

CATHOLIC AND ORTHODOX BULGARIANS IN THE VICINITY OF BUCHAREST. ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES OF THE 1990s

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The article will study the specific situation of the Bulgarian villages in the proximity of Bucharest. Their origins has traces in the XVIIth century, when catholics from region of Nikopolis have taken refuge to the north of Danube.

The studies of several villages of Bulgarian emigrants primarily from the XIX century in the vicinity of Bucharest became possible during the period 1993–1998 thanks to an agreement for collaborate research between The Ethnographic Institute and Museum in Sofia and The Institute of Ethnography and folklore “Constantin Brailoiu” in Bucharest. Dr. Valentina Vaseva and Dr. Eugenia Krasteva-Blagoeva participated on behalf of Ethnographic Institute and Museum, Sofia. The villages with Bulgarian Catholics in Romania – Cioplea (Choplea) and Popești-Leordeni (Popeshti-Leordeni) were studied, as well as the villages with orthodox Bulgarian population – Dudești (Dudeshti), Aluniș (Alunish) (Măgurele commune), Vărăști (Varashti), Valea Dragului and Brănești (Braneshti).

The presence of Catholic Bulgarian emigrant community in the vicinity of the Romanian capital is well studied due to the research of Catholics in Bulgaria and is directly linked with the endorsement of Catholicism in Bucharest¹. At the end of the XVII c. Bulgarian Catholics of the Nikopol district migrated and founded two compact villages in the southern vicinity of Bucharest-Cioplea and Popești-Leordeni. That phenomenon became even more massive after the Russian-Turkish wars in the beginning of the XIX c. The presence of Bulgarian emigrant Catholics of the Nikopol Eparchy² near the Romanian capital and the increasing influence of the Ottomans in the lands between the Balkan Mountains and the Danube made the Nikopol bishops, who were at that time charged with administration of the Catholics in Vlahia, move their episcopacy across the Danube in 1792. Initially they resided in the village of Cioplea and later – in Bucharest. Bishop Pavel Duvanlia was the first to reside in the village of Cioplea until his

¹ Св. Елдъров, *Никополската католическа епархия – неосъществената общност*, in *Локални общности*. Т. 1, София, 2000, pp. 35–44; Св. Елдъров, *Католиците в България 1878–1989. Историческо изследване*. София, 2002.

² The Nikopol Catholic Eparchy was founded in 1648.

death in 1804 (he died in the Baratia monastery). Later on, in 1842, the residence of the Bishop of Nikopol was moved to Bucharest³. The Berlin Congress and the new border between Bulgaria and Romania implied the separation of the Nikopol eparchy from the Valach territories across the Danube. After the founding of the Bucharest Archbishopric in 1883, the Nikopol-Bucharest bishop Ignatius Paoli was appointed as the First Bucharest Archbishop. The Nikopol eparchy was restricted to the lands south of Danube and the bishop resided in Russe. Two subsidiary episcopates – one in Galați (Galats) and one in Iași (Yashi) were added to the new Bucharest Archbishopric⁴.

Thus, by settling near the Romanian capital and going under the spiritual administration of the Bucharest Archbishopric, the Bulgarian Catholics found their way out from the Turkish oppression. Their fate was closely entwined with the history of the Catholic community in Bucharest. The integration of the Catholics from the two Bulgarian villages into the Romanian Catholic community was very intensive throughout the 1930s, when there was strengthening of the cultural bonds with the Catholics from Moldova, where the major pilgrimage places are to be found. Until the 1940s the priests of Cioplea were generally Polish by origin and after that the “domeni” (priests) descended from Moldova. Until the middle of the 60s of XX c. the church service and masses in the villages of Cioplea and Popești – Leordeni were officiated in Latin which imposed that children studied the language at school. Later on, the services and masses were conducted in Romanian.⁵ In spite of this, in the houses of some Catholic families from the village of Cioplea some old prayer-books dating from the end of the XX c. were preserved as family relics. Those prayer-books were printed in Rome in “Slavonic” language using the Latin script or as our informers put it – written in “Paulicianian”, “Bulgarian” or “Serbian”.

