

## Representations of Kinship Relationships in Bulgarian Folklore Epic

The problem of kinship has found relatively extensive representation in Bulgarian scholarly tradition. Kinship relationships have been paid attention in ethnographic works and regional research on the social structure and organization, in works dedicated to different rituals of the human life cycle (birth, baptizing, marriage and death), in investigations on calendar rituals and holidays and on the social context of the functioning of folklore.<sup>1</sup> Notes on various representations of the blood, marriage

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<sup>1</sup> Among the more significant studies dedicating special attention to kinship, we would mention the works of N. NACHOV, S. BOBCHEV, G. KEREMIDCHIEV, D. MARINOV, M. ARNAUDOV, R. PESHEVA, H. VAKARELSKI, S. GENCHEV, T.Iv. ZHIVKOV, R. IVANOVA etc. Cf. N. NACHOV, *Za pobratimstvoto* [On Ritual Brotherhood], Psp., XLIX-L, 32-71, LI, 375-403, LII-LIII, 443-506; S. BOBCHEV, *O pobratimstvie i posestrimstvie* [On ritual brotherhood and ritual sisterhood]. *Zhivaia starina*, 1896; G. KEREMIDCHIEV, "Rodstvenite otnoshenia v nasheto narodno tvorchestvo" [Kinship relationships in our folklore]. In: *Izvestija na fakulteta po slavianski filologii*, 7, Sofia, 1931; D. MARINOV, *Zhiva starina* [Living antiquity], 2, Ruse, 1894; D. MARINOV, "Narodna viara i religiozni narodni obichai" [Folk religion and folk religious rituals]. In: *Sbornik narodni umotvorenja*, 28, 1914; M. ARNAUDOV, *Ochertsii po bulgarski folklor* [Notes on Bulgarian folklore], Sofia, 1934; R. PESHEVA, "Strukturata na semeistvoto i roda v Bulgaria v kraia na 19-ti i nachaloto na 20-ti vek" [Structure of the family and kin in Bulgaria in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century]. In: *Izvestia na etnografskia institut i muzej*, VIII, 1965; R. PESHEVA, "Semeistvoto i negovoto istorichesko razvitie" [Family and its historical development]. In: *Etnografia na Bulgaria*, 1, 1980, 286-302; H. VAKARELSKI, *Etnografia na Bulgaria* [Ethnography of Bulgaria], Sofia, 1977, 445-476; S. GENCHEV, "Kumstvoto u bulgarite" [Godparenthood among the Bulgarians]. In: *Izvestia na etnografskia institute i muzej*, XV, C, 1974, 89-112, XVI, 83-109; T. Iv. ZHIVKOV, *Narod i*

and ritual kinship can be found in almost all folklore and ethnographic works from the end of the nineteenth century until nowadays. To different forms and aspects of kinship (such as godparenthood, ritual brotherhood, kinship terminology, kin structure, etc.) have been dedicated special research, and many others have been addressed in articles and scholarly publications of general character.

Kinship relationships are represented in the various forms of Bulgarian folklore culture – in legends and ritual songs, in fairy tales and proverbs, in anecdotes and folk ballads. The various folklore genres represent kinship relationships in a specific way, and interpret them according to the requirements of their aesthetic systems. The functioning of kinship relationships in the folklore culture can generally be defined as belonging at least to “two levels.” On the one hand, they are a chief factor in structuring the social network and in the formation of the basic roles in patriarchal culture.<sup>2</sup> They act as a core model for all types of social, family, economic, etc. relations within the traditional Bulgarian society.<sup>3</sup> In the big patriarchal family kinship relationships enable the creation of basic notions about social order and hierarchy, authority and prestige, social and cultural values. With respect to the various forms of folklore they function namely as the medium, in which every representation of social organization and cultural

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*pesen* [People and songs], Sofia, 1977; R. IVANOVA, *Bulgarskata narodna svatba* [Bulgarian folklore wedding], Sofia, 1984; R. IVANOVA, *Epos, obred, mit* [Epic, ritual, myth], Sofia, 1992, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. more about the role of kinship and family models in patriarchal culture in: T. Iv. ZHIVKOV, *op. cit.*; K. KASER, “Introduction: Household and Family Contexts in the Balkans”. In: *The History of the Family (an International Quarterly)*, I, 4, pp. 375-386.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. R. PESHEVA, “Rodovi ostatatsi i semeen bit v Severozapadna Bulgaria” [Kin traces and family life in Northwestern Bulgaria]. In: *Kompleksna nauchna ekspedicia v Severozapadna Bulgaria*, Sofia, 1956, pp. 9-27; R. PESHEVA, “Traditsionni formi na socialna organizatsia. Zadruga”. [Traditional forms of social organization. Zadruga]. In: *Sofijski krai*, Sofia, 1993, pp. 268-281; K. KASER, “Semeistvo i rodstvo v Bulgaria. Istoricheski i antropologicheski perspektivi” [Family and kinship in Bulgaria. Historical and anthropological perspectives]. In: *Bulgarska etnologia*, 3-4, 1999.

order receive their meaning and evaluation. On the other hand, kinship relationships function as a text within such context. Strongly dependent on the "objective" structuring of blood, marriage, and ritual relationships in the traditional society, once included and interpreted within folklore texts, in the symbolism of rituals, etc., they show a high level of "adaptability" to the principles of aesthetic representation. This "adaptability," which finds most vivid expression in the system of characters, in the motif and plot specificity of narratives and songs is an important factor in the realization and the aesthetic characteristics of the various folklore genres and forms, and especially that of the folklore epic.

