

Feast and Community in the Village of Ribnovo, Southwestern Bulgaria, between Tradition and Modernity

Petya Vasileva-Grueva

Assistant Professor at Department of Ethnology, Sofia St Kliment Ohridski University, Bulgaria

E-mail: p.grueva@abv.bg

Abstract: In recent years, the village of Ribnovo, in the municipality of Garmen, Bulgaria, has been permanently in the media and research spotlight because of the interest in its preserved traditions, which are presented as a cultural treasure and an integral part of the identity politics of the Muslim community. For the people of Ribnovo, holidays are not just a connection with the past and the ancestors, they are also perceived as an essential part of their modern identity. Their public presentation, among other positives, support the optimisation of social relations between people and social cohesion between generations, which is important for the modern sustainable development of the community. Adapted in this way, the tradition of colourful weddings and circumcisions (*sunnet* or *sünnet*) help to harmonise relations and overcome generational differences. Holidays for Ribnovo are part of their traditions and culture and help to maintain community cohesion. When presenting heritage to a broad audience, the emphasis should be placed not only on the way it is represented, but also on the role of its bearers and performers, who perceive it as a resource to harmonise their collective values and norms and organize their contemporary social rhythm and attitudes.

Keywords: Bulgarian Pomak Muslims community, cultural agency, cultural heritage, feasts, sunnah circumcision, traditional weddings

Introduction

During the winter season, Ribnovo, a high mountain village in southwestern Bulgaria, becomes one of the most popular settlements in the country. This is not because of the otherwise unique nature, the practice of winter sports or the opportunities for luxurious vacations. Winter in Ribnovo is the season of traditional colourful weddings and ‘written’ *gelini* (brides). In Bulgaria, it is one of the few settlements that can boast continuous natural (non-migratory) population growth, despite its geographical isolation, its poorly developed infrastructure and its distance from a large urban centre.¹ All residents of the village are Bulgarian Muslims (in Bulgaria the term Pomaks is also used) who practice Islam but have Bulgarian ethnic origin and speak Bulgarian.² There are two mosques in the village, which are attended regularly and where religious courses on the Quran are organised for children and students. At the end of last year (November 2024), a new modern high school building was solemnly opened in Ribnovo. The old one had not been able to accommodate the growing number of students for years. The presence of a school shows demographic stability and the retention of young families and adolescents in the village. However, the main livelihood of village residents is labour mobility around the country and abroad. Mainly men, but also entire families, perform various seasonal labour activities, generally in construction and agriculture in large European countries such as Germany, France, Spain, and Great Britain. Despite this widespread economic model, there are almost no cases of permanent immigration to the village, and funds earned abroad are often invested in the construction and furnishing of houses, as well as organising family celebrations.



Figure 1. The village of Ribnovo

It is during family feasts – *sunnet* (sunnah circumcision), engagements and weddings – that the people of Ribnovo manage to reproduce their traditions, which are characteristic of the Bulgarian Muslim communities in the region, resulting in them standing out through them from other villages, because here this heritage is not only preserved, but also seems current and alive. A connection to traditional practices from the past is most clearly sought primarily through the performance of wedding rituals. Of all the neighbouring Muslim villages in the Rhodope Mountain region, only in Ribnovo during weddings is the bride dressed in a replica of a traditional wedding costume. Her face is covered with white cream and sequins in the form of floral decorations, and a *prekriv* is placed on her head, a kind of bridal veil decorated with artificial flowers, then a veil and silver threads that are actually Christmas garlands. Transformed beyond recognition, in bright colours and a lot of glitter, the bride, together with her chosen one and their relatives, welcomes guests from near and far for two whole days. According to a tradition preserved for centuries, weddings are held only during the winter period from November to March. It is then that the harvest is already over, the men have returned from *gurbet* (seasonal labour outside the village), the houses are full of food and produce, and everyone in the village can indulge in festive joy. In the past, weddings

