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Sashka BIZERANOVA, *Mezhdū zhivota i smarta. Pogrebalni i pomenalni obichai pri balgari i vlasi vav Vidinsko* (Between life and death. Funerals customs amongst the Bulgarians and Wallachians from Vidin), Vratsa, Aleksprint, 2013, 544 p.

The volume is the result of the doctoral dissertation Sashka Bizeranova successfully defended in 2012. The author currently works as curator at the Regional Museum in Vidin. She is a Vidin native being born in a village located on the Danube bank, 25 km far from Vidin town. At first glance these circumstances suggest expectations for a conformist work. The use in south eastern European countries is that local intellectuals as teachers or cultural bureaucrats write works on local history which intend to satisfy the national canon. Bizeranova's book challenges this idea.

In this respect, several points should be emphasized. First, the topic, although apparently popular and well known, is framed in a comparative and intercultural context. From 1992 to 2011, Bizeranova did ethnographic field trips in 55 villages from the Vidin area, where the population is Bulgarian and Romanian speaking (the author calls them *vlasi* and *vlashkigovoreni*/speakers of Wallachian, terms she sees as overlapping). Secondly, she has tried in the end to extend the researched area in Romania, mainly in Dolj county, in settlements with Bulgarian speaking people, but not exclusively, as well as in Serbia, in Negotin and Zajechar, areas where islands of Romanian speaking population live⁹. Third, the author extensively uses the archives data, mainly those preserved at the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore in Sofia (pp. 24–26). She compared such information with her field findings and also with the appropriate chapters of the topic's literature. Forth, the vast bibliography is joining foreign books and papers to the Bulgarian works, without neglecting the works in Romanian. It is gratifying to see the author's efforts to learn Romanian, as it is seen from the quotations in the text.

The seven chapters are linked each other, the volume structure is balanced and the main argument easy to delineate. When dealing with the frames of the funeral rituals, they are historical and demographic, but the cultural patterns on which these rituals are lying are also thrown into proper relief. For instance, the author studied these patterns in forms of everyday life, as curses/*kletvi*, and dreams, while in the next chapter the concepts and representations of soul/*dusha* (Bg.)/*sufletu* (Rom.) and Other World/*onija svijat* (Bg.) are described according to the Bulgarians and Wallachians from Vidin. Bizeranova describes with a full amount of details the funeral rituals in three sequels: in the household of the dead person, on the road to the church and cemetery, including the burying rituals, and what happens after the burial. In the last chapter the author records the changes that the funeral customs have got after 1945.

The first chapter (pp. 34–76) deals with the history of the region from the Roman period onward until the Ottoman conquering of the region in 1396, Vidin being the last Bulgarian land that resisted. Bizeranova, purposely or not, does not melt the historical facts with statistics, mainly that of population and ethnic groups. She states that the Vidin population was Bulgarian, but acknowledges that as late as the 18th century there is not sound evidence for population and ethnicity (p. 43). Only at the beginning of the 19th century, there are accurate statistical data. Until then, the region was

⁹ In Vidin Bizeranova has interviewed 83 Bulgarians and 58 Romanian speakers. In Romania she met 14 informants, few of them Bulgarian speakers, while in Serbia all the eight informants were Romanian speakers (pp. 460–465).

successively depopulated and repopulated after the rebellion of Osman Pasvantoglu, the Vidin pasha. However, some very consistent pages present the problem of the Romanian speaking population in the region (pp. 57–73). Having quoted all the reliable data, the analysis is very fair, accurately establishing the place of the Romanian speakers in the past and present of the Vidin land¹⁰. Actually, what is really alarming in this region, Bizeranova states, is the demographic catastrophe, the social poverty and marginalization. While in the interwar period the local population was reckoned as 130,000 people, increasing under the socialist regime to 174,000 (in the 1950s), the last census, in 2011, did not find in the Vidin county more than 99,000 people.

The next two chapters analyse the daily life forms of the funeral culture amongst Bulgarians and Wallachians in Vidin, as well as in neighbouring territories in Romania and Serbia. The performing of rituals, nowadays, goes obsolete, especially in Bulgaria (p. 115). There are many common features in the ways the people subjected to research conceive the soul, the death, and the Other World (pp. 113–140). The main pattern is the popular creed that the souls of the dead pass to the Other World on a bridge. This pattern, Bizeranova argues it against other authors, is common to all Balkan peoples (p. 122). Another common trait is the belief that the people from our world could influence through their behaviour and actions the fate of their kin in the Other World (p. 120).

There are also differences, for instance the practice to curse near the coffin of the deceased (pp. 77–88). This should alleviate the trauma of unexpected deaths, as in the case of youngsters or violent deaths. But, while Bulgarians and Wallachians have this custom, which is less spread however amongst the latter, in Romania this practice is not even remembered. This is due, according to Bizeranova, to the deeper religious faith of the people from the left side of the Danube, while the curses near the coffin, of which the Bulgarians and Wallachians are accustomed, could be interpreted as vestiges of the pagan beliefs.

Other differences are related to the dreams and their interpretations. The dreams are seen by the people as a way into the Other World, as the death itself is. But, while the Bulgarians believe that the dreams have only the function to forecast the death, for the Wallachians the dreams have a “transcendental” function. Thus the “*fatalism* belongs to their culture... The dreams anticipate the future, explain the present, motivate the rituals, they are a bridge between this world and the other world” (p. 105).

