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THE POLITICS OF FOLKLORE IN BULGARIA

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Government-sponsored folklore in Bulgaria is a rich arena for the examination of the interplay between tradition and innovation in a highly politicized setting. With its strong ties to the past and its potential for manipulating the national consciousness, folklore has indeed served to promote nationalism, socialism and ethnic unity. This paper examines folk festivals, ensembles, folk music schools, and folklore research in terms of a cultural policy of selected preservation and directed innovation.

"What could be more apolitical than a Bulgarian folk dance?" This question might be posed by a naive layman, but an informed observer would quickly answer that virtually all cultural phenomena in Bulgaria are in some way affected by politics. More specifically, folklore, with its strong ties to the past, plus its potential for manipulating the national consciousness, is indeed an important arena for government involvement.

Government involvement in folklore takes many forms – some overt, such as sponsoring folklore festivals, schools, and ensembles, and others covert, such as determining the direction of folklore research. Government involvement derives from a centralist cultural policy which is fraught with inconsistency. On the one hand, the avowed aim is the preservation of traditional folklore; on the other hand, traditional folklore is usually religious, ethnic, regional and conservative – traits incompatible with the goal of creating a unified socialist Bulgarian folk culture. The result is a government policy of *selective* preservation of folklore coupled with *directed* innovation to serve political aims. This paper explores the political dimensions of folklore as a tool to serve nationalism and ethnic unity.[1]

Folklore and the Rise of Nationalism

As in many other European nations, folklore played an important role in the emergence of Bulgarian nationalism in the nineteenth century. In the fourteenth century, Bulgaria, a Slavic, Eastern Orthodox nation, was invaded by the Ottoman Turks. Turkish rule lasted five centuries and is viewed by Bulgarian scholars as "the darkest period in the history of the Bulgarian people" (Kossev et al. 1963:105). Bulgarian scholars proudly claim that under the "Turkish yoke," the peasant populace clung to their language and folklore in an effort to maintain their Bulgarian identity. ". . .Bulgarian culture now became a weapon of the people by means of which they resisted their conquerors, keeping their national spirit alive and inspiring them in their struggle for liberation" (Kossev et al. 1963:125-128). In general, folklore is seen as a "mirror of the historical life of the people," . . . a "living internal history of the people" (Dinekov 1977:5). This is especially relevant for *hajduk* songs, that is, folk songs about bandits who lived in mountain retreats and became guerrilla fighters against the Turks. According to Petur Dinekov, director of the Institute of Folklore, hajduk songs have influenced the folk consciousness, have awakened the will to fight, and have strengthened the resistance of the people (1977:10). In 1878 the National Liberation movement finally succeeded in creating an independent Bulgaria, and the National Revival in literature flourished. Poets and writers such as Petko Slavejkov, Georgi Rakovski, and Hristo Botev widely employed themes and motifs from folklore to express the plight of the people and to ignite the spirit of rebellion. ". . .The creation and evolution of Bulgarian revolutionary poetry during the revival

epoch is inconceivable without the influence of the hajduk song, without the adoption of their poetic traditions" (Dinekov 1976a:368). The greatest writers of the Revival all grew up under the sway of folklore (Dinekov 1976b:3). Continually, then, folklore has served as a tool of patriotic education. We see this during the Turkish period, during the National Revival and subsequently into the twentieth century with writers such as Nikola Vapcarov who use hajduk themes and poetics to illustrate anti-capitalist struggles (Dinekov 1976a: 370).

Politics of Folklore Research

It is no accident that the rise of Bulgarian nationalism coincided with early collecting activities in folklore.[2] As is true in many countries, concern for national history and independence often overlaps with pride in a distinctive folklore (Dorson 1966). Nor was it a coincidence that many writers of the National Revival were collectors of folklore. The collection and publication of folklore aided the quest for cultural and political unity; folklore served as a basis for the nation's self-identification and self-definition. What was defined as the nation were native folk institutions and traditions which had survived invasion and foreign political dominance.

The process of reaffirming the nation through cultural unity continues to the present and is reflected in numerous published works. The preface to almost every cultural work contains a tribute to the unity of the Bulgarian people. The question of cultural unity is often a politically sensitive subject, as the following examples will demonstrate. Perhaps most apparent is the use of dialect studies to substantiate Bulgaria's claim to Macedonia. Books and articles such as "The Unity of the Bulgarian Language in the Past and Today" defend the position that Macedonian is a dialect of the Bulgarian language and that Macedonian folklore is Bulgarian folklore. This claim is subtly expressed in folklore performances. For examples, the Pirin Ensemble's new Pirin suite includes dances and costumes from the Skopje, Bitola, and Debar regions, all in Yugoslav Macedonia.[3]