In 1995 we visited the village of Popești-Leordeni, at that time already a part of the public transport system, and in 1997 we visited the village of Cioplea which is now part of Bucharest. Popești-Leordeni had undergone the process of “systematization” of the Romanian villages which took place during the socialism period but the construction of concrete blocks appears to have “frozen” near the centre where the Monument of the fallen soldiers in the wars of 1913–1918 was erected. In the other part of the village the houses of the Bulgarian emigrants, typical for the Danube plain, are conserved. There live the descendants of old Bulgarian Nikopol Catholics, who proudly show their imposing new Catholic Church which was constructed in 1977 in the place of the old one, destroyed during the earthquake in Vrancea. The urbanizing measures of the socialist regime were brought to an end at 1989 without having solved the essential problems with the

³ В. Вассва, *Културната идентичност на българите католици от селата Чопля и Попец-Леорден при Букурещ*, in *Локални общности*. Т. 1., София, 2000, р. 58.

⁴ Св. Елдьоров, *Никополската католическа епархия – неосъществената общност*, in *Локални общности*. Т. 1, София, 2000, р. 35; Св. Елдьоров, *Католиците в България 1878–1989. Историческо изследване*. София, 2002, pp. 31–43

⁵ Н. Рашкова, *Литургични песнопения в музикалната култура на католическата общност в Свищовско*, in *Локални общности*. Т. 1, София, 2000, р. 31.

occupation of the village population in the vicinity of the capital. The socialist establishments – canneries, textile fabric factories, “Danubiana” tires factory, were already non-functional by the middle of the the 1960s.

Similar was the fate of the population of the other village of Bulgarian Catholics that was famous in the past – Cioplea, the original seat of the Nikopol bishops. Cioplea was founded in the southern outskirts of the Romanian capital by Bulgarian colonists from the Nikopol district and in the XX c. it was incorporated into the Dudești-Cioplea district. This double name unites two, completely independent in terms of culture and economy neighboring villages, neighboring villages of Bulgarian colonists that were merged in a single district in 1950s. At that time began the demolition of houses in both villages and today the descendants of the villagers dwell in the concrete blocks of one of the biggest neighborhoods in the capital – “Titan”. Nowadays from the two Bulgarian villages only the temples remain – the Orthodox Church “St. Nikola” of the former village of Dudești and the Catholic Church “St. Duh” (“Holy Spirit”) of Cioplea, with only 10–15 old houses that have not been demolished and the old cemeteries situated underneath the windows of the surrounding blocks⁶.

The village of Dudești was founded by Orthodox Bulgarians from Karnobat, Sliven and Yambol districts. The two Bulgarian villages – Cioplea and Dudești were originally founded in the borders of the vast estate of the Albanian land owner Stefan Moscu⁷ but neither early in their history, nor later are there any cultural or economic contacts or mixed marriages. As basic reason for this our respondents point out the different religions that were professed, regardless of the fact that the population of both villages consisted of emigrants from the lands south of the Danube sharing their motherly tongue – Bulgarian. The cultural differences between the descendants of the Bulgarian emigrants from the orthodox village of Dudești and the catholic population of Cioplea were confirmed yet again in 2007. During one of my meetings with Bulgarians from those communities I was told about the weird eating habits of the Catholics from Cioplea to eat roast ravens (cioara) and even to keep a “winter stock” of the salted birds⁸. Laughing, the orthodox participants directed me to the Catholic who was present at our meeting to inquire about the precise recipe of the raven dish. He, feeling rather offended, replied that according to the orthodox Bulgarians the Catholics of Bucharest “ate” all the ravens in the area around the capital⁹.

⁶ В. Васева, *op. cit.*, pp. 56; В. Васева, *Два надписа от църквата “Св. Никола” в бившето с. Дудеш, днес в границите на Букурещ*, in „Българска етнология”, София, 2006, кн. 3, pp. 91–97.

⁷ В. Трайков, Н. Жечев, *Българската емиграция в Румъния XIV в. – 1878 г.* София, 1986, p. 30; К. Велики, В. Трайков, *Българската емиграция във Влахия след Руско-турската война 1828–1829. Сборник документи*. София, 1980, p. 16, p. 23; Ст. Романски, *Българите във Влашко и Молдова. Документи*. София, 1930, pp. 366–373; М. Младенов, *Българските говори в Румъния*. София, 1993, p. 46; C. C. Giurescu, *Istoria Bucureștilor*. București, 1979, p. 222.

⁸ Respondent: Dumitru Vagea, born 1935 in Dudești, documented in Bucharest – 14 September 2007 by V. Vaseva.

⁹ Respondent: Iosif Kalmen, born 1949 in Cioplea, documented in Bucharest – 14 September 2007 by V. Vaseva.