In spite of the relatively rich literature on various aspects of kinship in Bulgarian folklore culture and in spite of the abundant publications dedicated to the Bulgarian and South Slavic epic, the problem of the representations of kinship relationships in Bulgarian folklore epic remains insufficiently researched. Almost all specialists on the epic have paid attention to the key role of kinship in the development of topics and fabulae in the epic songs, a special research of the epic from the perspective of the represented kinship relationships has not been done so far. The goal of the current text is to investigate some of the ways, in which kinship relationships have found representation in Bulgarian epic songs; to shed light on the forms of interpreting the various aspects of kinship in the epic context; and to point out the role of these interpretations in creating the epic characters, fabulae and images in this major form of Bulgarian folklore.

The wide range of representations of kinship relationships in Bulgarian folklore epic is indisputable – they are the core of almost every epic song, key components of most epic topics, and essential factors for the creation and interpretation of the epic characters. Even a brief look at the rich collection of epic songs in Bulgarian folklore reveals a variety of representations of kinship. From the abundant examples of the relation between the epic hero and his mother as his primary advisor; through the plots about the competition with the father or the inheritance of his heroic attributes; through the regularly reminded impulse of the hero to

find his long lost in the past brother and sister; to the exogamic search for a bride or for ritual brothers – Bulgarian epic songs show a large scope of represented kinship relationships. Interpreting it in a very specific way within the epic context, they refer to basic aspects of Bulgarian kinship system as in a micromodel.<sup>4</sup> The ways, in which they represent ritual brotherhood, fatherhood and siblingship as basic elements of its aesthetic world; the means by which they depict the competition between the basic figures of kinship mediation (those of the godfather and the bride); the interpretation of the avuncular relationships as a basic element in the socialization of the bridegroom, etc., are completely different from the means of representing those kinship ties in other folklore genres and forms. Certain types of relationships, such as the avuncular link<sup>5</sup> have turned into the basis for a whole circle of epic poems; others, such as the relationship between siblings, have become the core of the most persistent motif in the Bulgarian epic, the one of the hero's desperate search for a brother or sister; yet others, such as *kumstvo* (godparenthood), often form the circle of the hero's basic enemies.

Representing elements of the kinship system, characteristic for the social structure of the Bulgarian patriarchal society, the

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<sup>4</sup> The total of all types of relationships of kinship in a given society, together with the ensuing rights and duties, and the kinship nomenclature, which expresses these relationships, is commonly defined as "kinship system." Cf. R. PARKIN, *Kinship. An Introduction to the Basic Concepts*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1997; Cf. also "Parenté". In: *Dictionnaire de l'ethnologie et de l'anthropologie*, PUF, Paris, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> According to Radcliffe-Brown, who is among the first to define this type of kinship relationship, the term "avunculate" (the relationship between mother's brother and sister's son) follows a double scheme of reference and is respectively related to two opposite systems of relationships. On the one hand, the mother's brother presents the family authority and exercises particular rights upon his nephew, and on the other, the nephew is patronized and protected when necessary by his mother's brother. Cf. A.R. RADCLIFFE-BROWN, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, London, 1952. Following the assumptions of Levi-Strauss, R. Fox insists that avunculate (rather than incest prohibition) is the founding principle in human culture. Cf. R. FOX, *Kinship and Marriage. An Anthropological Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, 1967, p. 39.

epic world creates a "second" system of kinship relationships, comparable (though not coinciding) with its initial referent. Thus, for example, in light of the general characterization of the Bulgarian traditional culture as "patriarchal", the almost complete absence of the father as a concentration of authority in the epic songs, contrasted to the constant presence of the mother, is a paradox in Bulgarian epic. Another such paradox is the interpretation of godparenthood not as a relationship of patronage and support, but of a major threat for the success of the epic hero at his marriage.<sup>6</sup> Many kinship relationships receive interpretation, which does not coincide with their "real" being as elements of the kinship system in the patriarchal society; others can be completely effaced from the epic; yet third ones could be interpreted as if holding a central position in the kinship model. The epic plots not only "reflect" the model of kinship relationships in the society, but also construct an epic model of kinship with its specific roles, relations and rules of behavior, with customary characters, which represent particular kinship types and positions. This model could in many respects remind of the model of functioning of kinship in the society, but it also differs from it in many respects. Though seeming to contradict the model of kinship in Bulgarian patriarchal culture, the epic model of kinship serves as an alternative to that model, stands forth as its epic re-formulation.

