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Traditional Ritual Responses to Contemporary Misfortunes – The *Youth Kurban* Sacrifice and the Regulation of Social Life in a Post-socialist Bulgarian Village

Abstract. This paper presents a study of the so-called youth *kurbans* conducted in the spring of 2006 in the villages of Krlev Dol and Yardzhilovtsi, in midwestern Bulgaria, inhabited exclusively by Orthodox Christians. The aim was to trace the use of traditional ritual practices in enriching and regulating the social life in the village in the post-socialist period. The analysis focuses on contemporary forms of collective ritual sacrifice, the *kurban* – a feast with key social functions in the Balkan context – performed in times of natural and personal misfortune. The emphasis is on examples re-established by young people in the first decade of the new millennium. They organise, perform, and present the ritual sacrifice, self-regulating the social life in the village without the intervention of the Bulgarian Orthodox church. Traditional ritual patterns are widely used in response to social adversities and natural disasters. I suggest that at the beginning of the new millennium, the collective *kurban* and the joint ritual meal are becoming an integral part of everyday local religious practice, as well as an important element in marking and regulating the social and cultural boundaries of different groups in a post-socialist Bulgarian village.

Keywords: post-socialist Bulgaria, kurban, feast, religious practice, social boundaries

Introduction

This research presents a survey of a new ritual, the youth *kurban*, in the villages of Krlev dol and Yardzhilovtsi in the environs of the city of Pernik in midwestern Bulgaria, based on fieldwork conducted with Tzvetana Manova, an ethnographer of long standing at the Regional Historical Museum in Pernik. I will examine the usage of traditional ritual practices from the past in reviving, regulating, and enriching the social life of the village in the post-socialist period. My analysis focuses on the contemporary forms of the village *kurban*, a feast with promi-

nent social functions, traditionally related to the ritual support of community identity. It also emphasises innovations in the collective forms of ritual sacrifice. I will examine village *kurbans* as societal holidays, i.e., not only as rituals, supporting the relationship between the community and its patron-saint, but as practices important for the (re)production of group identity and communal unity.¹

The ritual that includes an obligatory blood sacrifice has entered all the Balkan languages as *kurban*, which derives from an Old Testament term rooted in the Aramaic word *korban*.² The ritual itself is traditionally performed by different ethnic and confessional groups, among both Christians and Muslims, in the Balkans.³ The sacrificial ritual functions on several social levels – as an individual sacrifice, and as a collective sacrifice from the family and/or the village community. These collective ritual sacrifices and the concomitant shared feasts are some of the best examples of the integrative, regulative, and communicative nature of the social ritual in the Balkans.⁴

Eric Hobsbawm's concept of 'invented tradition' is a key lens through which to view a vast variety of newly emerging, formalised ritual and symbolic practices that reinforce, by way of constant repetition, values and norms of community behaviour.⁵ The reference to the past and (in most cases) the construction of certain successions with some of the traditional models already known to the community, are used as a legitimisation for the above mentioned culture markers in the present. A key process for Hobsbawm is the *adaptation* of the old under new conditions and contexts and the *use* of well-known patterns for new and different aims. To these, I would add the idea of new *interpreta-*

¹ Jan Assman, *Kulturnata pamet* (Sofia: Planeta 3, 2001) [Bulgarian translation of *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis* (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1997)], p. 143.

² Asja Popova, 'Le kourban, ou sacrifice sanglant dans les traditions Balkaniques', *Europaea*, 1.1 (1995), 145–70 (pp. 145–47).

³ For background, see Biljana Sikimić and Petko Hristov (eds), *Kurban in the Balkans* (Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies, 2007).

⁴ See detailed comparison in Petko Hristov, *Obshtnosti i praznici. Sluzhbi, slavi, sabori i kurbani v yuzhnoslavianskoto selo prez parvata polovina na XX vek* [Communities and Celebrations: The Sluzba, Slava, Sabor and Kourban in South Slavic Villages in the First Half of the Twentieth Century] (Sofia: Etnografski institut s muzey [Ethnographic Institute and Museum], 2004).

⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1–14 (pp. 1–5).

tions of traditional ritual patterns in the changed social context of the post-socialist Bulgarian village.