lasted five whole days, with a particular ritual performed on each one – guests from both families were solemnly invited, produce was prepared, the bride's *cheiz* (dowry) was carried to her new house, where it was displayed so that all the guests could see it. One of the evenings also includes the henna ritual in which the bride's hands are painted with henna, sent mainly by the groom's mother. Henna is a symbol of well-being and happiness and has protective functions against evil forces. This is also the last evening that the young woman will spend in her father's house. The next day, the wedding begins and the bride puts on her festive costume, consisting of a shirt, vest, *shalwar* (loose trousers), *ruba* and an apron. For the first time, she also puts on a *feredzhe* (a long black cloak made of velvet, worn only by married women). After dressing, the 'gluing' begins. The bride's face is smeared with either beaten egg or thick white cream, shiny ornaments begin to be arranged such as coloured foil, gold leaf or sequins. After this procedure, attended only by women, is completed, the prepared veil is placed on the bride and she is taken from her home and handed over to her chosen one. He, together with his family, the gathered guests and musical accompaniment of traditional oriental instruments (drums and *zurna*), takes her to her new home. There, after the veil is removed along with the face decoration, the *hodja* (Muslim priest) performs the Muslim wedding ritual and signs a marriage contract called a *nikah*. This is how, in short, wedding rituals were performed in the past; it is characteristic of the two largest Muslim communities within the borders of Bulgaria among Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks) and ethnic Turks. Their family and calendar feasts, traditions, beliefs and values are strongly influenced by the Islamic religion, the dominant religious doctrine which spread across the Balkans after their conquest by the Ottoman Empire in the 14th century.

In a historical context, the preservation of the religion, as well as the traditional culture and worldview of Bulgarian Muslims, has been problematic since their inclusion as a community within the borders of the new Bulgarian state after the War of Liberation (1877–1878). Their perception as an immutable part of the Bulgarian ethnic community encouraged political elites during different periods to make permanent attempts to change their Muslim identity through various campaigns associated with forced conversion (the so-called Baptism of 1912–1913) or overt support for organisations such as Rodina and its stated aim to "clarify the national consciousness" (in the 1930s and 1940s). During the communist regime (1944–1989), Bulgarian Muslim communities were sub-

jected to a number of prohibitions and restrictions, the main goal of which was not only to modernise their way of life and raise their education and cultural level, but also to erase their traditional culture and Islamic religion completely (Ivanova 2002; Gruev 2003; Gruev, Kalyonski 2008). The policy during this period was open assimilation, which included the forced replacement of Turkish Arabic names with Bulgarian ones, a ban on celebrating family and calendar holidays characteristic of the community, a ban on wearing Muslim clothing, control over visiting mosques, limiting the practice of Islam, and imposing a 'new socialist festivity'. As a result of these measures, known in propaganda at the time and in scientific literature as the "Revival process", even in small, isolated settlements, centuries-old traditions were interrupted, affecting not only the community's holidays, but also its worldview and value system. Attempts to homogenise the country and create a unified socialist nation failed due to their violent nature and the repression that people had to endure. Such actions helped a persistent traumatic memory and distrust of official institutions to develop, which in the future would influence people's strategies for belonging and making sense of their cultural heritage.

Immediately after the political changes and transition to democracy in the 1990s, the possibility of free expression of cultural specifics and identity was restored. At this time the process of dropping various traditional elements of celebration and clothing had already left its mark on the Bulgarian Muslim communities in different regions of the country. In what way, and how to restore not only tradition, but also identification markers, turns out to be as much an individual as a collective choice. This presupposes the manifestation of a palette of identities, which scholars, historians and ethnologists have registered in the course of various field studies since the early 1990s (Georgieva 1998: 286–308; Brunnbauer 1999: 35–50; Gruev 2008: 335–355). They notice both signs of the adoption of a Turkish identity (so-called Turkification), primarily due to the return and active practice of Islam (mainly in the Western Rhodopes), and cases of voluntary adoption of Christianity (in the regions of Kardzhali and Nedelino).³ The development of different identification strategies and the emphasis on specific markers over others, according to the German scholar Ulf Brunnbauer, indicates an identity that is sensitive to context and determined by social, cultural, and political processes and individual decisions. Such a multiple or contextual identity is a clear indication that Bulgarian Muslims are having difficulty adjusting to their particular intermediate state of being

Bulgarians by origin and Muslims by faith (Zhelyazkova 2022: 818–824). In fact, historian Antonina Zhelyazkova even mentions a “taken away” identity, referring to the brutal policies of the communist party in the recent past on all Muslim communities. Dispossession is clearly the reason for catalysing a reverse process of constructing and legitimately presenting one’s own vision when shaping belonging, whether through religion, culture, or ethnicity. The search for a prestigious identity is underway and indications are that this process will only end when conditions are created at the macro and micro levels so that Pomak communities can feel confident and at ease in their own cultural, religious and ethnic existence.

