

# KUKERI: RITUAL PERFORMANCES IN BULGARIA

by

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(Under the Direction of Freda Scott Giles)

## ABSTRACT

The masked performances of Kukeri have survived from pre-Christian times and are still performed in multiple villages all over Bulgaria by men and women covered in goat skins and monstrous masks who, during the Winter months as well as around the Lenten season, chase the evil spirits away. The group of goat-skinned figures is followed by “funny men” dressed like women who stage satirical scenes commenting on current social issues such as presidential elections or price inflation. This dissertation analyzes the subject of Kukeri from the theoretical prism of performance studies and examines it as a performance incorporating theatrical elements such as improvisation, costumes and sets.

In addition to analyzing the performance elements of Kukeri, I examine the practices as a site for constructing and performing nationality, ethnicity and patriotism. Kukeri includes the stock characters of the two major religious groups currently present on the territory of Bulgaria—Muslims and Christians. I argue that the performances, contrary to widely spread scholarly affirmations and popular beliefs, do not belong exclusively to the Bulgarian-Christian segments of the population.

In addition, I investigate the performances as a site for constructing patriotism and nationality by also researching the process of “legitimatizing” Kukeri under Communism and reviewing the reconstructed Kukeri performances held at the official festivals away from their original village contexts and reframed according to the Party’s policy of staging and simulating the folk traditions of the people.

I also focus exclusively on the satirical scenes staged by the “funny men” groups and study them as sites of popular culture, political protest and social satire. From a cultural studies point of view, the Kukeri “funny men” scenes present an astute critique of the contemporary Bulgarian political situation.

INDEX WORDS: Kukeri, Koukeri, Kuker, Bulgaria, Bulgarian, Masked performances, Ritual, Folklore, Carnival, Balkans, Mumming, Mummers, Popular theatre, Street theatre, Political satire

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## DEDICATION

To Liliana Bakalova

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The ritual of Kukeri has survived from pagan times and is still performed in multiple villages all over Bulgaria. Although extremely popular within the territory of Bulgaria, the ritual is virtually unknown to the field of Western theatre studies. In recent years, the field of theatre has become increasingly interested in non-scripted events and the Kukeri practices provide a valuable case study that enhances our understanding of folk and street performances as preserved in the oral tradition.

The Kukeri ritual is performed by men and women covered in goat skins and monstrous masks who, during the Winter months as well as around Lent time, chase the evil spirits away. The group of goat-skinned figures is followed by “funny men” dressed like women who stage satirical scenes commenting on present social issues such as presidential elections or price inflation. Kukeri thus fuses seemingly contrasting performance elements such as ritual, social satire, and the Medieval procession—most of the satirical scenes are staged on moving carts or trucks. My research analyzes Kukeri as a performance incorporating theatrical elements such as improvisation, costumes and sets. In addition, my study for the very first time reviews the subject of Kukeri from the theoretical prism of performance studies.

In addition to analyzing the performance elements of Kukeri, I will examine the ritual as a site for constructing and performing nationality, ethnicity and patriotism. The ritual includes the stock characters of the two major religious groups currently present in the territory of

Bulgaria: Muslims and Christians.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the ritual is still widely considered to belong exclusively to the Christian segment of the Bulgarian population. The scholarly research published in Bulgarian places Kukeri exclusively within the Slavic and the Southern European folk traditions. My research will investigate the political connotation of such affirmations and its relations to the construction of patriotism.

The field research I undertook showed that certain villages with Turkish populations within Bulgaria celebrate Kukeri on the fourth day of the Muslim religious holiday Kurban Bairam. Yet, the fact that Kukeri is celebrated by the Turks in Bulgaria is widely unknown to the Kukeri performers from other regions and either unknown or ignored by scholars. By recording the ritual in the Turkish villages, I argue that the ritual, contrary to widely spread scholarly affirmations and popular beliefs, does not belong exclusively to the Bulgarian-Christian segments of the population.

In addition, I investigate the performances as a site for constructing patriotism and nationality by also researching the process of “legalizing” Kukeri under Communism. While some publications briefly mention the fact that Kukeri was banned shortly after World War II<sup>2</sup> and established again in the late 1950s by an official Party’s decision, no in-depth research has been undertaken to answer the question of how the Kukeri practices fitted into the wider Party’s policy of redefining ritual and customs and transforming them into political performances. For the first time, my research reviews the reestablished Kukeri performances at the official festivals away from the villages in the context of the Party’s policy of staging and simulating the folk traditions of the people. I also review the festival in the wider context of what in Bulgaria is known as “hudozhestvena samodeinost” or folklore that has been choreographed for staged

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<sup>1</sup> Bulgarians are predominantly Christian while the Bulgarian Turks are predominantly Muslim. In addition, there is a Muslim minority of non-Turkish Bulgarians.

<sup>2</sup> Bulgaria was a Socialist country from 1944 to 1989.

performances encouraged by the Party and its patriotic line. By doing so, I answer questions about simulating authenticity for political purposes.

Started under Communism, the official festivals have survived the fall of Communism and still attract wide audiences. Currently, even villages with no previous Kukeri traditions organize Kukeri ensembles, and groups from various regions travel to international carnival festivals. My research studies the reasons for such proliferation of folk performances and explores the ways national identity is being constructed within the new political realities of Bulgaria since it joined the European Union.

In addition to examining the festivals, I study Kukeri performances in the villages and focus specifically on the satirical scenes staged by the “funny men” groups. The scenes have been completely ignored by scholarly research in Bulgaria. In my dissertation, I answer the question of why Bulgarian academic circles would ignore the “funny men scenes” and further connect my argument to examining the sharp boundaries that still define academic fields in Bulgaria. I affirm that the current methodology of Bulgarian anthropology and folk studies could not handle a subject so closely related to popular art. As a result, the satirical scenes remain unrecorded and unresearched by academic circles in Bulgaria. I use the methodology of performance studies to analyze the satirical scenes and also to deconstruct the dichotomy of high and low art, still prevalent in Bulgarian academic circles. I also study the “funny men” scenes as embodied knowledge and oral tradition. Within its structure, the scenes incorporate a basic plot and heavily rely on improvisation.

## **Literature Review**

The main body of scholarly work about Kukeri has been published in Bulgarian. I was able to locate only three articles published in English. Within Bulgarian scholarly circles, Kukeri

has been analyzed through the theoretical lenses of the School of Cambridge, structuralism and semiotics. While Kukeri has been included in various sections of anthropological and folk studies publications, there are only about eight books in Bulgarian that focus exclusively on the celebration of the rites. There are about sixty journal articles in anthropology and folk studies, most of which are either descriptive or follow a structural or semiotic approach. Only a few of the articles relate the rites to theatre and their methodology follows the evolutionary theory of the School of Cambridge.

After Bulgaria gained its independence from Turkish rule at the end of the nineteenth century, the national tradition of scholarship began to develop. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Bulgarian ethnographer Mikhail Arnaudov included a description of the Kukeri rites in his publications on Bulgarian traditions and all subsequent scholarly literature credits his study as the first scholarly research done on the subject. In both of his books, *Ochertsii po Bulgarskia Folklor* [Studies in Bulgarian Folklore] and *Bulgarski Narodni Praznitsi* [Bulgarian Traditional Holidays], Arnaudov presents Kukeri entirely within the context of the Slavic as well as the Western European carnival traditions.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, politically, his work expresses the attempts of the young Bulgarian state to associate itself with the Western European civilization. Arnaudov is highly influenced by the School of Cambridge and its evolutionary theoretical approach. Operating within the theoretical framework of James John Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Arnaudov's text presents the Kukeri rites as relating to the myth of Dionysus. While later Bulgarian scholars offer different theories about the origin of the Kukeri rites, Arnaudov's analysis has not been disputed on methodological grounds and publications from the end of the

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<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Arnaudov, *Ochertsii po Bulgarskia Folklor* [Studies in Bulgarian Folklore] 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Vol.2 (Sofia: Akademichno Izdanie "Prof. Marin Drinov" [Academic Publication Prof. Marin Drinov], 1996). Mikhail Arnaudov, *Bulgarski Narodni Praznitsi* [Bulgarian Traditional Holidays] 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Sofia: Hemus, 1918).

twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century still cite Frazer and Gilbert Murray as valid theoretical sources.<sup>4</sup>

Following the first wave of Kukeri research, conducted mainly at the beginning of the twentieth century, a significant number of articles appear again in the 1970s, most of which adopt a structuralist methodological approach. Highly influenced by Vladimir Propp and the subsequent Soviet school of structural semiotics, the scholarly work of this period classifies the types of Kukeri rites and masks into structural models. The structuralist methodology remains influential within Bulgarian anthropology with articles published in the late 1990s still citing Edmund Leach and Claude Levi-Strauss as valid theoretical models long after the methodology has fallen out of favor with American and Western European scholars.<sup>5</sup> Within the 1970s and 80s, Petur Petrov's publications are among the most influential, with later scholars seeing them as equal in significance to those of Arnaudov's. According to Petrov, the Spring Kukeri celebrations relate to Thracian fertility rites, while the Winter ones relate to the Slavic masked games.<sup>6</sup> Petrov's conclusions are highly emblematic of the political power system in the socialist countries of the 1970s. Influenced by Soviet scholarly research, Petrov's analysis places Bulgarian customs within the context of the Slavic and most specifically, the Russian tradition.

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<sup>4</sup> Valeria Fol, "Modelut na Kosmosa v Obichai Kukovden," [The Cosmic Model in the Kukov Day Custom] *Chovek, Evolutsiia, Kosmos* [Humans, Evolution, Cosmos], 2 (1984): 126 – 37.

Also by Fol "Trakiiskoto Nasledstvo v Bulgarskata Kultura," [Thracian Heritage of the Bulgarian Culture] *Istoricheski Pregled* [Historical Overview], 3 – 4 (1981): 213 – 17. See also Fol i Stoian Raichevski. *Kukerat bez Maska* [The Kuker without a Mask] (Sofia: Universitetsko Izdatelstvo "Sv. Kliment Okhridski," [St. Kliment Okhridski University Press]), 1993.

<sup>5</sup> See Liudmila Ivanova-Ikonomova, "Novogodishni Maskiraniia v Gornodzhymaisko (ot Vtorata Polovina na XIX do Sredata na XX vek)," [New Year's Masquerades in the Region of Gornodzhymaisko], *Bulgarska Etnografiia* [Bulgarian Ethnography], 2 (1992): 69 – 79.

<sup>6</sup> Petur Petrov, "Kukeri: Bulgarski Obichai ot Antichen Proizhod," [Kukeri: Bulgarian Rites of Ancient Origin], *Etnogenezisi Kulturno Nasledstvo na Bulgarskia Narod* [Ethnogenesis and Cultural Heritage of the Bulgarian People] (Sofia: 1971). See also Petrov *Kukeri i Survakari—Izvestiia na Bulgarskoto Istoricheskoto Druzhestvo* [Kukeri and Sourvakari: News from the Bulgarian Historical Association] 1972.

And "Kukeri v s. Padarevo, Burgasko," [Kukeri in the village of Padarevo, Burgasko] *SBNY* 50 (1962): 345 – 69.

The majority of the 1970s publications also appropriate the Socialist jargon of disassociating the Kukeri rites from any religious meaning and instead follow Mikhail Bakhtin's model of the carnivalesque by explicitly defining the rites as either a carnival or a masquerade.<sup>7</sup> The decade also marks the Party's decision to start the nation-wide folk festivals at which groups from multiple villages and regions could present their work. Consequently, scholarly publications of the late 1970s and 1980s review the festivals in a descriptive way.<sup>8</sup> The decade also marks a crisis in the anthropological and the folk study research of the rites. Prominent scholars within Bulgarian circles, such as Georg Kraev, pose questions about the role of the anthropologist in researching rites recreated within the festival structure.<sup>9</sup> Lacking the theoretical vocabulary of post modernism, which has not become an active paradigm in Bulgarian academic circles at the time, and the theoretical reference of simulation, Kraev turns his attention to what he calls "classical folklore"—a model of the past which Kraev reconstructs as the lost original of the contemporary celebrations.

At the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the theoretical approach adopted in scholarly Bulgarian publications is still largely based on semiotics, with

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<sup>7</sup>M. Bochev, "Kukersi Igri: Kukeri: Kukerski Maski," [Kukeri Games; Kukeri: Kukeri Masks] *Problemi na Izkustvoto* [Topics in Art] 3 (1976): 27–34. Ani Kirilova, "Traditsionno i Suvremenno Sustoianie na Zimnite Karnavalni Praznitsi v Elhovsko," [Tradition and Current State of the Winter Carnival Celebrations in the region of Elhovsko] *Vekove* 4 (1981): 83-91.

<sup>8</sup> Ivan Dobrev, "Groteskata Sushnost na Bulgarskite Narodni Kukersi Igri," [The Grotesque in the Bulgarian Kukeri Games] *Bulgarski Folklor* [Bulgarian Folklore] 3 (1982). Elena Georgieva, "Opisanie na Kukerskite Obichai. Etnografski Materiali ot s. Ekzarkh Antimovo, s. Dragantsi, gr. Karnobat, c. Podvis, Karnobatsko i s. Stralzha, Iambolsko. Zapisani ot Elena Georgieva prez 1948 g" [Description of the Kukeri Rites. Ethnographic Material from the Villages of Ekzarch Antimovo, Dragantsi and Podvis in the Region of Karnobat, and the Village of Stralzha in the Region of Iambol. Recorded in 1948 by Elena Georgieva] pod. Ani Kirilova [ed. Ani Kirilova] *Bulgarska Etnografiia* [Bulgarian Ethnography] 2 (1991): 61–71.

<sup>9</sup> "Adaptivni Formi na Suvremennata Maskaradna Obrednost u Nas." [Adaptive Forms of the Contemporary Masquerade Customs in Bulgaria] *Bulgarski Folklor*. [Bulgarian Folklore]. 4 (1983): 84. Georg Kraev, "Adaptivni Formi na Suvremennata Maskaradna Obrednost u Nas," [Adaptive Forms of the Contemporary Masquerade Customs in Bulgaria] *Bulgarski Folklor* [Bulgarian Folklore] 4 (1983): 84. Also see Kraev, "Hudozhestvenata Samodeinost i Promeni v Maskaradnata Obrednost," [Community Arts and Studies in the Masquerade Rites] *Bulgarski Folklor* [Bulgarian Folklore] 1 (1985): 46, and "Tipologia na Kategoriata Parodiia v Kukerskiia Obred po Materiali ot selo Turiia i Selo Pavel Bania, Starozagorsko," [Typology of the Parody Category in the Kukeri Rites Based on Material from the Region of Turiia and Pavel Baniia Villages, Starozagorsko] *Folklor, Ezik i Narodna Sudba* [Folklore, Language, and Traditional Fate] (Sofia: 1979). 154–165.



Kraev analyzing visual signifiers in search of lost mythological meaning and Mikhailova basing her 2002 book *Maskirani li sa Maskiranite Personazhi* [Are the Masked Characters Masked] on archival material from the beginning of the twentieth century in search of images signifying pagan funeral rites.<sup>10</sup>

The very few publications that review the Kukeri rites in a theatrical context assert that the ritual has given rise to the beginning of mainstream Bulgarian theatre.<sup>11</sup> Thus, methodologically they are grounded in the evolutionary approach of the School of Cambridge, which has been discredited for being evolutionary and for bestowing a status of superiority to theatre over ritual. Articles that review the theatrical elements in the festival inevitably conclude that the festival itself could not constitute theatre and base their argument on a definition of theatre as a mimetic art form with clear separation between audience and performers.<sup>12</sup> In response to articles comparing Kukeri rites to theatre, folk studies scholars, such as Kraev, disagree both with seeing theatre as having developed out of the rites and with comparing the rites themselves to theatrical forms of expressions.<sup>13</sup> Kraev acknowledges that the rite celebrations have begun to resemble theatre. Yet, being bound by a very traditional definition of mainstream theatre, and lacking the methodology as well as the vocabulary of performance studies, Kraev could not define methodologically the changes that have occurred in the traditional celebrations and concludes that the rites have turned into “something else.”<sup>14</sup>

The 1982 *TDR* article “Winter Customs in Eastern Europe,” by Jean Marie Steinlen and Marguerite Oerlemans is among the only three English language publications that mention

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<sup>10</sup> Ganka Mikhailova, *Maskirani li sa Maskiranite Personazhi v Bulgarskata Narodna Traditsiia* [Are the Masked Characters Masked in the Bulgarian National [People’s] Tradition] (Sofia: 2002).

<sup>11</sup> See Margarita Bradistilova-Dobreva, “Teatralni Momenti v Obrednoto Zrelishte,” [Theatrical Moments in Ritual Spectacle] *Bulgarski Folklor* [Bulgarian Folklore] 7.1 (1981): 38 – 50.

<sup>12</sup> Evgenia Ivanova, “Kukerite—Magiia Igra ili Teatur,” [The Kukeri—Magic, Game or Theatre] *Problemi na Izkustvoto* [Topics in Art] 1 (1990): 60—4.

<sup>13</sup> Kraev *Adaptivni*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 86.

Kukeri.<sup>15</sup> The article is mostly descriptive, displaying the anthropological concern for authenticity that is typical for early performance studies.<sup>16</sup> The second article in English—Anna Ilieva and Anna Shtarbanova’s “Bulgarian Men’s and Women’s Ritual Dances with Implements and Attributes,” published in the music studies journal *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*—presents Kukeri as part of the male initiation rites.<sup>17</sup> The article adopts a semiotic approach with the authors explicitly defining their task as decoding meaning hidden in the masked games. The most recent article published in English about Kukeri is authored by an anthropologist. Gerald Creed’s “Constituted through Conflict: Images of Community in Bulgarian Rural Ritual” presents a general description of the Kukeri rites and sees its inclusion of the stock characters of both Gypsies and Bulgarians as signs of a community that has embraced diversity instead of idealized notions of national homogeneity.<sup>18</sup> The article explicitly states that to the best of the author’s knowledge Kukeri is celebrated only by the Bulgarian-Christian segment of the population. According to the author, the ritual is not practiced by the Turks living in the territory of Bulgaria.

### **Theories about the origin of Kukeri**

All of the existent literature on the Kukeri celebrations places Kukeri’s origin in either the practices of Ancient Thrace, Greece or within the Slavic tradition. Based on little evidence, each theory originated at a particular historical moment, defined by a particular political power. As a result, each theory served a specific political agenda. Within my study, I am not interested

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<sup>15</sup> Jean Marie Steinlen and Marguerite Oerlemans, “Winter Customs in Eastern European Countries,” *The Drama Review: TDR* 26.4 (1982): 19–24.

<sup>16</sup> The approach is exemplified by Richard Schechner’s earlier publications. See Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1985]. The book deems rituals performed for tourists to be of a lesser value.

<sup>17</sup> Anna Ilieva and Anna Shtarbanova, “Bulgarian Men’s and Women’s Ritual Dances with Implements and Attributes,” *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* (1991): 33.

<sup>18</sup> Gerald Creed, “Constituted through Conflict: Images of Community (and Nation) in Bulgarian Rural Ritual,” *American Anthropologist* 106.1 (2004) 68.

in asserting a primary origin of the rites for such attempts could easily be criticized for being too speculative. Instead, I focus on analyzing the political context surrounding the developed theories about the Kukeri origin. Ascribing an embodied practice to a specific ethnic or national tradition in a region marked with migration and cultural contamination of such magnitude as the Balkans inevitably becomes a political statement and an expression of a policy in service of specific national identity.

The theories ascribing the Kukeri games to the Ancient Greek tradition at the turn of the twentieth century coincided with the pro-European political aspirations of the newly founded Bulgarian state after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. In early twentieth century, Mihail Arnaudov, points to the similarities between the goat skin covered wild Kukeri men and the ancient Dionysus rites. According to Arnaudov, “In answering the question about the origin and the initial meaning of the [Kukeri] rites, we need to consider the amazingly similar Greek pre-Lent carnival of our times as well as the Ancient mysteries of Dionysus.”<sup>19</sup> Arnaudov further applies comparative analysis to draw similarities between the Bulgarian rites at the turn of the twentieth century and the Greek practices of ancient times: “The date of the celebrations [Spring], the Kukeri procession, the cross-dressing, the character of the king, the ritual plowing, the blessing for fertility—all of this reminds us of the Ancient celebrations of Dionysus”<sup>20</sup> According to Arnaudov, the Kukeri participants have unknowingly preserved within their bodies the ancient Greek tradition. In his account of the practices in the Bulgarian region of Burgas, Arnaudov lists references such as the local name of the performances, the Turkish word Dzhamali, and the presence of the Arab stock character, and yet he continues to frame them exclusively within the Western tradition. Establishing connections between the Bulgarian

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<sup>19</sup> Arnaudov *Ochertsii* 554.

<sup>20</sup> The character of the king, is a stock figure popular in multiple Bulgarian areas. A participant dressed as a king is carried on a three-wheeler as part of the procession.

embodied tradition and the cradle of Western Civilization coincides with the political aspirations of the young Bulgarian state to break away from the long centuries of Turkish influence and reclaim an undisputedly European cultural identity.

The theory of the Ancient Greek origin of the Kukeri practices holds ground within Bulgarian scholarship up until the 1960s, when a new theory connecting the ritual to the Slavic tradition responds to the political influence of the Soviet Union.<sup>21</sup> In 1963, Petur Petrov concludes that the masked practices of Bulgaria are the result of the fusion of Thracian and Slavic rites.<sup>22</sup> By using comparative analyses between the Russian and Bulgarian traditions, Petrov concludes that the presence of similar stock characters such as the bride, groom, horse, bear, etc. proves the Slavic origin of the Bulgarian carnival. The very same characters are of course present within the Turkish Anatolian and Greek traditions. While not examining any Turkish references such as the local names of the Bulgarian practices in certain regions, Petrov proceeds to explain the similarities between the Bulgarian and Greek traditions with the following rather extraordinary conclusion: the Greeks practicing the masked rituals are of Bulgarian descent.<sup>23</sup> The Greeks, being non-Slavic and capitalists in 1972 are politically excluded from the pan-Slavic discourse dominating Soviet and subsequently Bulgarian scholarship at the time.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In recent years the theory of the Ancient Greek origin of the Kukeri games has been recycled in certain publications that continue to apply comparative analysis. See Liudmila Ivanova-Ikonomova, “Novogodishnite Maskiraniia v Pirinskia Krai v Konteksta na Obshtobulgraskite I Mita sa Dionisis,” [The New Year’s Masked Games in The Region of Pirin in the Context of the Myth of Dionysus] *Balkanistic Forum* 3 (1993): 5—13 and Dimitrina Mitova-Dzhoneva, “Nai-Ranniat Komponent na Kukeriskite Igri,” [The Earliest Component of the Kukeri Games] *Anali* 1-2 (1995): 39-63.

<sup>22</sup> Petur Petrov “Kukeri v Padarevo, Burgasko” 68.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 276.

<sup>24</sup> A 1976 article by a Soviet scholar first points to the Slavic origin of the Bulgarian Kukeri rites. See Zlatovkaia, “Proizhozhdenia Nekotorih Elemntov Kukersogo Obriada u Bolgars,” [The Origin of the Kukeri Rites among the Bulgarians] *CZ, Moslo* 1967 31—46.

The theory of the Thracian origin of the Kukeri practices gains increasing popularity among Bulgarian scholarship throughout the 1980s and 1990s until it culminates in the work of Valeria Fol.<sup>25</sup> One of the more provocative and extraordinary theories, presented by Valeria Fol in several articles from the late 1980s and 1990s, as well in the 1991 book *Kukerut bez Maska* [The Kouker without a Mask], asserts that the Bulgarian Kukeri rites relate to the Thracian Dionysus's celebrations that the Greeks supposedly saw in their colonies and copied for their own rites.<sup>26</sup> Based on little evidence, the argument rests largely on a comparative analysis between a specific version of the myth of Dionysus and the contemporary Kukeri celebrations in a certain Bulgarian region:

The ringing of the cow bells, the death and the revival, [...] the emphasized phallic actions that the Kouker [sic] performs during the ritual, all these point to the genetic link with the ancient Dionysus-Zagreus rituals. The rituals are characteristics of the nonliterary, so called Thracian, Orphism.<sup>27</sup>

Methodologically, Fol's approach of reconstructing past practices of little or questionable evidence on the basis of comparative analysis with contemporary analogues has been highly criticized within international anthropological circles for being potentially too speculative and also evolutionary.<sup>28</sup> From a political stand point, Fol's studies yet again place the Kukeri practices entirely within the non-Turkish and non-Muslim traditions. According to Fol: "The kouker's [sic] ritual died away in the regions that remained with the state boundaries of Turkey after the liberation of Bulgaria (AD 1878) and the deportation of the Bulgarian and the Greek

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<sup>25</sup> Within Bulgarian scholarship, Petrov's theory has been disputed in the work of Georg Kraev. The Thracian origin theory, however, is still dominating the work of Valria Fol.

<sup>26</sup> Fol. i Stoian Raichevski, *Kukerut bez Maska*,

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>28</sup> For a summary of the critique "of cultural evolutionists, who made unwarranted use of present-day ethnographic information in reconstructions of the past" see Robert Layton. *An Introduction to Theory in Anthropology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 75.

population from the European part of Turkey before the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>29</sup> According to Fol, any practice of the Kukeri masked games within the Ottoman Empire belonged to the Bulgarians and Greeks and died out once they moved out. Supported with no cited evidence, the statement proves factually contradictory to the data collected by Turkish scholars such as Metin And about masked rituals practiced in various Turkish villages through Anatolia in the second part of the twentieth century, or nearly a hundred years after 1878.<sup>30</sup>

A ritual practiced by various ethnic groups and affected by migration—in addition to being under Turkish rule for over five centuries, since many Bulgarians remained in Anatolia until the early years of the twentieth century while Turks are still living on the territory of Bulgaria—would inevitably bear the mark of syncretism. Any attempt to place the practices exclusively within a particular tradition transforms the bodies of the ritual participants into sites on which centuries of cultural contamination stage the drama of one’s tradition and identity.

### **Methodology of Dissertation**

Methodologically, my approach applies the performance studies paradigm, as outlined by Richard Schechner, and uses it both as a method of knowing, or an episteme, and as providing a definition for the subject of my study.<sup>31</sup> Performance studies as a field exists at the intersection of other disciplines such as theatre, anthropology, sociology and gender studies to name only a few. The dominant perspective of my research incorporates the anthropological focus of performance studies and uses paradigms borrowed from the most recent work of performance

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid 86.

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed account of Metin And’s work see Chapter 4.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London: Routledge, 2003).

studies anthropologists such as Diana Taylor.<sup>32</sup> In addition, I also apply the methodology of gender studies, which in its definition of performativity could be seen as yet another component of performance studies.

My study analyzes Kukeri as a form of performance that involves the theatrical elements of stock characters, plot, staging, set, and costumes. In addition, I am examining the way the performances themselves provide the arena for staging gender, nationality and ethnicity. A working presupposition underlying this study is that gender, nationality and ethnicity are social constructs whose reiteration both serve and subvert normative systems of power.<sup>33</sup> Thus I am also incorporating the methodology of gender studies and the concept of performativity and most specifically the work of Judith Butler.<sup>34</sup> My study specifically questions what power structures the Kukeri performances support in their dramatization of the gender and national stereotypes. At the same time, I also examine the ways in which these very dramatizations subvert normativity.

My research is also informed by the paradigm of cultural memory, as outlined by Jeanette Rodriguez and Ted Fortier.<sup>35</sup> I particularly focus on the concept of memory culture, as defined in the field of anthropology and further outlined by the above scholars, and extend it to review the ways in which the concept itself could be dramatized. From a way of preserving cultural knowledge and transferring it from generation to generation, the Kukeri performances have become an arena for staging memory culture in their reenactment of folk tradition. What I am particularly interested in is the connection between staging cultural identity, the dramatization of

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<sup>32</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>33</sup> Whether gender is socially constructed or biologically pre-determined still constitutes a topic of heated scholarly debate. This study will focus on the ways gender, ethnicity and nationality are culturally defined and socially performed.

<sup>34</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>35</sup> Ted Fortier and Jeanette Rodriguez, *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith and Identity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).

authenticity and the resulting construction of national and patriotic consciousness with all of its political connotations.

I will also follow Diana Taylor's methodology, as outlined in her book *The Archive and the Repertoire*, and look at embodied memory as a way of constructing, sustaining and reiterating meaning. According to Taylor, live performances do not disappear but instead repeat themselves following their own codes of selectability. I am particularly interested in looking at what is kept and what left out in the embodied practices as signifying the construction of memory culture through a process of constant self- editing.

In addition, my research will closely follow Taylor's call for a shift in methodology and treat the carriers of embodied performances as equal colleagues instead of subjects. Such a shift leads to a power swing—instead of privileging the written (scholarly) word as the legitimate carrier of meaning it acknowledges the performers of embodied practices not simply as subjects of written studies but as equal experts. I will also resort to the distinction Taylor makes between the repertoire—dance, movement, singing, orality, live performance—and the archive—documents, texts, archeological excavations, bones, photographs, CD and video recordings—and the way the two interconnect to produce meaning.<sup>36</sup> The presently available archive about Kukeri consists of video recordings, photographs, previous scholarly field research and published material. In the case of official political documents testifying to festival and religious regulations, the archive has largely disappeared, which illustrates Taylor's observation about stability presenting a major mythological distinction between the archive and the repertoire. In that case, my research would largely depend on communal memory, or I will be using the repertoire to restore the missing data in the archive. I use the archive mainly to frame the Kukeri

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<sup>36</sup> Throughout my dissertation, I often use the terms "archive" and "repertoire" in the sense outlined by Diana Taylor.



practices within the specific political discourse of the second half of the twentieth century by referring to numerous treatises and speeches of the Bulgarian Communist Party as preserved in the State National Archive of Bulgaria.

Finally, in my research I borrow the tools of anthropology in conducting field research and taking both structured and unstructured interviews. During more than six months of field research in Bulgaria, I have observed multiple performances in person, conducted numerous interviews, and collected a vast amount of video and photographic material.

## **Chapter Outline**

Chapter 2 reviews the current state of Kukeri and argues that the same way performance studies as a paradigm exists on the border of disciplines, the Kukeri practices exist in between the forms of ritual, carnival, and theatre. At the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty first century, multiple towns and villages throughout Bulgaria continue to celebrate Kukeri day. At the local level, the performances still exhibit ritualistic characteristics by subjecting time, space and order to their own intricate code. At the same time, the participants from numerous regions travel to multiple national and international carnival festivals where they engage in the global cultural market. At both the local, and festival level, the Kukeri practices have also become a space for reenacting and reimagining one's tradition. At festivals, the participants often stage theatrical scenes to present their local customs. At the local level, they use traditional costumes and props to theatrically recreate the image of their cultural heritage. The chapter concludes by connecting the theatricalization of the Kukeri practices to cultural nostalgia.

Chapter 3 traces the roots of cultural nostalgia to the official policies of the Communist Party towards Bulgarian folklore in the second half of the twentieth century. It reviews the

Kukeri practices in the larger context of the Party agenda of instilling patriotism through sponsorship of groups practicing traditional ritual and customs. In the 1960s, multiple folk art festivals proliferate all over Bulgaria and greatly change the Kukeri practices. The Kukeri groups from multiple regions become ensembles with a unified look. In addition, in their preparation for festivals, the Kukeri participants alter their practices in search of the authentic. The festival stages thus contribute to the process of authenticity simulation. The chapter concludes by examining how the official Party line in its attempt to construct a pure Bulgarian identity cleanses syncretic forms such as the Kukeri of their foreign and especially Turkish influences.

Chapter 4 begins by arguing that the Kukeri practices are ultimately a highly syncretic form that reflects centuries of cultural contamination on the Balkans. It examines in detail the work of the prominent Turkish folklorist Metin And, whose field research points to examples of masked rituals very similar to the Kukeri, practiced by the Turkish population of Anatolia. Contrary to the data published in the majority of scholarly sources in Bulgarian, the chapter submits field research testifying to the existence of vibrant Kukeri practices among the Muslim population within the territory of Bulgaria. It also places the scholarly discourse that presents the Kukeri practices as belonging exclusively to the non-Muslim segments of the Bulgarian population within the frame of the political discourse and regulations of the Communist Party towards the religious Muslim minorities living on the territory of Bulgaria. All throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the Party accepts increasingly restricting regulations towards the Muslim and Turkish population in its attempt to transform Bulgaria into “a one nation state.” The chapter concludes by examining the cross-dressed masked celebrations in a couple of villages with Muslim population on the territory of Bulgaria.

