

Petko Hristov

hristov_p@yahoo.com

“Returning” Religiousness and New Local Identities on the Balkans

Abstract:

As a result of my fieldwork research in Bulgaria, Macedonia and Eastern Serbia, I will show in my article how, through re-vitalisation of traditional ritual practices and “invention” of new ones, a new local and group identity is built in a number of regions in the central part of the Balkans. The role of “returning” religiousness in building cohesion of the group and local identities will be shown through examples of restored traditional collective celebrations (village *sabors* in deserted villages, for example), new ritual practices (so called “youth *kurban*” in Midwestern Bulgaria), and renovation of traditional cult places (village chapels, family votive crosses) by *gastarbeiters* who returned to their birthplaces in Serbia and Macedonia.

Key words:

religiousness, collective ritual, community cohesion, local cultural heritage, local identity

After an entire decade of fieldwork in different regions of the Balkans (Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia) I began to ask myself in particular what constitutes “traditional culture” and “cultural heritage”, topics presented as one of the main research tasks that ethnologists face. The thoughts that I present here were caused by one of the meanings of the Latin *trāditiō*, understood as ‘passing on’, ‘narration’, but also as ‘lesson’, ‘teachings’.

Here are some preliminary questions to think about:

- To what extent does our understanding of “tradition” cover the notion of the model of transmitting cultural values, as a generator of permanent development of ethnic cultural systems, and to what extent – its definition as a collection of artifacts, techniques and stereotypes, determined by the invariant?

- Once it became clear how traditions are “invented”, even in a strictly conservative country like England (Hobsbawm 1983), how is folk culture “updated” and “modernised”, and isn’t it time to make the next step: making it clear to ourselves that by “tradition” modern ethnology actually denotes contemporary interpretations of the cultural past, which every subsequent generation accepts and “passes on” to the next, thus building its own identity?

- Can we consider “returning” religiousness among Orthodox Balkan peoples as traditional folk religion, or do ritual practices in post-socialist

decades use inherited matrices for building community identity on different levels – family, kin, village, and nation?

As an interpretation framework of my expose, I have used the conception about “the invention” of the new traditions in the European societies in the period, following the industrial revolution. By “invented” traditions, Erik Hobsbawm denotes the diversity of newly emerged formalized practices of a ritual and symbolic nature, whose target is to be “inculcated” in the community via repetition as values and norms of behavior (Hobsbawm 1983: 1, 5). A guarantee of this has been the referring to the past and (in the overwhelming number of cases), the structuring of continuity for some traditional models. A key process for Hobsbawm is **the adaptation** of the old in the new conditions and the use of the familiar models for new purposes; I would add **interpretation**. Most of these “invented” traditions establish or symbolize the social unity and/or membership of real or made up groups and communities. In this way they come closer to the integrative functions of the traditional rituals.

To me, as well as to Hobsbawm, “the object of primary interest is rather the appearance and establishment [of these “invented” traditions – P.H.], than their chances of continuing to exist” (Hobsbawm 1983: 1). My working hypothesis is that notwithstanding the diversity of newly emerging symbolic forms and practices in post-socialist Balkans, they keep their “umbilical cord” linking them to tradition.

Many Balkan ethnologists, still in the “double insider” position, in Slobodan Naumović’s definition (Naumović 1998: 101-120), share the primordial view on ethnicity that focuses on our common past. Tradition is interpreted as a constant cultural “basis”, on the myth of the “Golden age” of the national Revival and the strong national roots of traditional culture understood as pastoral-patriarchal and situated in the village (Naumović 1995: 114-128), which should be conserved, reproduced and (by all means) transferred to the next generations. Thus, the idea “once Bulgarian – forever Bulgarian” (or “Serbian”, “Turk”, “Greek”, “Albanian”, etc.), based on history, or “once Orthodox (Catholic etc.)”, based on tradition, is still predominant among both society and scholars in a number of the Balkan countries. Often this prejudice is transformed into a basis for the nationalistic platforms of various political organizations on the Balkans.

