

Visualizing tradition:
Role of Picture books
in Preserving the
Kukeri & Survakari
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Dimana Tomova Tomova

Masters Dissertation

Masters in Graphic Design

Escola Superior de Artes e Design (ESAD)

March 2025, Caldas da Rainha

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the cultural and visual representation of Kukeri & Survakari, a traditional Bulgarian ethnic ritual, within the context of contemporary graphic design and illustration. The study examines the historical origins, symbolic meanings, and artistic interpretations of Kukeri costumes and masks, analyzing their role in folklore and modern creative expressions. Additionally, it investigates picture books as a powerful medium for preserving and contemporizing cultural heritage, examining how visual storytelling can bridge the past and present. Utilizing a practice-based research methodology, the project involves the creation of a picture book that reinterprets these traditions through a modern design lens. By analyzing the intersection of folklore, design, and storytelling, this work highlights the significance of visual culture in cultural preservation and offers insights into the challenges and opportunities of adapting traditional narratives for contemporary audiences.

Keywords: Kukeri & Survakari, Bulgarian folklore, picture books, storytelling, illustration.

Esta dissertação explora a representação cultural e visual no contexto contemporâneo do design gráfico e da ilustração, dos Kukeri & Survakari, um ritual étnico tradicional búlgaro. Nesse contexto, é desenvolvido um estudo que examina as origens históricas, os significados simbólicos e as interpretações artísticas dos trajes e máscaras Kukeri, analisando o seu papel no folclore e na forma como se expressam modernamente em termos criativos. Além disso, conduz uma análise sobre os livros ilustrados como um meio poderoso para preservar e tornar contemporâneo o património cultural, examinando como a narração visual de histórias pode fazer a ponte entre o passado e o presente. Utilizando uma metodologia de investigação baseada na prática, o projeto envolve a criação de um livro ilustrado que reinterpreta essas tradições através de uma lente de design moderno. Ao analisar a intersecção do folclore, do design e da narração de histórias, este trabalho realça o significado da cultura visual na preservação cultural e oferece uma visão dos desafios e oportunidades da adaptação de narrativas tradicionais para audiências contemporâneas.

Palavras-chave: Kukeri & Survakari, folclore búlgaro, livros ilustrados, narração de histórias, ilustração.

Index

Abstract

Background

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Research question
- 1.2. Hypothesis
- 1.3. Research aim
- 1.4. Objectives

2. Literature review

- 2.1. Kukeri & Survakari
- 2.2. Picture books
- 2.3. Picture books & culture

3. Case studies

- 3.1. Bulgarian Mythology
- 3.2. Romania Winter Traditions
- 3.3. Day of the Dead

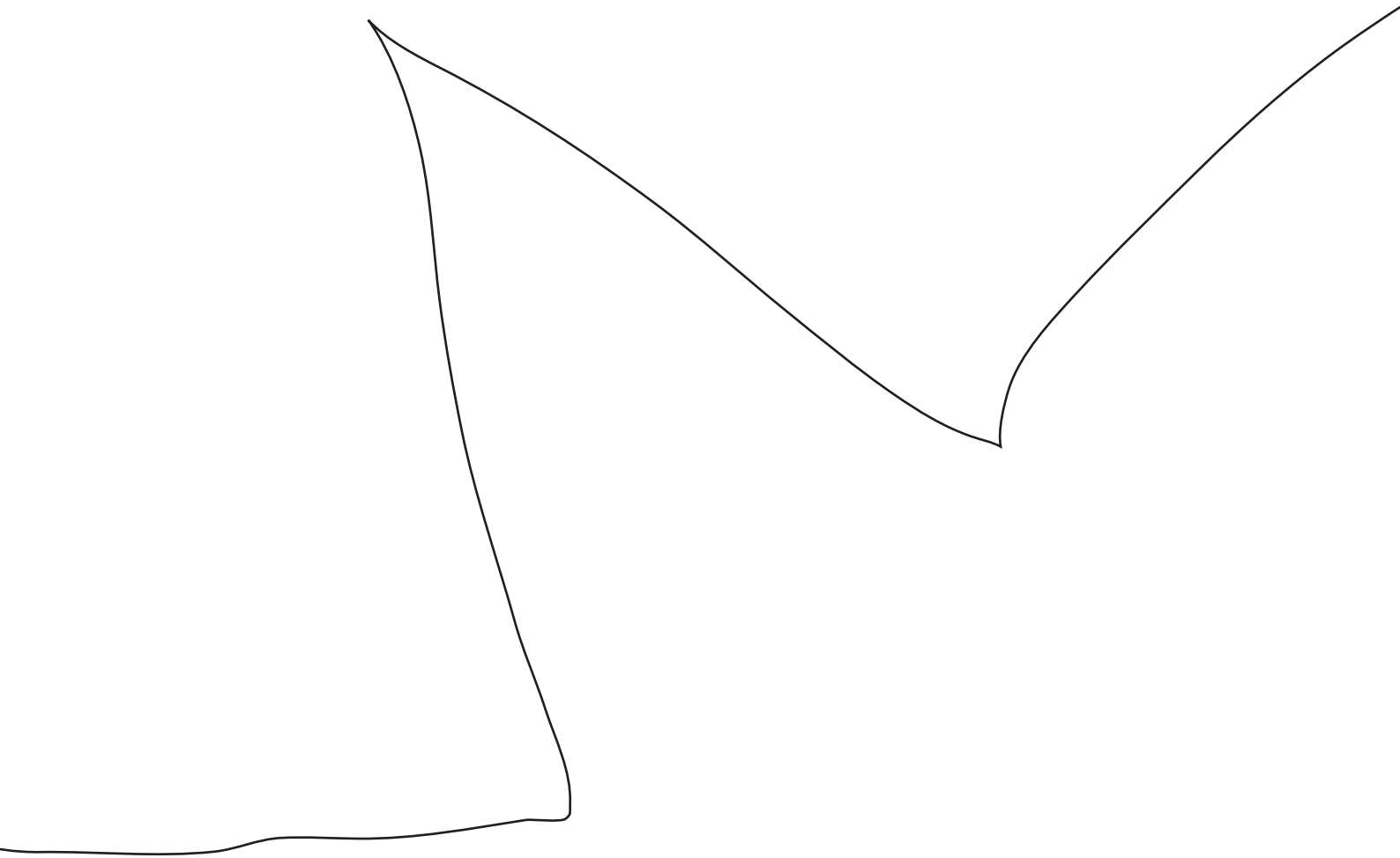
4. Practical framework

- 4.1. Introduction
- 4.2. Concept & themes
- 4.3. Target audience & relevance
- 4.4. Wordless narrative
- 4.5. Visual exploration of the Kukeri & Survakari
- 4.6. Structure & storyboard
- 4.7. Visual approach
- 4.8. Authenticity & artistic interpretation

5. Conclusion

6. List of figures

7. Bibliography



Background

From an early age, I was deeply curious about other cultures, people, and traditions—a curiosity shaped by two key influences: my parents and the foreign animations I watched as a child, such as *Naruto*. These shows not only inspired me to study Japanese but also sparked an interest in understanding traditions, religion, and customs from around the world. This fascination was further amplified during my years living abroad, where I experienced firsthand the significance of cultural identity.

While studying in England, I found myself nostalgic for home, which unexpectedly led to a series of drawings inspired by Bulgarian folkloric creatures, traditions, and customs. At the time, I did not fully understand why, as I had never actively explored my own culture before. In retrospect, I realize it was a way to reconnect with something familiar and meaningful—a response to the absence of my cultural surroundings. Often, we take our heritage for granted until we are distanced from it. Living abroad not only deepened my appreciation for other cultures but also helped me rediscover my own.

Among Bulgarian traditions, *Kukeri* and *Survakari* hold a special place for me. These are one of the most vibrant and widely practiced customs in the Bulgarian calendar, celebrated nationally. However, these traditions are often lost in modern representations. As a graphic designer, I find it puzzling that such significant cultural practices are not visually explored in contemporary media, especially when visual storytelling has proven to be an effective tool for preserving and adapting cultural heritage.

In Bulgaria, cultural preservation has often leaned toward rigidity. A conversation with a friend offered insight: *“Culture is culture; it is there to be preserved. Why should we experiment with it?”* This perspective highlights two key barriers—historical and economic. Under Ottoman rule, Bulgarians safeguarded their traditions as a means of preserving identity, equating authenticity with purity. This historical resilience has shaped a modern view of culture as untouchable. Coupled with economic instability, this perception limits creative experimentation with traditions in mediums like graphic design and illustration.

Yet, I believe culture should evolve. Currently, we have the tools to make traditions like *Kukeri* & *Survakari* accessible and engaging for younger generations. By experimenting with narrative and illustration and design, we can ensure that these customs not only survive but thrive in modern contexts.

1. Introduction

Each winter in Bulgaria, a fascinating tradition takes place—one where the spirit world meets the material world. Men and women prepare elaborate costumes, gather in groups, and dance to ward off bad luck and evil spirits. They chant, clang bells, and light fires, all to ensure a fruitful beginning to the year and bring blessings to their families and neighbors. This tradition, known as Kukeri and Survakari rituals, is one of Bulgaria’s most celebrated cultural practices.

Despite their ancient origins, these traditions continue to thrive. Expanding beyond rituals into festivals, crafts, and merchandise. Each year, the festivals attract thousands of visitors, strengthening cultural identity, local economies, and global interest. However, while their popularity and presence remains strong, their representation in contemporary graphic media is surprisingly scarce—particularly in regards to children.

In an era dominated by digital entertainment and globalized culture, younger generations have limited exposure to the Kukeri & Survakari outside of festivals and oral storytelling. Unfortunately, these traditional methods struggle to compete for attention when compared to the vast landscape of children’s media and entertainment. This raises an important question: How can we visually adapt these traditions for younger audiences? In a way that is both engaging and authentic?

Because the Kukeri and Survakari traditions are intangible, they rely heavily on oral transmission and live performances, making their integration into modern storytelling challenging. Picture books, however, can serve as a powerful tool for cultural education. Through a combination of illustration and narrative, they can bring folklore to life in a way that is both engaging and accessible for young readers.

This thesis explores how an illustrated picture book can bridge this gap, ensuring that the Kukeri & Survakari remain visible and relevant to future generations. The objective of this study is to examine how illustration and storytelling can work together to document and revitalize this tradition. By creating a culturally respectful yet modern picture book, this project aims to introduce young audiences to the rich visual and narrative world of the Kukeri & Survakari. By researching the tradition itself, picture books as preservation tools and exploring existing examples of effective design and illustration techniques, this study aims to develop a silent picture book that balances the traditional and contemporary.

1.1. Research problem

The Bulgarian traditions of Kukeri & Survakari have seen a resurgence in popularity, celebrated through festivals, tourism, and global media outlets such as *The New York Times* and *National Geographic*. The 2024 Surva Festival broke attendance records, with Deputy Director of Pernik Stefan Krastev remarking that ‘*it has exceeded all expectations.*’ However, the growing recognition and interest does not correlate to the tradition’s graphic representation and exploration. Instead, the Kukeri & Survakari’s image still remains limited to the souvenir sections or other commercially oriented endeavors.

This limitation creates a disconnect between the tradition and Bulgarian urban populations, particularly children, who lack engaging and educational resources about these traditions. While live performances and oral storytelling have preserved their essence, there is a significant absence of visually engaging tools, such as picture books, that could make the tradition accessible and relevant for younger audiences. Without these tools, children are limited to experiencing these customs as performances or attractions, missing the moral principles and cultural depth they embody.

Picture books are a unique medium that can address these concerns. The combination of narrative and illustration can be beneficial in translating the intangible into tangible, making the tradition accessible and engaging for younger audiences. This thesis addresses the lack of visual representation by exploring how an illustrated picture book can preserve and expand on the tradition of Kukeri & Survakari. Through visual and narrative experimentation, the project aims to contemporize these practices, foster intergenerational dialogue, and promote the vitality of Bulgarian heritage for future generations.

1.2. Main research question

Given the need to revisit and pass on the traditions of the Kukeri and Survakari to younger audiences, could we consider the creation of a silent picture book as the most appropriate device for this purpose?

Specific questions:

How can picture books be used to document and preserve cultural values, rituals, and traditions for future generations?

What design strategies and mediums can make the traditions of Kukeri and Survakari accessible and appealing to younger and global audiences?

How can illustration be used to reinterpret and contemporize the visual and narrative elements of Kukeri and Survakari while maintaining their authenticity?

1.3. Research Hypothesis

This study hypothesizes that illustrated picture books can serve as an effective tool for preserving and contemporizing the Bulgarian tradition of Kukeri and Survakari. By integrating traditional motifs with modern visual storytelling, such picture books can help transmit cultural heritage to younger generations in an engaging and accessible way. This approach is expected to enhance cultural appreciation, strengthen intergenerational connections, and contribute to the broader discourse on cultural preservation through design and illustration.

1.4. Research Aim

This study aims to explore how illustrated picture books, can preserve and promote the Bulgarian traditions of Kukeri and Survakari. Through adapting these traditions into visual narratives, the project seeks to engage younger audiences and foster intergenerational dialogue. Through a balance of traditional elements and contemporary design and illustration techniques, this research aspires to make these customs more accessible and relevant in modern contexts.

1.5. Research Objective

To achieve this aim, the study focuses on the following objectives:

Document Cultural Heritage

Research and visually represent the Kukeri & Survakari traditions, ensuring their authenticity and historical accuracy.

Enhance Accessibility

Develop an illustrated picture book that translates these traditions into a format suitable for young audiences.

Apply Contemporary Design

Use modern storytelling and visual techniques to maintain cultural integrity while making the traditions relevant in today's media landscape.

1.6

Research importance

Bulgaria possesses a rich cultural heritage, yet its traditional practices are underrepresented in contemporary media. Despite the current popularity of traditions such as Kukeri and Survakari, they face the risk of stagnation and diminished relevance, particularly among younger generations. Several factors contribute to this challenge, including entrenched attitudes toward cultural preservation, limited government funding, high emigration rates, and the pervasive influence of global and Western cultural trends. Without proactive efforts in documentation, creative exploration, and promotion, these traditions risk fading into obscurity, fostering a generation indifferent to their cultural roots.

While the Kukeri and Survakari are well-known, public understanding often remains superficial. Key aspects such as the artistry involved in creating costumes and masks, the community's role in sustaining these rituals, and their historical significance remain unexplored in contemporary media. This lack of depth leaves practitioners and their families without broader acknowledgment, while urban audiences remain disconnected from the traditions' cultural and artistic value.

The growing emphasis on global trends, urbanization, and technology further marginalizes Bulgaria's traditional practices, framing them as outdated rather than as living, evolving cultural expressions. If traditional culture continues to be excluded from modern media and creative formats, it risks being perceived as irrelevant and archaic.

This research is vital in addressing these gaps by proposing innovative methods, such as picture books, to preserve and contemporize traditions like the Kukeri and Survakari. By bridging the traditional with the modern, this study seeks to foster intergenerational and cultural dialogue, ensuring that these rich traditions remain relevant and appreciated in today's rapidly changing world.

Given the need to revisit and pass on the traditions of the *Kukeri and Survakari* to younger audiences, could we consider the creation of a *silent picture book* as the most appropriate device for this purpose?



2. Literature

review





Figure 1: Traditional Kukeri costume. Source: Stamenova, 1982, p. 13

2.1. Kukeri & Survakari

Definition The Bulgarian mumming rituals are collectively referred to as *Kukerstvo* (Кукерство) and *Survakatstvo* (Сурвакарство), with practitioners known as *Kukeri* (Кукери) and *Survakari* (Сурвакари). These traditions involve elaborately dressed men—and, in recent years, women and children—who perform group rituals at specific times of the year to ward off evil spirits and encourage fertility and rebirth. The practice is inherently social, taking place primarily in rural villages and small towns rather than large cities.

