezdari* bring to life and sustain a silent tradition. In order to contextualize the persistence of this practice over time, it is necessary to briefly clarify how the concept of continuity is understood in the present study. In Croatian ethnological and folkloristic literature, continuity is not conceived as the mere preservation of fixed forms, but as a dynamic process realized through repetition, reinterpretation, and adaptation. As

1 I refer to them as *zvezdari* throughout the text, following the terminology used by my interlocutors.

emphasized by Dunja Rihtman-Auguštin, continuity represents that which endures *within* change—the elements that persist despite shifting historical and social circumstances (cf. 1971). This perspective is closely related to the notion of the “continuity of change” frequently employed in studies of traditional music (cf. Ceribašić 2009). Following this understanding, the present research approaches continuity as the ongoing transmission and reinterpretation of the *zvezdari* custom within changing social, cultural, and musical contexts.

Tracing the origins and continuity of Trikraljski zvezdari

Following my initial encounter with this tradition, I began ethnographic research in several localities along the Croatian-Slovenian border, an area commonly referred to in public discourse as the “Sutla Valley”.² I focused on the villages of Sopot, Gorjakovo, Desinić, and Donji Škrnik, where the custom continues to be practiced in various forms. Taking place annually on 5 January, *zvezdari* rounds form part of the Christmas cycle of customs, a period characterized by diverse forms of *ophodi* (rounds or processions) throughout Croatia (cf. Rihtman Auguštin 1995: 192).³ Practices involving groups of men or boys, and occasionally women, visiting homes and singing customary songs in return for gifts are commonly referred to as *koledanje*, while their participants are known as *kolendari* (Ibid: 135; Lozica 1999).⁴ The custom itself, particularly the songs, exhibits considerable local variation (Čapo Žmegač et al. 1998: 197). Closely related to *kolendari*, which have attracted significantly more scholarly attention, are *zvezdari*, whose limited representation in the literature corresponds to their relatively inconspicuous presence in practice. Croatian ethnologist Milovan Gavazzi argues that their songs contain elements of *koleda*, which makes them the only form in northwestern Croatia that retain the traces of this influence (1991:

2 The Sutla Valley was historically part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1918. The area has a longstanding Catholic presence, and parish life has traditionally played an important role in community organization. *Zvezdari* rounds, performed on Epiphany Eve, are closely tied to the Catholic feast and contribute to fostering the religious identity of local communities.

3 Throughout the text, I use the term “rounds” to denote the ritual house-to-house visits on Epiphany Eve.

4 Researchers have offered varying interpretations of the origin of *koledanje* and its name: Niko Kuret traces it to ancient folklore, deriving *koleda* from the Roman *Kalendae*, while Milovan Gavazzi argues for a Slavic etymology, associating it with the fertility goddess Koleda (cf. Gavazzi 1991: 210–211).

213–214).⁵ While researchers generally trace the origins of *kolendari* to the pre-Christian period (cf. Dragić 2018: 189), *zvezdari*—who visit households carrying a star—are believed to be of later, Christian origin (cf. Braica 2002: 9). Gavazzi further situates the custom within a broader Central European context, suggesting that it spread along established cultural routes into northwestern Croatia. Alongside the Slovenian *Trikraljevsko koledovanje*, he identifies the related German *Sternsingen* tradition as the closest parallel and a probable predecessor of both (cf. Moser 1956: 126–161; Gavazzi 1991: 212–213).⁶

Apart from occasional references in related contexts,⁷ there is no comprehensive Croatian literature that specifically addresses the *zvezdari* tradition. Although some sources mention the presence of its variants in parts of Istria and Slavonia,⁸ it is generally understood to be rooted in northern and northwestern Croatia, with a focal area near the Slovenian border. However, these specific localities are mentioned in relation to the custom only in passing within secondary sources, such as brief popular online articles or exhibition catalogues presenting the ethnographic legacy of the region.⁹ The situation is equally discouraging when it comes to documented manuscripts, songbooks and sound recordings.¹⁰ While occasional written records appear in the first two categories,¹¹ the situation differs markedly with respect to sound recordings. These sometimes appear as part of broader accounts of Christmas customs, but when they are not specifically documented in the accompanying inventory list, they are difficult to locate. In

5 As an example, he refers to the song *Dobar večer, dobri ljudi* from Krapinske toplice, a municipality located near the area under study.