Another example of the politics of folklore research concerns the question of Turkish influence on Bulgarian folk music. In an effort to substantiate Bulgarian purity, it is claimed that Turkish music "left hardly a trace among the local Bulgarian populace" (Kaufman and Todorov 1967:9). Researchers also cite cultural unity in the case of the Pomaks, Bulgarians who converted to Islam during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In virtually every work dealing with Pomak folklore, it is emphasized that despite their Moslem religion, the Pomaks display "pure" Bulgarian folklore.[4] Clearly, the trend is toward the establishment of one Bulgarian national identity rather than multiple ethnic identities. Recently, the nationality designation (which appears on all identification papers) *Pomak*, or Bulgarian-Moslem, was abolished, along with the designation *Ciganin* for Gypsy; both were replaced by Slavicized names; for example, Ali Ramadan was changed to Ilija Ramadanov. Similarly, some minorities are discouraged from displaying folklore which conflicts with the image of national unity. For example, Pomaks are discouraged from wearing their Moslem dress in public. In these cases, not only religion, but also ethnicity is seen as detracting from the image of national unity.

Another significant concern of folklore scholars is demonstrating the socialist consciousness of folklore. Folklore creations are seen as the expression of the revolutionary spirit of the people. Partisan songs and "workers'" songs have been given special attention as evidence of the modern folklore process; an enormous quantity of these songs has been collected and published. Also, in virtually every introduction to folklore collections, reference is made to the motivating socialist spirit of the nation, guided by the Soviet Union.[5]

Government Sponsorship of Amateur Folklore Activities

Since the formation of the Bulgarian socialist state in 1944, folklore has continued to play an important role in promoting nationalism and ethnic unity, albeit through a new channel, namely government sponsorship. The government has created national and regional folk music and dance ensembles, amateur village ensembles, and a huge radio and television folk-music industry. In addition, the government sponsors many folklore festivals. These phenomena will be explored with attention to motivation, ideology, and political symbolism.

On the village level, government-sponsored *koledtivi*, or collectives for folk music, exist in nearly every Bulgarian village. These amateur performing groups meet regularly and rehearse the folk music, dances, and rituals of the recent past (pre-1950s). The result is a staged presentation of preserved folklore. Thus, for example, one village may stage a twenty-minute performance of how a five-day wedding used to be celebrated in their village. Kolektivi always perform in complete folk costume. Only traditional folk instruments are played; instruments such as the clarinet and accordion are not permitted even though they were introduced into Bulgaria over a hundred years ago. The motivation for this reasoning is that these "modern" instruments are not distinctive to Bulgaria.

Kolektivi exist in Bulgaria because of the organizational efforts of the *Centura za Hudožestvena Samodejnost* (Center for Amateur Arts), under the Ministry for Culture, which sets the guidelines for their activities. Kolektivi are most visible at folklore festivals, where participation is carefully screened with an eye to "authenticity." According to Venelin Krustev, director of the Institute of Music, "the most distinctive trait of the national festivals is their presentation of absolutely pure folk music, dance, customs, and games" (1974:72). At all national festivals, however, an obvious omission is the musical representation of some national minorities, namely Turks and Gypsies. When Turks and Gypsies do participate, they perform Bulgarian music, rather than music that is distinctively Turkish or Gypsy. Similarly, those rituals of the Pomaks which are distinctively Moslem, such as *Bajram* (the feast of sacrifice), are not enacted at festivals. In addition, at the 1979 Pirin Pee festival, some traditional Moslem Pomak costumes were altered to appear more Bulgarian. It is clear that the folklore presented at festivals is carefully screened. "Purity" and "authenticity" turn out to mean conformity to a unified image of Bulgarian folklore.

Besides government-sponsored regional and national festivals, there are also naturally-occurring informal gatherings or *subori*, which celebrate saints' days or historical holidays. These may occur on the village level or may draw participation from a wider area. During the last two decades, through government sponsorship, many of these saint's day celebrations have become regional folk festivals, which include political speeches and competitive awards. The government has also introduced many political holidays, such as International Workers' Day and International Women's Day. These holidays (as well as festivals and subori) are the occasion for political speeches linking folklore to patriotism. In all major cities, parades which take place on political holidays include massive folklore displays. For example, on September 9, the anniversary of the socialist revolution, thousands of school children perform Bulgarian folk dances in the central squares in perfectly rehearsed synchronization. Similarly, a trademark of the Rožen subor in the Rodope mountains is an ensemble consisting of 100 bagpipers playing simultaneously. In the Sliven district there is an ensemble of 100 *kaval* (end-blown flute) players. While traditionally music-making was a solo or small group endeavor, the trend of contemporary government sponsorship is toward massive numbers of peo-

ple playing, singing, and dancing together. These mass phenomena serve as symbols of the political and cultural harmony of the nation and reinforce the image of workers' unity.