In Bulgaria, the term *Kukeri* is often used as a general descriptor for all mumming traditions, though this broad usage overlooks important regional distinctions. Scholars specializing in Bulgarian mumming generally classify these traditions into two main groups: *Kukeri* and *Survakari*. This distinction is based on several factors, including the time of celebration, geographical location, ritual behavior, and historical origin. While different regions may have unique names for their local mumming customs, they are commonly grouped under these two broad categories.

The most fundamental difference between *Kukeri* and *Survakari* is the time of celebration. *Survakari* perform their rituals in early January, shortly after New Year's Day, during a period known as *The Dirty Days* (Мръсни Дни), or the time of year where dark forces are most prevalent. Their tradition emphasizes protection and renewal. Their costumes are predominantly made from thick furs, and their masks often feature intimidating, beast-like designs, reinforcing their role in scaring off evil spirits.

Kukeri, on the other hand, celebrate the transition from winter to spring, with their rituals commonly taking place in March, marking the beginning of the agricultural season. Their performances and costumes reflect themes of fertility and renewal. Their attire includes layered fabrics, colourful ornaments, intricate patterns, and elements of traditional women's clothing. Their performances often feature symbolic reenactments of cultivating the land, further reinforcing their connection to agricultural prosperity and new beginnings.

Origin The origins of the terms Kuker and Survakar have proven challenging for researchers and ethnologists due to the scarcity of historical documentation. The first recorded mentions and speculations about the term Kuker was made by the Bulgarian revolutionary Georgi S. Rakovski (Kraev. G, 2003). In 1857, Rakovski suggested that the rituals were of Slavic origin, proposing that *Kuk*, from the term Kuker, was the name of a Slavic god—possibly a deity of irrationality and wildness. His interpretation was influenced by his perception of the performances as primitive and savage in nature.



Figure 2: Kukeri practitioners in Karlovo. Source: *Kukeri-Karlovskobg, n.d.*

During the early 1900s, Doc. Balsamovich expanded on this idea, agreeing that the tradition had connections to ancient deities. However, he argued that its roots lay in the ancient Thracian fertility rituals, proposing that Slavic people later adopted these customs (Kraev. G, 2003). Around the same period, M. Arnaudov, renowned Bulgarian folklorist and ethnologist, in his research on traditional Bulgarian rituals, described Kukeri as a religious ceremony of simple-minded people, stripped of symbolic meaning and merely an imitation of Greco-Roman customs. He believed that the Ancient Bulgarians adapted these practices after settling in the Balkans.

In the 1970s, P. A. Petrov challenged Arnaudov's theory. He was the first to separate Kukeri and Survakari, arguing that they did not share the same origins. Instead, he suggested that Kukeri had Thracian roots, while Survakari were linked to Slavic traditions.

The debate over the origins of Kukeri and Survakari remains unresolved due to the lack of definitive historical evidence. However, the most widely accepted theory is that these customs originate from ancient Thracian traditions and are specifically connected to the cult of the Greek god Dionysus.

Figure 3: Kukuvden in the city of Strandja. Source: *Yambol Museum, n.d.*



Figure 4: Kukeri from old times. Source: Wikipedia, n.d.



Was Kuk the deity of wildness ? Similar to the ancient Cherni Bog and Beli Bog, to the deity of wisdom, the deity of the ability to talk and so on. If they had such gods and goddesses, no doubt they must have had a god of stupidity and savagery. In some villages in Bulgaria they play Kukove - their risings are quite wild. They prance about aimlessly, dress in old rags and sing silly songs.

- G.S. Rakovski; Gorski Putnik



Figure 5: Kukeri (Starci) near Sushica village. Source: Artefacts and Old Photos, via Svetovni Zagadki, 1935. Image retrieved from Facebook.

Survakari



Figure 8: Survakari dolls.
Source: Balgaran.co.uk, n.d.

The Survakari are associated with New Year's celebrations, mostly located in western Bulgaria, particularly in the Pernik and Kyustendil regions. The ritual typically takes place on January 13-14, following the Julian calendar, though some communities celebrate earlier, during *The Dirty Days* (Мръсни дни)—a period of instability and heightened vulnerability to evil spirits (Georgieva, 1999, p. 48). The primary purpose of the ritual is protection and renewal, ensuring health, fertility, and good fortune for the coming year. Ethnologists trace its origins to pre-Christian Indo-European traditions, particularly the Thracian Dionysian cult, which influenced both Slavic and Bulgarian customs (Venedikov, 1987, p. 65).

The ritual's core elements include masks, costumes, and rhythmic dances, symbolizing the battle between good and evil. Survakari masks—made from wood, leather, horns, and textiles—are designed to be intimidating, as their primary function is to ward off evil spirits (Marinov, 2005, p. 89). The costumes, crafted from animal fur, feathers, and organic materials, embody strength and protection. Another crucial feature is the bells worn by the performers, they are believed to have purifying properties. Their rhythmic clanging, combined with energetic dances, creates a powerful sensory experience that represents the cosmic struggle between light and darkness, life and death (Vasileva, 2003, p. 134).

Survakari groups, known as *Survakarska drujina* (Сурвакарска дружина), vary across regions, each with distinct costumes, dances, and ritual practices (Kolev, 2012, p. 97). While traditionally performed by men, some regions incorporate symbolic theatrical reenactments, such as mock weddings and funerals, representing the cycle of life and death (Arnaudov, 1967, p. 115). The Surva Festival in Pernik gathers numerous Survakari groups, showcasing the rich diversity of this centuries-old tradition.



Figure 7: Survakari at Surva, 2024. Source: Kukeri.net, 2024.



Figure 6: Kukeri with Zoomorphic masks and costumes from Dolno Sahranche village, 1950s. Source: Stamenova, 1982, p. 41.

Kukeri



Figure 9: Kukeri at Kuker-landia Festival in Yambol city. Source: Tourism-Yambol.com, n.d.

The Kukeri tradition is performed during the transition from winter to spring, primarily in southern and eastern Bulgaria—this includes the regions of Thracia, Plovdiv and Burgas. Celebrated around *Sirni Zagovezni* (Forgiveness Day) and *Todorovden* (St. Theodore's Day), Kukeri rituals ensure fertility, a successful harvest, and protection from evil (Marinov, 2005, p. 56).

The origins of Kukeri, like Survakari, trace back to pre-Christian Thracian and Slavic traditions, particularly fertility cults (Beshevliev, 2001, p. 98). The masquerade integrates protective and fertility symbolism, combining ritual actions to drive away evil while awakening the land for the new agrarian cycle.

Kukeri costumes differ from those of Survakari by their vibrant colours, ornamentation, and anthropomorphic masks (Georgieva, 1999, p. 72). Practitioners wear traditional women's clothing – *nosiya* (носия), their masks include decorative elements such as animal fur, feathers and mirrors, reflecting themes of fertility and renewal. The focus on colour and feminine elements further cement the Kuker's connection to spring, fertility and nature. Bells are persistent among the Kukeri and Survakari due to the believe of them having cleansing properties. A notable item they carry is a wooden weapon, such as swords, rakes or sticks. Combined with ritual dances, they help the Kukeri symbolically cultivate the land in an effect to mimic the act of *Plowing and Sowing* (Оране и Засяване). This is believed to have magical significance (Venedikov, 1987, p. 109). Giving them the role of mediators between humans and nature, reinforcing their protective and fertility-invoking function.

A key ritual element is the theatrical battle between good and evil, where the Kukeri triumph over dark forces. This symbolizes seasonal change, with spring prevailing over winter. In some villages, additional blessings for fertility are performed for young couples. Kukeri rituals vary across regions. In Yambol and Burgas, groups include symbolic characters such as *the bride* (булката) and *the old man* (страпеца), representing fertility and rebirth (Arnaudov, 1957, p. 112). Like, Survakari, Kukeri performances are often tied to village festivals, incorporating culinary and religious customs. In the region of Sofia and Plovdiv, Kukeri dances emphasize ritual movement's connection to agricultural work (Kolev, 2012, p. 87).

Figure 10: Kukeri (Starci) from Vasil Levski village, 1950s.
Source: Stamenova, 1982, p. 48.



Figure 11: Kukeri from Silistra at Maslenica Festival, Moscow, 2020. Source: Kvorum-Silistra.info, 2020.



Artistry

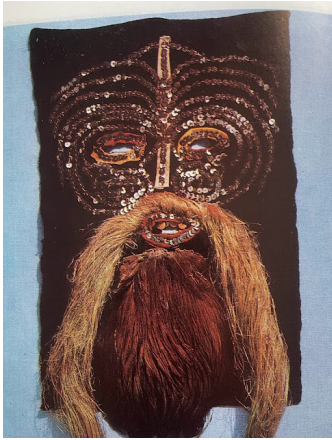


Figure 12: Kuker mask from Zidarovo village, beginning of the 20th century. Source: Stamenova, 1982, p. 84.

The artistry of the costumes is central to the Kukeri and Survakari tradition, with each element—materials, colours, and designs—carrying symbolic meaning tied to protection, fertility, and the cyclical nature of life. Beyond their visual impact, these handcrafted costumes serve as a link between humans and the spiritual world, transforming the wearer into a mediator of ancient ritualistic beliefs. Creating these elaborate costumes is a slow and costly process, often taking close to a year. While individual creativity plays a major role, the process is also deeply communal, with villages contributing materials like fur, feathers, and fabrics. Some villages even raise animals specifically for their Kukeri or Survakari to use for costumes.

There is an unspoken preference for natural materials, though modern influences have introduced new elements and design choices. The craftsmanship requires a diverse set of skills—sewing, carpentry, and artistic design—making the tradition an immersive creative process. While families often help in costume-making, the mask is the most personal aspect, with each practitioner crafting it individually as a point of pride. Because there is no rigid template, masks vary widely in expression, proportion, and texture, allowing for artistic freedom. This tradition, passed down through generations, serves as both a creative outlet and a binding force in social relationships. Many practitioners grow up continuing the work of their predecessors, blending inherited techniques with their own innovations, ensuring the tradition remains both preserved and ever-evolving.

Figure 14: Kuker mask. Source: Photo by author, 2024.



Figure 17: Mask at Surva festival. Source: Photo by Ivelina Asenova, 2024.





Figure 15: Kukeri from Padarevo village, second half of the 20th century. Source: Stamenova, 1982, p. 63.

Figure 16: Feather mask from Sadovik village. Source: Photo by author, 2024.



Rituals

Ritual performances are where Kukeri and Survakari costumes come to life, equipping practitioners with the tools to cleanse their surroundings and restore balance. These rituals follow a structured process, guiding practitioners through a symbolic disruption of the natural order before reestablishing harmony. Based on field research in the region of Pernik, three key steps define the Kukeri & Survakari practice: the gathering of the group, visits to village homes for blessings, and the ritual conclusion—a dance around a bonfire.

- Step 1* Participation in these traditions is inherently communal. A single practitioner cannot perform the ritual alone, reinforcing its role as a shared folkloric practice. Each village or town typically has its own Kuker or Survakar group, open to all who wish to join. Group sizes vary, sometimes reaching up to 90 members, with participants ranging from as young as three years old to elderly members in their eighties. Within these groups, practitioners take on specific roles that contribute to the ritual's symbolic meaning. One of the most common roles are *The Bride and Groom* (Булката и Младоженецът), representing new beginnings and prosperity. Another notable figure is the *Vyulyukbashiya* (Бюлюкбашия)—the group's leader, dressed in revolutionary attire. Other characters, such as *The Priest* (Попът), *The Bear and The Bear Handler* (Мечката и Мечкарят), and the *Grandmother* (Бабата), add comedic or protective elements to the performance. Historically, these roles were performed exclusively by men, a practice that Georg Kraev connects to seasonal symbolism—winter being linked to masculinity, while spring is associated with femininity (Kraev, G, 2003).
- Step 2* Once assembled, the group visits every household in the village. Families welcome them with food and drinks, while the Kukeri or Survakari dance and clang their bells to cleanse the home of negative forces. While other characters have specific functions; for example, the bear is believed to bring health and good fortune by walking over people.
- Step 3* The final stage of the ritual takes place in the village center, where the practitioners perform their dance around a bonfire. Villagers gradually join in, symbolizing the restoration of balance between the spirit world and the living. This closing ritual is meant to bring prosperity and blessings to all (S. Zheleva, D. Vasilev, 2022).

At its core, the Kukeri and Survakari tradition is a collective expression of resilience, deeply embedded in community collaboration. The 'magic' or superstition associated with the ritual is only fulfilled through mass participation, reinforcing a strong group spirit. Even today, these rituals continue to serve as a powerful social force, uniting people in shared cultural heritage and providing a means to collectively face the challenges of winter.



Figure 18: Survakari during ritual. Source: Photo by author, 2024.



Figure 19: Ritual bonfire. Source: Photo by author, 2024.

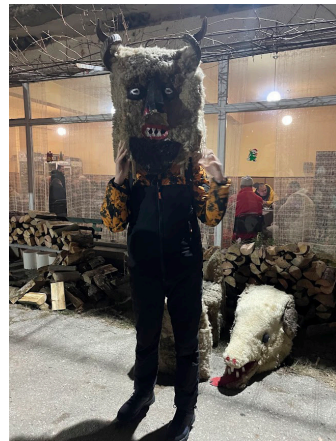


Figure 20: Student wearing mask. Source: Photo by author, 2024.



Figure 22: Dog mask. Source: Photo by author, 2024.



Figure 21: Bonfire ritual at Sadovik village. Source: Photo by author, 2024.



Figure 23: Group at Surva festival. Source: Photo by author, 2024.

Kukeri & Survakari in the contemporary

Today, the Kukeri and Survakari traditions remain deeply valued in Bulgaria, serving as key symbols of the nation's ethnic heritage. More than just remnants of the past, they continue to evolve, playing a vital role in Bulgarian society through cultural expression, social cohesion, and economic impact. While their historical and mystical significance remains important, these traditions now serve as platforms for artistic innovation, community participation, and international recognition.

Historical value The Kukeri and Survakari traditions are among the oldest forms of folk expression in Bulgaria, preserving knowledge, customs, and beliefs passed down for generations. These rituals reflect the human connection to nature, embodying the age-old desire to influence seasonal cycles, fertility, and prosperity through symbolic performance, music, and dance.

Economic, & Cultural Significance Their cultural significance has gained international recognition, particularly through UNESCO's 2015 inclusion of the Surva Festival in Pernik on the list of *Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*. This recognition not only highlights the traditions' importance but also encourages continued efforts for their preservation. By showcasing these rituals on a global stage, UNESCO has contributed to their longevity, inspiring both cultural institutions and local communities to actively maintain them.

In modern Bulgaria, the Kukeri and Survakari traditions play a multifaceted role, bridging history and contemporary society while impacting both social and economic life.

Festivals such as Surva in Pernik and Kukerlandia in Yambol have grown into major cultural events, drawing thousands of participants and visitors from Bulgaria and abroad. The Surva Festival alone attracts over 100,000 visitors annually, boosting local businesses and folkloric tourism (BNR, 2019). These festivals contribute significantly to local economies by attracting investment and increasing global interest in Bulgarian traditions.

Beyond their economic influence, these events serve as platforms for cultural exchange, welcoming mumming groups from other countries and fostering dialogue between different masquerade traditions.

Media outlets such as National Geographic and The New Yorker have reported on these rituals, further amplifying their international reach.

Intergenerational connection One of the most enduring aspects of the Kukeri and Survakari traditions is their role in connecting generations, reinforcing family and community bonds.

In many regions where these traditions thrive, they are family affairs, with the knowledge of the rituals, mask-making, and symbolism passed down from parents to children. These practices are not only essential in preserving history but also serve as a means of transmitting ethnic folkloric values and identity across generations (Kolev, G, 2012, p. 61).

The active participation of children is key to ensuring the tradition's survival. Young practitioners gradually take on larger roles, becoming the next guardians of the practice. Additionally, engagement in these rituals teaches social values such as cooperation, responsibility, and community belonging. Georgieva notes that "through their participation in the masquerade games, children acquire a sense of collectivity and continuity, which plays an important role in their social development" (Georgieva, I, 1999, 144). In this way, the Kukeri and Survakari rituals function as bridges between past and present, ensuring that the Bulgarian ethnic customs are carried forward into the future.

