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THE CELEBRATION OF THE DAY OF SAINTS CYRIL AND METHODIUS IN BULGARIA: THE TRANSFORMATION OF A RELIGIOUS HOLIDAY TO A SCHOOL AND NATIONAL ONE

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ABSTRACT. Mariyanka Zhekova, *The celebration of the Day of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Bulgaria: The transformation of a religious holiday to a school and national one.*

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The text is an attempt to interpret the mechanisms and stages of development of the holiday of St. St. Cyril and Methodius in Bulgaria. The day of the Holy brothers is nowadays an established holiday of Bulgarian education and culture, and of the Slavic alphabet. The first educators St. St. Cyril and Methodius were canonized in the end of the 9th century. After its institutionalization as a church holiday in the 13th century, the day of praise of St. St. Cyril and Methodius during the period of the Revival gained also secular character: except from the church service of the two equally ranked apostles, the holiday involved school celebrations and, after the Liberation of Bulgarian in 1878, also festive processions with the hymn of the Holy brothers. This Revivalist tradition with a religious and secular scenario resonates until today.

Cyril and Methodius are elitist saints affirmed as such by the Bulgarian state and the supreme church authorities. They were Byzantine diplomats, who created the Slavic alphabet after the will of the Byzantine emperor Mihail III with the purpose of popularizing Christianity among the Slavs in Slavic language. Later their deed was subject to persecution and their disciples found warm acceptance in Bulgaria. According to Tzvetana Georgieva (quoted in Simeonova 1994: 30), in Medieval Bulgaria St. St. Cyril and Methodius "were elitist saints, originally venerated through church forms of cult, and not through folk belief, or through association with medical practices, as this was the case with other Bulgarian saints." The cult to these apostles developed into reverence to their progressive deed and attained secular dimensions.

As a secular holiday, the day of the Salonica brothers was initially a Bulgarian phenomenon, which subsequently spread also among other Orthodox and Slav people.

For the first time the day of St. St. Cyril and Methodius was celebrated as a school holiday on May 11, 1851 in Plovdiv. The holiday took place in front of the school icon and involved singing religious songs. Celebrations with mixed religious and secular character were characteristic for the Bulgarian Revival, which in fact culminated in the struggles for independent Bulgarian church, education, and national independence. In that period, the role of the apostles as spiritual instructors for Bulgarians was enormous. According to Gatya Simeonova, "Bulgarian Revival did not pose in opposition school and church celebrations" (see Simeonova 1994: 59). Both the school and the church were powerful factors that safeguarded the Bulgarian ethnos throughout the Revival. The earliest school celebrations were very similar in form to the religious service, and the liturgy was subdued to secular considerations. When the secular school holiday grew into a national one, the church service remained as one of its elements.

The deed of St. St. Cyril and Methodius affirmed Christianity, the Slavic alphabet, books and literacy. The Holy brothers are Bulgarian saints and that is why already in the Revival they became patrons of churches, schools, craft-guilds, and cultural houses.

Throughout the Revival period, the day of St. St. Cyril and Methodius was celebrated on May 11. It is accepted that in the period before the Balkan wars in Bulgaria the day was a church and school holiday, and after the First World War the holiday gained official character and turned into a national one. After the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in 1916, the day of St. St. Cyril and Methodius was shifted to May 24. Its celebration was connected with new ideas and new messages. In the 1930s, the state policy laid an emphasis on Bulgaria's civilizing role in affirming Slavic spirituality and culture. The secular character of the holiday enhanced and gradually the water sanctification and the religious procession were dropped out, and there was introduced the award ceremony to prominent school teachers. The day of the Salonica brothers was venerated as an official holiday of the nation, because it was namely Bulgaria, which accepted their disciples and created conditions for the development of their literary and educating deed.

The socialist period is associated with taking out the holiday into the city square. The day was noted with celebrations, grand manifestations, and the blocks of manifesting people were guided by school wind instruments and brass bands, which performed the hymn dedicated to the first educators. The pupils carry transparencies and slogans with the images of the Holy brothers. During the socialist period the reference to the saintly status of Cyril and Methodius was avoided for understandable reasons. After the changes of 1989 the manifestations were dropped out, the scenario of the celebrations started to involve the water sanctification again, and the reference to the brothers as saints was reinstated.