The relatively successful implementation of the country’s political transition to democracy after 1989 and membership of the European Union in the new millennium normalised the internal dynamics of Pomak communities. Declaring affiliation becomes a matter of personal choice. Their inclusion in European labour markets, the advantages of labour mobility and free entrepreneurship relieve economic tension and allowed for a gradual opening to the world through familiarisation and the adoption of new cultural models. Bulgarian Muslims appreciate the advantages of national citizenship and origin without this necessarily being associated with pressure on their religion or Muslim identity. Contact with Western European societies and their ethnic and cultural pluralism gives them the feeling that they can harmonise their identification strategies without having to choose one dominant marker from among ethnicity, religion, mother tongue, etc. At the same time, in the various multicultural collectives, regional and cultural specificities such as traditions, folklore, festivities and clothing began to stand out and therefore be assessed by their bearers as important and defining.

Thus, for the people of Ribnovo, their existing local culture turns out not only to be the organic connection with the cultural and historical heritage of their dramatic past and ancestors, but also a powerful legitimising factor for the community in modern times, which gives them a sense of value and self-esteem.

With the start of the political changes at the end of the 20th century, residents of Ribnovo were among the first to restore traditional elements, not only in their festive but also in their everyday clothing. Women, depending on age and status, wore *shalwar*, *feredzhe* and various types of headscarf. Of course, the fabrics were factory made, not hand-woven, and the colours were flashy but the presence of traditional clothing even then was the most visible indicator

of the strength of tradition (Georgieva 1994: 143–145). The village began to organise both village-wide festivals for the circumcision of Muslim boys, so-called *sunnah* circumcision, and wedding rituals with the traditional ‘gluing’ of the *gelina* (bride). Both customs were strictly prohibited by the communist regime, and after the beginning of the 1970s, they were not performed publicly due to the threat of sanctions. The return to traditional clothing and festivities is also due to the fact that the village is religiously homogeneous, no Christians live here permanently, which the locals assess as one of the main reasons for the natural restoration of their culture in a form close to that known from the past, without experiencing any inconvenience or feeling of backwardness, which the regime had previously accused them of. Indeed, in the first decades of the transition in Bulgaria, the return to traditions among some of the Pomak communities was labelled as a form of conservatism and closedness, something that did not carry value in a rapidly changing Bulgarian society that was on the path to transformation according to new democratic standards and models. Geographically, spatially and symbolically, Ribnovo seemed consciously to maintain its distance from the processes of change, although this was only at first glance. Finally, left alone by the authorities and the identity policies forcefully imposed on them, villagers intuitively directed their efforts towards two important elements in their way of life that would preserve them as a collective. On one hand, this is a strengthening of social relations within the community. Religious life is being restored, new economic models are being adopted to counteract the economic crisis and widespread constant emigration. On the other hand, they are becoming cultural agents of their own heritage and are reviving their festiveness according to the tradition that was forcibly forbidden. For Fatme Muhtar-May, cultural agency is a natural process that allows the freedom to shape one’s culture and identity depending on personal and collective preferences and needs (Muhtar-May 2014: 4–9). Muhtar-May grew up in another Bulgarian Muslim village in the neighbouring municipality of Satovcha and as a child felt the consequences of the forcibly interrupted cultural tradition as well as the so-called ‘revival process’ on her community. She defends the thesis that the heritage of Bulgarian Muslims is fragmented. Today, the various Pomak communities not only have the right to reconstruct their holidays anew but also to give them new semantics.

Celebrating *sunnet* (sunnah circumcision)