6 See also Bonifačić Rožin 1974: 439; Miholek 2016: 152; Vojnović Traživuk 2019: 19.

7 Bonifačić Rožin 1974: 433; Čapo Žmegač et al. 1998: 197; Dragić 2006: 103–106; Dragić 2018: 224–226; Gavazzi 1991: 212–213; Habdija 2002: 56; Lozica 1996: 247–249; Lozica 1999: 79; Miholek 2016: 152; Novosel 2012: 93–98; Rajković 1974: 214; Peršić Kovač 2013: 43; Rihtman-Auguštin 1995: 139; Šprem Lovrić 1999; Vojnović Traživuk 2019: 19; Žganec 1971: 386.

8 Along with the corresponding name variants: in Istria it is often *kolejani* or *koledari* (Gavazzi 1991: 212; Ričković 1994: 73), while in Slavonia it is *betlemari* or *betlemaši* (Bonifačić Rožin 1974: 434; Dragić 2006: 103–104; Gavazzi 1991; Lozica 1996: 117; Miholek 2016; Peršić Kovač 2013: 45; Ričković 1994: 73; Rihtman-Auguštin 1995: 135).

9 See, for example, Šprem Lovrić 1999.

10 This refers to the ones held at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research in Zagreb, the central repository of folkloristic and ethnographic documentation of Croatian traditional culture.

11 See in Žganec (1950) songs no. 41, 732, 735, 737, 738, 739b, f, h, i, j, 740, 741 g, 743, 744 and 745.

case of the villages on which my research focuses, the documented record does not reflect the situation in the field; indeed, I have not found a single recording from the region.¹² Consequently, the *zvezdari* tradition remains largely undocumented, and the only source that specifically addresses it in the Sutla Valley is a documentary by Bruno Nikin, which features the two groups discussed in this article, those from Donji Škrnik and Desinić.¹³

Partly due to the aforementioned divergent memories and interpretations of the past, the presence of differing and contradictory information poses an additional challenge. This is particularly the case with data on the historical prevalence and representation of this custom in Croatia, which are not only inconsistent but also highly fragmented. In the localities central to this research, there is a general consensus that the *zvezdari* tradition has maintained a degree of continuity, although—as with many forms of living tradition—it has been sustained to varying extents across different historical periods. The scarce scholarly literature, together with references in media and public discourse, broadly supports the following timeline: although its longevity is often a matter of speculation:¹⁴ the tradition is known to have existed from at least the 1930s until the beginning of the Second World War, after which it was suppressed due to the prevailing political climate (cf. Bonifačić Rožin 1974: 434; Dragić 2018: 225). By the 1950s, however, as political conditions gradually eased, the custom re-emerged. The 1960s are often recalled as the first vivid point of remembrance—a kind of “golden age” of the tradition—which also corresponds to the childhood years of my interlocutors. A further decline is noted in the 1970s, when a combination of political factors and sociocultural changes—such as emigration, the disintegration of local communities, and the effects of globalization—contributed to the neglect and, ultimately, the gradual collective forgetting of certain traditional practices (cf. Rihtman Auguštin 1995: 155). The lack of institutional attention further hindered the survival of these traditions.¹⁵ Thus, individual actors became crucial, and revitalization relied primarily

12 Perhaps the closest geographically is *O sveta tri kralja, o blažen vaš dan* recorded in Sveti Križ Začretje, which was published by the Institute on the CD *Na dobro nam Božić dojde*, which is a compilation of traditional Croatian Christmas songs (cf. Vitez 2002).

13 The documentary was filmed in 2015 in the village of Zagorska Sela and it provides basic information on the history, main elements, and characteristics of the *zvezdari* tradition (cf. Nikin 2015).

14 For example, see an online article in a local magazine describing the tradition as several centuries old (Žažar 2019).