A central goal of these invented traditions is the establishment of social cohesion and its symbolic framing and/or membership in real or imagined communities. My working hypothesis is that, despite the diversity of new symbolic forms and ritual practices in post-socialist Bulgaria, they still maintain an umbilical tie to the tradition. Even at the start of a new millennium in the village of Graovo (Pernik region), these new *kurbans* still function as a significant mechanism in the construction of local identity. In the particular case of the *youth kurban*, we see a way of constructing distinctive group identity peculiar to a whole generation, one raised and nurtured in the years of active socialist atheism.

The Youth Kurban

The youth *kurbans* in the villages of Krlev Dol and Yardzhilovtsi, which I witnessed in the spring of 2006, do not have an earlier tradition in the festive-ritual system of midwestern Bulgaria. Both villages are part of the historical territory of the Graovo region but, taking into account the distance between them, it is unlikely that the new ritual was transmitted from one to the other. Instead, it seems that the local *kurban* tradition emerged and developed independently in each village. The only similar documented case of *kurban* 'for the health of the young people' is found in the village of Vlahovo (included in the municipality of Smolyan after 1960), in the Rodopa Mountains of southern Bulgaria. The ritual was performed there after a series of misfortunes with a young man in 2001. Locals decided to revive the traditional *kurban* for health, it having been discarded in socialist times. Every year, on the first Saturday in June, all the inhabitants of Gorno and Dolno Vlahovo organised a *kurban* for the 'health and luck' of young people in this micro-region, inviting guests from the neighbouring villages with Bulgarian-Muslim and Christian populations.⁶ These new *youth kurbans* are a fascinating new development in the ritual cycle of the post-socialist Bulgarian village.

⁶ Vanja Jordanova, 'Dva kurbana ot Ustovo' ['Two kurbans from Ustovo'], in *Obrednata trapeza* [The Ritual Table] (Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2006), pp. 301–05.

The Youth *Kurban* in Kralev Dol

Kralev Dol is situated in the eastern part of Graovo (Pernik region), in the foothills of Vitosha Mountain, near the capital, Sofia. On the village's land, the remains of a Roman villa and the ruins of a medieval fortress, Markovo Kale, have been found, testifying to a long continuity of occupation in the region. Today, the village has a population of about 500 people, but, in the words of the mayor, Plamen Georgiev, one of the initiators of the youth *kurban*, 'We are around fifty people who are the driving force of the village, at the moment'.⁷ Even though the school is closed, the village has an active social life, a small manufacturing shop, a local construction company, a vital community centre with a library, folklore and dance groups, and its own football team. The organisation of the youth *kurban* is undertaken by 30–50-year olds, supported by the mayor and the employees of the community centre. Georgiev, born in Kralev Dol in 1963, told me:

The kurban in the village is like the World Cup in the capital! Kurban is a holiday to every dweller of the village!... The kurban is important for the village, but it lasts just for a day. For me, the social life of the village as a whole is so important. We have a singing group; we want to establish a museum in one of the rooms in the community building; we take care of the Survakari [a male folklore group that performs winter masquerade rituals in January], and the football team, etc.

Traditionally, two *kurbans* for the whole village are organised in Kralev Dol, one on 9 May for the holiday of the Summer St Nikola,⁸ for which Lenten meals are always prepared (the *kurban* dish is a stew made of boiled beans), and another on 29 June, the patron saints day of the village's church, St Peter and St Pavel, which includes a ritual meat

⁷ All quotations from community members are from interviews conducted by Petko Hristov and Tzvetana Manova in 2006; the records are held in the archives of Pernik Museum and our personal collections. All contributors have given their permission for their words and their full names to be used. Translations are my own from the original Bulgarian.