In addition to the Muslim calendar holidays of *Ramadan Kurban* and *Bayram Kurban*, which are celebrated and honoured by all Muslims in Bulgaria, residents of Ribnovo quite consciously place emphasis on family holidays such as weddings and *sunnet*. It is through them that they build their image of a community that develops thanks to its festive nature. The *sunnet* is the holiday during which the circumcision of small Muslim boys is performed after they reach six months of age. According to the Muslim canon, this ritual physically and symbolically marks the boy's religious affiliation to Islam.⁴ Circumcision, by its very nature, is also a form of socialisation and integration of the individual into the community, so it is perceived not only as a family, but also a village-wide, holiday. Traditionally, in the past it was celebrated for several days, a festive meal was prepared (a sacrificial animal) and a religious processions, horse races (called *kushii*) and wrestling matches were organised. On the last day, the circumcision of all children of suitable age was performed by a ritual specialist called a *syunetchiya*. As mentioned above, during the socialist period this holiday was banned. Despite the restrictions and punishments imposed on people performing this ritual, the circumcision of young boys continued. Usually, parents and relatives took action to circumvent the imposed prohibitions and found ways to secretly carry this out, sometimes at risk to the life and health of the child.⁵ This is the reason why noisy revelry, sacrifice (*mevrit*)⁶ and organised fights have disappeared everywhere, and the celebration is limited only to the close circle of relatives. Immediately after the beginning of the democratic changes, the practice of celebrating circumcision as a village-wide celebration was restored everywhere among the two Muslim communities in Bulgaria, the Turks and Pomaks. During the years of transition, especially among Bulgarian Muslims, there has been a desire for circumcision and the entire accompanying complex of religious and ritual actions to be fully restored and to become not only a holiday, but also an important identity marker for the community.



Figure 2. Celebrating *sunnet*

For the local people, circumcision is considered a more labour-intensive festival than weddings, as well as more expensive to organise. Usually, a time is chosen that is consistent with the work commitments of the local people. This makes the summer months unsuitable for celebrations, since a large part of the active population is outside the village. It is also necessary that some time has passed since the last circumcision in the villages of the region, so that more families can circumcise their young boys during the holiday. In carrying out the entire event, good coordination at different levels in local, municipal and religious institutions is required, as well as the activation of inter-village, neighbour and family ties. The initiative to organise these holiday is related to the intention of a family to circumcise their son and provide the necessary funds for the feast, which has many guests and lasts four days. In addition to the main financial resource for meat and other food products, the family must also mobilise close relatives to process the slaughtered animals, help with the preparation of food and welcome guests. According to the locals, organising such a festive *sunnet* is an individual act for each family and is dictated by personal need and desire. The motives can be both religious – strong faith and a desire for the child to

have a prosperous start in life as a righteous Muslim, or value-oriented – the understanding that selfless giving (donation) will cause or accumulate both personal and collective well-being. During the four days, the house of the *dunsaybiya* (host) is filled with relatives, neighbours and friends who help free of charge preparing the festive food, welcoming and seeing off guests, serving, and cleaning. This common activity strengthens the sense of community and solidarity based not only on kinship and shared values, but also on traditions.

On each of the four days, food is prepared in the amount necessary to welcome all the village guests who will visit the host's home to express their good wishes. The care taken in organising the table is also the reason why the first official day of the *sunnet* begins with the transportation of wood to the house of the *dunsaybiya* or the place where the food will be prepared. The wood is delivered by truck, cart or loaded on a donkey. Everyone in the village, according to their abilities and desires, brings wood, which will be used for the cauldrons throughout the holiday. According to tradition, the 'woodcutters' must be greeted with *zurnas* (old musical instruments). Today this element is observed, and from morning on there are musicians with *zurnas* and drums who play throughout the village during the holiday. The men who provided the firewood are also the first to be feasted. On the first day, it is customary for only men to visit the host's house, with the second day reserved for women. Then relatives and friends come and leave gifts and greet the family, who, dressed festively, receive the greetings at the entrance to their home. Usually, a *horo* dance is performed in front of the house or in the courtyard, and musicians accompany the groups of guests throughout the day playing to create a festive mood.

The second day is known for traditional horse-riding with decorated and adorned horses. Mainly young men lead saddled horses decorated with tassels, capes, artificial flowers, etc. A noisy procession is organised, during which the horses walk along the main street with some of the braver young men dancing on their backs. Musicians are given money to play, and the day ends with an organised musical program and *horo* dances in the centre of the village. Tradition dictates that the boys who will be circumcised be mounted on horses during the solemn procession on the day of the circumcision. The horses are an attraction for both locals and guests in the village as they add the necessary festivity and authenticity to the event.