Figure 25: Surva Stage.
Source: Official Surva Festival
Facebook page, 2025.



Figure 24: Kids of Surva. Source: Didi D Photography, 2025.





Figure 26: DIY Children masks.
Source: 4th-grade students
from 38 OU Vasil Aprilov,
2024.



Figure 27: Children wearing
DIY masks. Source: Kinder-
garten Slunce, Kyustendil,
2021



Figure 30: Spirit of Surva from children to adults. Source: Official Surva Festival Facebook Page, 2025.



Figure 32: Contemporary mask. Photo by author, 2024.

Figure 31: Kukeri group passing. Source: Official Surva Festival Facebook Page, 2025.

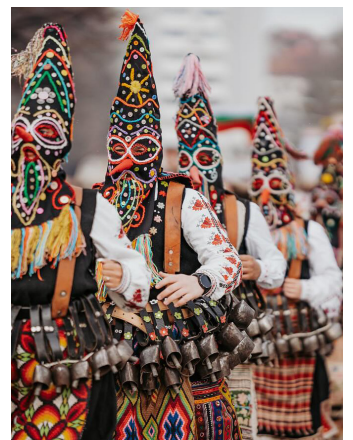




Figure 33: Mask artistry. Photo by author, 2025.



Figure 34: Kukur at Surva festival. Photo by Ivelina Asenova, 2024.



Figure 35: The priest and the revolutionary. Photo by Ivelina Asenova, 2024.



Figure 36: Kukur masks. Photo by author, 2025.



Figure 37: Costume of Evil entity. Photo by Ivelina Asenova, 2024.



Figure 38: Evil spirit. Photo by author, 2024.

Figure 39: Greek mumming practitioners from Patras. Photo by author, 2025.



Figure 40: Camile and camile handler from Ravno Pole village. Photo by author, 2025.

Graphic representation



Figure 41: Kukur Sticker. Designed by taralej.org, 2024.



Figure 43: Surva party. Hosted by EXE, artwork: Unknown, 2025.



Figure 44: Kukeri & Survakari. Zheleva S. & Vasilev D., 2022.

In the digital age, younger generations increasingly rely on visual media to absorb and engage with information. From social media to digital publications, images play a crucial role in shaping cultural awareness. To ensure that traditions remain relevant in modern society, they must be adapted to contemporary formats that align with current visual and digital trends. Graphic representation—through illustrations, posters, digital art, and picture books—has the potential to bridge the gap between folk heritage and modern audiences, making traditional practices more accessible and engaging.

The graphic representation of Kukeri & Survakari traditions can be found in the handicraft sectors, as souvenirs, posters, and books. However, compared to the scale and significance of this tradition, these examples are scarce, and some provide only a surface-level representation.

The image of Kukeri & Survakari is most commonly represented in the handicrafts and souvenir sector, mainly sold at festivals and sometimes online. These handcrafted items, such as dolls, magnets, and key chains, serve a decorative function and are widely used as keepsakes.

As the *Surva* (Сурва) festival has gained more appeal among younger audiences, the tradition has started to inspire events. For instance, in 2025, one of Sofia's most famous club - *EXE*, hosted its first-ever Kukeri & Survakari party, named after the festival of Surva. The promotion of the event featured an illustrated promotional post with a Kukur mask as the central focus.

Several villages that practice the Kukeri & Survakari tradition, such as Kabile and Charda, have incorporated murals as a form of visual representation. These murals reflect the cultural significance of the tradition and often appear in the heart of the communities where the rituals are still practiced.

In children's media, Kukeri & Survakari have the least representation. The tradition is mostly limited to colouring books and informational books, rather than creative forms of visual storytelling like picture books. S. Zheleva and D. Vasilev's *Kukeri and Survakari* is currently

the closest example of a book explaining the tradition that is directed toward children and uses illustration. Which highlights the serious lack of representation and gap in picture books about Bulgarian customs and traditions.

In conclusion, while there are some existing graphic representations of the Kukeri & Survakari traditions across various mediums—such as handicrafts, murals, and event promotions—their prevalence and depth remain limited. Particularly in children’s media, the representation is minimal and largely confined. To truly preserve and adapt these traditions for future generations, it is essential to create more meaningful, creative, and accessible graphic representations that resonate with younger audiences, helping the traditions remain relevant and connected to modern visual culture. By doing so, we can ensure that the cultural significance of the Kukeri & Survakari traditions is not only preserved but also celebrated and appreciated in contemporary society.

Figure 42: Kuker mural from Kabile village. Posted by Romyana Pavlova, n.d.



2.2. Picture books

Picture book, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, is ‘a book, especially for young children, that has a lot of pictures and not many words’ (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). However, this definition, even though popular, lacks profound nuance in depicting this genre of books. Barbara Bader (1976) provides a more comprehensive definition, describing picture books as *‘the text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historic document; and foremost, an experience for a [reader / beholder]’* (Bader, 1976, pg. 1). As an art form, picture books hinge on the interdependence of pictures and words, the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and the drama of the turning page.

Picture books act as a child’s first contact with literature and reading. Typically, they vary in format depending on the story and functions they carry but are, on average, composed of 32 pages. Picture books offer a unique blend between image and text, where both work interdependently to unveil a story. Unlike illustrated books, where imagery is secondary to text, in picture books the imagery is central—sometimes even more important than the text, as seen in genre variations such as silent picture books. As cultural products, picture books act as reflections of their contemporary world (Bader, 1976; Meunier, 2013), embedding societal values, traditions, and challenges into their narratives and visuals.

Development of the picture book

Illustrated picture books are a versatile and diverse storytelling mediums that offers a unique synthesis of illustration and literature. They play a critical role in preserving and transmitting cultural traditions to new generations, while also reinterpreting and adding new contexts to the visual and narrative understanding of cultural symbols, occurrences, and values.

The development of picture books has evolved significantly over time. As Nikolajeva and Scott (2006) note : *‘The earliest picture books were primarily educational tools, designed to teach basic literacy and morality, often with static illustrations that merely complemented the text.’* These early books served as guides to understanding social values, beliefs, and structures. The interplay between text and image can be traced back to ancient times, with precursors such as Chinese scrolls and Egyptian murals. These early examples demonstrate how the combination of text and imagery was used to structure societal and cultural understanding.

One of the earliest recognized picture books is *Orbis Pictus* (Visible World in Pictures) by John Amos Comenius, published in 1658. Though far from a modern picture book, *Orbis Pictus* was a textbook that incorporated illustrations as an educational tool to help young readers understand the text. Comenius, an influential Czech teacher and educational reformer, believed in the power of visual and textual interplay to spark curiosity and engagement in young readers. As he wrote, 'Let it be given to children into their hands to delight themselves withal as they please, with the sight of the pictures, and making them as familiar to themselves as may be...' (John Amos Comenius, 1658, pg.18). This foundational approach laid the groundwork for the dual role of picture books as educational and experiential tools.

The integration of illustration and text shifted dramatically with works such as William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789). Unlike its predecessors, Blake's illuminated poetry book used illustration not as a supplementary tool but as an integral part of the narrative. As Nikolajeva and Scott (2006) observe, Blake's work 'explored symbolic relationships and narrative storytelling' beyond practical depictions. This artistic interplay of text and image marked a significant step toward the modern picture book, transforming illustrations into narrative and emotional tools that complemented the text while holding independent meaning.

The 20th century heralded a golden age for picture book illustration, marking a pivotal period in the medium's evolution. The 20th century shaped picture books into a sophisticated art form, moving beyond purely instructional or decorative uses of illustrations to embrace artistic experimentation, narrative innovation, and cultural expression. Iconic works such as Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1907) established a balance between illustration and narrative, where visuals guided the story rather than merely decorating it. Other examples, like Virginia Lee Burton's *The Little House* (1942), addressed contemporary themes such as change and urbanization through intricate and emotive illustrations, demonstrating the capacity of picture books to explore complex subjects.

Artistic experimentation also defined this era, challenging the limits of what a picture book could be. Books like Dorothy Kunhardt's *Pat the Bunny* (1940) and Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969) utilized innovative formats and tactile elements, engaging young readers' senses and redefining interaction with the medium. Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) further advanced the relationship between text, image, and design, with illus-

trations serving as vital components of action, emotion, and context. As Nikolajeva and Scott (2006) note, *'Innovations in picture book design during the 20th century emphasized multimedia art, tactile materials, and augmented reality, creating immersive and engaging experiences that moved beyond traditional storytelling methods.'* This era also marked the formal recognition of picture books as cultural and artistic objects. The establishment of the Caldecott Medal in 1938 by the American Library Association was instrumental in validating illustration as an essential element of storytelling in children's literature. By fostering competition and setting high standards, the award encouraged innovation and excellence among illustrators, authors, and publishers. Notable Caldecott winners, such as Ezra Jack Keats's *The Snowy Day* (1963), reflected and influenced social and cultural shifts, addressing themes like diversity and inclusion at a time when such representation was rare.

In contemporary times, picture books continue to thrive as valuable artistic, educational, and cultural resources. They now incorporate complex narratives, layered themes, and sophisticated visual styles that appeal to dual audiences—children and adults alike (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). Silent picture books, such as Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006), challenge traditional storytelling by relying entirely on visual literacy to explore deep themes like immigration and belonging. Advances in printing technology and the global reach of the medium have expanded the diversity of picture books, enabling them to address relevant issues such as environmental awareness, cultural identity, and social justice. As Bishop (1990) notes, picture books serve as *'windows and mirrors'* for their readers, reflecting their experiences while offering glimpses into unfamiliar worlds. This thematic and artistic diversity enriches young minds, fostering empathy, aesthetic appreciation, and an understanding of the broader world (Kiefer, 1991; Heinsbergen, 2013).

2.3. Picture books & culture

UNESCO defines Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as *‘practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognize as part of their cultural heritage, continuously recreated in response to their environment and history’* (UNESCO, 2011). Oral traditions, rituals, and traditional crafts are examples of this, many of which are at risk of disappearing due to factors such as globalization, environmental changes, and a decline of interest among younger generations. This is highlighted by UNESCO’s 2009 report on ICH in need of safeguarding. One case of which are the Mijikenda people in Kenya, who express their cultural identity through oral traditions and performing arts related to the sacred forests. It is reported that - *‘exposure to western lifestyles through formal education, travel and migration’* - have let younger community members consider the traditions of the Kayas as irrelevant and thus the community suffered a decline in practitioners (UNESCO, 2009).

To address these challenges, UNESCO outlines strategies for safeguarding ICH, such as:

Community Participation: Engaging local communities in revitalizing their traditions.

Educational Programs: Raising awareness among younger generations through formal education.

Documentation and Research: Recording cultural practices to preserve them for future generations.

Cultural Promotion and Tourism: Showcasing traditions to wider audiences.

Institutional Support: Providing resources to sustain preservation efforts.

Christophe Meunier describes picture books as *‘not only historical and cultural artifacts but also spaces where new forms of cultural engagement emerge, allowing authors and illustrators to reflect their society and re-imagine traditions’* (Meunier, 2013, p. 3). This description hints that picture books can be used as tools to document, research and progress culture, both narratively and visually.

Giving them an interesting role in their relation to preserving and transmitting values and traditions. When applied to the sphere of culture, picture books have the capacity to inform, educate and socialize young readers about their surroundings, while also acting as building blocks in the formation of cultural identity. This is evident in the book *The Proudest Blue* by Ibtihaj Muhammad and S.K. Ali, which includes themes of cultural expression and acceptance even when faced with confusion and adversity. The hijab's symbolic meaning is nuanced in the context of the story. It is not only an identifier of religious or cultural beliefs but is also a tool for self-expression and empowerment in the modern day setting.

Picture books can act as tools for cultural promotion. They provide cultural traditions and customs a new space in which to be explored. Attributes such as an accessible and practical format and use of visual storytelling aid picture book in communicating with diverse audiences. Uniquely, picture books, unlike textbooks or science books, have artistic freedom. Their limited text and dependence on visual storytelling gives them universal appeal, language is not a barrier in understanding them. In turn, relaying on illustrations gives space for visual examination and interpretation, which creates a dialogue between the reader and picture book. *Clatter Bash! A Day of the Dead Celebration* by Richard Keep is a picture book with onomatopoeias, even so this does not hinder the depiction of *Dia de Los Muertos* but the opposite, it extends its reach. This book even read by a person of a different language or even cultural background would still be understood. This versatility of picture books could prove beneficial in promoting and showcasing certain practices even in settings where a tradition might not be practiced.

Picture books offer opportunities for collaboration and intercommunity dialogue. The process of creating a picture book in itself could be a community project, that invites collaboration between writers, illustrators and designers. Doing this would enable artist to express their unique cultural experiences, engage and offer resources to younger generations, as well as promote their work in the community. Strengthening community bonds and values could also be achieved from exploring cultural and visual narratives of a tradition. Having stories that represent the everyday experiences, objects and habits of a particular community can foster a sense of belonging and a collective spirit. *We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga* by Traci Sorell exemplifies this by exploring Cherokee people's traditional values of gratitude in a contemporary setting. The story focuses on the community members as pillars of a traditional practices and values. Underscoring the importance of a collective mentality in maintaining cultural identity.

Through these examples, this paper considers that most of the preservation strategies can be implied with the use of picture books. Through examining the connection between picture books and intangible cultural heritage, this study gains insight into how culture can be effectively preserved and communicated to contemporary audiences. Even though picture books can be valuable resources in helping realize all strategies, it should be noted that their key strengths lie in their ability to document and explore tradition and, to an extent, promote community engagement. All other strategies can potentially be influenced but on a secondary level.

Preserving culture through picture books

Picture books can be used to represent traditional practice and depict cultural symbols through their use of visual storytelling. Nikolajeva and Scott emphasize the importance of illustrations as a primary means of storytelling in picture books, enabling children to ‘*see their traditions come alive on the pages of a book*’ (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006, p. 25). Seeing tradition help children understand the complex system of values, habits, relationships and preparation that is present in a cultural tradition, even if foreign to them. Having visual representations of folk traditions – holidays, customs or rituals, help children go beyond abstraction and instead, give insight through the use of tangible examples. *The Day of the Dead* by Tony Johnston focuses on family and community dynamics in the celebration of *Dia de los Muertos*. The book outlines the important steps and roles in preparing for the celebration, such as the mother making empanadas, the uncles picking fruit and aunts grinding dried chili peppers. The illustrations and colours add cultural depth by introducing symbols, patterns, clothing and objects that are specific for Mexican culture. This visual storytelling educates children about folk traditions but also fosters an emotional connection, making these practices vivid and memorable. By documenting and celebrating such traditions, picture books act as vital tools for preserving and sharing intangible cultural heritage with future generations.

Picture books can serve as visual translators by adapting oral traditions, through this ability they aid in intergenerational sharing. Yanjun Wang and Yajie Jiang explain, picture books ‘*ensure that traditional knowledge is not only documented but also becomes part of the lived experience of younger generations*’ (Wang & Jiang, 2013, p. 58). Oral and intangible traditions

usually face more difficulty in being transmitted especially to younger generation, however, picture books are able to fill that gap. By incorporating illustration, text and design a multisensory experience can be created which allows opportunity in depicting the oral and intangible. Shanshan Zhao et al. highlight these qualities in relation to preserving traditions like calligraphy, puppetry, and folk music. Reporting that 95% of readers gained knowledge and respect for these practices, demonstrating picture books as effective in fostering cultural understanding (Zhao et al., 2024). This is particularly important for communities like the Mijikenda people in Kenya, who face challenges in transmitting their traditions to younger generations. By making the intangible – tangible, picture books ease this process by being helpful resources for elders, parents and educators to explain and pass down tradition. This both promotes cross-generational and cross-cultural dialogue.