### **The "atom of kinship" in Bulgarian folklore epic**

The specific ways of representing kinship in the epic are especially clearly outlined in the scope and meaning of the so called "kinship nucleus" or "atom of kinship."<sup>7</sup> The mother-child (and,

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. N. VUKOV, "Kumat kato vreditel i nizov personazh v bulgarskia yunashki epos" [The godfather as an evildoer and a low figure in Bulgarian folklore epic]. In: *Antropologichni izsledvania*, 3, Sofia, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> The interpretation on the minimal unit of kinship in the works of Radcliffe-Brown and Levi-Strauss has played a significant role in understanding the nature of kinship systems. According to Radcliffe-Brown the basic unit of

more specifically – mother-son) couple, which, according to M. Fortes and his followers, represents the core of the kinship nucleus,<sup>8</sup> has clearly expressed contours in the epic songs. It represents a kinship couple with unchanging and even stereotypical appearance in the songs, and we can consider it as a basic element in the “atom of kinship.” The attachment of the father to this couple is often very problematic. Even when he may appear in a role of a spouse and of a father to the epic hero, it would be difficult to observe a nuclear or individual family represented in the epic text. The coterminous presence of the mother and the father in the epic songs is not only exceptionally rare, but to a large extent unspecific for the Bulgarian epic. Even when in separate cases we may discover preconditions of the inclusion of the two characters, the fabula never “accumulates” them both, but always turns only one of them into a narrative motor. No matter the large variety of songs and variants, the parents of the central hero in Bulgarian epic – Marko, never sit together round a table, never send their son together in his pursuit of heroic exploits, and never meet him back

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kinship is the group of the “individual family,” consisting of a man, a woman and their child/children. In this unit there are present three specific types of social relationships (between parent and child, between children of the same parents and between husband and wife as parents to same child/children), which are defined as forming the “first order” of kinship relationships in the society. In a critique to this approach Levi-Strauss insists on the existence of a primary kinship structure, not coinciding with the structure of the family, and called by him “atom of kinship.” This primary structure consists of four elements: brother, sister, husband of the sister (father), and son. On the basis of the thus outlined “atom of kinship” Levi-Strauss succeeds in emphasizing the significance of the relationship with the mother’s brother as a natural consequence of the need of marriage and the incest prohibition, as well as a direct expression of the basic sociological principle in marriage relationships – the one of exchange. Cf. LEVI-STRAUSS, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, Paris, 1949; Cf. LEVI-STRAUSS, *Structural Anthropology*, New York, 1963.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. M. FORTES, “Introduction”. In: J. GOODY, ed., *The Developmental Cycle of Domestic Groups*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1958, p. 8; L. HOLY, *Anthropological Perspectives on Kinship*. Pluto Press, London, Chicago, Il., 1996, p. 29. About the parent-child relationships as a basic part of the kinship system, cf. esp. E. GOODY, “Forms of Pro-Parenthood: The Sharing and Substitution of Parental Roles”. In: J. GOODY, ed., *Kinship. Selected Readings*. Penguin Books, 1971; M. FORTES, “Filiation Reconsidered”. In: M. FORTES, *Kinship and the Social Order. The Legacy of L. H. Morgan*, Aldine Publishing Company, Chicago, 1969.

together after a battle victory or after a successful search for a bride. In isolated cases, when both of them can be found in one song, there is a conflict between them, expressed in the accusations, which the mother makes about the father's extreme anger against their son, or in her attempts to prevent the confrontation between Marko and his father.

The kinship nucleus does not suggest only the relationships between a child and his parents. The cultural recognition of filiations, i.e., to the fact of being a child of a parent," supposes, according to Fortes, the acknowledgment of four groups of relationships: between the woman and the man, who have begotten the child; between the child and his/her mother; between the child and his/her father; and between siblings, i.e. between children of same parents. This determines the acknowledgment of eight basic kin types: father, mother, husband, wife, son, daughter, brother, sister. As M. Fortes' famous definition states, "a group, which is based on these four types of relationships, and which includes those eight basic kin types, is a group called a nuclear, elementary or individual family."<sup>9</sup> Bulgarian epic songs include within its system all the eight basic kin types (which Murdock calls "first level of relationships" and "basic relatives"<sup>10</sup>), but represents each of them in a different way and in a specific combination with the rest. While the relationships between spouses can be traced almost only in the songs about faithful/unfaithful wife, and while the figures of the father and the mother demonstrate a tendency of mutual exclusion and impossibility for coexistence in epic fabulae, the relationships concentrated on the second generation level (son, daughter, brother, sister) demonstrate a high level of variety and combinative potential. The epic hero frequently has at least one parent and depending on that he almost always performs the role of a son; he would often have a brother or a sister, and would be looking for them in a large variety of narratives, or would depend on their support in dangerous situations, etc. The eight types form

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. M. FORTES, Descent, "Filiation and Affinity: A Rejoinder to Dr Leach". In: *Man* 59, 1959, pp. 193-7, 206-12, p. 206; L. HOLY, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> G. MURDOCK, *Social Structure*, New York, 1949.

the basis of narrative cycles, each of them encompassing a particular set and combination of those types.