Chapter 5 focuses entirely on the cross-dressed Kukeri characters all over Bulgaria. It reviews the “funny men” groups in the context of political satire, popular culture, as well as mummer’s and carnival humor. Although never taken to official festivals, and largely ignored by Bulgarian scholarship, the “funny men” groups are extremely popular at the local level with cross-dressed characters staging scenes on subjects varying from TV shows to political elections. By examining the definitional characteristics of carnival, I argue that the “funny men” scenes constitute the most authentic part of the carnival. The anthropological paradigm popular within Bulgarian scholarship sees the traditionally dressed stock characters together with the goat skin covered figures as authentic. On the contrary, I argue that the traditionally dressed Kukeri participants exhibit the frozen-in-time museum version of the practices, while the “funny men” groups present the most vibrant and living form of carnival. The chapter also examines the carnival stage as an arena for political protest. It concludes by studying the ways in which “the funny men” scenes construct Bulgarian identity.

## CHAPTER 2

### PERFORMING KUKERI: RITUAL, CARNIVAL, OR THEATRE

The same way performance studies, as a paradigm, exists on the border of disciplines, Kukeri exists in between ritual, carnival and theatre. The participants construct multiple identities and perform them accordingly. One and the same group might engage in ritual activities in their own villages on New Year's Day, then later in the year parade in the streets of the cities hosting masqueraded processions, as well as perform plays enacting the Kukeri tradition on festival stages.

#### **Kukeri as Ritual**

In the Western Bulgarian town of Razlog, Kukeri is performed yearly on January 1. The participants have recently begun to record the event from the pre-dawn dressing of the main Kukeri participant—a young boy covered in the best goat skins—up until the very end when the whole community gathers for a festive afternoon celebration in the town square. The DVD recordings run for as long as six hours and present a detailed account of the sequence of the Kukeri events. The film material of the most recent years such as 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007 presents a consistent picture of events performed in a ritualistic order. Each neighborhood designates a First Kukeri participant based on seniority and years of experience and it is considered a great honor for a household to have their son elected. In Razlog, only young unmarried men could wear the goat skins. While the goat skin figures are exclusively unmarried men, there is no gender or age restrictions for the rest of the participants.<sup>37</sup> In addition to Kukeri,

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<sup>37</sup> The rules change from region to region. Eleshnitsa, a village less than ten miles away from Razlog, currently accepts women among its goat skin groups.

the local population calls the goat skin men Chaushi and refers to the first Kukeri participant as to the First Chaush.

Early in the morning, the family of the First Chaush opens the door of their house for all neighbors to stop by and help themselves to the food offerings. The family literally leaves the door to their house open and sets the table strategically within the entrance to the house. The musicians and, in recent times, the camera person hired by the family to record the event, are the first to arrive. The neighborhood commissions the drummers and the zurna—a conical woodwind instrument—players to perform the traditional folk compositions. The musicians start playing shortly after they have tried the food of the hosts and perform continuously for the next seven to nine hours. Once the music starts playing, the household members begin dancing the horo—a traditional Bulgarian step dance played either in a semi or a full circle with all performers holding hands. The dance is interrupted only when a family member needs to attend to a different activity such as greeting a guest or re-warming the pot with the home made brandy, which constitutes the main offering. Meanwhile, the First Chaush receives the basics of his costumes such as the foam padding to support the heavy cattle bells each performer carries under his furs. A group of men wrap and sew the skins around each of his legs. In the last stage of the dressing, the maker of the skins carries a piece of wood in the shape of a cross with the over garment stretched on it.<sup>38</sup> Once introduced, the top skins are widely admired with the members of the small gathering praising them aloud. The goat skins have previously been seen by the group that has specifically approved and ordered them. Yet, on the particular day of the Kukeri celebrations, the moment the goat skins enter the house of the First Chaush is treated as a special one. Once the First Chaush is dressed, the company leaves the house. Initially, the group consists

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<sup>38</sup> The over piece has pre-sewn openings for the head and the hands and the wood in the shape of a cross is used for storage purposes.

of the First Chaush, his immediate family and friends, the musicians and a couple dressed in folk attire. All except the First Chaush are playing the traditional folk dance of horo following the rhythm of the drums and the zurna. The procession goes in a slow circular movement in the direction of the square. Along the way, neighbors wait to greet the players with small offerings of sweet warm brandy and chocolate candies. Performers and observers shake hands with the observers joining the horo and becoming performers themselves. More young couples dressed in folk attire come out of the houses and gradually the group grows into a long procession. More men in goat skins join the First Chaush as well. The participants playing the horo move in slow and rhythmical steps, while the goat skin ones jump chaotically in all directions. According to the participants, in the past, the goat skin players acted as guards to the horo. Nowadays, although the city provides police enforcement, the Kukeri men still run around the horo and keep the crowds away. On its way to the square, the procession is greeted by people standing on their balconies and it takes a few hours for the constantly increasing and slowly moving group to finally reach the square which is the gathering place for all of the neighborhoods. In the square, the horo continues with people from the whole town joining in. While some might choose to stay on the side and observe, there is no clear demarcation between players and observers. The horo consists of neighbors dressed in both contemporary and traditional attire. Around two o'clock in the afternoon the groups return to their neighborhoods with the company of the First Chaush covering the same route in the steps of the horo. At the end of the event, the Kukeri participants have continuously performed for over seven hours a monotonous ritualistic movement such as the steps of the horo or the jumps of the goat skin men.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> For ritual as a performance of a rhythmically monotonous movement leading to a trance see Felicitas Goodman, "Trance, Posture, and Ritual: Access to the Alternate Reality," *The Nature and Function of Ritual*, ed. Ruth-Inge Heinze (London: Bergin & Garvey, 2000) 277-83.

While the Razlog Kukeri players might participate in multiple festival processions hosted by other towns throughout the year, the full ritual event takes place only on January 1. The participants could put the costumes on for other occasions, but the community involvement starting from the feast at the home of the First Chush and ending with the grand horo in the town square happens only on that particular day. When performed in the villages or towns of its participants, the Kukeri practices follow a specific sequence of chronological events. Yet, when presented at festivals for an audience of outsiders, the events are drastically compressed in time and space. When conducted at the local villages or towns, the Kukeri celebrations are performed by and for the community at home. When included in festivals, they are directed exclusively toward an audience of outside judges and observers. Since the audience at festivals might not belong to the same community, it might also lack a previous encounter with any of the practices. As a result, the participants compose an abbreviated version of Kukeri by highlighting certain key moments. A presentation at a festival could last only for a few minutes within which the audiences witness a “trailer” version of the home events. At the local level, thus, the practices exhibit ritual characteristics such as following a sequence of events performed in their designated time and space for the benefit of the participants who are also their main observers. Time and space, in this particular case, indicate the frame within which the practices are conducted on their designated day, such as January 1 or Monday before Fat Sunday, and in their designated location such as the towns or villages of the participants.<sup>40</sup> Time also refers to the actual duration of the

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<sup>40</sup> I use the term ritual to indicate Kukeri practices at the homes of the participants, performed by and for their communities by following a particular sequence of codes or events. At festivals, all of the above characteristics are purposefully broken or rearranged. Multiple scholars list a strictly ordered sequence of events as a ritual definitional feature. For some of the analyses that have influenced me see Bruce Kapferer, *A Celebration of Demons: Exorcism and the Aesthetics of Healing in Sri Lanka*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991). According to Kapferer ritual is “a multi-modal symbolic form, the practice of which is marked off (usually spatially and temporary) from, or within, the routine of everyday life, and which has specified, in advance of its enactment, a particular sequential ordering of acts, utterances and events, which are essential to the recognition of the ritual by cultural members as being representative of a specific cultural type” (3). See also Roy Rappaport “Ritual,” *Folklore*,

practices which could last for up to twenty hours. Space refers to the homes of the participants and the members of their community, as well as the streets and squares of their towns and villages.<sup>41</sup> At the home of the participants, time is measured by the specific sequence of events such as putting on the goat skins, greeting the guests, and traveling to the town center. Ritual codes, thus, take control over time. At festivals, the arrangement turns around and time guides the sequence of performed events.<sup>42</sup> If a group is given fifteen minutes, it must arrange its presentation within the limits of those minutes.<sup>43</sup>

On January 1, 2007 I was present at the Kukeri celebrations in the village of Varvara in central Bulgaria. As a visitor, I did not witness the dressing of the goat skin figures but was part of the larger square gathering.<sup>44</sup> In Varvara, too, each neighborhood has its own goat skin group which comes to the town square in a procession headed by musicians playing a drum and a gaida—a bagpipe instrument popular in South Eastern Europe. Prior to the procession or the entrance of each group into the square, the goat skin figures run all over the village in a chaotic dance. While in Razlog the groups move from the house towards the square, in Varvara, they split and dash around the village. Varvara goat skin groups also carry heavier bells and are not

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*Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments*, ed. Richard Bauman (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992) 249-61. According to Rappaport ritual “may be defined as the PERFORMANCE [in original] of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers. [...] Ritual is understood to be a form of structure, that is a number of features or characteristics in a more or less fixed relationship to one another” (250).

<sup>41</sup> For a definition of ritual time as “time out of time” or “a specific temporal dimension devoted to special activities” see Alessandro Falassi, “Festival: Definition and Morphology,” *Time out of Time: Essays on the Festival*, ed. Alessandro Falassi (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987) 1-10.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Schechner uses the terms event and set time: “*Event time* [italics in original], when an activity itself has a set sequence and all the steps of that sequence must be completed no matter how long (or short) the elapsed clock time. ... *Set time* [italics in original], where an arbitrary time pattern is imposed on events—they begin and end at certain moments whether or no they have been ‘completed.’ Here there is an antagonistic contest between the activity and the clock” (*Performance* 8). See Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>43</sup> It could of course be argued that those fifteen minutes constitute the code of the festival, which is a ritual within its own right. Even so, the festival codes are not intricate to the Kukeri ritual itself while the local ones are. As a result, while making guest appearances, the Kukeri participants plan their performances by paying acute attention to the time limits imposed by the schedule of the festival.

<sup>44</sup> There is no secrecy associated with the dressing ritual in Bulgarian Kukeri celebrations. Yet, the gatherings usually include only immediate family members, close friends and neighbors.



accompanied by the musicians who appear only at the very end for the entrance to the square. Instead, the goat skin ones jump to the gongs of the bells wrapped around their chests and shoulders. A bell could be as big as a foot in diameter and as heavy as twenty pounds. While running through the streets, the goat skin figures “jump” over the villagers and touch them for good luck. The masks, which are made annually and kept in secret to the very day of the celebrations, constitute the most prominent feature of the Varvara costumes. The goat skin covered figures in their wild dance present fantastical images which stand in sharp contrast with the rest of the regularly dressed villagers.

Similar to Razlog groups, Varvara participants travel to multiple festivals throughout the year. Yet, when asked by a TV station a couple of years ago to recreate the exact sequence of events as of January 1 so that the station could record it, the participants vigorously refused. While the Kukeri participants might present a version of their custom throughout the year, January 1 enjoys the status of a special day that could not be recreated. Had the TV crew come on January 1, the participants would have agreed to be filmed.<sup>45</sup> The Kukeri groups make the very clear distinction between the event itself, which happens on a particular day and in a particular manner, and its later presentations on festival occasions. While encountering Kukeri participants on national festivals, I was always invited to visit their own villages or towns on the designated day of their celebrations in order to “see what it *really* was.” The symbolic connection to a particular day as well as a particular sequence of events performed on that specific day for the main benefit of the participants themselves bestow a ritualistic status to the local celebrations and distinguish them from their later presentations on official festival stages.

Within the local villages and towns, the practices are performed primarily for the benefit of the local community with the participants themselves being both the planners and the main

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<sup>45</sup> Lazar Andreev, Personal Interview, 08 January 2007.

consumers of the celebrations. Less than ten miles away from the town of Razlog, the village of Eleshnitsa currently performs the Kukeri ritual on Easter day. On Easter day 2006, the Kukeri group entrance to the square was delayed until a small delegation of English guests arrived. While remembering the incident, one of the major Kukeri performers expressed strong dissatisfaction: “We do it for ourselves. Not for them [official village guests]. This is *our* tradition.”<sup>46</sup> At the local level, thus the Kukeri ritual is performed first and foremost for the well being of the village community.

On Easter day, 2007, I observed the groups of each Eleshnitsa neighborhood to slowly approach the village square in the rhythmic steps of the horo under the music of the very same musicians who earlier that year had played in Razlog. The Eleshnitsa participants usually borrow costumes from Razlog or Blagoevgrad—another town in the same region. The goat skins they put on are exactly the same as the ones the participants in Razlog use earlier in the year and their masks come from the Blagoevgrad groups. Structurally, the Kukeri practices in Eleshnitsa are very similar to those in Razlog. The traditional folk attire of the two places is very similar too and consists of red pleated skirts, colorful aprons and scarves for the women and white tight pants, short skirts and dark vests for the men. Yet, both groups assert their practices as unique. Participants from both Razlog and Eleshnitsa would go to extensive length to argue that “no one does Kukeri day the way we do and no one does it better than we do.” The participants thus assert a phenomenological model of a ritual in which meaning is being constructed through and during the event. Structurally, the rituals in Eleshnitsa and Razlog would fit the same formula of the following events: dressing the Kukeri participants, gathering of the neighborhood, approaching the square under the sounds of the drums and the zurnas in the slow steps of the

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<sup>46</sup> Georgi Kiritsov “Mustaka”, Personal Interview, 18 May 2007.

horo, gathering in the square, leaving the square and returning to the neighborhoods.<sup>47</sup> Yet, as an event, whose meaning is contingent on the exchange between participants and observers, the Kukeri practices generate a different identity when performed at different villages. In addition, they also generate a different non-ritualistic identity when presented at festivals outside the towns and villages of their players.

### **Kukeri as Carnival at Regional, National and International Festivals**

On Sunday January 14, 2007 I followed the guest appearance of the Kukeri group from the town of Bansko in the capital of Sofia. Being from the same region as Eleshnitsa and Razlog, Bansko practices are structurally very similar to those I had previously seen earlier that year. The procession followed a pre-approved route covering major streets in downtown Sofia. People walking in the streets would briefly look at the Kukeri presentation and move along. At best, they would stand still and observe until the procession passed them by. The very small following the Kukeri group managed to generate consisted of the hired photographers, a Western tourist in dreadlocks who vividly enjoyed the rhythm of the drums, and me. In Sofia, the Kukeri procession looked as a museum presentation of an exotic custom. Yet, it was also intended to be presented as such. Meaning was being constructed as contingent not only on the audience reaction but also on the performer intentions.<sup>48</sup> The participants staged their procession in a rectangular rigid formation with neatly constructed rows that contrasted the free flow of the local

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<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of the structural-functionalist and phenomenological models of ritual see Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982)12-13. For an application of a phenomenological model to embodied practices see Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). Jones analyses body art by summarizing that “in its activation of intersubjectivity, body art, in fact, demonstrates that meaning is an exchange and points to the impossibility of any practice being ‘inherently’ positive or negative in cultural value” (14). By further basing her argument on Merlan-Ponty, Jones reviews “the temporal structure of the body, [as] playing out subjectivity and objectivity as performative rather than fixed” (160).

<sup>48</sup> For performer’s intentions or performer’s vision of the self and performance see Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002). Crane introduces her study of medieval courtiers by placing performance in the moments in which “self-conception intersects with self-presentation, and behavior conveys something of how courtiers inhabited their social identities” (1).

celebrations I had seen earlier that year. A couple, dressed in folk attire, lead the procession and carried a sign announcing the name of the city. In the first row, women dressed in the local traditional attire held hands in the dance of the horo. Yet, instead of moving in a semi circle, the women walked straight ahead as if on a parade. No observers broke their row to join in as they would have done at the local celebration. While at both Eleshnitsa and Razlog, the horo included dancers in traditional as well as contemporary everyday attire, the costumed look of the Bansko procession in the streets of Sofia remained intact. The goat skin figures briefly paused to perform the highly symbolic act of jumping and chasing the evil spirits away from strategic buildings, such as the Ministry of Education, and their wild moves attracted inquisitive glances from the people in the streets. On the following day, *Trud*, a major Bulgarian national newspaper, published the following account of the event: “Yesterday, Kukeri participants from Bansko walked in a carnival procession in the streets [of Sofia]. Masqueraded men, women, and children walked from St. Aleksandur Nevski Church to NDK [National Performance Hall] where they presented songs and dances, typical for the region [of Bansko].” The parade mode of the procession, the jumping in front of state buildings, and the final presentation on a stage erected especially for the occasion served as publicity for the city of Bansko—a well known ski resort with rising property values that attract local and international investors. The participants constructed an animated postcard with Kukeri as a subject matter and performed it accordingly. In response, the newspapers published the performer pictures, publicized and further constructed the masqueraded identity of the event. The briefing in *Trud* used the term carnival in its most common, everyday meaning of a gathering in festive costumes. In this use of its, the term is completely deprived of any ritualistic meaning, but so are the Kukeri practices taken to the streets of Sofia. Although the population in Razlog refers to the Kukeri celebrations in their own

town as a carnival, the term in that case describes a ritualistic event of excessive dance, music, eating, and drinking.<sup>49</sup> When performed in the local villages, Kukeri could also be seen within the carnival tradition of events staged between Christmas and Lent.<sup>50</sup> In addition to the goat skin figures, who fall in the tradition of the “wild men,” the Kukeri celebrations present cross-dressed characters in contemporary attire playing scenes with explicitly sexual content.<sup>51</sup> Staging the carnal and the low become legitimate choices within the Kukeri context. The participants reserve the term “masqueraded” exclusively for the cross-dressed “funny men” characters who wear comically exaggerated contemporary costumes and props, stage satirically obscene scenes and are rarely taken to national and international festivals. Instead, the goat skin figures together with the characters in folk attire are deemed to signify the “uniquely traditional” part of the festivities and are thus presented at festival locations where ironically they become “the masqueraded” ones. At a festival, their costumes as well as the dressing of the First Chaush is deprived of any ritualistic or ceremonial significance. The 1992 DVD recording of the Razlog Kukeri tour of France shows the men helping each other put on the goat skins on the curb in front of their bus.

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<sup>49</sup> Certain scholars have argued that carnival exhibits ritual characteristics. In his seminal work *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin calls carnival “comic rituals” and includes carnival pageants together with the comic shows of the market place in the category of ritual spectacle (5). See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans., Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984). For carnival as ritual see also Roberto Da Matta “Carnival in Multiple Planes,” *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle*, ed. John MacAloon (Philadelphia: ISHI, 1984) 209-40; James Fernandez, “Contemporary Carnival in Asturias: Visual Figuration as ‘Ritual’ of Parodic Release and Democratic Revitalization,” *The Dynamics of Changing Rituals*, eds. Constance Hartung, Jens Kreinath, Annette Deschener (Oxford: Lang, 2004); Ronald Grimes, *Research in Ritual Studies: A Programmatic Essay and Bibliography* (Chicago: Scarecrow Press, 1985). According to Fernandez, “[C]arnival play can be a highly repetitive and ritualized representation of life. And in its very profanity it attains that kind of time out or time that is the characteristic of ritual action” (22). Grimes includes carnival together with celebrations, feasts, contests, sports and games in his festival subcategory of ritual (*Research* 2). Loosely basing his argument of Turner, Da Matta sees carnival in the context of “ritualistic dislocation” which is “fundamentally to dislocate an object from its place, a process that brings a clear consciousness of the nature of the object, of the properties of its original domain, and of its adaptation to its new locale” (214).

<sup>50</sup> Christmas and Lent as specified by the Easter Orthodox Church calendar. Most publications on carnival, review it in the context of the Catholic tradition. The Kukeri celebrations present a case study of carnival within the Easter Orthodox tradition.

<sup>51</sup> For carnival as a ritual of reversal in which the low becomes high, the male—female the disorder order see Chapter 5. Also see Herman Tak, *South Italian Festivals* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2000) 12; For “wild men” and Medieval carnival see Crane 155-60; Samuel Kinser, “Wildmen Festival, 1300-1550,” *Oral Tradition in the Middle Ages*, ed., W. F. H. Nicolaisen (New York: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1995) 145-61.

At official festivals, the carnival presentation is devoid of any excess such as drinking or staging obscene vignettes and the participants become professional performers who make sober and timely appearances. Their main agenda is to act as cultural ambassadors while at the same time enjoy visiting foreign places.<sup>52</sup> The performers thus become the tourists with sightseeing becoming a main incentive for their appearances. The irony of the situation is quite obvious: while traveling nationally or internationally the Kukeri participants do indeed perform for strangers or foreigners at festivals that attract tourists while at the same time they themselves are foreigners and tourists as well. Scholarly accounts of contemporary festivals often focus on the loss of community significance in favor of becoming a destination for an audience of outside tourists. The members of the audience are seen as exhibiting the behavior of tourists<sup>53</sup>. Yet in the case of the Kukeri groups traveling to foreign carnivals, the performers are no less tourists than their audience is. The identity they construct and subsequently perform for both themselves and their practices is one of tourists presenting on a tour.

The DVD recordings made by the Razlog Kukeri participants of their appearances in France for the years 1997-2000 are shot as tourist accounts of foreign places. The camera poses not only on the Kukeri street procession but also at the architecture of the surrounding buildings and the costumes of the fellow carnival participants. The 2000 DVD consists of two parts, the second of which shows a detailed presentation of the main attractions of Paris such as the Eiffel Tower and the memorial of Princess Diana. The recording shows a very brief scene of the Kukeri group dancing in their goat skins and a very extensive study of their walks in the regular tourist attire of slacks and sweatshirts. The main performer of the tour becomes the city of Paris and its presentation constitutes the main spectacle that later would be shown to the audience of family

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<sup>52</sup>Atanas Bonkov, Katia Harizanova and Sashka Nakova, Personal Interview, 18 May 2007.

<sup>53</sup> For the “development of carnival as cultural tourism events” see Melanie Smith, *Issues in Carnival Tourism Studies* (London: Routledge, 2003) 147-50.

and friends back home. The camera rarely focuses on the participants themselves; instead it documents the city. With the same detail the camera shoots the dressing of the First Chaush back home it investigates the structure of the Eiffel Tower. For over fifteen minutes, the film studies the metal construction from every possible angle and height. The participants at international carnivals construct and subsequently perform the identity of tourists and cultural ambassadors and their performance is as truthful and original as the performance of the Kukeri practices back home on January 1. To argue otherwise, would be to presuppose the existence of an original. In the case of festival presentations, the Kukeri groups simply enact a different, but not secondary, identity for both themselves and the Kukeri ritual while away from home.

At carnivals, the participants become audience to the other groups and thus once again appropriate the status of tourists collecting new impressions. Although the audience members, meaning the residents of the cities hosting carnivals and their guests, do not participate in the performances the same way the residents of Razlog would on January 1<sup>st</sup> the line is still crossed, but in the other direction—performers become audiences as well. The 2006 recording of the Kukeri French tour shows the Bulgarian men in their goat skins leaning against a temporary erected stage and observing the presentation of other groups. The participants themselves might also become players in the scene of a fellow group. The 2001 DVD shows performers dressed in bright green and yellow pagliacci costumes break the circle of the Kukeri horo and join hands with the Bulgarian performers in the rhythm of the dance.

A festival like this one places within its structure performances with no geographical, historical or cultural connections. Fantastic figures covered in goat skins parade in between groups of majorettes in mini skirts with the audience applauding both. Participants from all over the globe present staged versions of their traditional dances or customs. Local meaning, one

could argue, is lost in the collage of the festival structure. In the Summer of 2007, I attended a regional festival organized by the Bulgarian town of Pavel Bania.<sup>54</sup> The festival included presentations from local Kukeri groups in addition to a beauty pageant and a pop concert. Striving to become a modern spa center, the town used the occasion to stage, celebrate and advertise its own identity. Pavel Bania played itself as a tourist destination situated in an area with both natural and cultural resources. Kukeri groups from several villages parked their buses around the main road, changed into costume, walked the streets in a procession and gathered in the square for the final presentation. A temporary stage hosted the town administration as well as the newly elected Ms. and Mr. Pavel Bania, who, to further advertise the town's natural resources, wore the costumes of Neptune and a Mermaid. The festivities ended in the steps of the horo. "Neptune" in a costume based on the Disney look held hands with the "Mermaid" and was followed by men in goat skins, a pop singer with flamboyantly dyed blond hair, tight jeans and bright red heels, the town's administrators in dark suits and audience members in casual attire. The free flow of images taken from Bulgarian folklore and global pop culture dispelled any sense of thematic consistency. Seen from the lenses of late twentieth century postmodernism, the event called to mind Mike Featherstone's statement according to which, "We live in localities where the flow of information and images have obliterated the sense of collective memory and tradition in the locality to the extent that there is 'no sense of place.'"<sup>55</sup> At the beginning of the twenty first century, scholarly circles still untangle the question of the festival and its connection to postmodernism.<sup>56</sup> Yet, carnival has always questioned and destabilized any sense of place and

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<sup>54</sup> Pavel Bania is situated in Central Bulgaria and is surrounded by villages with vibrant Kukeri pre-Lent practices.

<sup>55</sup> See Mike Featherstone, "Global Culture: An Introduction," *Global Culture, Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*, ed., Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1990) 1-15.

<sup>56</sup> The 2006 International Conference on the Arts in Society organized a seminar on *The Postmodern Festival: At the Cross Roads Between the Local and the Global?* which asked the following question: "The 'postmodern condition' is said to be characterised by the rejection of meta narratives and universal paradigms in favour of more localised forms of knowledge. In a postmodern world the boundaries between artist and audience, seriousness and play, high



locality by inverting social values and incorporating dislocated images within its narrative. Combining disconnected images and events constitutes the essence of carnival.<sup>57</sup> At the end of the twentieth century, carnival even becomes a metaphor for postmodernism precisely because it presents playful copies of the images in place of the originals.<sup>58</sup> The carnival of the twenty first century has thus preserved its very traditional nature of combining unrelated playful copies of cultural or political originals.<sup>59</sup> Within the structure of the carnival, the copies substitute for the originals. The English Mock Lord of the sixteenth century rules at night the same way the Bulgarian goat skin men walk the Summer festival of France and stand for the Kukeri participants dashing in the Winter months back home. The only difference is that, in the case of the Bulgarian Kukeri performances, one and the same players engage in the game of creating double identities.<sup>60</sup> By choosing to participate in international carnival events, the Kukeri groups create alternative identities and perform them accordingly.

The diverse identities the festival participants perform function together in the unified framework of the carnival and thus construct the global character of the event. Currently, there

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culture and kitsch and local and global have become blurred. Instead, eclecticism and jouissance have become the order of the day. The question for discussion is whether festivals reflect or should reflect this postmodern paradigm which perceives all local artistic and cultural expressions as having equal 'validity' or have most of today's festivals seemingly rejected postmodern philosophies in favour of a new metanarrative of globalisation, characterised by cultural homogenisation?"

<sup>57</sup> See Ricahrd Schechner, "Carnival (Theory) After Bakhtin," *Carnival: Culture in Action : The Trinidad Experience*, ed., Milla Cozart Riggia (London: Routledge, 2004) 3-13. According to Schechner, "[C]arnival brings together performance events that do not necessarily belong together. Masking, clalypso, and steel band are 'natural' to carnival simply because they occur within the carnival frame" (6).

<sup>58</sup> See Ihab Hassan, "Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective," *Exploring Postmodernism: Selected Papers Presented at a Workshop on Postmodernism at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Comparative Literature Congress, Paris, August 20-24, 1985*, ed., Matei Calinescu and Douwe Fokkema (Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1987) 21; Mark Lipovetsy, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos* (New York: Sharpe, 1999). Lipovetsky summarizes that postmodernism presents reality as "a combination of carious languages and language genres, a colorful crazy quilt of intertexts. As a result, the search for equivalents of reality recedes, allowing play with the conventions of language to come to the fore. [...] [I]n postmodernism we find a carnival of cultural languages, completed with all the features we expect form Carnival" (17).

<sup>59</sup> The very notion of the original has also been problematized in late twentieth century criticism. For an analyses of simulation and simulacra see Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," *Selected Writings*, ed., Mark Poster (Stanford UP, 1998) 166-84.

<sup>60</sup> As opposed to a carnival such as the Lord of Misrule where we have one player for the Mock Ruler, or the copy, and another player—Elizabeth—for the original or the ruler herself.

are two contrasting views of globalization in circulation. The first view connects globalization to homogeneity, while the second reviews it as providing “unity through diversity.”<sup>61</sup> Respectively, some scholars analyze local customs as a reaction against globalization and see them as an attempt on the part of the communities to define and preserve a distinct identity.<sup>62</sup> Yet, other researchers define festival as a product of and a reaction to globalization.<sup>63</sup> The Kukeri participants I interviewed shared that they plan and stage their festival presentations with a concern for presenting a unique and distinct look. The reason why they choose not to take the “masqueraded groups,” or the ones dressed like contemporary pop culture images, to international or national festivals is because they do not deem them sufficiently “unique.” The irony again is self-evident. The participants construct unique identities for their performances at international carnivals in order to distinguish themselves or, in other words, as a reaction to the uniformity of globalization. At the same time, the performance of their identity put next to the performances of the other groups creates a global experience with the identity of each group competing on the global cultural market of the festival. The festival thus becomes both a reaction against and a product of globalization. Having to define themselves against a backdrop of so many other groups, the Kukeri performers select and plan the type of presentation that would best differentiate them from the others. Instead of asserting global uniformity, in that particular case, the international festival acts as a regulator of traditional identity, or the reimagined image

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<sup>61</sup> Featherstone 147.

<sup>62</sup> See, among others Scott McCabe “The Making of Community Identity through Historic Festive Practice: The Case of Ashbourne Royal Shrovetide Football,” *Festivals, Tourism and Social Change: Remaking Worlds*, ed., David Picard and Mike Robinson (Toronto: Channel View, 2006) 99-118. According to McCabe, “[E]vents and cultural festivals can work to promote and increase a sense of community identity that can counteract the largely negatively constructed impacts of global mobility and media attention” (100).

<sup>63</sup> Garth Green and Philip Scher “Introduction: Trinidad carnival in Global Context,” *Trinidad Carnival*, eds., Garth Green and Philip Scher (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2007) 1-24. Keith Nurse, “Globalization in Reverse: Diaspora and the Export of Trinidad Carnival,” *Carnival: Culture in Action—The Trinidad Experience*, ed., Milla Riggia (London: Routledge, 2004) 245-55. Nurse analyses the Caribbean carnivals in North America and Europe as offspring of Trinidad Carnival and connects them to the global flow of culture and migration. Similarly, Green and Scher review Trinidad Carnival as a “cultural industry” as “the local effects of larger global trends involving technological restructuring, economic liberalization, and the emergence of multicultural aesthetics” (21).

of such, in the same manner a museum curator at a folk collection might sanction contemporary contamination in order to preserve a “pure” version.

### **Kukeri as Theatre**

While taking part in officially organized carnivals, the Kukeri participants present theatrical version of the practices, which they stage within the structure of the festivals. The video account of the 1997 Razlog Kukeri group visit to France reveals a carefully choreographed event. The recording made by the participants themselves first shows them waiting for their stage call outside the tent with the temporary stage. The men have put their goat skin costumes on and are passing the time as any actor in a green room would. The following shot reveals a black out during which a voice announces the Bulgarian performers. Next, the lights come on to reveal a bare stage framed with a theatrical backdrop of a circus scene. The men in goat skins enter in front of the painted image of clowns and acrobats and under a sign announcing “Roi du Cirque” or “King of the Circus.” The Kukeri presentation consists of highly stylized and carefully choreographed configurations. The bodies of the men jump in unison and form the meticulously rehearsed movements of the dance. The staging takes into consideration the house sight lines and places the Kukeri men in a widely open semi circle. By composing and rehearsing their dance with acute consideration of the composition principles of balance, rhythm and variety, the Kukeri participants envision and construct the identity of stage performance for their practices. The audience responds accordingly and welcomes them with cheering and clapping. The eldest Kukeri man, Blago Tatarchev, who is also the leader of the Kukeri group at one of the neighborhoods back home, is greeted as the star of the night. Dressed in the traditional attire of a shepherd, Tatarchev claims the space in the center of the stage and the goat skin men start moving under his command. Next, the Kukeri group performs a presentation of a ritual which

surprisingly is not done within their own town and is typically not a part of the New Year's Kukeri celebrations. Tatarchev, the leader of the group, holds a prop version of a wooden plough in which he harnesses a couple of Kukeri men to play the role of oxen. While practiced in multiple Bulgarian villages, the scene is usually performed as part of the pre-Lent Spring and not the New Year's Winter celebrations. As in theatre, historical and geographical accuracy become secondary to spectacle. The audience responds accordingly and greets the plowing approvingly. Half way through the performance, a group dressed in traditional attire enter and form the horo under the sounds of the musicians. The men in folk attire present the stage embodiment of the town community that on January 1 would play the horo in the streets of Razlog. Next, an actor holds the ritual pita bread and recites a poem-blessing. Surprisingly, he says the poem in Bulgarian and directs it to the other Kukeri actors on stage in stead of to the people in the house. The French audience in the house thus attains the status of spectators to a theatrical presentation of a ritual. The fourth wall in this particular case remains unbroken.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, the men in folk attire embody the fictional community or the audience to the Kukeri ritual itself. At that point, the presentation breaks away from its rigid choreography and the men start to chaotically cover the space on stage by often turning their backs to the audiences in the house. The circle of the men in national attire playing the horo with the goat skin figures running around them takes over the proscenium stage.<sup>65</sup> The frontal presentation of the initial composition designed to best accommodate the house sight lines is replaced by the ritual configuration of the community circle. The procession exits both stage left and right in the steps of the horo. The choice to not

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<sup>64</sup> A recording of a presentation on another festival stage shows Tatarchev taking the ritual bread, walking in the house and offering it to the audience members who after a moment of initial discomfort break a piece from it.