The third day is loaded with the most entertainment for guests and residents of the village. On this day, *baburaks*, masked characters (only men are allowed to wear masks), perform, whose purpose and appearance is to cause laughter and a good mood among the crowd gathered in the centre of the village. At each *sunnet*, the men wearing masks are different with each choosing his own costume and mask; the objective is to be unique and original. Both male and female characters are presented, dressed in costumes that include *shalwars*, veils and scarves, and with noticeably enlarged breasts. Some of them carry stuffed toys instead of babies, use crutches to show disability, wear masks of comic book characters, turbans and so on. After the procession through the centre of the village, a humorous program of sketches and dialogues is presented to the gathered crowd, with the main goal of drawing attention to and highlighting the failings of modern society. Topics covered include alcoholism, interest in gambling and sports betting, mercantilism in human relationships, laziness, and excessive use of social networks. In an indirect way, *baburak* performances act as a social corrective, emphasizing and ironising the negative phenomena that have clearly affected the social and family lives of the villagers. The program shows that the community has a desire for self-regulation and reflection, seeking to laugh at itself and condemn its shortcomings.

The last day is also the most solemn. In addition to new entertainment, it is also loaded with religious activity and rites that give the greatest value to the circumcision ritual. The primary factor in the importance of this day is the presence of the regional mufti and *hodjas* in the village, who facilitate the religious and official figures who will participate in the festive procession and public prayer (the so-called *alay* and *dua*). At *sunnets* in the region, on the day of *alay*, between ten and fifteen important guests are always present, such as regional muftis, the chief mufti or one of his deputies, representatives of the Turkish embassy or other guests from Turkey, village mayors, deputies from the Bulgarian parliament, regional governors, etc. The participation of these representatives of the spiritual and secular authorities gives legitimacy of the highest order to the holiday and shows its important place in Muslim festivities. Many guests arrive from neighbouring villages and areas on this last day. Usually, they are not only relatives of the children who will go through the ritual, but also many people who want to join in the festive atmosphere, to see acquaintances or enjoy the organised music, dances and competitions. Again the festive program starts in the square, where the religious and official figures

who have already arrived are located, and *pehlivani* (wrestlers) appear, who will also be part of the festive procession. Despite the cold weather these men, of different ages and enviable physiques, are dressed only in leather trousers that reach below the knee and red scarves on their heads – the traditional clothing of participants in the so-called fat wrestling of the past. But the most attractive are the young children who are about to be circumcised. They differ from the other boys in the costumes they wear. The most impressive elements are the cloaks, hats and staffs that they must hold. The clothing is purchased mainly from Turkey, with the main idea being that the boy should look like a prince, emir or commander, a proud representative of the Muslim faith. Bringing him riding a horse is recommended, but not compulsory, and many boys are carried in their parents' arms.



Figure 3. The *dua* public prayer

At the appointed time, the entire procession with religious figures, official guests, wrestlers, children on horses, their parents, guests and villagers set off in a long procession to the stadium, located at one end of the village. After a tour of the field, the celebration begins with the recitation of a public *dua* (prayer). This is preceded by a number of statements and speeches by official guests. The order

is strictly defined. Religious figures speak first – the regional mufti, the chief mufti, the imams, etc., who read statements in the form of sermons. According to them, the event is not just a holiday, it is part of the essence of every Muslim, its organisation shows the responsibility of the community and its dedication to Muslim values. The norms and morals that every young Muslim must possess and show in their actions are affected. More speeches by officials follow, all of which praise the community's cohesion, religiosity, and positive development. The speeches are greeted with applause and approval from the gathered crowd, after which a prayer begins in Arabic for the well-being of the boys who will be circumcised and a public blessing for the gathered crowd. When this finishes there is an announcement that the boys to be circumcised should head to the house of the *dunsajbiya*, where the procedure will begin. Usually, an average of between 30 and 70 boys are circumcised during one *sunnet*, not only from Ribnovo, but also from neighbouring villages. While the boys undergo circumcision, the horse racing and the wrestling matches begin. The prize fund for both events is provided by the host. During the ceremony, a charity bazaar is organised with the assistance of the mufti's office, and the funds raised are used to support orphaned children from all over Bulgaria. After four long days of festivities with lots of music and merriment, the celebration ends successfully, the tradition has been observed and the religious socialisation of the male offspring has been completed. Ribnovo has welcomed and hosted guests from near and far, but more importantly for the community social ties have been reaffirmed and social networks have been optimised. In one day, the village has been a symbolic centre for all Muslims because it has brought the religious and political elite of the country together in one place.