The nuclear family, which, according to Murdock, is "a clearly outlined and an actively functional group in each society," fails to be represented entirely in none of the narrative schemes and plots of the Bulgarian epic. We will not be able to find in the epic the mythological in scale model of the large patriarchal family, which we can witness in the carol songs for example. In all of the plots the family is marked with a significant missing, whose compensation turns out to be a motor and meaning of the narrative development. The lack of betrothal motivates each of the fabulae about marriage exploits; the missing of the brother or sister, in whose name the epic hero would like to pronounce an oath, "unlocks" the plots about the finding of the lost siblings in remote lands; the lack of a child is the core motif in the plots about the epic "divorce" and of the hero's finding a new wife. Having in mind the fact that the looking for a bride is in itself a necessity of establishing a kinship relation through the marriage signifier, we may conclude that the majority of the epic plots is connected with the lack of a kinship relationship and with emphases on the efforts for overcoming this lack.

While the relationships of the "first order" are marked by the principle of the lack and its compensation, the relationships of the "second order"<sup>11</sup> are to a large extent an instrument and a means for overcoming the lack in the epic plot. The hero never looks for a relative belonging to the second kinship circle. He might need and desperately search for a godparent, a ritual brother (who, in the

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<sup>11</sup> According to Radcliffe-Brown the genealogical ties between parent and child are widened to an extent that they connect every individual with the parents of his/her parents and with the children of his/her children; the relationships with siblings are extended to connect every individual with the children of his/her siblings; the relationships between spouses reach out to connect every individual with the parents and siblings of the husband or wife. All these connections form the so called "relationships of a second order." They result from "the connection between two elementary families through a common member, such as the father's father, the mother's brother, the wife's sister, etc." Cf. A.R. RADCLIFFE-BROWN, "The Study of Kinship Systems". In: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 71, 1941, p. 2.



epic stylistic, is considered as equivalent to a brother<sup>12</sup>), or even a ritual marriage supporter (*dever*), but he would never be looking for a nephew or an uncle, a cousin or an aunt. The relatives outside the first kinship circle are never a target for hero's investigation and interest, but are rather the characters, which provide help and support in his trials or themselves pose trials and obstacles to the hero. Also, in accordance with the selectivity in representing kinship relationships in the epic, the generation of the parents' parents is completely missing, and the connections with the wife's parents or the brother's/sister's children is oriented entirely to the male representatives. Never would the lack of a grandfather, uncle or a mother-in-law be considered as worth being the core of an epic plot. On the contrary – the mother's brother would be the one who has to compensate the missing of the father and to be a patron in the hero's marriage exploits; or, after the success in competition, the father-in-law is the one who would have to give the bride to the hero, etc. Through the tension between the lack and the means of its satisfying the epic manages to preserve balance in the plot dynamics and a certain level of hierarchy in the different types of kinship and their functional relevance to the kin status of the major epic hero. This hierarchy and this structural equilibrium in the role of the kinship relationships of the first and second order has enormous significance in the representation of different forms of kinship in the epic, and in the appearance and adequate symbolic disposition of blood and marriage kinship ties in the epic songs.

The only relative outside the first circle of kinship, who takes active part in the epic fabulae, is the mother's brother. His

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<sup>12</sup> About ritual brotherhood and its representation in the epic cf. A. VESSELOVSKIY, *Istoricheskaia poetika* [Historical poetics], Leningrad, 1940, pp. 583-585; ZHIRMUNSKIY, *Narodniy geroicheskiy epos. Sravnitel'no-istoricheskie ocherki* [Folk heroic epic. Comparative historical research], Moskva-Leningrad, 1962; B. PUTILOV, *Russkiy i yuzhnoslavianskiy geroicheskiy epos. Sravnitel'no-tipologicheskoe issledovanie* [Russian and South Slavic Epic. Comparative typological research], Moskva, 1971. On ritual brotherhood in Bulgarian epic songs cf. N. NACHOV, *op. cit.*, and N. VUKOV, "Pobratimstvoto kato komplemetarna forma na rodstvo v bulgarskia folklor" [Ritual brotherhood as a complementary kinship relationship in Bulgarian folklore]. In: *Sbornik dokladi ot mejdunarodnia simpozium po problemite na bulgarskia folklor*, Sofia, 2003.

presence is often at the expense of the weakened functions of the father as a patron, protector and initiator of the epic hero. The relationship with the mother's brother facilitates to sustain the link with the group of relatives from the mother's kin. The figure of the mother's brother, together with the one of the epic bride, preserves in the social relationships the "openness" of the kin (based on a patriarchal and patrilocal principle) to the other kin groups, with which it has come or will come into contact in the process of biological reproduction. The mother's brother (as the bride does as well<sup>13</sup>) represents the memory of the structural openness of the kin; they are a "corrective" addition to the consolidating genealogical principle of descent,<sup>14</sup> elements of which are generally considered to dominate the cultures of patriarchal type.<sup>15</sup> The high level of functionality of these two characters in the Bulgarian epic (together with the relatively low role of the father in the epic plots) is an expression of the preserved balance between the consolidating closeness of the patriarchal kin and its openness to other kin groups and other social circles.