<sup>65</sup> While the temporary stage lacked the picture frame walls, I refer to it as a proscenium to best describe the audience arrangement.

perform a curtain call creates the theatrical illusion of a community event that would spill into the streets.

At the local villages and towns of the participants, the Kukeri players visit the houses of their neighbors or at least encounter them in the streets. In most pre-Lent celebrations the goat skin figures, similarly to the English mummers, go from house to house and are greeted by the hosts. Within the festival space, the Kukeri groups often recreate the house visits by staging a fictional encounter between the goat skin figures and community members dressed in folk attire. The hosts of the house in their own villages would be dressed in contemporary clothing. Yet, when played within the space of the festival, the hosts wear the national attire and their clothing becomes the costumes wrapping the actors who play not simply characters but an embodied tradition as well.

The 2006 regional Kukeri festival in the village of Kamen hosted guest appearances by groups from several near by villages and towns. The official DVD recording of the event reveals groups following each other in the village square where they briefly play their scenes. The participants from the village of Mladovo open their presentation by creating the domestic New Year's scene taking place in the household prior to the Kukeri player visit. The actors set the scene not in a specific moment of the historical past but rather within the fictional realm of the tradition. A small three leg table covered with a hand made cloth presents the central prop. The family too is reduced to its ideal version of an old man and woman, son and daughter, grandson and granddaughter. The old man raises the New Year pita bread and the rest of the characters start reciting their lines. A festival assistant moves and holds the microphone in front of each performer. Similar to a stage hand dressed in black, the assistant stays apart from the theatrical event by being dressed in contemporary clothes. Each actor holds a piece of the bread and asks

what his or her fortune would be.<sup>66</sup> The scripted lines reveal each character receiving the fortune most appropriate for him or her. The son draws the plough and the oxen, the daughter—the bucket and the cow, the grandson—the coin, and the granddaughter—the book.

The group of the village of Tetovo opens its scene with four women dressed in national attire. Their lines provide all of the necessary exposition by covering the basic Who, What, Why and Where. One of the women informs that “Today is Kukeri Day. Monday. Clean Monday. Let us fix ourselves for the Kukeri men who will visit our house. The Kukeri men walk on this day to chase the evil away. They bring luck and eye the girls for a bride.” The rest of the scene is presented as a dialogue with the other women propelling the story with questions:

SECOND WOMAN: And do they play “Kukeri Bride”?

FIRST WOMAN: They do. The people try to steal the Kukeri bride for luck. But it is very hard to steal the Kukeri bride. The Kukeri men guard her with their swords. But whoever manages to steal her will have plenty of luck in his house.<sup>67</sup>

SECOND WOMAN: How would we know which girl a Kukeri man has liked?

FIRST WOMAN: He will tease her with his stick [a phallic resembling prop the Kukeri participants carry in this region] and we will know that soon...[shows the implication of a sexual act].

FOURTH WOMAN: Who plays on Kukeri day?

FIRST WOMAN: Young unmarried men. And among them a man whose time to get married has come. [Looks around]. We too have a girl in the house. If someone starts teasing her, it means he has liked her.

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<sup>66</sup> Within Bulgaria, each household would still put pieces of paper with “fortunes” such as “health,” “education,” “travel” in the New Year’s bread.

<sup>67</sup> The cross-dressed traditional character of the bride that accompanies the goat skin figures is often called a Kukeri bride.

FOURTH WOMAN: Quick. The Kukeri men are coming!

Following the exposition, a group of identically dressed Kukeri figures enter the square to perform their dance. All men wear identical masks, tops, bottoms and shoes and perform the uniform movements of an ensemble. The participants thus construct and perform the identity of a choral ensemble with each Kukeri man blending in the uniformity of the group.

In the Kukeri domestic scenes performed at officially organized festivals, female community members play the female roles of the hostesses. Yet, the Kukeri bride is always a cross-dressed man. A festival scene thus juxtaposes a female actress in national attire playing the female hostess and a man dressed in the very same national female attire embodying the Kukeri bride. The scenes usually show the hostess of the house, played by a female community member, greeting the Kukeri cross-dressed bride who is holding hands with the Kukeri groom. Consistent with the ritual tradition, the Kukeri bride and the goat skin figures never talk. During the festival presentation, the masks never come off to reveal the faces of the players. On the contrary, in the contemporary local celebrations, the participants often take their masks off to chat with neighbors and friends and the Kukeri bride often exchanges playful remarks with “her” fellow participants. The festival presentation stages not simply the image of the Kukeri local celebrations but the image of the ideal Kukeri celebration—it stages the idealized image of tradition *per se*. The participants construct for themselves not the role of contemporary community members taking part in the Kukeri celebrations back home, but the theatrical part of the ideal ritual performer, existing within the uncontaminated ritual codes that are “out of time,” and “out of place.”

The village of Izvor, situated near the city of Pernik, which is the host of the most prominent international masked carnival in Bulgaria, has a longstanding Kukeri tradition. In

recent years under the guidance of the local librarian the village has started a Kukeri group with the exclusive purpose of traveling to festivals. The newly founded group introduced elements that were unusual for the village such as masks and colorful costumes. The Kukeri groups who traditionally walk the streets of Izvor on January 1 wear random rags, cover their faces either with pieces of cloth or dirt and thus fall within the tradition of the Christmas mummers. The new group was founded with the firm determination to construct costumes or in other words to stage identities suitable for festival competitions. The local librarian, Dimitrinka Mircheva, approached the initiative as a dramaturgue researching and creating a new form within the parameters of “the traditional.” Since the village has a long lasting tradition of raising sheep, Mircheva chose sheep skin as a medium for making the masks. Her initiative was welcomed by her fellow villagers who gathered night after night at the local library to sculpt the new disguise by using found objects such as chicken bones and turkey necks. As in a theatrical prop shop, the group resorted to using common materials such as plastic buckets which they skillfully dressed and painted. The creation of the theatrical illusion of an “authentic image” was of upmost importance: one year, the children in the group failed to properly cover the plastic buckets, they used as a base for the masks, and the group did not embark on a festival tour. As Mircheva shared, “In the past, the base of the masks [in the regions which used masks and not just cloth or dirt] would have been carved out of wood. We came up with the idea to use some buckets. But we can’t go to a festival and let people see we have used them. They need to be properly covered with materials traditional for us.”<sup>68</sup>

In addition to building the stage props of masks, the newly founded group introduced a choreographed version of the movements performed by the bell-wearing figures. Instead of the chaotic dance, typical for the local celebrations, a choreographer designed an orderly

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<sup>68</sup> Mircheva, Dimitrinka, Personal interview, 19 May 2008.



composition of measured movements. As a result, currently, the villagers foster both their local mummer's version of the Kukeri ritual and its most recently staged variation. Ironically, the latter presents an image more firmly grounded in the realm of the uncontaminated tradition. While the local celebrations still include the stock character of the priest, the cross-dressed bride, the groom, the bear, and the gypsy couple, the rest of the characters are free to select any, including contemporary, disguise. A bell-carrying Kukeri figure could still wear rags or might choose to dress as a cartoon character. In addition, the masks are never worn at the local celebration. While women have been conspicuous participants in the local mummer's processions, for each festival participation, their female bodies are carefully disguised under layers of costuming. At festivals, the group presents the stage image of pure tradition according to which women are excluded from the exclusively male ritual of the Kukeri practices. At festival stages, the group even chooses a male actor to represent the female host greeting the Kukeri men further broadening the gap between the theatrical version of the ritual and its contemporary practice in the local community of Izvor.

The recently founded group of the town of Iambol best illustrates the current trend to theatrically simulate the tradition of Kukeri. Situated in a region with vibrant Kukeri practices, the city itself has never celebrated the ritual. Eliian Khristov, founder and artistic director of the group, borrowed, edited and fused elements of the Kukeri rituals from the adjacent villages. As Khristov summarizes the ensemble exists "with the sole purpose of winning first prizes at festivals."<sup>69</sup> Unlike the group from the village of Izvor, the Kukeri participants from the town of Iambol do not engage in local processions, but restrict their activities entirely to official festival presentations. As Khristov outlined, "We make only official, or should I should I say professional appearances? No, I can't say professional but that's only because we do not get

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<sup>69</sup> Eliian Khristov, Personal Interview, 10 June 2007.

paid.”<sup>70</sup> The group exists on the principles of an amateur ensemble which still observes strict rehearsal schedules. While referring to their rehearsal period, Khristov uses the word “training sessions” (*trenirovki*) which further reinforces the competitive nature of the ensemble’s activities. Not surprising, in 2007 the group won several first prizes at various regional festivals given for best recreation of a tradition.<sup>71</sup> Like a theatrical director yearning for a standing ovation, Khristov dreams of a festival jury standing up at the sight of his group’s entrance. The same way a theatrical critic decides the fate of a production, the jury verdict at the end of each festival determines the ensemble future choices. When the jury disapproved of women being part of the Kukeri group, Khristov decided to have them dressed in national attire instead of goat skins. While at regions with vivid and longstanding local Kukeri traditions, women have become regular members of the goat skin groups, they are usually excluded from groups that exist solely as theatrical ensembles. Yet, Khristov has no claim for authenticity. As he asserted during our conversation, “What is authenticity? Nothing is authentic any more. This is theatre.”<sup>72</sup> The masks of each member of his groups display the glitter and colorful pieces of glass typical for the region but also the name of Iambol. Like a sports team, the group exhibits a signature look which turns their costumes into easily recognizable uniforms.

The scene the ensemble performs mimes the traditional plowing of the earth by embellishing it with humorous skits. As a director, Khristov implements his personal artistic vision: “We do have the traditional stock characters, but we also have Baba Iaga.”<sup>73</sup> This is how I see it—most kids were afraid of Baba Iaga. And that’s what the Kukeri celebrations are for—to chase the evil away. So once the bride gives birth, Baba Iaga steals the baby. And the Kukeri

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Even villages with traditional Kukeri local celebrations compete for the prize of “recreation of a tradition” whose very title reinforces the theatrical status of any festival participation.

<sup>72</sup> Khristov.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. Baba Iaga is a fairy tale witch character.

men save the baby.”<sup>74</sup> The costume of Baba Iaga incorporates the local traditional female attire together with a mask of a wrinkled face with a prominent nose and a ragged head scarf. After the Kukeri men chase Baba Iaga away, the Kukeri bride gives birth to a baby. The Kukeri bride is often portrayed as carrying a baby in the villages with long standing ritual traditions. Yet, Khristov added the scene in which the stock character of the doctor helped the bride give birth: “We need to do it the same way it happens in life. There is a baby. Where does this baby come from?”<sup>75</sup> In the villages with local traditions, the figure of the doctor performs the duty of resurrecting a Kukeri man who has died in a battle with another goat skin figure.<sup>76</sup> In addition to directorial innovations, the Iambol ensemble stresses on recreating realistic details such as having the Kukeri bride wiping “sweat” from the forehead of the Kukeri groom during the plowing scene and the couple exchanging wedding bands during their wedding ceremony. The stage presentation of the group was so skillful that it was easily mistaken for the most authentic entry by other festival participants. While interviewing villages with long standing Kukeri traditions within the region, I was told that the way the plowing scene was “really done in the past was by first plowing the field and then mimicking the sexual act between the bride and the groom, and finally by showing the bride give birth.” An explicit mime of a sexual act was another element Khristov added to his theatrical staging of the Kukeri ritual. Prior to his staging, sexuality was always implied obliquely—a Kukeri man would touch the bride with his long stick. Yet Khristov’s presentation proved so convincing and appealing that other groups accepted

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> For other examples of death/resurrection scenes connected to Mummer performances see J. S. Udall, “Christmas Mummers in Dorsetshire,” *Folklore Record* 3.1 (1880): 87-116.

it as the most authentic one and thus worthy of adopting. Theatrical presentation based on tradition replaced the very source it was built upon.<sup>77</sup>

The Kukeri celebrations as theatrical presentations closely fit within the vaster trend of performing and theatricalizing a nostalgic view of idealized versions of folk traditions.<sup>78</sup> Within their homes, the Kukeri participants would often have a space arranged to portray the stage image of a folk interior with objects from the past. The rooms convey not the past that was but the past that *is*, the past that is constantly reconstructed and reimagined within the fictional realm of the tradition.<sup>79</sup> The rooms bear the marks of a theatrical set with their extensive use of props, background drops and arrangements. When I was visiting the city of Razlog, Blago Tatarchev showed me the room he had dressed as an old peasant interior with a combination of objects he had inherited from his grandparents and recently acquired props designed to look “traditional”. The main wall was covered with a backdrop of a bed spread made of long black and white goat skin while the cattle bells the Kukeri men wore during festivals formed a row in the middle of the set. The central piece and focal point of the whole arrangement presented the doll figure of a goat skin Kukeri man whose costume was an exact replica of the real ones. The interior was completed by an arrangement of colorful rugs and antique objects.

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<sup>77</sup> The example could of course be seen as once again illustrating the postmodern concept of simulation.

<sup>78</sup> For nostalgia and identity see Fred Davis, “Nostalgia, Identity and the Current Nostalgia Wave,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 11:2 (1978): 414-24. According to Davis, “In short, nostalgia is one of the means—or, better yet, a readily accessible psychological lens—at our disposal for the never ending work of constructing, maintaining and reconstructing our identity” (419). In the case of the Kukeri participants identity overlaps with tradition. See also David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (London : Cambridge UP, 1985) 41-7.

<sup>79</sup> See Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw, “The Dimensions of Nostalgia,” *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*, eds. , Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1989) 1-18. According to Chase and Shaw, “Tradition may be the most important encounter the non-historians have with what passes for history. The past is represented in their present through activities and practices, though ritual and ceremony, and through ideas, and beliefs. ... Tradition is the enactment and dramatization of continuity” (11). For a summary of theory of nostalgia see Judith Broome, *Fictive Domains: Body, Landscape, and Nostalgia, 1717-1770* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2207) 13-33. According to Broome, “Nostalgia, imbued with supportive illusions, is a self-constituting performance that needs to be constantly repeated. Nostalgia has only an imagined referent; the lack of any historical referent is concealed by the repetition of a performance in [...] nostalgic cultural products” (17).

Similarly to Tatarchev, in the village of Szabokruk, the leader of the Kukeri group has created a folk setting within his house. The room exhibit includes the typical for the region female national attire as well as props such as a butter beater, copper pots and the bells the Kukeri participants wear. The central exhibition piece consists of a low three leg table, which is the signature prop of each domestic scene staged at a festival. The table, often covered with a table cloth in the most generic folk pattern of red and black, that was mass produced during Socialism and is still widely used in both households and restaurants, becomes a collective image of the “traditional” home. As in theatre, a prop stands for a setting, period, and an ideal. The ideal in that case coincides with the tradition within whose fictional realm the identity of the Kukeri practices is constantly being reconstructed both at festival and at the local level. In the home of the Szabokrut Kukeri leader the three leg table displays a stylized Kukeri mask constructed from sheep skin and cattle horns together with the awards his group has won at the annual carnival procession in the streets of Gabrovo. The gold inscribed winner’s plaque together with the mask become the trophies of the group while the room presents itself as the static performance of the reimagined vision of a custom whose props belong to the past and which continues to exist within the present mainly as the theatrical implementation of the traditional.

The 2007 recording of the Kukeri practices in Razlog reveals a meticulous arrangement of folk objects in the house of the First Chaush. The camera first focuses on the cattle bells, examines them closely and thus establishes their central role. The rest of the setting is designed by a collage of traditional fabric forming the background to the Kukeri participants who by facing the camera in their dance construct the identity of actors performing on stage. To the sides, a colorful arrangement of hand woven rugs hangs like a drop. The composition is

completed with “authentic” props such as sheep fur shoes and painted pottery attached to rugs.<sup>80</sup> A table cloth in folk patterns replaces the usual plastic cover. Instead of glass bottles and plastic ware, a wine jug with matching cups completes the décor. None of the above objects would be in circulation in the household on a regular day. They might, at best, exist as decoration. On that particular day, though, they replace contemporary objects the same way the folk attire replaces regular clothing. The goat skins too stand as scenic drops that are later taken down to become the costumes of the Kukeri men. In front of the camera, the bodies of the participants continuously move in the rhythm of the traditional dance their ancestors have played. Their bodies, clothes and homes undergo the theatrical transformation of becoming the actors, costumes and décor of tradition seen in ideal terms. Before leaving for the street procession, the actors dressed in goat skins and national attire pose for their shots in front of the background of colorful rugs. The photographs of the event, together with the DVD recordings, will be stored to form the archive of tradition. The pictures and the discs themselves become performance pieces that frame and preserve the past.<sup>81</sup> The Kukeri performers do not simply document the event but use the camera to further reinforce the theatrical representation of keeping one’s tradition. The 2003 DVD of the Kukeri celebrations in Razlog shows the leader of the neighborhood constantly giving the camera person instructions as to what to record. Under his directions, the camera focuses first on the old woman of the house and then on the baby dressed in a mini version of the national attire. The hunched figure of the great grandmother together with the child become the dramatic embodiment of the tradition which is passed from the elders to the young.

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<sup>80</sup> For authenticity and nostalgia see Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of The Miniature, The Gigantic, The Souvenir, The Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983). According to Stewart, “ ‘Authentic’ experience becomes both elusive and allusive as it is placed beyond the horizon of present lived experience, the beyond in which the antique, the pastoral, the exotic, and other fictive domains are articulated” (133).

<sup>81</sup> In his discussion on nostalgia and identity, Lowenthal concludes, “Photographs also serve as surrogates for roots” (43).

## Conclusion

In multiple regions all over Bulgaria, the Kukeri practices exist both as local celebrations and festival events. Based on local tradition, performed on a very specific day, and observing a very specific order of events, the Kukeri groups have preserved certain ritualistic characteristics and ritualistic structure in their performances. Simultaneously, the very same Kukeri performers who participate in the local rituals form groups whose main goal is to compete at local, national and international festivals. When taken away from the villages, the Kukeri ritual becomes a theatrical performance aimed at audiences of outsiders. The performers themselves become actors, tourists and cultural ambassadors traveling to international locations. On the festival stage, the Kukeri performances compete on the global cultural and economic market. The festival space becomes the site on which the participants simulate their national heritage and tradition. Even at the local level, the Kukeri day constructs a site for simulation of the traditional. The participants, often design a theatrical environment of old objects as background for their performances. They put on the folk attire of their grandparents and perform the traditional dance of the horo. The celebrations are, then, recorded and the DVD and picture material enter the personal archive of the participant households.

The current multiple identities of the Kukeri practices, ranging from local rituals and carnival presentations to theatrical events, were formed to a great extent in the second half of the twentieth century. This phenomenon, can be traced back to the official political line the Bulgarian Communist Party undertook in the 1950s. Culture was to turn towards the native. Rituals deeply rooted in folklore, such as the Kukeri, were to become the basis for the creation of professional performances. From local events, multiple folk customs grew into official festivals. In addition, community groups received the necessary support to enact folk traditions

theatrically. In the next chapter, I review in detail the long-lasting effects Socialism and the official Party line with respect to culture had on the Kukeri practices.



Figure 1. Kukeri Festival in Razlog. 2007. Photograph by the author.





Figure 2. Kukeri Day in Varvara. 2007. Photograph by the author.



Figure 3. Bansko Kukeri Group in Sofia. 2007. Photograph by the author.

### CHAPTER 3

#### KUKERI AND COMMUNITY ARTS UNDER SOCIALISM

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Kukeri practices in multiple regions underwent significant changes with a long lasting effect. During the period, Bulgaria experienced two significant political changes. In 1944, the country became a Socialist Republic, with the Bulgarian Communist Party serving as the main legislative body. In 1989, Bulgaria began its transition to democracy. Under Socialism, the Kukeri practices were greatly affected by the Party's overall propaganda program for supporting folklore, with the ultimate goal of fostering patriotism and opposing Western art and political influences. In the 1960s, the state sponsored the first national festivals for folk arts. Until then, the Kukeri practices existed only as local celebrations. Koprivchitsa and Pernik were among the towns that hosted the very first major festivals started under Communism. The Kukeri groups from multiple regions became regular guests at those events. The framework of the festival and its stages affected the Kukeri practices that in multiple regions became highly structured ensembles. During the period, community arts (khudeozhestvena samodeinost) transitioned from local amateur events to well structured organizations that received substantial financial support and political approval from the Party. The community arts, under which the Kukeri practices fell together with numerous other local customs and rituals, were seen as an expression of the creativity and power of the Socialist worker. The political support the Kukeri performances received affected them in contrasting and often contradictory ways. While in certain regions, the Kukeri groups became ensembles with highly rehearsed presentations; in others the practices preserved their original look and the

support they received from the local community centers (chitalishta) prolonged their existence. On one hand the officially sponsored national festivals belonged to the wider Party propaganda apparatus. Yet, their political agenda was relatively obscure to the regular participants, many of whom never identified themselves as supporters of Communism. As a result, after the country transitioned to Democracy, the festivals remained extremely popular events and continued to influence the Kukeri practices.

### **Political Turn toward Patriotic Art**

At the beginning of the 1960s, the Bulgarian Communist Party strongly opposed the influence the West had on the arts in Bulgaria. The prime minister of Bulgaria, Todor Zhivkov, addressed the need for fostering patriotism through the arts in a series of public speeches.<sup>82</sup> Prior to that point, the Communist Party enforced a policy of internationalism. The policy was consistent with the strong Soviet influence that discouraged the celebration of national cultures. All of the closed allies of the Soviet Union were to participate in the cultural dialogue of socialist internationalism. Zhivkov's rise to power coincided with Stalin's death in 1953, which marked the beginning of a wave of changes that spread over Eastern Europe.<sup>83</sup> Culturally, Zhivkov had the insight to propel a policy towards patriotism, which gained him the support he needed from both the intelligentsia and the working population.<sup>84</sup> The preceding climate of internationalism had alienated all layers of society, including professional and amateur artists. In the transitional years of the early 1960s, Zhivkov needed to solidify his power position and encouraging a turn towards appreciating Bulgarian history and culture gained him a considerable public support. In

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<sup>82</sup> In 1954, Zhivkov becomes the Head of the Party. In 1962, he becomes a prime minister.

<sup>83</sup> For a summary of the political unrest in the period 1953 to 1956 in Eastern Europe see R. J. Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 191. Crampton relates the end of Stalin's cult to the Hungarian upheaval. In Bulgaria, the power shifted from Chervenkov, a Stalin's ally to Zhivkov, a much younger apparatchik.

<sup>84</sup> I am indebted to Asen Kirin, a professor of Art History at the University of Georgia and a member of my dissertation committee, for bringing this point to my attention.

English, a couple of publications analyze Zhivkov's policy of patriotism as an ingenious political move. According to Crampton, "This [a policy of nationalism] was useful because as ideological commitment declined the party needed greater legitimacy at home [...]. There were, it seemed in the late 1960s, two easy roads to enhanced legitimacy: consumerism and a greater assertion of national identity."<sup>85</sup> Similarly, John Bell observes, "It was certainly true that since 1944 [...] [a]ll things Soviet or Russian were exalted over Bulgaria's own past and culture. [...] In seeking to undo some of the damage to the national psyche, Zhivkov was undoubtedly seeking some common ground on which to stand with the creative intelligentsia and with the population in general."<sup>86</sup>

On April 1, 1963 Zhivkov held a meeting with representatives from the Culture Unions. His closing speech focused on the necessity for the state to oppose Western pop music and abstract art by encouraging the development of Bulgarian artworks on national topics. According to him, "Certain members of our youth have started to neglect all that is ours, national, and Bulgarian. Instead, they worship Western music and the Western grotesque modern style of dancing."<sup>87</sup> In his highly performative speech, Zhivkov further told the specific example of restaurant Kamenitsa in the city of Plovdiv where the orchestra could not perform a single horo and instead played jazz and rock and roll on New Year's Eve.<sup>88</sup> The archive record shows that the audience at the assembly greeted the example with "a gasp." The speech follows with a broad theoretical justification:

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<sup>85</sup> Champton 198.

<sup>86</sup> John Bell, *The Bulgarian Communist Party from Balghev to Zhivkov*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985. 141.

<sup>87</sup> *Protokol ot Sreshtata Nauka i Kultura s Rukovodstvata na Tvorcheskite Suyuzi 1 April 1963*, [Record of the Meeting for Science and Culture with the Boards of the Cultural Unions] 17, Fond 1 Opis 5 [Record 5] 5, a.e. 570 [archival unit 570] Sofia: State National Archive. Personal Translation.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid 31.

Recently, some theoretical works assert that the national character of our culture is no longer necessary... and that it has to be replaced with some intersocialist or even humanist culture. ... Those theories practically call to ignore the image of the Bulgarian worker in Socialism and to instead write about some non-existent worker of Socialism per se. That would mean to create art per se, art incomprehensible to the people. ... Such logic would be in service to the West.<sup>89</sup>

At the end of his speech, Zhivkov firmly concluded, that all art should be patriotic, close to the Bulgarian folklore and thus close to the people. The guidelines he draws to all Union Members were clear: use the folklore to create music and dances that are to replace in popularity the ones coming from the West. The political decision, taken by the Party, to support folklore and use it for creating new art forms affected for decades existing rituals such as the Kukeri ones. Forms like the Kukeri performances which up to that point existed exclusively at the local level as community celebrations were transformed into big state supported regional and national festivals. In addition, their study within Bulgarian scholarship received the necessary political approval and encouragement.

The Party continued to enforce patriotism through the arts in multiple series of lectures and speeches all throughout the 1960s. On May 20, 1967 Zhivkov closed the First Assembly of the Bulgarian Communist Party with a speech titled *National Culture, Socialist Culture*. According to his speech, any art was to have a distinctly national character by drawing on the historical Bulgarian past. In addition, art should be accessible and “enter the home of the worker and become part of his or her day.”<sup>90</sup> In order to be an artist, one must first and foremost be a patriot: “One must be a Bulgarian Patriot and know well the history of Bulgaria [...]. We have

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid 54.

<sup>90</sup> Todor Zhivkov, *Izbrani Suchinenia* [Collected Works], V. 14, (Sofia: Partizdat, 1976) 139.

such uniquely Bulgarian cultural traditions.”<sup>91</sup> The speech stressed the leading role the community center leaders needed to take for the future development of the arts. The work of the community centers became crucial for fostering patriotism especially among the youth. On 27 December 1967, Zhivkov delivered yet another speech titled *Some Basic Problems in Our Work with the Youth*.<sup>92</sup> The speech saw the lack of youth involvement in the community centers as a major problem. Zhivkov clearly concluded that the youth “need[ed] to actively participate in the community arts.”<sup>93</sup> During that period, the Kukeri practices in multiple regions became ensembles under the local community centers.

### **Community Arts Centers and Folk Festivals**

As an umbrella term, community arts (khudeozhestvena samodeinost) includes theatre, music, art, design, and folk art to name only a few. The term “khudeozhestvena samodeinost” signified the community involvement in the arts and its role for preserving local folk practices. In English, the expression “community arts” comes closest to describing the essence of the term. “Hudoshhestvena” means artistic, while “samodeinost” indicates an activity performed by a non-professional or an amateur. Most of the Kukeri performers I interviewed used the term to describe the nature of their activities. Currently, the term is devoid of any direct political meaning. Participants who might identify themselves as opponents of the ex-Communist state use it freely to describe themselves. Yet, in the 1960s, Community Arts became an institution under the direct control of the Party.

Every Bulgarian village has a community center (chitalishte) whose building is often the most prominent one. The community centers have a long history in Bulgaria and during the years of Ottoman rule they acted as a place of education for the Bulgarian population. Shortly after the

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid 148.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid 300.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid 317.

Communist Party came into power in 1944 it realized the potential the community centers had for propaganda purposes. As an institution, they already had a history of being centers for fostering patriotism and for preserving the Bulgarian identity throughout the centuries. By the 1950s, by official decrees, new buildings were constructed in multiple villages and thus the community center became a prominent symbol situated often in the very central square. By the 1950s, the community centers had come under the National Front (Otechestven Front), the state organization responsible for the success of cultural propaganda.<sup>94</sup> As buildings, they hosted the local library as well as provided room for the rehearsal of various community arts. While the very term “samodeinost” presupposed an amateur participant, the community center leaders were often highly educated.<sup>95</sup> In the 1960s, it was not uncommon for them to be specifically sent to work in a given region. The participants or the ensemble members consisted of local residents. In the 1940s up until the 1950s, the community centers were mostly involved in non-folk arts such as theatre. During that period, *The Community Art Magazine* (Khudeozhestvena Samodeinost), the official journal of all community arts, published articles that mainly reflected the repertoire of the local amateur theatres. Yet, in the 1950s, the magazine began to exclusively report on folk

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<sup>94</sup> *Postanovlenie na Ministertsia Suvet I TsKa na BKP za Predstoiashkata Rabota na Narodnite Chitalishta 16 Uyli 1955*, [Regulation of the Ministry Assembly and The Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party about the Future Work of the National Community Centers 16 July 1955] 2-3, Fond 1 Opis 5 [Record 5] a.e. 173 [archival unit 173] Sofia: State National Archive. Also *Propaganda I Agitatsia, Tska na BKP 17 Ianuari 1957*, [Propaganda and Agitation, The Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party 17 January 1957], Fond 1 Opis 5 [Record 5] a.e. 262 [archival unit 262] Sofia: State National Archive. On 17 Jan. 1957 The Central Committee of the Party reviews the main objectives of the National Front and declares it as a public political organization that should become the community union of the people. Its main purpose is to foster patriotism. The document once again reflects the necessity of close collaboration between the local community centers and the National Front.

<sup>95</sup> “Pravilnik za Kategorizirane I Prekategorizirane na Rukovoditelite na Khudeozhestvenata Samodeinost Izdaden ot Komiteta za Izkustvo I Kultura,” [Rules and Regulations about the Community Leader Categories] *Durzhaven Vestnik* [State Newspaper] 19 Noemvri 1969 [19 Nov. 1969] <<http://www.paragraf22.com/pravo/pravilnici/pravilnici-n/37.htm>> According to the list of rules community leaders should be graduates from fine arts high schools and college programs in order to be eligible for promotions.



art which proved consistent with the line the Party adopted for supporting folk arts and patriotism. In 1952, the Central Home of the Folk Art was established as an official institution.<sup>96</sup>

In the 1960s, the festivals for folk music proliferated and provided stages for village residents to perform embodied practices. Scholars from the National Academy of Sciences and musicians from the National Radio became regular guests at the festival events. On August 27, 1957, representatives from the National Radio reported to the Central Committee of the Party at the regular Propaganda Meetings (*Propaganda i agitatsia*) that although the radio staff was very willing to resist the proliferation of Jazz music they lacked the necessary recordings of Bulgarian folk performances. In his speech, Vasil Ivanov addressed the assembly with the following:

Do not think that the executive board of the National Radio favors this Jazz music. That is not true. It is true that our programs include inappropriate songs. We need to create our own music that is both entertaining and meaningful. We believe there are a lot of folk songs spread all over Bulgaria that remain unrecorded. We would like to record and use them in our programs. But do not think that would be easy. [...] We need time and money. Our youth wants dancing music. We need to create our own dance music. Otherwise they would listen to foreign radio programs<sup>97</sup>

The radio thus began a campaign for locating and recording folk songs and using them for its daily programs dedicated to national art.

The movement for publicizing folk art by the national media was closely connected to the official halting and denouncement of any Western style of music such as rock or jazz. Any

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<sup>96</sup> Galia Simeonova, *Traditsionnite Praznitsi v Sustoianie na Promiana*, [Traditional Holidays in a State of Change] (Sofia: Academic Press 'Marin Drinov', 2000) 134.