One prominent feature of picture books is their ability at simplifying complex topics for young audiences. As Nikolajeva and Scott (2006) emphasize, illustrations in picture books are not merely decorative but serve as primary vehicles for storytelling, allowing children to grasp ideas that might otherwise be abstract or challenging (Nikolajeva, p. 25). For example, *Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story* by Kevin Noble Maillard uses a poetic narrative paired with detailed illustrations to explore the cultural, historical, and emotional significance of fry bread in Native American communities. The book is able to simplify the complexities of identity, history, and resilience into digestible, relatable themes for children, making it an engaging educational tool. It subtly highlights the connection between tradition, food, community and affirms the role of the individual in this cultural cycle – ‘*You are fry bread*’ (K.N.Maillard). According to *The Classroom Bookshelf*, *Fry Bread* ‘*serves as a love letter to Indigenous nations and communities, emphasizing the dynamic and adaptive nature of Native culture*’ and offering young readers a lens into the significance of community and shared traditions.

Picture books are easily transportable and practical objects that can be enjoyed across various settings, including homes, schools, and libraries. They are globally embraced as being effective and beneficial for children’s development. Studies have shown that early exposure to picture books significantly enhances literacy and cognitive development, making them an invaluable tool for parents and educators. For example, research from the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) found that shared reading experiences with picture books contribute to language acquisition and later academic success. These qualities of picture books create great reachability, marketability, and space for cultural traditions to be explored.

Even though children’s book publishing is a competitive and saturated market, the current climate of cultural acceptance and awareness has raised the significance of multicultural literature. Awards such as the *Pura Belpré Award*, *Coretta Scott King Book Award*, and *Asian/Pacific American*

Award for Literature highlight the growing demand for culturally rich narratives that celebrate diverse traditions and experiences. Books like *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña and *We Are Water Protectors* by Carole Lindstrom exemplify how picture books can serve as bridges to connect children with their own heritage and foster cross-cultural understanding. This growing niche of multicultural literature is especially significant in diverse societies like the USA, where picture books offer a valuable platform for exploring, preserving, and sharing cultural traditions within and beyond diaspora communities.

Through creatively documenting heritage, picture books like *We Are Water Protectors* serve as powerful tools to unite communities and raise awareness about pressing issues that threaten cultural values, traditions, and livelihoods. Inspired by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline, the book draws from Indigenous traditions, highlighting the Ojibwe prophecy of a 'black snake' as a symbol of environmental destruction (Lindstrom, 2020). By weaving cultural narratives into a universal message of environmental stewardship, the story connects communities to shared challenges and collective action.

Carole Lindstrom, author and member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe, explains, '*Women are the keepers of the water in Indigenous culture, and I wanted to show the strength and importance of this role*' (Lindstrom, 2020). Michaela Goade's illustrations amplify this message, blending Indigenous symbols and natural imagery to reflect the interconnectedness of people and the environment. The book's visual storytelling not only documents cultural heritage but also inspires unity by celebrating shared values and fostering empathy across diverse audiences (Kirkus Reviews, 2020).

By addressing environmental threats through an Indigenous lens, *We Are Water Protectors* unites readers around a critical issue while honoring the traditions and beliefs of its creators. The book's success, including its 2021 Caldecott Medal, underscores its role in amplifying underrepresented voices and bringing communities together to safeguard both cultural and environmental heritage (Carlson, 2021).

Cultural picture books aid in cultural transmission, educational development and strengthening cultural identity (Prisca Martens et al., 2015). They benefit children by helping them connect to their heritage, giving them a sense of identity and belonging. For children from minority cultures, these books validate their experiences and affirm their place in a multicultural world (Sharp & Johnson, 2016). They are tools for parents and educators to help teach and visualize a child's own heritage and the traditions of others. This fosters both cultural literacy and cross-cultural empathy (Bishop, 1990). They are also valuable to communities, the continued visibility of their cultural practices helps sustain tradition in the face of modernity. Local artists and writers also gain opportunities to contribute to cultural preservation through their creative works.

Picture books as an extension of culture

Picture books are not limited to preserving cultural traditions; they also expand, reinterpret, and add new meanings to them. Through their dynamic combination of text, illustrations, and innovative formats, picture books adapt cultural practices to contemporary contexts, ensuring their relevance and accessibility for younger generations and the community they portray- *'Books reflect the culture of the author who holds the pen, providing a social lens for the decade in which they were written.'* (Belcher, 2018, p. 31). This statement hints that picture books hold subjectivity which might skew the perception of culture, however this nuance could prove beneficial in ensuring the continuity, reach and engagement of a particular cultural practice. Thus experimentation with cultural narratives be it written or visual can act as valuable safeguarding tool.

Picture books contribute to the dissemination of cultural heritage, helping stimulate community practice and creating both economic and creative opportunities. This medium helps validate heritage in the face of a fast-developing consumer market, allowing communities to gain action in the preservation and promotion of their cultural legacy (Shanshan Zhao et al., 2024). By presenting cultural narratives in innovative ways, picture books help traditions evolve, fostering both connection to the past and resonance with the present. Depicting tradition in a visual format creates room for creative expression, interpretation and subjectivity, in turn local authors and illustrators are free to engage their own experiences with that of their cultural surrounding.

Picture books prolong cultural relevance and contemporize traditions. When confined to static forms, cultural tradition, especially those who are intangible, risk fading away in the face of globalization and modernization. Picture books can serve as bridges, reintroducing cultural values and practices to younger audiences in a relatable and engaging way. *Festival of Colours* by Kabir Sehgal and Surishtha Sehgal does so by exploring the Indian festival of Holi, a celebration of colours and the arrival of spring. The language and narrative are simple to follow and coupled with a vibrant illustration style makes this story of tradition, celebration and community easy to comprehend by younger audiences, while still adding insight and maintaining the core values of the tradition itself. In order to survive, a culture must be progressive, if not it risks being left as a memory of the past.

Thus experimentation and reinterpretation are vital in relating a tradition to the contemporary. Picture books reinterpret cultural practices to align with modern values and challenges, such as inclusivity, diversity, and environmentalism. This evolution ensures that cultural narratives remain relevant in addressing current societal needs. *We Are Water Protectors* by Carole Lindstrom ties Indigenous values of environmental stewardship to modern climate activism, showing how ancient beliefs can inspire solutions for today's global issues.

Picture books expand cultural traditions by giving them a new platform in which to develop both visually and narratively. Through illustrations and design cultural symbols recontextualize and innovate format styles re-engage reader interest. By blending traditional motifs with modern art styles, illustrators create visual narratives that resonate with contemporary readers. *Diwali* by Hannah Eliot is an example of this, the book centers on the tradition of Diwali, the illustrations feature a wide range of symbols, patterns and items that are essential to the celebration. The illustrator Archana Sreenivasan, uses a bold and contemporary style, with clean lines and bright colours, simplifying traditional motifs and giving them modern appeal. With the development of modern technology, picture books can use interactive and experimental formats, such as die-cuts, pop-ups, and accordion books. These approaches can benefit and make traditions more engaging and accessible to modern audiences.

Through storytelling, a picture book has the ability to blend traditional and contemporary narratives and reinvent folklore for modern audiences. Merging traditional stories with modern perspectives, ensures that the core values of a culture are not lost while addressing new contexts. *Lon Po Po: A Red-Riding* by Ed Young, a Caldecott medal winner in the year 1990, is an interesting example of this blend. According to Christiansen (2013), the book masterfully blends traditional Chinese folklore with captivating illustrations, making it an excellent example of cultural adaptation in children's literature. Through its storytelling and illustrations, the book merges the traditional folktale with a modern narrative and artistic approach, adding more depth and complexity to the original (Grace's Reading Corner, 2018). The retelling of the story incorporates themes of bravery, resourcefulness and independence, giving the story a contemporary appeal and making characters relatable. This reimagining adds and pushes the traditional narrative while also giving it a new cultural perspective.

The quantity and experimentation of picture books centered around specific traditional practices create a diverse visual and narrative

library of knowledge and symbols that build on one another. This approach offers a variety of perspectives to view a tradition and its elements, giving both writers and illustrators an opportunity for creative interpretation, while offering audiences a layered and enriched experience. For example, picture books like *Lon Po Po* by Ed Young reinterpret traditional folktales through innovative art styles and modern narrative techniques, merging old and new (Grace's Reading Corner, 2018). This underscores the idea that culture should not only be preserved and appreciated but also challenged and explored. By doing so, picture books create a dialogue between old beliefs and new societal trends, as seen in works like *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales, which combines immigrant experiences with cultural motifs to reflect modern realities (Morales, 2018). Quantity also holds importance over reachability and relatability, The day of the dead, This way of looking at culture offers a chance for new generations to interact with, reinterpret, and leave their mark on traditions, ensuring their continued evolution and relevance (Sharp & Johnson, 2016).

Picture books are creative tools for expanding and making certain cultural practices accessible. Their uniqueness stems from their ability to visually communicate, adopt interactive and relatable formats and experiment with culture. Illustrations allow for immediate emotional and intellectual engagement. Representing cultural practices in ways that are accessible to children, even before they can read text. By adapting traditional narratives into formats that children find engaging, picture books create a bridge between historical practices and modern interests. They allow traditions to evolve without losing their essence. Through creative storytelling and visual reimagining, picture books ensure that cultural values adapt to contemporary realities. By blending traditional and contemporary elements, picture books keep cultural practices alive, ensuring their relevance for future generations and fostering a deeper connection to heritage in an evolving world.

3. Case studies ✨ ✨ ✨

3.1. Bulgarian Mythology: Review & visualization of mythical creatures

Stefani Nedelcheva, professionally known as Podtochka, is a Bulgarian graphic designer specializing in visual communication and editorial illustration. Her diploma project, *Bulgarian Mythology*, is a bilingual booklet that creatively compiles stories of Bulgarian mythological creatures, reimagined through contemporary design and illustration. Published in 2024, the book continues to gain recognition as a modern exploration of Bulgarian folklore.

Reflecting on her project, Nedelcheva explains:

‘Bulgarian mythology plays a crucial part in the forming of our cultural heritage. What mostly drove me towards that theme was personal interest, challenging myself, and seeing to what extent I could recreate those mythical creatures, each with specific characteristics in appearance and symbolism.’

The booklet features eight chapters, each dedicated to a mythological creature. Every chapter includes a digital illustration, an explanation of the creature’s meaning, and a short accompanying story. Nedelcheva employs a geometrical, shape-driven art style inspired by traditional Bulgarian patterns like the Shevitsa, visually linking her work to Bulgaria’s rich artistic heritage. The stylistic choices balance tradition with modernity, appealing to both local and international audiences.

The book’s bilingual format (Bulgarian and English) reinforces its role as a cultural bridge, fostering cross-cultural transmission and supporting cultural tourism. By incorporating dual languages, the booklet serves as an educational resource for Bulgarian readers and an introduction to Bulgarian folklore for global audiences. The use of a clean slab serif font further enhances its modern aesthetic, ensuring readability across diverse age groups.

The physical design of the book reflects its accessibility. Its compact 140×280 mm format makes it portable and practical, encouraging

sharing across various settings, from classrooms to cultural exhibitions. Through thoughtful design, the booklet not only documents folklore but also transforms it into an interactive and visually engaging experience.

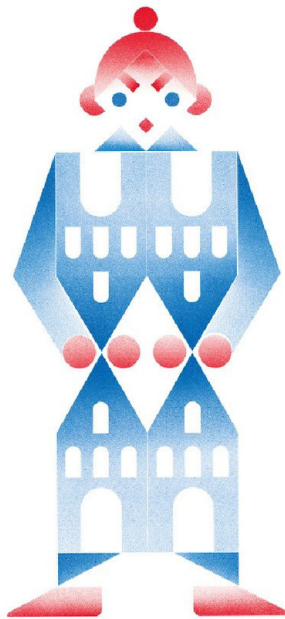
Bulgarian Mythology exemplifies how graphic design can contemporize cultural heritage while preserving its authenticity. By blending digital illustration with a deep respect for folklore, Nedelcheva has created a work that resonates with younger generations and showcases the potential of graphic design in cultural preservation. Her project illustrates the power of reimagining traditions through a modern lens, making them relevant, relatable, and enduring.

Figure 44-46. Visualizations of mythical creatures from Bulgarian folklore (Source: Nedelcheva, n.d., *Podtochka Bulgarian Mythology*)



Съдържание
Contents

Едновременно
помага и вреди
на хората.
She both helps
and harms people
at the same time.



20

Българска митология

Лесник
Lesnik
6-9
Кравесмърт
Kravesmürt
10-13
Караконджул
Karakondzhul
14-17
Кукимора
Kikimora
18-21
Змей
Zmey
22-25
Самодива
Samodiva
26-29
Ламя
Lamyа
30-33
Дявол
Duavol
34-37

Българска
митология

Преглед и визуализация
на митични същества
Дипломна работа
Стефани Неделчева

Bulgarian
Mythology
Review and Visualization
of Mythical Creatures
Diploma Work
Stefani Nedelcheva

2024

3.2. Romanian Winter Traditions

Madalina Adronic, a Romanian illustrator based in Italy, blends contemporary illustration techniques with traditional Romanian patterns, foods, and cultural practices. Her work celebrates her heritage, reinterpreting it in a way that resonates with modern audiences. Her collection *Romanian Winter Traditions* visually documents five common Romanian customs: *Cu Capra* (The Goat Dance), *Cu Colida* (The Carolers), *Cu Sorcova*, *Cu Steaua* (The Star), and *Cu Ursul* (The Bear Dance). Notably, some of these traditions share similarities with Bulgaria's Kukeri and Survakari, particularly *Cu Ursul*, which closely parallels the Bulgarian *Bear and Bear Handler* (*Мечка и Мечкар*)

Adronic's illustrations emphasize character design, proportion, and colour to convey cultural depth. Her characters feature small heads and exaggerated, chunky bodies, focusing attention on their traditional clothing and patterns. Vibrant, saturated colours—reds, yellows, purples, and browns—contrast with subdued blue and white backgrounds, making the traditional designs and objects the centerpiece of each illustration. These visual choices highlight the intricate details of Romanian customs, ensuring their prominence and cultural significance.

The collection has been adapted into accessible products like postcards, posters, puzzles, and lock screens, broadening its appeal and reach. By integrating traditional imagery into versatile objects, Adronic not only promotes Romanian heritage but also makes it relevant for contemporary audiences. This approach exemplifies how graphic design can balance cultural preservation with modern aesthetics, ensuring traditions remain vibrant and relatable.

Through *Romanian Winter Traditions*, Madalina Adronic demonstrates the power of visual storytelling to simplify and reimagine cultural traditions while preserving their essence. Her work bridges the gap between tradition and modernity, fostering cultural pride and promoting awareness across diverse audiences.

Figure 47-49. The Bear Dance , Carolers & Goat Dance (Source: Andronic, n.d., Madi Andronic Romanian Winter Traditions)



3.3. The Day of The Dead

The Day of the Dead by Tony Johnston is a celebrated picture book that explores the tradition of *Día de los Muertos* through vivid storytelling and illustrations. Recognized by institutions such as the American Library Association (ALA) and School Library Journal (SLJ), the book has become a valued tool for cultural education, also featured in Reading Rockets' *'Celebrating the Day of the Dead'* section.

The narrative focuses on a Mexican family's preparation for *Día de los Muertos*, introducing young readers to symbols, foods, and habits central to the celebration. Beginning with the family's intimate routines and transitioning to community practices, the book provides a holistic view of the tradition, balancing personal and collective experiences. This storytelling approach invites curiosity while fostering emotional engagement with the holiday.

The book's design reinforces its cultural message. Each page features a border that highlights significant objects or symbols, such as empanadas, effectively combining visual storytelling with textual details. The vibrant illustrations capture the essence of Mexican traditions, while the consistent composition ensures clarity and accessibility.

Written in English with Spanish words and phrases integrated throughout, *The Day of the Dead* serves as both an educational tool and an authentic cultural experience. This bilingual approach enhances its accessibility and positions the book as a valuable resource for multicultural education.