15 Unlike in Croatia, the practice of *Trikralsko koledovanje* in Slovenia has been systematically documented since the beginning of field recordings, which dates to around 1955, and continues to the present day (cf. Šivic 2014: 44).

on their efforts. Thanks to such grassroots initiatives, the period of decline was relatively short-lived and was followed by a renewed wave of revitalization at the turn of the century (Ibid),¹⁶ within the political context of the newly established Republic of Croatia after its independence in 1991, marking a continuity that extends to the present day.¹⁷

Trikraljski zvezdari in practice: stars, songs, and local interpretations

There are several name variants for this custom, including *Trikral(j)ski zv(j)ezdari*, *Trikraljski ophodi*, and sometimes *Žv(j)ezdarenje*. It takes place on Epiphany Eve, announcing the birth of Jesus to the local community and marking the conclusion of the Christmas season.¹⁸ A group of at least three, and typically six men gathers at dusk and visits households throughout the night, singing and carrying the star. The star represents the Star of Bethlehem, which, according to biblical tradition, guided the Three Wise Men to the newborn Jesus.¹⁹ Earlier sources describe three boys dressed as the Magi—Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar (cf. Bonifačić Rožin 1974: 434; Dragić 2006: 104; Gavazzi 1991: 212; Lozica 1996: 247–249)—whereas recent versions of the custom feature mostly adult men, except in Desinić, where a sister joins her brothers. Family and friendship connections among *zvezdari* are, in fact, an important characteristic. In some cases, they wear costumes, though they are neither assigned nor perform the specific roles corresponding to the biblical figures.²⁰ The star and the song, as central

16 Interestingly, a similar timeline can also be observed in neighboring Slovenia, suggesting that it reflects a broader regional dynamic (cf. Kumer 1995).

17 For example, this is the case with *zvezdari* from Gorjakovo. See Šučur 2012; 2013.

18 Although similar ritual rounds were performed in the Sutla Valley for other holidays as well—most often for New Year and Candlemas, sometimes even by the same groups—the defining feature of those held on Epiphany Eve is the obligatory inclusion of both star carrying and singing *trikraljska popevka*.

19 I refer to them throughout the text as the Magi.

20 It is worth noting that one theoretical framework for studying such practices is folk theatre. Croatian folklorist Ivan Lozica, a key figure in this approach, examined this custom as a symbolic system of folkloric representation (cf. 1990: 111–118; 2002: 173–186), distinguishing two forms: the type described here, where the *zvezdari* sing without performing specific roles, and another involving a costumed performance. Similarly, Croatian writer and folklorist Nikola Bonifačić Rožin explored Christmas plays with biblical themes in Banija and Slavonia, places inhabited by both Croats and Serbs. These plays, *Tri kralja* and *Vertepi*, are generally performed in the same period, and he highlights connections between Eastern and Western *koledanje* and Christmas folk theatre (1974: 439). Slovenian ethnologist Niko Kuret interprets these performances as largely paratheatrical (cf. 1951; 1986).

elements of the custom, serve as primary reference points in efforts to revitalize the tradition. Each group has its own star and performs a localized version of *trikraljska popevka*, or the Epiphany carol, characterized by unique melodies and lyrics. Thus, the stars and songs vary locally (cf. Gavazzi 1991: 201), reflecting the living and adaptive nature of the custom, with each revitalization effort introducing transformations shaped by contemporary interpretations. The following discussion examines such transformations through five groups from the aforementioned localities of Gorjakovo, Desinić, Donji Škrnik, and Sopot (two groups), categorized into three generational cohorts based on their age and relationship to the tradition: older (Donji Škrnik and one Sopot group), middle (Desinić), and younger (the other Sopot group). Interestingly, there is no intergenerational participation in practice.