In light of the observations made so far, we may point out that in Bulgarian heroic epic the basic unit of kinship encompasses all the relationships of the first kin circle, and the relationships with the mother's brother and the bride. To some extent all these

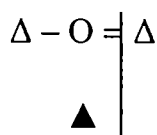
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<sup>13</sup> Cf. about the functions of the bride in Bulgarian epic in: "Neviasata kato mediator i dar: aspekti na "zhenskoto" rodstvo v bulgarskia yunashki epos" [The bride as a mediator and a gift: aspects of women's kinship in Bulgarian folklore epic]. In: *Bulgarski Folklor*, 2, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Fortes defines descent as a relationship between the Ego and the ancestor, and mediated by the parent. Unlike filiation, which is merely the act of being a parent to a child, the descent is a relationship referring rather to the politico-juridical sphere. Cf. L. HOLY, *op. cit.*, p. 45. Cf. more about the connection between kinship and descent in: E. EVANS-PRITCHARD, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of the Nilotic People*, Oxford University Press, London, 1940; M. FORTES, *The Dynamics of Kinship Among the Tallensi*, Oxford University Press, London, 1945; M. FORTES, "The Structure of Unilineal Descent Groups". In: *American Anthropologist*, 55, 1953, pp. 17-41.

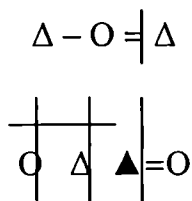
<sup>15</sup> Cf. on this issue in: K. KASER, "The Origins of Balkan Patriarchy". In: *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook*, 1992, 8, pp. 1-39; R. A. WAGNER, "Patriarchy in the Balkans: Temporal and Cross-Cultural Approaches". In: *The History of the Family*, 1, 4, 1996, pp. 425-442.

relationships cover the “atom of kinship” (as defined by Levi-Strauss), which consists of a man, his wife, their son, and the mother’s brother:



Although including most of the basic relationships of kinship in society (mother, brother, husband, wife, son, brother, sister, mother’s brother, brother-in-law),<sup>16</sup> from the point of view of the epic representation of kinship the scheme is incomplete at least for two reasons. Firstly, it does not suggest the presence of the first generation level of the son, and in such a way excludes from representation his siblings (brother, sister, ritual brother and ritual sister), while they apparently have a major role in the epic kinship model. The representation of the brother and sister in the generation of the parents solely is no doubt insufficient, as long as the brother and sister relationships in the epic are represented mainly as linked to the lower generation, i.e. as sons and daughters of Marko’s parents. Secondly, the scheme is incomplete because of the absence of the son’s bride, who is the real target of a large number of songs about epic marriage, as well as in many plots about Marko’s family life.

If we take into consideration these two structural elements, the basic unit of kinship in the epic can be represented in the following way:




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<sup>16</sup> According to Levi-Strauss, “in order the kin structure to exist, there should always be three types of family relationships: of blood kinship, of marriage kinship, and of descent – i.e. a relationship between siblings, between spouses and between parent and child.” Cf. Cl. LEVI-STRAUSS, *Structural Anthropology*, p. 46.

As obvious, it includes two marriage links – between the hero's mother and father (a link, which is very rarely actualized in the epic songs); and the one between the hero and his bride, which is the major focus of attention in the epic narratives. Generally, the attention in the epic is oriented toward the epic characters belonging to the generation level of the epic hero, while the representatives of the previous generation play a role mainly as supporting the hero in his efforts to find a bride, a ritual brother, or a lost sibling.

The scheme encompasses elements of blood and marriage kinship, which are distinguished by the level of their actualization in the epic plots. The mother's brother for example preserves his active relationship with his nephew, but has almost no relationship to the nephew's father and absolutely none with the hero's brother and sister. The siblings of the hero themselves enter in no relationship with their father. The only ones who preserve active relationships with all the other elements in the model of kinship, are the epic hero himself, his mother and his bride. This is logical, as long as in the South Slavic epic the narratives follow exclusively the figure of the hero, and as long as the hero's mother and bride are respectively the starting point and the main target in his whole social and cultural realization.<sup>17</sup> However, if the mother is, so to say, "given" in the world of the epic hero, the bride belongs to the marriage kinship ties, which are to be "acquired,"<sup>18</sup> and thus her finding and winning responds to specific criteria and follows specific marriage strategies.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. more about these characteristic features of the South Slavic and Balkan epic, in B. PUTILOV, *op. cit.*; T. POPOVIC, *Prince Marko. The Hero of South Slavic Epic*, Syracuse University Press, New York, 1988; *Epos, etnos, etos*, Sofia, 1995, etc.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. about kinship by marriage and the "marriage theory" in the anthropology of kinship, in: Cl. LEVI-STRAUSS, *Structures élémentaire de la parenté*, Paris, 1949; L. DUMONT, "The Marriage Alliance". In: J. GOODY, ed., *Kinship. Selected Readings*. Penguin Books, 1971; R. NEEDHAM, "Remarks on the Analysis of Kinship and Marriage". In: R. NEEDHAM, ed., *Rethinking Kinship and Marriage*, Tavistock, London, 1971.