By blending narrative, design, and language, *The Day of the Dead* exemplifies how picture books can preserve and transmit cultural traditions while fostering understanding and appreciation across diverse audiences. It demonstrates the power of visual storytelling in making cultural practices tangible and engaging for younger generations.

Figure 51: *Preparing to Celebrate Día de los Muertos.* Johnston, T. (1997). *Day of the Dead.* Clarion Books.



Figure 50: *Day of the Dead Book Cover.* Johnston, T. (1997). *Day of the Dead.* Clarion Books.

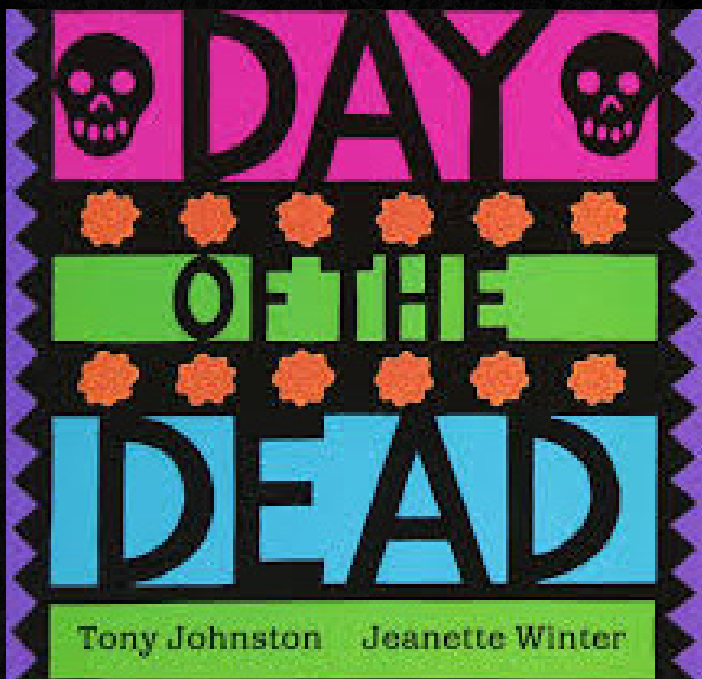
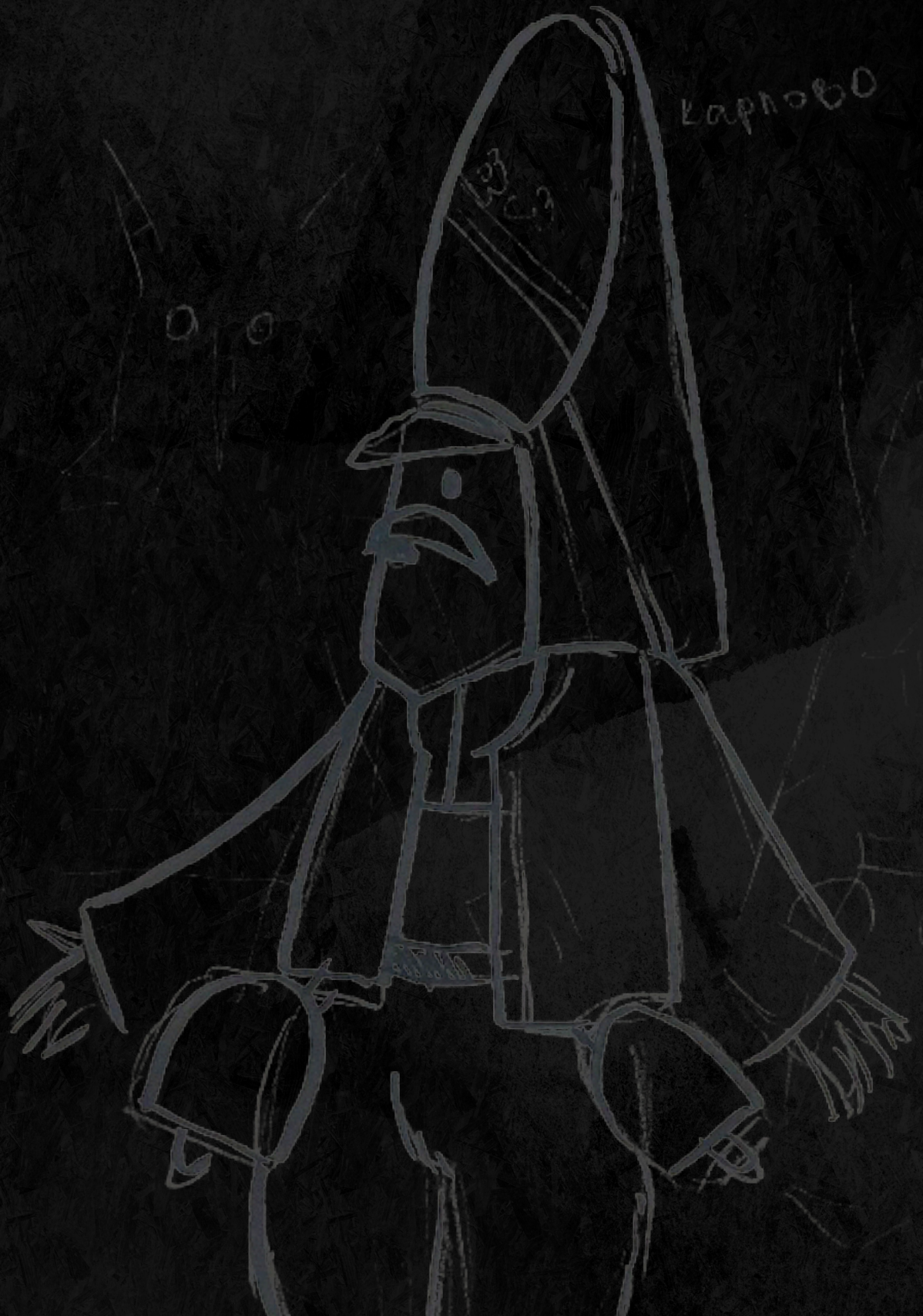
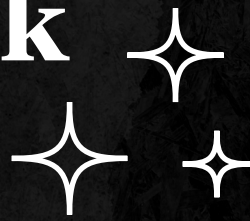


Figure 52: *And They Dance.* Johnston, T. (1997). *Day of the Dead.* Clarion Books.

4. Practical Framework



4.1. Introduction

The practical framework focuses on the decision-making process and practical work involved in creating a picture book for the Kukeri & Survakari tradition. Despite the tradition's significance, it remains largely absent from the picture book sector, limiting children's exposure—particularly those living abroad or in urban areas.

This book aims to accurately depict the rituals and the strong communal aspect of the tradition, which is a neglected angle in current titles. The existing children's books on Kukeri & Survakari are limited to coloring books and informational titles, such as Stanka Zheleva and Dimitar Vasilev's *Kukeri & Survakari: Symbols, Customs, and Heritage for Generations*. While this title is invaluable in documenting visual details, customs, and regional variations for younger audiences, it is not a picture book. Thus the tradition of Kukeri & Survakari has yet to be explored through illustrated narratives. The closest example to the format of a picture book remains Studio Zmei's *Enchantments: Legend of the First Kuker* (Чародейства: Легенда за първия кукер), a picture book adaptation of their animated pilot episode for *Zlatna Yabulka* (The Golden Apple). It utilizes animated frames and places them in the format of a picture book, similar to Disney's approach to adapting their animated movies into books. However, it must be recognized that this title is a reformatted animation and is not a stand-alone picture book.

To the best of this study's knowledge, no stand-alone picture book has been created with a sole focus on the Kukeri & Survakari tradition, its community practices, and its core values. This project seeks to address that gap through introducing a wordless picture book that visually guides children through the steps of the tradition while introducing key figures seen in the rituals and festivals. The wordless format allows for a universal storytelling experience, making the tradition accessible to both Bulgarian and international audiences. By relying solely on visual narrative, the book encourages children to engage with the imagery, interpret the story in their own way, and develop a deeper connection with the cultural heritage it represents.

4. 2. Concept and themes

The project seeks to authentically portray the core values of the Kukeri & Survakari tradition: the transition of the seasons and the importance of human resilience and connection in the face of adversity. Through the exploration of costumes, ritual practice, and inter-communal relationships, the project hopes to create a meaningful and engaging way for children and families to connect with this tradition. The story will follow characters as they go through the stages of the ritual, showcasing the magical transformation they undergo while warding off evil and marking the transition from winter to spring. The book will emphasize how the characters' participation in the ritual helps restore balance and harmony, both for the community and the natural world.

The book will explore three key aspects of the tradition – community, costumes and masks, and ritual practice. Costumes and masks are central to the Kukeri & Survakari, through them practitioners become a Kuker or a Survakar. They act as a form of magical equipment that disguises and metaphorically transports the practitioner in the spirit realm, giving him the means to scare and ward off evil. The mask is the focal point of the costume, it embodies the ability to transform and connect the practitioner to the natural world, to the scary and primitive. With the current regional diversity of masks and costumes, focusing on a costume design from a specific region would act as a limitation in introducing the tradition in its full visual potential. Thus, mixing the rituals with the diversity of costumes found in festivals is beneficial in informing readers on these versatilities.

Community is a vital part of the tradition. This is exemplified in the quantity of participants that can be found in Kukeri & Survakari groups. Within the groups, Kukeri & Survakari are central figures, however their magic abilities are always supported by human figures. For example, Kukeri & Survakari groups all have human leads which serve to guide them, helping to direct their magical powers. Other roles that can be found are: the Priest, Doctor, Bear and Bear Handler, Bride and Groom. These characters are representations of common village professions and archetypes and all give insight into the significance each individual has in context of the group. Numbers play a role in enforcing the magical elements of the tradition. By having more people the natural order would be easier to disturb and prompt change, in this case change of seasons. This is connected to the pagan roots of the tradition, where humans are believed to have the ability

to provoke through specific actions. Outside of magical symbolism and purpose, community participation is essential in the preparation of the tradition and celebration of it on a practical level. It is obvious that the bases of the tradition comes from superstitious believes but the social aspect and connection it offers is an important factor for its endurance in the face of time.

Ritual practice is the culmination of the Kukeri & Survakari tradition, it is where all efforts and tools are finally utilized. It is the moment where the practitioners start a bonfire and proceed to dance around it. The bonfire in Bulgarian culture is a symbol of warmth, strength and energy, by lighting it the practitioners call on nature. During the rituals only the bells from the Keri & Survakari can be heard with a supporting drum which adds to the magic of the tradition, making them integral symbols to be included in a picture book. The ritual ends with every village or town member joining in on the fun and participating, with this the cycle meets its completion. The rituals are where artistry, community and belief combine together to reestablish order, they are fundamental in showcasing why the tradition is, it's meaning and value. Mostly in contemporary representation the masks are always highlighted as the main attraction of the Kukeri & Survakari, the ritual practices often go unmentioned even though they hold an integral part.

4. 3. Target audience & relevance

This picture book is designed for children: ages 4–7. It caters to families, and educators as a visually engaging introduction to the traditions of Kukeri & Survakari. By using a wordless format, the book becomes accessible across languages, allowing readers from different cultural backgrounds to experience the story without language barriers. The absence of text also encourages deeper engagement through visual storytelling, prompting parents and children to interpret and discuss the scenes together, fostering cultural dialogue.

The book aims to authentically depict the Kukeri & Survakari traditions, including their costumes, rituals, and symbolic meanings. While staying true to historical and folkloric elements, the story and characters serve as bridges between the past and present, showing how these traditions continue to be relevant in contemporary life.

By making the tradition visually compelling and easily accessible, the book helps preserve Kukeri & Survakari by ensuring that younger generations can engage with them in a format suited to their learning and imagination. At the same time, it contributes to the modernization of these traditions by adapting them into a contemporary artistic medium, allowing them to be experienced in a new and innovative way. Through this addition to the representation of Bulgarian culture in picture books, this project hopes to inspire other creatives to contribute to Kukeri & Survakari's representation in this field.

4. 4. Wordless narrative

The decision to do a wordless narrative has to do with the tradition itself, accessibility factor and cultural dialogue. The most important reason for choosing this format lies in the way the tradition is practiced and the information available on it. Being present at both Surva 2024, Surva 2025 and village rituals in the district of Pernik this research notes of the environment, sounds and overall feeling of the tradition. It is mysterious and unexplained, despite the crowds of people the only prominent sounds are those from drums and the Kukeri & Survakari's bells. There is no explanation or narration as to what is taking place or why it is special, however the audible and visual experience offers insight into it. The picture books aims to convey these feelings of mystery and magic similar to the actual experience of being there. The wordless format offers the reader an opportunity for interpretation and wonder which are both fundamental in the tradition itself and hint at its curious and ancient roots.

A silent format benefits the book in a practical way as well adding to a universal quality that does not depend on language. This would make it accessible to both Bulgarian and foreign audiences. Due to the high emigration rates Bulgaria is facing and the many families living outside of the country, these book would provide information to children and parents who could not read or understand the Bulgarian language.

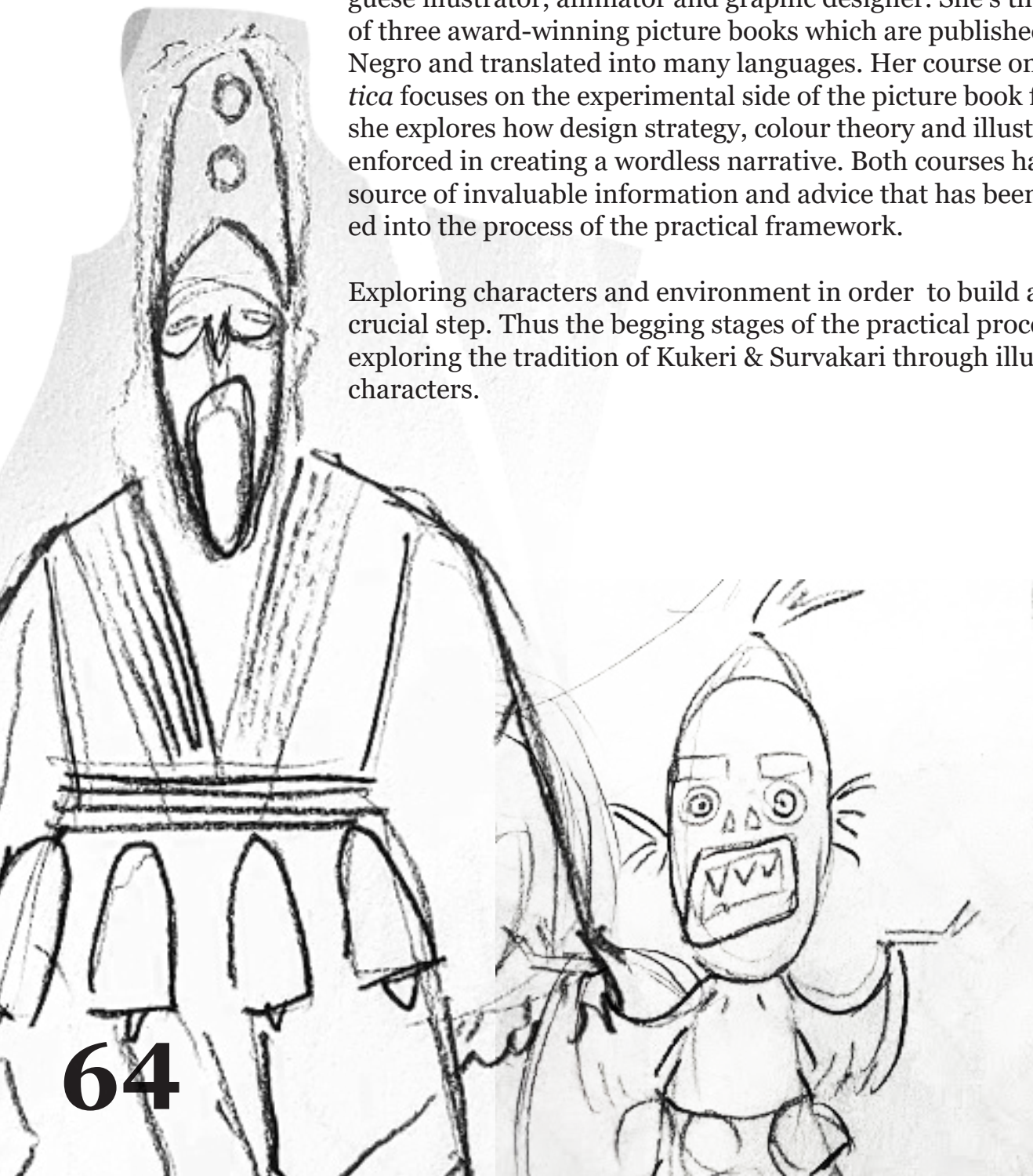
The silent picture book offers the benefit of interpretation, creating a dialogue with its readers. This gives each reader a unique take and experience when going through the visual narrative. It has the potential to bring forth conversation and dialogue about the Kukeri & Survakari tradition within a family or even classrooms.