Taken alone, however, religion, language, customs, and culture still do not represent ethnic identity (Altermat 1998: 62). For a number of European ethnologists the process of ethno-genesis is most of all formation of the sense of unity, despite the basis on which it is built (Shnireljman 1999). *Ethnicity* always presupposes a system of cultural symbols, which may change their concrete form and configuration, but bears the function to preserve (and reproduce) the internal group integration and the distinction from the others.

This forces the scholar, especially when studying new processes and trends on the Balkans, to include in the range of interpretative strategies, the “constructivist” conception of *ethnicity*, of the ethnical groups and their boundaries, provoked by the appearance of Fredrik Barth’s classical work “Ethnic Groups and Boundaries” in 1969 (Barth 1969), called by some authors “a Copernicus revolution in the field” (Gossiaux 2002: 12). ***Ethnicity is interpreted first of all as a relation of identity and differences, i.e. of identity/non-identity.***

For the researcher it is of special importance to analyse, in any separate case and historical moment, the combination of means, techniques and strategies of behaviour, used to preserve and confirm, or on the contrary – to remove the boundaries between communities and groups. The researcher’s role is not to feed “the character and content of nationalism as an “information source” of collective behaviour” (Geertz 1998/1973: I, 348), but through interpreting and through the self-interpretation of the bearers, to reach the meaning and significance that certain symbols have “inside”, i.e. for the group, which is a creator and bearer of the culture.

In such interpretational framework the contemporary Balkan researcher’s task is just the opposite of the above-mentioned situation of “the double insider syndrome” – analysis should be concentrated on revealing the processes of constructing identities and avoiding their mystification, mythologisation and “ideologisation”. Researchers can avoid the trap of the myth of national exclusiveness only by comparative interdisciplinary research, eliminating the idea of the mono-ethnic affiliation of cultural symbols. Namely the comparative approach has been mentioned as one of the important tools with which contemporary ethnology in a global European perspective underlines its scholarly identity (about “*Ethnologia Europea*” cf. Roth 1996: 10-13).

During the course of my fieldwork research in the border regions of Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia during 2001, 2005 and 2009, I encountered such a “conflict of interpretations” – similar family celebrations (*slava*, *služba*, *svetac*) and collective sacrifices (*kurban*) of the Orthodox population were recognized as both “our” and “imported” (at least their names), as both traditional ethnical, and “national” (Bulgarian, Serb, even Macedonian) cultural markers. The research was focused on the rituals that were classified as “marking the boundaries” (in social and cultural aspect) of different kin and local/parochial territorial communities (Cohen 1985: 53), observed in the context of Balkan social, cultural and political realities during the 20th century. An especially clear example of such “new”, changed interpretation is the transformation of traditional village *kurbans* on St. Elijah’s Day (typical for Macedonia, for all of Bulgaria and for South-eastern Serbia) to an integral part of the rituals on the newly established national celebration in Republic of Macedonia, related to the anti-

ottoman *Ilinden* uprising in Macedonia during 1903 (cf. Hristov 2007: 250).

My fieldwork included research in the Northwestern mountainous part of Croatia, on the border with Slovenia, among the *Greek Catholics*/Uniats in Žumberak and the *Roman Catholics* in Zagorije, in the villages of the so-called “*Torlak*” part of the Balkan Mountains on both sides of the frontier between Serbia (Timok region) and Bulgaria (Belogradchik region), in the villages with Serbs and Bulgarians in the regions of Pirot and Caribrod/ Dimitrovgrad in Serbia, in the regions of Godech and Tran in Middle Western Bulgaria (cf. Hristov 2003: 249-268). In the course of my fieldwork, I came across a number of peculiarities of (self-) identification, related to elements of language (dialect), of confessional affiliation and cultural symbols, which are common in most of the cases or at least are dispersedly found on both sides of the (political) border. In every separate case the respondents pointed out those features of the confession (“*vera*”), language and cultural symbols, which actualize self-consciousness with different levels of identification.

In this sense (self-) identity is not static, but constantly changing and variable. In most of the cases the ethnic component is dominant and the other levels (religious, linguistic and cultural) are hierarchically structured. Actually the strategy of choosing one or another type of identity is strictly situational and because of its pragmatic motives, “representative identity” depends on the interlocutor (depending on the researcher’s declared national or confessional affiliation) and his ethno-linguistic identity: the researcher from Bulgaria is loved or hated only because he is Bulgarian (especially in Macedonia).