The current paper traces the particular expressions of the transformation between church, school, and national holiday of the Day of the Holy brothers in a small

mountain town in Bulgaria, Chepelare, where I carried out fieldwork research in May 2009. Chepelare is a town of 10,000 people. It is situated in the Central Rhodope mountain, along the upper stream of the Chepelarska river, on the average altitude of 1,000 meters. Especially important for the town is its proximity to the ski resort of Pamporovo and to the city of Plovdiv. The population is a mixed one, including Bulgarian Orthodox Christians and Bulgarian Muslims. The town has two churches, a mosque, and 23 chapels in its vicinity. The Christian population, and very often the Muslim one too, is widely open to donor initiatives for building chapels (5 of the chapels were built after 1990). The chapel "St. St. Cyril and Methodius" was created in 1993 after a dream, which indicated the place for the construction, and donations from the town dwellers. In 1994, at the initiative of the municipality, the Day of the Holy brothers was proclaimed as the town holiday.

In 1841 a school was built in the yard of "St. Athanasius" church in the town. In 1855 girls also started to attend it (Dechev 2002: 210), which was "a great innovation of the times."¹ According to the people living in Chepelare, the town was a center of spiritual life, one located between Mount Athos and another big Orthodox center – the Bachkovo monastery.² Accounts from local citizens testify that in Chepelare the day of the Salonica brothers was celebrated for the first time in 1873 in one of the schools affiliated with the two churches. Details are not known, but the holiday quite possibly included also church and secular school elements.

In volume 3 of "Chepelare's Past," which describes the town history from 1900 till 1944, the editors narrate about the pathos in the preparation and carrying out of the Day of the Slavs' first educators (Mihailov, Demirev 2001: 162-163). In the day before the holiday, the pupils went to pick lilac, with which to decorate the façade of the school building. On the day itself, after the end of the church service, lively round dances with the accompaniment of the school brass music took place. Sport competitions were organized. In the evening there took place a procession with lit torches, when the pupils marched along the main streets in the town carrying hand-made torches. These traditions are still preserved and well-developed in Chepelare.

An innovation of the socialist period, which occurred throughout the country, was the manifestation on May 24. The torch procession was shifted to the evening before that date. Prior to the procession there was held a solemn meeting in the cultural house, which represented an official school holiday with pronouncing the school year results, the outstanding pupils, the awards, etc. The meeting involved also the graduates, who celebrated a full anniversary after the finishing of their secondary education in the town. The manifestation gathered the entire population audience and students, teachers, former graduates, etc. as taking part in the procession. The torch procession and the parade are perceived by Chepelare people as a specific

¹ Informant: Kostadin Glushkov, born in 1943 in Chepelare. His mother was from Chepelare and his father was from Plovdiv. He has got higher education and is a philologist, speleologist and local historian. Record: M. Zhekova, May 2009, Chepelare.

² Informant: Kostadin Glushkov. Record: M. Zhekova, May 2009, Chepelare.

emblem of the town, which persisted even after the changes of 1989. During the interviews, people of Chepelare emphasized at their own initiative the symbolic aspect of the torch procession as: “an apotheosis of spirituality”³ in the town, “a symbol of knowledge and science”⁴, “Sign of education and light”⁵, “the torch that ... burns in the hearts of all people”⁶. In the torch procession, there participated students from primary school, but for several years – also the elderly students, as well as children from kindergartens.⁷

During all the month of May there are organized cultural and sports events – concerts, theatre performances, exhibitions, book presentations, competitions, etc. There are guest groups and choirs, as well as performers from the local community. May 24 was chosen as a town holiday for several reasons. The education paths of the citizens, the convenient climate conditions in May,⁸ and the beautiful mountain spring⁹ gather together on this date Chepelare people dispersed all around the country and the world. Another reason for the choice, which is pointed out by the citizens is that the town is small and to a certain extent deprived of cultural events,¹⁰ which provokes the appropriation of a nationally important holiday as a day of the town. By a tradition, the town gets especially enlivened on this day and I had the chance to witness this during my fieldwork. The manifestation in the Day of the Slavs’ first educators is nowadays seldom organized in the country, but it is still preserved in Chepelare. A ceremonial water sanctification ritual is carried out. The official people

³ Informant: Kostadin Glushkov. Record: M. Zhekova, May 2009, Chepelare.

⁴ Informant: Neven Agovski, born in 1957. He has got higher education and is a teacher of English, a director of the Professional High School of Tourism in Chepelare, and was a Deputy Mayor of culture (2003-2007). Record: M. Zhekova, May 2009, Chepelare.

⁵ Informant: Totka Ishpekova, born in Panagyurishte. She has got higher education, was an agronomist and a former teacher in the High Polytechnical School, and is currently a pensioner. Record: M. Zhekova, May 2009, Chepelare.