As about the signs that anticipate a potential death, because the borders between the Other World and this one are fragile, a lot of circumstances and beings could announce an imminent death. Bizeranova records amongst these some domestic animals, as the hen, the cock, the horse, the dog, or savage ones, like the snake, the owl, the raven, as well as plants and trees.

For the description of funeral rituals, the information is very detailed, covering almost a half of the volume (pp. 141–398). While at the Bulgarians the last confession is not compulsory, the Wallachians as well as the Romanians take a special care to perform it. Still, the Bulgarians have a different tradition: a young relative of the deceased kisses his/her hand and after a few days looks for a priest to attend his own confession (pp. 148–9). The time spent to stay with the deceased in the household differs too. In Bulgaria, keeping the guard of the deceased lasts one night and often takes place in different rooms, but in Romania this happens along two or three days, everybody staying in the same room with the deceased (pp. 186–187). The author is mentioning also a funeral custom which exists only at the Bulgarians (and Wallachians too), that is to post up obituaries/*nekrolozi* in the open public spaces or on the gates or walls of the house where the dead used to live. It seems that this custom originated from the Bulgarian urban centres where people adopted it at the beginning of the 20th century, being spread later in the rural world (pp. 198).

The road from the house of the deceased person to the cemetery adds an important common feature: the including in the funeral procession of the bearers of the *koliva* (a sweet meal made with boiled wheat). The author based on Mircea Eliade her theory that this meal is shared by the Balkan peoples because it survives from prehistoric rituals (p. 232). Crying after the deceased and letting

¹⁰ Bizeranova quotes an official statistics according to which in 2009 around 15,000 people speak Romanian in Vidin county.

small coins are also common, though the ways and places of performing it differ. A striking belief met in all the researched areas is the vampires-hunt: against the revengeful return of the deceased soul, special rituals are performed during the burial (pp. 243–256 with maps in the appendix).

There are still important differences too, like the fore place that an embellished tree has at the Romanians, in Bulgaria, Serbia, and Romania (p. 229). The tree stays next the deceased in the house, and after the burial is put on the grave. Some modern inventions as carrying the deceased photo portrait, or using, instead of the cart which carries the corpse, a tractor or a car, are diminishing the authenticity of the old ritual (p. 236). The author pays attention also to some atypical funeral rituals like the wedding of the death and the ways of burying children or suicides. (pp. 272–286).

The sixth chapter concerns the after burial rituals (pp. 294–399). All of them are concentrated on the alms/*pomana* (Bg. and Rom.). This takes place before forty days after the burial as well as thereafter. Besides, all people in the researched areas perform in the first forty days after death the rituals against vampires, as well as carrying water to the grave (pp. 302–308). The forty days alms mark the decisive turn of the souls to the Other World, thus being the core ritual. The places of its performing are similar: at the grave, at the Danube or at the small rivers that pour in the Danube for taking the water and carry it at the grave and in the house of the deceased.

Still, there are differences (p. 309). First, while at the Bulgarians the carrying water takes place only in the last week of the forty days period, the Wallachians, both in Bulgaria and Serbia, and the Romanians accomplish this task immediately after the burial (p. 314). There are sound differences too, about making this ritual at the house of the deceased. The Wallachians of Bulgaria bring recovered symbols of the burial like the little tree/*pomişor* (Rom.), similarly embellished and put in the middle of the ritual dishes, while at the Wallachians from Serbia, the so-called “white alms/*pomana alba*” (Rom.) supply the main ritual. In both situations, water-carrying is performed once again. These sequences miss at the Bulgarians, being replaced by offering a table full of clothes, fair meals etc. for enhancing the memory of the deceased. A peculiarity too is the performing by the Wallachians in Bulgaria of the so-called hoopoe/*pupăza* ritual that happens in the same forty days interval, for assisting the soul to step into heaven.

Although the forty days alms express the peak of separating the deceased from this world, the relatives continue to keep a symbolic relation with him/her. There are other alms distributed, mourning is kept during the first year after the burial, the graves are visited and cleaned still much time, every year on the occasion of the greatest religious feasts. The author adds a detailed description of one spectacular ritual, the alms for alive/*pomana na zivotu* (Bg.)/*pomana de viu* (Rom.) with similar sequences as the forty days alms, but the ritual is performed this time for somebody who is alive. The ritual is largely spread among Wallachians in Vidin, however some influences could be discerned among the Bulgarians too (p. 392).

When Bizeranova aims to discuss the changes of the funeral rituals imposed by the communist regime, that chapter, the last, is too short (pp. 400–422) for accurately treating this topic. Nevertheless, it redresses a methodological shortcoming of the work, which is using different data sources, although limited to the area submitted to research. To put together on the same page information from archives, field research and topic literature issued from different times may incur the blame of inaccuracy. Anyway, this lack is partially covered by the last chapter. We find here (p. 401–402) that since the very beginning, October 1944, the communist authorities have issued one detailed set of rules/*pravilnik* which was handed to the relatives of a deceased person: it obliged them to bury the dead body “without priest, without cross, without religious service, without alms and other customary Christian rituals” (here are quoted files from the Vidin State archives). In the first decades, the Vidin people have shifted these commands, but in the 1970s the number of so-called “civil burials/*grazhdanski pogrebenija*” has strikingly taken off (from 29% in 1971 to 69% in 1976, p. 406).

This book is doubtlessly an excellent ethnographic piece of work. The reader may appreciate the fine description of the funeral rituals and their sound framing, as well as the fair approach of the ethnicity matter. Such qualities balance some possible criticism about the lack of a theoretical perspective or, here and there, the methodological errors.

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