⁸ In the traditional Bulgarian calendar, St Nikolas is an important saint in whose honour there is a big winter festival, *Nikulden*, on 6 December (see Vasileva 2003). See Margarita Vasileva (ed.), *Traditional Bulgarian Calendar* (Plovdiv: Vion Publishers/Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2003). In some regions Orthodox Christians also celebrate a summer version of the festival, *Leten Nikulden*.

dish evoking a lamb sacrifice. These two *kurbans* are accompanied by ritual feasts, for the St Peter's holiday in front of the church, and for the Summer St Nikola under a group of very old trees, 'three oaks', also known as *Svetogo*, 'belonging to the Saint'. These two Christian holidays were organised every year with the help of the church administration and older local people and the practice has not been interrupted, even in the era of Bulgarian socialism. The village holiday (*sabor*) is different from the village *kurban* feast and is celebrated on *Krăstovden* ('The Feast of the Cross', 14 September), when every householder invites guests and relatives to a feast at their home. On this day there is no common *kurban* sacrifice.

Opposed to these traditional *kurbans*, 'done for centuries', the newly created practice of the youth *kurban* in Kralevo Dol has a fixed date of origin (1 May 2003), particular performers (young people), and a purpose (luck and health of the young). The catalyst for the founding of this first youth *kurban* was a series of misfortunes including a young man with broken limbs and the deaths of two young people from the village (a 27-year-old man in an accident, and another from a heart attack). At first, two members of the affected families, the mayor of the village and the owner of the village pub (Liybka Tosheva, born in 1958 in Kralevo Dol), intended to make their own *kurbans*, but after a discussion with the younger members of the village, it was spontaneously decided that the *kurban* would be held for the health of all the young in the village. Plamen Georgiev:

We thought that when we make kurban, we will stop all these misfortunes with the young people of the village. And really, after we did the kurban [in 2003], we haven't had any serious accidents with young people after that. We don't even have any severe illnesses any more.

The first date proposed for the feast was 22 March, the first day of spring, but since that was during Lent, they decided on 1 May, international Labour day, which is an official public holiday in Bulgaria.

In the first three years, the organisation of the youth *kurban* was based only on 'enthusiasm, without us even thinking about it much'. Every young person from the village used to leave a small amount of money in the pub to help fund the *kurban*, paying for the two lambs that are ritually sacrificed in the centre of the village, in front of Luybka Tosheva's pub, because, she says, 'the *kurban* should be sacrificed where the food will be prepared'. According to tradition, the sacrificial

animal should be slaughtered by a man. In the case of the youth *kurban*, this man was Hristo Toshev, Liubka's husband, born in 1953 in Kralev Dol. Before the sun rises on the feast day, and before the slaughtering of the lamb, Hristo says a blessing: 'For the health of the young people, may they live long and healthy'.

According to Lyubka Tosheva, 'The *kurban* should be given away to people by the one who have prepared the dish' (personal communication). Thus, for the first three years, she was the one preparing the *kurban* and the one who was giving it away to the locals on the village square. The first *kurban* in 2003 was for the young people, after which they went home and some of the organisers stayed in the pub where Lyubka would give away ritual bread and boiled wheat, as is the tradition for the day of St Peter. Last year, the organisers decided that the youth, too, should eat where the sacrifice was performed, 'because the *kurban* should be eaten by all together!', said Lyubka. Besides the lamb for the *kurban* meal, the organisers provided bread and the beer for the common feast, and the *kurban*-soup was served by two young employees of the community centre, following the rule that all the food should be given away.

After the first three years, in the spring of 2006, the model of the celebration was changed. According to the traditional beliefs of the locals, once a *kurban* was defined as a 'votive offering' it should take place for at least three years and if it continues for another year, it should be considered annual. This is why the organisers decided to move the whole ritual preceding the *kurban*, and the *kurban* itself, from the village square to the churchyard, the place where all the other village *kurbans* traditionally took place.

On 1 May 2006, I attended a youth *kurban*, distinctive in the active preparatory participation of the elderly citizens of Kralev Dol. In the first years of the feast, they would not take part in the preparation of the *kurban*, nor attend the shared feast table. Later, despite the belief that 1 May is the young people's *kurban*, older citizens gradually began taking part by giving small amounts of money and helping with the preparations. Stoyana Efremova Jordanova, one of the women cooking the *kurban*-soup on that early morning of the 2006 feast, proudly said: 'We are the main support of the young people! But we are still just helpers! We celebrate our *kurban* on the day of St Peter and the Lenten one on the Summer St Nikolas's day'.