For the people of Ribnovo, the holidays are not only a connection with the past and their ancestors, they are also perceived as an essential part of their modern identity. Each element in the celebration triggers a mechanism of social cohesion, such as mutual aid and support from relatives, loved ones, neighbours and institutions, a collective rethinking of values and a condemnation of moral shortcomings. The influence of different types of authority that are important to the community – the religious institute, the local government, the state – is renegotiated. The community has once again successfully affirmed its vitality and shown resilience in the face of today's challenges.

The traditional Ribnovo wedding today

The restoration of the traditional colourful wedding from the past is seen by the people of Ribnovo as one of the processes of the successful ‘production’ of heritage. This not only revived a unique tradition that was typical for all Pomak communities, although it is no longer practiced. Nevertheless, it represents Ribnovo (and along with it also Muslim Bulgarians) as a carrier of a cultural phenomenon and part of the cultural wealth not only of Bulgaria, but also on a global scale (Muhtar–May 2014: 25–26). In fact, its recognition and popularisation as a unique and distinct tradition and its placement on the cultural map of Bulgaria come mainly from outside the community.



Figure 4. The *horo* dance in the village square

Every year with the onset of winter, the village begins the traditional wedding nuptial season. This is an event that reflects on the entire community due to the characteristic marital endogamy in the village and the presence of large clans. Even in modern times, the model of mutual assistance between relatives in the preparation and conduct of the wedding is preserved at every stage, from the

display of the *cheiz* (dowry), through to welcoming and caring for the guests. The musicians who are hired play in the village square and anyone who wishes can attend, even if they are not personally invited by the newlyweds and their families. This makes Ribnovo weddings crowded, public, and visually and materially lavish. The highlight is the 'gluing' of the *gelina* (bride), which is done on the second day of the wedding, in the bride-to-be's house. In the presence of the closest people, mainly women, the bride's face is smeared with a thick layer of *zdrave* cream and various shiny ornaments and sequins are glued on in a strict sequence.⁷ Covering the bride's face with colourful elements is a Muslim, but not a Quranic, tradition associated with the idea of the transformation that the young woman experiences during the wedding ceremony and is a visualisation of the acquisition of a new status after marriage. Hiding the bride's true face with this peculiar mask allows for the successful passage of this important rite of passage in the life cycle of each individual (Karamihova 1993: 150–153; Kyurkchieva 2004). According to folklorist Veselka Toncheva and her comparative analysis of the ritual, where it is still registered today among the various Pomak communities the main idea of this initiation is symbolic death, passing through the afterlife and return with the new social status of married woman and future mother (Toncheva 2012). The colourful mask and the shiny *telove* (silver threads, replaced today by Christmas garlands) lowered around the bride, symbolise the veil behind which that change takes place, because none of those around her should see the true face of the *gelina*, nor should she have the opportunity to see what is happening around her.



Figure 5. The gluing ritual

After the gluing ritual, the eyes must remain closed and the woman's movements are severely restricted; she holds a mirror in her hands. The function of the mirror is ambiguous. The explanation is that either the *gelina* can use it to see what is happening around her, or that it serves to reflect everything bad so that she is not cursed. In a modern pragmatic context, the explanation for the gluing ritual is also that the colourful shiny sequins are supposed to reflect bad or envious glances and thoughts that can destroy the happiness of the young family. Brought out of her father's house and supported by her husband and mother, the young bride walks to her new home, accompanied by music, relatives, loved ones, and guests.



Figure 6. Farewell to the father's house

Conclusions

The coverage of Ribnovo and the presentation of those of its traditions that have been preserved to this day began gradually about 15 years ago and is seen mainly in the media through reports on morning TV and other TV shows and documentaries. The 'colourful tale' of Ribnovo residents is becoming popular and recognisable, showing the 'exotic' and unknown side of some of the Muslims in Bulgaria.⁸ The growth of the influence of social media and the rapid sharing of information further help to spread new and unknown aspects of their traditions and interest in them across national borders. This also coincides with the widespread development of cultural tourism and emerging local policies for the preservation and protection of cultural and historical heritage. The focus on Ribnovo as a place of living and active tradition has a positive effect on all spheres of the social, cultural and economic life of the community.⁹ Ten years after my last research trip to the village, the change is visible: the dowry is richer, the weddings are increasingly crowded, and the decoration on the face and the bride's attire are increasingly lavish.¹⁰ There is also a change in the performance of the various rites in the wedding ritual with some dropped in