⁶ Informant: Maria Dafova, born in 1943 in the living quarter of Ustovo. She has got a BA degree, was a former teacher of history and Russian language at “Vassil Drumev” High School, and is currently a pensioner. Record: M. Zhekova, May 2009, Chepelare.

⁷ Informant: Bogdana Stoykova, born in Pazardjik. She has got higher education in Bulgarian Philology and has lived in Chepelare since 1997. From 1997 to 2008 she has worked as a chief expert in the department of “Education and Culture” and as a PR at the municipality of Chepelare. Currently she is unemployed. Record: M. Zhekova, May 2009, Chepelare.

⁸ Informant: Elena Palyongova, born in the village of Ravnogor, municipality of Bratsigovo. She has got a special pedagogical education and has lived in Chepelare since 1956. She was a former primary teacher at “Vassil Dechev” High School and is currently a pensioner. Record: M. Zhekova, May 2009, Chepelare.

⁹ Informant: Donka Stoycheva, born in the village of Malevo, Smolyan region. She has got a BA degree and has lived in Chepelare since 1957. She has worked as a teacher of biology, instructor, and a former head of the pioneer and Komsomol school organization. Currently she is a pensioner. Record: M. Zhekova, May 2009, Chepelare.

¹⁰ Informant: Yana Dimova, born in Chepelare. She has got a high theatre education, was an actress at the Haskovo theatre and has worked at the Municipality of Chepelare for one year as a chief radio specialist and media communication. In 2009 she led the two concerts of the Municipal children’s complex of Chepelare on the occasion of May 24, as well as of the ceremonial farewell of the graduate class.

Record: M. Zhekova, May 2009, Chepelare.

– mainly former teachers, greet from the tribune the manifesting people. The interviewees proudly share that the day of the town has not been politicized.¹¹ After the manifestation there is organized a concert and prominent cultural activists, teachers and students are awarded for their accomplishments. The Day of the Holy brothers is associated by the informant with festivity and celebratory spirit. Dwelling on sources from traditional culture and Christian religiosity, the means for achieving the atmosphere of festivity are different – “words, music, images, and dance” (Simeonova 1994: 126). Over the last years there is no brass orchestra in Chepelare, which is perceived by the citizens as a lack and there is sought an alternative. For attaining sober and celebratory atmosphere, a cheer leader team and a brass orchestra from Lovech have been invited in recent years. The latter take part in the concerts, and lead the torch procession and the manifestation. The cheer leaders were so much overwhelmed into the holiday in Chepelare that in 2009 they even danced with torches in their hands.

The citizens of Chepelare distinguish between May 11 (the church holiday of the Holy brothers) and May 24 (the Day of the Bulgarian education, culture, and the Slavic alphabet). On May 24 a water sanctification ritual is held in the square and the church choir sings songs, i.e. there are involved religious elements, but the two holidays are not mixed together. The day unites Christians and Bulgarian Muslims. Although connected with Christianity, it does not oppose people of the Muslim religion. It is a common town holiday. Several of the events that are carried out are financed by ordinary citizens and firms through a donor's campaign. In the evening, the new school graduates are taken farewell by the gathered people. In the culminating points of the celebrations, which are concentrated on 23rd and 24th of May, there take part all town dwellers, at least as audience. Although being a separate case by itself, the day of St. St. Cyril and Methodius in Chepelare repeats the paradigm that is known country-wide, i.e. the holiday is perceived as a marker of national identity. At the same time it bears traces of regional identification.

How does the day of St. St. Cyril and Methodius develop in time and space? From a church holiday, which is noted by a religious service, the day of the Holy brothers passes to the Bulgarian school as a holiday of teachers and students, and later exits into the town square and the town center as a national holiday and grows into a festive procession, in which everybody takes part – either as a participant in the manifestation, or as a cheering public. Established as a holiday by the church and the state, the day of St. St. Cyril and Methodius was gradually transformed from

¹¹ Informant: Neven Agovski, born in 1957. He has got higher education and is a teacher of English, a director of the Professional High School of Tourism in Chepelare, and was a Deputy Mayor of culture (2003-2007). Record: M. Zhekova, May 2009, Chepelare.

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a church holiday into a day of reverence to the progressive deed of the first educators, yet without losing its religious elements completely. From a school holiday it is adopted and perceived as one of the emblems of the nation. This holiday represents a dynamic process of construing national and supra-national symbols, of national, Slavic, Orthodox consolidation and European integration (after the pronouncement of St. St. Cyril and Methodius as spiritual patrons of United Europe by Pope John Paul II in 1980) – through the sharing of common spiritual and cultural values.

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