*Fig. 1. Organisers serving the youth kurban in the churchyard, 1 May 2006.
Photo by Petko Hristov*



*Fig. 2. Preparing the kurban soup by the older women, 1 May 2006.
Photo by Petko Hristov*

The answer to my question as to how many *kurban* they make in Kralevo Dol was consistent: 'Three: one "lenten", one "with meat" and a "youth" one.' The elderly women showed their 'guest status' at the feast with their behaviour, as well. While for the traditional *kurban* each of them prepared and brought a ritual bread (*pogacha*) and cooked wheat, for the youth *kurban* they simply brought flowers to put on the icons in the village church. They brought their grandchildren with them.

The youth *kurban* feast performed for 'the luck and the health of the young people' in Kralevo Dol, represents a diverse and unique combination of familiar community traditional ritual practices and newly established ones (according to Hobsbawm's concept). The presence of the Orthodox Church in the ritual is also intermodal: while in the first years of the ritual performance a priest from the neighbouring village was paid to attend the feast, in 2006 the sanctification was entrusted to two young, newly-settled priests – 'Old Believers'.⁹ Despite a certain amount of distrust towards them from elderly villagers, they engaged with the ritual without remuneration, after the tacit agreement of most of the community. They also served in the church following the 'old style' of the Julian calendar. The people of Kralevo Dol seem satisfied with the 'old style' liturgy of the new priests; they are unquestionably well educated, lacking mercenary motivation, and another strong positive feature of their skills is enthusiastically highlighted by Georgiev, quoting older people in the village: 'They are singing really nice, just like in Alexander Nevsky!' (the cathedral church in Sofia).

According to the organisers, the whole festive system of the new *kurban* is still open to negotiation among the participating young people. Plamen Georgiev summarised this as follows:

The kurban feast is ours – we are going to do whatever we would like to do! [...] We are doing this for the young people and thus they will get whatever they want – a disco with a DJ, meatballs, BBQ, beer! This will be it! On the twelfth of July [the traditional kurban on St Peter's day, Julian calendar], we are going to celebrate it the way the grannies want it. On that day it is their choice.

⁹ Clergy of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church who do not accept the replacement, begun in late 1969, of the Julian calendar by the so-called New Julian calendar, the dates of which match those of the Gregorian calendar. Priests sympathetic to this way of thinking hold their liturgy and rituals according to the 'old Orthodox tradition', i.e., according to the Julian calendar.



Fig. 3. Consecration of the youth *kurban* by old-style priests, 1 May 2006.
Photo by Petko Hristov

The Youth *Kurban* in Yardzhilovtsi

The new youth *kurban* in Kralev Dol is not unique in last two decades. Another was founded in 2001, in Yardzhilovtsi, the largest village in Pernik region, with no direct connection with, or influence from Kralev Dol.

Yardzhilovtsi is an old village in the western part of the Graovo region, consisting of four 'neighborhoods' (*mahala*): Upper, Krăstina, Middle and Down. There is a construction company, a small pastry concern, a working school, and a community centre, actively organising the activities of the amateur folklore groups of the village. The most famous of these is the *Survashkari*, traditionally made up of young men

who ritually travel through the village performing masquerade games on *Vasiliovden* (Saint Basil the Great's day), the start of the new calendar year on 14 January in the old style (Julian calendar); in local tradition, the ritual is known as *Surva*. The group regularly takes part in the annual international festival of masquerade games held in the city of Pernik, where they often win awards.