As the most recognizable symbol of the custom, the star is prepared in advance of *zvezdari* rounds. Traditionally, its body was constructed from a sieve used in boiling grain: the mesh was removed and the interior of the frame covered with paper coated in oil. Onto this surface, biblical figures—such as the Magi, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus—were affixed, after which the remaining space was decorated with colored paper (cf. Gavazzi 1991: 212).²¹ Among the examples documented during the fieldwork, the *zvezdari* from Donji Škrnik most faithfully reproduced this traditional model when, twenty years ago, they crafted a star based on a preserved specimen from their area dating to the 1930s.²² While the sieve generally retains its symbolically circular shape, in some cases, additional star-shaped arms are added, as in the case of the older generation of *zvezdari* in Sopot. Successive generations introduced further transformations. The group from Desinić constructed an eight-pointed cardboard star covered with aluminum foil and inserted a commercially produced nativity scene, whereas the younger Sopot group radically reinterpreted the traditional form, reducing it to a nativity scene with only a small star attached to the roof.²³ The light source also evolved: instead of a candle once mounted on the exterior of the sieve to illuminate the scene, particularly through colored paper placed over carved openings, more recent versions feature battery-powered lamps or strings of Christmas

21 A notable documented example is the star preserved in the Pregrada Municipal Museum, decorated with colorful crepe paper flowers characteristic of the area. Donated in 2008 by Ivan Burić from Benkovo, it was accompanied by the lyrics to two songs – one of them matching the version sung by the older *zvezdari* group in nearby Sopot – although the melodies remain unknown.

22 An image of their star is available online in Jazbec 2019.

23 An image of the star, together with the video of their music performance, is available online in Jazbec 2020.

lights wrapped around the structure. Once completed, the star is mounted on a long pole, allowing one of the participants to raise it above his head, ensuring visibility from a distance, particularly at night. Many stars feature two sides with different Christmas motifs. In some versions, such as that of the older Sopot group, one side marks the approach to the household and the other its departure, with the star rotated accordingly during the visit. *Zvezdari* take great pride in their stars, which are often passed down through generations—within families or from friends and neighbors—and carefully maintained and redecorated every year, reflecting both their symbolic significance and the continuity of the tradition.

On the eve of their rounds, the group gathers at the home of one of its members to finalize the route before setting out for the first household. Historically, groups visited only the households in their own village and a few neighboring villages within walking distance. Today, however, with the use of cars, they travel much further, extending the boundaries of their customary routes. This practical change reflects broader shifts in mobility and rural connectivity, which have modified both the spatial and social dimensions of the custom. At the same time, notable transformations have occurred in its social dynamics. The previously mentioned change in gender composition—exemplified by the group from Desinić, consisting of three brothers and one sister—has reshaped the internal dynamics of the custom and prompted discussion among other *zvezdari*. Although older bearers were initially cautious, the modification was soon widely accepted both within the *zvezdari* community and among their hosts. In the past, groups typically visited fewer households and spent more time socializing with the families, particularly with older members of the community, thereby reinforcing the intergenerational ties crucial for sustaining silent traditions. The current approach, by contrast, prioritizes quantity: as many as forty houses may be visited in a single night, with considerably less time for interaction. What was once a form of communal gathering has, in part, adapted to the contemporary rhythms of social life. Another notable difference, recalled by interlocutors who remember the 1960s, is that in the past the group would often begin their house-to-house visits with only a few members, but by morning their number would typically have doubled as friends and neighbors spontaneously joined along the way. Today, they note, this no longer occurs: assembling a group of only three members is challenging enough and requires substantial planning, as people are less accustomed to spontaneous singing and, for various reasons, less willing to participate. This shift further reflects the changing nature of engagement in local traditions: one that increasingly depends on organization and intentionality rather than the spontaneity of shared practice.

Upon arriving at a household, the *zvezdari* position themselves beneath a window and begin singing a recognizable song: a folk interpretation of the biblical story of the Magi (cf. Gavazzi 1991: 212), locally referred to as *trikraljska popevka* or *zvezdarska popevka*. Once the hosts become aware of their presence, they may allow them to finish the song before opening the door. A ritual exchange of greetings follows: the *zvezdari* offer wishes of health and prosperity for the holiday season, which the host usually reciprocates, inviting them inside. Traditionally, their arrival at the house and entry are considered an honor, and in return they are customarily offered food and drink (often wine and cooked pork sausages typical of the winter season), as well as small gifts. While Gavazzi suggests that the collection of gifts may have contributed to the partial preservation of such customs (Ibid), my interlocutors emphasized that their primary motivation for participation is their affection for the tradition and a desire to prevent it from being forgotten:

“Our motivation is love for tradition, for customs; it would be a shame if something that our fathers and grandfathers have preserved and nurtured were to die out. If we have the will, why wouldn’t we devote a little effort to it? We have an extremely rich tradition and culture, which is very often neglected and, I can say, stigmatized, so it would be good if it were researched a little more.” (Krunoslav)²⁴

Guided by this idea, these individuals have become the key custodians of the “silent” *zvezdari* tradition, whose structure and dynamics are shaped largely by music. The *trikraljska popevka*, in particular, reflects the locally defined character of the custom: each village, and sometimes each group, maintains its own distinct version, performed repeatedly throughout the night as they visit successive households.²⁵ Transmitted primarily orally, the earlier forms of this songs are difficult to reconstruct, and archival recordings are scarce. As a result, contemporary analyses rely largely on personal and localized memory, as well as on the living practice sustained through individual effort.

²⁴ Throughout the text, I provide my own English translations of interviews conducted in Croatian and refer to my interlocutors by their first name.

²⁵ When examining Christmas customs and their variants, Rihtman-Augustin’s observation is equally applicable: “In every local, even family performance, the uniqueness of the environment, time, and contact with neighboring cultures, as well as the interaction of different social classes, is expressed.” (1995: 18)

Continuity through modification: *trikraljska popevka*

The key musical characteristics of *trikraljska popevka* are examined here through the five previously mentioned *zvezdari* groups and the examples of their respective variants. Typically, each group performs a single version of *trikraljska popevka* on each visit, along with other customary songs. However, in this respect, the Donji Škrnik group is an exception: in an effort to preserve the tradition's diversity, they have performed as many as five distinct songs over the years. One of these—used as the representative example for this group in the comparison below—appears to be a variant of a song collected by ethnomusicologist Vinko Žganec in Pristava, a village located eight kilometers from Donji Škrnik.²⁶ The analysis therefore draws on five contemporary versions of *trikraljska popevka*, one from each *zvezdari* group. When juxtaposed with earlier variants, such as the one collected by Žganec, it is evident that the overall content structure has remained largely consistent in the Donji Škrnik example, while the remaining versions display minor variations. To illustrate the prevailing structure among these four examples, I present the lyrics recorded in Sopot and performed by the older-generation *zvezdari*, whose member Pero learned this version from his uncles during childhood in the late 1960s:

*Dobar večer Krstijani,
dobar večer vam Bog daj.
Mi vam bomo zdaj zapeli
od presvetlih kraljev trih.*

*Tri su kralja mudri ljudi
ki su šle svoje države.
Ki su Jezuša iskali
da bi ga darovali.*

*Jena zvezda im put kazala
do betlehemske štalice.
Žima huda i ledena
nič im ni naškodila.*

*Mi se od vas obračamo
Svetim trim kraljom vas zručamo.
Vas i vaš veseli stan
prekriži ga Bog i svet Florijan.*

²⁶ For comparison, see song no. 744 in Žganec (1950).

*Bog vas prekriži
u vašoj hiži.
I daj vam Bog
jenu laku noć.²⁷*

The content structure of the analyzed songs follows a tripartite model: greeting, narration, and a farewell with a blessing. The opening lines begin with a greeting to the household ("*Dobar večer Krstijani*"), which functions not only as a polite introduction but also as a performative gesture that situates the event within the Christian festive context. In the following lines, the *zvezdari* identify themselves as bearers of the Magi's message and announce the purpose of their visit, thereby marking the transition from everyday interaction to ritualized, sacred communication. The central stanzas recount the biblical story of the Magi, who left their homelands to seek and honor the newborn Jesus. Although this narrative appears in various versions, the Star of Bethlehem remains a constant element, symbolizing both divine guidance and the emblematic object of the custom. The closing stanzas introduce the farewell ("*Mi se od vas obračamo*"), entrusting the household to the protection of the Magi ("*Svetim trim kraljom vas zručamo*"). This blessing usually extends further through invocations of divine and saintly protection, culminating in a devotional conclusion.