Among the Serbian population in the region of Pirot (Serbia), situational identification, on the contrary, was mostly on confessional basis: I was “recognised” as “one of our own” (“*naš*”), because I came from “*the only 100-kilometre-long straight line in the Balkans* (between Niš and Sofia – P.H.), *where there are neither mosques, nor Catholic cathedrals*” – i.e. from the historic-cultural region, known as “*Šopluk*”. A main ethnographic feature of these region, according to ethnologists on both sides of the border, is their “traditionality” and “long lasting archaism” (cf. Hristov 2004 : 70).

During the course of my fieldwork in Eastern Serbia and Macedonia, I also faced the challenges of the new “*gastarbeiter*” identity, formed during the decades of labour mobility (mainly of the male population) in a number of villages. I reached the conclusion that the prolonged presence of part of ex-Yugoslavia’s *gastarbeiters* in Germany, with its multicultural environment as example, led them to actualize their kin networks and local identity, related to their birthplaces on the Balkans. Once they returned to their native villages after retirement, these people at first renovated their own houses and bought homes in the city nearby. Later, though, the former

gastarbeiters took it as a duty to renovate and continuously preserve the religious (in this case Orthodox Christianity) and the ritual sacred places of the family and the local community. For example, in Halovo village, populated by Wallachians, a local *gastarbeiter* had gold-plated the entire altar of the parochial church.



Picture 1 – Halovo

There are many examples, but here I will use only one: In the village of Trgovište, near Knjaževac, in Eastern Serbia, a former worker in the Mercedes concern who returned from Germany renovated the family chapel (*zavetina*) during the 1990s, considering this as an important “obligation” (*zavet*). According to him, the renovation of the chapel built in the middle of the 19th century is “his sacred duty to family tradition and his ancestors”.



Picture 2 - Trgovište 1



Picture 3 – Trgovište 2

Just in comparison: the condition of a similar but non-renovated 19th-century family chapel in the same village:



Picture 4 - Trgovište 3

There are other examples, also from Macedonia, but what is truly notable for the researcher is that all *gastarbeiters* developed a strong local

identity that was related to the Orthodox cult places. My interpretation is that by seeing themselves in “the mirror of otherness” in the multicultural environment of Germany these people from the Balkans discovered their strong bond with their birthplaces in the mountainous regions of the peninsula. This is proven by their return home, even though most of these *pechalbar*’s villages are already deserted today. Nevertheless, the nostalgia for the home place still remains – some of these *gastarbeiters* in the end of their lives return from all over the world to their villages in order to die “at home”.

In Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia there are also villages that have been completely abandoned for decades, but every year local people return for the patron saint’s feast in order to make the collective offering (*kurban*) and the common table “as if the village were still there” (Hristov 2007: 247-260). Even for just one day during the year, at this celebration in “our Christianity” pattern (“*naša narodna vera*”), the people “restore” their local identity, thus constructing again the community of their home village, which has long ago gone past its territorial borders. In my opinion, this way of constructing a local and/or regional identity will become even more frequent in the conditions of pan-European mobility.

The difficulties before the researcher’s efforts in studying population with similar/allied cultural and linguistic (dialectal) features in the border areas in the Balkans result from mythologized (often ideologised) historical memory (in most of the cases also burdened by propaganda clichés, imposed by the corresponding “modern” national state). This is a result of the scholarly disciplines’ development in separate countries: to ethnologists and historians from the mid-19th and early 20th century “tradition” possesses a certain antiquity, while naming a given artifact as “traditional” means to directly relate it to another, hard to define concept: “authenticity” (Feintuch 2001: 470). During this period of development of the scholarly disciplines, characterising something as “traditional” or “authentic” most often placed it against the process of modernisation. Each generation of patriotic researchers mourns the disappearance of “tradition”, the loss of the “golden age” of folk culture and the abandonment of “pure” pastoral virtues, while at the present time folk culture is described as “remnants” of this past (Benovska-Sabkova 2004: 30).