In Yardzhilovtsi, the *kurban* tradition had been 'lost', abandoned from the middle of the twentieth century during the socialist period, and the St Nikolas church was only used as a cemetery church. The motives for the organisation of a new *kurban* in May 2001 are similar to those in Kralev Dol. The year before, there were seven cases of young men between eighteen and twenty-six years old who died through illness or in car accidents. This provoked communal memory, harking back to 1944, the 'blackest year in the history of the village', according to Ginka Spasova, born in Yardzhilovtsi in 1923, when 'eighteen young men left the village, eleven of whom were never to come back', having been killed taking part in the local partisan unit. The parallel between the two 'black years' for the village played a key role in inspiring Yardzhilovtsi young and middle-aged people to make a new *kurban* for the 'health of the young people' and all the villagers.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Summer St Nikolas's day in Yardzhilovtsi was celebrated traditionally with a *kurban* on 9 May (New Julian). On that day, the village young people, carrying gonfalons and led by the priest, walk through the village in a litany procession, which concluded with a prayer for rain.¹⁰ For this feast day, a special communal celebration for the entire village *kurban* was held. Each neighbourhood sacrificed a lamb, or a ram, and prepared four cauldrons of *kurban* soup. If the Summer St Nikolas celebration day happens to be on a Lenten Friday, the ritual dish should be bean stew, according to Ginka Spasova.

Most of the Yardzhilovtsi residents gather around a shared table in front of the church, and each woman brings ritual bread (*kolach*) with a decorated cross and a hole in the middle in which they placed a candle, and flowers to decorate the icons of St Nikolas and the Virgin Mary. The *kolach* was placed on a platter with boiled corn and then

¹⁰ The so-called *Litiya*, or *Krstonoshe*, is a popular Christian Orthodox custom, usually held in spring, in which believers, led by the village priest, go round the village territory with gonfalons.

placed on the table with the other contributions for consecration by the priest. The male representatives of the village community were to prepare and cook the *kurban* ritual dish and to provide the alcohol for the common table, wine and *rakia*. After the consecration of the ritual dishes and breads, a big table was prepared and each family took their traditionally designated neighbourhood place. The feast joyfully concludes with dances (*horo*) and songs. This village *kurban* was different from communal village festivities such as *sabor*, celebrated on *Golema Bogoroditsa* (the day of St Mary, 28 August, old style). One of the organisers of the celebration, Ginka Spasova, says,

On the day of the kurban, the whole village comes – men, women, children, old and young, everyone is coming. Only those who are not able to walk don't come... Here [where the kurban is cooked and given away], you eat for health – yours and everyone else's. You have to bring your own bowl and eat here. This is what you should do, for health!

After the political change on 9 September 1944, the tradition of the village *kurban* in Yardzhilovtsi was slowly abandoned due to pressure from the new communist regime. In the first decade after the imposition of socialist ideology, some of the old people still brought and gave away their own *kurbans* – for the health of a newborn child, for the beginning of a young man's military service, etc., but by the early 1950s the practice was finally abandoned as a communal holiday.

The decision to make a *youth kurban* in Yardzhilovtsi in 2001, for the health of all the young, presented the mayor and other initiators with a dilemma as to when and where the ritual should take place. According to the mayor, Grigor Hristov, it was decided that a small chapel would be constructed, because, 'This is how you make *kurban*: in front of a chapel.' The historical, traditional place for the *kurban* – in the old church – was abandoned, as it now functioned mainly as a cemetery church in communal consciousness. According to Grigor Hristov, it was simply impossible for a '*kurban* ritual for health to be made in the cemetery' (2006).

The danger of a political division in the community prevented the ceremony from being held in the *Murtvak* region, where the young partisans had been killed in 1944. '*The place for the kurban and the chapel should not divide the village, but on the contrary to unite it*', as Grigor Hristov says. Thus, the oldest part of the village, *Oslome*, was chosen

for the new *kurban*. It was decided that the building of the new chapel should start at the same time as the celebration of the first *kurban*, dedicated to the *Leten Nikulden* (St Nikolas day in summer), precisely because this saint is perceived as a patron and protector of the village. In this way, the traditional *kurban* on 9 May was given a new shape, with a newly chosen ceremonial place, marked with the building of a new orthodox chapel, and a new focus — the 'health of the youth'.

In the spring of 2001, just days before the first *kurban* took place, a person specially chosen by the organisers went to the site before dawn to note the exact direction from which the sun would rise in order to properly orient the construction. About four hundred inhabitants of Yardzhilovtsi gathered for the first *kurban*, witnessing at the same time the ground-breaking ceremony, in which the mayor and the other organisers took part, for the new church and the construction and consecration of the stone altar. In subsequent years, those gathered for the *kurban* would light their candles on this first stone altar. At every celebration, voluntary donations were made to help fund construction of the church, but the main work was done with the help and the resources of the local people and businessmen. According to the mayor, none of the state or local institutions in Pernik, or the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, helped this construction.