favour of others. For example, the wedding song, a folklore characteristic of the region, is no longer performed during the gluing or when the bride is taken out of her father's house.¹¹ At the same time, attempts are being made to include other new elements such as so-called 'Turkish' henna, a ritual borrowed from wedding customs in modern Turkey, performed in the village square, or all-day music with a live performer or with a DJ.¹¹ Both elements are primarily oriented towards entertaining the guests and villagers gathered in the square. There is also a desire to revive various forgotten or abandoned elements in order to restore or emphasize authentic practices from the past, such as the traditional gifts (for example a live ram given to the bride) that are exchanged between the newlyweds and their families. In some cases, engagement and wedding are close together (within one or two weeks) or one after the other, united by the ritual of 'returning the *banitsi* (pies)', etc.¹²

It is clear that an active and functioning heritage is being presented, re-constructed with a view to adapting traditional wedding customs to the contemporary vision of local people for relevance, aesthetics and entertainment. According to Michel Rothenberg, heritage is both representation and social practice, knowledge and emotion, politics and imagination (Rothenberg 2013). Holidays for Ribnovo are part of their tradition and culture, but at the same time they are also key to the interaction between generations and maintaining community cohesion. When presenting heritage to a broad audience, the emphasis should be placed not only on the way it is represented, but also on the role of its bearers and performers, who perceive it as a resource with which to harmonise their collective values and norms and organise their contemporary social rhythm and attitudes. For the older generation, it is completely clear that in order to continue a tradition, young members of the community must not only be brought up with it, but also recognise and understand it as their own cultural value. Therefore, the most common answer to the question of why this is done was: "the young like it that way" or "the young want it". Participation of both young and the old shows not only the negotiation of a consensus around the implementation of each element of the holidays, but also helps build shared understanding of the markers of collective identity that are important for the entire community. In cultural terms, this allows Ribnovo to seek opportunities to present to an increasingly wider audience (national and international) the specific examples of its preserved heritage and thus generate the necessary symbolic capital not only for itself as a settlement, but also for the entire

Pomak community in Bulgaria. The ensemble for presenting local traditions and folklore, supported thanks to the school and the teaching staff, has already participated in several national festivals and reviews of folk art and has won several awards. Last year, in 2024, the gluing *gelina* ritual was inscribed on the national representative list of UNESCO Living Human Treasures. In May 2024, a documentary by Professor Bettany Hughes broadcast on the global television channel Viasat History included Ribnovo weddings and customs.¹³ Thanks to modern information channels and online media, almost all holidays can be watched live. Ribnovo is already a desirable tourist destination and is included in various cultural tourism routes. These are just some of the activities that make the village and its traditions recognisable and popular and stimulate the listed rituals to seek representativeness, not authenticity. Another trend also observed is that more and more cultural figures from the Pomak communities in different settlements present and film their wedding rituals as they were performed in the past, mainly through reenactment (for example YouTube has material on similar folklore reenactments from the villages of Breznitsa and Beslen). In social terms, preserved heritage allows Ribnovo to maintain its viability and neutralise the negative contemporary trends of depopulation, demographic stagnation and one-way labour migration, which are characteristic of all Bulgarian regions that are remote from the large regional centres. The village is full of life, the school is expanding and modernising, the infrastructure is improving, small businesses and companies are operating, and the quality of life of local people is improving through the services provided. The rise of intangible local cultural heritage empowers the community, providing it with tools to successfully implement policies for the sustainable development of rural areas. In conclusion, it can be said that, although it might sound paradoxical, tradition makes Ribnovo villagers modern.

The active role of the entire community contributes to heritage being considered not as a legacy, but as a dynamic category that not only allows and encourages human creativity and the desire for preservation but also strengthens community cohesion and social integration between different groups and individuals (Santova 2014: 11–15; Ganeva-Raicheva, Bokova, Nenov 2022). The holidays that the village reproduces develop not only economically, but also socially, because they optimise the quality and nature of established social ties and therefore support the generation of the community's symbolic capital. Today, people are bearers of unique cultural patterns. Through this process,

they seek to overcome both the traumatic past and memory, as well as the accumulated negative stereotypes of Bulgarian Muslims.