Additional evidence of political involvement in folklore is the case of government manipulation of traditional rituals. For example, *Gergjovden* (St. George's Day), traditionally celebrated by dancing, singing, and roasting lambs, has now been renamed *Den na Ovčarja* (Day of the Shepherds). This name comes from the association of St. George with the protection of the flocks. In village shepherding cooperatives, productive workers are honored with speeches and medals, and all workers are served a lamb dinner. The setting of the ritual has thus shifted from the home to the cooperative, and the religious content of the ritual has been secularized. Similarly, *Babinden* (Grandmother's Day), which is traditionally celebrated by bringing food and gifts to old women who assist in childbirth, has now been renamed *Den na Rodilnata Pomošt* (Day of Assistance in Childbirth). In city hospitals and village clinics, obstetricians and midwives are honored with a stiff ceremony. Other examples of the transformation of traditional rituals include *Trifon Zarezan* (St. Tryphon) which has become *Den na Lozarja* (Day of the Grapekeepers), and *Sirni Zagovezni* (Cheese Sunday), which has become *Den na Počitta kum Roditelite* (Day of Parental Respect) (Janev 1970).

Replacement of religious symbols with secular, mainly political, symbols can be seen in funeral rituals. Now, instead of carrying orthodox crosses or icons, funeral marchers carry a red star mounted on a pole. Similarly, the entire Christmas season has been secularized by the substitution of an emphasis on New Year's. The word "Christmas" does not appear on greeting cards or in store windows, gifts are exchanged on New Year's, and workers receive New Year's Day, not Christmas, as a holiday. In the past, of course, Christmas was a very important religious and ritual event. The religious significance of another important folk holiday, Easter, has been replaced by an emphasis on the first day of spring. Instead of printing Easter cards, the government prints "First Day of Spring" cards.

In sum, government sponsorship of the preservation of folklore is highly selective. Folklore is artificially and selectively preserved on festival stages. However, in actual village contexts, the religious content of rituals has been secularized and politicized.

Government Sponsorship of Professional Folklore Ensembles and Folk Music Schools

Professional folk music and dance ensembles serve as a guiding force in the current direction of folklore in Bulgaria. After the Second World War, national and regional ensembles were formed by the recruitment of some of the best folk musicians and singers from villages and towns. Perhaps most famous is the *Duržaven Ansambul za Narodni Pesni i Tanci* (State Ensemble for Folk Songs and Dances) founded in 1951 by Filip Kutev and Ivan Kavaldžiev. For the first time on such a large scale, musicians and singers from all parts of the country were combined into one group.

From their very inception, ensembles did not play village music, but instead, a new Westernized form of Bulgarian folk music. Ensemble music consists of harmonized arrangements of village melodies or composed melodies for large groups of instruments and voices. Likewise, songs are either arranged in non-traditional multi-part harmonies for large choruses, or else performed solo with an instrumental arrangement. The advent of Western musical arrangement, according to Bulgarian ethnomusicologists, is a natural and necessary step in the development of contemporary folk music.[6] This process may also be viewed as a conscious manipulation of the direction of folk music away from tradi-

tional forms and toward the polyphonic choral texture of European classical music. Indeed, many of the composers and arrangers of ensemble folk music were trained in classical music in the Soviet Union.

Traditional texts of folk songs are reworked by state poets into subtle political statements. For example, in a number of songs in the Pirin Ensemble's repertoire, the word "Macedonia" has been replaced by "Bulgaria." Also, traditional texts are almost always abridged and condensed for concert performances and radio recordings. This often causes the disruption or complete loss of the meaning of the song. Frequently, entirely new texts which reflect political and economic concerns are grafted onto traditional melodies.[7] Songs composed in folk style about partisan heroes are currently popular. Songs of this type are disseminated widely through the radio and the record industry, and consequently, a few have passed into oral tradition. The ensembles are also an obvious vehicle for the popularization of these composed songs.

The ensemble repertoire is chosen carefully by cultural planners with an eye to political content and entertainment. All regional ensembles are required to perform folklore not only from their own region, but from other regions as well, thereby presenting a concert program which expresses the unity of the country. Unfortunately, regional styling suffers in this process. Furthermore, the ensemble repertoire always includes at least one Russian song to symbolize friendship with the Soviet Union. From their very inception, there was a marked emphasis on Thracian music in the ensembles. This occurred probably because virtually all of the ensemble organizers were Thracians themselves. Although Thrace is only one of eight ethnographic regions in Bulgaria, Thracian music has come to be the "national music" of Bulgaria. It is heard on the radio and at concerts more than the music of any other region. Furthermore, this Thracian emphasis is perpetuated by being the major portion of the repertoire taught at folk-music schools. Government sponsored schools offer students ensemble training and transmit to the students the ensemble aesthetic. At the schools, students learn the technique, style, and often the exact repertoire which ensembles play. This contributes to a marked standardization and homogenization of folk music throughout the country.