4. 5. Visual exploration of the Kukeri & Survakari

This section is dedicated to the initial exploration process. This includes sketches and process work.

For understanding the practical side of picture books, visual storytelling and narrative Online courses were utilized - *Picture book Creation* by Flavia Z Drago and *Experimental Techniques for Picture books* by Catarina Sobral. Flavia Z Drago is a Mexican picture book illustrator and creator of *Gustavo The Shy Ghost*. Her course focuses on picture book narrative and character development, giving a hint into story structure and visual execution. Catarina Sobral is a Portuguese illustrator, animator and graphic designer. She's the creator of three award-winning picture books which are published by Orfeu Negro and translated into many languages. Her course on *Domestic* focuses on the experimental side of the picture book format, she explores how design strategy, colour theory and illustration are enforced in creating a wordless narrative. Both courses have been a source of invaluable information and advice that has been incorporated into the process of the practical framework.

Exploring characters and environment in order to build a story is a crucial step. Thus the begging stages of the practical process focus on exploring the tradition of Kukeri & Survakari through illustration and characters.



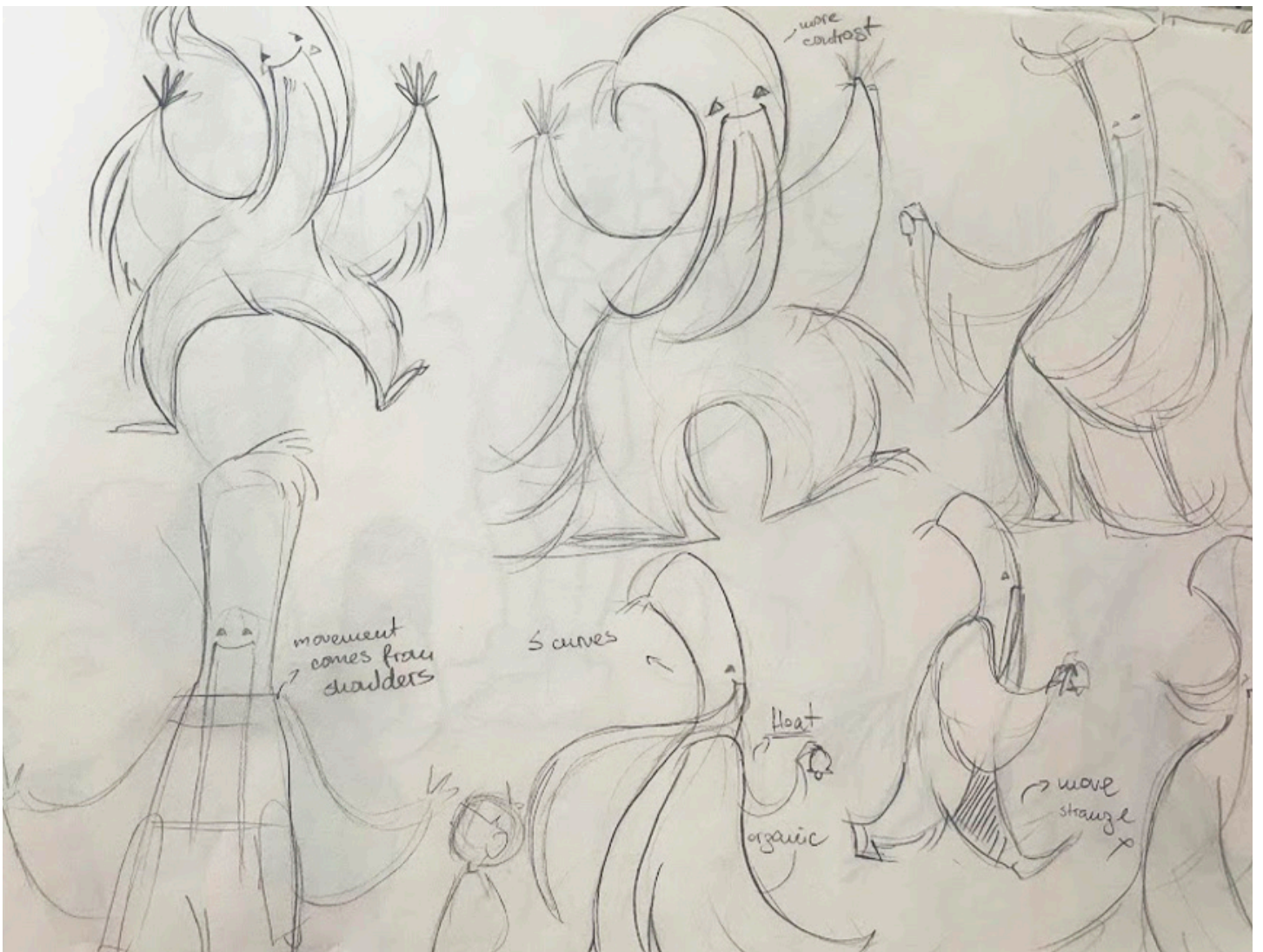


Figure 53-55: Kukeri Character Design – A series of sketches exploring the design and features of various Kukeri characters, focusing on mask details, costume elements, and symbolic representations.

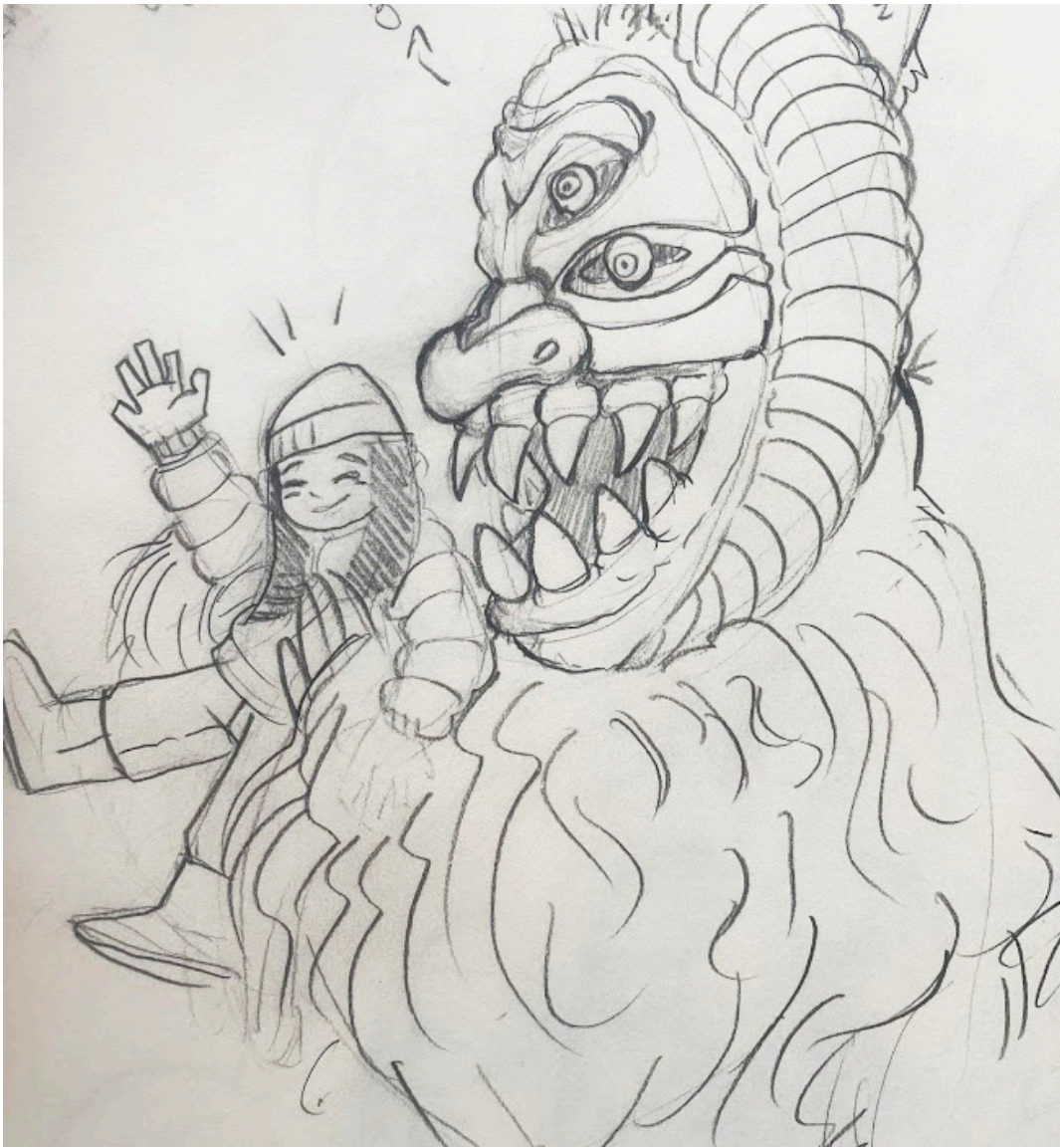


Figure 56: Sketch of Kuker Holding Child Taken from Reference Photo. Photo by author, 2024.



Figure 57: Sketch of Kukeri. Photo & artwork by author, 2024.



Figure 58-60: Character Design and Sketches of Boy Who Wants to Be a Kuker. Drawn by author, 2024.

4. 6. Structure & storyboard

The picture book of Kukeri & Survakari is named 'Surva' an homage to the most famous festival 'Surva', as well as the term used in some villages to describe the rituals of the Survakari. Surva is a 24 page book, containing 10 full spread illustrations. The picture book is wordless and relies solely on visual narration. The story is set in winter and follows the Kuker/Survakar group in their rituals to scare off evil spirits. The format of the book is horizontal as a means to describe their journey from winter to spring.



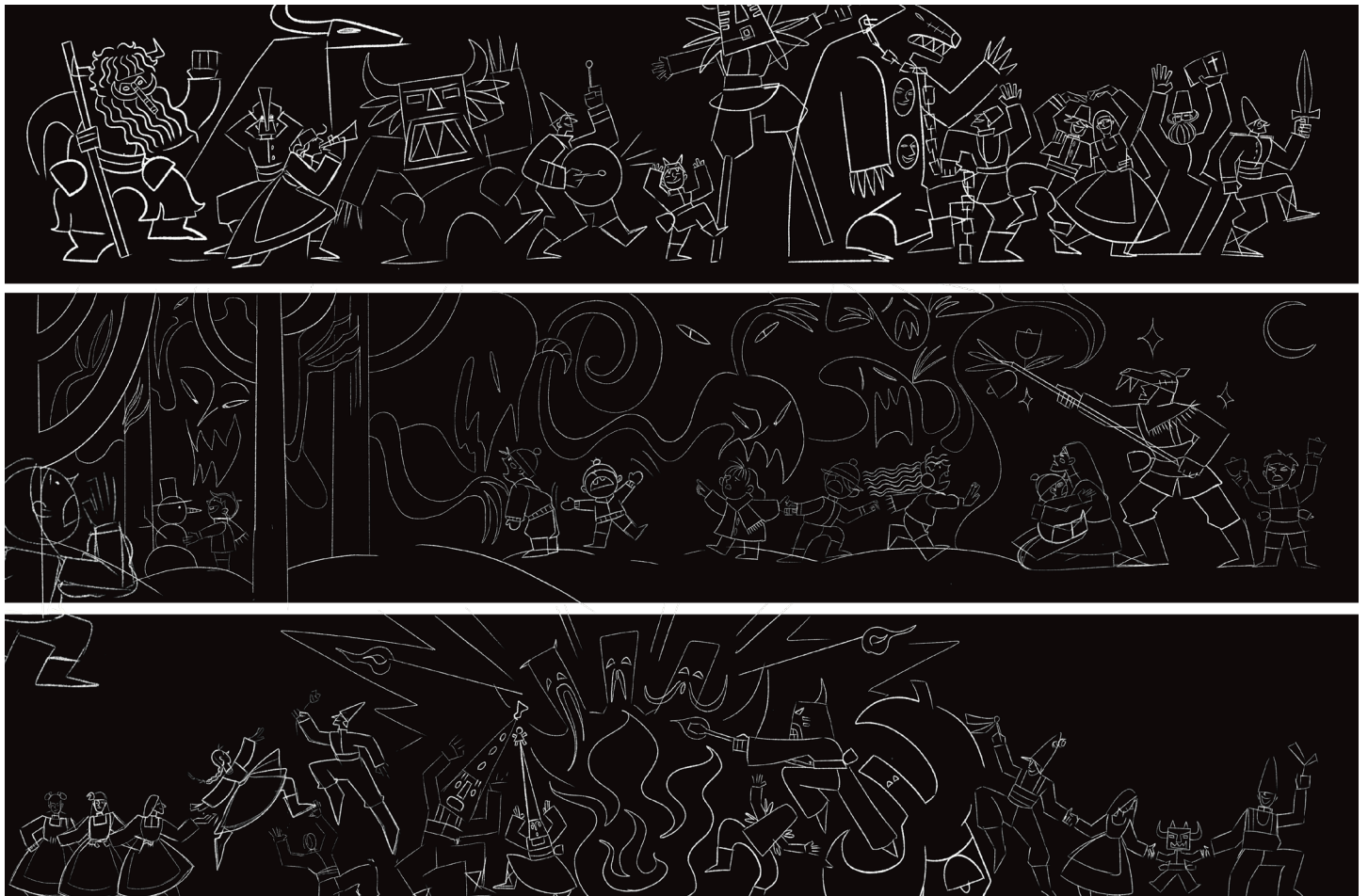
Figure 61: Thumbnail Drawing of a Kuker Character. Drawn by author,

Visual storytelling & narrative flow

Surva follows a linear, step-by-step walk-through of the Kukeri & Survakari tradition, using a repeated composition across spreads. The horizontal format reinforces the journey-like progression of the ritual, leading readers from the darkness of winter to the renewal of spring. Each spread maintains a consistent background, ensuring that the focus remains on the characters and their actions. The compositions are designed to create a natural page-turn effect, with characters moving toward the next scene, guiding the reader forward.

Direction is an important component for the narrative. Flipping through the book indicates forward direction and progression, presenting time in a linear manner. This allows for clarity in character dynamics and motivations.

Figure 62-64: Character Lineup and Dynamics. Drawn by author, 2025.



Pages Story



**Pages 1–2
Introduction** A boy builds a snowman on a dark winter night, unaware of the looming evil spirit above him.

**Pages 3-4
Conflict** The snowman is destroyed by the spirit, and the surrounding children panic, running toward the next scene.

**Pages 5-6
Gathering** The child reaches his mother, and suddenly, a Kuker appears. The evil spirit hesitates, sensing something different.

**Pages 7-8
Blessing of homes** The spirits grow curious while Kukeri enter a house, where a family greets them with treats.

**Pages 9-10
Journey** A small boy in costume bravely scares away an evil spirit, while the older Survakar & Djumal continue forward.