Similarly to the changed view of ethnical identity as a process of construction, the view of “tradition” as an interpretation of the cultural past is gradually making its way in Balkan ethnology. In the dynamic globalization process in the early 21st century, which describes the world with the “global village” metaphor, “tradition” as heritage from the culture of the pre-modern village is subjected to radical change. According to contemporary anthropology, proclaiming something as “tradition” becomes an act of interpretation, a way of selecting and labelling, a fundamental way of bringing considerable order into the disarray of social life (Feintuch 2001:

471). Teaching “folk tradition” to every new generation in the present, presenting the basics of joint interpretation of our Balkan cultural past, can become a basis for our shared future in a united Europe, Europe of “unity in diversity”. In this aspect the role of both researchers and university professors is extremely important.

The Balkans are still expecting their researchers: young ethnologists, unburdened by the “double insider syndrome”.

Literature:

Altermat 1998: Урс Алтермат. *Етнонационализмът в Европа*. София, 1998 [Altermatt, Urs *Nationalismus in Europa*, Zürich: Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 1997]

Barth 1969: Fredrik Barth. Introduction. – In: *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Bergen-Oslo-London, 1969

Benovska-Sabkova 2004: Милена Беновска-Събкова. Размисли върху методите за проучване на традиционната култура в съвремеността. – В: *Етно-културолошки зборник*, књ. IX, Сврљиг, 2004, 29-34

Cohen 1985: Cohen, A.P. *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. London/New York, 1985.

Feintuch 2001: Burt Feintuch. Tradition. – In: Bariefeld, T. (Ed.) *The Dictionary of Anthropology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, pp. 470-471

Geertz 1998/ 1973: Kliford Gerc. *Tumačenje kultura*. I-II, Beograd, 1998 (= Clifford Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York, 1973)

Gossiaux 2002: Jean-François Gossiaux. *Pouvoirs ethniques dans les Balkans*. Paris, 2002

Hobsbawm 1983: Eric Hobsbawm. Introduction. – In: Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger (Eds.) *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-14.

Hristov 2003: Петко Христов. Семейно-родовое жертвоприношение в регионах болгарско-сербского пограничья. – В: *Славянское и балканское языкознание: Человек в пространстве Балкан. Поведенческие сценарии и культурные роли*. Москва, 2003, 249-268

Hristov 2004: Петко Христов. Границите на “Шоплука” и/или шопи без граници. – В: *Скривене маѓине на Балкану*. Београд, 2004, 67-82

Hristov 2007: Petko Hristov. Celebration the abandoned village: the ritual process in the post-socialist Balkans. – In: Sikimić, B., Hristov. P. (Eds.) *Kurban in the Balkans*. Belgrade, 2007, 247-260

Naumović 1995: Слободан Наумовић. *Српско село и сељак: између националног и страначког симбола*. – В: ГЕИ САНУ, Књ. XLIV, Београд, 1995, 114-128

Naumović 1998: Slobodan Naumović. Romanticists or Double Insiders? An Essay on the Origins of Ideologised Discourses in Balkan Ethnology. – In: *Ethnologia Balkanica*, 2, 1998, 101-120

Roth 1996: Klaus Roth. European Ethnology and Intercultural Communication. – In: *Ethnologia Europea*, 26, 1996, 3-16

Shnireljman 1999: В. А. Шнирельман. Национальные символы, этноисторические мифы и этнополитика. – В: *Македония – проблемы истории и культуры*. Москва, 1999.

Петко Христов

Повратак религиозности и нови локални идентитети на Балкану

На основу резултата теренских истраживања у Бугарској, Македонији и источној Србији, у овом раду ћу показати како се, кроз ревитализацију традиционалне ритуалне праксе и „измишљање“ нове, граде нови локални и групни идентитети у одређеним регијама централног Балкана. Улога повратка религиозности у изградњи кохезије групе и локалних идентитета приказана је кроз примере обновљених традиционалних прослава – сеоских сабора у напуштеним селима, нове ритуалне праксе – тзв. курбана за младе у западној Бугарској и обнављање традиционалних култних места – сеоских капела и породичних вотивних крстова од стране гастарбајтера, који се враћају у своја родна места у Србији и Македонији.

Кључне речи: религиозност, колективни ритуал, кохезија заједнице, локално културно наслеђе, локални идентитет.