<sup>97</sup> *Propaganda i Agitatsia, Tska na BKP 23 Avgust 1957*. [Propaganda and Agitation, The Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party 23 August 1957]. Fond 1, Opis 5[Record 5], a.e 281 [archival unit 281]. Sofia: State National Archive.

Western or Modern art such as Abstract art was condemned as elitist and bourgeoisie.<sup>98</sup> The patriotic line the Party adopted affected all of the arts. Bulgarian cinema was to produce a series of films on grand historical themes.<sup>99</sup> As a result, a number of epic movies told the legendary stories of the Medieval Bulgarian kings as well as the fighters against the Ottoman rule. During that period, the subjects of the films resonated in the “funny men” scenes of the Kukeri practices. At multiple places, the goat skin Kukeri figures are accompanied by a group of dressed up performers called “funny men” who perform subjects borrowed from politics or popular culture. With the help of the local community centers, scenes from the Liberation Movement against the Turks were enacted in multiple villages as part of the Kukeri celebrations. Archival pictures from the village of Dubene, kept at the local community center, show the group dressed in full soldier uniforms from the end of the nineteenth century. Similarly, the community center in the village of Kliment keeps photographs of Kukeri performers impersonating Raina Kniagina, the legendary woman who wove the flag under which The April Revolt (Aprilsko Vustanie) took place.<sup>100</sup> The Kukeri practices together with the local community centers actively participated in the patriotic discourse of the second half of the twentieth century.

During the period, all arts operated under the slogan Closer to the People, Closer to Life.<sup>101</sup> The very first festivals for folk art were set in the 1960s as a new art form. Previously, the Kukeri practices existed exclusively as local celebrations. The festivals quickly gathered popularity and thus fulfilled the Party agenda of celebrating folklore as an art form close to the

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<sup>98</sup> *Protokol ot Sreshta Nauka i Kultura s Rukovodsvata na Tvorsheski Suyuzi 17 April 1963*, [Record of the Meeting between BKP and the Leaders of the Art Unions 17 April 1963] 1, Fond 1, Opis 5 [Record 5] a.e 570 [archival unit 570] Sofia: State National Archive. Todor Zhivkov yet again denounces modern and abstract art as inaccessible for the people.

<sup>99</sup> *See Reshenie 159 Ot 21 yuni 1958 za Sustoiانيeto i Razvitieto na Kinematografiata* [About the Current State and Further Development of the Bulgarian Cinema 21 June 1958] 21, Fond 1, Opis 6 [Record 6] a.e 3645 [archival unit 3645] Sofia: State National Archive.

<sup>100</sup> Bulgarian revolt against the Ottoman Empire at the end of the nineteenth century.

<sup>101</sup> The slogan in Bulgarian reads: Poveche mezhdy naroda, po blizko do shzivota. For more see *Reshenie 159*.

people. In 1965, the first National Festival of Folk Arts in the small historic town of Koprivchitsa listed 4000 participants. The festivals quickly gathered popularity and the Fifth Festival in Koprivchitsa enlisted 18, 500 participants.<sup>102</sup> The National Kukeri and Survakari festival in Pernik still draws an average of 5 000 masked participants. The general setup allows each group ten to fifteen minutes of stage time. Usually, the participants include an introduction of a custom typical for their region in addition to the presentation of the goat skin covered Kukeri figures. In certain villages, new masks are made annually for each celebration. An award from the festival means an instant recognition for the local group that is still often under the guidance of the local community center. The award is framed and included in the permanent exhibition in the office of the community center leader. The achievement then becomes a stimulus for further participations.

In the 1970s and 1980s, in multiple regions, representatives from the Committee for Culture encouraged the local residents to resurrect and recreate the Kukeri practices of their grandparents for festival purposes. In the 1980s, an ethnographer from the Committee for Culture visited the neighborhood of Luzhata in the town of Ivailovgrad. Ivan Nedelchev was a teacher in a near by village when he met the person whom he remembered under the name of Tomangelov.<sup>103</sup> Acting upon Tomangelov's request, Nedelchev organized a group of young men at the local community center to form a Kukeri ensemble for festival participations. According to Nedelchev: "Tomangelov knew that I had interest in such [traditional, folk] things. He said that it should all be authentic. He did not want anything modern."<sup>104</sup> Nedelchev thus met with the elders of the village and recreated the custom based on their recollection. Up until that point, the local Kukeri figures had worn masks made out of fabric. The elders though remembered that

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<sup>102</sup> Simeonova 141.

<sup>103</sup> Ivan Nedelchev, Personal Interview, 9 June 2007.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

before they emigrated from Asia Minor, the masks had been made out of goat skins.<sup>105</sup> In the 1980s, prior to traveling to the Pernik Festival the newly founded group changed the disguise to reflect the descriptions of the elders. The devil, a major stock character of the group had always been wearing a white costume. After a few festival participations, Nedelchev decided to change the devil's costume to a black one. As he pointed out during our interview: "It is more theatrical that way. Anytime we see the image of a devil, he is black."<sup>106</sup> The manner in which the group constructed its image from the goat skin masks based on images preserved in the oral tradition to the black devil modeled on popular images reflected the way participants negotiated contradictions such as authenticity and innovation. Both authenticity and innovation exist within the framework of the festival whose guiding principle is performing the traditional. Authenticity exists as a performance or a simulation. Innovation, while rejected and denied, often takes place for the sake of a more effective presentation. The oral tradition is scrutinized in search for the most effective presentations. In the case of Ludzhata, some elders remembered that the Bei, the Kukeri leader, used to wear a hat. The Kukeri men used to try to knock it down and the one who succeeded was "tied" with "chains" by the others. Since the story presented a possibility for a highly theatrical presentation, the newly founded Nedelchev's group recreated the custom first at Pernik and later as part of the local celebrations.

Although supported by the authority under Communism, the festivals bore no tangible traces of Communist propaganda and remained popular after the country transitioned to democracy in 1989. During Communism, the festivals were exempt from any overt Communist slogans, speeches, or manifestations. Their content was limited to the performance of folk

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<sup>105</sup> The population of Ivailovgrad consists of Bulgarians who emigrated from Asia Minor at the beginning of the twentieth century. During the centuries of Ottoman rule over Bulgarian, it was not uncommon for Bulgarians to reach the furthest points of the Empire.

<sup>106</sup> Nedelchev.

customs. They were of course part of the political and propaganda network for limiting outside, and especially Western, influence. Yet, the connection to the Party propaganda system was relatively obscure to the regular participants. Unlike the official manifestations, such as the parades for Labor Day (May 1), or September 9 (the day on which the Party celebrated the start of Communism in Bulgaria), participation in the festivals was and still is voluntary. Since it never felt like a political obligation, rehearsing for public presentations became a beloved hobby to most of the participants, who, regardless of their political orientation, continued to attend multiple festivals. The fact that the festival's role in the wider network of the Party propaganda remained relatively obscure to the average participants marks the very success of the propaganda apparatus. Operating without even being noticed marked the ultimate efficiency of the propaganda system.<sup>107</sup>

The process of becoming ensembles under the local community centers had a long term effect on the Kukeri practices. In certain places, it led to the formation of a more structured form of stage presentations. Yet, in other places the Kukeri ritual maintained its original form while the political approval of its celebration and its adoption by the cultural centers aided its preservation. In the village of Dinevo, near the town of Haskovo, the Kukeri practices enjoyed popularity among the local population due to the work of the community center leaders. As soon as the community center closed in the 1990s, the Kukeri celebrations became extinct. In that particular case, the community center played the role of an organizer that kept the tradition alive. As soon as the community center leader left, the group lacked the necessary discipline to continue performing. Tonka Boncheva, a long time resident of the village, remembers that when

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<sup>107</sup> In that the power acted very much following a Foucauldian model. Instead of stemming from a tangibly centralized source, the propaganda apparatus permeated all layers of society and acted from multiple local and decentralized centers. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, transl. Robert Hurley, London: Penguin, 1976. 93.

the community center took over the organization of the celebrations, it did not impose any significant changes.<sup>108</sup> As a result, the local Kukeri participants never wore elaborate masks or ornate folk attire. Instead, they simply concealed their faces with either ashes or old scarves. The celebrations fell into the pre-Lent carnival Mummer tradition. Any of the village residents, including women, could dress up for the occasion. Cross-dressing was widely practiced by both female and male participants. In the carnival tradition of reversal of order and value, it was not uncommon for the players to wear their attire inside out or to put underwear over their pants.<sup>109</sup> What distinguished the local celebration in Dinevo from any other region I researched was the lack of noisy and wild processions. Instead, the Kukeri performers visited the village houses in silence with no music or dances. Upon entering a household, the masked participants would quietly sit in the corner of the room. The procession would enter mostly the houses where the village women would gather every night to chat and do craft work. The women would try to elicit some information from the masked figures by asking them who they were and where they came from. All of their questions would be met with complete silence. On the following day, some of their closest relatives and friends would reveal that they were part of the Kukeri group. As Tonka Boncheva stressed, the old people always told the young to welcome the Kukeri group for they would bring good luck to the household. Unlike in other villages, the quiet procession would not stage mummer scenes or joke with the hosts. In addition, the participants would not wear animal skins but would instead dress in old clothes. While in other places such as the village of Izvor similar traditions were greatly altered for festival purposes, with the participants

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<sup>108</sup> Tonka Boncheva, Personal Interview, 20 May 2008.

<sup>109</sup> For carnival and inversion of order see Chapter 5.

starting to make elaborate masks and fur costumes, the Dinevo practices preserved their original look and the local community leader did little to interfere with the custom.<sup>110</sup>

In other regions, the community center leader became involved not only in preserving but also in altering the look of the Kukeri celebrations. In the central Bulgarian village of Sushitsa, the Kukeri group presents a structurally rigorous dance. Instead of jumping chaotically in the streets, the masked figures gather in the central square and form two straight lines opposite each other. The dancers further step in a specific rhythm and move in circular formations. The costumes of the group also construct the highly disciplined and designed look of an ensemble. Half of the figures wear white, while the other half are dressed in black. The costume of the white Kukeri participants consists of wide cotton pants, white shirt and vests and low masks covered with beads. The black ones wear dark long hair goat skins around their legs, cotton shirts, highly decorated vests and high masks in the form of a colorful cone. With their look, the members of the group symbolize the basic struggle between the good and the evil. In the end, the good or the white Kukeri members always win and the pre-Lent practices end with a celebration of the incoming Spring and earth resurrection. The group is well known and liked at regional and national festivals, and the village itself often hosts regional Kukeri games. The local community center leader acts as a leader to the group and regularly heads rehearsals in preparations for folk festival presentations. Since the look of the participants adheres to traditional fabric and colors, the illusion of ritual authenticity is easily achieved. Yet, the current practices were mainly designed in the 1950s by a choreographer affiliated with the local community center.<sup>111</sup> Prior to that, the movement of the masked figures was chaotic, while their costumes consisted mainly of found objects. Anton Vasilev, a long time resident of the village, remembers that before the

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<sup>110</sup> For a description of the practices in Izvor in see Chapter 2.

<sup>111</sup> Gerogi Andonov, Personal Interview, 11 May 2006.

practices fell under the umbrella of the community center, the Kukeri group would play on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday.<sup>112</sup> Gradually, the celebrations moved entirely to the weekend and the house to house weekly visits were mostly abandoned. In the past, the group exhibited a great diversity in their choice of costumes. While some participants would wear goat skins around their legs, white cotton shirts, a belt with cattle bells, and high masks, others would simply throw some old raggedy clothes on. In general, there was no particular organization or direction in the look of the event. As Anton Vasilev pointed out, “Anyone could dress up and find some rags to disguise with.”<sup>113</sup> The faces of all participants were fully covered. Yet, some of them would use old nets or transparent scarves instead of tailored masks. Cross-dressing was wide spread with mostly men dressing like women. On Sunday, the whole village would gather in the square and start a fire. The young men would then jump over it for health. Very much in the carnival tradition of excess, drunkenness and violence were also widely spread among the participants.<sup>114</sup> It was not uncommon for an unruly masked man to demand payment from the audience in the form of a drink at the local pub. A month before the celebrations, the participants would take the bells out and every night would shake “the rust off” and practice with them. The tradition is long lost and as Anton Vasilev pointed out, “Now they travel to festivals all year round and there is no time for ‘rust’ to gather on the bells. There is no need to shake it off.”<sup>115</sup> The current community center leader also confirmed that the group owes a lot of its look to a past choreographer. Yet, since the rhythmic dance and symmetrical configurations have become a favorite with both participants and audience members, the group has decided to preserve the innovations and transform them into its traditional look. Their presentations thus become a

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<sup>112</sup> Anton Vasilev, Personal Interview, 11 May 2006.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> For carnival as an event of excess, see Chapter 5.

<sup>115</sup> Vasilev.



theatrical staging on the subject of tradition and as such very much fall into the tradition of “refined” (obraboten) or choreographed folklore. Under Socialism, the group was a regular guest at the national Kukeri festival in the town of Pernik. Currently, it still travels to multiple events throughout the year. Although it does not practice house to house visits, it stages grand presentations in the central square that draw the interest of both local and regional audiences.

In the nearby village of Dubene, the Kukeri practices also underwent changes in the 1970s when the group first started attending the national Kukeri festival in the town of Pernik. Up until the 1960s, according to photographs kept in the archive at the local community center, the group combined variety within its unified look. While all participants wore fifty to a hundred cattle bells around their waist, their shoes as well as masks exhibited individual choices.<sup>116</sup> Staiko Gamberov, a local resident who has been a Kukeri participant from the age of three, remembers that the change took place in 1974 when the group attended the Pernik festival and was advised by the jury to design exactly the same look for all of its participants.<sup>117</sup> The uniformed costume of the Dubene Kukeri group consists of white shirts, red waist bands with up to a hundred cattle bells, brown rough cotton military pants (bridzh), white cotton shirt with a red scarf (alen), and traditional shoes made from pig skins (tsarvuli). The participant faces are covered with masks with stylized face features painted on nets, and their heads are hidden under colorful scarves. Two props complete the costume: a shepherd staff (gega) decorated with colorful strings and a sword. The separate elements of the costume the group has been using since the 1960s are authentic, even more authentic than the ones they used prior to that.<sup>118</sup> Thus the paradox: while the look is theatrically designed to simulate authenticity it is achieved not by theatrical props but by objects preserved in the family through generations. The sword Staiko

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<sup>116</sup> The large number of bells is specific for the village and source of pride for the participants.

<sup>117</sup> Staiko Gamberov. Personal Interview. 22 May 2007.

<sup>118</sup> I use “authentic” in the sense of coming from an old source such as fabric that was woven in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Gambezov uses is 180 years old and has been passed to him by his grandfather. The red scarves are also made locally and hand dyed and painted by a couple of brothers long passed away. In contrast, the pictures taken from the period prior to the group festival participations reveal participants in contemporary shoes and boots. Such “innovations” were strictly sanctioned and discouraged by the festival jury.

Unlike in other regions, the Dubene Kukeri procession is not accompanied by any musical instruments. Instead, a group of women sing traditional folk songs. The horo is played under their voices. Both the group of the women and the Kukeri group are under the leadership of the local community center. The group of women is also the local ensemble for folk singing, and in addition to the Kukeri practices, it often participates at various other events. Similar to the Kukeri group, it is dressed in unified folk female attire. In the past, the pre-Lent celebrations began on the Monday in between Cheese and Fat Sunday.<sup>119</sup> On Monday, Wednesday and Friday groups from different neighborhoods would play horo and perform the house to house visits. According to Staiko Gambezov, the current community center leader, “There were at least four or five simultaneous celebrations all over the village. On Fat Sunday, all of the neighborhoods would gather in the square.”<sup>120</sup> In the early years of Communism, the weekly celebrations were discouraged, mainly because during the weekdays the residents were expected to work eight hour shifts. As a result, the celebrations moved entirely to the Sunday and while nowadays the group still performs the house to house visits, they have limited all of the events to the weekend. The participants remember that in the 1950s the group for the first time would play on days different from the pre-Lent week. During that period, they would receive invitations for official Party

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<sup>119</sup> The Cheese and Fat Sundays fall on different dates each year and are determined according to the Orthodox Easter. On Cheese Sunday, one could eat milk products, and on Fat Sunday—meat. After that, one is to fast up until Easter.

<sup>120</sup> Staiko Gambezov. Personal Interview. 22 May 2007.

events. On Labor Day, May 1, the group was once invited to perform in front of the Party elite and Todor Zhivkov. The local old people greeted such participations with disapproval. For them, no bells could be rung after Fat Sunday. The custom, taken out of its traditional context and place, became a presentation of the traditional meant for the stage. It very much exhibited what Todor Zhivkov called for in his speeches: the creation of new art forms that incorporated elements from the folk tradition and thus fostered patriotism among the nation.

The move to festival participations inevitably lead to a change to more sophisticated masks. The festival truly became the arena of the new Kukeri art form which incorporated elements of the local celebrations by transforming them into a spectacle. While at the beginning, certain villages might have had two sets of masks—one for festivals and one for local celebrations—gradually in certain regions, the more elaborate festival look prevailed at the local level as well. The village of Voiniagovo, situated close to both Sushitsa and Dubene, uses masks manually made by the participants. The high mask is made out of fabric attached to a metal triangular frame. The decoration includes multiple small mirrors, believed to have the power to chase the devil away, colorful strings and beads. As Tsonka Damianova, the leader of the local community center leader, pointed out, “When the sunshine hits the masks, the beauty of the sparkle takes your breath away.”<sup>121</sup> The body of the costume consists of white hand woven cotton shirts, and a skirt made from old hand woven fabric (*mesali*) covering the pants. For a signature prop, the group uses a silk whip. Within their general framework, the masks exhibit certain variations in the decoration. Yet, the group constructs a strong sense of a designed ensemble. As Tsonka Damianova asserted, all of the items were authentic, meaning that they were manually tailored from fabric found in the attics of the old houses. Similarly to Dubene, the Kukeri participants were accompanied by a group of singing women. As a singer in the group,

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<sup>121</sup> Tsonka Damianova, 23 May 2007, Personal Interview.

Tsonka Damianova wore a folk costume that had been in her family for over a hundred years. In the past the celebrations were on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday in between Cheese and Fat Sunday. Since the group started attending festivals, depending on the invitations they would receive, they might not perform in their own village. As Tsonka Damianova summarized, if the Kukeri participants were to attend a festival in the nearby town of Karlovo during the week of the local celebrations, they would chose traveling over staging performances within the village: “The people here know us. We try to go somewhere where the people have not seen us.”<sup>122</sup> The group has thus transformed itself into an ensemble for cultural presentations.

Upon interviewing elderly residents, I was able to reconstruct a partial account of the Kukeri celebrations in the village before the 1960s. According to Stoianka Veleva, “Now the Kukeri men dress differently. Before, they would throw just a scarf over their face. Now, they spoil the old hand woven fabrics their grandmothers made. I ask is that what their grandmothers labored for.”<sup>123</sup> The look of the past approximated the mummer tradition of simply concealing one’s face and covering one’s body with rags. A simple white or black fabric would fulfill the task of hiding one’s face and allowing one to play jokes on the neighbors without being recognized. The group of women singing the Kukeri song still existed and was dressed in the uniformed fashion of the day. Stoianka Veleva herself was wearing the old folk attire of her youth during our interview and shared that she had never “switched to the city fashion.” The festival presentations preserved the look of the female group that had largely become obsolete except among the very old and thus simulated a traditional look for the Kukeri practices. Stoianka Veleva’s recollections were confirmed by another long time resident of the village,

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Stoianka Veleva. 23 May 2007. Personal Interview.

Tsonka Damianova.<sup>124</sup> According to her, “You put on what you found, what you had.” In addition to the simple scarf look, Tsonka Damianova described a net mask with the features of the face painted on in a manner very similar to the one I encountered in Dubene. Both residents confirmed that in the past the celebrations were strictly performed on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, while later on they were moved to Sunday. Recently, even on Sunday there would be no celebrations as the group might travel to well known national festivals in the towns of Shiroka Luka or Karlovo. Comparing the current masks to the one of the pre-festival period, Tsonka Damianova concluded, “Now the masks are much better. More beautiful.”<sup>125</sup> Her grandson was a member of the group and had received an honorable mention from a major festival in Sofia. In the years before the community center established its leadership, the Kukeri celebrations were chaotic and the masked men were chasing the young girls all over the village. While the girls would be playing the horo, the men would “attack” them with the silk whip, throw ashes at them, and the girls would run back into their homes. Ever since the event came under the guidance of the community center, it acquired the discipline of a rehearsed performance.

The fairly recent highly decorated masks covered with beads and mirrors have completely replaced all of the previous Kukeri disguises and have succeeded in their claim to authenticity in front of juries and audiences. Yet the process was a gradual one. A study done in 1989 by Dzhoan Shefler<sup>126</sup> describes the existence of five different types of masks in the village of Voiniagovo.<sup>127</sup> The author places the origin of the highly decorated ones in the period between 1959 and 1964. The next two masks coincide with the recollections of my informants: an image

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<sup>124</sup> Tsonka Damianova. Personal Interview. 23 May 2007.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Dzhoan Shefler is the name of the author as it appears in the Bulgarian publication. The English version of the name is given as Joan Sheffler.

<sup>127</sup> Dzhoan Shefler, [Joan Sheffler] “Maskaradnata Obrednost v Bulgaria: Maski i Kultura (Pet Lika ot Selo Boiniagovo, Karlovsko)” [Masked Ritual in Bulgaria: Masks and Culture (Five Images from the village of Voiniagovo in Region of Karlovo)] *Bulgarski Folklor* [Bulgarian Folklore] XVII.2 (1991): 31-35.

painted on a net and a very thin white fabric simply thrown over the face. Shefler also describes a brown mask made out of a hollow pumpkin (kratuna) with a hot red pepper for nose and a mask of sheep skin. Macho Mollov, manager of the Museum of History in the town of Karlovo summarizes the process:

In the village of Voiniagovo Starchev [Kukeri] day was one of the most joyful annual holidays.<sup>128</sup> Around twenty years ago [in the 1960s] with the help of an artist, the group designed its [official] costume. Now they have an ensemble to attend festivals, while the local community celebrations remain only in the memory of the very old<sup>129</sup>

The national festivals affected the practices in two contrasting ways. Since the groups were exposed for the very first time to a grand performance that combined presentations from all over Bulgaria, they were also able to borrow elements from other regions. Currently, the Voiniagovo mask could also be seen in the village of Kabile, which belongs to a very different municipal district. To investigate which was the original would be rather futile and any conclusion would most certainly be greeted with heated objections by the participants of the other village group. What is undisputed is the influence that each group exerts on the other contestants. Thus, the villages became equal participants on the cultural market of the festival. The festival context also leads to each group redefining itself by finding a specific and unique identity. Thus, the second way the festivals affected the local traditions were by encouraging certain groups to invent new practices that would distinguish their region from the rest of the competitors.

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<sup>128</sup> In the area of Karlovo, the Kukeri celebrations are often referred to as Startsi or Old people. Some participants believe that the word is also connected to the word strashno (scary).

<sup>129</sup> Macho Mollov, *Startsi i Starchev Den v Karlovska* [Kukeri Day in the Region of Karlovo], Karlovo: Regionalen Istoricheski Musei [Regional Museum of History].

In the village of Kliment, situated close to Sushitsa, Voiniagovo, Dubene and the town of Karlovo, the festival participations of its Kukeri group lead to the abandonment of certain practices such as the ritual Spring plowing of the earth and to the introduction of new characters. The symbolic plowing of the earth lead by either the stock character of the young bride or groom and performed by a couple of Kukeri figures is among the most wide spread pre-Lent practices all over Bulgaria. Upon taking part in the Pernik festival, the Kliment group noticed that their plowing is not much different from the staging of multiple other ensembles. As a result, the community leader together with the mayor and the Kukeri participants coined some new stock characters to stage the incoming of the Spring.<sup>130</sup> A young girl dressed in folk attire decorated with flowers was carried on a wooden chair and represented the Spring. Since the presentation was greeted with approval by the festival audiences, it became a signature look for the group. At the same time the Kukeri figures were kept as close to the original, as preserved in photographs from the turn of the twentieth century and in the oral tradition of the village, as possible. Since the village is situated in the Rose Valley, or the region that produces the well-known Bulgarian rose used for an ingredient in multiple perfumes, the Kukeri masks incorporate the image of the rose. A net with a painted face very similar to the Dubene look extends into a head piece covered with colorful plastic flowers.<sup>131</sup> The back of the head is covered with a red hand painted scarf extending from a military hat (furashka). The upper body is covered with a white cotton shirt or a white hand made wool sweater with a red vest. On their chests, the participants wear black or brown bands with multiple cattle bells. The pants are made of rough military fabric and decorated with multiple colored strings.

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<sup>130</sup> Mano Manov and Nikolina Nikolova, Personal Interview, 25 May 2007.

<sup>131</sup> In the past the flowers were made out of fabric.

While certain villages become prone to altering their practices for festival purposes, others stay resistant to change. The village of Vasil Levski situated close to Sushitsa and Karlovo presents an example of a community that for years has been an active festival participant with a very strong local Kukeri tradition. Similar to other places, the group is under the local community center and has taken part in multiple political events under Socialism. A photograph preserved at the village library shows the Kukeri participants on stage in front of a Party Slogan announcing a Party Congress. In addition to the community leader, the Kukeri group has a leader of its own and an assembly of participants in charge of approving all practices and potential changes. In the 1960s, the same choreographer that introduced the highly structured dance in the village of Sushitsa attempted to alter the chaotic movements of the Vasil Levski group but was met with strong local resistance. The local participants acknowledge that the Sushitsa presentations have become a favorite at festivals and the group a regular winner of awards. Yet, the residents of Vasil Levski deemed such a change as contrary to what they had heard from their elderly or to the practices as preserved in the oral tradition and the local community memory.

In certain places, when a group decides to alter its look for festival purposes, the process becomes an arena for negotiating one's identity, tradition and the very essence of the Kukeri practices. In the village of Dragodanovo, situated near the above villages, the Kukeri participants wear colorful coats and pants made from processed goat skin turned into blankets (guberi). Although not exactly the same, all costumes have a white base and rectangular pink color patterns which complete each other into a unified composition. According to Marina Todorova, the village librarian, in the past the Kukeri figures had a different look and dressed in "what they had."<sup>132</sup> Yet, once the group started attending regional festival, the participants noticed that certain other villages had constructed a very strong ensemble look. As a result, the

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<sup>132</sup> Marina Todorova, Personal Interview, 10 June 2007.



costumes were altered to convey a unified appearance. The question of whether this decision was consistent with the essence of the Kukeri practices is still being negotiated within the village. While some believe that the group is not “a folklore ensemble,” and all of its participants should exhibit a strongly individual look, others assert that opting for a unified ensemble look helps assert a strong identity for the group as a whole and distinguish it from other festival competitors. The festival jury plays a key role in such decisions. The participants from the losing groups often take their loss as an indication that they need to change their practices. The paradox is self-evident. The main purpose of the jury, consisting mainly of scholars, is to reward the regions that have preserved their unique traditions. Yet, the award also has an artistic component measuring the most effective presentation. Thus, it is not unusual for a group that has lost to scrutinize the presentation of those who have won and “borrow” certain characteristics in order to become more successful next time. The process of “borrowing” is largely acknowledged both among the local participants and the scholars researching the traditions. Multiple publications point to its negative effect on the local traditions.<sup>133</sup> The publications thus adopt the voice of the ethnographer concerned with perpetuating a frozen in time image of the Tradition. Yet, at the local level, participants have found a way to negotiate change and tradition. Tradition has opened to incorporate change. All of the participants I interviewed asserted that all of their practices, including every single element of their costume, was traditional and authentic. Authentic was the most used word by all groups to describe the Kukeri celebrations in their own villages or towns. It was applied even to costumes that had undergone a complicated process of change in the past forty to fifty years. One of the more obvious reasons for such insistence on authenticity is the

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<sup>133</sup> See among others Georg Kraev, “Maskaradnite Igri v Suvremennata ni Kultura,” [Masked Games in Our Contemporary Culture], *Khudozhestvena Samodeinost* [Community Arts], 6 (1984): 34-7. Also Georg Kraev, “VIII Natsionalen Festival na Survakarite i Kukerite—Pernik 85,” [Eight National Festival of Survakari and Kukeri, Pernik 85], *Bulgarski Folklor* [Bulgarian Folklore] 6.2 (1985): 115-19.

very requirement established by most festivals that the group presentations be uniquely traditional. Yet, a more subtle reason stems from the fact that the changes themselves are part of the rather sophisticated process of simulation of the authentic. Made from old materials found in the attics, the costumes do indeed incorporate “the original.” Authentic, in that particular case, means made by hand instead of by a machine or out of one’s ancestor’s hand woven fabric instead of cotton bought at the Mall. The process and the materials present the tradition while the look, which largely depends on the specifics of the region, is open to change as inspired by the cultural exchange of the festival. The question of folk authenticity became highly politically charged in the early years of Communism. During the period, the community center leaders together with the chairs of the professional folk ensembles “purified” songs and performances of any syncretic and especially Turkish elements.<sup>134</sup> The process was closely connected to the Party propaganda program of creating and recreating versions of purely Bulgarian folklore that could instill national pride in the population.

### **The Scholar as a Festival Jury Member**

The National Festival in Pernik began in 1966. The festival distinguishes between the Christmas (Survakari) and pre-Lent (Kukeri) masked celebrations and has separate awards for each.<sup>135</sup> The awards are for a whole presentation of a Kukeri group, for the whole presentation of a Survakari group, and for preservation of the tradition. The jury consists of well-known Bulgarian scholars and museum staff members with numerous publications on the Kukeri

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<sup>134</sup> See Buchanan 232. In the section, the author researches the work and influence of Maria Kuteva, who was the wife of the founder of the most prominent ensembles for folk performances started under Socialism: “While Koutev, [sic] busied himself with the song’s arrangement, his wife rewrote its lyrics, for as she explained to me in 1988, its original words did not meet the Ensemble’s poetic standards. [...] An important aspect of Kouteva’s [sic] work was to cleanse the Ensemble’s texts of ideologically problematic idioms such as Turkish words.”

<sup>135</sup> The distinction was first coined by Petur Petrov. Later scholarly sources have questioned the assertions. As outlined earlier, I use Kukeri for both the Christmas and pre-Lent celebrations. So do the participants from the various regions who name themselves either as Kukeri regardless of the time of their celebrations or use one of the multiple local names such as Dzamali, Startsi, etc.

practices. Within the framework of the festival, scholarship becomes prescriptive criticism. The scholar becomes the ultimate authority. From a student of ritual and social practices, the scholar becomes their judge. Tsvetana Manova, a prominent Bulgarian ethnographer at the Pernik Museum of History and a long time jury member, summarizes the role the festival imposes on the scholar: “The jury plays the role of a keeper [of the tradition]. Because of the subject it works with, it has outstretched its objective [to evaluate] and has started to take care for the preservation of the traditional. It has overstepped its function.”<sup>136</sup> The very premise of the festival as outlined in its official agenda is to preserve the tradition. The founding of the festival fell in between the two speeches Todor Zhivko’s made in 1963 and 1967 in which he clearly outlined the patriotic line the Bulgarian culture was to undertake. During our interview, Manova drew a clear connection between the political context of the 1960s and the inauguration of the Pernik festival:

The Party Congress outlines the parameters of the culture. During the same period, multiple festivals for national and folk arts [narodno tvorchestvo] are started all over Bulgaria: in the town of Koprivchitsa, etc. The Union of the Masters of the Folk Arts is founded in the same period. ... The basic postulate is fostering patriotism<sup>137</sup>

While inaugurated with a political decree, the Kukeri festival, at least on its surface, preserves an apolitical face. Its participants and jury were not necessarily Party members. On the contrary, quite a few of the participants I encountered during my field research envisioned the Kukeri practices within the context of opposing the Communist regime.<sup>138</sup> As Manova shared during

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<sup>136</sup> Tsvetana Manova, Personal Interview, 11 April 2008.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Often the participants presented the Kukeri practices in the context of both resisting Turkish rule and the Communist regime. Within the oral tradition, the celebrations have acquired the status of rebellion. During the

our interview, it is only recently that she herself had become interested into researching the reasons why the festival received support from the government authority. The propaganda thus was within the general framework the Party adopted towards supporting folk art. Folk art in addition to fostering patriotism was essentially the art of the people. It was also highly accessible to the masses. All political reasons aside, as Manova noted, the Pernik Festival has achieved its goal of keeping the practices alive:

What would happen if there were no festival of the masked games? I believe the practices would have died out since there is no place for such a ritual in our contemporary industrial society. Thus, the festival has played a positive role in the preservation of the masked games. It has played a very key role in the preservation of the rituals of the Bulgarian people.<sup>139</sup>

The indirect role the festivals played in prolonging the life of ritual practices at the local level is also acknowledged in scholarly publications. According to Galia Simeonova, “The paradox is evident: the stage version of the rituals become an incentive for their recreation within the local traditions of the villages as well.”<sup>140</sup> In her study of the relation between local practices and festival participations, Simeonova finds that in certain cases a group in a village might scrutinize the local oral tradition for a long forgotten ritual to present at a festival. Before traveling to the festival, the group might rehearse their presentation in the village, which gradually leads to the ritual becoming a regular part of the village life once again.<sup>141</sup>

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Turkish rule, the Kukeri men, the story went, would disguise themselves and attack the Turks. In the early years of Communism, the local authority in multiple villages would discourage the practices. In the village of Eleshnitsa the Kukeri celebrations were initially staged on Eater. Under Communism, the day was changed to May 1—Labor Day. Most of the participants were required to participate as part of the official Labor Day manifestation and yet they chose to put the goat skins on and parade as Kukeri men. Georgi Kiritsov. Personal Interview. 18 May 2007.