Over the years, this place in *Oslome*, chosen for the old 'new' *kurban* and the new chapel, has gradually and intentionally turned into a sacred place for the community. Locals are enthusiastic about the new building and the renewed *kurban* practice. The number of people who return to Yardzhilovtsi every year for the celebration is constantly increasing, with more than six hundred as early as 2002. Warned by older residents that once the annual *kurban* tradition is started it should not be stopped, the organisers have taken responsibility for preparing the whole ritual, including the meals and everything needed for the shared table, using their own donations as well as collective funding, such as money gathered by the *Survashkari* folklore group during their masquerade games in the village. In January 2006, *Survashkari* won again in Pernik and the prize money was given to the village for the purchase of two rams, the next sacrificial animals for the *youth kurban*. The *kurban* is thus being made and given away the traditional way, with each of the older women bringing ritual bread and placing it on a tray with boiled corn, as it was done before 1944. They bring flowers to decorate the icons and they light their candles on the unfinished altar as well.

2003 was a challenging year for the new/restored *kurban* practice when on 9 May it poured with rain. The locals proudly told me how no one would leave the meadow where the *kurban* dish was cooked and the preparations began. Even though they were soaking wet, everyone stayed so that they could eat the ritual dish there, where it was meant to be. So, the shared ritual meal of the celebration was saved and the new *kurban* tradition firmly established. In the words of Mayor Hristov: 'This was our test of whether the *kurban* is going to be maintained or not. This was the test day — on the third time!'

In May 2006, I had the opportunity to observe a similar test — on that feast day, it again poured. Locals explained that in the past they used to make a special ritual litany for rain on that day. Nevertheless, very few of the people who came to the *kurban* celebration elected to partake of the ritual dish at home. The majority stayed until the sun dried the meadow, and they prepared the feast tables in the early afternoon on 9 May, while congratulating each other: 'Congratulations on our *kurban*! Who drinks — to drink again; who gives — to give again!' As practice established since 2001 required, the remainder of the ritual meal was given to the school's canteen and to the kindergarten, to be given to the children the next day.

Conclusions

The phenomenon of new *youth kurban*s in the region of Pernik is difficult to fit into a classic ethnographic interpretative model for the re-construction of tradition. In line with new perspectives on post-socialist Bulgarian villages, I concur with Margarita Karamihova's observation, based on her work on contemporary *kurban* practices of Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria, that, 'The *kurbans* represent a true specific social rule, one which doesn't ask questions, but gives answers to specific needs instead.'¹¹

In this study, my aim has been to demonstrate how, through a centuries-old traditional cultural matrix specific to the Balkans such as a ritual offering of a blood sacrifice, different local communities are constructing and/or deconstructing their own social-cultural identity at the beginning of the twenty-first century. My observations indicate

¹¹ Margarita Karamihova, 'Kurbanite, koito šokirat samo etnologa', in *Obrednata tra-peza* (Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2006), pp. 320–26 (p. 325).

that the *kurban* ritual and the feast itself are becoming an integral part of everyday local religious practice at the beginning of the new millennium, as well as an inseparable element of the rituals 'marking the borders' of different local and social communities in a post-socialist Bulgarian village.¹² Furthermore, the study of the *kurban* as an important part of the festival cycle is particularly topical as regards post-socialist revival and the reduction of other aspects of the ritual life in the village in the last two decades, resulting in the regulation of all social life. Regardless of whether this process is referred to as 'return' or 'revitalization' of religious life and ritual practices, it becomes part of the religious landscape¹³ and an increasingly topical response to life and social crises that have marked the transition to democratization in many post-socialist countries of Eastern Europe.

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¹² Cf. Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 53.

¹³ Cf. Evgenia Troeva, and Petko Hristov, 'Sacred Geography of the Post-Socialist Balkans: Transformations of Religious Landscape and Pilgrimage', *Southeastern Europe*, 41.1 (2017), 1–18.

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