<sup>19</sup> About the specific approach kinship to be regarded not that much as a set of models but as a realization of strategies, cf. P. BOURDIEU, "Marriage strategies as strategies of social reproduction". In: *Annales. E. S. C.*, 27, July–October 1972, pp. 1105–25; P. BOURDIEU, "Esquisse d'une theorie de la pratique". In: *Travaux de Droit, d'Économie, de Sociologie et de Sciences Politiques*, 1972.

## Kinship and the world of the epic hero

The model of kinship outlined by us so far allows us to make a more detailed analysis of the basic characters of kinship in the epic, and to reveal their major ways of representation, their specific content, and their functionality in the epic aesthetic world. The epic songs ascribe to every figure a particular position depending on his/her kinship status, and turn this position into a launching point for the development of the plots. In this world of collisions, battles and marriage achievements, the designation of being a brother, nephew, ritual brother, etc., has special importance for the character's role and function in the evolvment of the epic narratives. The belonging to a certain kinship position regulates thus the behavior of the epic personages "from within." It provides them with the basic set of strategies, which every of the personages would embody and make explicit in the epic context as a godfather, brother, sister, bride, etc. The designation of the kinship role and position of the epic characters turns into a constant element of their biographies and is the major factor for their functionality in the epic songs, for their inclusion and development in the epic narrative. Apart from giving basic parameters for the distribution of roles and positions of the epic figures, every kinship term in the songs actualizes whole segments of the kinship model and reifies the major dispositions of the epic kinship system.

Having in mind this, there would be no surprise that the figure of the chief hero in Bulgarian and South Slavic epic tradition, Prince Marko, is deeply embedded within the representation of kinship relationships, which surround all his activities and constitute the basic stages in his whole biography. In some epic plots he is primarily in the position of a son and brother, in others he is a husband and father; some plots emphasize his role as a godfather in marriage, yet others – him being an uncle and a patron to his sister's son. In spite of the various transformations, which the other epic characters undergo as well, none of them possesses such richness of kinship roles engrained into respective patterns of behavior in the epic plots.

The basic reason for this depends on the fact that their designation to a kinship position is related exclusively with the epic hero and the kinship relationship with him is the motor of the epic appearance of all other characters. The epic hero organizes around himself all the kinship relationships in the Bulgarian epic. He is the Ego, around which each of them receives its explicit meanings namely as *a kinship relationship to the hero*. His figure not only sieves which of the kinship relationships to receive a foreground representation, but “arranges” them by importance and by those characteristics, which he gains as a hero in every plot.

If we try to find an explanation about the presence, absence, or a specific interpretation of particular kinship relationships in Bulgarian epic (i.e. the figures of the grandfather or grandson, of the godfather or the ritual brother, etc.), it would not be incorrect to suggest that they result from the fact that the epic hero himself might not “activate” certain kinship relationships as functional elements of his biography, while he would activate others in a way, which would turn into principle signs of his epic characteristics. Even a random look at the span of kinship ties around the hero shows that he has no interest in sustaining relationships with characters, which are two generations distanced from him. He has no grandfather (both on his father’s and his mother’s side), nor does he “wait” until he would become a grandfather himself. It is also very characteristic that we will not see him as being a father to a girl, nor would we find an expression of traces of his father’s brother too. From generational point of view the characters around the epic hero belong only to his own generation (brother, sister, ritual brother, ritual sister, wife), from the preceding one (mother, father, godparent, mother’s brother, etc.) or from the succeeding one (son, nephew). Apart from the avuncular relationships between the hero and his mother’s brother or sister’s son, and apart from the strongly stereotypical relationship between the hero and his mother, one can say that the priority of representation in the epic songs belongs to the relationships with the characters of the generation of the hero himself, which is one of the factors testifying to a low level of genealogical depth in Bulgarian epic.

Another characteristic feature in the organization of the kinship relationships around Marko is that he is basically a hero at a wedding, i.e., the span of kinship in the epic is accompanied with a tendency to represent the plots through the marriage model. The epic singer shows no interest into revealing about heroes' ancestors or genealogy, while he often gives a truly detailed account of the participants in the marriage procession, and especially to the figures, which have key ritual importance in the folklore wedding. The composition of the marriage procession and the kinship relationships of the hero as a bridegroom with its participants are presented in a number of songs and are turned into a launching point for the epic narrative. The detailed account however customarily excludes not only the representatives of the bride's kin, but often the whole family circle of the hero. In the focus of representation in the hero's marriage are usually the godfather, the ritual brothers and the mother's brother, and quite rarely (if at all) hero's brothers and sisters.