<sup>139</sup> Manova.

<sup>140</sup> Simeonova 146.

<sup>141</sup> Simeonova 142.

Within the festival, the presentations became staging of the ritual rather than the ritual itself. At the same time, the ritual itself continued to exist at the local level, with the participants celebrating in their home villages as well. As Manova acknowledged, “What we see at the festival is not the tradition, but its performance. The groups present on stage and the event becomes a theatrical one.”<sup>142</sup> Galia Simeonova makes a similar observation: “[In festivals] the ritual props exist as items of an exhibition show, the ritual clothing is paraded as in a fashion show of folk attire or an art exhibit, the ritual food is presented in a food show.”<sup>143</sup> During our conversation, Manova also stressed the complexity of the terms tradition and authenticity. While the very goal of the jury was to reward the most traditional presentations and thus act as a keeper of the tradition, its ability to grasp an embodied practice complicated its agenda:

The participants often say, “Manova knows the tradition.” But what is the authentic? I know what the tradition is in my region [Pernik] since I started doing field research. But not before. In terms of written sources, we all start with Arnaudov, or the turn of the twentieth century. Thus we can’t really talk about authenticity per se. All we could assert is relative authenticity. From the point where we caught it.<sup>144</sup>

### **Kukeri Festivals and the Legacy of the Socialist Era**

The jury of scholars that was a prominent feature of the Socialist era festivals is still present at all festivals throughout the country. The very festivals such as Koprivchitsa and Pernik that were started under Socialism survived the transition to democracy. Part of the reason for their longevity is that even under Socialism, their affiliation with the larger Party propaganda mechanism remained relatively obscure. The festivals in the early 2000s exhibit a format very

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<sup>142</sup> Manova.

<sup>143</sup> Simeonova 146.

<sup>144</sup> Manova.

similar to the one set in the early 1960s. The jury sits on a podium in one end of the square, while each group enters from the other end and is given ten to fifteen minutes to present its local customs. In the newly established market economy, the festivals turned profitable enterprise for the cities hosting them. As a result, even towns with no Socialist festival traditions such as Razlog, initiated festival events. In the 2000s, there are numerous folk festivals held at various times of the year throughout the country.

In the 1960s, instead of inventing entirely new structures, the Party and specifically the Committee for Culture based all of the folk festivities on already existing models. Some of the festivals, such as the one in the town of Koprivchitsa, had the name of “subor” or fair.<sup>145</sup> The fair had been a popular event in all villages and towns since the turn of the twentieth century. Prior to Communism, it often coincided with the day of the Saint who was the protector of the particular village.<sup>146</sup> The fair included traditional dances such as the horo, instrumental music, folk singing, plenty of food, and a bazaar for various goods. Nowadays, the Kukeri festivals in towns such as Razlog or villages such as Eleshnitsa and Varvara still approximate a fair. I was present at both the 2007 and 2008 Easter Kukeri Celebrations in Eleshnitsa and the 2007 New Years Kukeri parade in Varvara. Both villages teemed with regional merchants who exhibited goods ranging from underwear to kitchen appliances and tourist souvenirs of small Kukeri dolls on folding

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<sup>145</sup> For a summary of Bulgarian fairs (subori) in English see Donna A. Buchanan, *Performing Democracy: Bulgarian Music and Musicians in Transition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006) 169-71. Buchanan provides a detailed description of the artistic organization of festivals and the various rounds such as “pregled (critical revue), subor (fair) sreshta (meeting, assembly), or festival (festival)” (170). For a description of the festival system during Socialism in Bulgarian see Simeonova 134-37. For archival research of festivals from the turn of the twentieth century published in Bulgarian see Tatiana Tsankova, “Maskiraneto po Sirnitsa v Konteksta na Gradska Praznichna Kultura (Kraia na 19 v. –40-te-te godini na 20-b. v Gabrovo)” [Pre-Lent Masquerades in the Context of the Town Holiday Culture in the End of the Nineteenth up until the Ninety-forties of the Twentieth Century in the Town of Gabrovo], *Maskaradnite Igri: Minalo i Suvremennost* [Masked Games: Past and Present], ed. Irena Bokova (Sofia: Krakra, 1995) 151-62.

<sup>146</sup> The Committee for Culture under Communism censored all religious references from the officially organized fairs.

tables. Early in the morning, the local pubs set outdoor barbeques and started making the traditional kufteta (meatballs with onions and bread).

When invited to a regional fair, the Kukeri local groups become part of the program that might include folk singing groups from various community centers, poetry readings, and short satirical sketches. The poetry usually extols the beauty of the village and Bulgaria in general.<sup>147</sup> On 27 May 2007, I attended a folk fair in downtown Sofia. The invited groups represented various community centers from all over Bulgaria. The representatives from the village of Stoletovo arrived with all of their ensembles including the Kukeri one. Once on stage, the community leader of the village recited a short patriotic poem. The opening line of “You are so beautiful country of mine”<sup>148</sup> set the tone for the rest of the program which focused on the beauty of the local folk customs. Recordings of folk music served as musical background to the poem, while girls in folk attire constructed the scenic backdrop. Next, a group of small children entered the stage and performed a horo under the sounds of a song about the Rose Valley. The village of Stoletovo is situated in the region which produces the Bulgarian rose and the flower served as a recurrent theme throughout their presentations. The group recreated the custom of collecting the roses while their community center leader recited yet another poem extolling the local traditions. The Kukeri figures were last to enter the stage. A drummer dressed in a folk costume announced their entrance. The men, dressed in the Kukeri attire of flower covered masks typical for the region, circled the stage several times and stopped occasionally to shake their cattle bells. Upon their exit, the children group performed a song that used to be part of the repertoire of the

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<sup>147</sup> For a description of a Bulgarian fair in English see Buchanan 173. On 23 Sep. 1989 Buchanan witnessed a fair in the Sofia neighborhood of Krasna Poliana. The event included “stalls selling food and drink, a ferris wheel, a dog show, a baked goods competition, and a makeshift stage in the stadium’s center where entertainers, including clowns and local amateur folklore collectives, provided a nonstop show broadcast over an extensive sound system.” One of the most prominent professional ensembles for Bulgarian folklore Filip Kutev was also present.

<sup>148</sup> Personal translation.

Socialist national children choirs.<sup>149</sup> As in all folk fairs, the content of the Stoletovo program approximated a variety show in which most participants wore traditional folk attire. The only thread that connected them was the recreation of the traditional which was still very much consistent with the official line set for such events in the 1950s and 1960s under The Committee for Culture and the Communist Party. Like the fairs from the second half of the twentieth century, the one I observed served only as a staged “trailer” of the local custom.<sup>150</sup>

## Conclusion

Started under Socialism in the 1960s, the folk festivals incorporated within their highly rigid structure chaotic ritual celebrations such as the Kukeri performances. At the same time, the Kukeri practices in multiple regions became organized and rehearsed events under the leadership of the local community leaders. Prior to the 1960s, the Kukeri customs existed exclusively at the local level as community events with no clear separation between audiences and performers. However, the folk festivals introduced a new presentational format and groups from multiple villages for the very first time traveled to perform outside the borders of their local communities. While certain festivals such as Pernik focused exclusively on masked Kukeri customs, others such as Koprivchitsa constructed the equivalent of a variety folk show, in which the Kukeri performers shared the stage with music and dance ensembles. Under Socialism, the festivals provided the arena for staging patriotism based on customs and tradition. Rituals such as the Kukeri became consistently viewed as either exclusively Bulgarian or at best as belonging to the Slavic and/or European masked traditions. In the second half of the twentieth century, in addition

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<sup>149</sup> The name in Bulgarian is “Sladkopoina Chuchuliga” and the song is known by all.

<sup>150</sup> The village of Stoletovo does have a vibrant local Kukeri pre-lent tradition which includes house to house visits. Yet, the Kukeri group also holds regular nightly rehearsals together with the other ensembles at the local community center prior to each festival participation. Each festival participation also has a new script with the group presenting various customs at its various guest appearances. The customs themselves do not change yet the presentations could stage them in various ways.



to becoming performance ensembles, the Kukeri practices were framed within the patriotic discourse of Communist Bulgaria.

The trend is still alive and both participants and scholars refer to the Kukeri performances as ancient pagan practices that originated either from the Thracians, the Greeks or the Slavs and were later preserved by the Bulgarians who turned them into part of their authentic folklore. No current research examines the Kukeri performances as a syncretic form that reflects centuries of cultural contamination between the Christian and Muslim population on the Balkans. In the following chapter, I examine field research trip data together with Turkish publications that, contrary to the current theories circulated in Bulgarian scholarship, clearly show examples of Kukeri practices among the Turkish population in the Balkans. In addition, I look yet again at the period between 1944 and 1989, examine the official Party line towards patriotism and nationalism, its policies towards the Turkish minority on the territory of Bulgaria, and its long lasting effect of affirming inheritably syncretic forms such as the Kukeri ones as purely Bulgarian.



Figure 4. Kukeri Participants of Dubene. Date unknown. Photograph courtesy of Dubene Community Center. The participants are shown in their pre-festival participation days before their group turned into an ensemble under the leadership of the community center. Instead of unified costumes, the participants wear different tops, scarves and shoes.



Figure 5. Kukeri Participants of Dubene. 1980s. Photograph courtesy of Dubene Community Center. The group of men are dressed as Bulgarian soldiers fighting the Turkish Army at the end of the nineteenth century.



Figure 6. Kukeri Participants of Eleashnitsa on Labor Day. 1980s. Photograph courtesy of Georgi Kiritsov "Mustaka". The poster in the background announces May 1, Labor Day, which under Communism was honored as the day of the worker.

## CHAPTER 4

### KUKERI: NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND TRADITION

The current population on the Balkans reflects centuries of migration. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the nineteenth century, the newly founded countries shared contested land and population, and a heritage of tension that transformed the region into a zone where nationality, land and tradition remain in a state of conflict and negotiation. While the history of the Balkans is built upon constant population mobility, leading to syncretic cultures, the region is abundant with examples of nationalism, constructed over claims of land and cultural tradition.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Bulgaria underwent several significant shifts in its official policy to the Muslim minority living on its territory. In the early years of Communism, the Party followed the ideology of internationalism and encouraged ethnic diversity. Starting in the 1950s, the Party shifted to a stand of strong nationalism which propelled a policy of forced assimilation of the Muslim population. After the fall of Communism, Bulgaria officially acknowledged the religious and political rights of its Muslim minority and avoided ethnic and religious violence. Currently on the territory of Bulgaria, the Muslim population comprises Muslim Turks—a bilingual group—Bulgarian Muslims—a Bulgarian speaking religious minority—and Muslim Gypsies.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bulgarian Muslim are also referred to as Pomak or Pomatsi in Bulgarian. Currently Bulgarian Muslim or Bulgaro Mokhamedani in Bulgarian is the most accepted term in both scholarship and media. For publications in English presenting a summary of the evolution of the term see Maria Todorova, “Identity (Trans)Formation among Bulgarian Muslims,” *The Myth of Ethnic Conflict*, ed. Beverly Crawford and Ronnie Lipschutz (Berkeley: University of California, 1998) 471-510.

The existing studies place the Kukeri ritual within the folk customs of the non-Turkish and non-Muslim segments of the Bulgarian population. The only article on the subject published by an American scholar reaffirms Kukeri as a ritual unknown to the Turkish population. In “Constituted through Conflict: Images of Community (and Nation) in Bulgarian Rural Ritual,” Gerald Creed affirms: “I found no evidence of Turkish participation in mumming activities.”<sup>2</sup> Within Bulgarian scholarship, there is only one article describing the Kukeri Spring celebrations and one publication describing the Fall masked Dzhamali ritual among the Bulgarian Muslims.<sup>3</sup> The two articles present isolated cases of publications on the subject.<sup>4</sup> The mainstream of scholarly research conducted in Bulgarian defines Kukeri as belonging exclusively to the Bulgarian folk tradition. I was able to locate only one more isolated publication on masked practices among the Bulgarian Muslim population. A manuscript of an anthology, printed in the 1980s and preserved in the National Archive, contains a paragraph outlining the Fall mumming customs of the Bulgarian Muslims. Consistent with the political agenda of the Party during the period, the authors use the example to “prove” the Bulgarian origin of all Muslims and Turks living on the territory of Bulgaria. The main body of publications places the origin of Kukeri within the European and Slavic tradition and reviews the ritual as loosely connected to the Christian calendar.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the field research I conducted led me to a remote Turkish village on the territory of Bulgaria that performed the Kukeri ritual on the fourth day of the Muslim religious holiday of Kurban Bairam. I was also able to reach yet another remote village in the Rodope

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<sup>2</sup> Gerald Creed, “Constituted through Conflict: Images of Community (and Nation) in Bulgarian Rural Ritual,” *American Anthropologist* 106.1 (2004) 68.

<sup>3</sup> Anni Kirilova, “Opisanie na Kukeriskite Obichai,” [A Description of the Kukeri Rites] *Bulgarska Etnografia* [Bulgarian Ethnography] 2 (1991): 61—70. Taniia Mareva, “Maskaradni Igri ot s. Zaburdo, Chepelarska Oblast,” [Masked Games from the village of Zaburdo in the region of Chepelare] *Rodopi* 1 (2004): 43—9.

<sup>4</sup> Taniia Mareva, an ethnographer at the Museum of History in Smolian and author of one of the above articles greatly encouraged me to travel to villages within the Rodopa mountain in search of masked practices among the Muslim population. As Mareva pointed out, currently the research done on the subject remains insufficient.

<sup>5</sup> The Winter celebrations belong to the period of the 12 Days of Christmas (December 25 to January 6) while the Spring ones fall within the pre-Lent tradition.

Mountain inhabited by Bulgarian Muslims who performed masked rituals very similar to the Kukeri ones as part of their circumcision festivities. In both places, the celebrations were suspended under Socialism and reconstructed after its fall at the end of 1989. Within Turkish scholarship, there is also evidence for vibrant mummary tradition with features similar to the Kukeri ones practiced by the Turks of Anatolia. Contrary to the view predominant among Bulgarian scholars and ritual performers, the Muslim population in both Bulgaria and Turkey participates in masked games very similar to the Kukeri ones.

### **Negotiating Heritage, Identity, and Conflict**

The Kukeri practices do not present an isolated case of cultural contamination and syncretism between the Christian and Muslim population on the territory of Bulgaria. On the contrary, the masked performances fall into the larger context of shared religious and folk customs practiced by both groups. Significant body of research exploring the similarities in the rituals between the Christian and Muslim population was conducted by various Bulgarian scholars in the late 1980s in a climate of strong nationalism enforced by the official Party line. The field research data was used to prove the Bulgarian and Christian origin of all of the Muslim and Turkish population on the territory of Bulgaria. Viewed in a climate of political and national tolerance, the results of the field research simply speak of highly syncretic cultures that for centuries have existed next to each other. In the 1980s, Mariia Nikolchevska, at the time an ethnographer at the Regional History Museum of Kurdzhali, a region with both Christian and Muslim population, published a series of articles on customs practiced by both communities. Nikolchevska's field research provides data of Easter practices in a series of Muslim villages

whose population would celebrate the day by lighting fires and painting eggs.<sup>6</sup> According to her informants, the lighting of the fires symbolized the crucifixion of Christ, whom the Muslim population honored as a prophet.<sup>7</sup>

Whether a certain practice is seen as Bulgarian or Turkish is often the result of a strong political agenda. Being in direct contact with Turkish customs for over five centuries, multiple Bulgarian practices such as the Kukeri ones are contaminated yet claimed as nationally traditional. The majority of participants I interviewed projected the Kukeri practice onto the realm of Bulgarian tradition and saw the sense of their national identity as contingent upon its preservation.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the 2005 Kukeri Carnival in Razlog was organized with the help of the Culture without Borders Association which according to its chair Maria Patasheva “has for a goal to preserve Bulgarian traditions.” As Patasheva summarizes, “The Bulgarian traditions carry the Bulgarian mystical spirit and it is absolutely essential to resurrect [the traditions] in today’s hectic times. Especially among the young. Our call is for the old to remember and the young to learn and to show how in the heart of the Balkans the Bulgarian mystic tradition is very much alive.”<sup>9</sup> In other regions, the oral tradition and selected printed materials place the Kukeri practices within the context of the Bulgarian revolt against Turkey at the end of the nineteenth century. The villages of the Balkan region of Karlovo and Kalofer include stock characters in the typical for the nineteenth century uniform of the Bulgarian rebels waiving the green flag of the insurrection. The practices in the village of Gabarevo annually stage a scene of firing the cherry wood cannon to recreate the beginning of the April uprising that in 1876 drew international

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<sup>6</sup> Nikolchevska, Mariia, “Pashkalnata Traditsia na Islamiziranoto Bulgarsko Naselenie na Iztochnite Rodopi,” [Pashka Traditions among the Islam Population in the Region of Eastern Rodopi] *Bulgarski Folklor* [Bulgarian Folklore] 4 (1986): 39—44.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid 40.

<sup>8</sup> My field research included the following regions with Bulgarian non-Turkish and non-Muslim population: Razlog/Eleshnitsa, Karlovo/Kalofer/Kyustendil, Ivailovgrad, and Sliven/Iambol.

<sup>9</sup> *Chanove i Zvantsi* [Bells], 2005, DVD.



attention and sympathy to the subordinate position of the Bulgarians in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>10</sup> The 1961 film, *Koziiat Rog* [The Goat Horn] further reinstates the image of the Kukeri man as a Bulgarian rebel against the Turks. A scene in the movie stages a vendetta attack on the local Turkish official by a Bulgarian father and his daughter who use Kukeri disguise to blend with the celebrations and kidnap their target. During my 2007 field research in the central Bulgarian village of Turiia, I was reminded of the film by local participants who had accepted the film as a reliable source relating the Kukeri tradition to the Bulgarian insurrection against the Ottoman rule. An article published in 1971 in a local newspaper also frames the Kukeri practices in the village of Turiia within the patriotic discourse. According to its author, St. Doncheva, under the Turkish rule, the practices “adopt new elements to better express the heroic spirit of the Bulgarian and his eternal strife for freedom.”<sup>11</sup> According to Doncheva:

The white shirt [of the participants] is replaced with a colorful vest worn on bare chest. The outfit underlines the masculinity and strength of the Bulgarian. The skin of the mask stretches on a couple of wooden sticks in the form of a double crossed cross. The [Bulgarian] people used the sign of the cross to show that they strongly kept their [Christian] faith. When the Kukeri men would meet Turks in the street they would pat

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<sup>10</sup> One of the most horrific events during the revolt was the killing of children and women in the church of Batak. During Bulgaria’s independence the public as well as the government often found themselves having to negotiate its meaning. During the early wave of internationalism in late 1950s and early 1960s, the Party stresses that the ordinary Muslim population was not involved in the massacre. See *Tsentrallen Komitet po Rabota s Balgaromohamedanite* [Central Committee of Working with the Bulgarian Muslim], 6 March 1964, Ford 1, Opis 5 [Record 5] a.e 608 [archival unit 608], Sofia: State National Archive, 58-9. During the period of strong patriotism and political repression of the Muslim population of Bulgaria in the 1980s the Party interprets and uses the events to foster Bulgarian/Turkish antagonism. For more see *Bulgarska Akademia na Naukite 5 Iuni 1989* [Bulgarian Academy of Sciences 5 June 1989], Fond 1, Opis 63 [Record 63], a.e 78 [archival unit 78], Sofia: State National Archive 2.

<sup>11</sup> St. Doncheva, “Kukersi Igri v Kazanlushko,” [Kukeri Games in the Region of Kazanluk] *Iskra* 2 Feb., 1971

them with their wooden swords on the neck as if for health while in reality the act symbolized the great desire of our people to finally challenge their slave masters.<sup>12</sup>

In 1971, the year of the article, the cross of the Kukeri masks was already replaced with a doll. As a religious symbol, the cross was banned by the Party and taken away from the Turiia village costumes in the early 1950s.<sup>13</sup> Under Communism, the cross, together with other Christian symbols such as the church, could legitimately exist only within the domain of patriotism. The article's description of the participants baring their chests as early as the nineteenth century is factually problematic. An early twentieth century black and white photograph in the Turiia's museum shows a Kukeri participant in full mask wearing a white shirt under his vest. In addition, Khristo Kaluidzhiev, a local resident born in 1936 remembers all Kukeri men wearing white shirts and ascribes the bare chests to the group's recent desire to foster a more theatrically effective look. Kaluidzhiev also objects to the inclination of seeing anti-Turkish symbolism in the Kukeri attire by pointing that "the Carnival has nothing to do with the slavery. It's a Spring ritual. For fertility. For better crops."<sup>14</sup>

Written in 1971, the highly speculative interpretation of the Kukeri practices as outlined in Doncheva's article reflected the Party's nationalistic line that overshadowed the 1970s and dominates the 1980s. Consistent with the political attempt of shaping Bulgaria into a one-nation state, the official Party Policy abandoned its previous Marxist stand of seeing the Ottoman Empire as having victimized the Bulgarian Christians and the Muslim poor alike. The decade also marked the beginning of ever increasing sanctions against the Muslim minority living on the territory of Bulgaria. In order to win public support for its often violent policies, the Party fostered patriotism based on anti-Turkish and anti-Muslim sentiments.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Khristo Kaluidzhiev, Personal Interview, 10 June 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

## **Socialism, National Identity and Policy towards the Muslim Population on the Territory of Bulgaria**

In the first years of Socialism, the official ideology adopted by the Bulgarian Communist Party rested on the principles of internationalism. History and the nation were defined by class struggle. In the 1950s, the Party line targeted the integration of the Muslim population living on the territory of Bulgaria and encouraged its active participation within the Socialist power structures. The National Archive has preserved multiple treatises called “Working with the National Minorities,” all of which focus on developing a “friendly relationship between the Bulgarian and Turkish people,” promoting class unity and denouncing nationalism.<sup>15</sup> History, including the five centuries of Ottoman rule over Bulgaria, is evaluated through the paradigms of Marxism and class struggle:

It is a historical fact that in 1396 Bulgaria was invaded and subsequently ruled by Turkey for approximately five hundred years. As it is well known this slavery was hard and cruel and every attempt for national liberation of the Bulgarian people was barbarously put down. Yet, when we approach historical events, we must analyze them from the point of view of class struggle.<sup>16</sup>

While some of the vocabulary the treatise uses such as “national liberty” and “barbarously put down” defends strong national positions, its overall tone raises above nationality and ethnicity. Bulgarians and the poor segments of the Turkish population are seen as equal victims to the ruling classes of the Ottoman Empire. The blame is thus thrown on the “feudal ruling class and its agents.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Rabota sred Natsionalnite Maltinstva 21 Iuni 1958* [Working with the National Minorities 21 June 1958], Fond 1 Opis 5 [Record 5], a.e.349 [archival unit 349] Sofia: State National Archive. Personal Translation.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid 12.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid 12.

In the early years of Socialism, the guiding theory towards the formation of the nation rested on a combination of Marxism and Leninism. The Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party affirmed the notion of the nation as an economic entity in service of capitalism: “Marxism and Leninism teach that the [idea of the] nation has not and will not exist for ever [since] it was originated in the context of the capital means of production”<sup>18</sup> The working class of Bulgarians and the poor Turks left on its territory after the fall of the Ottoman Empire were presented as equal victims to the ruling bourgeoisie. Nationalism was further related to the interests of the ex monarchy: “The monarchy together with the Fascist ruling circles guided by class self-interest, encouraged Bulgarian chauvinism and lead a policy of discrimination against the national minorities. Unlike previous powers, the Bulgarian Communist Party declares itself as the union of all working classes regardless of nationality and religion.”<sup>19</sup>

According to the Party, although the Turkish population living on the territory of Bulgaria shared the language and religion of the Turkish nation, its identity was shaped in rather different terms because of the “different economic, political and cultural conditions of Socialist Bulgaria. [...] The religious and linguistic factors were not the definitive ones. [...] The Turkish population on the territory of Bulgaria was developing into a socialist national minority.”<sup>20</sup> As outlined by the official political line, language and religion became secondary to cultural and social factors as key elements of identity construction. The country was seen not simply as “a geographical location but as a social category.”<sup>21</sup> The country thus existed as a social construct—even more, the individual was involved in the daily social construction of his or her country and

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<sup>18</sup> *Tesisi na Tska na BKP za rabotata na Partiata sred Turskoto Naselenie 1958* [Policy of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party towards the Turkish Population 1958], Fond 1, Opis 6 [Record 6], a.e. 3713 [archival unit 3713], Sofia: State National Archive.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 74.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid 83.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 89.

more specifically of its socialist order. The briefings of the second meeting of the committee for “Working with the National Minorities” conducted on July 10, 1959 defined yet again the question about one’s country.<sup>22</sup> Nationalism was presented as a form of reactionary propaganda connected to capitalism. The minorities living on the territory of Bulgaria themselves were defined as Socialist instead of National groups. In a speech made to the assembly, one of the speakers, Ibrahim Tatarliev, summarized: “The Turkish population in Bulgaria is a socialist minority, part of the Bulgarian nation, whose country is the People’s Republic of Bulgaria.”<sup>23</sup> All of the speakers at the assembly asserted the spirit of internationalism and affirmed that “[a] Party who is international would never touch the Turkish language,” meaning it would never accept a policy towards discrimination and an official ban on the Turkish language spoken by the Turkish population living on the territory of Bulgaria.<sup>24</sup>

Only a couple decades later, the official Party line would make a sharp turn in its national policy resulting in a ban on both the language and customs practiced by the Turkish population living in Bulgaria. Yet, in the 1950s the Party still allowed the free practice of both the Turkish language and folklore. The religious practices were regulated and restricted in accordance with the atheism adopted by the Socialist countries. Nevertheless, the archive has preserved multiple documents that attest to Turkish being taught at schools as well as to Turkish community theatres and folk groups being officially approved and even sponsored by the state.<sup>25</sup>

In the 1950s and 1960s the Party line towards the Bulgarian Muslim—a Bulgarian speaking Muslim minority—focused on affirming the group’s Bulgarian identity. Multiple

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<sup>22</sup> *Za rabota s Natsionalnite Maltintsva 10 Iuli 1959* [Working among the National Minorities 10 June 1969], Fond 1, Opis 5 [Record 5], a.e 388[archival unit 388], Sofia: State National Archive.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid 7. Ibrahim signifies a speaker with a Turkish name. Under Socialism, Bulgaria was NRB, an abbreviation for Narodna Republika Bulgaria—People’s Republic of Bulgaria.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid 15.

<sup>25</sup> *Tesisi na Tska na BKP*.

treatises outline the danger of confusing one's religion with one's ethnicity. The Bulgarian Muslims were to be constantly reminded that they belonged to the Bulgarian ethnicity. Regulations on appearance such as bans on the traditional female attire of wide colorful pants, dark overcoats (*feredzhe*), and head scarves were enforced together with policies monitoring the group's embodied traditions. Scholarly work was officially ordered to research and prove the Christian past and Bulgarian roots of the Bulgarian Muslims.<sup>26</sup> The Bulgarian Muslims were defined as a group that had been forced to accept the Muslim religion under the Ottoman Empire. They were affirmed as victimized Christian Bulgarians, who in the face of violence have, against their will, renounced the religion of their people.<sup>27</sup> To support the above thesis, the Party ordered scholarly research and clearly outlined the results the research was supposed to produce through evidence extracted both from physical remains and the oral traditions. A report by E. Staikov given to the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party on November 26, 1956 summarizes:

A few centuries ago, the Bulgarian [Muslims] were forced by the Turkish rulers to accept the Muslim religion. [...] The Central Committee at the Bulgarian Communist Party decides: By the end of 1957, the Historical Department of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences to publish a brief scholarly history of the Bulgarians practicing the Muslim religion with an appendix of documentations that serves as a scientific base to the historical propaganda. The Ministry of

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<sup>26</sup> *Ot Bulgarska Akdemiia na Naukite do Drugaria Atanas Stoikov—Zam. Savezhdasht Otdel Nauka, Obrazuvanie i Izkustvo pri TsKa na BKP 11 April 1955* [From the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences to Comrad Atanas Stoikov—Chief of Department of Science, Education and Art at the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party 11 April 1955] Fond 1, Opis 6 [Record 3], a.e 3062 [archival unit 3062], Sofia: State National Archive. 125—6.

<sup>27</sup> The contrasting theory, reflected in Bulgarian scholarship after the Fall of Communism reviews the possibility of a voluntary acceptance of the Muslim religion by certain Bulgarian groups in the Ottoman Empire. For a summary of the argument in English Todorova 473. The residents of the Muslim Bulgarian village of Ribnovo whom I interviewed shared the belief that their ancestors had accepted the Muslim religion by choice and recollected painful memories from school history teachers under Socialism who taught them otherwise. In scholarship both theories are currently in circulation.

Culture is to send composers, writers and choreographers to study the customs, songs, and dances of this [Bulgarian Muslim] population and assure the writing of suitable repertoire for the community ensembles of its regions.<sup>28</sup>

The repertoire and the archive were to both produce results in accordance with the policy of the power structure.<sup>29</sup> Physical evidence such as grave stones, old houses and mosques were to be scrutinized, dug into and proven to contain Christian signs within their structures. The embodied practices were to be recorded, studied and proven to belong to the customs practiced by the Bulgarian Christians.<sup>30</sup> Although the Party banned the open practices of both Christian and Muslim religious ritual, it still affirmed Christian heritage as defining Bulgarian identity. Multiple treatises from the 1950s and 1960s encouraged the founding of folk ensembles for Bulgarian music and dance in the villages with both Turkish and Bulgarian Muslim population. In the village of Ribnovo, the Bulgarian Muslim residents were to accept for their official folk ensemble the version of the traditional female attire most reminiscent of the Bulgarian model. Instead of wide pants for the women, the official folk costume requirements introduced a skirt under the colorful apron that was common both for the Bulgarian Muslim and Christian traditions. The Turks living on the territory of the Bulgarian village of Giovren were similarly supplied with folk costumes consistent with the Bulgarian tradition of the nearby regions.<sup>31</sup> All folk music reminiscent of the Turkish tradition was banned. As a result, the zurna and the drum

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<sup>28</sup> *Meropriatia za Isdigane Politicheskoto I Kulturno Ravnishte na Bulgarite s Mohamedanska Viara. 23 Noemvri 1956* [Programs for Improving the Cultural Level of the Bulgarian Muslims 23 Nov. 1956] Fond 1, Opis 6 [Record 6], a.e 3062[archival unit 3062], Sofia: State National Archive.

<sup>29</sup> I am basing my use of the terms of the terms “archive and repertoire” on the work of Diana Taylor. See Taylor *The Archive*.

<sup>30</sup> Later scholarly publications reflect the political line the Party took in the 1960s. In the late 1980s, Mariia Nikolchevska, an ethnographer at the Museum of History in the town of Kardzhali published a series of articles proving the Bulgarian origin of the Muslim population in her region. See Mariia Nikolchevska, “Etnografski Dokazatelstva za Proizhoda na Islamiziranoto Naselenie,” [Ethnographic Proof about the Origin of the Islam Population] *Istoriata I Nie* [History and We] (Sofia: Otechestven Front, 1986) 90—110. See also Nikolchevska, “Paskhlnata”.