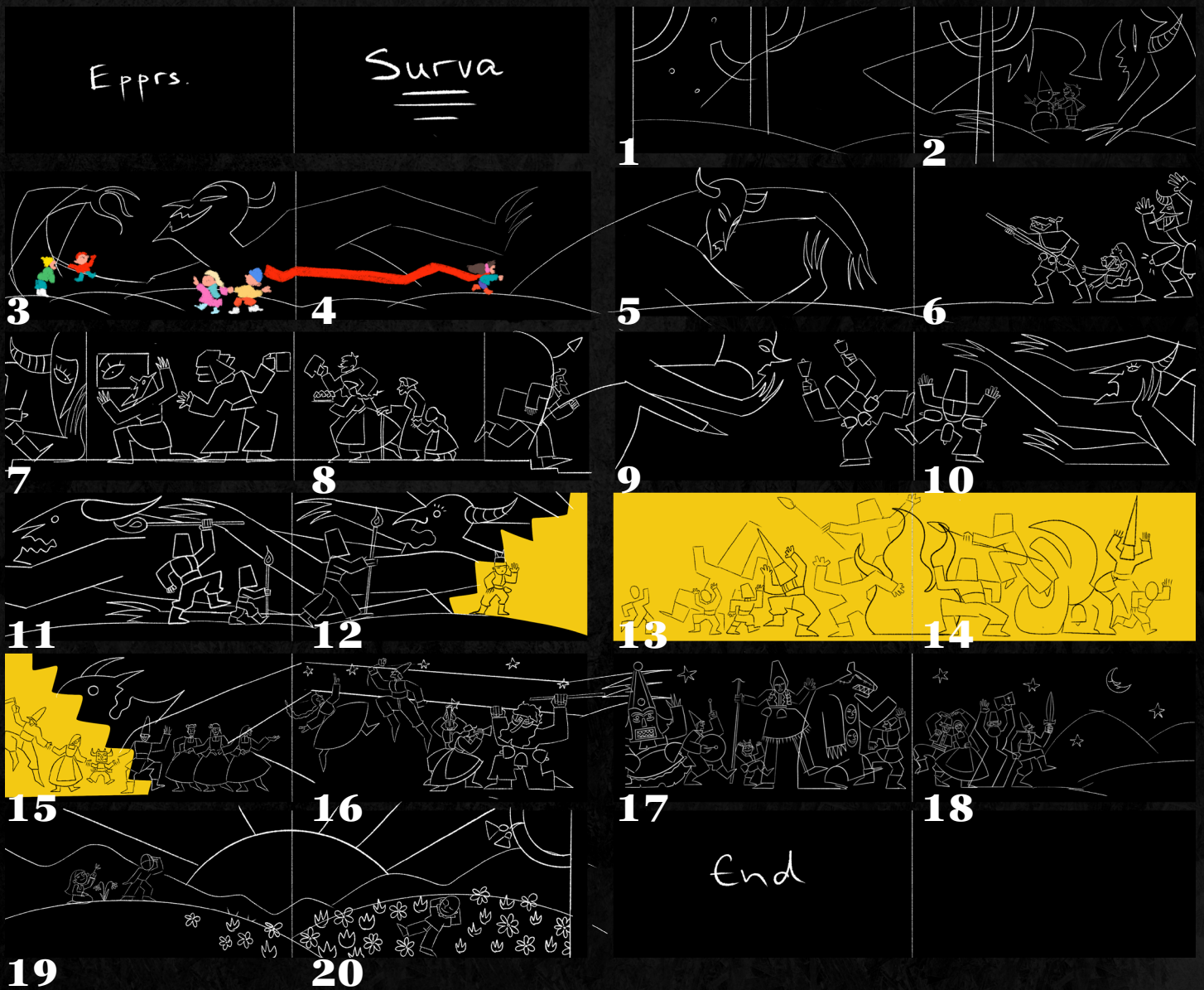
**Pages 11-12
Journey** The Survakari walk with torches, lighting the way.

**Pages 13-14
Culmination** A huge bonfire blazes as Kukeri & Survakari dance around it, symbolizing the triumph over darkness.

**Pages 15-16
Aftermath** The villagers join in, dancing the traditional horo. Joy fills the scene, an evil spirit lies defeated.

**Pages 17-18
End of line-up** Our heroes move forward, under a clear, starry sky—no more evil spirits. Balance has been established.

**Pages 19-20
Resolution** A young Kuker watches the sunrise, as winter gives way to spring.



Direction & conflict

Kukeri, Survakari and human characters

Evil spirits

By structuring the story this way, the book mirrors the natural progression of Kukeri rituals—from preparation to performance to celebration—while also conveying the symbolic transformation from darkness to light, fear to joy, winter to spring.

Cover

Ideas for the cover & back of the book. They are composed from a singular long illustration in an effort to mimic the inside of the book.



Figure 65: Cover and Back Illustration, Kuker Walking Forward, Cheering Crowd Behind Him.

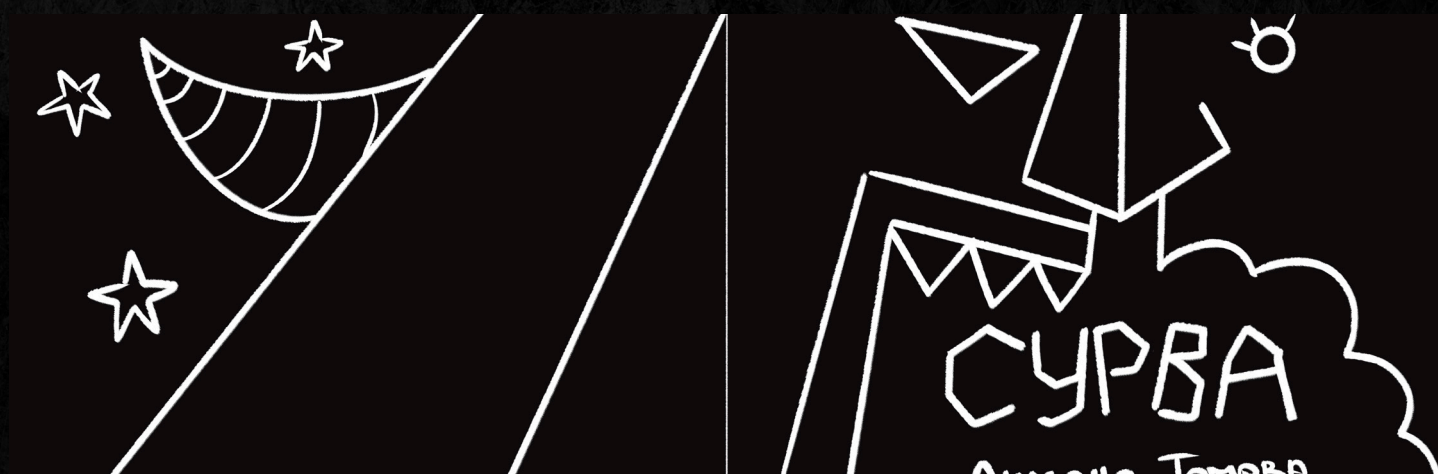


Figure 67: Cover and Back Illustration, Kuker and Evil Spirit Facing Each Other. Drawn by author,

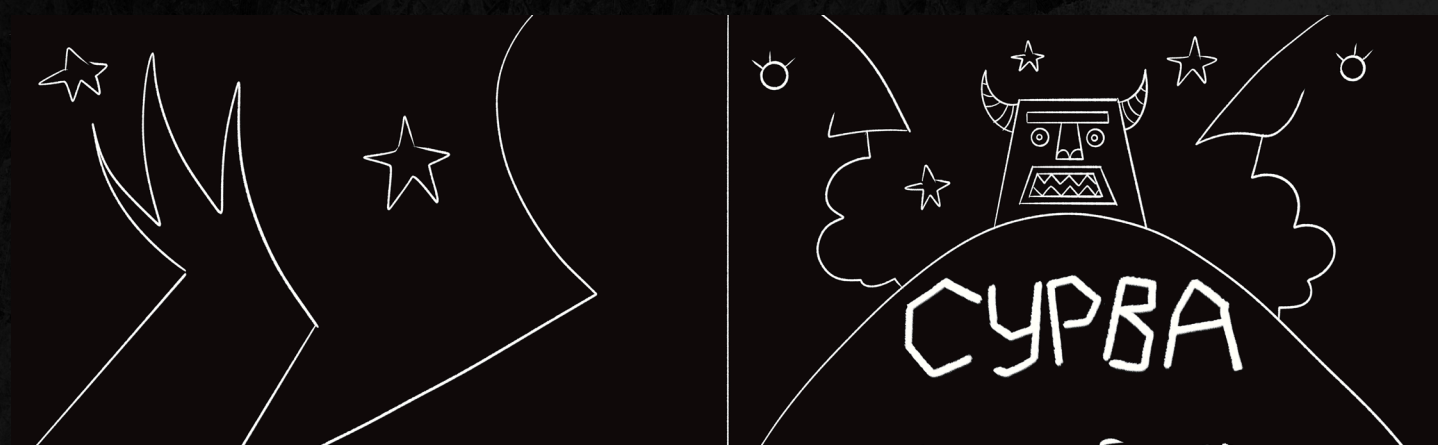


Figure 66: Cover and Back Illustration, Kuker Mask and Two Evil Spirits Being Frightened by It.
Drawn by author, 2025.

4. 7. Visual approach

Surva adopts a stylized and flat illustration approach, characterized by exaggeration, geometric lines and shapes, simplified perspective, and strong color contrast. Inspired by traditional Bulgarian illustrators and the Shevitsa embroidery patterns, the style maintains a strong cultural connection while ensuring readability in character-packed scenes. The color palette is designed to enhance contrast—backgrounds remain monochromatic and dark, creating a sense of mystery, while characters are depicted in bright, bold colors inspired by Kukeri & Survakari costumes and traditional Bulgarian clothing. The illustrations are created digitally, incorporating textures and line work for added depth and detail while preserving the overall stylized aesthetic

Stylization

The stylized approach to illustration in *Surva* simplifies character design, enhancing readability while allowing for complex, character-driven visuals. This is achieved through simplified anatomy, proportion, and perspective, resulting in angular and geometric forms. This stylistic choice is rooted in traditional Bulgarian illustration and the *Shevitsa*, a geometric pattern found in Bulgarian folk costumes. The influence of renowned Bulgarian illustrators, such as Lyuben Zidarov and Stoyan Anastasov, informs the decision to adopt minimal lines, flat colors, and simplified angular anatomy. Both Zidarov and Anastasov have contributed significantly to the field of Bulgarian children's illustration, with their works becoming staples in the culture. Their shared stylistic elements, including the use of geometric shapes, are reflected in *Surva's* approach to character design.

The *Shevitsa*, a symbolic decoration historically sewn into traditional Bulgarian clothing, provides a direct link to Bulgarian heritage. While the patterns vary, they all share geometric forms, making them ideal for integrating into the visual language of *Surva*. By incorporating these elements, the book solidifies a visual connection to Bulgarian ethnic culture.



Figure 70: Boy and Girl Illustration for Drujinka Magazine. Lyuben Zidarov, 1951. In Lyuben Zidarov, The Illustrator (Zahari Stoyanov).



Figure 69: Bulgarian Shevitsa. Produced by Art Hobby, n.d.



Figure 71: Illustration from Chicho Peyo Picture book. Stoyan Anastasov, 2019. In Chicho Peyo by Elin Pelin (Miranda).



Figure 72: Illustration for Slaveiche Magazine. Lyuben Zidarov, 1958. In Lyuben Zidarov, The Illustrator (Zahari

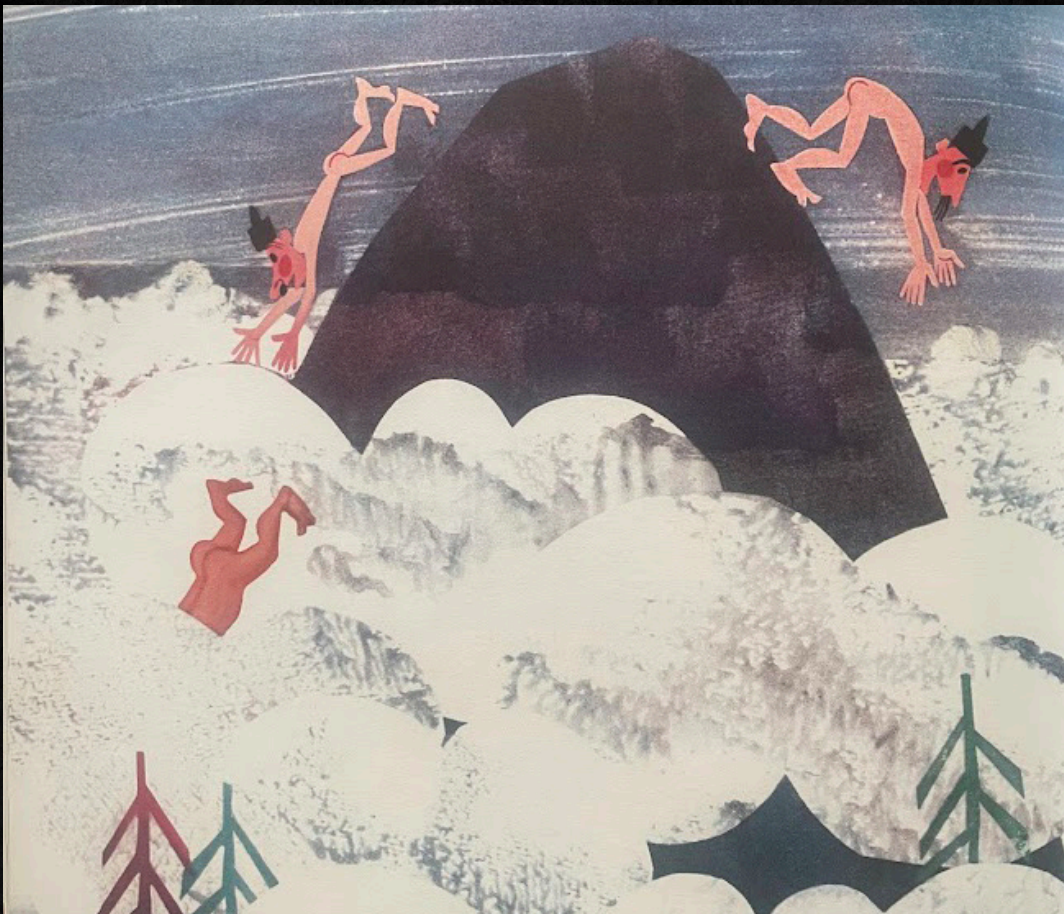


Figure 73: Illustration for The Three Idiots Story. Stoyan Anastasov, 2019. In Chicho Peyo by Elin Pelin (Miranda).

Takeaway...

✦ ✦
Colour ✦
Cutouts
Bold shapes
Exaggeration
Mixed media &
Textures

Scenes and characters created using S. Anastasov, L. Zidarov & the Shevitsa as inspiration.



Figures 74-77: Illustration Style Developed from the Shevitsa Design and L. Zidarov and S. Anastasov's Art Styles. Sketches Depict Different Aspects of the Kukeri & Survakari Tradition. Drawn by author, 2024.

Character Design



*Figure 78: Happy Kuker Boy
Walking During the Night.
Drawn by author, 2025.*

In *Surva*, the central conflict between the Kukeri & Survakari and the evil spirits drives the narrative, making character actions and emotions essential to the story. Rather than focusing on individual characters, the picture book emphasizes the group as the protagonist, reflecting the collective nature of the Kukeri & Survakari tradition. To balance a large cast of characters, maintain readability, and highlight cultural details, the anatomy of the characters is simplified. This simplification is achieved by using geometric shapes to structure their anatomy and proportions, creating a unified and accessible visual language.

The poses of the characters are dynamic and free from perspective, allowing space to highlight the intricate traditional patterns and textures of their costumes. The proportions of the Kukeri & Survakari are exaggerated compared to the human characters, whose proportions remain more aligned with real-life human anatomy. This exaggeration further emphasizes the Kukeri & Survakari's magical, otherworldly appearance, while also highlighting their diverse costumes. The variation in proportions is used in an effort to visually reinforce the mixing of the material and spiritual world.