In terms of content, a particularly illustrative example is the variant sung by the younger generation group from Sopot that is gradually taking over the custom while reinterpreting it, thus offering a valuable basis for diachronic comparison. The group consists of three close friends who began their rounds three years ago, motivated by fond childhood memories of the tradition and their families' involvement in it. However, rather than adopting the locally well-established version of *trikraljska popevka* performed by their elders, the group opted for a different variant, which was known to one member but of uncertain origin. This version is slightly shorter (which is a common characteristic of newer renditions) but includes additional lyrics containing a request for a gift inserted before the farewell, a feature typical of caroling traditions more broadly. Another important aspect frequently discussed by my interlocutors concerns the language of

27 The English translation is as follows: *Good evening, Christians, good evening, may God give to you. We will now sing to you about the three most holy kings. Three kings, wise men, who went from their own lands, who sought Jesus to give him gifts. One star showed them the way to the Bethlehem stable. The winter harsh and icy did not harm them at all. We take our leave from you, to the three holy kings we commend you. You and your happy home may God and Saint Florian bless. God bless you in your house. And may God give you a good night.*

the lyrics. Alongside local dialects, *trikraljska popevka* historically incorporated a considerable number of Slovenian linguistic elements. Due to the area's borderland position and longstanding patterns of daily labor migration to Slovenia, this influence remains strong—to such an extent that it is sometimes difficult to determine whether certain words belong to Croatian dialects or to Slovenian. Given the region's complex sociopolitical history, the question of language has often been interpreted from two opposing perspectives. On the one hand, under the influence of linguistic purism that gained momentum following Croatia's independence, words of Slovenian origin were replaced in many versions with those considered “more Croatian”. One interlocutor commented: “*We also knew many Slovenian [songs] before, a lot of them were sung here. As a child, I knew many more. However, when that time came, we said that Slovenian is not ours, so now we'll sing in our own way.*” (Pero) On the other hand, advocates of local tradition have emphasized the importance of preserving songs in their original linguistic form, viewing these mixed elements as integral to the tradition itself. One of them remarked: “*That is Slovenian-Austrian [tradition]. Here we sing a lot of Slovenian ... we don't usually speak like we are doing now. We speak semi-Slovenian. And it doesn't make sense to change it to Croatian, because those songs wouldn't even sound very good in pure Croatian.*” (Dragutin)

Just as linguistic features reveal the layered cultural identity of the local area, the musical features of *trikraljska popevka* likewise reflect both continuity and adaptation within this living tradition. It is evident that members of the older generation seek to ground their singing in more than fifty years of lived, individual and local memory. They perform a cappella in triple meter, most often in three parts. One of them told me: “*Here it is traditionally sung in three parts: the first, second, and third. That is, the first and second parts, and the rest of the village in the third, or the bass. Those who do not really know how to sing are in the bass, because for the first and second parts one still needs to know better.*” (Nenad)

Occasionally a fourth voice—an additional bass part—is added, either doubling one of the upper melodies an octave lower or providing the root of a chord. This four-part texture historically determined the minimum number of singers required to cover all vocal parts, while any additional participants were welcomed as contributors who could enrich one or more of the existing parts. The main melody, typically in a major key, with a narrow tonal range and formally simple structure, is usually carried by the second part, with the first part sung a third above it.

In contrast to the older generation, the middle and younger generations of *zvezdari* demonstrate more flexibility in adapting the music to contemporary circumstances. Although the vocal element is retained—since the

primary purpose remains to tell a story, announce the end of the Christmas season, and convey good wishes for the year ahead—one of the most notable changes is the introduction of an instrument, which is a consequence of the reduced number of vocal parts. More precisely, while the middle generation retains multipart singing with the addition of accordion accompaniment, the youngest generation has transformed the original multipart a cappella practice into unison singing accompanied by accordion. This shift has also altered the manner of performance, affecting its pace, articulation and overall atmosphere; the songs tend to be faster, less articulated and less contemplative. As one member of the middle generation noted, the *zvezdari* themselves are aware of the innovations they introduce:

“When we started rehearsing the songs, at one point we quite accidentally came up with the idea of trying to sing with the accordion, and it somehow seemed nice to all of us, that it was good. And since we are generally a somewhat younger group compared to the people who once nurtured this tradition, we thus modernized the singing, which made it more accessible to people.” (Srećko)

The introduction of new elements is motivated by the belief that such changes appeal to the local community, with novelty itself forming part of the appeal. However, these accordion additions are not isolated cases. The instrument’s growing inclusion reflects its local popularity and practical advantages: it is well suited for outdoor rounds and produces enough volume to signal the *zvezdari*’s arrival from a distance. While the community generally embraces such innovations, older *zvezdari* tend to disapprove of the shift from a purely vocal to vocal-instrumental form. As one interlocutor explained, he does not consider the accordion to be part of the tradition: *“Young people also went [singing] this year. But this, with the accordion, is not the tradition. With the accordion, they walked around Kumrovec and here for New Year’s, but for the Three Kings, the star goes and [the singing is] a cappella.”* (Pero)

Pero attributed this shift in performance practice partly to broader socioeconomic changes that have reduced opportunities for communal and spontaneous singing, which in turn has led to a decline in vocal preparedness among younger generations.²⁸ Another factor contributing to the waning of spontaneous multipart singing is the limited frequency with which these groups perform together outside this specific context. In most cases, they gather to sing only for this occasion, rehearsing the songs

28 Similar changes are evident in a wide range of other music-related domains, and it is worth noting that the Slovenian counterpart of the tradition exhibits an almost identical trend (cf. Šivic 2014).

only a few days before the rounds. Furthermore, with the discontinuation of transgenerational transmission, younger *zvezdari* have lost contact with traditional approaches to singing and musical thinking—particularly with regard to the polyphonic way of leading voices. More importantly, the addition of an instrument significantly alters the soundscape of the custom. This is especially evident in the second part of the custom, when the music is not strictly tied to the functional demands of the round and may occur after *zvezdari* have entered a household. “*One would go to such houses where it was known that they would be happy and sing with us afterward. First, this festive part was sung, the trikralska, and then when we entered the house, anything was possible.*” (Marcel)

During this segment, which is optional and dependent on the atmosphere and the host’s encouragement, the *zvezdari* perform various songs that are not necessarily thematically related to *zvezdari* tradition itself. Whereas earlier, upon entering a household and continuing to sing,²⁹ their repertoire consisted mostly of seasonal church and folk songs, it is now dominated by the locally prevalent “gig music”, a popular derivative of folk music operating within the broader framework of both popular and folk genres. These genres change rapidly, creating challenges for performers attempting to keep pace. Their interpenetration arises partly because some participants are active musicians in other music fields, making cross-influence inevitable. All these factors significantly influence both the dynamics of the custom and the interpersonal relationships that sustain it, which develop differently depending on the presence or absence of music. Consequently, alongside broader sociocultural changes, they reflect wider developments in music and shifting musical preferences shaped by processes of globalization and modernization (cf. Šivic 2014: 43).

Although this silent tradition largely persists away from general public attention, the *zvezdari* express a desire for greater visibility, seeking recognition for their efforts and for the preservation of the custom’s continuity. This aspiration became particularly evident over a period of fifteen years during the annual gatherings held each January from 2012 in the old village of Kumrovec, organized by the group from Donji Škrnik in collaboration with the local museum.³⁰ These events brought together *zvezdari* primarily from

29 The catalogue of the exhibition presenting Christmas customs in the area notes that some *zvezdari* groups did not enter houses (cf. Šprem Lovrić 1999).