<sup>31</sup> Shanov, Ramadan, Personal Interview, 22 May 2007.

used at all public ceremonies could no longer play in the village of Ribnovo during public festivities.<sup>32</sup>

By the 1980s, the policy towards the Bulgarian Muslims entered its final and most extreme phase. The very idea of the Bulgarian nation also took a turn and from a multi ethnical nation aiming towards Socialist internationalism, Bulgaria was declared to be a “one-nation state.” A 1989 document bearing the stamp “highly confidential” proclaims: “Historically, Bulgaria has developed into a one-nation state and any attempt to create artificially formed ethnic minorities is of reactionary character.”<sup>33</sup> The Party had already banned the use of any languages but Bulgarian, and launched a campaign for changing the names of the Muslim population living on its territory.<sup>34</sup> All residents received passports with new Bulgarian names. The name change was compulsory and the campaign bordered on violence. Having renamed both the Turkish and the Bulgarian Muslim population, the Party made the claim that only Bulgarians live on the territory of Bulgaria.<sup>35</sup> The names together with the spoken language were thus officially recognized as constructive elements towards one’s identity.

Any rituals bearing connection to either Islam or the Turkish language were strictly banned. Because of its affiliation to the Bairam religious celebrations, the Kukeri tradition in

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<sup>32</sup> Mustaf Avdikov and Kadri Mashev. Personal Interview. 15 April 2008. Zurla and drum are instruments attesting to the highly syncretic culture on the Balkans. Both are used in the Bulgarian and Turkish folk traditions. Yet, in 1962 the Party makes it a priority to fight any Turkish influence among the Bulgarian Muslims. Under Socialism, the accordion replaced the musical of the zurla in the village of Ribnovo.

<sup>33</sup> *Bulgarska Akademia na Naukite, Etnografski Institut i Muzei 5 Juni 1989* [Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Ethnographic Institute and Museum 5 June 1989] Fond 1b, Opis 63 [Record 63], a.e 68[archival unit 68], Sofia: State National Archive, 3.

<sup>34</sup> In the second half of the twentieth century, there are several campaigns for changing the names of the Muslim Population of Bulgaria. In the village of Giovren the names of the Turkish population were changed in the early 1950s. The village of Ribnovo has preserved within its collective memory an incident of the early 1960s when the local Bulgarian Muslim population destroyed the only bridge leading to the village and thus stopped the committee that was on its way to forcefully change their names. Avdikov, Mustafa, Personal interview. 14 April 2008. For sources on the various name changes campaigns in English see Mary Neuburger, *The Orient Within: Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Modern Bulgaria* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004).

<sup>35</sup> While the Bulgarian Muslims are ethnic Bulgarians, the Turks living on the territory of Bulgaria recognize themselves (and are currently politically recognized) as of a Turkish ethnicity.



villages such as Giovren was interrupted. Instead, the Party approved of folk groups focusing on Bulgarian song and dance together with official celebrations of national and Socialist holidays. The residents of Ribnovo remember grandiose celebrations for March 3, the National Holiday of Bulgaria commemorating its independence from the Ottoman Empire. The Party treatises from the period include special sections on controlling both oral traditions and embodied practices: “The Ministry of the National Education must incorporate in its elementary and junior school programs additional hours for studying and singing of Bulgarian patriotic and national songs.”<sup>36</sup> A document from the Party archive dated 1988 contains the following report on the Turkish population in Bulgaria: “Typical for the last fifteen to twenty days is the spread of celebration of national holidays, festivals of amateur performances, and patriotic events. There are only isolated cases of weddings and funerals performed with Islamic rituals.”<sup>37</sup>

By the end of the 1980s, the official Party line reached a climax in its attempts to deny the very existence of Turks on the territory of Bulgaria. The success of the political rejection of the existence of minorities relied heavily on theoretical discourse. The bodies were first denied within the discourse. The Party commissioned writings by scholars in which the very existence of Turkish population on the territory of Bulgaria was theoretically denied. An archival entry in a folder from 1988 contains the scholarly writings of Maksim Blagoev, who at the time held the degree of a senior scholarly associate.<sup>38</sup> The writings are addressed to the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party and present detailed arguments that deny the very existence of Turkish minority on the territory of Bulgaria. Blagoev begins by rejecting the existence of a

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<sup>36</sup> *Niakoi Predlozhenia vuv Vrazka s Vuzroditelnia Protses 1989* [Some Suggestions about the National Revival Process 1989] Fond 1b, Opis 63 [Record 63], a.e 68 [Archival Unit 68] Sofia: State National Archive.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid 40.

<sup>38</sup> *Do Drugaria Georgi Tanev 9 Avgust 1988* [To Comrad Gerogi Tanev 9 August 1988] Fond 1b, Opis 63 [Record 63] 63, a.e 29 [archival unit 29], Sofia: State National Archive.

Muslim minority based on the argument that all religion had been abolished under Socialism.<sup>39</sup>

Second, he installs the term Turkish-speaking Bulgarians.<sup>40</sup> Based on such an approach, the difference in identity between the Turks and Bulgarians living on the territory of Bulgaria becomes solely and entirely linguistic. Thus, once the use of the Turkish language is banned, as it was in the later years of Socialism, it would logically follow there would be no difference in identity among the citizens of Bulgaria. Blagoev further asserts the rather bizarre theory according to which the very existence of Turkish speaking people in Bulgaria provides an example of tribe remnants from the seventh century rather than of Turkish people left on the territory of Bulgaria after the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the nineteenth century. Bulgar tribes, who at the end of the seventh century join the Slavs on the Balkans to form Bulgaria, present, according to Blagoev, the direct ancestors of the twentieth century Turks living on the territory of Bulgaria: “We are having a population such as Ancient Bulgars, Usi, Kumani, etc. that has not become linguistically integrated within the Slavic language tribes” (23). Thus, according to Blagoev, the past fourteen centuries, have failed to bring complete integration between the tribes that initially formed Bulgaria.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to providing an example of discourse in service of power, the above writing illustrates how the very existence of the body could be theoretically denied and remodeled. The bodies are being renamed, and all of their traditions and embodied practices either altered or exterminated. During the period, the only embodied practices allowed stemmed from the Bulgarian folk tradition. The only clothing allowed came from the contemporary for the period

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid 12.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid 14.

<sup>41</sup> Even if one excludes the centuries of Ottoman rule over Bulgaria (for the old tribes could presumably blend with the Turkish majority and not have to integrate with the Bulgarian speaking population) there are still seven plus one centuries: from the end of the seventh century, when Bulgaria was found, to the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> its fall under Ottoman rule and from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its independence, to the end of the twentieth century, the date of Blagoev's writing.

European attire. The attire for any folk ensembles with predominately Turkish participants had to adhere closely to the traditional Bulgarian costumes. Since all of the population of Bulgaria spoke Bulgarian, responded to Bulgarian names, wore Bulgarian clothing, sang Bulgarian songs, and played Bulgarian folk dances, Bulgaria was legitimized as a one-nation-state.

### **Political Discourse and Embodied Practices of the Muslim Population on the Territory of Bulgaria.**

The National Archive contains a set of manuscripts written at the end of the 1980s on the history of the Muslims on the territory of Bulgaria. The folders stamped Confidential contain editing suggestions for molding the data in the manuscripts to a shape consistent with the official policy towards the Muslim population. One of the entries contains a book length study called *Pages from the Bulgarian History*—a study of the Bulgarian Muslims under the edition of Academic Khristo Khristov.<sup>42</sup> The opening statement of the chapter on embodied traditions, summarizes: “All theoretical and specific research of the folk of this part of the Islamized Bulgarians, which under the Ottoman rule is also subjected to a linguistic assimilation, shows that we have at hand a Bulgarian folk tradition.”<sup>43</sup> The manuscript is of especial political significance as it refers to the Turks living on the territory of Bulgaria, and not the Bulgarian Muslims. Within the highly politically charged discourse, the Turkish population is transformed into Bulgarians who in addition to the Muslim religion have accepted the Turkish language and have become linguistically assimilated within the Ottoman Empire. According to the writing, the Turks on the territory of Bulgaria are not Turks but Bulgarians who have forgotten their language. By 1989, the names of the Turks living on the territory of Bulgaria are already

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<sup>42</sup> Academic is the highest scholarly title in Bulgaria. *Study of the Islamized Bulgarians and the National Regeneration Process* [Stranitsi ot Balgarskata Istoria. Ocherk sa Islamisiranite Balgari i Ntaionalnovarsroditelnia protses], Ed. Khristo Khristov. Fond 1b, Opis 63 [Record 63], a.e.64 [archival unit 64], Sofia: State National Archive.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid 160.

changed to Bulgarian ones. The practice of Turkish language at both public and private places is banned. As a result, within the archive, the Turks on the territory of Bulgaria could leave no mark. The last step is to prove that their bodies have always belonged to the Bulgarian tradition. Within the historical discourse, the bodies are claimed to belong to either the pan-Bulgarian Medieval tribes or to a group of Bulgarians who have lost their language. The site on which the bodies leave their mark is either obliterated by political bans or framed within the Bulgarian tradition.

In the climate of late Socialism, the very discourse of a Turkish folklore would be impossible. When mentioned, the folklore of the Muslim population is seen in the context of the Bulgarian customs. Syncretic performance forms such as the Kukeri ones that are practiced by both the Christian and Muslim population of Bulgaria are claimed to belong entirely to the non-Muslim Bulgarian tradition. Politically, the fact that certain Muslim villages do perform masked rituals similar to the Kukeri ones is used to prove the Bulgarian origin of the Muslim population. Since at multiple places the Kukeri rituals exist in conjunction with Muslim celebrations, they are either banned or when not banned taken out of context for propaganda purposes.

At the end of the 1980s, the fact that the Bulgarian Christian, Bulgarian Muslim and Turkish populations practice masked games within their traditions is seen as proof of common Pan Slavic origin of all three groups. An isolated mention of masked rituals in *Study of the Islamized Bulgarians and the National Regeneration Process* uses the Kukeri practices to prove the pan-Slavic origin of the Turks on the territory of Bulgaria. The brief paragraph examines the masked ritual of Dzhamali, a Fall celebration of figures masked into animal costumes, as belonging to the “paleobalkan heritage and the civilization of the Ancient Thracians.” Islam, the study attains without specifying how, has influenced the ritual by changing its date to the Fall.

The closing sentence stresses on the importance of previous studies that place the Kukeri games within “the Slavic-speaking Christian population” and specifically refers to the work of Benkovskaa-Subkova.<sup>44</sup>

In her research, Benkovska-Subkova reviews the Bulgarian masked rituals in the context of the Greek and Romanian traditions by stressing their European belonging.<sup>45</sup> A comparative analyses together with semiotic readings leads the author to conclude that the Bulgarian masked games “like the European ritual masquerades in general, have inherited the system of holidays of the late Antiquity and early Byzantine.”<sup>46</sup> The comparative analysis of Benkovska-Subkova includes examples of Romanian Spring ritual performed with a highly decorated plough.<sup>47</sup> A highly decorated plough is of course a prop central to the ritual celebrations of multiple ethnic groups including the Turks.<sup>48</sup> The example clearly shows not so much the inadequacy of comparative analysis as its highly political potential. A politically charged discourse that aims at associating Bulgaria exclusively with the Slavic traditions could certainly produce the necessary comparative analysis that points to existing similarities between the Kukeri games and other Slavic masked traditions. It could either ignore that the very same similarities exist between the Bulgarian and Turkish masked practices or even use them to place the Turkish tradition within the Slavic one. Either way, framing the Bulgarian masked games within a certain tradition, Thracian, Greek, pan-Slavic, Anatolian, or exclusively Bulgarian, achieves validity mainly as an expression and assertion of a political discourse.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid 177.

<sup>45</sup> Benkovska-Subkova, Milena, “Bulgarskata Maskaradna Obrednost v Konteksta na Evropeiskata Traditsiia,” [The Bulgarian Masked Tradition in the Context of the European Tradition] *Bulgarska Etnografia* [Bulgarian Ethnography] 3 (1994): 3—15.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid 15. English text in original. The abstract of the article is published in English.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid 10.

<sup>48</sup> In his folklore studies, the leading Turkish scholar Metin And presents descriptions of a similar ritual as part of the Anatolian Turkish tradition. See Metin And, “On the Dramatic Fertility Rituals of Anatolian Turkey,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 39.2 (1980) 8.

### **Kukeri and Masked Rituals among the Anatolian Population of Turkey**

In his article “On the Dramatic Fertility Rituals of Anatolian Turkey,” Metin And presents a detailed account of rituals and mummer scenes performed by cross-dressed and skin-covered masked characters. Grounded in the Cambridge School’s evolutionary theory of theatre’s origins, the article reviews the folk performances as primitive artistic forms that failed to develop into aesthetically sophisticated theatre. Written in 1980, the text presents a theoretically outmoded approach, yet an invaluable account of field research abundant with documentation of rites practiced in remote villages in Anatolia. The Turkish stock characters and performances that Metin And describes are highly reminiscent of current rituals within Bulgaria. For example, according to And, “ In many of the Anatolian peasant plays we find in one instance a black faced character who is dressed in black goatskin or sheepskin and is called the Arab, and his adversary whose face is whitened and who wears a white goatskin or sheepskin” (88). The character of the black faced Arab presents a central figure in the Kukeri celebrations of multiple Bulgarian villages such as Belopoliane and Dolno Lukovo to name only a couple.<sup>49</sup> In addition, the Bulgarian village of Vasil Levksi in the Karlovo/Kalofer region annually stages a mock battle between white and black sheepskin Kukeri men.<sup>50</sup>

Metin And also gives an account of winter rites in which skin covered figures visit from household to household to chase the evil away: “Usually at the winter solstice young people, dressed in skins representing camels, foxes, and other animals, go from house to house to the accompaniment of pipe and drum. They carry sheep-bells on their necks and their waists. The bells attached to them were supposed to be a potent means of expelling demons.”<sup>51</sup> The above

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<sup>49</sup> The population of both villages, situated in the region of the town of Ivailovgrad in South East Bulgaria originates from Bulgarian emigrants from Asia Minor.

<sup>50</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid 89.

description closely corresponds to the Kukeri Winter customs in multiple Bulgarian locations such as Razlog, Blagoevgrad, Eleshnitsa, and Shaborkut to name only a few. In addition, multiple villages and towns in Bulgaria perform the Spring Kukeri ritual of mock plowing of the earth which according to Metin And is also typical for the Turkish population of Anatolia: “For instance in the village Yenigazi in the district of Sarikamis (Kars), during the months of April and May there is a ceremony observed called Cift Cikarma or Cift Ekmegi (Presenting the Yoke or Yoke Bread), to celebrate the first ploughing and the first scattering of seed and to promote fertility of the ground.”<sup>52</sup> During the rite, And continues, the head of the household put on a fur coat and “had a tail made of rags and his face was blackened with soot.”<sup>53</sup> Within Bulgaria, the plowing scene has various stage implementations with the most typical version presenting a couple of goat or sheep-skin-covered Kukeri men in the role of the oxen led by either the Kukeri bride or groom.

Both the Bulgarian and Anatolian traditions stage stock characters such as the cross-dressed bride, the camel, the doctor, the bear, and the sheep or goat skin covered men to name only a few. Metin And describes “a bear play in which the bear tamer and bear arrive with pipe and drum players, and the bear dances to music with others.”<sup>54</sup> The bear scene is still highly popular within the Bulgarian tradition and is usually enacted by “a bear owner” playing the fiddle with “the bear” (a participant in costume) dancing to his music. In addition, the mummer scenes of Anatolia, according to And, exhibits explicit sexual references such as a mock sexual act or rape: “Other important elements common to most Anatolian plays are the mock or ritual marriage, obscene pantomimes of the sexual act, the presentation of objects such as clubs, sticks

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid 90.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid 90.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid 91.

or mallets in phallic shapes or mere sticks with allusions to its phallic meaning.”<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the Bulgarian Kukeri tradition is abundant with phallic and other sexually explicit references. The examples shows a heritage of cultural contamination between the Bulgarian and Turkish population that have for centuries lived on the Balkans.

### **Kukeri Practices among the Turkish Population of Bulgaria.**

In addition to the Metin And’s account of masked rituals identical to the Bulgarian Kukeri practices all over Anatolia, I was able to find examples of masked celebrations practiced by the Turkish population on the territory of Bulgaria. The village of Golemanovtsi is situated in the Southern parts of Bulgaria and is populated primarily with Turks. During the first half of the twentieth century, the village celebrated a Fall ritual called Dzhamali. Not only are the rites extinct, but they are also completely forgotten by the current population. Yet, during my field research, I was able to find Behide Sali who was born in 1919 and able to recreate some childhood memories of the celebrations. Although Sali had lived all her life on the territory of Bulgaria, she did not speak the language and I was able to interview her with the help of another local resident, Beiham Mehmed Ali, acting as an interpreter. According to Sali, at the end of September men dressed in colorful rags would visit from house to house and perform a lively dance. The ritual and the men celebrating it were called with the Turkish word Dzhamali. Although not dressed in skins, they would still carry heavy cattle bells around their waists and in their hands. The men would jump into the streets and the noise of the bells was believed to bring “abet”—or good luck.<sup>56</sup>

Asi Ramadan who was born in 1928 in the same village was able to remember a few additional details of the long lost ritual. According to Ramadan, at the end of September men

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid 92.

<sup>56</sup> Behide Sali, Personal Interview, 12 April, 2008.



would dress like a camel—a few of them would throw a colorful rug over their backs and would start walking the warehouses where the corn was stored for the Winter. The men would carry a bag and fill it with corn while joking with the owners. No owner could refuse to let them freely take away from his goods. At that particular night, the camel men with heavy cattle bells took advantage of a temporary suspension of all social norms—at any other occasion they would have been chased away as thieves.

In addition to the above extinct rituals, I was able to find some evidence for vibrant Kukeri celebrations still practiced in the village of Giovren, a Turkish village on the territory of Bulgaria. Since Giovren's Kukeri group does not travel to national festivals, the village custom is virtually unknown to the rest of the country. The DVD recording of Kurban Bairam celebrations on January 13, 2006 starts with a close up of the local mosque. The camera moves to reveal the circular shape of the horo played by young girls dressed in the casual attire of jeans and jackets. To the side, elderly women in colorful headscarves and long garments stand next to men of all ages and observe the dance. The orchestra plays songs in both Bulgarian and Turkish. A figure wrapped in sheep skins descends the steps leading to the square where it is shortly joined by other fur covered creatures. The local population, which consists exclusively of Turks living on the territory of Bulgaria, currently refers to the masked figures as Dzhadalar—a Turkish name for devils—or in more recent times as Kukeri.<sup>57</sup> On their heads, the Kukeri men wear either rectangular head pieces made of fur painted in shades of red or plastic gorilla masks. Either way, their bodies are covered with pieces of fur painted in orange and red completed with brown pieces of rough fabric. The men wear belts with cattle bells and carry wooden swords. The colorful group is accompanied by the stock characters of the doctor, the policeman, and the bride—kaduna in Turkish. All of the stock characters are dressed in a carnivalesque manner with

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<sup>57</sup> Ramadan Shanov, Personal Interview, 22 May 2007.

old clothes and objects taken out of context. The cross-dressed bride is holding a broken umbrella and is wearing huge boots, flowery apron, a straw hat and a fabric to conceal “her” face.<sup>58</sup> The policeman depicts the dilapidated version of the Socialist militia uniform in combination with a wooden gun that occasionally shoots noisy blanks. The doctor wears a white uniform, an old leather bag, oversized glasses and a stethoscope hanging down his neck.

Upon entering the square, the sheep-skin-covered men start chasing the women to the greatest amusement of all. They further engage in the disjointed mummer skits of sword fights and death and resurrection scenes.<sup>59</sup> When one of the Kukeri man “drops dead” in the middle of the square, the doctor revives him with a magical injection—a performance greeted with laughter by the crowd. The policeman meanwhile follows the rest of the sheep skin figures and performs multiple “arrests.” The cross-dressed bride is dragged on a piece of rugged fabric down the icy slope and is later pushed in a three wheel cart around the square. Meanwhile, the young girls continue performing the horo around the mock comical scenes staged by the Kukeri figures. While no men join the girls, the Kukeri figures do break the circle of the young women who accept them as partners in their dance.

The local residents remember the Kukeri or Devils to have always been part of the last day of the Kurban Bairam celebrations.<sup>60</sup> The group of skin covered figures always includes the cross-dressed character of the woman for the heart of whom the Kukeri men compete. The village residents describe the typical mummer scenes of sword fights as well as death and subsequent revival as traditional elements of the comical skits performed in the square. In addition, a mock wedding between the strongest Kukeri man and the bride could be performed

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<sup>58</sup> The fabric over the face is not to be confused with religious concealment. All of the women in the village have their faces uncovered. The cloth over the Kukeri bride falls within the mummer tradition of hiding the face behind masks, ashes or rags.

<sup>59</sup> For mummer scenes and the Kukeri practices see Chapter 5.

<sup>60</sup> Ramadan Shanov, Rufe Shanova and Ismail Terziev. Personal Interviews. 22 May 2007.

by a mock hodzha—a Turkish priest or imam. As the local residents explain, it is not uncommon for the real village hodzha to observe the mock one conducting the wedding ceremony. All of the scenes are performed in good humor with occasional obscene references which place them within the carnivalesque tradition.<sup>61</sup> The audience too endures humorous assaults by the Kukeri men who often throw ashes at the crowds. While preserving the basic framework of traditional stock characters, the Kukeri participants improvise various scenes throughout the years. Ramadan Shanov, the chair of the local Community Cultural Center recollects that a couple of years ago the comical scene portrayed a mock rape and castration. After “raping” the “bride,” one of the Kukeri men was “castrated” by the doctor who used a wood hammer to perform the “operation.” In addition to exemplifying raw humor, the scene falls yet again within the carnivalaseque tradition with its use of objects, such as the wooden hammer, out of context.<sup>62</sup>

In the past, the Kukeri procession used to visit each home in the village and chase the evil away. The group of skin covered men and comical stock characters was known to engage in humorous encounters with the hosts. In addition to the current characters, the participants would also dress as a camel—four men would throw a piece of fabric over their back. The bride too had a different costume and used to wear the traditional Turkish attire of shalvari—wide pants tightly tied at the ankles—white headscarf and a black feredzhe—a long overcoat. Some of the participants I interviewed related the sheep skins the Kukeri men wore as costumes to the skins left by the animals cooked in the first days of the Bairam celebrations.

The village performs yet another mummery rite on March 14<sup>th</sup> to celebrate the beginning of Spring. Young boys wrap cattle bells around their waists and jump over fire for health and good fortune. The music performed on both Kurban Bairam and the Spring rites presents a

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<sup>61</sup> For obscenity and carnival see Chapter 5.

<sup>62</sup> For carnival and use of props out of context see Chapter 5.

combination of Turkish and Bulgarian folk melodies. The dances too create the highly syncretic composition of both Bulgarian and Turkish steps. The scenes are currently performed exclusively in the Turkish dialect of the Turkish population living on the territory of Bulgaria. Yet some of the songs present typical Bulgarian folk stories from the Rodopa region. In addition to rendering a syncretic culture, the celebrations pose the highly sensitive question of identity. The question of identity is further complicated by the practice of similar rituals among the population of Bulgarian Muslims at wedding and circumcision celebrations.

### **Masked Celebrations among the Bulgarian Muslims**

During the Spring of 2008, I visited the remote village of Ribnovo situated in the Rodopa Mountain and populated exclusively with Bulgarian Muslims. Ribnovo's location makes it the most isolated village within a region with a predominantly Muslim population. Recently, its residents have drawn sporadic yet significant attention with their customs and dress. A random internet search of the village name brings up vivid images of women dressed in a manner highly unusual for the rest of the country. Ever since the fall of Communism in Bulgaria, the women of Ribnovo have returned to the traditional for the region female Muslim dress. Unmarried women currently wear wide pants made of a large amount of fabric tightened at the calf, vibrant aprons, and colorful headscarves. The headscarves, usually in various patterns of big bright flowers, partially cover the hair and tie under the chin. All of the garments exhibit saturated colors in startling combinations of fabrics ordered and delivered from either Turkey or the Middle East.

Ever since the early 1990s, in addition to reinstating traditional dress, Ribnovo began to openly celebrate its religious rituals. In early Spring, the village performs the ritual of Muslim circumcision. The celebrations spread over four days and include community dances, songs and performances. The DVD recordings of the 2005 March ritual reveal a true community event that

claims the public space in a celebration of excess. On the third day, young men exhibit their riding skills by parading on highly decorated horses. The rest of the population pours into the streets in long processions. A comedic scene staged by masked characters, resembling the stock characters typical for the Kukeri celebrations, entertains the crowd. The characters in the scenes are called Baburetsi which according to the local participants means “something scary.”<sup>63</sup> Kukeri itself is an umbrella term that is used to indicate masked celebrations, each of which is also known by its local name such as Dzhamali, Startsi, Chaushi, etc.<sup>64</sup> Ribnovo’s Baburetsi relates to all of the above practices in its incorporation of a masked scary figure and cross-dressed stock character. Currently, Ribnovo’s group includes a few characters in plastic monstrous masks. The 2005 recording reveals two separate groups of masked figures approaching the village square. The first one consists of an old man and a woman, a donkey, and a couple of figures in contemporary plastic disguise. The old woman figure presents a cross-dressed performance by a male actor covered in the typical for the region female attire complete with a few comedic elements. Although “hunched” with old age, (s)he still carries a bundle with a baby “played” by a plastic doll. The old woman’s face is fully covered with a colorful scarf which serves the purpose of a mummer’s mask. The donkey lead by a figure in a green mask carries a bundle of straw and corn on its back and has a cattle bell, identical to the Kukeri bells of other regions. Although none of the performers wear goat or sheep skins, their characters fall within the mummer tradition of celebrations such as the Kukeri ones. For instance, in multiple Bulgarian villages, the cross-dressed figures of the old woman carrying a baby, known as “grandma with a

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<sup>63</sup> Iosein Boshnakov, Personal Interview, 15 April 2008.

<sup>64</sup> An additional separation is sometimes made between the Winter practices, Survakari, and the Spring ones which are called Kukeri. As outlined earlier, for convenience purposes I choose to follow the wide-spread pattern of calling both practices Kukeri.

baby,” the old man, the doctor, and the young bride and groom comprise the stock characters of the Kukeri celebrations.

In the Ribnovo procession, the old woman is followed by her husband who is also dressed in the village’s traditional male attire of a red waistband and a red fez. An intricate mask portraying wrinkled skin, huge nose, and bushy eyebrows covers his face. In his performance, the old man exhibits carnivalesque raw humor. To the greatest approval of the audience, the man pulls his long shirt to reveal a very simple yet effective device of a spoon tied below his knees. A hidden rope pulls the spoon up and the crowd burst into laughter at the sight of the phallic image.

The second group parades the masked characters of a pregnant young woman, her husband, a doctor, a midwife and an ambulance. The performers stage the comical scene of the young woman giving birth—a favorite topic for mummer skits within the Kukeri celebrations.<sup>65</sup> The young bride, a cross-dressed man costumed in the colorful female attire of the region, has “her” face uncovered, and instead of a mask, exhibits exaggerated make up. Bright lipstick, red circles on the cheeks and purple squares above the eyes together with a residue of a freshly shaved facial hair set the scene for the actor’s highly comedic impersonation. The bride is conspicuously pregnant and is seeking help from the women in the audience. The audience becomes performers by giving her a hand in her heavy walk. The DVD recording shows the cross-dressed character of the bride walking in the rows of the women who treat “her” as a fellow friend. When overwhelmed with pain she falls on the ground, women from the audience run to help and support her. When the procession reaches the square the masked group climbs on stage and performs the birth scene for the whole village to see. The bride is placed in an ambulance, made out of a metal cart with an orange flashlight and pushed by a character wearing the sign “ambulance” around his neck. The groom, dressed in the traditional for the village attire

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<sup>65</sup> The scene is especially popular in the villages and towns of the Balkan Karlovo/Kalofer region.

of a red waistband, brown pants, white embroidered shirt and a red fez, holds his bride's hand while the doctor performs the operation. To the approval of the crowd, the doctor pulls a plastic doll from under the bride's skirt and announces the birth of a healthy boy. The midwife (another cross-dressed character) cuts the umbilical cord (a plastic tube painted with ketchup) and throws it in the crowd, which screams in reply. For a moment, the bride faints and is given a life-saving shot. Finally, the doctor takes a big needle and a thick thread and sews her stomach. The bride gives a natural birth while the doctor performs a C-section and the impossibility of the situation adds to the carnivalesque spirit of the scene. Once miraculously recovered, the bride leads the horo with all of the audience joining in.

Other years, the comic groups have staged scenes on topics such as stealing of a bride, baby accident, and a wedding. "Kiki" Ardikov has participated as a central figure in the festivities ever since they were resurrected in the 1990s. In our personal interview, Kiki shared that he relied on the oral tradition preserved within his family to organize the first masked scenes.<sup>66</sup> Kiki pointed to improvisation and immediacy as being the key elements of the event. The group decides on a very loose scenario and a few fixed characters. Yet, once in the square, they rely on improvisation. The actors are exclusively male and each actor is responsible for concocting a costume. Traditional attire combined with exaggerated features, masks, and objects out of context construct their costumes. Once, Kiki dressed in his wife's colorful wide traditional pants but added a pair of suspenders and a shirt too tight and short for him. In addition, the scenes themselves focus on events presented out of context or proportion. In a recently staged skit, the cross-dressed character of the grandma dropped the wooden doll of her baby, which was smashed by horses. The accident called for "police" and "lawyer" intervention. In yet another scene the newly married "bride" was upset by the oily rag "she" received as a present by "her

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<sup>66</sup> "Kiki" Ardikov, Personal Interview, 15 April 2008.

mother in law.” A few years ago, the participants also staged “stealing of a bride”—a scene connected to multiple Kukeri celebrations all over Bulgaria. As Kiki explains:

We didn’t plan in advance. Improvised on the spur of the moment. Decided to do stealing of the bride. I was the mother. “My daughter” and I were coming back into the village. The boy and his friends planned to steal her in the square.

Someone told us. And we chased the boys with logs. Fight, quarrel. The police [masked characters] came. More quarrel and fight. Now people expect that. On the third day of the circumcision [celebrations] to see something funny. To laugh.

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Instead of focusing on contemporary scenes, the masked groups base their skits on the past. On another occasion, a player in the group, dressed as an old woman, wanted to dance the horo, but was forbidden and chased away by “her husband.” The “woman” persisted and the confrontation with her “angry husband” presented the basic conflict in the comedy. The scene reflected the old tradition according to which married Muslim women were discouraged from dancing in public. The focus of the scene in the past as preserved in the local oral tradition becomes a metaphor for the whole ritual of circumcision. The ritual itself is reclaimed and publicly staged after a lengthy interruption forced by the Party ban on religious practices under Socialism. The very way the women dress publicly reclaims the old tradition too. The clothes with their stunningly theatrical combinations of lavish color and patterns become the space for restaging one’s identity.

Since both clothing and ritual become a public statement, they are taken to a full extreme. The circumcision celebrations currently stage an event of opulent excess by claiming both the civic space of the village streets and the personal space of the participant’s homes. During the first day, all men visit the homes of the families who will have their sons circumcised and carry

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.



gifts of firewood loaded on horses, donkeys and cars. From dawn to dusk, the men in the families accept and chop the wood. During the second day, the women visit the households with gifts of food, towels, table cloths and other household items. The continuous procession of women to the house of the family lasts from early morning to late at night. The women of the household greet each guest and personally accept each gift. During that day, the streets of the village are taken over by a long line of women approaching or waiting to reach the door of each household whose child is to be circumcised. At the end of the first day, the men are invited for dinner and on the second day, the women gather for a meal. The celebrating families prepare the food for the traditional communal meal over the course of several days.

The following two days stage the public celebrations including the masked performances. The boys are dressed in opulent costumes and covered with sparkling fabrics, veils and flowers. An older family male member, usually the father, accompanies each boy for a public march on the back of a highly decorated horse. In the streets, older boys exhibit their riding skills by performing rodeo tricks. The public enjoys a staged wrestling between men with bare chests covered with oil. On the very last day, the huge gathering is greeted by Bulgaria's Chief Mufti who has arrived especially for the occasion.

Staging public weddings with a white face bride, called *gelina*, is yet another masked ritual that the village of Ribnovo has resurrected after decades of political regulations and bans. A wedding spans over a couple of days, involves all community members, claims and reshapes public space. During both days, the participants take over both private and public spaces while dancing the *horo* under the sounds of the *zurna* and the drums. Prior to the first day, the men under the direction of the women erect a long scaffolding in front of the bride's home to hang the items of her dowry. The composition is arranged with acute attention to color, texture, and shape.