In Bulgaria, UNESCO campaigns for the inclusion of selected cultural practices and examples of traditional folk culture in various representative and national lists are gaining increasing popularity.¹⁴ In this way, the desire of local communities in particular to mobilise and make efforts to revive and promote their heritage among a larger audience is stimulated, while at the same time increasing recognition in a national and international context is sought. The maintenance of characteristic, 'authentic' or recognisable holidays, festivals, customs and rituals, as well as the efforts made to reproduce them, are a sure indicator of the vitality of communities. This activity is not only an effort to fit into the cultural map of the state, but serves much more significant goals related to internal processes of synchronisation, interaction, social reproduction and maintained relationships within the communities themselves.

Notes

¹ Ribnovo is a village located in southeastern Bulgaria and is part of Garmen municipality in the Blagoevgrad region. It is located high in the Rhodope Mountains at an altitude of 1200 m above sea level. The population is about 3,000.

² There are many theories about the origin of the Pomak (some spread by the Pomak themselves), but to this day the dominant factor is their Slavic Bulgarian ethnic character.

³ This activity is carried out by Preast Boyan Sariev and his St John the Baptist Foundation.

⁴ According to the Quran, but also popular to interpretation, circumcision symbolises the sacrifice that the prophet Ibrahim was going to make with his son to show his devotion to Allah. The removal of a small part of the body of every Muslim symbolises commitment and devotion to Islam.

⁵ In a documented story, a resident of the village of Ribnovo tells of her brother's child, circumcised secretly at night near a vineyard below the village. There were complications and the child was taken to the hospital; the parents and the circumciser were in real danger of being sued. See more detail in Safie and Sherif Dzhurkin "They changed our names to make us Bulgarians" – Violence, politics, memory. The communist regime in Pirin Macedonia – reflections of a contemporary and a researcher. Sofia, 2011, 355–358.

⁶ Mevrit (Mevlid, Mevlüt) is a significant Islamic tradition, primarily meaning the celebration or recitation of stories about the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. It also refers to a religious ceremony held for various occasions such as deaths, births, special

events involving readings from the Quran and a poem about the Prophet's life, often featuring a *hafiz* (one who can recite the Quran) and an imam.

⁷ According to adult informants, before the introduction of the use of 'health' cream, the face was smeared with beaten egg yolk and sugar, and because sequins were not always available foil and colourful paper from *Caramel Mu* sweets were used.

⁸ A reference to the documentary *The Colourful Tale of Ribnovo*, by Anton Hekimyan, a journalist from bTV. It is one of the first documentaries to present Ribnovo wedding traditions to a general audience: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PmXwL1N-hY>

⁹ The village is also becoming an attractive tourist destination outside the wedding season. Its proximity to other popular resorts such as Bansko and Ognyanovo has prompted many tourists to visit and create their own impressions of the people and the settlement.

¹⁰ Dowery or *cheiz* is the name given to everything that the bride's family has prepared and purchased to financially provide for the young family's life together. In addition to traditional hand-woven fabrics and blankets, there are also purchased items such as furniture, kitchen equipment, modern electrical household appliances, etc.

¹¹ When the bride was taken away, the song "Forgive me, mother, forgive me..." was most often performed. The disappearance of singing was explained to me in two ways. One was the Quran states that a woman should not raise her voice loudly (F. R., female, around 55 years old, recorded June 2023); someone else explained to me that young people do not know and do not like these sad songs.

¹² The ritual of 'returning the pies' seems most vividly to demonstrate the power of the community. First, during the engagement, the groom's family unites and donates a considerable number of trays with sweet and savory pies and pastries to the girl's family. Within a week, all relatives and acquaintances on the girl's side must organise and return this number of full trays. Each time, the number of exchanged pastries exceeds a hundred.

¹³ A crew from the show visited the village in the summer of 2023 to film material for the series *World Treasures* with Bettany Hughes.

¹⁴ This refers to the Representative List of Elements of Intangible Cultural Heritage; the national Living Human Treasures system; the Register of Good Practices for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, etc. https://bulgariaich.com/?act=content&rec=15&sql_which=6

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Petya Vasileva-Grueva, PhD, is Assistant Professor at Department of Ethnology at Sofia's St Kliment Ohridski University. Her research area is current processes in Bulgarian society from the beginning of the transition period. Over the years, she has conducted field research in small settlements among different ethnic and confessional communities (mainly Bulgarian Muslims and Roma). She leads key university courses in this field in bachelor's and master's programs in Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at Sofia University.

E-mail: petjasv@uni-sofia.bg

ORCID: 0009-0000-3825-9067