The influence of the ensembles on Bulgarian folk culture should not be underestimated. The ensembles have created a class of government-sponsored professional musicians. An inevitable result of such professionalization is that villagers begin to see themselves, and are seen by others, as inferior. Musical tastes and aesthetics are shaped by the ensembles because of their high visibility. Ensemble music is widely distributed by the mass media through records, radio, television, and concert performances. The greatest percentage of folk music records consist of ensemble singers or musicians with ensemble accompaniment. Naturally, the Bulgarian public and the international public become accustomed to hearing the newer ensemble style, and, thus, public taste is molded. Today, what many Bulgarians consider as folk music is what the ensembles perform, rather than what the villagers perform. This emphasis on ensemble music, along with the emphasis on Thracian music, contributes to the formation of one Bulgarian "national music" rather than regional musics. The ensembles, in effect, serve as symbols of the cultural unity of the country and the modernization of the nation's folklore.

Conclusion

To summarize, folklore continues to serve nationalistic ends today as it did in the nineteenth century. In the struggle for National Liberation, traditional hajduk songs stirred the spirit of revolt and in turn were used as models by revolutionary poets. Today, state poets continue to use folk

models in creating songs which praise the socialist regime. Since 1944, the government has taken a serious interest in its nation's folklore. The collecting and publishing activities of the folklore institutes, as well as the work of the recording industry, also reveal nationalistic motivations. Furthermore, government-sponsored folklore in Bulgaria is a rich area for the examination of the interplay between tradition and change in a highly politicized setting. The performance-centered activities of the kolektivi, the ensembles, and the folk-music schools are examples of selective preservation and directed innovation for cultural and political purposes. On the one hand, one may observe in contemporary Bulgaria the traditional village folklore of the recent past preserved by kolektivi at folklore festivals; on the other hand, one may observe the transformation of traditional rituals into political holidays; and finally, one may observe professional ensembles which emphasize popularization, theatricality and cultural unity.

Clearly, the government's attitude has shaped the direction of these various types of folklore phenomena. According to Todor Todorov, "The purpose of Bulgarian cultural policy is not to preserve tradition on the level it has been, but to direct it to such a course of development, which will bring it in harmony with contemporary cultural needs" (1976:176). In coming years, as schooled performers gradually replace traditional performers, it will be interesting to observe the direction of Bulgarian folklore. A new generation of Bulgarians is emerging, a generation shaped by government-sponsored folklore rather than by village traditions.

NOTES

[1] Data were collected 1979-1980. The author lived in Sofia for one month and travelled to other provincial towns and villages for nine months; five months were spent observing folk music schools. Four additional research trips (1971-1976) yielded supplemental material. Contact was made with the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (Institute of Folklore, Institute of Music, Ethnographic Museum), the Center for Amateur Arts, and many professional and amateur ensembles and collectives.

[2] For surveys of early collecting activities see Krader (1969), Tilney (1971) and Dinekov (1981).

[3] Similarly, Yugoslav folk dance companies often include a Šop (Bulgarian) suite in their performances.

[4] See Silverman (1983) for a discussion of Pomak culture.

[5] For example, Manol Todorov writes in the introduction to his textbook on folk music: "In musical folklore, a great role in the building of socialist consciousness and the development of contemporary socialist culture was played by the Soviet Union" (1973:4).

[6] For example, Todor Todorov writes: " The polyphonic development of folk music by composers is a normal stage in its existence. This stage had to come as a natural solution to the problem of the new function of the song. . .to satisfy. . . the wider musical interests of contemporary man" (1976:179).

[7] Here is an example of such a song sung by the ensemble at Radio Sofia:

The moon shines brightly among the stars
as the factories shine in the mountains
in the mountains, and in the plains.
The birds sing, mother, in the valleys
and in the factories, the machines are lined up.
They sing for the heroes
at the power plants, at every turn.
The birds sing from the forest
like the combines in the meadows.
They sing strong-willed and happy
about the tables, full and abundant.

Songs reflecting similar sentiments have also entered oral tradition:

Stojan's mother said to him:
"Stojan, my son, Stojan
go out my son, lead
father's oxen from the stall
plough the black earth
and sow the white wheat."
"Mother, my dear old mother
you speak beautifully
but mother, I'm ashamed
to plough with oxen.
I'll sign up
at our new cooperative farm
and become a tractor driver
and plow deep furrows."

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