The compilation, up to ten feet high and more than thirty feet long, exhibits fabrics, clothing, towels, covers and furniture. A group of elderly women is known for their skill in creating pleasing arrangements and is called upon by most households.<sup>68</sup> The colorful backdrop becomes the public face of the future home. A practice discouraged under Communism for its default association with the Muslim faith, the wedding is currently staged with ultimate and purposeful excess. Early in the morning, an audience of local women gathers to observe and critique the dowry backdrop. On the following day, the family of the groom stages a procession to carry their gifts for the bride. The gifts, colorful clothing and fabrics, attached on high wooden constructions are carried as banners throughout the village. The event is highly reminiscent of a manifestation with the colorful clothing replacing the official slogans popular for the obligatory celebrations during Socialism, which aimed at replacing any other and especially religious forms of gatherings. All throughout the day, the guests which include the whole village play the horo under the sound of the musicians. In the evening, the women gather at the place of the bride to apply her mask. The bride, provided she is marrying with her parent's consent, has her face painted with an elaborate pattern.<sup>69</sup> Over a base of thick white cream, the women draw a design of colorful lining. Lastly, an arrangement of sparkling circles and strings is glued to further conceal the face and enrich the mask. The gelina (bride) is lead by the closest members of her family and allowed to look only at a mirror, which she carries in front of her face. With her eyes closed for most of the time, she follows behind a married woman, and is in return followed by another married woman who walks into her steps. The residents were unsure of the meaning of

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<sup>68</sup> Mustaf Avdikov and Kadri Mashev, Personal Interview, 15 April 2008.

<sup>69</sup> Wedding unions are not arranged by the families and are preceded by dating. Yet, the bride is masked only in the cases in which both families approve of each other. In cases of parental disapproval, young couples are known to elope and marry in secret. Later, they could ask forgiveness, which they are usually granted, and have a lavish wedding, but the bride will not be masked. Some of the residents I interviewed implied that the mask is applied only in cases of virginity.

the mirror or the stepping yet certain that both have always been a part of the ritual. The mirror in other Bulgarian rituals symbolizes chasing the devil or the evil eye.<sup>70</sup> Yet, any interpretation of its presence in the gelina ritual would be highly speculative. What constitutes interest is not its meaning, but very presence regardless of the ritual's long interruption. The presence of a detail like that reconfirms the tenacity of the oral tradition and reaffirms community memory as a site for preserving one's identity. Once the gelina reaches her future house, a pot of water is broken for luck. Small children from the village wait in the bedroom of the newly weds. With her eyes closed, the gelina touches one and its gender foretells the gender of her firstborn.

Although some Bulgarians turned to Islam as early as the fourteenth century, polygamy never became a practice within their communities. Ever since they converted to Islam in the centuries of Ottoman rule, the Bulgarian Muslims existed as a marginal community. While abandoning Orthodox Christianity, which is the official Bulgarian religion, as well as Slavic names, they never stopped speaking the Bulgarian language. Their customs present a highly syncretic and contaminated culture. Existing on the border of Bulgarian and Turkish traditions, the Bulgarian Muslim has fused the two to form a marginal identity, which because of its syncretic nature proves highly vulnerable to political manipulation.

## **Conclusion**

Masked practices such as the Kukeri are present in the folklore traditions of both the Muslim and Christian population on the Balkans. The Kukeri ritual presents a specific example in the larger context of shared religious and folk customs among the Muslim and Christian groups on the Balkans. As a tradition existing on the crossroads of cultures, the Kukeri performances exemplify the highly syncretic nature of Balkan culture. Each ethnic and religious

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<sup>70</sup> The residents I interviewed vigorously disapproved of a recent article which had connected the gelina mirror to devil chasing. According to them, the author of the article had taken the liberty to publish a personal and erroneous interpretation as a fact.

group has combined the Kukeri practices with their own religious holidays. Within the Bulgarian Orthodox tradition, the ritual exists either as part of the twelve days of Christmas or the pre-Lent festivities. In the villages with Muslim population on the territory of the Bulgaria, the masked performances are celebrated either as part of Kurban Bairam or the circumcision rites.

Questions such as which tradition borrowed from which stage the highly political debate about national identity and belonging on the Balkan peninsula. In the 1980s, the Communist Party of Bulgaria ordered various publications to focus on the common folk practices among the Christian and Muslim segments of the Bulgarian population. Scholars conducted field research, recorded embodied practices and used the results to prove the purely Bulgarian origin of the Muslim minority living on the territory of Bulgaria. After the fall of Communism, the government abandoned the political agenda of strong nationalism. Yet, both scholars and participants continue to affirm the Kukeri practices as belonging exclusively to the Bulgarian non-Muslim tradition. The only publications mentioning masked practices among the Muslim population present isolated cases of research that exist at the margins of the main body of scholarly publications which clearly and exclusively places the Kukeri ritual within Bulgarian folklore. Contrary to the mainstream of Kukeri Bulgarian scholarship, the field research I conducted clearly spoke of vibrant Kukeri practices in villages with Muslim population on the territory of Bulgaria and affirmed the ritual as a syncretic and complex form reflecting centuries of cultural contamination.

In addition to practicing the Kukeri ritual, the Turkish population has also inspired one of the most popular stock characters. The image of the Turk is a central figure in the mummer's scenes that accompany the Kukeri practices all over Bulgaria. In the next chapter, I review

mummer's humor and examine the presence of the Kukeri Turkish character as part of the overall discussion of carnival humor.



Figure 7. Woman of the Village of Ribnovo. 2008. Photograph by the author.



Figure 8. Circumcision Day in Ribnovo. 2005. Courtesy of Kadri Mashev.





Figure 9. Circumcision Day in Ribnovo. 2005. Photograph courtesy of Kadri Mashev. The scenes shows the cross-dressed bride getting ready to give “birth”.

## CHAPTER 5

### “FUNNY MEN” SCENES

The “funny men” scenes performed by cross dressed characters constitute an integral part of the Kukeri celebrations all over Bulgaria. The name “funny men” or smeshnitsi in Bulgarian designates the humorous nature of their performances. Their groups usually accompany the goat-skinned figures and follow the carnival procession on open trucks. The cross-dressed characters vary from traditional stock characters such as the doctor, the nurse, the bride, the mother in-law, etc. to contemporary characters portraying public figures and commenting on politically controversial issues. The traditionally dressed stock characters have earned a legitimate status within the Bulgarian scholarship on Kukeri practices and are often taken to regional, national, and international festivals. In contrast, the contemporary cross-dressed figures are present primarily at the local level as part of the local celebrations and are subsequently excluded from scholarly studies. With their explicitly sexual behavior and tendency to reenact celebrity figures or reality TV shows, the contemporary cross-dressed figures fall within the realm of popular performances that are often ignored by scholarship for being kitschy and for deviating from the traditional. Yet, it is precisely within those scenes that the most innate characteristics of carnival are to be discerned. Within international scholarship, carnival is defined as an event of excess (excessive drinking, eating, costuming) as well as a performance of explicit sexuality, inversion of social order and raw humor pertaining to the lower body.

The Kukeri “funny men” scenes exhibit all of the above characteristics while at the same time, reviewed from a cultural studies point of view, present an astute critique to the



contemporary Bulgarian political situation. The scenes reveal multiple characteristics that do not necessarily construct a unified image or narrative. First, the scenes, although varying greatly in subject matter, fall within the traditions of mummer's performances.<sup>71</sup> Within the mummer performances or the house to house visits, the traditionally dressed stock characters stage jokes with the hosts. Second, the contemporary scenes staged in the village squares on topics such as "Big Brother" or the latest presidential elections fall within the tradition of popular culture.<sup>72</sup> Third, the cross dressed men stage the highly sexually explicit image of the carnivalesque body. Within carnival, the body takes on a distorted image and is often disguised to present the ugly and the abnormal. In the cases of sexual explicitness, the carnivalesque body is the marking of gender to the very extreme and exaggerates both physicality and behavior. In his seminal work on carnival, Mikhail Bakhtin defines performing the low bodily functions as well as the grotesque body image as core characteristics of carnival.<sup>73</sup>

The cross-dressed mummery figure of the young bride wearing traditional folk attire presents the frozen in time museum image in contrast to the contemporary cross-dressed "funny man" wearing a short skirt and black stockings. The contemporary "funny men" groups thus, although ignored by Bulgarian scholarship, present the very living and evolving form of carnivalesque cross-dressing and raw humor. Fourth, "the funny men" scenes become the arena on which contemporary Bulgarians use political satire to highlight the social and political absurdity of life in a post Socialist society. Last, the scenes becomes a site for negotiating and

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<sup>71</sup> As a term mummery or mummer's performances cover carnivalesque events that usually include house to house visits and the staging of non scripted scenes in the period around Christmas as well as before Lent. The performers disguise themselves and visit their neighbors who often give them food and gifts. Traditional mummer's scenes include the death and resurrection scene in which one of the characters is killed in a mock battle and later resurrected, usually by the stock figure of the doctor.

<sup>72</sup> The Bulgarian "Big Brother" is a spin off from the American version of the show.

<sup>73</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans., Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968) 21.

constructing the image of Bulgaria as a county entering the international scene of the European Union and becoming an equal competitor in the global cultural market.

### **Mummer's Humor**

The “funny men” scenes constitute the central expression of mummer's humor. The scenes are staged by the stock, often cross-dressed characters. Mummer's humor heavily draws on the carnivalesque inversion of order and subjects civic order to the internal code of the carnival. Although extinct, the Kukeri celebrations in the small Southeast Bulgarian village of Belopoliane provide one of the best examples of mummer's humor. The local population used to practice the mummery pre-Lent tradition of the Kukeri rites up until early 2000. Currently, due to the aging of the population, the ritual is extinct. Yet, the residents have preserved the recollection of the celebrations within the oral tradition of the region. The pre-lent Kukeri ritual consisted of private house visits abundant with humorous encounters with the hosts followed by a public staging of mummery scenes in the central square. Within the region, the celebrations are known by the name of their main participant, Bei. The Bei, a Turksih word for a local ruler, presented the central figure of the mock ruler who was drawn on a two-wheeler leading the procession. Within the first decades of the twentieth century, large numbers of the Bulgarian population emigrated from Asia Minor to the current region of Dolno Lukovo and Belopoliane.<sup>74</sup> According to the present day residents, the Bei celebrations were carried by their ancestors from Asia Manor to the new settlements within the territory of Bulgaria. The ritual as described in their recollections proves very similar to the field research data collected in the area of Asia

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<sup>74</sup> Not all of the Bulgarian population moved immediately to independent Bulgaria after the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the nineteenth century. Numerous Bulgarians remained living in remote areas such as Asia Minor and did not relocate to Bulgaria until the twentieth century.

Manor at the end of the twentieth century by the Turkish folklorist Metin And.<sup>75</sup> Similarly to the Anatolian Turkish practices, the Bei skin covered Kukeri men of Dolno Lukovo were called Arabs and had their faces painted with ashes.

According to Stefka Kondova, a resident of Dolno Lukovo, on the eve preceding the celebrations a man wearing carnival attire and a red sword used to play a horn whistle and to thus announce the impending festivities.<sup>76</sup> Early on the following morning, the two men who were to pull the two-wheeler picked up the Bei from his house. Throughout the day, the Bei was not to touch the ground or even feed himself. Instead, he was fed and carried around by his “servants.” The colorful procession included the animal skin covered and cattle bell wearing Arabs as well as the Bei women played by men dressed in the national Turkish female attire. A group of men from the village guarded the Bei by following his cart and holding on to a rope that extended from it. Yet, another group “attacked” the procession and thus the mock battle took place.<sup>77</sup> As Stefka Kondova pointed out, “the men would fight but no matter what happened on that day no one could take you to court for it. It is all considered a joke.”<sup>78</sup> The civic rules were thus temporarily suspended and subjected to the logic of the carnival.<sup>79</sup> The day carved out an

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<sup>75</sup> For details on Metin And research refer to Chapter 4.

<sup>76</sup> Personal Interview. 12 June 2008.

<sup>77</sup> A typical mummer scene would include a mock battle between adversaries followed by a death and resurrection scene—one of the adversaries is killed and resurrected usually by a doctor. For a summary of an English mummer’s play see among others Gerald Weales, *Religion in Modern British Drama* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961) 96.

<sup>78</sup> The fight could be rather serious. Sometimes, people might wait until the carnival to settle old scores.

<sup>79</sup> Within scholarship, the temporarily suspension of civic rule within the structure of carnival is seen either as a preserver of the status quo or as having the potential to overthrow the civil order. In the first case, carnival is reviewed as a temporarily release from social constraints at the end of which order is restored. For more see Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969). According to the second theory, carnival inverts order by turning the low into the high, the male into female, etc. and thus presents a threat to social order. For more see Mihail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans., Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Michigan Press, 1984). For secondary summary of both theories see among others: Mirk Stenberg, “The Riding of the Black Lad and other Working Class Action: Towards a Specialized and Gendered Analysis of Nineteenth Century Repertoire,” *Challenging Authority: The Historical study of Contentious Politics*, eds., Michale

alternative space in which the ritual of everyday civility gave way to the ritual of the carnivalesque within which humor legitimized the offensive.<sup>80</sup> The day also enjoyed the special privilege of a holiday. The Bei celebrations were always performed on the Monday following Fat Sunday. The carnival code took over regular business time and the participants demanded for all businesses to close. Should the Kukeri men happen to see some one working they would chase and even beat him or her until s/he joined the procession. Once a member of the celebrations, a villager was safe from the Kukeri men attacks. Celebrating and laughing thus constituted the norm for the day while all other “serious” activities such as laboring were deemed in violation with the code.

To further guard its carnivalesque code, the Bei procession had its own body of legislators which included the figure of the Kadiia, a Turkish word for Sudia (judge) in Bulgarian, who followed from house to house and wrote mock fines for the hosts. Within the carnival event, the Kadiia also had the right to call on a wife and a husband, listen to their complaints and pronounce a verdict. His stock joke was to throw a hot pepper in the fire of the hosts and leave them to breathe the fumes it would produce.

Once the Bei procession had visited all of the households, the whole village gathered in the square for the performance of the mock plowing of the earth during which the Bei for the

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Hanagan, Leslie Page Moch and Wayne Ph Te Brake (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) 17-36. Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge UP, 2005) 98.

<sup>80</sup> I use ritual of civility in the sense in which Erving Goffman defines ritual as providing the proper basis for preserving one's face in everyday encounters. See Erving Goffman *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (Garden City: Anchor Book, 1967). See also Erving Goffman, *The Goffman Reader*, eds., Charles Lemert and Ann Branaman (Malder: Blackwell Publishing, 1997). Goffman also defines the self as “kind of a player in a ritual game which copes honorably or dishonorably, diplomatically, or undiplomatically with the judgmental contingencies of the situation” (31). Goffman defines deference and demeanor as key to the interpersonal ritualistic exchange: “An act through which the individual gives or withholds deference to others typically provides means by which he expresses the fact he is a well or badly demeaned individual. ... First in performing a given act of presentational deference, as in offering a guest a chair, the actor finds himself doing something that could be done with smoothness and aplomb” (27). Consequently, “Deference and demeanor practices must be institutionalized so that the individual will be able to project a sacred self and stay in the game on a proper ritual basis” (30).

very first time stepped down from the cart onto the ground. Similar to other regions of the country, the Bei pushed the plow with two other performers playing the oxen. The ritual ended with women singing folk melodies and the whole village gathering for a communal meal during which the Bei for the following year was selected.<sup>81</sup> Although bearing a Turkish name, the Bei was dressed in the Bulgarian folk attire traditional for the region: a low cylinder fur hat (kalpak), white shirt and a vest. Unlike the cross-dressed Kukeri bride of other regions, the wife of the Bei was played by the actual wife of the person embodying the Bei. Cross-dressing was still practiced and men impersonated the Bei women—a group of young female characters who would inevitably find themselves in the core of the humorous mock battle. Cross-dressing presented the central comical element in the celebrations. The residents I interviewed laughed at the recollection of the male performers using yarn balls under their shirts to create mock bust.<sup>82</sup>

Cross-dressing also presents a core mummery tradition. In the Western Bulgarian village of Zhabokrut, women do not participate in the Winter Kukeri celebrations. Instead men dress in both contemporary and traditional folk attire and perform house visits as part of the January 1 ritual. In the past, the Kukeri men known locally by the name of Dzhamalar started their visits at the stroke of midnight.<sup>83</sup> The costumes they wore were less elaborated and consisted of fur coats turned inside out. The garment turned inside out together with the male turned into the female signified the reversal of values within the framework of the Winter carnival. The bells that the Kukeri men wrapped around their waists came directly from the barns and during the rest of the

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<sup>81</sup> Some of the residents asserted that first the Bei performed the plowing and then the new Bei was selected while others argued that it was the other way around.

<sup>82</sup> Scholarship often frames carnivalesque cross-dressing within the Bakhtinian idea of inversion of order and rebellion. See Eckehard Simon, “Carnival Obscenities in German Towns,” *Obscenity: Social Control and Artistic Creation in European Middle Ages*, ed., Jan Ziolkowski (Boston: Brill, 1998) 193-214. According to Simon, “Reversing one’s gender through cross-dressing was part of the inversion pattern, of the world upside down, informing most carnival reveling, young people dress as old people, others reverse the front and back of their clothes, some dress upside down’ (209).

<sup>83</sup> Biser Petrov. Personal Interview. 21 May 2007.

year were worn by the cattle. Wearing furs and cattle bells within the framework of carnival portrays yet another schism with orderly civil behavior and provides yet another license for disorderly conduct.

Nowadays, the day still provides the Kukeri men with the license to perform crude jokes that would be deemed rather unacceptable on any other occasion. The house to house procession includes the stock characters of the groom, the bride, the doctor, the policeman, the bear, the bear owner, the mother and the father in law. The house visit consists of traditional ritual elements such as the hosts giving money to the Kukeri performers, offering them food and home-made brandy and playing the horo in the yard. Oleg Manov, a long time participant explains that one of the main goals of the practices is to provide relief from everyday problems and “make everyone laugh.”<sup>84</sup> For example, the Kukeri doctor might upon entering a house demand to perform a gynecological exam on the hostesses. The policeman would respectively issue mock parking tickets and require immediate payment. The “bear” would walk all over the host and give him a massage. The fur-covered Kukeri men would make noise with their cattle bells, chase each other and cause great disorder within the household.

The Zhabokrut procession also incorporates the character of Santa Claus, the Eastern Orthodox priest, and a character carrying the national flag. The carnival thus juxtaposes the leading figure of the New Years holiday (Santa Claus) to those of church and state. Santa Claus also represents a fairly recent addition to the traditional procession that illustrates the evolving of the ritual and its capability to adjust to social changes. Before Socialism, Santa Claus was associated with Christmas. Yet, since the Party discouraged the celebrations of any religious holidays, the figure of Santa Claus was moved to the New Years Celebrations. After the fall of Socialism, he became part of both the Christmas and December 31<sup>st</sup> festivities. While traveling

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<sup>84</sup> Oleg Manov. Personal Interview. 21 May 2007.

to national festivals, the Kukeri group does not present the Santa Claus figure and instead simulates the pure traditional look of its ritual. It does not recreate the jokes the group plays on the local hosts either. Instead, the hosts, presented by actors, simply greet the Kukeri visitors and take part in the traditional horo. At the local level, the event is abundant in laughter caused not only by the interaction between the stock characters and the village residents but also by the comical behavior of such figures as the doctor and the priest.

Within the carnival tradition of the low becoming high, a high figure such as a king or a priest would be presented by a layperson dressed in a costume who would often transform objects of status such as a church garment into a grotesque representation of itself by combining it with rags, crude shoes or disproportional masks. Within carnival, laughter stems from either observing the distorted image of a figure of high status or by virtue of simply recognizing one's friend dressed as a character. Within the Bulgarian tradition, the stock character of the Eastern Orthodox Priest is often dressed in a raggedy church garment combined with worn out shoes while the Doctor often wears an "ugly" mask and a worn out black leather bag. Yet even when wearing a believable costume, a Kukeri priest is bound to make his fellow villagers laugh for they see in him a neighbor and a friend taking on a role. In carnival, the gaze of the spectator is the gaze of the community member that recognizes a fellow neighbor wearing a funny costume of a priest or bear.

In Zhabokrut, the costume of the priest was purchased by the community from a regular church vestment supplier. The actor recreates a believable version of a priest by wearing accurate garments and even singing accurate religious hymns. What defines his presence as a carnivalesque, is not his appearance per se but his appearance as constructed by the look of the

other participants or by the other elements of the carnivalesque system.<sup>85</sup> Positioned next to a man in a bear costume and a crossed-dressed “bride” with an exaggerated make up, the priest could be read only as a participant within the carnivalesque performance. Taken out of the carnival system, the Kukeri priest could lose its humorous or “non-serious” appearance.<sup>86</sup> The Zhabokrut’s participants remember and enjoy telling a curious incident that has recently happened in the near-by town of Kustendil. The group was invited to present on the officially organized celebration of the coming Spring. The stage exhibited the town and state officials including the ex-prime minister of Bulgaria Simeon Koburgostki as well as a legitimate priest, who according to the Zhabokrut participants “looked more poorly dressed than our own Kukeri priest.” While noticing the Zhabokrut priest, Simeon Koburgotski approached him and kissed his hand, clearly taking him for a legitimate clergyman. The Kukeri priest without a minute of hesitation blessed the ex-prime minister.

### **“Funny Men” Scenes and Popular Culture**

The “funny men” scenes are never taken to international festivals or reflected in Bulgarian scholarship on the Kukeri practices. The silence that surrounds them within the official domain of festivals and publications underlines the existing schism between low and high culture. The Bulgarian Kukeri have been legitimized as traditional celebrations and are thus

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<sup>85</sup> The principle of meaning generation is similar to the one described by Saussure. In his seminal work on linguistics, Saussure asserts that “each linguistic term derives its value from its opposition to all the other terms.” For more see Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans., Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959).

<sup>86</sup> In his analyses of the Feast of Fools—a medieval carnival in which the lower clergy dressed as animals, women or higher clergy—Ingild Salid sees the liminal carnivalesque body as a source for laughter: “The reversal of social roles and biological categories are experienced as ludicrous. The ludicrous effect is obtained because mutually exclusive meanings are brought together in one sign and because the reversals create a paradox between real/apparent: The lower clergy played bishops. When they played bishops they were experienced (and experienced themselves) both as subdeacons in reality and as bishops in appearance at the same time. In addition these “bishops” behaved like clowns. When the lower clergy used animal masks and made animal noises they were human beings playing animals. They were simultaneously men and animals. The experience wavered continually between opposite meanings and between reality and appearance” (30). For more see Ingild Gilhus, “Carnival in religion: The Feast of Fools in France,” *Numen* 37.1 June 1990: 24-52.



studied and officially presented as such. Traditional translates into “authentic” or a celebration containing national costumes as well as animal masks. Yet, the very carnivalesque contemporary element of the event has been censored both in scholarship and public festivals. In contrast, at the local level, the “funny men” scenes flourish and present carnivalesque features such as sexual explicitness, cross-dressing, excess and humor which are in return the most authentic carnival characteristics, if there are any.<sup>87</sup>

During the 2007 Winter Kukeri celebrations one the most common public figures to be presented by a “funny man” was Azis. Azis, a Bulgarian pop folk (chalga in Bulgarian) singer is also the public figure who has been challenging normative gender, music and style standards. Within the public Bulgarian realm, Azis is the most celebrated pioneer of pop culture and because of this she often finds herself in the midst of the low/high culture controversy.<sup>88</sup> Being a Gypsy and a transvestite automatically positions Azis as a marginal figure. Yet, within the public realm, Azis openly embraces and further constructs both her ethnic and sexual identities and the highly theatrical image of her public appearance has won her significant popularity and wealth. In addition to being a top selling singer, Azis is a TV show hostess and a constant topic for social gossip. In her public appearances, Azis wears highly theatrical, often female, costumes with layers of jewelry. Her public image is thus already cross-dressed, inverted and very much a challenge to the normative system.

Within the 2007 carnival Kukeri celebration of the village of Eleshnitsa, Azis’s character was played by a cross-dressed man. Yet, her image instead of expressing carnivalesque inversion simply presented an inversion that had already been staged outside the carnival framework and within the public domain. The original, it could be argued, was carnivalesque already. The only

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<sup>87</sup> Carnival is by nature a copy so to refer to it as authentic presents an innate contradiction.

<sup>88</sup> A transvestite who often openly dresses in female costumes, Azis prefers to be referred to as she and her.

difference was that its carnival version used amateur rather than professionally styled costumes, make up and hair. A transparent fabric was wrapped around the Kukeri actor's body as a dress, while his hair was painted greenish yellow in imitation of Azis's professionally dyed blond hair. The carnivalesque representation thus stressed on the constructedness of Azis's image in a humorously exaggerated way.

The 2007 Kukeri Razlog celebrations also included a couple of participants representing Azis and her partner and husband Kitaetsa. Earlier that year, Azis had staged a wedding ceremony that had no legal bearing within the legislative system of Bulgaria. The ceremony was a highly theatrical personal statement and an event modeled after the legally recognized ceremonies. The list of guests included a few Bulgarian celebrities and the wedding was highly covered by the media. The media such as the Bulgarian web site [www.bulphoto.com](http://www.bulphoto.com) used a highly theatrical vocabulary in its report of the event:

Yesterday [02 October 2007] Azis and Kitaetsa celebrated their wedding in the Sofia club Dali. ... Although in Bulgaria same sex marriage is forbidden, Azis and his boyfriend Nikolai-Kitaetsa said "yes" in a ceremony that resembled the official ones performed in the city halls. ... [T]he two exchanged wedding bands and signed their names in who knows what. Then as the custom has it, the guest shouted "Kiss the bride" and Azis and Kitaetsa touched lips as if in a children's play. The performance continued with a toast.<sup>89</sup>

In Eleshnitsa's carnival, the character of Azis walked into the square hand in hand with Kitaetsa. Their scene was staged amidst scenes commenting on corruption in the National Assembly. Azis's and Kitaetsa's images fell in both the pop culture and political category subjects presented by the different scenes. Azis himself belongs both to the realm of the TV

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<sup>89</sup> Personal translation.

shows *Survivor* and *Big Brother* (Azis was a contestant in the latter) and the world of political controversy. Azis's wedding in real life was also staged as a political statement. In his own words: "I hope they [people] consider the various social aspects of that fact [the wedding]"<sup>90</sup> At the same time, Azis's popular image belongs to the realm of pop music and talk shows. Within the Kukeri carnivals, both talk shows and reality TV present favorite subjects for the "funny men" scenes.

As shown in the 2006 DVD of the Kukeri celebrations in the village of Varvara, the content of the scenes presented in the square is heavily influenced by popular TV culture. The 2006 Varvara celebrations present a mock *Gold Fever* with a cross-dressed actor acting as the signature for such programs female assistant.<sup>91</sup> In most Bulgarian TV games, the host is inevitably assisted by a woman dressed in a short skirt and a deep cut blouse. The TV program itself presents a carnivalesque oversexed image of femininity. It does within itself present a performance of the female image as generated through popular magazines and music video clips.<sup>92</sup> Staged within the Kukeri carnival framework the image of the female TV assistant becomes a performance of a performance.

Consistent with the carnival tradition, the staged "funny scenes" of popular TV games use mock props and offer mock prizes. The Kukeri *Gold Fever* uses an old computer with an antenna to "draw" the lucky numbers while the 2007 Varvara Kukeri *Survivor* awards an ass that wore the label Ferrari.<sup>93</sup> On January 1, 2007 I was present at the Kukeri celebrations in the village of Varvara and observed the program presented in the village square. The "funny men"

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<sup>90</sup> *Takuv e Zhivotut* [That's Life]. Bi Ti Vi. 30 November 2006.

<sup>91</sup> In the TV show *Gold Fever* a computer randomly selects the participants who later play games similar to a roulette.

<sup>92</sup> For gender as performative and affirmative of social normativity see Butler, *Gender*.

<sup>93</sup> The ass is a recurring image at carnival. In the medieval carnival, for example men who were beaten by their wives rode an ass.

rode through the streets on the back of a truck under an umbrella and a wooden clothes line. Upon dismounting and entering the square stage, the “hostess” introduced the clothes line as the central prop for the game Survivor. The hanging items turned out to be pig ears which the contenders had to eat without using their hands. As part of the presentation, the cross-dressed men staged a mock battle and kicked and pulled each other to the general delight of the audience. 2007 also marked the year Bulgaria joined the European Union—an event accompanied with heated newspaper discussion as to whether the Union would forbid the consumption of pig’s ears, cow’s liver and stomach. Staged next to a rusty weapon with a sign “Watch Out Europa!” pulled by a ragged Kukeri policeman, the Kukeri “survivors” staged the image of the Balkan pig ear eating savage and the highly exaggerated carnivalesque performance of the image underlined its constructedness. Earlier in the procession, the participant waving the European Union flag also rode the ass and once again staged the image of the backward Bulgarian joining the advanced Western World—an image that was widely constructed within the Western European press mainly through articles fearing an invasion of cheap labor from the new members of the Union. By reiterating savageness within the carnival framework, the Kukeri participants destabilized the very image of savageness.<sup>94</sup>

### **“Funny Men” Scenes and Political Satire**

In addition to providing examples of popular culture, the Kukeri practices in various regions of the country include groups of “funny men” who stage skits with strong political resonance. The scenes comment on variety of highly controversial issues such as organized crime and corruption. Prominent public figures such as Simeon Koburgotski often provide the main characters for the political Kukeri satire. The DVD recording of the 2005 Kukeri carnival from the town of Razlog includes an open truck with a table, couch, pine trees, a painted portrait

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<sup>94</sup> For destabilizing normativity by reiteration see Butler, *Gender*.

of Simeon Koburgotski and a poster announcing, “I got my forests back. Now I am selling.” The male actor sitting on the couch makes phone calls, gesticulates, and writes receipts. The set up is a carnivalesque response to the controversy surrounding the return of Koburgotski’s land. In addition to having been elected as a prime minister, Koburgotski is the son of the last Bulgarian king, Boris III. Having lived in exile in Spain throughout Socialism, he returned to become Prime Minister in 2002. Shortly after, in the Fall of 2002 a forest estate hosting the last Bulgarian king’s residency was returned to him. The event caused political controversy due to the questionable status of the estate and subsequent committees were formed to investigate whether it was state or personal property.<sup>95</sup>

The Razlog’s carnival truck also exhibits a sign, “For the people I do not care.” The scene expresses the “talk” of the everyman or the circulating rumors according to which Kuborgotsi entered the Bulgarian political scene in order to come in possession of the lands his family used before 1944.<sup>96</sup> The scene played out the conversations happening at the dinner table in the average household or pub. Similar to a political debate happening in a pub, it constructed a highly disjointed narrative. Within mainstream culture, such negative representation of a public figure unsupported by specific facts would run the risk of being labeled as slander. Within the frame of the carnival a statement accusing the prime minister of having to put on a false face of concern for the nation to further his personal agenda becomes the uncensored voice of the crowd. The community members who are the actors look for and enact the subtext and inner motivation, to use classical acting terms, of the public figures who are their characters. Behind a public speech about the welfare of the nation, they search for the personal interest of the speaker, or for

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<sup>95</sup> Dimitur Iliev and Bozhidar Dimitrov, “Bistritsa Dadena bez Dokumenti” [Bistritsa Given without Documents], *Standard* 10 Feb. 2006.

<sup>96</sup> The public debate surrounding the ex King’s property revolved around whether the land belonged to or was given for use to his family. Since Bulgaria is currently a republic, the question of whether proper documentation of ownership could be submitted becomes legally crucial.

his subtext. When enacting the political satire, the actors replace the official lines of their characters with the subtext they have seen underneath. In addition, the carnivalesque attire of the actors gives the scenes the necessary quotation marks that also grant immunity. In the Koburgotski's scene, the players wear the logically displaced costumes of a cross-dressed nurse and a cross-dressed female character in a long, shabby coat and a blond wig tied in a pony tail. The nurse is to later take part in the traditional mummary death and resurrection scene. Except that on that particular day the resurrection scene and the politically satirical one unite to further reinforce the carnival structure of the event. All of the sudden, the man who is making the phone calls and presumably selling the land on behalf of the ex-king's son faints. By pushing and pulling his "dead body" the nurse manages to resurrect him.