The arrangement and the internal hierarchy among the characters in Bulgarian epic songs are conditioned not so much by norms and models guaranteed by the patriarchal culture, or by notions of authority and prestige existing in the society, but rather by the functional importance of each kinship relationship in the epic plots, and by the level in which they would appear able to satisfy basic requirements, concerning chief moments in hero's biography and status. Together with interpreting the hero as a center and regulator of the kinship statuses of the other figures, the folklore epic emphasizes that namely the designators to a kinship position are the adequate and the functional ones in the figure of the epic hero. They are the parameters through which the hero has real "weight" in a culture heavily laden with the symbolic meanings of kinship. The figure of the main epic hero is formed according to the rules of a folklore culture, in which the community raises the principles of kin affiliation as its chief model and in which kinship relationships have the role of basic signifiers of personal and collective identity. The hero represents in a concise way the meeting ground between the kinship norms in the community, and the specific notion of the heroic, according to

which a hero has to be an embodiment and affirmation of these norms. In such a way the folklore epic reifies kinship as a basic ideological model in Bulgarian folklore culture, and a chief factor in the creation and functioning of its aesthetic world.

### **Kinship sought, kinship discovered**

Another basic feature of the representation of kinship in Bulgarian epic is that it is generally depicted as examined and confirmed. This finds expression in numerous motifs, plots and situations in the Bulgarian epic, in which kinship relationships are actively sought and dramatically discovered, tested and proved in series of acts of kinship solidarity and support. The logic of presenting kinship as sought, examined and recognized is prefigured by a basic condition in the epic model of kinship, according to which the epic family is destined not to be able to gather together in unity. While the mother bears the traces of a constantly present figure in the epic songs, the father is regularly missing, and the brother and sister have to be found only after long travels and difficult battles. Even when the brother and sister are found and brought back home from distant lands, the epic family still fails to realize at least partially its unity – once having met and embraced their mother, the hero's siblings are "destined" to fall at the threshold of the house and to die because of surprise and emotions.

All this determines an anxiety of looking for a kinship tie by the epic hero, a pressing need to compensate for an inherent lack in his kinship circle. The majority of the representations of the brother, sister, ritual brother, or wife, etc., are closely connected with motifs about the intentionally sought and randomly discovered kinship and its careful examination and recognition, which takes an extended structural role in numerous plots. The motif of recognizing a particular kinship tie is directly related to thematic circles, such as the avoidance of incest, the impossibility for a second marriage, the need of help in battle, etc. With the discovery of the kinship relationship, which often takes place as if



“occasionally,” the epic plot gets successfully unknit and brought to its end.

The appearance of the motif of recognizing kinship can be various – logically prepared or unexpected; well integrated in the aesthetic whole or isolated; accumulating its own weight in the plot or subdued to a more general epic framework. It is a rule that the acts of the epic heroes in the situations of recognizing kinship are guided not by principles of logical, aesthetic, or psychological coherence, but by a preliminary existing “norm” in the epic code, according to which the hidden kinship tie *has to be revealed*, unveiled and made explicit. In such a way, although incorporated in the epic by means of characters, situations and symbols, kinship is also externally positioned to the plots, prefigures their basic coordinates, determines the direction of the epic logic, and conditions the outcome of the basic conflicts. The plots “take into consideration” the potential of meanings, provided by kinship relationships, they adjust their own logic and form their textual development according to the way, in which kinship ties act as a given code in the folklore culture. The hero has no other option but to find his sister, and, once having found her, he cannot but feel the drama of recognizing her in a situation of an occasionally avoided incest. The ritual brother cannot but help the epic hero; the husband, who has returned home after years of absence needs to be recognized by his wife and would thus prevent her from a second marriage. The heroic epic does not leave unused the opportunities for unlocking this code – no cases are known, in which a kinship relationship, initially presented as “hidden” in Bulgarian epic songs, would not be recognized and affirmed in the end.

This dynamics in the epic plot, which is connected with searching, finding out, examining and recognizing, reflects directly upon the figure of the basic epic hero. He is himself “impossible” without a particular kinship tie, and he has to pass through all the stages of the plot in order to satisfy this pressing need. The figure of the epic hero is closely dependent on the image of the looked for and finally found relative. The absence of a relative is a *hiatus* in the epic narrative, which the travel and the heroic deeds have to overcome and make up for. By finding his

relative the hero carries out his relationship with the past, reestablishes a harmonious state, which had been destroyed years before. It is hardly a coincidence that every situation of recognizing kinship in the epic songs is accompanied with detailed stories recalling moments back into the past. In light of these “backward projections” of the epic plot, kinship receives additional meanings of genealogy – even when the specificity of a particular kinship link is not inherently a genealogical one. By the numerous retrospective explanations in the narrative even situations concerning relatives of the same generation as the epic hero are construed in the form of genealogy, as an object of retroactive search, proof and affirmation.

The means of recognizing kinship can be various – a wonderful body sign, a golden tress in hero’s hair, a wedding ring, the voice, etc. However, the most widely spread and the most reliable means of testifying the existence of a kinship tie remained the questions about kin and family belonging that the epic characters pose to each other. An enslaved girl asks Marko about his parents and discovers that he is her brother; astonished at the extraordinary care and support of an eagle, Marko inquires about her past and recognizes the bird, which he had once saved and accepted as a ritual sister; an occasional sign provokes asking about family belonging and prevents thus a battle between brothers or an incest between brother and sister, etc. The changes in the characters’ appearance do not pose an obstacle to the success in recognizing kinship – time has not been able to distort those significant signs through which kinship can be indisputably testified.