The most important mark of the cultural identity of the Bulgarian community from Popești and Cioplea is their confessional affiliation, which for a long time had been the reason for their cultural isolation from the surrounding Orthodox population. Moreover, the isolation was double – in regards to the Orthodox Bulgarians from the nearby villages who were a majority and also from the Romanians who were Orthodox Christians as well and were called “Valachs” by the immigrant Catholics.

Catholicism as a common religion promoted the feeling of kinship between the inhabitants of Cioplea and Popești-Leordeni. In the past there were marriages mainly between the Bulgarians of those two villages because these were the only Catholic villages in the area around Bucharest. This is the reason why in them still live many related families, who often pay visits to each other at the temple holidays and family festivities – weddings, holy communions, anointments. There were people among the ones we interviewed in Cioplea whose family name – Banchovi, originates from Banat where the founders of the family came from¹⁰. We were told about cases of marriages with residents of Vinga in Banat who settled near Bucharest. After the 1950s of XX c. the marriages to Orthodox Romanians became more frequent which led to religious compromises and the change of family traditions. We were told about a case where the Catholic father, in order to appease his mother-in-law, agreed to make his son have his hair ritually cut, something that the Orthodox Romanians value very highly¹¹.

Today the elderly villagers of the former Cioplea village regularly go to the morning and evening daily service in the church, whereas the young go to the Sunday service and strictly to the major calendar Holidays. Even today the custom of young girls to wear traditional dresses, inherited from their great grandmothers, at the ceremonial liturgy for Christmas still exists. Most of those girls don't speak or even understand the Bulgarian language which is preserved only in the homes of the elderly couples in the area. Another tradition that was preserved until the 1940s was the women of Cioplea and Popești-Leordeni to be buried with their traditional dresses which they made during their lifetime and kept up until their death.

Church masses in the old church in Cioplea are generally attended also by worshipers from Moldova, mainly young people who came to work in the capital and settled in the near blocks during the past two-three decades. All the elderly people we encountered in the church at the official evening liturgy for St. Anton of Padua's day on the 13th June 1997 were descendants of the Bulgarians from Cioplea whose ancestors have built the temple and are still supporting it with their own resources. At the entrance of the church there is a slab with the inscription: “*Biserica romano – katolica. Cioplea*”. According to the Catholic tradition St. Anton of Padua is the patron of children and for this reason, at his day women and children brought sprigs of lily for consecration in the temple which they would keep for curing child illness through the whole year.

The old means of living of the Bulgarians from the two Catholic villages of Popești-Leordeni and Cioplea – vegetable-growing, dairying and silkworm-breeding,

¹⁰ Respondent: Josif Banchov, born 1933 – Cioplea, 15th of June 1997, documented by V. Vaseva.

¹¹ Respondent: Josif Kalmen, born 1949 – Cioplea, 13th of June 1997, documented by V. Vaseva.

are completely extinct today, although in the process of restoration of land ownership in the 1990s also brought with it new life in the hope for their revival. In the memories of childhood and adolescence of the people from the generation born in the 1930s we interviewed, the rich people in Cioplia owned around 30–60 “pogons” of land (roughly 150 to 300 decares) which they cultivated using horses unlike the Orthodox Bulgarians who used oxen. Each of them also owned around 20–30 cows whose milk was bought by special *laptari* (milkmen) from the village, transported to the capital with phaetons and delivered on subscription to the houses of the rich people in the center of Bucharest. In the neighboring Orthodox Bulgarian village of Dudești there were shops owned by Jewish traders who supplied the population from the surroundings with fabrics and cotton prints imported from Italy, Austria etc. The Jewish traders bought the milk and sweet cheese from the villagers in order to resell them in Bucharest. Apart from the dairy products, they also bought the production from the vegetable gardens in the villages – radishes, dill, parsley and the specially cultivated for the market very expensive plant – “tarhon”, which was used in the process of making mustard. Among the re-sellers there were people from Oltenia who came during the summer for seasonal work in the vegetable gardens of the rich land owners. They went in groups of 10–15 people, buying up vegetables from the gardens and carrying them on their backs in two panniers attached to a yoke to the various Bucharest markets for re-sale. In the old village of Cioplea there even existed a separate street for the shepherds who usually looked after about 30 sheep and around Easter sold lambs in the city¹².