In addition to Razlog, the nearby village of Eleshnitsa is yet another place with a vibrant tradition in staging political satire. In Eleshnitsa, each neighborhood would have a group of cross-dressed men who in addition to the goat skin group would enter the square and present in front of the jury and the audience. In the year 2007, a carnival group commented on politically controversial issues such as corruption and economic growth. As an audience member, I observed an open truck with a wooden desk and a couch on which a couple of men wearing dark suits sat and waived at the crowds. The signs attached to the truck frame announced "National Assembly. We do accept all kinds of bribes." Next to it, a bigger truck hosted an "exhibition" of cross-dressed men in short skirts and deep cut blouses waiving the signs "We don't need heat if we have porno." In Bulgarian, the joke was based on the proximity of the words "heat" (parno) and "porno" (porno.) The preceding year—2006—was marked by a political scandal involving Valio Toploto, (Valio the Heat) a nickname for Valentin Dimitrov, the ex chair of the main Gas company in Sofia (Toplofikatsiia Sofia) who was prosecuted and later sentenced to five years in

prison for embezzlement. The trial lasted for over two years and drew significant public attention.<sup>97</sup> The trial became a public staging of the social conflict of the increasing schism between the average citizen or everyman and the new oligarchy. The everyman was the TV audience member who observed the perpetual trial postponement with a cynical look. The average audience member was fully aware of the political absurdity of living in a post Socialist society that had inherited its main political players from the Socialist regime and produced a new generation of underground criminal organizations that had gradually permeated the power structures and often managed to fully legitimize themselves. Yet, the crimes remained unrecorded. Hardly any trials were ever held.<sup>98</sup> The archive was mostly silent. Everyday conversations were abundant in accusations and recognitions of the political and social ills. The conversations entered the collective memory and the oral traditions. Yet, the legal system or the state archive would hardly record any accusations or verdicts. Mainstream culture in terms of theatre and film produced no work on the subject either. It was the popular culture that reacted the fastest. Songs imitating American rap reflected on crime within the power structures and the Kukeri carnivals fully embraced corruption and embezzlement as favorite topics for its “funny men” scenes.

The DVD recording of the January 1994 Eleshnitsa Kukeri celebrations shows a group of motorcyclists wearing signs, “Insurance Company Vis 2.” The procession is followed by a truck

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<sup>97</sup> The first court hearing was on 13 September 2006. The final verdict was pronounced on 30 May 2008.

<sup>98</sup> For the inadequacy of the Bulgarian legal system to prosecute mafia members in English see Doreen Carvajal and Stephen Castle, “Mob Muscles Its Way into Politics in Bulgaria,” *NYTimes* 15 Oct. 2008. According to the article, “While corruption affects many corners of society, the impact is particularly stark in the legal system, where some people without political connections have resorted to hiring decoy lawyers, for fear that their legal documents would vanish if presented to particular clerks by lawyers recognized as working for them. ... Among Western nations, impatience is growing, particularly at the lack of trials of high-level government officials accused of corruption. As Frans Timmermans, the Dutch minister for European affairs, argued, “What we need to see is real people put before real judges, convicted and put in jail”

<[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/16/world/europe/16bulgaria.html?pagewanted=3&\\_r=1&sq=Bulgaria&st=nyt&scp=6](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/16/world/europe/16bulgaria.html?pagewanted=3&_r=1&sq=Bulgaria&st=nyt&scp=6)>

carrying signs such as “We destroy cash registers for \$20,” “Alban Bodyguard, Security Racket firm” “We kidnap businessmen for \$80,” “Destroy and set pubs on fire for \$150,” “Guard the virginity of old women for free.” The carnival setup closely relates to the political reality and the proliferation of mafia in the post-Socialist society of the early 1990s. Just like a theatrical piece in the style of selective realism, the posters and signs mark the backbone of the story while the rest of the narrative is left to the spectator to fill in. The audience being local could draw from their personal experience of living in the reality of post-Socialist Bulgaria to fill in the rest of the narrative. To all of the spectators, the name Vis-2 immediately speaks of Vasil Iliev, the mafia Boss of Vis 1 and 2, insurance firms involved in “protection” racket operations.<sup>99</sup> The general practice for the firm employees was to offer insurance to small business owners and threaten them with violence if they refused it. In April 1994, the organization was involved in the killing of a Chinese trader who refused to pay.<sup>100</sup> Thus, within the carnival procession “Alban Bodyguard, a Racket Security Firm” stands for Vis-2 while the supporting signs of kidnapping, arson and murder relate to the criminal activities of the organization. In the early 1990s, Vis 1 was among the most powerful Bulgarian crime organizations enjoying the legal status of a firm. Stickers with its name could be seen at stores, restaurants and private properties all over Bulgaria. The average citizen was fully aware of the organization’s criminal nature and openly discussed it. Yet, its leaders were not prosecuted and, on the contrary, enjoyed visibility and open participation in the public arena. It is only now, more than ten years later, that newspapers are publishing articles that openly discuss the connections the mafia had with the political leaders of the time. In 2007, leading Bulgarian newspapers such as *Standard* and *Novinar* published interviews with mafia members such as Marin Marinov, according to whom Bulgarian

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<sup>99</sup>Vasil Iliev was killed on 25 April 1995.

<sup>100</sup> For a summary of Vis-1 history and criminal activity in English see Slavi Angelov, “Gang Bang” *24 Hours, Vagabon*, 25 Oct. 2008 < [www.vagabond-bg.com/index.php?page=akcent&id=831-35k](http://www.vagabond-bg.com/index.php?page=akcent&id=831-35k) >.



politicians from the two major parties collaborated with the mafia boss.<sup>101</sup> In 1994, the archive was silent. It was within the community realm of the carnival, that the most acute social critique took place. The carnival became a protest but also an acknowledgement for what remained unspoken within the official media. It was on the carnival truck that in 1994 Vis 1 was called a racket firm while the main stream media referred to it only as a firm. The carnival as well as the daily dinner table of the average citizen became the stage for a free expression of political protest. At the same time, mainstream culture such as theatre and film made no comment on the surrounding mafia driven violence and corruption.

The 1997 Eleshnitsa Kukeri celebrations also staged a scene that made a comment not only on corruption, but also on drug dealing and violation of the Yugoslavia embargo. A black Mercedes with tainted windows exhibited the sign “A Car for Macedonia.” When stopped by a participant wearing the carnival uniform of a policeman, the car’s driver went out and handed folded money. The car was allowed to pass by until it was stopped by customs. Participants dressed in camouflage performed a search and found a white substance. The driver bribed them too and successfully continued on his way.

The end of the 1990s marked two major shifts taken by the Bulgarian mafia—from a violent local organization dealing mainly with rackets it turned into a major player in the drug traffic and smuggling business. During that period, Bulgaria officially supported the Yugoslavia embargo.<sup>102</sup> However, criminal organizations within the country took advantage and saw a profitable opportunity. The village of Eleshnitsa is situated close to the Western border of

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<sup>101</sup> “Krusnikut Kanel Trenchev and Sofianski za Ortatsi,” [The Godfather Offered Partnership to Trenchev and Sofianski] *Standard* 22 Oct. 2007, 26 Oct. 2008 <<http://paper.standartnews.com/bg/article.php?d=2007-03-22&article=182839>>. “Sofianski Imal Obsht Biznes s Karamanski,” [Sofianski has had Personal Dealings with Karamanski] *Novinar*, 22 March 2007, 26. Oct. 2008 <<http://www.novinar.net>>

<sup>102</sup> In 1991 the United Nation Security Council establishes an embargo on the delivery of arms to the Republic of Yugoslavia.

Bulgaria near Macedonia and Yugoslavia. In the late 1990s the region became the major route for smuggling goods and arms.<sup>103</sup>

In addition to domestic problems, the Kukeri carnival includes images from international politics. The difference is in the source or the original of the carnivalesque presentation. While in the case of domestic issues, the participants rely on personal experience in addition to newspaper articles and TV reports, in the case of international politics the original is always already mediated and stems from the TV screen. The 2002 Razlog carnival as recorded in the DVDs of the participants includes a truck with a group of “funny men” wrapped in a carnival version of a long white male Islamic dress covering the head and falling down to the knees. The sign on the truck reads, “Osama Bin Laden Wishes You a Happy New Year and Peace on Earth.” The figure of Osama Bin Laden constituted a popular presence within the Kukeri carnivals of the early 2000s. For instance, a participant from the village of Varvara shared during our interview that a man dressed like Bin Laden’s most recently spread image wore a TV frame around his head as part of the local carnival procession. The Razlog version of the Middle East Conflict expresses a politically neutral position. The signs as well as the physical language of the participants in the scene are neither pro nor against the war. What it does is confirm the popular celebrity status of Bin Laden. As most participants share, “We try to build our scenes around something that is contemporary, relevant, popular.” While seemingly political, the Bin Laden scene is just the opposite—highly apolitical. Even the sign “Bin Laden Wishes You Peace on Earth” is more carnivalesquely humorous by virtue of drawing an obvious contradiction or an illogical juxtaposition than a political statement. The Bin Laden image as highly circulated by the media

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<sup>103</sup> As Doreen Carvajal and Stephen Castle summarize, “The roots of this organized crime date to the collapse of Communism in the early 1990s. Thousands of secret agents and athletes, including wrestlers once supported and coddled by the state, were cast onto the street. During the United Nations embargo of warring Serbia in the 1990s, they seized smuggling opportunities and solidified their networks.” For more see Doreen Carvajal and Stephen Castle, “Mob.”

has entered popular culture. Multiple copies of his image have been generated and circulated through TV and the Internet. The proliferation of the copies has become overwhelming to the point of questioning the very existence of an original or of making the need for an original no longer necessary. The carnivalesque image of Bin Laden presents not an inverted carnivalesque copy, but a copy of a copy. In the Varvara's version, the choice of the participant who played him to put his head in a TV frame comes the closest to revealing the original of Bin Laden's image. The original is always mediated through a screen.

The same way Bin Laden's image exists as part of the disjointed news discourse of contrasting events, the Bin Laden 2002 Razlog scene is followed by a truck hosting a group of men dressed in ragged uniforms wearing a sign, "A Fire Command". The sign on the truck reads, "We can put off anything but the greed of our congress representatives." As opposed to the Bin Laden scene, this one takes a very specific political position and expresses a civil protest staged within the carnivalesque framework. An old car following the truck is set on fire and the "firemen" jump to put the flames out to the greatest delight of the audience. A general disorder ensues. The action falls within the tradition of spectacle. The vibrant flames together with the bodies of the actors fighting them present a colorful and energetic scene playing on the liveness of the event. The fire is indeed happening and the men are indeed putting it out in the town square and sounds of the sirens play against the sounds of the carnival drums and pipes. Yet, the audience does not run away from the rather real flames. The fire as well as the bodies of the carnivalesquely dressed performers exist in the liminal space between reality and performance.

### **"Funny Men" Scenes and the Sexual Explicitness of Carnival**

Within the Kukeri carnival, groups of funny men often present political satire while being dressed in short skirts, torn stockings, high heels and oversized wigs. The actors freely jump

from scene to scene. A political satire could be followed by a subject focusing on the lower body functions such as copulation or giving birth. According to Bakhtin:

Degradation here [in carnival] means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. ... To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth.<sup>104</sup>

Bakhtin further sees carnival degradation as a positive, rejuvenating and transforming force. Performing the grotesque does not present an end within itself. On the contrary, it is a necessary step towards rejuvenation:

Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth takes place. Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving.<sup>105</sup>

Within the Bulgarian Kukeri carnival, the birth scene is a favorite among “the funny men” groups. The Winter celebrations in Razlog featured a double birth scene. In the first one, on the back of a truck a Kukeri man covered in a bear costume gave birth to little baby bears. The doctor showed a couple of teddy bears to the crowd who greeted them accordingly. In the second scene, a cross-dressed “funny man” wearing contemporary carnivalesque female attire was subjected to a full medical procedure. The back of the truck which served as a stage

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<sup>104</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 21.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. 21.

exhibited the mock medical system comprising plastic bottles on sticks filled with colorful liquids. The “pregnant” character was positioned on a patient’s chair and surrounded by the medical team. The doctor presented the grotesque body of a hunchback dressed in a ragged blue apron. A rugged brown wig covered his semi bald head and a pair of oversized glasses hung on his nose. The pregnant character in a birth giving position was covered with a pale cloth with a cut in the middle for the baby to come through. With the help of oversized pliers, the doctor reached under the cloth and pulled some fleece which he threw at the crowd. His comment, “She does have a lot of fleece” was greeted with laughter by the crowds gathered in the town square. Next came the plastic doll presenting the baby and a bunch of bloody animal intestines that were thrown into a basin and thoroughly shown to the crowd. Sounds of disgust and laughter emanated from the audience. Finally, the “baby” was measured on the oversized scale and declared to be a healthy one. The performance centering on lower body functions ended with a birth of a perfectly proportioned “baby”. The deformed body of the doctor together with the grotesquely dressed body of the pregnant cross-dressed character produced the perfect baby very much in accordance with what Bakhtin calls conceiving and rebirth within the framework of the carnival.

The village of Varvara also annually has a group of “funny men” who follow the Kukeri procession on January 1. The funny men stage a carnival tableau on a moving truck and drive along the streets all throughout the morning. Around 11am they park their vehicles in the village square and share the stage with the village officials and the skin-covered Kukeri figures. The DVD recording of the 2006 celebrations shows the “funny men” presenting shortly after the traditional stock characters of the bide, the groom, the bear, the bear owner, the mother and father in law have played a short scene on a Christmas theme. In contrast to the stock cross-

dressed characters of the bride and the groom, who wear traditional folk attire, the “funny men” or smeshnitsi in Bulgarian utilize contemporary combinations of shirts, belts, wigs and stockings. While the stock figures in folk attire present the frozen image of tradition or the annual staging of the imagined image of one’s heritage, the funny men embody the very principle of the carnival tradition within its own time. With their raggedy and absurd combinations of shirts revealing torn stocking, the “funny men” express the typical carnival characteristics of cross-dressing and sexual explicitness.

As the DVD recording reveals, the 2006 “funny men” group in the village of Varvara is presented by a “hostess” named Adriana. Upon seeing the young man dressed in a colorful gown with an even more colorful wig and a plastic white purse declaring himself to be “your hostess Adriana” the audience bursts into laughter. After some seasonal greetings, Adriana introduces the state ensemble for folk singing Filip Kutev which is again greeted with laughter. The joke stems from the displacement of a Bulgarian household name—Filip Kutev is indeed the best known national ensemble for folk performance which especially during the years of Socialism was deemed as a symbol of national culture. Instead of the actual Filip Kutev members though, the Varvara stage is taken by a chorus of local elderly women in folk costumes who perform a couple of folk songs typical for the region. The women themselves fall very much within the traditional look of the Kukeri celebrations with their authentic folk costume and performance.<sup>106</sup> The group thus has the necessary legitimacy to travel to national Kukeri festivals. Yet at the local level, they too become part of the raw humor of carnival—a cross-dressed contemporary figure presents them by joking about their age and physical condition: “Here they are. Old but steady. I hope they have not forgotten their pampers [diapers] though.” The audience and the women themselves greet the “hostess’s” joke with approving laughter. In a true exhibit of carnival

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<sup>106</sup> It could of course be argued that rather than authentic their costumes become a simulation of tradition.

mockery, the “hostess” further promises the folk group a trophy of a chestnut as an award for their performance.<sup>107</sup>

The folk group is followed by a satirical scene staged by the group of cross-dressed men, wearing signs “Pichi grip.” The sexually explicit joke transforms the expression “Ptichi Grip” which in Bulgarian means Bird flu into Pichi which in raw jargon refers to the female reproductive system. A table constitutes the central prop in the satirical scene and all of the cross dressed patients suffering from the flu are to be examined there. The year 2005 marked the proliferation of bird flu, an event that was thoroughly reflected in the news. Within its own framework of reversal, the Varvara carnival transformed a serious and grim event into a theme for public amusement. The tool of laughing over grim events is deeply engrained within the popular culture of Bulgaria whose population used humor and jokes to comprehend and survive the political controversies of socialism.

One by one the cross-dressed characters of Varvara lay down on the table and let the Kukeri doctor scrape the flu away. The cross-dressed participants have their legs fully covered in tights and open them for the doctor who mimics the scrape procedure. The sexual explicitness of the carnival is thus implied and performed following theatrical conventions. The costumes too present theatrical exaggerations suitable for staged presentation. A character wears an oversized blond wig combined with brightly colored earrings and deep red make up. Regardless of the cold January weather, the actors wear revealing clothing to further emphasize their comical appearance. Short shirts over mock breasts show bellies and tight skirts exhibit hairy legs. Objects out of context such as slippers combined with elegant purses complete the combinations.

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<sup>107</sup> For carnival as a ritual of mockery see Peter Burke *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978) 184-9.

The participants thus construct the carnival bodies by illogical juxtapositions and theatrical excess. As a result, the participants assert their carnivalesque identity.

### **“Funny Men” Scenes and the Bulgarian Identity**

Using “the funny men” scenes for making political statements or commenting on social problems with humor is closely related to treating the carnival as a site for constructing Bulgarian identity. The identity of the Bulgarian was a central performance topic of the Kukeri Varvara celebrations of 2007. A day before the January celebrations in the village of Varvara, I interviewed Petia Peneva who as a chair of the local community center (*chitalishte* in Bulgarian) was also in charge of the official program.<sup>108</sup> During our conversation, Peneva stressed the Bulgaria’s acceptance to the European Union as the main topic of the day to follow. The program was to reflect the diversity of Bulgarian society and construct the image of a multi-ethnic and ethnically tolerant Bulgaria entering the Union. While the village of Varvara had a population of both Christian Bulgarians and Gypsies, Peneva was determined to also include the character of the Muslim or Turkish Bulgarian. Around noon on January 1, the residents of the village gathered around the stage in the square to witness the official program of the Kukeri carnival. The goat skin figures temporarily suspended their wild running in the streets and the cross-dressed procession reached the stage. After the scene of a Christmas celebration presented by the cross-dressed characters wearing traditional folk attire, the stage was taken by three couples wearing carnivalesque versions of traditional Christian Bulgarian, Gypsy and Turkish attire. Instead of presenting an inversion of values, the script of the scene was to be perceived in a straight forward manner or as presenting the three ethnic groups participating at equal terms in the celebrations and respectively the social order of contemporary Bulgaria. Their equal carnival participation was to be read as a symbol for equal civil one. Their attire still confirmed the

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<sup>108</sup> Petia Peneva. Personal Interview. 31 December 2006.



carnavalesque principles of playful juxtaposition, exaggeration and excess. The Turkish female character was dressed in bright gold wide pants (shalvari), red jacket, a head piece decorated with silver coins and a transparent flowery scarf covering her face. Within Bulgaria, no women are currently covering their faces. Muslim women, if wearing a head piece, use fabric to cover their hair while leaving their faces open. The Kukeri Turkish woman thus presented a fictional Turkish character or the idea of Turkishness. It did, in other words, construct a stock character. Similarly, the cross dressed character of the Turkish man wore the signature red fez, black wool pants and vest, white shirt and a red waist band, all of which were no longer in use but had rather become museum pieces of traditional costume. In a carnivalesque manner the Turkish “man” also wore a red plastic nose, a pair of red plastic glasses and a fake mustache. The gypsy character was flamboyantly dressed in contrasting patterns and colors. The actress wore a skirt in black, yellow, green and pink flowers under a coat decorated with blue and red leaves and a shoulder scarf in gold and blue. Her costume was completed by a yellow plastic flower tucked behind her ear.

Prior to appearing as Gypsies and Turks, the actors with slight costume alterations participated in a politically satirical scene. The central subject was again the acceptance of Bulgaria into the European Union. The scene, though, interwove the political past and present. Laughter became the tool for dealing with the political burden of the Communist oppression as well as the post-Communist corruption. The hostess of the Kukeri program began by announcing that the European Union would invest into a factory in the village of Varvara and would employ the local population. Yet, the Union needed to see the secret files of all, “unborn and dead,” prior to making employment decisions. One by one carnival dressed women entered the stage to “apply” for the job. The first one was rejected for having reported a co-worker for missing a May

1 manifestation.<sup>109</sup> The second one was turned down for having “in 1956 publicly supported the Hungarian Revolution and challenged the Socialist order.” The third one was sent back for “having been at friendly terms with enemy agents.” The fourth one was deemed unsuitable because she had disseminated jokes about Todor Zhivkov (a long time Communist leader, president, and chair of the Bulgarian Communist Party). The fifth one was accused of having stolen a pumpkin from the local agricultural commune and her application presented the culmination of the scene. Upon hearing that she had committed theft the director of the new factory approved her application with the following words, “If she is a criminal, take her in. It is the criminals that prosper now. Congratulations!” In her final speech, the employment agent directly addressed the audience gathered in the square: “As you could see we hire only the best. We accept only personnel that has passed our background check and has a clean past.” The carnivalesque reversal was played as a game of true and false, content and appearance. The joke was structured around false content presented as true appearance. The person with the criminal past was deemed as the most suitable for the job and also announced as having a clean record. A way to deal with the contemporary problems of high corruption was to see reality or the social order as being carnivalesque or as presenting a reversal of values. The joke also utilized a carnivalesque time displacement.<sup>110</sup> Behavior that would have been deemed as an offence under Communism was cited as being an offence in the post Communist era. Logically, telling jokes about the ex Communist leader or not attending a May 1 manifestation, could not possibly constitute political transgressions carrying liability after the fall of Communism. Yet, the story

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<sup>109</sup> May 1<sup>st</sup> or Labor Day, was a widely celebrated holiday under Communism all over Bulgaria. Most employees were required to participate in the locally organized manifestations and to parade in the streets with flags, banners, flowers, balloons and slogans.

<sup>110</sup> As Wilson Harris summarizes, “The key to carnival lies in a displacement of time frames to break a one-track commitment to history.” See Wilson Harris, *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992) 59.

fulfilled the double purpose of caricaturing the past and of constructing a carnivalesque story of displaced events. The same way an object such as a pair of slippers would complete a ball gown in carnival cross dressing or an ax would be used to cut bread in a street procession, the events from the Communist order were transferred to the current post-Socialist times.

## **Conclusion**

Within the carnival narrative of Kukeri, “the funny men” scenes employ raw humor to achieve multiple and complex goals. One and the same scene could simultaneously participate in the carnivalesque parade of base physical humor while providing an astute social critique. The “funny men” heavily rely on improvisation and their practices fall within the oral folk tradition. At the same time, although the scenes belong to the realm of embodied knowledge, they are regularly recorded as tapes and photographs by the participants themselves and thus become a part of the personal archive of the performers. By retrieving this very same archive, I was able to reconstruct the political reality of each year during which a specific scene was performed. Within their narrative, the scenes interweave the most controversial and relevant social and political events of their time. The carnival space thus becomes the arena for voicing a unique form of social protest. The “funny men” scenes carve out an immediate space to express social ills such as government corruption and mafia crime long before the official archive of the newspapers and the TV programs give any account of the subject.

At the same time, the “funny men” scene employ the traditional characteristics of carnival such as cross-dressing, inversion of order and celebrating the base and the ugly. The grotesquely dressed bodies of the participants become the stage on which the carnival tradition is reenacted and preserved. Yet, the scenes are ignored by Bulgarian scholarship which deems them as kitsch. Instead, the scholarly publications in Bulgaria frame the Kukeri tradition within a

discourse of authenticity and a search for pure archetypes. As a result, the traditionally dressed stock characters become legitimate subjects for research while the contemporary “funny men” are discarded as expressions of recent and unwanted deviations.

By commenting on politically relevant events, the “funny men” scenes also provide a site for constructing Bulgarian identity. The image of the Bulgarian entering the European Union and the image of Bulgaria as a country negotiating tradition and change are constructed by carnival exaggeration within the Kukeri space. Constructing identity also presents the thread that unites the separate sides of the Kukeri performances. By negotiating questions such as the meaning of the Kukeri practices and how they participate in the narrative of enacting one’s tradition and relating to one’s presence, the Kukeri performers continuously enact, reenact and further construct the identity of the Kukeri practices. In the final chapter of my dissertation, I trace the thread of constructing one’s identity as a unifying feature for all of the diverse roles of both the Kukeri practices and their participants.



Figure 10. Kukeri Day in Varvara. 2007. Photograph by the author.



Figure 11. Kukeri Day in Varvara. Azis and Kitaetsa. 2007. Photograph by the author.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Still vibrant after centuries of existence, the Kukeri tradition continues to be performed in multiple regions all over Bulgaria. Participants dressed in goat skins share the carnival space with traditionally dressed stock characters and “funny men” impersonating contemporary figures. As part of the oral tradition and embodied knowledge, the Kukeri tradition provides the stage on which Bulgarians negotiate their cultural identity and heritage.

At the local level, the Kukeri practices exist as community events performed either around New Year’s Eve or in the pre-Lent period and as such they still exhibit ritualistic characteristics. The participants construct and reenact the identity of ritual performers that adhere closely to the tradition as handed down to them for generations. In multiple villages and small towns, the performers follow a strict code of events that govern the sequence in which the ritual is annually performed. On Kukeri day, the ritual completely takes over and reshapes the civic space. The participants pour into the streets where traffic and all “normal” business activities are temporarily suspended. The performers in multiple regions point to the Kukeri day as the biggest holiday of the year—more significant and honored than any other religious or secular holiday. Even community members who have long left their native places return home for the festivities.

Enacting the Kukeri practices as ritual is closely connected to staging them as theatrical performances. As a background to the performances, the participants design and arrange sets of traditional props that further stage the identity of Kukeri as belonging to tradition. For themselves, the participants construct the identity of actors who with the aid of costumes and

learned movements enact the custom not only for the rest of the community but also for the camera that will preserve the event in the family archive. Kukeri as theatre is even more evident when the local custom is taken to regional and international festivals. The local performers appropriate the identity of cultural emissaries who export the product of Bulgarian tradition. On the global stage of the international festival, the Bulgarian performers assert themselves as equal and distinct participants in the cultural market. The Kukeri ritual is remodeled to fit the festival requirements by presenting an abbreviated staged version of the home practices. The participants successfully perform the dual identity of ritual players at home and members of an acting company abroad. The complex identity of the Kukeri practices proves any search for authenticity futile. The practices have long entered the postmodern interplay of copies and originals.

Kukeri as festival has its root in the second half of the twentieth century and is closely connected to the Bulgarian Communist Party's policy for instilling patriotism. Until the 1960s, the Kukeri custom existed solely as local and community celebrations that blended the boundaries between audiences and performers. Prior to that time, the Party followed a strict line of internationalism and subjected Bulgarian identity to the inter-Socialist identity. With the power switch within the Party in the 1950s, a new policy aiming at gaining vast support among the population came into play. Todor Zhivkov, First Secretary of the Party, inaugurated multiple programs asserting a patriotic identity for Bulgarian culture. The policy proved highly successful and gained public support from all layers of society. The Kukeri practices together with other folk customs became essential players in the discourse of patriotism. A practice preserved from ancient time could only show the tenacity of the Bulgarian tradition. In the 1960s, the first festivals for folk performances were started in various regions all over Bulgaria. In a short amount of time, the events proved highly popular and attracted crowds of audiences, scholars



and participants. The political propaganda of the Party remained relatively obscure in the course of the festival which marked the very success of the propaganda apparatus. Participants who were not fervent Communist supporters but identified themselves as ardent supporters of the Bulgarian tradition became unconscious players in the political game of instilling patriotism. The period had a long lasting effect on the Kukeri practices. In multiple regions, the very first Kukeri ensembles were formed under the guidance of the local Community Centers. As a result, numerous groups developed a unified, often highly embellished look and transformed their practices into choreographed performances. Festival participations and the winning of prizes became a major incentive. In the 2000s, the festivals set up under Socialism continue to operate and act as major regulators for the practices. In addition, new festivals are continuously being organized to promote tourism within the new realities of the market economy. The perception of the Kukeri practices as a keeper of the Bulgarian tradition together with their role for instilling patriotism survived the fall of Communism which again proves the power of the propaganda net set up under Communism. The identity of the Bulgarian patriot is continuously being constructed, acted and reenacted both at the local level and at the festival stages.

Not only does viewing the Kukeri performances as purely Bulgarian instill patriotism, but it also denies the highly syncretic nature of the practices. On the other hand, seeing the Kukeri practices as syncretic transforms the very nature of Bulgarian identity from pure and unique to hybrid and culturally contaminated. Within Bulgaria, the majority of scholarly publications together with the participants themselves identify Kukeri as belonging exclusively to the Bulgarian and Christian layers of the population. At the same time, there are Muslim villages with vibrant masked traditions very similar to Kukeri. Yet, their tradition remains marginalized and largely unknown within Bulgaria. The very few publications that analyze the Kukeri

practices among the Muslim population also served propaganda purposes in the late 1980s and helped the Party in its project of forced assimilation of the Muslim population. The fact that the Muslim and Turkish population within Bulgaria had customs similar to the Christian ones was deemed “proof” of ancient Christian and Bulgarian roots. The Kukeri performances did thus once again find themselves in the midst of a highly politically charged political discourse on national identity.

Viewed in a climate of religious and ethnic tolerance, the fact that the Kukeri practices belong both to the Christian and Muslim traditions renders them as highly syncretic. Thus, to define the Kukeri customs as belonging to a tradition that is purely Bulgarian is to ignore their complex nature. On the contrary, reviewing the Kukeri practices as belonging to a hybrid tradition renders the very nature of Bulgarian tradition and identity as syncretic. Having reviewed multiple examples of masked celebrations among the Turkish and Muslim population both on the territory of Bulgaria and within Turkey, it is my assertion that the Kukeri tradition renders the Bulgarian tradition as highly syncretic and in a state of a continuous cultural dialogue with the other Balkan traditions.

The “funny men” scenes present yet another characteristic of the Kukeri tradition that remains marginalized by main stream scholarly publications. The crossed dressed contemporary figures are labeled as presenting kitschy deviations from the pure tradition. Yet, it is my assertion that the very core characteristics of carnival such as cross-dressing, gender and social inversion, as well as sexual explicitness, could be found precisely in the “funny men” performances. The “funny scenes” with their focus on low and grotesque humor construct the carnival identity of the Kukeri practices. In addition, they present a stage for astute social and political critique. By enacting various subject matters ranging from the role of the mafia to

government corruption, the “funny men” become the first to voice public discontent. By tracing the “funny men” tradition back for the past ten years, I was able to construct an oral tradition that reacted more quickly to political injustices than any of the official archival sources.

Throughout my dissertation I often used the terms “the archive” and “the repertoire” in the sense outlined by Diana Taylor. As an embodied knowledge, the Kukeri practices belong mainly to the repertoire. Yet, as video recordings and photographs they also enter the personal archive of the performers. At a purely practical research level, it was by tracing the personal archive that I was able to reconstruct the practices of the past. While reviewing the period of Socialism, I found the repertoire of the practices in a complex and dependant relationship to the archive left by the Communist Party—the official power of the time. Decisions made within the structures of power and spread through written documents controlled and changed the nature of the embodied practices especially during the period of forced assimilation of the Muslim population living on the territory of Bulgaria.

In my future research, I would like to further study the connection between the Bulgarian Kukeri performances and the folk traditions of the Balkans. Since the Kukeri customs fall within the larger context of shared Muslim and Christian traditions, I am particularly interested in collecting data about other examples that render both traditions as syncretic. Theoretically, I would like to trace how such examples have been used by both sides to assert a certain pure national identity and thus to continue further to reveal patriotism and nationalism as social constructs. I would also like to research the role of the Gypsies or the Bulgarian Roma population within the Kukeri tradition.<sup>111</sup> I would like to review both the role of the musicians who in multiple regions are mainly Gypsies, and the significance of the Gypsy stock character.

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<sup>111</sup> Both terms are in circulation in Bulgaria. While “Bulgarian Roma” has acquired a status of greater political correctness, Gypsies or Tsigani is still very much in use and considered appropriate.

Theoretically, I would like to continue analyzing the Kukeri practices as a site for staging ethnicity by expanding the argument to include not only the Bulgarian and Turkish, but also the Gypsy traditions. In addition, I would like to further focus on the role of women. In various regions, women have become active participants who claim the exclusively male Kukeri performance tradition. In addition, the female body presents a favorite subject for the “funny men” scenes. By cross-dressing, the “funny men” not only construct a carnival identity for the Kukeri practices but also construct a performance of gender. Finally, in my future research, I would continue tracing the development and changes the Kukeri practices are undergoing. The tradition has proven to be highly resilient and is still thriving in multiple regions all over Bulgaria. It has throughout the years successfully negotiated change and managed to adapt to the shifting political and economic realities.

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## APPENDIX A

### MAP OF BULGARIA



**APPENDIX B****MAP OF BLAGOEVGRAD-BANSKO REGION**

The village of Eleshnitsa is situated at about eight miles south east of Razlog.

## APPENDIX C

### MAP OF KARLOVO REGION



The village of Sushitsa is about four miles from Karlovo. The village of Dubene is about five miles from Karlovo and the village of Kliment is about five miles from Dubene.