All this demonstrates kinship statuses as a major characteristic of the epic characters, and reveals the situations, which they trigger, as constant elements in the epic aesthetic world. They form the nucleus of the so-called by Veselovski “historical vocabulary” of common loci and formulae,<sup>20</sup> and can be regarded as elements of a stable aesthetic system, which pass from song to song, having their content modeled in the respective epic context. As permanent elements of the epic world, kinship relationships have

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<sup>20</sup> A. VESSELOVSKIY, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

turned, to use Gatsak's words, into "historically stable reality of the folklore tradition"<sup>21</sup> and a "stabilizing factor" for the enormous variety of epic plots and variants. They are both "achronic" and "diachronic,"<sup>22</sup> invariable and changeable elements in the epic narratives. As long as they are the initial characteristics of the epic heroes, they come as if "out of time", from the immobile epic past, and they receive their "temporal characteristics" by being examined and affirmed throughout the plot.

A key importance in the situations of recognizing kinship has the motif of death. Each of the plots with discovering and recognizing a relative in the epic poses a figurative travel of the hero in the afterlife, in the space of the crucial lack, of the meaningful missing of a kinship relationship. The whole travel of the hero in his search for a sibling, or his travel back to the new wedding of his wife, is marked by the signs of death; each one of the expressions of help on behalf of the fairies and birds – hero's ritual sisters – takes place in the dramatic moment between life and death; the unsuccessful attempts to recognize the existence of a kinship tie are separated only a few seconds from the moment of death or from its omen. The loss of a kinship relationship is tantamount to death, to passing in the world of the afterlife, from where it is impossible to return without a relative's mediating support and recognition. In his search for his relatives the hero has to enter the realm of the unknown and "alien," so that to be able to bring his long lost kinsmen back into being. The mutual recognition means a return to life, while the failure to recognize the relative prevents the possibility to go back into the world of the living, as is vivid in the plots about incest or fratricide.

The unrecognisable appearance needs to be overcome in the epic songs. The codes of kinship need to be shown as

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<sup>21</sup> V. M. GATSAK, *Folklor. Problemi Tezaurusa* [Folklore. Issues related to thesaurus], Moskva, 1994.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. in this respect Levi-Strauss' classic formulation that kinship is not a static phenomenon – "It exists only in self-continuation... Even the most elementary kin structure exists both synchronically and diachronically." Cf. Cl. LEVI-STRAUSS, *Structural Anthropology*, p. 47.

unsubmissive to time and death, and, together with the memory of a kinship relationship present in the past (as expressed through words and dialogues between the characters), they overcome the distance of time and the boundary between the two worlds. The signs of a sacred binding (the ring), the bodily mark and the human voice turn out to be means through which the lost kinship tie will be reconstituted – they are identifiers of kinship, through which the mediation between the world of the dead and the world of the living becomes possible. The magic sense of these identifiers lies also in the fact that they are recognizable and transparent only to the addressee they are aimed at, while for the other characters they do not convey the necessary meaning. Only the wife can recognize her husband's ring, only the sister happens to know about the golden tress in her brother's hair. The relative is the only one who would ask a question about the hero's descent and who would have on his/her mind to check whether the person, whom he/she has occasionally met is a relative.

The fateful predestination to get oneself revealed to the exact person motivates the behavior of the hero, who customarily knows about the possible existence of such kinship relationship, but refuses to reveal himself to the other participants in the epic plot. The returning husband goes first to the vineyard and finds his mother there crying herself of sorrow for her long imprisoned in distant lands son. However, the hero does not reveal himself to his mother, nor to his father, but only at the wedding feast organized by his wife. It is a seeming contradiction in recognizing kinship, which is presented as "natural" and entirely justifiable in the entire aesthetics of the epic text. The formal contradictions in the plots are perceived, in Putilov's words, as artistic constants, creating an admiring harmony of the whole."<sup>23</sup> As discovered and recognized, as encoded and transmitting ancient mythological meanings, as arranging and modeling the structure of the epic texts – kinship has a significant role in the creating and sustaining this epic harmony.

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. B. PUTILOV, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

## Conclusion

In Bulgarian epic songs we find a system of relationships, which refers directly to the model of family and kin in Bulgarian traditional culture, but represent them in a way, which is characteristic for the aesthetic system of the folklore epic. Certain elements of this system (patriarchality, hierarchy, kin solidarity, basic norms and prohibitions) are clearly expressed in the epic songs, while others, such as the structuring of the large kin group, the role of the father and the ancestors, etc., do not receive visible representation. In spite of the numerous levels of "deferral" from the model of kinship and the family in Bulgarian folklore culture, the heroic epic essentially represents knowledge about the basic principles in the kinship system, and about the values in a folklore culture conditioned by the meanings of kinship. As such, the Bulgarian epic songs represent an *epic culture of kinship*, which is symbolically expressed in the dynamics of the various relationships and the epic system of characters, in the organizing potential that kinship relationships have for the logic and sequence of the epic plots, and in the function of kinship as a major code in the epic aesthetic world.