30 The Old Village Museum in Kumrovec is the biggest open-space *in situ* ethnographic museum in the Republic of Croatia, which includes around thirty traditional housing and farm facilities from the late 19th and early 20th century (<https://www.mss.mhz.hr/en/stranica/o-muzeju>, accessed 29. 10. 2025).

the Sutla Valley, including participants from both Croatia and Slovenia, who presented variants of the custom, with accompanying stars and songs, while making rounds around the village in the form of a revue.³¹ Unfortunately, these gatherings were discontinued in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic. According to a museum custodian, they have not been resumed due to limited public interest. During this period, the Donji Škrnik group was active in exchanges with their Slovenian counterparts, participating in meetings and concert-like events in Slovenia, where they presented the five songs they nurture. To preserve these songs more permanently—especially given the absence of younger bearers of the custom in their village—they recorded them in 2015 together with ten other traditional songs from the locality. The resulting CD served as a kind of thank-you gift for hosts during the rounds but was not widely distributed due to production costs, which could not be covered without institutional support.

Despite the wider invisibility of this tradition, there is occasional interest in it from outside the *zvezdari* circle. For instance, a local *klapa* vocal ensemble recently recorded a newly composed song titled *Trikraljska popevka*,³² and several folklore groups have staged festival performances, all of which contribute to its recognition beyond the local communities.³³ Among older members, however, there are signs of fatigue from sustaining the tradition independently, accompanied by resignation and concern for its future—particularly in areas where continuity is uncertain. One interlocutor declared: *“It’s almost over, it will die out, in a few more years there will be fewer and fewer of these groups... No one can sing it like we do. Those were the old voices, the old melody.”* (Nenad) However, where younger bearers participate, enthusiasm remains strong, suggesting that the tradition may continue into the future: *“We love it. We can hardly wait to get started on that day. I don’t know what would have to happen for us to stop it. I hope it won’t [die out]. As long as we are alive and healthy, we’ll carry on with this custom.”* (Jurica)

31 A short video of the meeting held in 2018 is available here: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=saved&v=808144839385876> (accessed 31. 10. 2025).

32 *Klapa* is a traditional vocal ensemble that originated in the coastal part of Croatia. It forms part of a newer, diatonic musical layer that is highly adaptable to various musical styles and has readily incorporated this tradition. The recording of the song can be accessed at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5xVCu8mHXg&list=RDg5xVCu8mHXg&start_radio=1 (accessed 29. 10. 2025.).

33 See, for example, a report on the folklore group from Pregrada presenting the custom at the folklore festival in Venice: <https://www.pol.pregrada.hr/index.php?p=18&ru=1&rb=347> (accessed 31. 10. 2025).

Local continuity in practice: reflections on *Trikraljski zvezdari*

Exemplifying a “silent tradition” sustained through the quiet, persistent dedication of local bearers, the *Trikraljski zvezdari* custom embodies both cultural richness and cross-cultural influence, revealing a dynamic interplay between local practices passed down through generations and contemporary musical and aesthetic adaptations. Despite sociopolitical upheaval, migration, and broad cultural change, the practice continues to thrive in the small communities of the Sutla Valley. Although largely unseen, it endures through intergenerational commitment; the layered nature of the tradition reflects the close interdependence of its practitioners and their deep attachment to local tradition. While *zvezdari* rounds once held greater meaning and were more tightly woven into communal life, they still serve as symbols of community identity and continuity. However, the revitalization efforts initiated largely “from below” highlight both the fragility and adaptability of this living tradition. Participation patterns and modes of musical transmission have been reshaped by wide-ranging changes: while older generations may retain elements of earlier forms, both they and younger groups actively adapt, illustrating how living traditions negotiate modernity. At the same time, transformations in *trikraljska popevka*—both musical and textual, shaped by other genres and contemporary sensibilities—illustrate how innovation and continuity coexist within a single practice. Since this music is rarely performed outside the context of the custom, its survival depends almost entirely on the ongoing commitment of local bearers. Although *zvezdari* remain largely unrecognized beyond their communities, this “silent”, localized character—understood as a practice that is often unnoticed rather than widely visible—may be precisely what enables the tradition to persist on its own terms, adapting to changing circumstances while sustaining a sense of belonging. These small communities continue to provide the conditions for intimate, intergenerational participation, reinforcing communal ties and shared memory. Ultimately, like many other customs, *Trikraljski zvezdari* will endure as long as its practitioners attribute functional, aesthetic or symbolic value to its continuation, ensuring that this quiet, living tradition remains an active part of local life.

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