After the demolition of houses during the “systematization” period up until 1974 the gardens of the Bulgarian emigrants were also destroyed. Nevertheless, the adherence to the traditional means of living is still to be discerned in some of the rites of the inhabitants of concrete blocks in “Titan”. One of our respondents told us that when her mother-in-law who was strongly attached to her garden passed away, her family lit candles in the mornings and evenings three days after the burial, not in the block of flats where the family lived but in the garden of their late relative¹³.

The process of fading away of the old means of livelihood in the Catholic villages is one of the major differences as compared to the Orthodox Bulgarian emigrants around Bucharest, who even during socialism and in transition period that followed continued to practice their vegetable-growing trade. For them and for their families the sale of agricultural products at the Bucharest markets even today is a good source of income. One of the women from the village of Aluniș (Magurele district) we spoke to came from a rich vegetable-growing family. Forty years ago her father owned 20 “pogons” of land where he grew vegetables for the market and 20–30 cows and water buffalos whose milk he sold to subscribers in Bucharest and also supplied with cream the city sweet shops. Gardening as one of the main means of livelihood found its way into the rites of the Orthodox Bulgarians who ritually trim the fruit trees on New Year's Day to make them

¹² Respondents: Josif Banchov and Dimitar Markov, born 1935 – Choplea, 15th of June 1997, doc. by V. Vaseva.

¹³ Respondent: Teresa Gostin, born 1935 – Choplea, 17th and 18th of June 1997, doc. by V. Vaseva.

produce more fruit. In the village they do it using an axe but not the vines or fruit-trees, as it is around the whole ethnic territory of Bulgaria, are being cut but the eggplants which are very important for the vegetable growing industry¹⁴. In the past the silkworm-breeding was also widely spread in the village, that's why they used to put the first red egg dyed at Easter at the silkworms¹⁵.

These days, descendants of the Orthodox Bulgarians gather together to celebrate the patron saint's days of their churches and the days of common commemoration of the dead, among which the biggest is the summer All Souls' Day (*Moși de vara*). After the mass at All Souls' Day in the church where the names of the dead are read, people visit the graves of their late relatives and on the territory of the graveyard they meet many of their fellow villagers who nowadays live in different parts of the capital. On the 16th of June 1997 we eye-witnessed the celebration of the patron saint's day of the church "St. Duh" (St. Spirit) which is situated in the cemetery of the village of Aluniș and marked its 200th anniversary. On the 14th of June, the same year, we were also present at the summer All Souls' Day at the old cemetery of the demolished in 1965 Orthodox Bulgarian village of Dudești (which is now a part of the capital). Even though today the cemetery is situated in the very "Titan Balta Alba" living complex, the people we spoke to at the neighborhood's alleys had gathered to commemorate their late relatives, held dear the memory of their native village and their Bulgarian origin. Among the people we talked to were the daughter and the grand-daughter¹⁶ of one of the former mayors of Dudești (1914–1916), whose family had donated a meadow for the expansion of the local cemetery¹⁷.

Today, the former Catholic and Orthodox Bulgarian emigrants feel like Romanian citizens who know their origin. Bulgarian language is used at present only in the domestic sphere or by the elderly people. The young people and the children of mixed marriages do not talk or understand Bulgarian due to the fact that only the official language of the Romanian state is being taught in the public schools. There hasn't been a Bulgarian school in none of the Bulgarian villages in the vicinity of Bucharest and the one that was open in 1869 in the Romanian capital was not massively attended by the children from the nearby villages. It should also be taken into account that the illiteracy rate among the rural population in Romania at the end of XIX and the beginning of the XX c. was exceptionally high, reaching up to 70–75%¹⁸.

¹⁴ Respondent: Florica Vasile, born 1923 – Alunish, 15th and 22nd of October 1995, doc. by V. Vaseva.

¹⁵ Respondent: Angelina Staiko, born 1911 – Alunish, 17th of October 1995, doc. by V. Vaseva.

¹⁶ Respondents: Petra Petkov, born 1916 and Anna Ronkov, born 1933 – Dudeshti, 14th of June 1997, doc. by V. Vaseva.

¹⁷ В. Васева, *Два надписа от църквата "Св. Никола" в бившието с. Дудец, днес в границите на Букурещ*, in *Българска етнология*, 2006, кн. 3, р. 91.

¹⁸ Н. Жечев, *Основаване и дейност на българското училище в Букурещ до 1878 г.*, in *Българската църква и училището в Букурещ*. София, 1994, pp. 30–44; М. Люлюшев, *Букурещкото българско училище от Освобождението до края на Втората световна война*, in *Българската църква и училището в Букурещ*. София, 1994, pp. 122–138.