The evil spirits, depicted as shadowy, larger-than-life figures, emerge from the darkness of the night. Their sleek design and exaggerated size makes them imposing, while their communication with the viewer is achieved through their facial features expressions and poses. This visual contrast between the spirits and the Kukeri & Survakari further emphasizes the ongoing battle between good and evil in the story.



Figure 79: Kukeri & Survakari Proportions Compared to Human Characters. Drawn by author, 2025.



Figure 80: Simplified Anatomy Build Using Geometrical Shapes. Drawn by author, 2025.



Figure 81: Three Bulgarian Dancers Dressed in Traditional Clothes – Nosiya. Flatness of Style Allows for Extra Detail to Be Added. Drawn by author, 2025.

Attention to traditional details, instruments and masks

Diverse character line-up



Figure 82: Character Line-up. The Diversity of Size, Shape, and Proportion Adds Diversity Among the Characters, Making Them Easier to Distinguish and Visually Intriguing as a Group. Drawn by author, 2025.

Focus on scale & proportion



Figure 83: Evil Spirits Are the Biggest in Size, Showing Their Might Above the Human Characters. Drawn by author, 2025.

Roles



Bride & Groom



Priest & Revolutionary



Bear & Bear Handler



The Family

The Love Birds



Kukeri & Survakari from different regions



Dervish from Pazardjiz region



Babuger from Bansko



Djumal from Popneci village

Backgrounds

The driving force of Surva's narrative lies in the dynamics of its characters, so the backgrounds are deliberately simplified and minimalistic, allowing the focus to remain on the characters and their actions. The backgrounds are not only visually restrained but serve a symbolic role, providing essential context for the time of day, environment, and the presence of evil spirits. This approach clearly distinguishes different settings—black signifies night, while white and blue evoke the presence of snow, marking the winter season. Warm yellow tones, seen in environments such as the interior of a house seen on fig. 84, reflect warmth, liveliness and safety. By using these minimal yet textured blocks of color, the backgrounds reinforce the thematic contrasts in the story, such as the duality between light and dark, safety and danger, and the physical and spiritual realms.

Figures 84-85: Page 2 & 3 Colour Dynamic. Drawn by author, 2025.



Colour

Color plays a crucial role in conveying the narrative of Surva. The palette is built from a combination of bright warm tones, dark cool shades, and earthy browns and beiges. The contrasting warm and cool tones visually represent the conflict between good and evil, light and darkness, helping to instantly communicate the story's driving forces.

Warm, vibrant colors like yellows and reds are used throughout the Kukeri & Survakari characters, symbolizing light, sound, and action. Elements such as the yellow bells, red bonfire, and background of the home all share a warm hue, linking the color to the energetic, active aspects of the narrative. These bright colors create a stark contrast with the dark, cool tones used for the backgrounds and the evil spirits. Deep blues and blacks evoke the cold of the night and the malevolent presence of the spirits, signaling danger and building tension in the story. The coolness of the blue reflects the cold winter night, while the darkness surrounding the evil spirits intensifies their ominous role in the narrative.

The earthy tones of beige, caramel, and brown represent the Kukeri & Survakari costumes, which are traditionally made from animal fur and wool. These natural colors are complemented by brighter colors for the patterns and accessories, such as reds, greens, and whites. The incorporation of these three colors reflecting the Bulgarian flag and add symbolic depth. Red represents passion and life, green symbolizes nature and balance, and white stands for purity. To underline the gradual transition from winter to spring, supporting colors like orange, saturated blues, and pinks are used sparingly, adding subtle highlights to patterns and accessories.

Figure 86: Main Colour Palette. Drawn by author, 2025.



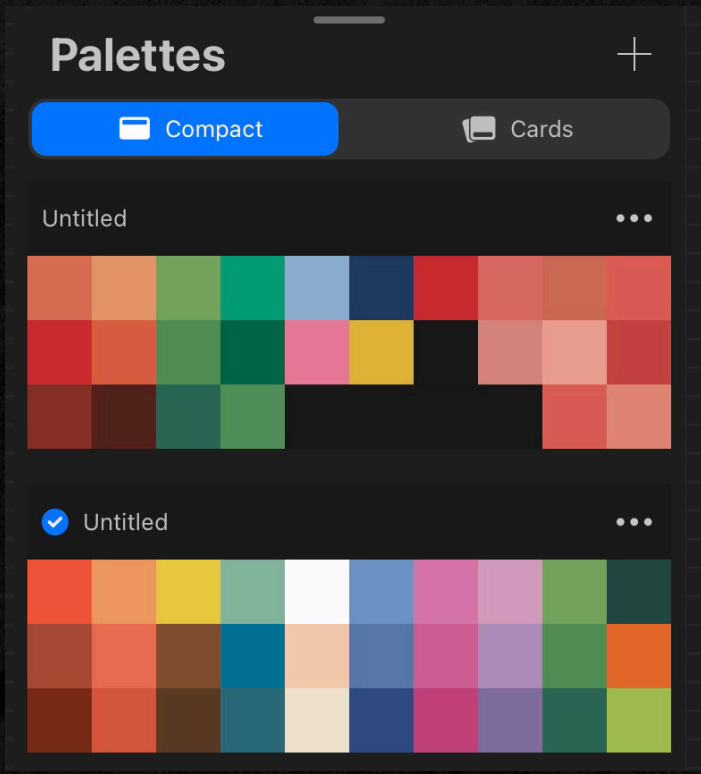


Figure 87: Extensive Colour Palette. Drawn by author, 2025.

Full colour palette & colour distribution throughout the Storyboard



Figure 88: Colour Separation and Overview of Storyboard, That Is Present in the Final Book. Drawn by author, 2025.

Texture

To add depth to the otherwise flat and solid illustration style, various textures and line work are incorporated into Surva. These elements enrich the composition without overwhelming the characters, helping to maintain visual balance. Rough digital brushes are used to depict natural elements like snow, creating a sense of texture while maintaining the flat aesthetic.

Line work plays a key role in defining specific details, such as shadows, facial expressions, and certain textures like wood. Texture are prominently used in the backgrounds, adding a sense of three-dimensionality. For the Kukeri & Survakari costumes, fuzzy brush lines are employed to depict diverse materials such as fur, wool, and other fabrics, reflecting the textures found in their real-life counterparts.

Figure 89: Textures Used. Left to Right: Shadows, Fabric, Fur, Wood, Snow. Drawn by author, 2025.



4. 8. Authenticity & artistic interpretation

The picture book *Surva* is rooted in an authentic depiction of the Kukeri & Survakari tradition, drawing from first-hand field research conducted at both festivals and village rituals. The book stays faithful to the tradition by portraying the phases of the ritual practice, the diversity of costumes and characters, and the core themes of protection and transition, ensuring they closely reflect real-life customs.

At the same time, the book takes artistic liberties to shape a visually engaging and structured narrative. This is achieved through characterization and simplification, breaking down the tradition into a format and style that resonates with its main audience—children. The inclusion of child protagonists and a clear sequence of events provides a strong storytelling flow, guiding readers through the rituals in an accessible and engaging way.

Additionally, certain themes are adapted for storytelling purposes. One example is the depiction of evil spirits, which serve as visual representations of the dangers associated with the Dirty Days in Bulgarian folklore. Another creative decision is the combination of festival and ritual elements, allowing for a broader showcase of costume diversity and character variety. In reality, Kukeri & Survakari groups from different villages do not meet, as such encounters are considered an omen of bad luck, but this artistic choice enhances the book's visual and cultural richness.

Artistic interpretation also extends to composition and pacing. The horizontal format and repeated compositions emphasize the linear nature of the ritual, reinforcing the journey from winter to spring. While real-life Kukeri & Survakari rituals unfold in a more fragmented and spontaneous manner, the book structures these moments into a cohesive sequence, allowing readers to experience them as a story with a beginning, climax, and resolution.

By balancing authentic cultural elements with artistic storytelling, *Surva* preserves the core essence of the tradition while making it accessible, engaging, and visually compelling for new generations.

5. Conclusion

Surva fills a significant gap in the cultural representation of the Kukeri & Survakari tradition, offering a visual narrative that is both culturally rich and accessible to modern audiences. Despite the prominence of these traditions in Bulgarian ethnic culture, their depiction in children's literature remains scarce, especially in visual formats like picture books. By showcasing the intricate rituals, vibrant costumes, and dynamic character interactions, Surva provides an engaging entry point for young readers to explore these essential aspects of Bulgarian heritage.

The book's simplified yet expressive illustration style, combined with a carefully chosen color palette and minimalistic backgrounds, makes the Kukeri & Survakari characters and their traditions engaging for a global audience. The story transcends language barriers, allowing the vibrant visuals to speak for themselves, and thus makes these cultural traditions more approachable for children and adults alike. Surva is not only a celebration of Bulgarian folklore but also a tool for preserving and sharing these customs with the next generation.

In the future, Surva has the potential to inspire similar projects, encouraging more graphic designers, illustrators, and storytellers to explore the rich cultural traditions of Bulgaria and other countries through visual art. Additionally, the book's international appeal can help introduce these traditions to a global audience, fostering cultural appreciation and understanding. Ultimately, Surva aims to educate younger generations about the importance of preserving cultural practices while making them relevant and captivating in the context of modern storytelling.

6.

List of figures

- Figure 1 – Traditional Kukeri costume (Stamenova, 1982, p. 13)
- Figure 2 – Kukeri practitioners in Karlovo (Kukeri-Karlovskobg, n.d.)
- Figure 3 – Kukuvden in the city of Strandja (Yambol Museum, n.d.)
- Figure 4 – Kukeri from old times (Wikipedia, n.d.)
- Figure 5 – Kukeri (Starci) near Sushica village (Artefacts and Old Photos, via Svetovni Zagadki, 1935)
- Figure 6 – Kukeri with Zoomorphic masks and costumes from Dolno Sahranche village (Stamenova, 1982)
- Figure 7 – Survakari at Surva, 2024 (Kukeri.net, 2024)
- Figure 8 – Kuker dolls (Balgaran.co.uk, n.d.)
- Figure 9 – Kukeri at Kukerlandia Festival in Yambol city (Tourism-Yambol.com, n.d.)
- Figure 10 – Kukeri (Starci) from Vasil Levski village, 1950s (Stamenova, 1982)
- Figure 11 – Kukeri from Silistra at Maslenica Festival, Moscow, 2020 (Kvorum-Silistra.info, 2020)
- Figure 12 – Kuker mask from Zidarovo village, beginning of the 20th century (Stamenova, 1982)
- Figure 14 – Kuker mask (Photo by author, 2024)
- Figure 15 – Kukeri from Padarevo village, second half of the 20th century (Stamenova, 1982)
- Figure 16 – Feather mask from Sadovik village (Photo by author, 2024)
- Figure 17 – Mask at Surva festival (Photo by Ivelina Asenova, 2024)
- Figure 18 – Survakari during ritual (Photo by author, 2024)
- Figure 19 – Ritual bonfire (Photo by author, 2024)
- Figure 20 – Student wearing mask (Photo by author, 2024)
- Figure 21 – Bonfire ritual at Sadovik village (Photo by author, 2024)
- Figure 22 – Dog mask (Photo by author, 2024)
- Figure 23 – Group at Surva festival (Photo by author, 2024)
- Figure 24 – Kids of Surva (Didi D Photography, 2025)
- Figure 26 – DIY Children masks (4th-grade students from 38 OU Vasil Aprilov, 2024)
- Figure 27 – Children wearing DIY masks (Kindergarten Slunce, Kyustendil, 2021)
- Figure 30 – Spirit of Surva from children to adults (Official Surva Festival Facebook Page, 2025)
- Figure 31 – Kukeri group passing (Official Surva Festival Facebook Page, 2025)
- Figure 32 – Contemporary mask (Photo by author, 2024)
- Figure 34 – Kuker at Surva festival (Photo by Ivelina Asenova, 2024)
- Figure 35 – The priest and the revolutionary (Photo by Ivelina Asenova, 2024)
- Figure 36 – Kuker masks (Photo by author, 2025)
- Figure 37 – Costume of Evil entity (Photo by Ivelina Asenova, 2024)

Figure 38 – Evil spirit (Photo by author, 2024)

Figure 39 – Greek mumming practitioners from Patras (Photo by author, 2025)

Figure 40 – Camile and camile handler from Ravno Pole village (Photo by author, 2025)

Figure 42 – Kuker mural from Kabile village (Posted by Romyana Pavlova, n.d.)

Figure 43 – Surva party (Hosted by EXE, artwork: Unknown, 2025)

Figure 44 – Kukeri & Survakari (Zheleva S. & Vasilev D., 2022)

Figure 44-46 – Visualizations of Mythical Creatures (Nedelcheva, S., n.d.)

Figure 47 – Goat Dance (Andronic, M., n.d.)

Figure 48-49 – The Bear Dance & Carolers (Andronic, M., n.d.)

Figure 50 – Day of the Dead Book Cover (Johnston, T., 1997)

Figure 51 – Preparing to Celebrate Día de los Muertos (Johnston, T., 1997)

Figure 52 – And They Dance (Johnston, T., 1997)

Figure 53-55 – Kukeri Character Design by author, 2024

Figure 56 – Sketch of Kuker Holding Child Taken from Reference Photo (Photo by author, 2024)

Figure 57 – Sketch of Kukeri (Photo by author, 2024)

Figure 58-60 – Character Design and Sketches of Boy Who Wants to Be a Kuker (Drawn by author, 2024)

Figure 61 – Thumbnail Drawing of a Kuker Character (Drawn by author, 2024)

Figure 62-64 – Character Lineup and Dynamics (Drawn by author, 2025)

Figure 65 – Cover and Back Illustration, Kuker Walking Forward, Cheering Crowd Behind Him (Drawn by author, 2025)

Figure 66 – Cover and Back Illustration, Kuker Mask and Two Evil Spirits Being Frightened by It (Drawn by author, 2025)

Figure 67 – Cover and Back Illustration, Kuker and Evil Spirit Facing Each Other (Drawn by author, 2025)

Figure 68 – Storyboard of Surva (Drawn by author, 2025)

Figure 69 – Bulgarian Shevitsa (Produced by Art Hobby, n.d.)

Figure 70 – Boy and Girl Illustration for Drujinka Magazine (Lyuben Zidarov, 1951)

Figure 71 – Illustration from Chicho Peyo Picture book (Stoyan Anastasov, 2019)

Figure 72 – Illustration for Slaveiche Magazine (Lyuben Zidarov, 1958)

Figure 73 – Illustration for The Three Idiots Story (Stoyan Anastasov, 2019)

Figures 74-77 – Illustration Style Developed from the Shevitsa Design and L. Zidarov and S. Anastasov's Art Styles. Sketches Depict Different Aspects of the Kukeri & Survakari Tradition (Drawn by author, 2024)

Figure 79 – Kukeri & Survakari Proportions Compared to Human Characters (Drawn by author, 2025)

Figure 80 – Simplified Anatomy Build Using Geometrical Shapes (Drawn by author, 2025)

Figure 81 – Three Bulgarian Dancers Dressed in Traditional Clothes – Nosiya. Flatness of Style Allows for Extra Detail to Be Added (Drawn by author, 2025)

Figure 82 – Character Line-up. The Diversity of Size, Shape, and Proportion Adds Diversity Among the Characters, Making Them Easier to Distinguish and

Visually Intriguing as a Group (Drawn by author, 2025)

Figure 83 – Evil Spirits Are the Biggest in Size, Showing Their Might Above the Human Characters (Drawn by author, 2025)

Figures 84-85 – Page 2 & 3 Colour Dynamic (Drawn by author, 2025)

Figure 86 – Main Colour Palette (Drawn by author, 2025)

Figure 87 – Extensive Colour Palette (Drawn by author, 2025)

Figure 88 – Colour Separation and Overview of Storyboard, That Is Present in the Final Book (Drawn by author, 2025)

Figure 89 – Textures Used. Left to Right: Shadows, Fabric, Fur, Wood, Snow (Drawn by author, 2025)

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